Virtue Ethics

Do karma and rebirth make sense?

[A naturalistic conception of karma and rebirth, or, being good as if everyone matters]

by Piya Tan ©2007

1 Critically thinking about karma and rebirth

CAVEAT. This is an exploratory paper on how a naturalistic approach may help to answer some problems in Buddhist doctrines, especially those of karma and rebirth. Although a naturalistic approach to Buddhism avoids certain difficulties, especially where empirical proofs appear to be lacking, I must state that the start that my own view is a traditional Sutta-based one, here very similar to that of scientist practitioners such as Allan Wallace.[1]

1.1 FOUR CRITICAL QUESTIONS. Traditional Buddhists see karma and rebirth as the twin pillar of their daily lives. Before Buddhism, karma generally referred to ritual acts that the ancient Indians had to perform for the sake of present happiness, future wellbeing and the safe passage of ancestors to the beyond. And all these rituals could only be performed by the brahmins, and at some cost. Like a number of other reform movements, Buddhism ethicized and demythologized such pre-ethical notions: that karma is a self-motivated act for which one is accountable, and that one is not *born* good or evil, but that one *is* what one does.

Dale S Wright raises "Critical questions towards a naturalized concept of karma in Buddhism" (2004),

> based on the thesis that a naturalistic concept of karma, inherent in the concept as articulated in the many Buddhist versions of it, can and should be developed, and that with further cultivation for the emerging context of contemporary global culture, the concept of karma could constitute a major element in the ethical thinking of the future. (Wright 2004:79)

Wright goes on to raise questions about four dimensions of the concept of karma as it is understood in Buddhism, "Each area of questioning is offered as a way to begin to hone the concept, to separate it from elements of supernatural thinking, and to work towards locating those elements that might be the most effective today in the domain of ethics." (2004:79 f). And here I have abridged his four points on karma, namely,

(1) on ultimate cosmic justice;
(2) that karma may be socially and politically disempowering;
(3) on karmic consequences; and
(4) individual and collective aspects of karma.

1.1.1 Ultimate cosmic justice. All of the world's major religions have taught that, at some point, good and evil lives will be rewarded with good and evil consequences. But these religions are also forced to admit that this doctrine contradicts what we sometimes experience in our lives. Good people may just as readily be severely injured or die from an accident, or die early of disease, as anyone else, and people who have lived unjustly and unfairly may not necessarily experience any deprivation in their lives. Not everyone seems to receive their just karmic rewards. One way to face this realization is to conclude, at least provisionally, that the cosmos is largely indifferent to the sphere of human merit as well as to our expectations of justice.

The religious claim that there is a supernatural connection between moral merit and ultimate destiny may derive from our intuitive sense that there there ought to be justice, even where it seems to be lacking. That the corporate criminal ought to be punished, that the innocent child ought to live well rather than to

[1] See eg Wallace 2006a.

suffer from a devastating disease, and that some things ought to be different from what they appear to be, are all manifestations of our deep seated sense of justice.

But whether that now intuitive internal sense is sufficient reason to postulate a supernatural scheme of cosmic justice beyond our understanding and experience is an open question that has remained as closed in Buddhism as it has in other religions. *The form that this closure takes in Buddhism is the doctrine of rebirth, which plays the same role that heaven does in theistic traditions as ultimate guarantor of justice*. As it is not easy to see the workings of karma in daily life—and more often than not we see the good suffer, while the evil prosper—the traditional conception of karma often requires the doctrine of rebirth so that this karmic imbalance is put right. This online remark, by **Bob Zeuschner,**[2] is a typical contemporary response of non-traditional Buddhists:

> And, no one in non-Hindu worlds has ever needed an untestable "law of karma" to explain why some people are enslaved. Bigger, more powerful groups of people enslaved them. For what reason? Several different reasons. They lost in battle and were enslaved. They could be used as cheap labor to make others wealthy. They were considered less than human, etc, etc.
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> For me, the big problem with the "law of karma" (besides the fact that it is not empirical) is that it ensures that there is justice no matter what. If you rape and kill people and don't get caught, we don't have to worry. You will pay for it in your next life. If you start a war where hundreds of thousands die needlessly, we don't have to worry. You will pay for it in your next life. We don't need courts, or police. If I am shot while driving on the LA freeway, it was my karma and I deserved it. Why bother to look [for] the shooter?
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> I teach karma as an important part of early Buddhism, but I personally do not consider it essential to Buddhist philosophy or Buddhist ethics. It just seems to be wishful pre-scientific thinking. (Email posted in Buddha-L, 23 May 2007)

1.1.2 Karma may be socially and politically disempowering. The second question about karma follows from the first, and is, in fact, the primary critique that has been leveled against the idea since it has been introduced to the West: that the idea of karma may be socially and politically disempowering in its cultural effect, that without intending to do this, karma may, in fact, support social passivity or acquiescence in the face of oppression of various kinds. This may criticized as a failure of courage and justice.

Edward Conze, for example, writes of certain "rich old women"[3] who find rebirth attractive for all the wrong reasons:

(1) It allows them to believe that they have spent much of their time in the past as Egyptian princesses and the like.
(2) It frees them from the sense of social guilt which is endemic in the bourgeoisie of the early 20th century, by persuading themselves they deserve their money and privileges as a reward for merit gained in the past.
(3) It convinces them that their precious selves will not be lost when they die.

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[2] Bob Zeuschner is a specialist in Buddhist philosophy and ethics. At Pasadena City College, Pasadena, California, he teaches a wide range of courses in philosophy, including ethics, logic, and critical thinking.

[3] This clearly alludes to people like German aristocratic adventurer, **Helena Petrovna Blavatsky** (born Helena von Hahn, her father was a German officer in Russian service) (1831-1891), a founder of the Theosophical Society, the English woman **Annie Besant** (1847-1933), a Theosophist and women's rights activist, and the French explorer and spiritualist **Alexandra David-Néel** (1868-1969). The Concise Oxford Dictionary def **theosophy** as "any of various philosophies professing to achieve a knowledge of God by spiritual ecstasy, direct intuition, or special individual revelation; esp a modern movement following Hindu and Buddhist teachings, and seeking universal brotherhood." The Theosophical Society was founded in NY City in 1875 by HP Blavatsky, Henry Steele Olcott, William Quan Judge and others. Its initial objective was the investigation, study and explanation of mediumistic phenomena, but soon turned to eastern religions. In the early 20th century it is connected with the rise of Buddhism under heavy western and Protestant influence. For refs, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theosophy_and_Buddhism.

Furthermore, **theosophy** promised them a share of the wisdom of ages and thrilling participation in mysterious and esoteric kinds of knowledge.[4]

If one assumes that *cosmic justice prevails over numerous lifetimes*, and that therefore the situations of inequality that people find themselves in are essentially of their own making through moral effort or lack of it in previous lives, then it may not seem either necessary or even fair to attempt to equalize opportunities among people or to help those in desperate circumstances. For example, if you believe that a child being severely abused by his family is now receiving just reward for his past sins, you may find insufficient reason to intervene even when that abuse appears to be destructive to the individual child and to the society.

We know very well that Buddhist concepts of compassion have prominent places in the various traditions, and we can all point to Buddhist examples of compassionate social effort on behalf of the poor and the needy. Nevertheless, we can suspect that it may have unjustifiably diminished or undermined concern for the poor and the suffering in all Buddhist cultures.

If the truth is that the cosmos is simply indifferent to human questions of merit and justice, that truth makes it all the more important that human beings attend to these matters themselves. If justice is a human concept, invented and evolving in human minds and culture, and no where else, then it is up to us alone to see that we follow through on it. If justice is not structured into the universe itself, then it will have been a substantial mistake to leave it up to the universe to see that justice is done. Although, given our finitude, human justice will always be imperfect, it may be all the justice we have.

1.1.3 Karmic consequences. A third area of inquiry in which to engage the concept of karma concerns the nature of the reward or consequence that might be expected to follow from morally relevant actions. Here Wright employs a distinction borrowed from **Alasdair MacIntyre** that is now common to contemporary ethics between *goods that are externally or contingently related to a given practice*, and *goods that are internal to a practice and that cannot be acquired in any other way*.[5] If we look at a single act, say an act of extraordinary generosity or kindness, such as when someone goes far out of her way to help someone else through a problem that he has brought upon himself, we can see many possibilities for rewards that might accrue upon him. The person helped may in fact be wealthy, and offer a large sum of money in grateful reciprocity. Members of his family may honor the practitioner of kindness, and her reputation in the community for compassion and character might grow. He may become known as a citizen of extraordinary integrity, which could lead to all kinds of indirect rewards. These are all good consequences, and all deserved, but also all contingent outcomes, all goods that are external to the moral act itself. On the other hand, occasionally, contingent misunderstanding may give rise to exactly the opposite outcome—the same act of generosity may be misunderstood, resented, reviled, or lead to a denigrated reputation that the person never overcomes.

The rewards or goods internal to that act of kindness are directly related to the act, and are not contingent on anything but the act. When we act generously, we do something incremental to our character—we shape ourselves slightly further into a person who understands how to act generously, is inclined to do so, and does so with increasing ease. This is true whether the act is positive or negative in character.[6] Generosity, when it becomes an acquired feature of our character, becomes a virtue, in fact one of the central Buddhist virtues, the first of the six perfections. This is to say that acts of generosity may or may not give rise to external goods like rewards of money or prestige, but they do give rise to a transformation in character that makes us generous, kind, and concerned about the well-being of others.

Our question, then, is what kinds of rewards, or goods, does the doctrine of karma correlate to virtuous or non-virtuous acts? The answer depends on the Buddhist tradition, and there is no single voice. From acts of generosity, we get everything from the virtue of generosity, compassion or wisdom, as *internal goods*, to health or wealth, that is, *external goods*, with a variety of specific alternatives in between.

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[4] E Conze, *Memoirs of a Modern Gnostic,* vol 2, Sherborne: Samizdat, 1974:33.

[5] Alaisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 1981:188. (Wright's fn)

[6] The first thing that accrues from an act of this sort is that someone is helped, something good has been done to the world out beyond the practitioner. But my focus here is on the rewards that come to the agent. (Wright's fn)

Dale S Wright points to an example from the Dalai Lama, where (claims Wright) he is primarily interested in external goods: "As a result of stealing, one will lack material wealth."[7] Because we all know that successful thieves and corporate criminals may or may not live their lives lacking in material wealth, we can only agree with this claim insofar as we assume that the author is here metaphysically referring to an afterlife, some life beyond the end of this one.

Had he focused on **internal goods**, argues Wright, he might have said that, as a result of stealing, one will have deeply troubled relations to other people, as well as a distorted relation to material goods. As a result of stealing, one will find compassion and intimacy more difficult, be further estranged from the society in which one lives, and feel isolated and unable to trust others. As a result of stealing, one will become even more likely to commit other unhealthy acts, and may ultimately find oneself in an unfulfilled and diminished existence. These results of the act of stealing have a direct relation to the act; every act pushes one further in some direction of character formation or another, and further instantiates us in some particular relationship to the world.

The more human beings get involved, the more likely it is that a human sense of justice will intervene, drawing some connection between virtue and reward, or evil and suffering. People who characteristically treat others with kindness and just consideration are often treated kindly themselves, although not always. Those who are frequently mean spirited and selfish are often treated with disdain. Honesty in business often pays off in the form of trusting, faithful customers, while the habit of cheating customers will often come back to haunt the merchant. These dimensions of karma and of ethical relations are clear to us, and we are thankful that they exist. But it would seem that their existence is human and social, rather than structured into the cosmos.

Wright summarizes the foregoing by stating that how you conduct yourself ethically has at least three benefits:

(1) it shapes your character and helps determine who or what you become;
(2) it helps shape others and the society in which you live, now and into the future; and
(3) it encourages others to treat you in ways that are commensurate with character—they will often do unto you as you have done unto them, although not always.

The first and second outcomes can be counted as goods *internal* to ethical action: our actions do shape us and they do have an effect on the world. The third is *external*, that is, contingent, in that it may or may not follow from the ethical act. The more human justice there is, the more the distribution of external goods is likely to match the extent of our merit.

Thus, insofar as we can gather evidence on this matter, some dissociation between merit and external goods is important to maintain. *Although good acts do not always or necessarily lead to a life of good fortune*, they often lead to the development of good character. Therefore, if there is a contingent relation between external goods as rewards and merit, it would be wise to articulate a system of ethics and a doctrine of karma that do not rely heavily on this relation in spite of the longstanding Buddhist tradition of doing so for purposes of moral motivation.

1.1.4 Karma: individual and collective. The fourth and final dimension of the concept of karma that Wright examines is the extent to which karma can be adequately conceived as a consequence or destiny that is *individual*, as opposed to one that is *social or collective*. This concept has, however, been overwhelmingly understood in individual terms, that is, that the karma produced by my acts is *mine* primarily, rather than *ours* collectively.[8] Wright sees serious philosophical difficulties with this way of understanding the impact of our lives. Perhaps most strikingly, the view that my acts and their repercussions remain enclosed in a personal continuum that never dissipates into the larger society and continues to be forever "mine" reinforces a picture of the world as composed of a large number of discreet and isolated beings, a view that a great deal of Buddhist thought has sought to undermine.

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[7] Dalai Lama, *The Way to Freedom: Core Teachings of Tibetan Buddhism*. San Francisco: Harper, 1994:100. (Wright's fn)

[8] See William Waldron, *The Buddhist Unconscious*, London: Routledge/Curzon, 2003:160-169. (Wright's fn)

Instead of seeing ourselves in terms of separate existences, we should begin to see *how lines of influence and outcome commingle, along family lines and among friends, co-workers, and co-citizens, such that the future for others arises dependent in part upon my acts, and I arise dependent in part upon the shaping powers of the accumulating culture around me*. This type of thinking, based heavily on the expanding meaning of dependent arising, is strongly present in early Buddhist ethics. But because we seem preoccupied with the fear of death and individual destiny, this notion has not developed to the extent of its potential.[9]

1.2 "TRANSFER OF MERIT." The notion of "merit transfer" seems to be an excellent middle path between selfish personal quests and compassion for others. However, the idea that you might give the rewards of your own good acts to another less fortunate, may have the effect that the karma or the goodness of an act is viewed as a self-enclosed package that is your own alone, and one that could be generously given away at some time later as needed.

Then there is the problem when a skillful means for meditation is taken out of its context, and taken to be what really does happen when we do good things. It is important to remember that many Buddhist ethical teachings are not at first prescriptions about how to treat others, but rather prescription about how to treat your own mind in meditation so that you become the kind of morally virtuous person that the tradition envisages.

However, what began as a "transfer" of merit may rebound the other way around so that *you picture yourself as deserving of merit*. When seen from the outside, this is doubly problematic, because the one to whom you are supposedly being generous, in fact, gets nothing because, after all, this is mental exercise, while you picture yourself doubling your own merit, thereby cultivating exactly the pride and self-satisfaction that you wanted to overcome. If, however, the end pursued is understood in terms of humility and unselfishness, then you are unlikely to be caught up in this wrong view.

Furthermore, it is helpful to note that if merit works on *the economy of scale* (more is better), spiritual training works on *the scale of economy* (small is beautiful). **The Velāma Sutta** (A 9.20), after listing nine types of proverbially luxurious gifts, goes on to mention eleven kinds of practice that outside all those gifts, and the last of these is defined in these inspiring words:

> And, householder, even though the brahmin Velāma gave those great gifts, and even if he were to cultivate a heart of lovingkindness **[396]** for just as long as it takes to tug at the cow's teat (to milk it), greater would be the fruit if he were to cultivate the perception of impermanence for even the moment of a finger-snap![10] (A 9.10.5b/4:395 f) = SD 16.6

1.3 REBIRTH. There are many ways in which an individualized concept of karma persists in spite of numerous Buddhist teachings against it: the notions of impermanence, dependent arising, not-self, and later extensions of these ideas such as emptiness are prominent among them. But all of these ideas apparently run aground on the concept of rebirth, and it is there that karma is most problematic. All the four critical questions raised above about karma derive their impact from the association that karma has with rebirth. **Wright** raises two points here.

1.3.1 We do not really know what happens when we die. First, if this really is an open question about what happens to people after they die, then we would expect that evidence will need to play at least some role, and we would assume that scientific investigation is the best way to gather and assess it. But here we see pious Hindus and Buddhists who write books gathering what seems to them the incontrovertible evidence for reincarnation, and Western scientists who, seeing no evidence whatsoever, do not even raise the question. In fact, the question of rebirth is really a metaphysical one, which leaves most of us in the position of needing to sort out the possibilities ourselves. However, the most honest and therefore

[9] See further **Group Karma?** = SD 18.11b.

[10] "For even the moment of a finger-snap," *accharā,saṅghāta,mattaṁ.* Also in **Cūḷ'accharā S** (A 1.6.3-5/A 1:10), in the same context of lovingkindness. See Introd (2-4).

spiritually and intellectually compelling response is to admit that we simply do not know what happens to us after we die. Or, at best, take the teaching *on faith* for reasons best known to us.

1.3.2 The problem of rebirth. The second point concerns the difficulty that Buddhists face in trying to fit a doctrine of rebirth to fit in with other central teachings. Buddhists claim that there is no permanent or substantial self because all things are both impermanent and dependent on other impermanent conditions. Whenever rebirth is given a strong and substantial role, not-self and related teachings are reduced in significance. Wherever not-self and related teachings are emphasized, questions concerning rebirth would arise. In several respects, rebirth stands in the way of our understanding karma in purely ethical terms. Rebirth may encourage us

(a) to assume a concept of *cosmic justice* for which we have insufficient evidence;
(b) to ignore issues of *justice in this life* on the grounds of speculation about future lives;
(c) to focus our hopes on *external rewards* for our actions, like wealth and status in a future life rather than on the construction of character in this one; and
(d) to conceive of our lives in *strictly individual terms*, as a personal continuum through many lives, rather than collectively, where individuals share in a communal destiny, contributing their lives and efforts to that collective destiny.

Although at the time when Buddhism first emerged, karma and rebirth continued to be linked together in order to make the newly emerging domain of ethics viable, today, ironically, given the cultural evolution of ethical understanding, Wright argues, karma may need to be disconnected from the metaphysics of rebirth in order to continue the development of Buddhist ethics.[11] If the early Buddhists ethicize the concept of karma *by lifting it out of the sphere of religious ritual and applying it to all of our morally relevant actions*, then if we are to carry on that spirit, we need to question, even rethink, the link between karma and rebirth. Among Buddhists today, educated in a world of science, and favourably disposed to contemporary standards for the articulation of truth, a naturalized concept of karma without supernatural preconditions will more likely be both persuasive and motivationally functional.[12] We shall continue this discussion based on the Suttas later. [4]

1.4 A NATURALISTIC THEORY OF KARMA. Wright suggests a few ways to develop a naturalistic theory of karma: this would treat choice and character as mutually determining—each arising dependent on the other. It would show how the choices you make, one by one, shape your character, and how the character that you have constructed, choice by choice, sets limits on the range of possibilities that you will be able to consider in each future decision. *Karma implies that once you have made a choice and acted on it, it will always be with you*, and you will always be the one who at that moment and under those conditions embraced that path of action. The past, on this view, is never something that once happened to you and is now over; instead, it is the network of causes and conditions that have already shaped you and that is right now setting conditions for every choice and move you make.

The concept of karma brings this pattern of freedom in self-cultivation clearly to the fore, and does so with great insight and natural subtlety. It highlights *a structure of personal accountability in which every act contains its own internal, natural rewards or consequences*, even if Buddhists sometimes succumbed to the temptation to offer a variety of external rewards as well. Although money does talk, promising it when it may or may not be forthcoming is a questionable strategy of motivation. Better to teach, as Bud-

[11] In a book just released as this essay came to completion, the US scholar of Tibetan Buddhism, **Robert Thurman** articulates exactly the opposite point on the concept of rebirth: that without a belief in individual immortality—a theory of the soul—a fully ethical life is not possible. While respecting the motivation and sincerity of those who do consider the idea of rebirth to be essential both to Buddhism and to enlightened life, Wright disagrees with the arguments provided, and find adherence to contemporary standards of critical thinking the most compelling consideration. See *Infinite Life: Seven Virtues for Living Well*, NY: Riverhead Books, 2004. (Wright's fn)

[12] Winston L King explores the question of the separability of karma and rebirth, concluding that "a doctrine of karmic rebirth is not essential to a viable and authentic Buddhist ethic in the West," in "A Buddhist Ethic Without Karmic Rebirth," in *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 1 1994. (Wright's fn)

dhists have, that the best things in life are free, and that the very best of these is the freedom to cultivate oneself into someone who is wise, insightful, compassionate, and magnanimous.[13]

This freedom, however, is not always certain and is *limited by its own finitude and by choice*, and we are often shaped by forces far beyond our control, that is, *the encompassing forces of nature, society, and history*. If the solitary ethical decisions we have been focusing on so far have the power to move us in the direction of greater human excellence, argues Wright, then how much more so **the unconscious "non-choices"** that we make everyday in the form of habits that deepen over time and shape our character. Some accounts of karma are exceptionally insightful in understanding how character develops through ordinary daily practice or habits, often without reflection or choice—the ways we do our work and manage our time, the ways we daydream, or cultivate resentment, or lose ourselves in distractions, down to the very way we eat and breathe.

This is clearly a strong point in Buddhist ethics. On this understanding of karma, closely related to the development of meditation, ethics is largely a matter of daily practice, understood as the self-conscious cultivation of ordinary life and mentality towards the approximation of an ideal defined by images of human excellence, the awakened arhats and bodhisattvas.[14]

Unlike other religious and philosophical traditions, Buddhism is generally less concerned with difficult and monumental decisions, than with preparing yourself for life. As such, it is much more important to focus on what you do with yourself moment by moment than it is to imagine how you would lighten the gray areas of moral dilemmas, or solve major moral crises. Buddhists generally understand that it is only through disciplined practices of daily self-cultivation that you would be in a good mind to handle the big issues when they do arise. The Buddha insightfully teaches that the self is malleable, and open to this kind of ethical transformation, and here we see the greatest impact of the understanding of the notion of not-self.

In fact, the Buddhist doctrine of **not-self** (*anattā*) is one of the places in the teachings where we can begin to see beyond the individual interpretation of karma that has dominated the tradition so far. If karma is to be a truly comprehensive teaching about human actions and their effects, we have to broaden and deepen our vision of karma, of how our actions affect others and society as a whole. This extended vision can be grounded on the extraordinary Mahayana teaching of **emptiness** (*śūnyatā*), the Buddhist vision of the interpenetration of all beings. Following this vision, we can imagine a collective understanding of karma that overcomes limitations of individualized spirituality.

A naturalized philosophical account of the Buddhist idea of karma can, according to Wright, insightfully reflect these and other dimensions of our human situation. Separated from elements of supernatural thinking that have been associated with karma since ancient times, its basic tenets of freedom, decision, and accountability are impressive, and clearly show us something important about the human situation, including the project of self-construction, both individually and collectively conceived, profoundly enabling the quest for human excellence.

1.5 A COMMON-SENSE VIEW OF KARMA. Even a weak understanding of karma is not as bad as a strong belief in the notion of a supreme being. If you believe in karma, to that extent you are amenable to the idea that you are or you can be the author of your own actions, but this training is more difficult for one who relegates his personal responsibility to an external agency. The most deleterious aspect of the supreme-being idea is that it becomes *an easy focus for the expression of repressed pains, fears and desires*. Ironically, it is painfully true when such a theistic zealot claims, "It is not I who act, but God who moves me," and the like.

The reality is that such supreme-being ideas are *often reflective of the believers' desire for power*, generally reflected in a sense of a lack of it. The quest for power is *politics* by any other name, and understandably religions based on the idea of a supreme being are, as a rule, absolutist (centralized dogmas,

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[13] The question of what to do about people who can only be motivated by promises of external rewards is an important social question, but not one within the scope of a philosophical effort to reflect on the truth of the matter or on what the rest of us should believe for motivational purposes. (Wright's fn)

[14] For the connection between meditation and Buddhist ethics, see Georges Dreyfus, "Meditation as Ethical Activity," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 2, 1995. (Wright's fn)

total obedience, etc), triumphalist (only they are right) and intolerant (everyone else is wrong). If religion leads to a sense of self-emptying, then such power-based systems are clearly the contrary of it. On a spiritual level, self-emptying refers to the letting go of views, especially intolerance and dogmas, so that one is capable of unconditional love for all, humans, non-humans and the space that holds them.

True self-emptying begins when you do not force yourself against nature, but learn from it, and thereby live in harmony with others, society and nature. A proper understanding of karma, especially a *naturalistic* vision of it, is both healing and enlightening. Here is where we have to rise above Buddhism as religion, race, culture, and worldliness, into its spirituality of the here and now.

Georges Dreyfus opens his paper, "Meditation as ethical activity" (1995), by noting the difficulty that western scholars face trying to do a comparative study of western moral philosophy with Buddhist ethics:

> Like other rich traditions, Tibetan Buddhist traditions have developed substantive ethical systems, at the personal, interpersonal and social levels, while lacking a theoretical reflection on the nature of their ethical beliefs and practices. This lack of theoretical ethics, what we could call second degree ethics in opposition to substantive ethics, affects not only Tibetan Buddhism, but Indian Buddhism and other related traditions, and is quite remarkable given the richness of Indian Buddhist philosophical reflection in general.
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> Compared to domains such as the philosophy of language and epistemology, Indian Buddhist traditions never developed a similar systematic reflection on the nature of ethical concepts. This is not to say that notions such as virtue or goodness are unknown in Indian Buddhist traditions, but that they are *not taken to be philosophically interesting*. Ethical concepts are studied, but they are not thought to warrant a theoretical discussion.
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> For example, in the Vinaya literature, which is often taken as the main reference in ethical discussions in many Buddhist traditions, there are extensive substantive discussions: what are the precepts, what is included in them, what is excluded, etc. Very little attention is devoted, however, to the nature of ethical concepts. Precepts are discussed *practically*, but their status is not systematically theorized. (Dreyfus 1995:29 f; reparagraphed & emphasis added)

Thanks to the spiritual latitude of Buddhism in general, we often find such philosophical reflections and argumentation in the thoughts and words of the practising Buddhists of our times. Although far from being systematic, such philosophizing throws greater light on this area than ever before. Let us look at a few examples of them.

Firstly, we much correct the common misconception about the connection between the act and the suffering. **Matthew Bortolin** is an ordained member of Thich Nhat Hanh's Buddhist Community in France and a *Star Wars* fan, who has written a book on Buddhist themes found in the film series, called *The Dharma of Star Wars*.[15] In his book, he describes karma thus:

> Karma is not a cosmic decree of justice or system of reward and punishment. If you break your leg today it is not because you swore at your brother yesterday. That is not the functioning of the law of karma. The remorse you feel for swearing at your brother is the fruit of karma, not the fact of the bone fracture. Similarly, an act of kindness does not always necessarily produce happiness —the *intention* behind the action or thought is of critical importance. If one performs a kind deed in the hopes of being rewarded by the stars or God then that deed is not good karma.
> (Bortolin 2005:112-113)

The American Buddhist scholar and author **Alexander Berzin,** on his website, insightfully explains karma as follows:

[15] Matthew Bortolin, *The Dharma of Star Wars.* Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2005.

We could talk about a network connecting physical points in one moment, like all the different parts of a machine. That is how we usually think of a network, isn't it? Here, let's change dimensions and think of a network in terms of connecting different moments of time. We acted like this; we acted like that. I yelled then; I yelled another time; and then I yelled again.

For example, each time I complain, the karmic force of that act networks with the karmic forces of previous times I complained. The more times I complain, the stronger the network of karmic force from complaining grows and the stronger its effects can be. Here, the abstraction becomes what we in the West might call a "karmic pattern."

This is what karmic networks are talking about, and I think this way of explaining it makes a lot better sense of the whole picture of karma than using such words as "collection of merit." It is certainly not a collection of points that we keep in a book and, with enough points or "merit," we win a prize. (Alexander Berzin, "The Mechanism of Karma." 22 Apr 2006)[16]

What Berzin has explained briefly here is defined more fully in **the Sallaṭṭhena Sutta** (S 36.6) in terms of the latent tendencies (*anusaya*).[17] The Sutta begins by explaining that *an uninstructed worldling, when experiencing pain, would suffer twice over: physical suffering and mental suffering*. The reason for this is explained thus:

(1) And being touched by that painful feeling, he shows aversion towards it. When he shows aversion towards the painful feeling, **the latent tendency of aversion** (*paṭighânusaya*) towards painful feeling lies latent in him.

When touched by a painful feeling, he delights in sensual pleasure.

Why is that so?

Because, bhikshus, the uninstructed ordinary person knows no other escape than through sensual pleasure.[18]

(2) And when he delights in sensual pleasure, **the latent tendency of lust** (*rāgânusaya*) towards pleasant feeling lies latent in him.

(3) He does not understand according to reality the arising, the passing away, the gratification, the danger and the escape with regards to feelings.[19]

Not understanding these things according to reality, **the latent tendency of ignorance** (*avijjā'nusaya*) towards neutral feeling lies latent in him.[20]

(4) If he feels a pleasant feeling, he feels that it is yoked to him. If he feels a painful feeling, he feels that it is yoked to him. If he feels a neutral feeling, he feels that it is yoked to him.

This, bhikshus, is called an uninstructed ordinary person who is yoked to birth, death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain and despair—he is one who is yoked to suffering, I say![21]

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[16] http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/x/nav/n.html_2034651659.html#initial_scope-mechanism_karma.

[17] On latent tendencies, see SD 6.14 Intro (5) & SD 17.4(7.3).

[18] Comy: The escape is mental concentration, the path and the fruit, but he does not know this, knowing only sensual pleasure. (SA 3:77).

[19] Cf **Cūḷa Sīhanāda S** (M 11.7/1:65), where the Comy says the arising (*samudaya*) the views of being (*bhava,-diṭṭhi*) and non-being (*vibhava,diṭṭhi*) are due to any of these eight conditions (*attha-ṭ,ṭhāna*): the five aggregates, ignorance, contact, perception, thought, unskilful consideration, evil friends and the voice of another [Pm 1:138]. Their disappearance (*atthaṅgama*) is the path of stream-entry which eradicates all wrong views. Their gratification (*assāda*) may be understood as the satisfaction of psychological need that they provide; their danger (*ādīnava*) is the continual bondage that they entail; the escape (*nissaraṇa*) from them is Nirvana (MA 2:11). See also **Chachakka S** (M 148) where the latent tendencies are explained in connection with each of the 6 senses (M 148.28-33/3:285).

[20] The most important characteristic of neutral feelings to note is their impermanent nature (It 47). This is because a neutral feeling appears to be the most stable of the three types of feeling. When they are noted as impermanent, it will lead to the arising of wisdom, thereby countering the latent tendency of ignorance. See §3n. See Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization,* 2003:171.

(S 36.6.8/4:208 f) = SD 5.5

The uninstructed worldling suffers both physical and mental pain because

- he reacts to the painful feeling with *aversion,* thus reinforcing the latent tendency of aversion in him;
- he *delights* in sensual pleasure, thus reinforcing the latent tendency of lust in him;
- he *ignores* the neutral feeling, thus reinforcing the latent tendency of ignorance in him.

The Sutta goes on to explain that the instructed noble disciple, on the other hand, feels only the bodily pain, but not mental suffering, because

- *he does not show aversion towards the painful feeling*: the latent tendency of aversion is not reinforced in him;
- *he does not delight in sensual pleasure*: the latent tendency of lust is not reinforced in him;
- *he understands the true nature of neutral feeling*: the latent tendency of ignorance is not reinforced in him. (S 36.6.10/4:209 f) = SD 5.5

In psychological terms, the unwise person lives an emotionally *reactive* life, controlled by his dislike for pain, his like for pleasure, and ignoring of neutral feeling, or measuring others as friend, foe or stranger.[22] Such a person is said to be emotionally dependent.

1.6 EMOTIONAL INDEPENDENCE. If your purpose in life is to find *personal happiness*, you can never be truly happy: it is like trying to hold a candle and keep it lit in the middle of a storm. Yet, if you seek *happiness outside of yourself*, you can never be happy, either: this is like waiting for the sunshine in a north-facing icy cave (as a Tibetan saying goes). Happiness can only arise for one who is not emotionally dependent on others and on things: true happiness can only be found in self-understanding and emotional independence. In a number of suttas,[23] the person who gains spiritual liberation by becoming a *stream-winner* is exulted in these words:[24]

> [He] saw the truth,[25] won the truth, knew the truth, plunged into the truth, crossed over doubt, abandoned uncertainty, who has gained self-confidence in the Teacher's Teaching, one independent of others.

You are not truly an *individual* if you are always seeking the approval of others, especially when you should be thinking for yourself what should rightly be done; or, if you are easily affected by the negative comments or attitudes of others. You may become merely a hollow figure to be filled in by the thoughts, actions and quirks of others, without a mind of your own. This is not to say that it is always good to think for yourself and not to be amenable to the feelings of others—that might make you an *individualist.*

A true individual is one who is independent of approval or disapproval; he examines praise and blame in like manner; he sees gain and loss as aspects of the same thing; he see happiness and sorrow as

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[21] **Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya S** (M 38) concludes with an interesting, broader explanation of how an unawakened person delights all kinds of feelings—whether pleasant, painful or neutral—"he delights in that feeling, welcomes it, and remains clinging to it." It also describes a Buddha responds to these feelings (M 38.30-41/ 1:266-271). See Introd above & also **Cūḷa,vedalla S** (M 44.25-28/1:303 f).

[22] See SD 17.3(2.1).

[23] The basic statement as at V 1:12; **Ambaṭṭha S** (D 3.2.21-22/1:110); **Kūṭadanta S** (D 5.29/1:149); **Cūḷa Saccaka S** (M 35.24/1:234, 26/1:235); **Upāli S** (M 18/1:380); **Mahā Vaccha,gotta S** (M 73.10/1:491); **Dīgha,-nakha S** (M 74.15/1:501); **Brahmāyu S** (M 91.36/2:145); **Sīha S** (A 8.12.9/4:186); **Ugga S 1** (A 8.21/4:209); **Ugga S 2** (A 8.22/4:214); **Kuṭṭhi S** (U 5.3/49).

[24] *Atha kho…diṭṭha,dhammo patta,dhammo vidita,dhammo pariyogāḷha,dhammo tiṇṇa,vicikiccho vigata,-kathaṁ,katho vesārajja-p,patto apara-p,paccayo satthu,sāsane.* For refs, see prec n.

[25] "The truth" (*dhamma*) here refers to the 4 noble truths. Having seen the truth for himself, he cuts off the fetter of doubt and now has "the noble and liberating view that accordingly leads the practitioner to the complete destruction of suffering" (*yā 'yaṁ diṭṭhi ariyā niyyānikā niyyāti tak,karassa sammā,dukkha-k,khayāya*, **Kosambiya S**, M 48.7/1:322)

mutually interconnected. This understanding broadens his mind to see how suffering arises in those who are in some way emotionally dependent on others. Just as a person with good eyes seeing a blind person or one who has lost his way, points out the safe and right way to them, the spiritual person spontaneously and wholesomely helps to others.[26]

The "normal" worldling is only happy *about* something, while the spiritual person is simply *happy*. Understandably, the spiritual person is never a hedonist (much less a pessimist), as the spiritual person has found a joy far beyond what any hedonist can ever imagine. This spiritual joy is so real, lasting and boundless, that he cannot imagine why others should not seek it or be deprived of it. Compassion is a natural character of the spiritually happy, and it inspires him to improve the lives of others, human and non-human, and to sustain an environment of joy wherever he is.

The true individual is happy here and now, as he is not dependent on any memory of some past joy, or the promise of some future gain. His understanding of the five precepts allows him to sustain an environment that respects life, others, and the environment. All this becomes his support for mental health and mindfulness that are the bases for liberating wisdom. Above all, he knows all this can be achieved in this very life itself, and not to be postponed to some future time or a new life.

2 A naturalistic view of rebirth

2.1 "DOES REBIRTH MAKE SENSE?"

2.1.1 Discourses on rebirth. As **Bhikkhu Bodhi** points out in his two short but instructive articles, both entitled "Does rebirth make sense?" (2001), newcomers to Buddhism are usually impressed with the clarity, directness and practicality of the Dharma as found in such teachings as the four noble truths, the noble eightfold path, and the threefold training. However, when the seeker, especially a westerner or one westernized, encounters the teaching of rebirth, he often balks, convinced that it does not makes sense. Even some scholars or modernists dismiss it as a piece of cultural baggage that the Buddha retains in deference to the worldview of his times. Others interpret it as a metaphor for the change of mental states, with the realms of rebirth serving as symbols for psychological types. Some even argue that the traditional texts on rebirth must be interpolations.

Even a quick glance of the Pali Canon would show that the rebirth doctrine is so widely and coherently present in it that to expunge it would be throwing out the bath-water with the baby! For example, when the suttas speak of rebirth in the five realms—the human world, the heavens, the preta realm, the animal world, and the hells—there is no hint that they are to be taken symbolically. On the contrary, the suttas often say that rebirth occurs "after death, when the body breaks up,"[27] which clearly means that rebirth is a real-life process.

Bodhi, in his articles, tries to show that the idea of rebirth makes sense in two ways: first, that it is *intelligible*, having intrinsic meaning as well as meaningful in relation to the Dharma as a whole; and second, that it helps us *to make sense of our place in the world*. He tries to establish this in relation to three domains of discourse: the ethical, the ontological, and the soteriological. However, to date, he has written only on the first two discourses. I have built some ideas on his helpful arguments, and will try to fill in the missing third discourse (the soteriological). There is a fourth one, that is, the scientific discourse on rebirth, but which we have discussed elsewhere,[28] and is here summarized first before going on to discuss the other discourses.

2.1.1 The scientific discourse. Scientists generally rejected rebirth or avoid discussing it because they are not agreed on how to "measure" rebirth. Rebirth research would not attract any funding because

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[26] On **emotional independence**, see further SD 13.1(3.10).

[27] *kāyassa bhedā param maraṇā:* **V** 1:227 f, 2:162, 3:5, 20, 72; **D** 1:83, 107, 143, 162, 245, 2:85, 141 f, 196, 250, 271, 320, 356, 3:52, 111, 181, 235; **M** 1:23, 71, 183, 279, 285, 287-289, 308, 334, 361, 403 ff, 2:21, 85 ff, 149, 262, 3:6 f, 99, 147, 171, 203 ff; **S** 1:94 f, 231, 2:83, 3:8, 109, 126, 207 f, 4:240, 307 f, 342 ff, 351, 5:266, 366 ff, 381; **A** 1:8, 9, 29-32, 48, 55-58, 63 f, 97, 138, 146 f, 164 f, 192 f, 202 f, 213 f, 256, 269 f, 281, 2:66, 85 f, 123, 128, 130, 3:3, 19, 33, 35, 38 f, 40-42, 147, 189, 225 f, 252 ff, 4:62, 77, 93, 129, 236, 5:69, 141, 220, 270, 301; **U** 50, 87; **It** 12, 14, 23 f, 35, 58 f, 73 f; **Nm** 211, 282, 356, 403; **Nc** 125, 135; **Vbh** 337; **Kvu** 256; **Pug** 51, 60.

[28] See SD 2.17(2).

it is unlikely to provide any material benefit. Neither the National Science Foundation (NSF) nor the National Institute of Health (NIH) is likely to fund such research, argues **B Alan Wallace**, because

> This is outside their paradigm. They're not interested in providing funding for things that challenge the foundation of materialism. So basically, it's like asking the Catholic Church to pay for research to show that Jesus never lived. (Wallace 2006b:5)[29]

The most obvious scientific objection to reincarnation is that there is *no evidence of a physical process by which a person could survive death and travel to another body*, and researchers such as Ian Stevenson recognize this limitation. Another fundamental objection is that *most people simply do not remember previous lives*.

Some skeptics dismiss claims of evidence for reincarnation as arising from *selective thinking*[30] or as the psychological phenomena of *false memories*[31] that often come from one's own belief system and basic fears, and thus cannot be counted as empirical evidence.[32]

2.2 THE ETHICAL DISCOURSE. First, in early Buddhism, the doctrine of rebirth makes sense in relation to *ethics*. In the ethical theory of early Buddhism, the teaching of rebirth provides an incentive for avoiding evil and doing good, in which context, it is related to the law of karma, "which asserts that our morally determinate actions, our wholesome and unwholesome deeds, have an inherent power to bring forth fruits that correspond to the moral quality of those deeds." (Bodhi 2001:2).

> It is only too obvious that such moral equilibrium cannot be found within the limits of a single life. We can observe, often poignantly, that morally unscrupulous people might enjoy happiness, esteem, and success, while people who lead lives of the highest integrity are bowed down beneath pain and misery. For the principle of moral equilibrium to work, some type of survival beyond the present life is required, for karma can bring its due retribution only if our individual stream of consciousness does not terminate with death. Two different forms of survival are possible: <u>on the one hand, an eternal afterlife in heaven or hell, on the other a sequence of rebirths</u>. Of these alternatives, the hypothesis of rebirth seems far more compatible with moral justice than an eternal afterlife; for any finite good action, it seems, must eventually exhaust its potency, and no finite bad action, no matter how bad, should warrant eternal damnation.
> (Bodhi 2001:2; emphasis added)

The naturalist might well be right in asserting that "the cosmos is largely indifferent to the sphere of human merit as well as to our expectations of justice" [1.1.1], and, like the God-idea, there seems to be no scientific way to prove the validity of karma and rebirth.[33] *The materialist* might even claim that personal existence ends with death, and with it all prospects for moral justice. "Nevertheless," argues **Bodhi**,

> I believe such a thesis flies in the face of one of our deepest moral intuitions, a sense that some kind of moral justice must ultimately prevail. To show that this is so, let us consider two limiting cases of ethically decisive action. As the limiting case of immoral action, let us take *Hitler, who*

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[29] The NIH has in fact spent more than US$21 million funding research on the effects of the Transcendental Meditation (TM) technique on heart disease. In 1999, the NIH awarded a grant of nearly US$8 million to Maharishi University of Management to establish the first research center specializing in natural preventive medicine for minorities in the US: http://www.usmedicine.com/article.cfm?articleID=47&issueID=12. However, that was a time when mindfulness meditation was not well known or used yet in the US.

[30] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selective_thinking.

[31] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/False_memory.

[32] See SD 2.17(2).

[33] But the similarity ends right here; for, as we shall soon see that a belief in karma and rebirth provide better option for a more moral but *safer* world than some sort of divine being would. Most of the global violence and terrorism we see today (the first decade of 21st century) are perpetrated by God-believers, motivated by religious and political goals or by meaninglessness in the present life.

was directly responsible for the dehumanizing deaths of perhaps ten million people. As the limiting case of moral action, let us consider *a man who sacrifices his own life to save the lives of total strangers*. Now if there is not survival beyond death, both men reap the same ultimate destiny. Before dying, perhaps, Hitler experiences some pangs of despair; the self-sacrificing hero enjoys a few seconds knowing he's performing a noble deed. Then beyond that—nothing, except in others' memories. Both are obliterated, reduced to lifeless flesh and bones.

Now the naturalist might be correct in drawing this conclusion, and in holding that those who believe in survival and retribution are just projecting their own wishes out upon the world. But I think something within us resists consigning both Hitler and our compassionate hero to the same fate. The reason we resist is because *we have a deep intuitive sense that a principle of moral justice is at work in the world, regulating the course of events in such a way that our good and bad actions rebound upon ourselves to bring the appropriate fruit*. Where the naturalist holds that this intuition amounts to nothing more than a projection of our own ideals out upon the world, I would contend that the very fact that we can conceive a demand for moral justice has a significance that is more than merely psychological. However vaguely, our subjective sense of moral justice reflects an objective reality, a principle of moral equilibrium that is not mere projection but is built into the very bedrock of actuality.

The above considerations are not intended to make belief in rebirth a necessary basis for ethics. The Buddha himself does not try to found ethics on the ideas of karma and rebirth, but uses *a purely naturalistic type of moral reasoning* that does not presuppose personal survival or the working of karma. The gist of his reasoning is simply that *we should not mistreat others*—by injuring them, stealing their belongings, exploiting them sexually, or deceiving them—*because we ourselves are averse to being treated in such ways*. Nevertheless, though the Buddha does not *found* ethics on the theory of rebirth, he does make belief in karma and rebirth *a strong inducement to moral behavior*. When we recognize that our good and bad actions can rebound upon ourselves, determining our future lives and bringing us happiness or suffering, this gives us a decisive reason to avoid unwholesome conduct and to diligently pursue the good.

(Bodhi 2001:2 f; emphases added)

The naturalistic moral reasoning is more commonly known as the golden rule or the ethic of reciprocity, and is a universal notion found in all the major world religions and philosophies.[34] It simply means "treat others as you would like to be treated," and is arguably the most essential basis for the concept of human rights or common decency. A locus classicus for the Buddha's golden rule is well defined in **the Veḷudvāreyya Sutta** (S 55.7), here presented in full:

(1) TRAINING AGAINST KILLING.

"Here, householders, a noble disciple reflects thus:

'I am one who wishes to live, who does not wish to die. I desire happiness and dislike suffering. Since I am one who wishes to live…and dislike suffering, if someone were to take my life, that would not be pleasing and agreeable to me

[34] "Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself: I am the Lord." (**Torah**, Leviticus 19.18; cf Matthew 22.39, Luke 10.27). "And if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not vex him. But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." (Torah, Leviticus 19.33-34). "And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise." (**Jesus**, c5 BCE-32 CE, Matthew 7.12, Luke 6.31). "This is the sum of duty; do not unto others what you would not have them do unto you." (***Mahabharata*** 5.15.17, c500 BCE). "What you do not wish upon yourself, do not to others." (**Confucius**, c551-479 BCE). "What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow man." (Hillel, c50 BCE-10 CE). "None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself." (Muhammad, c571-632 CE, Sahîh al-Bukhâri & Sahîh Muslim, a hadith).

Now, if I were to take the life of another—of one who wishes to live, who does not wish to die, who desires happiness and dislikes suffering—that would not be desirable and agreeable to him, too.

What is undesirable and disagreeable to me is undesirable and disagreeable to others, too. How can I inflict upon another what is undesirable and disagreeable to me?'

Having reflected thus, he himself refrains from harming life, exhorts others to refrain from harming life, and speaks in praise of refraining from harming life.[35]

Thus, his bodily conduct is purified in three respects.[36]

(2) TRAINING AGAINST TAKING THE NOT-GIVEN.

Furthermore, householders, a noble disciple reflects thus:

'If someone were to take from me what I have not given, that is, to steal from me, that would not be desirable nor agreeable to me. Now, if I were to take from another what he has not given, that is, to steal from him, that would not be desirable nor agreeable to him, too.

What is undesirable and disagreeable to me is undesirable and disagreeable to others, too. How can I inflict upon another what is undesirable and disagreeable to me?'

Having reflected thus, he himself refrains from taking the not-given, exhorts others to refrain from taking the not-given, and speaks in praise of refraining from taking the not-given.

Thus, his bodily conduct is purified in three respects.

(3) TRAINING AGAINST SEXUAL MISCONDUCT.

Furthermore, householders, a noble disciple reflects thus:

'If someone were to have sex with my wives,[37] that would not be desirable nor agreeable to me. Now, if I were to have sex with the wives of another, that would not be desirable nor agreeable to him, too.

What is undesirable and disagreeable to me is undesirable and disagreeable to others, too. How can I inflict upon another what is undesirable and disagreeable to me?'

Having reflected thus, he himself refrains from sexual misconduct, exhorts others to refrain from sexual misconduct, and speaks in praise of refraining from sexual misconduct.

Thus, his bodily conduct is purified in three respects.

(4) TRAINING AGAINST FALSE SPEECH.

Furthermore, householders, a noble disciple reflects thus:

'If someone were to damage my welfare with false speech, that would not be desirable nor agreeable to me. Now, if I were to damage the welfare of someone else with false speech, **[355]** that would not be desirable nor agreeable to him, too.

What is undesirable and disagreeable to me is undesirable and disagreeable to others, too. How can I inflict upon another what is undesirable and disagreeable to me?'

Having reflected thus, he himself refrains from false speech, exhorts others to refrain from false speech, and speaks in praise of refraining from false speech.

Thus, his bodily conduct is purified in three respects.

(5) Training against divisive speech.

Furthermore, householders, a noble disciple reflects thus:

'If someone were to divide me from my friends by divisive speech, that would not be desirable nor agreeable to me. Now, if I were to divide someone else from his friends by divisive speech, that would not be desirable nor agreeable to him, too.

What is undesirable and disagreeable to me is undesirable and disagreeable to others, too. How can I inflict upon another what is undesirable and disagreeable to me?'

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[35] "[H]e himself refrains from harming life, exhorts others to refrain from harming life," that is, one keeps the Precepts oneself and encourages others to do the same: this is "one who lives both for his own good and for the good of others" (**Atta,hita S,** A 4.96/2:96 f; **Sikkhā S, A** 4.99/2:98 f). "[He] speaks in praise of refraining from harming life" refers to spiritual friendship and the practice of altruistic joy (*muditā*).

[36] See previous note.

[37] *me dāresu,* lit. "with my womenfolk.

Having reflected thus, he himself refrains from divisive speech, exhorts others to refrain from divisive speech, and speaks in praise of refraining from divisive speech.

Thus, his bodily conduct is purified in three respects.

(6) Training against harsh speech.

Furthermore, householders, a noble disciple reflects thus:

'If someone were to address me with harsh speech, that would not be desirable nor agreeable to me. Now, if I were to address someone else with harsh speech, that would not be desirable nor agreeable to him, too.

What is undesirable and disagreeable to me is undesirable and disagreeable to others, too. How can I inflict upon another what is undesirable and disagreeable to me?'

Having reflected thus, he himself refrains from harsh speech, exhorts others to refrain from harsh speech, and speaks in praise of refraining from harsh speech.

Thus, his bodily conduct is purified in three respects.

(7) Training against frivolous talk.

Furthermore, householders, a noble disciple reflects thus:

'If someone were to address me with frivolous talk and idle chatter, that would not be desirable nor agreeable to me. Now, if I were to address someone else with frivolous talk and idle chatter, that would not be desirable nor agreeable to him, too.

What is undesirable and disagreeable to me is undesirable and disagreeable to others, too. How can I inflict upon another what is undesirable and disagreeable to me?'

Having reflected thus, he himself refrains from frivolous talk and idle chatter, exhorts others to refrain from frivolous talk and idle chatter, and speaks in praise of refraining from frivolous talk and idle chatter.

Thus, his bodily conduct is purified in three respects. (S 55.7.6-12/5:353-355) = SD 1.5

This training of the body and speech forms the bases of Buddhist moral virtue, which in turn conduces to mental development for the realization of right view and spiritual liberation.

The Buddha includes belief in rebirth and karma in his definition of right view, and their explicit denial in wrong view, as found in this stock passage:

Here again, he is **one has right view**, without distorted vision, thinking,

"There is what is given, what is offered, what is sacrificed.

There is fruit and result of good or evil actions.

There is this world, there is the next world.

There is mother, there is father.

There are spontaneously born beings.

There are brahmins and recluses who, living rightly and practising rightly, having directly known and realized for themselves this world and the hereafter, proclaim them."[38]

We have here a classic example of *normative ethics* where certain beliefs and practices are *prescribed* as constituting "right view," that is, a mental attitude that is the basis for spiritual liberation (and also its result). In the first line of the prescriptive passage, *charity* is said to be efficacious. Line two is a statement on karma, followed immediately by that on rebirth and other planes of existence. Line four concerns

[38] *Sammā,diṭṭhiko kho pana hoti aviparīta,dassano: Atthi dinnaṁ atthi yiṭṭhaṁ atthi hutaṁ, atthi sukaṭa,dukkaṭaṁ kammānaṁ phalaṁ vipāko, atthi ayaṁ loko atthi paro loko, atthi mātā atthi pitā, atthi sattā opapātikā, atthi loke samaṇa,brāhmaṇā sammaggatā sammā,paṭipannā ye imañ ca lokaṁ parañ ca lokaṁ sayam abhiññā sacchikatvā pavedentî ti:* **M** 1:289, 291, 402, 3:24, 52, 72; **S** 4:349, 352, 356; **A** 1:269, 270, 271, 5:268, 285, 296; **Nm** 1:188. See **A** 10.206.10/5:296 = SD 3.9. The stock passage for wrong view is more numerous: **D** 3:264, 287; **M** 1:287, 291, 401 f, 515 (x2), 3:22, 52, 71; **S** 3:206, 207 (x3), 208 (x2), 4:348, 351, 355; **A** 1:268, 270, 271, 4:226, 5:265, 284; **Nc**:VRI 249 (x2).

the bases of family and society. Line five refers to celestial beings.[39] The last line declares that there is the spiritual life and the possibility of spiritual knowledge (or more specifically, that of rebirth and other realms).

Karma and rebirth work in tandem to provide harmonious communal living and as the bases for the spiritual life. In either case, whether one lives a home life or as a renunciant, karma and rebirth form the matrix of an ethical life. The purpose of the ethical life is not the harvesting of good karma, but rather that it inspires and empowers one's commitment to ethical ideals.

The principles behind karma and rebirth explain that much of our present living conditions—our aptitudes and dispositions, our virtues and vices—are rooted in past karma and previous lives. This understanding allows us to work with the present conditions to our spiritual advantage, and also so that we can face the future with fortitude and courage. No matter how weak or disadvantaged we may be, we can still transform ourselves, surmount the outer and inner obstacles, and advance towards true happiness here and now, if not hereafter. In short, *karma and rebirth entail personal accountability and moral responsibility*.

2.3 THE ONTOLOGICAL DISCOURSE. The teachings of karma and rebirth have a still deeper ethical significance than as simple pointers to moral responsibility. They show us not only that our personal lives are shaped by our own karma, but also that we live in an ethically meaningful universe. When karma and rebirth are viewed in the broader perspective of the universe, we begin to have a sense of cosmic order that transcends the physical. Such a cosmos is ordered not only in the physical, biological and mental dimensions but also the ethical. Although this ethical order may not be immediately palpable, and cannot be detected by scientific measurements, this does not mean it is not real. Here we are dealing with our minds and hearts, with our feelings, thoughts, emotions and motivations. None of these can be measured scientifically or otherwise, but they are very real, for they constitute our very being.

By conforming to the principles of ethics, we are in fact aligning ourselves with the Dharma, the universal law of righteousness and true reality behind the cosmos. This brings us to the *ontological* aspect of the Buddhist teaching on rebirth, its implications for understanding the nature of being. Rebirth works as an integral part of interdependent conditionality that links up all existence. The sentient universe is regulated by *different orders of conditionality* layered in such a way that higher orders of conditionality (karma) can exercise dominion over lower ones (physical, biological and psychological causation).[40] In this way, karma autonomously governs the process of rebirth, bending the lower orders of conditionality towards the realization of its own potential, working as naturally as the seeds and plants that flower and bear fruit according to their conditions under which they live. **Bodhi** explains further:

> To understand how karma can produce its effects across the succession of rebirths we must invert our normal, everyday conception of the relationship between consciousness and matter. Under the influence of materialistic biases we assume that material existence is determinative of consciousness. Because we witness bodies being born into this world and observe how the mind matures in tandem with the body, we tacitly take the body to be the foundation of our existence and mind or consciousness an evolutionary offshoot of blind material processes. Matter wins the honored status of "objective reality," and mind becomes an accidental intruder upon an inherently senseless universe.
>
> From the Buddhist perspective, however, consciousness and the world coexist in a relationship of mutual creation which equally require both terms. Just as there can be no consciousness without a body to serve as its physical support and a world as its sphere of cognition, so there can be no physical organism and no world without some type of consciousness to constitute them as an organism and world. Though temporally neither mind nor matter can be regarded as prior to the other, in terms of practical importance the Buddha says that mind is the forerunner. Mind is

[39] Said of a non-returner (D 1:156, 2:92 f, 200 f, 203, 252, 3:107 f, 132; M 1:34, 226; S 5:346; A 1:232); cf D 1:27. Cf Vbh 412; Dhs 1215 (DhsA 386). As one of the 4 forms of birth (*yoni*): the oviparous or egg-born (*aṇḍajā yoni*), the viviparous or womb-born (*jalābujā yoni*), the moisture-born (*saṁsedajā yoni*), the spontaneously-born (*opapātikā yoni*) (D 3:230; M 1:73; Miln 127; Vism 552).

[40] On the 5 natural orders (*niyāma*), see **Sīvaka S** (S 36.21/4:230 f) = SD 5.6(2).

the forerunner, not in the sense that it arises before the body or can exist independently of a physical substratum, but in the sense that the body and the world in which we find ourselves reflect our mental activity. (Bodhi 2001:5; emphases added)

Karma is volitional mental activity, and it is such a store of mental activities that direct the stream of consciousness from the past life into a new body, and into the present, where the past goes on encroaching on us, influencing the way we perceive things and how we react to them, and so perpetuating itself. In **the (Kāya) Na Tumha Sutta** (S 12.37) the Buddha says:

> Bhikshus, this body is not yours, nor does it belong to others.[41]
> It is to be regarded as old karma,[42] put together, willed, something to be felt.[43]
> (S 12.37/2:64) = SD 5.14.

"Old karma" and related terms are explained in **the (Nava Purāṇa) Kamma Sutta** (S 35.146) based on the framework of the four noble truth (here given in slightly abridged form):

> **2** Bhikshus, I will teach you new and old karma, the ending of karma, and the way to the ending of karma. Listen, pay close attention to it, I will speak.
> **3** (1) And what, bhikshus, is **old karma**?
> The eye, bhikshus, is to be regarded as old karma, put together, willed, something to be felt.
> The ear,…The nose,…The tongue,…The body,…
> The mind, bhikshus, is to be regarded as old karma, put together, willed, something to be felt.
> —This, bhikshus, is called old karma.
> **4** (2) And what, bhikshus, is **new karma**?
> Whatever deed, bhikshus, one does now through the body, through speech, through the mind—this, bhikshus, is called new karma.[44]
> **5** (3) And what, bhikshus, is **the ending of karma**?
> When, bhikshus, one reaches liberation with the ending of these deeds of the body, of speech, and of the mind—this, bhikshus, is called the ending of karma.
> **6** (4) And what, bhikshus, is called **the path leading to the ending of karma**?
> It is this noble eightfold path,…
> —This, bhikshus, is the path leading to the ending of karma.
> **7** Thus, bhikshus, have I taught old karma, taught new karma, taught the ending of karma, taught the path leading to the ending of karma.
> **8** Bhikshus, whatever a teacher should do out of compassion for the good of disciples, for the sake of their welfare, it has been done to you by me
> **9** These, bhikshus, are the foot of trees;[45] these are empty houses.[46] Meditate, bhikshus! Be not heedless! Regret not later!
> This is our instruction to you. (S 35.146/4:132 f) = SD 4.12

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[41] Comy: Since there actually is no self, there is nothing belonging to a self; thus it is said: "It is not yours" (*na tumha*). And since there is no self of others, too, it is said, "Nor does it belong to others" (*na pi aññesaṁ*) (SA 2:70).

[42] Comy explains that the body is not "old karma" but because it arises from old karma, it is referred to in terms of its conditions. It is seen as "put together" (*abhisaṅkhata*) since it is created by conditions. It is "willed" (*abhisañ-cetayita*) because it is based on volition (the will), rooted in volition. It is "something to be felt" (*vedaniya*) because it is the support for what is to be felt [ie the basis and object for feeling] (SA 2:70, 402). See **Nava Purāṇa Kamma S** (S 35.146) = SD 4.12 Introd.

[43] *Vedaniya,* lit "to be felt," "a basis for feeling"; "intelligible" (DPL); "(a) to be known, intelligible, comprehensible (D 1:12, 2:36; M 1:487, 2:220); (b) to be experienced (S 4:114; A 1:249, 4:382" (PED: vedeti).

[44] In other words, "new karma" here refers to the 3rd noble truth, the arising of suffering.

[45] "Those are the foot of trees," *etāni rukkha,mūlāni.* "Foot" here is usually single, like "bottom".

[46] Sometimes rendered as "empty place".

"Old karma" here refers to the whole physical body as well as its sense-faculties: our eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind faculties have been fashioned by our past karma, which to some degree filters and shapes our sensory experiences, that is, how we see things and how we respond through the three doors (physical acts, speech, and thoughts), our "new karma." Ultimately, it is our volition (*cetanā*), our deliberate and habitual acts (through body, speech and mind),[47] that shape out present and future lives. Bodhi explains:

> When we encounter suitable external conditions, the karmic seeds deposited in our mental continuum rise up from their dormant condition and produce their fruits. The most important function performed by karma is to generate rebirth into an appropriate realm, a realm that provides a field for it to unfold its stored potentials. The bridge between the old existence and the new is, as we said above, the evolving stream of consciousness. It is within this stream of consciousness that the karma has been created through the exercise of volition; it is this same stream of consciousness, flowing on, that carries the karmic energies into the new existence; and it is again this same stream of consciousness that experiences the fruit. Conceivably, at the deepest level all the individual streams of consciousness are integrated into a single all-embracing matrix, so that, <u>beneath the surface of events, the separate karmic accumulations of all living beings crisscross, overlap, and merge</u>. This hypothesis—though speculative—would help account for the strange coincidences we sometimes meet that prick holes in our assumptions of rational order.
>
> (Bodhi 2004:6; emphasis added)

The generative function of karma in the generating of new existences is described by the Buddha in a short but pithy text called **the Bhava Sutta** (A 3.76):

> **1**a Then, the venerable Ānanda approached the Blessed One. Having approached the Blessed One, he saluted him, and sat down at one side. Seated thus as one side, the venerable Ānanda said this to the Blessed One:
>
> "'Existence! Existence!' venerable sir, so it is said. How does existence occur?"
>
> **1b** "Now, Ānanda, if there were no karma ripening in the sense-realm, would there appear any sense-realm existence?
>
> "No indeed, bhante."
>
> "Even so, Ānanda, <u>karma</u> is the field, <u>consciousness</u> is the seed, <u>craving</u> is the moisture, for the consciousness of beings, hindered by <u>ignorance</u> and fettered by <u>craving</u>, to be established in a *low* realm. Thus, Ānanda, there is further rebirth. Thus, Ānanda, there is existence."
>
> **2** "Now, Ānanda, if there were no karma ripening in the form-realm, would there appear any form- realm existence?
>
> "No indeed, bhante."
>
> "Even so, Ānanda, <u>karma</u> is the field, <u>consciousness</u> is the seed, <u>craving</u> is the moisture, for the consciousness of beings, hindered by <u>ignorance</u> and fettered by <u>craving</u>, to be established in a *middling* realm. Thus, Ānanda, there is further rebirth. Thus, Ānanda, there is existence."
>
> **3** "Now, Ānanda, if there were no karma ripening in the formless realm, would there appear any formless realm existence?
>
> "No indeed, bhante."
>
> "Even so, Ānanda, <u>karma</u> is the field, <u>consciousness</u> is the seed, <u>craving</u> is the moisture, for the consciousness of beings, hindered by <u>ignorance</u> and fettered by <u>craving</u>, to be established in a *subtle* realm. Thus, Ānanda, there is further rebirth. Thus, Ānanda, there is existence."
>
> (A 3.76/1:223 f) = SD 23.13

[47] On how karma can be unconscious, see **The unconscious mind** = SD 17.8b.

Here, the phrase "hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving" (*avijjā,nivaraṇānaṁ…taṇhā,saṁyojanānaṁ*) refers to the twin roots of rebirth: not knowing true reality, one keeps on grasping at life.

At the time of death, an especially powerful karma arises and pushes the stream of consciousness to a realm of existence corresponding to its own karmic character. When consciousness (the seed) is planted or "established" in that realm, it sprouts forth into the psycho-physical organism, a process technically called "name-and-form" (*nāma,rūpa*).[48] As the organism matures, it provides the site for other past karma to take root and fruit. Then, reacting to various karmically induced experiences, we engage in actions producing new karma with the capacity to generate still another rebirth. In this way, the round of existence keeps turning from one life to the next, that is, the stream of consciousness, propelled by craving and steered by karma, continues to embody itself in various births.

The significance of the Buddhist teaching on karma and rebirth is that *we are the true masters of our own destiny*. Through unwholesome actions, rooted in greed, hate and delusion, we produce unwholesome karma that further creates present and future misery and bondage. Through wholesome actions, rooted in generosity, compassion and wisdom, we beautify the mind and enjoy present and future happiness. Wisdom allows us to see through the false face of things into the true reality below the appearances that had preoccupied us. In this way, the defilements can be uprooted and we will in due course win the freedom beyond karma and rebirth.

2.4 THE SOTERIOLOGICAL DISCOURSE. We need a *naturalistic* vision of rebirth, even if it is not easily self-evident through our human senses. Naturalistic Buddhism can be an effective way of experiencing Buddhism as the Buddha taught it. Even if the idea of "original Buddhism" or "early Buddhism" is only a theoretical possibility or an academic construction, it is a far better spiritual option than later, cultural forms of Buddhism—that is, if one is interested in self-awakening.

A naturalistic understanding and acceptance of the teaching of rebirth entails neither belief in a supreme being nor any kind of insuperable determinism. Omitting various recorded "proofs," both circumstantial (testimonies of the faithful)[49] and scientific (such as those by Ian Stevenson and others),[50] I present two compelling reasons for a naturalistic belief in rebirth: (1) the cycle of nature, and (2) the Buddha's teachings.

2.4.1 The cycles of nature. Nature consists of unending cycles and cycles within cycles. There are the cycle of day and night, the lunar cycle (phases of the moon), seasonal changes, the tides, the solar cycle (the earth rotating around the sun), the water cycle, the food cycle (or food chain), the carbon dioxide and carbon cycle, the nitrogen cycle, energy cycle (eg the greenhouse effect) and life cycles (in humans, animals, and plants).[51] Of special interest here is the plant life cycle, that is, there are seeds, that germinate into plants, that flower, that are pollinated and fertilized, that fruit, and that seed, and so the cycle goes on.

The human life cycle is like the plant life cycle: there are the spermatozoa and the ova, the fertilization and gestation process, the child growing up into an adult, who repeats the cycle. For the materialist, this process begins at birth and ends with the death of the individual. Although human or biological survival after death is at best theoretical or speculative, this limitation can be said to be that of our current level of human knowledge. If all the vital processes of the universe go in cycles, why not human and animal lives?

2.4.2 The Buddha's teachings. The most compelling internal evidence for the Buddha's teaching of rebirth is found in stock passages on the supernormal knowledges (*abhiññā*) of the arhat, especially the

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[48] On *nāma,rūpa,* see SD 17.2a(12). For the full causal sequence, see **Cetanā S 2** (S 12.39) = SD 7.6b & also **Moḷiya Phagguna S** (S 12.12/2:13). On the interdependence of name-and-form and consciousness, see **Mahā,nidāna S** (D 15.22/2:63) = SD 5.17 or SD 7.6. On the reverse process, see **Cetanā S 2** (S 12.39) = SD 7.6b or SD 17.8a(6.1).

[49] See eg Francis Story, *Rebirth as Doctrine and Experience: Essays and Case Studies*, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1975.

[50] See eg http://www.healthsystem.virginia.edu/internet/personalitystudies/case_types.cfm.

[51] On some of these cycles, see http://www.trinity.wa.edu.au/plduffyrc/subjects/science/cycle.htm.

knowledges of the recollection of past lives and of the rebirth of beings, such as those found in **the Sāmaññ,phala Sutta** (D 2), here given in full:

1 The knowledge of rebirth.[52]

95 With his mind thus concentrated, purified, and bright, unblemished, free from defects, pliant, malleable, steady and utterly unshakable, he directs and inclines it to **the knowledge of the recollection of past lives**. He recollects manifold past existence, that is to say, one birth, two births, three births, four births, five births, ten births, twenty births, thirty births, forty births, fifty births, one hundred births, one thousand births, one hundred thousand births, many aeons of cosmic contraction, many aeons of cosmic expansion, many aeons of cosmic contraction and expansion, thus:

'There I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance. Such was my food, such my experience of pleasure and pain, such the end of my life. Passing away from that state, I re-arose there. There too I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance. Such was my food, such my experience of pleasure and pain, such my life-span. Passing away from that state, I re-arose here.'

Thus, maharajah, he recollects his manifold past lives in their modes and details.[53]

96 PARABLE OF THE TRAVELLER. Just as if a man were to go from his home village to another village, and then from that village to yet another village, and then from that village back to his home village. The thought would occur to him,

'I went from my home village to that village over there. There I stood in such a way, sat in such a way, talked in such a way, and remained silent in such a way. From that village I went to that village over there, and there I stood in such a way, sat in such a way, talked in such a way, and remained silent in such a way. From that village I came back home';[54]

Even so, maharajah, with his mind thus *concentrated,* he recollects his manifold past lives...in their modes and details.

This, too, maharajah, is a fruit of recluseship, visible here and now, more excellent than the previous ones and more sublime.

2 The knowledge of karma.[55]

97 THE DIVINE EYE. With his mind thus *concentrated,* he directs and inclines it to **the knowledge of the passing away and re-arising of beings**. He sees—by means of the divine eye [clairvoyance],[56] purified and surpassing the human—beings passing away and re-arising, and he knows how they are inferior and superior, beautiful and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate, in the heavens, in the suffering states, faring in accordance with their karma:

'These beings—who were endowed with evil conduct of body, speech, and mind, who reviled the noble ones, held wrong views and undertook actions under the influence of wrong views—after death, when the body has broken up, have re-arisen in a plane of misery, an evil destination, a lower realm, in hell.

But these beings—who were endowed with good conduct of body, speech, and mind, who did not revile the noble ones, who held right views and undertook actions under the influence of right views—after death, when the body has broken up, have reappeared in a happy destination, in heaven.'

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[52] *Pubbe,nivāsanânussati,ñāṇa*, lit "the knowledge of the recollection of past abiding [existence]."

[53] This knowledge is detailed at Vism 13.13-71/411-423.

[54] The 3 villages are the world of sense-desire, the form world, and the formless world (DA).

[55] *Cutûpapāta ñāṇa,* "the knowledge of the passing away and arising (of beings)," or "knowledge of rebirth according to karma" (*yathā,kammûpaga ñāṇa*), or "the divine eye" (*dibba,cakkhu*): see foll n.

[56] *Dibba,cakkhu*, clairvoyance, not to be confused with the Dharma-eye (*dhamma,cakkhu*) (see n in §104). On the relationship of this knowledge to the 62 grounds for wrong views, see **Brahma,jāla S** (D 1) = SD 25.3(76.3). See pre c.

Thus, maharajah, by means of the divine eye, he sees beings passing away and re-arising, and *how they fare according to* their karma.

98 THE PARABLE OF THE CITY SQUARE.[57] Maharajah, just as if there were a mansion in the central square [where four roads meet], and a man with good eyesight standing on top of it were to see people entering a house, leaving it, wandering along the carriage-road, and sitting down in the central square [where four roads meet]. The thought would occur to him,

'These people are entering a house, leaving it, walking along the streets, and sitting down in the central square [where four roads meet].'[58]

Even so, maharajah, with his mind thus *concentrated,* he sees by means of the divine eye, how beings *fare in accordance* with their karma.

This, too, maharajah, is a fruit of recluseship, visible here and now, more excellent than the previous ones and more sublime. (D 2.95-98/1:81-83) = SD 8.10

It should be noted that these knowledges are not accessible by way of our ordinary senses, but are attained only by the meditator, "with his mind thus concentrated, purified, and bright, unblemished, free from defects, pliant, malleable, steady and utterly unshakable," which he "directs and inclines it to" that those direct knowledges (*abhiññā*). Buddhism, in other words, claim that there is a source of knowledge beyond the five physical senses: this direct knowledge is *the mind*—the sixth sense—at its supreme best. While the first direct knowledge is traditionally taken as the internal evidence for the Buddha's teaching of *rebirth*, the second is the evidence for the teaching of *karma*.

3 Rebirth without a soul

3.1 HOW DOES REBIRTH OCCUR WITHOUT A SOUL? This is one of the most difficult Buddhist questions, the answer of which is simply incomprehensible to those who are unable to let of the notion of the soul or an abiding entity. In fact, the process of rebirth without any abiding entity is easier to explain than that with an abiding entity. The impossibility of an abiding entity (such as a soul) is very simple to prove.

The proof against the existence of an eternal soul goes like this: there are only two possible kinds of existence, that is, the physical and the mental (the "spirit" is an imaginary concept, so it is omitted here). Whatever exists must exist either physically or mentally. In either case, the existence has to be *impermanent.* Conclusion: if any soul exists, it must be impermanent; hence, there is no such thing as an eternal soul.

But how does rebirth occur *without* a soul? It is a common notion amongst adherents of the Theravāda Abhidhamma tradition that we exist on only a "moment to moment" basis. We are but a series of mental events that rush by so fast that they are almost unnoticeable. All things really start from and exist on only one thought at a time like a rotating *wheel* that touches the flat plane at the tangent. Or, a movie film strip that gives one the impression of movement and emotions on the screen when we are actually only looking at one frame at a time at high speed and our mind fills in the rest![59] Just as death is only a thought moment, so is birth and rebirth. Many people, however, take the process of rebirth quite literally, that is, as one person becoming another. In a way this notion is true but not completely true; for one has mistaken a momentary manifestation or event to be a "fixed" existence.

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[57] On this parable, see also SD 2.17(8).

[58] On the significance of this simile in confirming canonical acceptance of the intermediate state (*antarā,bhava*), see "**Is Rebirth Immediate?**" = SD 2.17.8.

[59] In the silent movie films, the eye perceives motion as being fluid at about 16-18 fps (frames per second), partly because of its blurring. Modern theatre films (both celluloid and digital) run at 24 fps. At 50 fps of very sharp images, your eyes would make out more details, and there is no "retinal persistence" of the intervals of darkness. The eye is unable to perceive the breaks! See http://thebrain.mcgill.ca/flash/a/a_02/a_02_s/a_02_s_vis/a_02_s_vis.html.

The key to understanding the problem of rebirth without an abiding entity lies in two words: *inter-dependence* and *continuity*.[60] The word "car," for example, refers to the totality of its parts, but we cannot take any single piece of it (say the steering-wheel, the bonnet, or a cam-shaft) and call it "car."[61] In the same way, a human being is made up of parts, namely, the four elements (earth, water, fire and wind), or in modern terms, solidity, fluidity, heat and gas (that is, the four phases of matter), plus consciousness.

The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (D 22; M 10) contains a very useful (albeit somewhat gruesome) simile for understanding the purpose of *meditating on the four elements*, that is, the simile of the butchered cow:

> Just as a skilled butcher or his apprentice, having slaughtered a cow, were to sit at the cross-roads with the carcass divided into portions, so, too, a monk reviews this body, however it may be placed or disposed, in terms of the elements, thus:
>
> "There are in this body
>
> (1) the earth-element (*paṭhavi*),
> (2) the water-element (*āpo*),
> (3) the fire-element (*tejo*),
> (4) the wind-element (*vāyo*)." (D 22.6/2:294 = M 10.12/1:57 f) = SD 13.2-3

The Commentaries explain this simile of the butchered cow in terms of meditation of the four elements (but the explanation serves us here, too). A butcher, having fed and raised a cow, in due course takes it to the shambles, ties it to a post and slaughters it. Up to this point, the butcher still has the notion of it being a "cow." If someone were to ask him what he is doing, he may reply, for example, "I am feeding the cow," or "I am killing the cow." Even after the cow has been slaughtered, but before he has dismembered it, he still maintains the notion that it is a cow.[62]

3.2 WHO THEN IS REBORN?[63] **The Milinda,pañha** records that when the Greek king Milinda asks the monk Nāgasena this question, the latter answers, "It is name-and-form, maharajah, that reconnects (*paṭisandahati*)." [2.3]. When the king further asks "What does name-and-form reconnect to?" Nāgasena politely says that the question is wrongly put, and adds: "Maharajah, by means of this name-and-form one does karma, good and bad, by that karma, one reconnects to another name-and-form."[64] In other word, it is karma that generates a new "being" from moment to moment.[65] And because this re-connecting goes on ceaselessly, one is not free from rebirth and suffering.

What is reborn is a very rudimentary form of the consciousness, which like a tiny seed that sprouts, under the right conditions, into a tree. However, it is important to understand that it is all *a continuous process of discrete mental moments*. The Milinda,pañha gives the following list of similes to demonstrate this:

- A man steals another's mangos claiming that they were different from those planted by the owner.
- A man lights a fire and leaves it, and it burns a neighbour's field, but the man pleads innocence on the ground that it is a different fire.
- A light in a man's house sets the village afire, but but the man pleads innocence on the ground that it is a different fire.
- A man marries a girl earlier betrothed to another, but claims that she is a different woman.
- A man asks for some milk, but when left for a day, it curdles, and the man insists on having the milk he has asked for, not the curds.

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[60] For a summary of the arguments given in Miln, see Collins 1982:182-188 (§§6.1.2-6.2).

[61] Miln 25; cf "there is no occurrence of a being in the ultimate sense" (*paramatthena sattûpaladdhi natthi*) (Miln 268).

[62] See **Bhava S** (A 3.76) at (3.3) above.

[63] *Ko paṭisandahati,* lit "who reconnects?" ie who is linked to a new life.

[64] *Iminā pana mahārāja nāma,rūpena kammaṁ karoti sobhanaṁ vā pāpakaṁ vā, tena kammena aññaṁ nāma,-rūpaṁ paṭisandahatî ti.*

[65] For a summary of the canonical rebuttal of a "person," see Collins 1982:178-182 (§6.1.1).

In all these cases, the arguments are to be *rejected* because in each case, the events are *connected in the same sequence*, the latter being "produced from" the former; "even so, maharajah, for whatever name-and-form that that ends with death, another name-and-form is reconnected, arising from just that former one."[66] (Miln 48). As **Rupert Gethin** summarizes it:

> …I cannot say, by appeal to the teaching of no self, claim that it was not I who robbed the bank yesterday but some other person who no longer exists, since the teaching of no self states quite categorically that the "I" who exists today only exists by virtue of its dependence upon the "I" that existed yesterday; there is a definite causal connection. (Gethin 1998:144)

In the same way, the being that dies and the one that is reborn as a result is "neither the same not different" (*na ca so na ca añño*) (Miln 40 f). Take these similes for example:

- A tender infant who is now a full grown adult.
- The flame of a candle burning at differing times in the same night.
- Milk turning into curds, then into butter, then into ghee.

In another well known simile, *a signet ring makes its impression on hot wax*, but nothing from the ring is transferred to the impression.[67] A further example comes from the Greek philosopher, Heraclitus (late 6th cent), who declared that, "You cannot step in the same river twice."[68] Similarly, in the Complex Systems Theory, there is *autopoiesis,* the process of a system (especially a biological system) that keeps its basic form but replaces itself with new material.[69]

British philosopher, **Derek Parfit**, who specializes in problems of personal identity, rationality and ethics, and their relationship, sums up the ideas here with this pithy comment:[70]

> If I say, "It will not be me, but one of my future selves," I do not imply that I will be that future self. He is one of my later selves, and I am one of his earlier selves. There is no underlying person who we both are. (Parfit 1971:25)

I will now briefly mention one last point, before we return to our study of virtue, and this concerns what happens *between* rebirths.

3.3 IS REBIRTH IMMEDIATE? Opinion is divided even today as to **whether rebirth is immediate or that there is an intermediate state in between rebirths**. Certain traditional Theravāda teachers reject the doctrine of the intermediate state (*antarā,bhava*), claiming that the Buddha did not teach it.[71] The earliest reference to the doctrine of "immediate rebirth" is found in **the Milinda,pañha,** where king Milinda asks the question: "Who is reborn faster: one who is reborn in the Brahma world or one who is reborn in Kashmir?"

Nāgasena answers that both of them are reborn in equal time, and gives two similes. In the first simile, Nāgasena asks Milinda to think of two places—one 200 leagues away (Kashmir) and another just 12 leagues away (Kalasi)—and asks the king how fast he needs to think of either of them. The king answers that he takes equal time. The second simile is a classic one:

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[66] *Evam eva kho mahārāja kiñcāpi aññaṁ maraṇantikaṁ nāma,rūpaṁ aññaṁ paṭisandhismiṁ nāma,rūpaṁ, api ca tato yeva taṁ nibbattaṁ.*

[67] David S Noss, *A History of the World's Religions*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003:176.

[68] Samuel Enoch Stumpf, *Philosophy: History & Problems*, 5th ed, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1994:13; 6th ed 1999.

[69] **Autopoiesis** lit "self-creation" (from Greek: *auto* = *αυτό* "self," and *poiesis* = *ποίησις* "creation or production") and expresses a fundamental interconnectedness between structure and function. The term was orig introduced by Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela in 1973: *Autopoiesis and Cognition: the Realization of the Living*, edd Robert S Cohen & Marx W Wartofsky, Dordecht: D Reidel, 1980. See Alder Fuller, *Autopoiesis and Dissipative Structures*. Euglena Edu, 2005). http://www.prototista.org/E-Zine/Autopoiesis.htm.

[70] Cf Parfit's remark here with the discussion the acquired selves (1.4) above.

[71] Kvu 361-366; UA 92-94 = UA:M 136-140; Buddhadatta's *Bhāratiyā Bauddh'ācāryayā,* 1949:229,14.

> "What do you think about this, sire? If two birds were to fly through the air and one should alight on a tall tree and the other on a short tree, and if they came to rest simultaneously, whose shadow would fall on the earth first and whose shadow would fall on the earth later?"
> "They would do so simultaneously, revered sir." (Miln 83, Horner's tr)

Nāgasena's argument is simply that rebirth is immediate, taking only a thought-moment. On the other hand, the Pali Canon—and the Mahāyāna and the Vajrayāna—all agree that there is an intermediate period (not exceeding 7 weeks).[72]

Since there is no way of verifying whether rebirth is immediate or that there is an intermediate state, *we may accept it as an article of faith*, *but not as a dogma*. What is of immediate relevance is that karma and rebirth works in terms of conditionality that goes beyond the individual: we are all karmically and causally connected in some way. We are in the same cosmic karmic boat adrift in the sea of samsara. What we do or do not do will often somehow affect ourselves and others, too. Understanding this is forms the bases for a naturalized conception of karma and for virtue ethics, both of which we shall examine in turn here.

4 A naturalized conception of karma

4.1 "NATURAL RELIGION." In 2004, **Dale S Wright**,[73] wrote a thought-provoking paper on "Critical questions towards a naturalized concept of karma in Buddhism." His paper led to the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*' first online conference, aptly themed "Revisioning Karma," attracting twelve other learned contributions on karma.[74] Here, I shall discuss his main ideas alongside those of **Georges Dreyfus**' paper, "Meditation as ethical activity" (1995), and the thoughts of **Damien Keown** (1992, etc).[75] I am interested in examining two useful conceptions of karma, that is, *as a naturalized ethical concept and as virtue ethics*. This paper also examines the question: *is it possible to practise Buddhism if one has difficulties with accepting the doctrines of karma and rebirth*?

The Penguin Dictionary of Religions[76] defines "**natural religion**" as

> A spontaneous and unargued religious response to the world, or religiousness which develops in human experience untaught.[77] As such, it is contrasted with 'the positive religions'[78] as specific traditions, or systems claiming authority for their doctrines. In 18th-century Europe, natural religion (as eg in David Hume's *Dialogues* thereon) denoted those beliefs supposedly common to all mankind, or at least attainable by human reason… (Hinnells 1984:228)

A naturalized conception of karma, as such, would not appeal to any theistic notion, but understood simply from the workings of natural law or process. This significance of such a notion to Buddhists, especially contemporary Buddhists, is noted by Wright as follows: "Among Buddhists today, educated in a world of science and favorably disposed to contemporary standards for the articulation of truth, a naturalized concept of karma without supernatural preconditions will more likely be both persuasive and motivationally functional." (2004:89). Wright appraises the significance of the karma concept in contemporary scholarship thus:

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[72] For a fuller discussion, see **Is rebirth immediate?** = SD 2.17.

[73] Dept of religious Studies, Occidental College, LA, email: wright@oxy.edu.

[74] See http://www.buddhistethics.org/online.html.

[75] Keown's magnum opus here is *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (1992), where he insightfully compares Buddhist ethics to Aristotelian. For a useful critical response to Keown here, see Dreyfus 1995. See also SD 4.13 Intro (2.2).

[76] Ed John R Hinnells, 1984.

[77] EJ Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History.* London: Duckworth, hb 1975, sb 1976; NY: Scribner, 1976:39; Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion.* NY: Macmillan, 1963; NY: New American Library, 1964; London: SPCK, 1978; NY: Harper & Row, 1978:40-43, 217-218, 226. (Hinnells' refs)

[78] WC Smith, op cit, 1978:45. (Hinnells' refs)

> The primary reason that karma is a promising ethical concept for us today is that it appears to propose a natural connection between a human act and its appropriate consequence, or, in traditional terms, between sin and suffering, virtue and reward. The connection requires no supernatural intervention: we suffer or succeed because of the natural outcome of our actions themselves, rather than through the subsequent intervention of divine punishment or reward. Moral errors contain their own penalties as natural consequences, and every virtue encompasses its own reward. Although some dimensions of Western culture presuppose such an arrangement today, it is instructive to recall that this kind of understanding wasn't articulated in the West until Rousseau in the eighteenth century.[79] (Wright 2004:79; emphasis added)

4.2 JOHN DEWEY'S "COMMON FAITH." John Dewey (1859-1952) is perhaps America's most remarkable thinker, educator, psychologist and social activist. He was one of the founders of the philosophical school of Pragmatism, a pioneer in functional psychology, and representative of the progressive movement in the US Education. Despite his religious background and voluminous output in the fields of education, psychology and social philosophy, he only wrote one book, but a very significant one, on religion: *A Common Faith* (1934).[80]

The main aim of Dewey's *A Common Faith* is to show that religious experience is consistent with **empirical naturalism** (that is, explaining the world through personal experience without resorting to supernatural notions).[81] In his Terry Lectures at Yale University which were later published in 1934 as *A Common Faith*, Dewey explains the thesis of his lecture in the following way:

> Today there are many who hold that nothing worthy of being called religious is possible apart from the supernatural....[but]....I shall develop another conception of the nature of the religious phase of experience, one that separates it from the supernatural and the things that have grown up about it. I shall try to show that these derivations are encumbrances and that what is genuinely religious will undergo an emancipation when it is relieved from them....When the vital factors [of experience] attain the religious force that has been drafted into supernatural religions, the resulting reinforcement will be incalculable. (*A Common Faith*, 1934:1, 2, 50, 57)[82]

Dewey concludes by saying:

> Men have never fully used the powers they possess to advance the good in life, because they have waited upon some power external to themselves and to nature to do the work they are responsible for doing. Dependence upon an external power is the counterpart of surrender of human endeavor …Were the naturalistic foundations and bearings of religion grasped, the religious element in life would emerge from the throes of the crisis in religion. Religion would then be found to have its natural place in every aspect of human experience that is concerned with estimate of possibilities,

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[79] See Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002. [Wright's fn]

[80] "Dewey wrote a quantity of material comparable to the Pāli Canon—his collected works fill around fifty volumes—but he wrote only one small book on the subject of religious experience. Why Dewey was so reluctant to deal with religion is hard to grasp, but some scholars have suggested that this has something to do with Dewey's conservative Christian upbringing—one scholar has even traced Dewey's reluctance to write about religion to the particular fact that when Dewey was young his mother nagged him every day with the question: 'Are you right with Jesus?' In any case, Dewey's failure to probe more deeply into religious experience is precisely why the early Buddhist tradition has something of profound importance to offer to pragmatism in a way that is consistent with pragmatism's own philosophical commitments." (JJ Holder 2004:4)

[81] See also Dewey, *Experience and Nature,* 1925, 1929 (2nd ed): http://www.erzwiss.uni-hamburg.de/sonstiges/-dewey/DewExpNa.pdf; & Randy L Friedman, "Deweyan pragmatism." In *William James Studies* 1,1 2006: http://williamjamesstudies.press.uiuc.edu/1.1/friedman.html.

[82] As quoted by JJ Holder 2004:5.

> with emotional stir by possibilities as yet unrealized, and with all action in behalf of their realization. All that is significant in human experience falls within this frame.
>
> (Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 1934:46)

Naturalistic philosophers generally seek "natural" explanations of man and the universe without recourse to supernatural ideas (such as God, divine justice, karma, or rebirth). **John J Holder,** in his paper, "A naturalistic theory of religious experience" (2004), using Dewey's ideas, attempts to reconstruct the link between naturalism and religion, at least in the case of early Buddhism. As in the case of Buddhism, religion need not be linked with supernaturalism: indeed, "the whole point of Dewey's writing on religious experience and the point of early Buddhism as well is that a certain kind of naturalism *is consistent* with the development of religious experience" (2004:7, which in fact is the subject of Holder's paper).

> Both Dewey and the Buddha regarded their own philosophical ideas as a "middle way" between the ethical, metaphysical, epistemological extremes prevalent among their contemporaries. Dewey often referred to his own philosophy as a *via media,* and the Buddha, of course, is well-known for describing the Noble Eightfold Path as *majjhimā paṭipadā*. Interestingly, the extreme positions between which Dewey and the Buddha tried to steer a middle course were not all that different. The Buddha, for example, rejected the extremes of essentialist and eternalist metaphysics in the Brahmanical tradition, on the one extreme, and the annihilationist metaphysics of the materialists, on the other extreme. Similarly, Dewey was trying to carve out a position between the extremes of Hegelian idealism (an essentialist and eternalist metaphysics in its own right) and the reductionist materialism that took its cue from the natural sciences. (Holder 2004:9)

Both the Buddha and John Dewey are *empiricists* in the sense that a central position is given to "experience," that is, in two ways:

(1) as a proper way to justify claims to knowledge; and

(2) as the psychological or phenomenological basis for analyzing human action.

As empiricists in the first sense, they hold that the true test of any idea or doctrine is how it works in real-life experience. Understandably, both the Buddha and Dewey attack metaphysically speculative views (*diṭṭhi*), "for the simple reason that they could not be verified in experience and have little to contribute to resolving problematic situation at hand" (Holder 2004:10).

As regards empiricism in the second sense, both the Buddha and Dewey hold very rich psychological theories of experiences, "much richer, in fact, that the sensation-oriented empiricism of early modern philosophers like Locke and Hume" (id). In both cases, non-cognitive or affective aspects of experience, such as feeling, dispositions and habits, play significant roles in the understanding of experiential processes. Indeed, as the Buddha notes in **the Brahma,jāla Sutta** (D 1) all religious ideas, indeed all perception, are grounded in contact (sense-impression) and feeling.[83]

4.3 "EMERGENTIST" NATURALISM. John J Holder points out the critical importance of understanding that the *naturalism* of early Buddhism and Dewey's pragmatism is of a special kind called "**emergentist naturalism**" to differentiate it from the *reductive* or *eliminative* kinds of naturalism.[84] Reductive naturalism, for example, tries to explain the whole universe in terms of physical substances operating mechanically, that is, the push and pull of natural forces, and it reduces *everything*—including art, psychology, literature, and the human mind—in terms of physics.

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[83] D 1.105-130/1:39-43 = SD 25 & ***Vedanā*** = SD 17.3 (3.2).

[84] *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology* defines **emergent** as being "descriptive of or characteristics of new or unexpected properties or qualities that 'emerge' as a result of combinations or rearrangements of existing elements. The most prominent example are *mind* and *consciousness,* emerging from complex neurophysiological and biochemical components. The critical aspect of an emergent property is that one could not predict it from its constituent parts. *Emergentism* is a philosophical position that stresses that objects and phenomena (particularly psychological ones) have emergent properties." (Arthur S Reber 1985:234)

Emergentist naturalism is non-reductive in that the higher orders *emerge* from, but are not reducible to, lower order processed. Holder gives the example of a painting, which conveys meanings that emerge from, but are not reducible to the oils or canvas, or consciousness emerges from, but is not reducible to brain states.

> The principle of *continuity* is central to emergentism. "Continuity," means both that higher order operations grow out of lower order operations without being identical with that from which they emerge and it precludes complete breaks and gaps in the processes. In other words, sounds do not cease to be physical sounds when they become articulate speech; but by conveying linguistic meaning, they do take on new distinctions and arrangements and thus new qualities emerge. Emergentist naturalism accounts for identity despite change (Dewey's favorite example was that of an acorn becoming an oak tree.) The temptation in philosophy has always been to ascribe these higher order processes to transcendental realities (like Plato's forms) or to spiritual beings like God. The temptation in the hard sciences has been to explain them away by referring only to matter and forces. But emergentist naturalism is a middle way, avoiding reduction to physics and at the same time avoiding transcendental metaphysics. (2004:13; emphasis added)

All this sounds familiar to informed Buddhists: this is how the Buddhist texts and teachers explain the nature of consciousness and rebirth without an abiding soul or entity. Dewey, too, rejects the view that a human being has any permanent essence, and instead regards the person as an impermanent, interdependently arisen, natural phenomenon.

4.4 IDENTITY AND CONTINUITY IN EARLY BUDDHISM. The Poṭṭhapāda Sutta (D 9) contains some interesting passages discussing the nature of personal identity and continuity. Towards the end of the Sutta, the Buddha speaks of three kinds of self—or more exactly, "acquired self" (*atta,paṭilābha*)[85]—to Poṭṭhapāda, that is,[86]

(1) the material acquired self (*oḷārika atta,paṭilābha*), made up of the four elements, and is nourished by solid food;
(2) the mind-made acquired self (*mano,mayā atta,paṭilābha*), mind-made, replete with limbs and organs;[87]
(3) the formless acquired self (*arūpa atta,paṭilābha*), without form, made up of consciousness.[88]

If there is any "self," it is an *acquired self,* that is, a physical one, existing in sense-world, a mind-made one of the form dhyanas, and a formless one of the formless attainments.[89] This is what we would normally take as "individuality," "personality," or "selfhood." In other words, they are all impermanent selves. The Buddha's teachings are, in fact, for the ridding of these selves (since they are in the ultimate analysis, conditioned, impermanent and unreal).[90] This discussion then ensues between the Buddha and the wise layman Citta:

> **49b** THE SELF IN TIME. Citta, what if you were asked thus: '**Did you exist in the past or not? Will you exist in the future or not? Do you exist now or not?**'—How would you answer?"

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[85] "Acquired self," *atta,paṭilābhā = atta,bhāva.paṭilābha* (DhsA 308), where Comy says it refers to the 3 realms of existence (DA 2:380). In **Sevitabbâsevitabba S** (M 114.11/3:52), *atta,bhāva.paṭilābha* refers to the acquisition of individuality, ie a mode of rebirth. The same Sutta describes two kinds of *atta,bhāva.paṭilābha,* one that increases unwholesome states and the other decreasing unwholesome states (id). Cf **Atta,bhāva.paṭilābha S** (A 4.172/2:159 f) for 4 types of individualities are acquired through one's own volition, through another's volition, through both, or through neither; also listed in **Saṅgīti S** (D 1.11(38)/3:231).

[86] See **Sampasādanīya S** (D 28.15/3:111) = SD 14.14; also A 2:159; cf D 3:231.

[87] See V 2:185; A 3:122.

[88] See Kvu 263.

[89] For details on the dhyanas, see **Dhyana** = SD 8.4.

[90] See D 9.40-45/1:195-198 = SD 7.14. See also Collins 1982:74 f, 137 f, 156-160.

"Venerable sir, if I were ask *thus,* I would reply as follows:

'I *existed* in the past—that I did not exist then is not the case; that I *shall exist* in the future—that I will not exist then is not the case; that I *do exist* now—that I do not exist now is not the case.'"[91] (D 9/1:200) = SD 7.14

[COMMENTS ON §49b. It is important here to note the *grammatical tense* of the sentences. What are not denied is that that the acquired self "existed" (*ahosiṁ*), "shall exist" (*bhavissati*) and "exists" (*atthi*). The sense would be very different if the verb were *sati* ("exists") for all cases. This may be construed as a statement of the *continuity* of the acquired self from the viewpoint of diversity (*nānatta,naya*).][92]

50a THE REAL SELF. "Now, Citta, what if then they were to ask thus:

'That past acquired self that you *had*, is that your real acquired self—and that the future acquired self is non-existent, and the present acquired self non-existent?

Or the future acquired self that you *will have*, is that your real acquired self—and that the past acquired self is non-existent, and the present acquired self non-existent?

Or the acquired self that you *now have*, is that your real acquired self—and that the past acquired self is non-existent, and the future acquired self non-existent?'

—When asked thus, Citta, how would you answer?"

50b "Venerable sir, when asked thus, I would reply as follows:

'When there was my past acquired self, only that is real; and the future one does not exist, the present one does not exist.[93]

When there is my present acquired self, only that is real; and the past one does not exist, the future one does not exist.

When there will be my future acquired self, only that is real; and the present one does not exist, the past one does not exist."

Venerable sir, when asked I would answer thus." (D 9/1:200 f) = SD 7.14

[COMMENTS ON §50ab. Paraphrased, the three questions simply read: "Which one is your real self: the past, the future, or the present one?" The answer is clear enough: whichever time period we are referring, the acquired self exists in then, but not at the other two times. This may be construed as a statement of the *identity* of the acquired self by way of unity (*ekatta,naya*).[94] Compare §50b with Parfit's remark at (3.2).]

51 "Yes indeed, Citta, at the time when there is the material acquired self, it is reckoned that there is no mind-made acquired self, it is reckoned that there is no formless acquired self—there is only the material acquired self.

At the time, Citta, when there is the mind-made acquired self, it is reckoned that there is no material acquired self, it is reckoned that there is no formless acquired self—there is only the mind-made acquired self.

At the time, Citta, when there is the formless acquired self, it is reckoned that there is no material acquired self, it is reckoned that there is no mind-made acquired self—there is only the formless acquired self.

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[91] *Ahos'ahaṁ atītaṁ addhānaṁ nâhaṁ nâhosiṁ, bhavissām'ahaṁ anāgataṁ addhānaṁ nâhaṁ na bhavissāmi, atthâhaṁ etarahi nâhaṁ n'atthî ti,* lit "I existed in the past, I did not not exist then; I shall exist in the future, I will not not exist then; I do exist now, I do not not exist now." This is the sort of passage that the Sarvâstivāda—those who uphold that the dharmas exists in all the three times—would appeal to for support: see eg Abhk 5.25a = Abhk:-Pr 806. See also Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism,* 1988a: 601 f.

[92] On the viewpoint or method of diversity (*nānatta,naya*), see SD 25.3 (49.2).

[93] *Yo me ahosi atīto atta,paṭilābho sveva me atta,paṭilābho tasmiṁ samaye sacco ahosi, mogho anāgato mogho paccupanno.*

[94] On the viewpoint or method of unity (*ekatta,naya*), see SD 25.3 (49.2).

52 SIMILE OF THE MILK PRODUCTS. Citta, just as from a cow comes milk, and from the milk comes curds, and from the curds come butter, and from the butter comes ghee, and from the ghee comes cream.

But when it is milk it is not reckoned as curds, or butter, or ghee, or cream;
and when it is curds it is not reckoned as milk, or butter, or ghee, or cream;
and when it is butter it is not reckoned as milk, or curds, or ghee, or cream;
and when it is ghee it is not reckoned as milk, or curds, or butter, or cream;
and when it is cream it is not reckoned as milk, or curds, or butter, or ghee.[95]

53 Even so, Citta, when *any one of the three acquired selves—the material, the mind-made, or the formless—is present, then we reckon that the other two are not present.*[96]

For, Citta, these are merely common names, common expressions, common usages, common designations in the world that the Tathāgata [Thus Come] uses without attachment to them [without misapprehending them]."[97] (D 9/1:201 f) = SD 7.14

[COMMENTS ON §§51-53. §51 is an "idea" summary of what has been discussed so far, as confirmed by the "image," summary, the simile of the milk products. The simile is of course familiar, and is found in a more developed form in **the Milinda,pañha** [3.2]. The simile is interesting in that it contains both the ideas of identity (the key names) and of continuity (the set of names in each sentence). The passage closes with the Buddha's declaration of the language and spirituality: the Buddha uses words without attaching "self" to them.]

This understanding of how identity works through continuity by the methods of unity and of diversity supports the notion of how rebirth can occur with an abiding self, and we have a sense of identity and selfhood. Further discussion on identity and continuity will be found below [4].

4.5 REJECTION OF SUPERNATURALISM. Both the Buddha and John Dewey reject the reliance on *supernaturalism* of traditional religion. The "supernatural" here refers to agents or realities that are "above" or "outside" the natural world, typically described as a mysterious power that is eternal, immaterial, unchanging, beyond the space-time continuum. But all such supernatural things are simply *discontinuous* with the natural order, that is, the causal and temporal order. In short, the supernatural represents a break or gap in nature. Both the Buddha and Dewey caution that dependence on supernatural beings or realities often forms a major obstacle to religious development. Dewey openly states:

> Belief in a sudden and complete transmutation through conversion and in the objective efficacy of prayer, is too easy a way out of difficulties. It leaves matters in general just about as they were before; that is, sufficiently bad so that there is additional support for the idea that only supernatural aid can better them. (*A Common Faith,* 1934:47)

Now it should be noted that even some scientists and philosophers reject supernaturalism. In the case of the Buddha and Dewey, "while they rejected supernaturalistic forms of religion, they did not reject religious experience and religious meaning" (Holder 2004:16). Both attempt to reconstruct religious

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[95] These are 5 products from a cow. The traditional "5 tastes of a cow" (*pañca go,rasa*), however, are milk (*khīra*), cream (*dadhi*), buttermilk (*takka*), butter (*navanīta*), ghee (*sappi*) (V 1:244; Dhā 1:158, 323, 397; SnA 322; VvA 147). The point is that just as there is no "essence" in the cow, but only the different bovine products, so too in a human being there is no self , soul or permanent entity. The qualities that constitute us are constantly changing. "When the change has reached a certain point, it is convenient to change the designation, the name by which the personality is known—just as in the case of the products of the cow. But the abstract term is only a convenient *form of expression.* There never was any personality, *as a separate entity,* all the time." (D:RD 1:263 n1)

[96] Essentially, this is the philosophical stand of the "everything exists" (*sarvam asti*) of the Sarvāsti,vāda. See for example Paul Williams, *Buddhist Thought,* 2000:112-118.

[97] *Loka,samaññā loka,niruttiyo loka,vohārā loka,paññattiyo yāhi Tathāgato voharati aparāmasan ti,* lit "These are names of the world, expressions of the world, usages in the world, designations in the world…" See prec n & Miln 25, 27. For details, see Introd (1) above.

meaning without its supernatural baggage. Avoiding the extremes of supernaturalism (which attribute everything to the supernatural) and of reductive materialism (which dismiss everything religious), they point to a middle way of a personal and direct experience of reality. This middle way is virtue ethics, which we shall now examine.

5 Virtue ethics

5.1 WESTERN PHILOSOPHICAL VIEW. Virtue ethics is currently one of three major approaches in normative ethics.[98] Virtue ethics may be simply said to emphasize the *virtues*, or moral and ethical character, in contrast to the approach which emphasizes *duties or rules* (deontology), or that which emphasizes the *consequences* of actions (consequentialism). This theory goes back to ancient Indian and Chinese philosophies, and in the West, to at least to the Greek philosophers, Plato (c428-c348 BCE) and Aristotle (384-322 BCE). Most modern western conceptions of virtue ethics are somehow rooted in the three Aristotelian concepts of *arête* (excellence or virtue), *phronesis* (practical or moral wisdom) and *eudaimonia* (happiness or prosperity).

Western philosophy generally sees virtue ethics as being more concerned with what makes *a good person*, rather than what makes *a good action*. Although according to Buddhist philosophy, there is really no "person," but only "action," in either case, it overlaps with such a notion of virtue ethics in being a *teleological* system of ethics, that is, one concerned with the person's proper goal (*telos*). In short, Buddhist ethics is concerned with preparing one for the goal of spiritual liberation (nirvana).

The British philosopher **Alasdair MacIntyre** (b 1929), a key figure in the recent surge of interest in virtue ethics, defines **virtue** as "an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods."[99] He identifies the central question of morality as having to do with the habits, virtues and knowledges concerning how one should live one's life.

MacIntyre's approach to moral philosophy demonstrates how the individual's good judgement arises from the development of good conduct or character. The underlying standards are not based on what a virtuous person *decides* but rather on the *virtues* of life that enable moral action to be both rationally sensible and directed to its correct ends. In fact, MacIntyre understands himself to be reworking the Aristotelian notion of an ethical teleology. It should be emphasized that MacIntyre intends the idea of virtue to supplement, rather than replace, moral rules; for, he describes certain moral rules as "exceptionless" or unconditional.

The British philosopher, **Derek Parfit**, probably has the last word regarding the most basic principle underlying virtue ethics, that is, when he proposes:

> It is sometimes thought to be especially rational to act in our own best interests. But I suggest that the principle of self-interest has no force. There are only two genuine competitors in this particular field. One a principle of biased rationality: do what will best achieve what you actually want. The other is the principle of impartiality: do what is in the best interests of everyone concerned.
>
> (Parfit 1971:26)

5.2 SUTTAS ON VIRTUE ETHICS. There are Sutta teachings on what we today call "virtue ethics," but it should serve our purpose to examine two texts: a very short sutta—**the Hiri Ottappa Sutta** (A 2.9)—and an excerpt from a well known Sutta—**the Bāla Paṇḍita Sutta** (M 129). This latter Sutta can be

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[98] **Normative ethics** is that branch of the philosophical study of ethics concerned with classifying actions as right and wrong. It regards ethics as a set of *norms* related to actions. As such (unlike descriptive ethics, which deals with what is popularly *believed* to be right and wrong), normative ethics is prescriptive, dealing with what we *should* take to be right and wrong. Because normative ethics examines standards for the rightness and wrongness of actions, it is distinct from *metaethics* (which studies the nature of moral statements) and from *applied ethics* (which places normative rules in practical contexts).

[99] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue.* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981:188.

regarded as the locus classicus for virtue ethics. The Hiri Ottappa Sutta is very short, so it is presented here in full:

THE HIRI OTTAPPA SUTTA (A 2.9)

Monks, there are two bright states[100] that protect the world. What are the two?

Moral shame and moral fear.

Monks, if these two bright states were not to protect the world, then there would be no mothers nor mothers' sisters nor uncles' wives nor teachers' wives nor guru's wives. Instead, the world would come to confusion such as there is amongst goats and sheep and fowl and pigs and dogs and jackals.

But, monks, since these two bright states do protect the world, therefore there are seen mothers, mothers' sisters, uncles' wives, teachers' wives and gurus' wives.

(A 2.9/1:50) = SD 2.5[101]

Early Buddhist regard moral shame and moral fear as *the foundation for the ethical life*, and are called "the world-protectors" (*loka,pāla,* A 1:51), since they are the preconditions for a functional society. Moral shame (*hiri* , Skt *hrī*) is a sense of disgust with evil. The Abhidhamma defines it as "to be ashamed of what one ought to be ashamed of, to be ashamed of performing evil and unwholesome deeds" (Pug 24).[102] It is one of the seven noble treasures (*ariya,dhanāni*),[103] that is, the treasures of generosity and so on (*cāga,dhanāni*): faith, moral conduct, moral shame, moral fear, learning, generosity, wisdom.[104]

Moral shame is often paired with moral fear (*ottappa*).[105] According **to Visuddhi,magga**, the proximate cause for moral shame is self-respect, while for moral fear it is respect for others. Out of self-respect (*attāna garu katvā*), one, like the daughter of a good family, rejects evil-doing through moral shame. Out of respect for others (*paraṁ garu katvā*), one, "like a courtesan," rejects evil-doing through moral fear.[106] The former can also be called *self-regarding moral conduct* (motivated by the *shame* that the deed entails), while the latter, *other-regarding moral conduct* (motivated by the healthy *fear* of karmic repercussion). As such, these two actions are known as the two bright states that protect the world, if not for which "one would neither respect one's mother, nor one's mother's sister, nor one's brother's wife, nor one's teacher's wife...." (A 1:50).

We will now examine a relevant section from **the Bāla Paṇḍita Sutta** (M 129):

THE 3 MARKS OF A FOOL

2 "Bhikshus, there are these three characteristics, signs and attributes of the fool. What are the three?

Here the fool is one who thinks evil, speaks evil and does evil.[107] If the fool were not so, how would the wise know him thus: 'This good person is a fool, a false person.' Since the fool thinks evil, speaks evil and does evil, the wise know him thus.

3 The fool feels physical pain (*dukkha*) and mental pain (*domanassa*) here and now in three ways.

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[100] "Bright states," *sukkā dhammā,* that is, wholesome conditions.

[101] See also **Abhabba S** (A 10.76/5:144-149) = SD 2.4.

[102] Cf Dhs:R 18 f.

[103] DA 2:34; ThaA 240; VvA 113. Cf Sn 77, 462 (= D 1:168), 719.

[104] D 3:163, 251; A 4:5; VvA 113; cf A 3:53.

[105] eg M 1:271; S 2:220; A 2:78; It 34; Tikap 61; J 1:127; Vism 221; DhA 3:73. Edgerton (BHSD) has *apatrāpya* and the compound *hrīr-apatrāpya* (P *hiri,ottappa*). The term *ottappa* is derived from *apa* + √*TRAP* (to be abashed) [Skt **āpatrapya* > *apatrapā* (Trenckner)]. Andersen suggests that this etym must be preferred to that of Childers: **autappya* > *uttāpa*, *ut* + √*TAP* (heat) (PG 62). In his tr, Ñāṇamoli renders *hiri* as "conscience," but apparently mistranslates *ottappati* as "is ashamed" and *ottappa* as "shame," Vism:Ñ 524 f.

[106] Vism 14.142/464 f.

[107] Also as A 1:102.

(i) Bhikshus, if the fool sits in an assembly or along a street or in a town square, and if the people there are discussing certain pertinent matters, then if the fool is one who destroys living beings, takes the not given, misconducts himself in sensual pleasures, lies and takes intoxicants that are the basis of heedlessness, he thinks, 'These people are discussing pertinent matters that are found in me, and I am seen engaging in them.'

This is the first kind of physical and mental pain that the fool feels here and now.

(M 129/3:163) = SD 2.22

[COMMENTS ON §§2-3. Here Buddha points out the first reason for avoiding evil: it is not worth doing because of *social disapproval,* that is, it causes social disharmony and problems. Of course, there is also the *fear* that other might know the evil one has done, and so suffer psychological pain therefrom. This is a statement based on "moral fear" (*ottappa*). The evil-doer is usually very guilt-ridden, as he is reminded of his evil deed when he *hears* others discussing a similar misdeed.]

4 (ii) Furthermore, bhikshus, when a robber, an offender, is caught, the fool sees kings inflicting various kinds of torture on him:[108] having him whipped, caned, clubbed, his hands cut off, his feet cut off, his limbs cut off, his ears cut off, his nose cut off, his ears and nose cut off; having him subjected to 'the porridge pot,' to 'the polished-shell shave,' to 'Rāhu's mouth,' to 'the fiery garland,' to 'the flaming hand,' to 'the blades of grass, to 'the bark dress,' to [being strapped to the ground by an iron ring around each limb, fastened by iron spikes and then surrounded by fire, called][109] 'the black antelope,' to [having pieces of his flesh cut and hung on] 'the meat hooks,' to 'the coins' [disc-slice], to 'the lye pickling' [immersion in strong alkaline solution], to 'the pivoting pin [where a spike is driven in his skull from ear to ear], to 'the rolled-up straw mat' [being beaten up]; and having him splashed with boiling oil, and having him thrown to the dogs to be devoured, having him impaled alive on stakes, and having his head cut off with a sword.

Bhikshus, the fool then thinks thus: 'Because of such evil actions, when the robber, the offender is caught, kings have *such tortures* inflicted on him. Those things are found in me, and I am seen engaging in them.'

This is the second kind of physical and mental pain that the fool feels here and now.

(M 129.4/3:163 f) = SD 2.22

[COMMENTS ON §§4. Here we have a sort of behaviourist description of the punishment of criminals terrifies the evil-doer although he is at large. The evil-doer is guilt-ridden, as he is reminded of his evil deed when he *sees* others being punished for their misdeeds.]

5 (iii) Again, bhikshus, when the fool is resting on a chair, on a bed or on the floor, then his past evil deeds—his bodily, verbal and mental misdeeds—cover him, overwhelm him, envelop him. Just as the shadow of a great mountain peak in the evening covers, overwhelms and envelops the earth, so too, when the fool is *resting*, his past evil deeds *overwhelm him.*

Then the fool thinks, 'I have not done what is good, what is wholesome; I have not made myself a shelter from anguish. I have done what is evil, what is cruel, what is wicked. When I pass away, I shall go to the destination *of those who have done evil*.' He sorrows, grieves and laments, he weeps beating his breast and becomes distraught.

This is the kind of physical and mental pain that the fool feels here and now.

(M 129.5/3:164 f) = SD 2.22

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[108] As at **Mahādukkha-k,khandha S** (M 13.14) & **Kamma,kāraṇa (or Vajja) S** (A 2.1/1:47-49). For other details (Comy) of the tortures, see nn in A:WH 1:42 f.

[109] NmA 278 ad Nm 154 = M 13.14 (1:87,15).

[COMMENTS ON §5. Here, we see how suffering follows the evil-doer "like a wheel that dogs an ox's foot" (Dh 1). While the good person sits in peace and happiness, recalling his good deeds, the evil is ever haunted by his misdeeds. In fact, he actually has not rest, even when he has the time for it. His ill-gotten fortunes do not really bring him any satisfaction.]

6 A fool who has given himself up to misconduct of body, speech and mind, after death, when the body has broken up, re-appears in a plane of misery, an evil destination, a lower realm, in hell.[110]

7 Bhikshus, if one were to speak correctly of that which is utterly undesirable, utterly disagreeable, utterly unpleasant, it is in respect of these lower worlds. So *extremely undesirable* are these lower worlds that it is difficult to find a simile for suffering in hell."

(M 129.6-7/3:163-165) = SD 2.22

[COMMENTS ON §§6-7. This last passage the sad and painful destiny of the evil-doer. Indeed, such pains and terror of inhuman states can be seen in this life itself. Here, if one has difficult accepting the notion of rebirth, it can be understood as a projection or imagery of what life can be like by way of the fruits of a bad act or evil life.]

We see here the various aspects of sufferings of an evil-doer on various levels: (i) social, (ii) legal, (iii) psychological, and (iv) spiritual. The way these four kinds of suffering awaiting an evil-doer is significant. The first there are called "the three characteristics, signs and attributes of the fool," meaning that "the fool feels physical pain (*dukkha*) and mental pain (*domanassa*) **here and now** in (these) three ways," that is, socially, legally, and psychological, and the fourth, the spiritual (by way of a bad rebirth) still awaits him! In fact, on a closer reading of the passages, it will be seen that *psychological dissatisfaction* is always present or latent in the evil-doer, whether he knows it or not.

The characteristics and conditions of a wise and good person is just the reverse. His well being can be seen here and now, and in due course, his rebirth, too, will be happy.

THE STATE OF THE WISE

47 Then the Blessed One, having taken a small stone the size of his fist, addressed the bhikshus, "Bhikshus, which is bigger: the stone the size of my fist or the Himalayas, the king of mountains?"

"Venerable sir, the stone the size of your fist cannot be compared to the Himalayas. It is not even a fraction of it; there is no comparison."

"Even so, bhikshus, the physical and mental joy that a Wheel-turning King enjoys because of possessing the seven treasures[111] and the four kinds of success[112] cannot be compared to the happiness of heaven. It is not even a fraction of it; there is no comparison.

48 Bhikshus, even after a long time, the wise man were to regain the human state, he is born into a high family—well-to-do kshatriyas, well-to-do brahmins, well-to-do householders—one that is rich, wealthy, having much possessions, with abundant gold and silver, with much assets and means, with much money and grain [food]. He is handsome, comely, graceful, possessing the best complexion.

He gets food, drinks, clothes, vehicles, garlands, scents, cosmetics, bed, dwelling and light. He conducts himself well in body, speech and mind, and when the body breaks up, after death, re-appears in a happy destination, in a heavenly world.

49 THE GAMBLER'S LUCK. Bhikshus, suppose a gambler, lucky at the very first throw, wins a great fortune. That lucky throw *as such* is negligible: it is a far more lucky throw when the wise

[110] *apāyaṃ duggatiṃ vinīpātaṃ nirayaṃ.* See the Tamo Sutta (S 1:93 A 2:85; cf Pug 51).

[111] That is, the wheel (of the empire), the elephant, the horse, the jewel, the woman, the householder, and the advisor.

[112] That is, beauty, long life, health, charisma.

man, conducting himself well in body, speech and mind, when the body breaks up, after death, in a happy destination, in a heavenly world.

This is the complete and perfect state of a wise man."[113] (M 129.47-49/3:177 f) = SD 2.22

Understandably a naturalist Buddhist may have problems with the descriptions the hells [§4(ii)], which appear deterministic and mechanistic, and with the idea of rebirth [§§6, 49], which seems to be supernaturalistic. The point is that the evil-doer will somehow face his demons in this life itself, and the good person will always enjoy inner peace. We will continue this discussion under the heading of "the four self-assurances" at the end of this study [7.3].

5.3 BUDDHIST EXAMPLES. The suttas often speak of "worldlings," "true persons" and "noble ones," especially in this stock passage:

…the uninstructed ordinary person who is not a seer of the aryas [noble ones], and is unskilled in the Dharma of the aryas, undisciplined in the Dharma of the aryas, who is not a seer of the true persons, and is unskilled in the Dharma of the true persons and undisciplined in the Dharma of the true persons…(such a person considers the five aggregates to be self.)

(**Pārileyya Sutta,** S 22.81.14-19/3:96 f) = SD 6.1

A "**worldling**" (*puthujjana*) is one "born of the crowd," and is more fully called "uninstructed worldling," one unskilled (*akovida*), that is, he lacks even a theoretical knowledge of the Dharma, is undisciplined (*avinīta*), and also lacks practical training in the Dharma: in short, a non-thinking crowd-follower. He is not a "seer of the noble ones" (*ariya,dassavī*), that is, he has no fellowship with the Buddha or the noble disciples (the saints), since he lacks the wisdom-eye that discerns the truth they have seen.[114]

The terms "**true person**" (*sappurisa*) and "**noble one**" (*ariya*) are often synonymous, but *sappurisa* sometimes has a broader sense. The term ***sappurisa*** may be translated as "true person, true individual, superior persons, virtuous person, or ideal person." In some contexts, such as **the Pārileyya Sutta** (S 22.61)[115] and **the (Anicca) Saññā Sutta** (S 25.6),[116] it clearly includes the faith-follower (*saddhānusārī*) and the truth-follower (*dhammānusārī*), those, although not yet on the path, but are assured of it.[117]

The exemplary follower of the Buddha is called a "noble disciple" or more fully "instructed noble disciple" (*sutava ariya,sāvaka*).[118] Some of the best examples of the Buddha's admonitions in terms of virtue ethics can be found in this connection, such as these summaries from **the Sigāl'ovāda Sutta** (D 31), on the qualities of the noble disciple (here clearly referring to a lay follower):

The Blessed One said this:
"Young householder, ***the noble disciple***
(A) gives up **the four defilements of conduct**,[119]
(B) does no evil deeds out of **the four motives**,[120]

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[113] This is of course spoken in reference in terms of *puñña* (merit), the good or "meritorious" actions of body, speech and mind, that is, to the mundane fruits that still bind one to the wandering-on (*saṃsāra*).

[114] See SD 12.14(3) for details.

[115] **The Pārileyya S** explains that the uninstructed worldling is one who holds the view that the aggregates (ie the body) is the self, that the 5 aggregates constitute a personal identity (*sakkāya*)—one of the 3 fetters preventing one from gaining stream-entry: see SD 3.3(2). He clings to one or more of the self-identity views (***sakkāya,diṭṭhi***): the aggregate as the self, the self as possessing the aggregate, the aggregate as in the self, or the self as in the aggregate (S 22.81/3:94-99) = SD 6.1.

[116] S 25.6/3:227 = SD 17.4(10).

[117] On these 2 individuals, see **(Anicca) Saññā S** (S 25.6/3:227) = SD 17.4. For the qualities of the *sappurisa*, see D 33.2.2(6)/3:252, 34.1.8(7)/3:283; M 113; A 7.64/4:113, 8:38/4:144 f & at M 110.14-24/3:23 f.

[118] See MA 1:20-25; SA 2:98-101, 2:251 f; AA 1:61-63; Nc 75-78; Pm 2:445-449; DhsA 348-354.

[119] "Defilements of conduct," *kamma,kilesa,* lit "defilements of karma"; alt tr "vices of conduct" (Prayudh Payutto, 1969). These refer to actions of body and of speech, ie moral virtue (*sīla*).

(C) does not indulge in **the six ways of squandering wealth**[121]—
through avoiding these fourteen evil ways, he covers[122] the six directions, and he is on his way to conquering both worlds, successful both in this world and in the next. When the body has broken up after death, he arises in a heavenly world.

(A) What are **the four defilements of conduct** that he has given up?
Young householder, they are:[123]

(1) The defilement of deed that is the harming of life;
(2) The defilement of deed that is the taking of the not-given;
(3) The defilement of deed that is sexual misconduct;
(4) The defilement of deed that is the uttering of false speech.

(B) By which **four motives** [grounds][124] does he do no evil deed?

(1) He does no evil deed led by the bias of desire;[125]
(2) He does no evil deed led by the bias of hate;
(3) He does no evil deed led by the bias of delusion;
(4) He does no evil deed led by the bias of fear.

(C) What are **the six ways of squandering wealth** that he does not indulge in?[126]

(1) The addiction to strong drinks, distilled drinks, fermented drinks and that which causes heedlessness,[127] young householder, is a way of squandering wealth.[128]
(2) Roaming (and loitering) the streets at unseemly hours is a way of squandering wealth.
(3) Frequenting fairs [or shows] is a way of squandering wealth.
(4) Addiction to gambling, a basis for heedlessness,[129] is a way of squandering wealth.
(5) Associating with evil friends is a way of squandering wealth.
(6) The habit of idleness is a way of squandering wealth. (D 31.3-7/3:181 f) = SD 4.1

And how, young householder, should the noble disciple cover[130] **the six directions**?
Young householder, these should be regarded as the six directions, namely:

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[120] "Out of…motives," *ṭhānehi,* or "for…the reasons".

[121] "Ways of squandering wealth," *bhogānaṁ apāya,mukhāni*, or "the sources of loss of wealth."

[122] "Covers," *paṭicchadi,* lit "get…covered," protect.

[123] Listed here are the first 4 of the five precepts, the fifth being the precept against taking drinks and intoxicants, which is discusses in the foll sections (D 31.7-8).

[124] "Motives" (*ṭhānā*), here syn with *agati,* lit "not coming," ie wrong course or "bias", conditioned by the four motives here (V 1:339; Vism 683).

[125] *Chandâgatiṁ gacchanto pāpa,kammaṁ na karoti. Chanda* normally tr neutrally as "desire" but here is used in the negative sense, meaning "sense-desire". *Agati* has been rendered as "bias". *Gacchanto* here lit tr as "going (by)" and is idiomatically rendered as "led by," "by way of" or "because of". Alt tr: "He does no evil by way of being led by desire".

[126] These vices are also those of an evil friend (*pāpa,mitta*) who is a "reckless companion" [§19]. The **Dīgha,-jānu S** (A 8.54) gives a summary of 4 ways of squandering wealth: (1) womanizing; (2) addiction to drinking; (3) addiction to gambling; (4) bad company (A 8.54.8-9/4:283 f) = SD 5.10.

[127] "Strong drinks…that causes heedlessness," *sura,meraya,majja-p,pamāda-ṭ,ṭhāna,* also tr as "strong drinks, distilled drinks and fermented drinks that causes heedlessness." Comy says that there are five kinds of "strong drinks" (***surā***): made from crushed seeds (*piṭṭha,surā*), from cakes (*pūva,surā*), from rice (*odana,surā*), from fermented yeast (*kiṇṇa,pakkhita,surā*), from a mixture of ingredients (*sambhāra,saṁyutta,surā*) (DA 3:944; VvA 73; VbhA 381). Comy also says there are 5 kinds of "distilled drinks" (***meraya*** = *āsava*): made from flowers (*pupph'ā sava*), from fruits (*phal'āsava*), from honey (*madhv-āsava*), from sugar (*gul'āsava*), and from a mixture of ingredients (*sambhāra,saṁyutt'āsava*) (DA 3:944). ***Majja*** seems to be a general term for "drinks". However it is likely that *majja* is the weakest of the three, while *surā* is the strongest. On when the precept against intoxicants is not breached, see Pāc 51 (V 4:110).

[128] "A way of squandering wealth," *bhogānaṁ apāya,mukhaṁ,* also "a way of losing wealth."

[129] "Gambling, a basis for heedlessness," *jūta-p,pamāda-ṭ,ṭhāna.*

[130] "Cover," *paṭicchadi,* lit "get…covered," protect.

(1) Parents should be regarded as the front direction [the east].
(2) Teachers should be regarded as the direction to the right [the south].
(3) Wife and children should be regarded as the direction at the back [the west].
(4) Friends and companions should be regarded as the superior direction [the north].
(5) Slaves, labourers and workers [employees and charges] should be regarded as the direction below [nadir].
(6) Ascetics and brahmins [religious renunciants and practitioners] should be regarded as the direction above [zenith]. (D 31.27/3:188 f) = SD 4.1

5.4 BAD TEACHERS AND GOOD TEACHERS. **The Lohicca Sutta** (D 12) is a very instructive discourse on bad teachers and good teachers. Three of such teachers are blameworthy:[131]

(1) A renunciant who has *not* gained the fruit of recluseship teaches, but his pupils reject him;
(2) A renunciant who has *not* gained the fruit of recluseship teaches, but his pupils listen to him;
(3) A renunciant who *has* gained the fruit of recluseship teaches, but his pupils reject to him.

In the first two cases, the teachers have "not attained the fruit of recluseship" (*sāmaññattho ananuppatto*): as such, whether their pupils rejected or accepted them, they are blameworthy because they have not been liberated themselves.

In simple terms, the first blameworthy teacher—the unawakened renunciant rejected by his pupils—is likely to be a foolish teacher, and the Sutta compares the first blameworthy teacher to *an unrequited lover.* The second teacher—the unawakened renunciant with amenable pupils—is blameworthy because he would not be a spiritually effective teacher: he is like *one who weeds the field of another when his own needs weeding.*

Although the third teacher is awakened, he is still blameworthy because his pupils reject him, that is, either he has poor teaching skills or he has bad pupils: it is like *having cut off an old fetter, one were to find a new one.* Understandably, this third teacher would be blameworthy only insofar as he continued to teach those who would not listen to him. There is an interesting case where the Buddha himself may be said to find himself in, that is, the case of the quarrelsome Kosambī monks. When the Buddha admonishes the feuding parties to reconcile, they actually tell him off. Noting their recalcitrance, he goes into the rains retreat all alone. During his absence, the public, learning of the monks' recalcitrance, refuse to support them, and those monks repented. The Buddha succeeds in teaching them by his absence![132]

Only the liberated teachers with amenable pupils are not blameworthy: his pupils benefit from his teaching and go on to attain spiritual excellence. The best example is of course the Buddha himself, whose virtue is still efficacious despite his absence.

This brings us to an interesting contemporary question: how should we treat living teachers, especially cult figures, who are influential, knowledgeable, even charismatic, but unawakened? The initial answer is obvious: thanks to our infinite capacity for self-delusion and insatiable thirst for approval, the admirers of such blameworthy teachers follow their noses and ignore the Lohicca Sutta. If we are to keep to the spirit of the Lohicca Sutta, even the best teachings or writings of the most brilliant charismatic guru are not worth a thought-moment's notice. The reason is simple: what great virtues they seem to extol only reflect their inner lack of them, since they are neither *sappurisa* nor arya (or worse, if they were to canonize or apotheosize themselves). I think this is the moral behind the stories of *when Devadatta wears an unbecoming robe* (DhA 1.7),[133] and *the donkey in a lion-skin* (J 189).[134]

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[131] D 12/1:244-234 = SD 34.8.

[132] See **Upakkilesa S** (M 128/3:152-162) = SD 5.18. The incident is also recorded in Mahv 10 (V 1:337-360), **Kosambiya S** (M 48/1:320-325) and **Pārileyya S** (S 22.81/3:94-99) = SD 6.1.

[133] **Deva,datta Vatthu** (DhA 1:77-83); cf **Kāsāva J** (J 221/2:196-199).

[134] **Sīha,camma J** (J 189/2:109 f). A related story is **Camma,sāṭaka J** (J 324/3:82 ff), where a mendicant wearing leather garment, seeing a ram falling back before him, thinks that it is paying him homage, but is deservedly fell by it!

This is not to say that wisdom or awakening comes from burying one's head in the blissful sand of ignorance, as **the Indriya,bhāvanā Sutta** (M 252) wisely warns us against.[135] One should be wise with regards to the cleverness of cult gurus, to have the courage to answer them if there is a need to, and to compassionately warn others of its grave consequences if it merits so. Ultimately, it is not that one *has* right view, but that one *is* right view. The point is that while a wrong view bears the full rights of its author, right view has neither copyright nor ownership rights. To know right view is *being* selfless.[136]

6 Meditation as ethical activity

6.1 MORAL TRAINING. Buddhist living, whether for the renunciant or the lay person, is that of the threefold training, that is, in moral virtue, in mental focus, and in wisdom.[137] For the renunciant, it is called "the fruits of the recluseship" (*sāmaññ a,phala*), because the practices themselves are what gives the recluse his spirituality, and will in due course free him from suffering.[138] For the lay person, the basic, that is, ongoing, training, is that of moral virtue by way of the five precepts, namely:

(1) the training-rule against destroying life;
(2) the training-rule against taking the not-given;
(3) the training-rule against sexual misconduct;
(4) the training-rule against speaking falsely; and
(5) the training-rule against strong drinks, distilled drinks, fermented drinks and that which causes heedlessness. (D 3:235; A 3:205, 275; Vbh 285)

The positive values (or kinds of respect) behind these "negative precepts" (*vāritta sīla*) are the respect for life, for the property and happiness of others, for the person and his dignity, for truth, and for personal and spiritual growth [6.3].

According to **the Mūla Sutta** (A 3.69), those who violate these five precepts do so through being motivated by greed, hate or delusion.[139] Psychologically, greed causes *fear* (due to a preoccupation with one's sense of lack); hate leads to *violence* and destruction (that is, the desire to end what one dislikes); and delusion is the basis for *confusion* (one is unable to see beyond one's opinions). Understandably, **the Pañca,bhera,bhaya Sutta** (S 12.41) states that he who breaks any of the precepts "brings upon himself terror and fear in this life and also brings terror and fear to the next life, too, and he feels (physical) pain and (mental) displeasure."[140] **The Vera Sutta** (A 5.174), describing the effects of breaking these precepts in a similar tone, calls these precepts themselves as "fear and hate."[141] According the Saṁyutta Commentary, fear and hate are volitions (*bhaya,vera,cetanāyo*), that is, the motivators for the breaking of the precepts (SA 2:72).

6.2 THE FIVE MINDFULNESS TRAININGS. Thich Nhat Hanh, in his book entitled *For a Future to be Possible*, describes in poetic detail how the five precepts may be used a "the Five Wonderful Mindfulness Trainings," as listed here. This fivefold training is an example of the aspirations towards a Buddhist vision of virtue ethics.[142]

> THE FIRST MINDFULNESS TRAINING. Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I vow to cultivate compassion and learn ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life.

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[135] M 252/3:298-301 = SD 17.13.

[136] For a complementary teaching, see **The teacher or the teaching?** = SD 3.14.

[137] Traditionally called "training in moral virtue" (*sīla sikkhā*), "training in concentration" (*samādhi sikkhā*) and "training in wisdom" (*paññā sikkhā*) (D 1:207, 3:220; A 1:229). See SD 9 Intro (10d).

[138] See **Sāmaññ a,phala S** (D 2/1:47-86), esp esp §§33-100 = SD 8.10.

[139] A 3.69/1:201-205 = SD 18.2.

[140] S 12.41/2:68-70 = SD 3.3 (4.2). The Sutta also appears as **Pañca Vera S** (S 55.28/5:387-389) and **Bhaya Vera S** (A 10.92/5:182-184), and it also has other names such as **Pañca Bhaya,vera S**.

[141] A 5.174/3:204-206 = SD 6.4.

[142] Detailed comys on each of the training is given by Nhat Hanh in his book, 1993: see biblio.

THE SECOND MINDFULNESS TRAINING. Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing and oppression, I vow to cultivate loving kindness and learn ways to work for the well being of people, animals, plants and minerals. I vow to practice generosity by sharing my time, energy and material resources with those who are in real need. I am determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others. I will respect the property of others, but I will prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on Earth.

THE THIRD MINDFULNESS TRAINING. Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct, I vow to cultivate responsibility and learn ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families and society. I am determined not to engage in sexual relations without love and a long-term commitment. To preserve the happiness of myself and others, I am determined to respect my commitments and the commitments of others. I will do everything in my power to protect children from sexual abuse and to prevent couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct.

THE FOURTH MINDFULNESS TRAINING. Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I vow to cultivate loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve others of their suffering. Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I vow to learn to speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy and hope. I am determined not to spread news that I do not know to be certain and not to criticize or condemn things of which I am not sure. I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord, or that can cause the family or community to break. I will make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.

THE FIFTH MINDFULNESS TRAINING. Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I vow to cultivate good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society by practising mindful eating, drinking and consuming. I vow to ingest only items that preserve peace, well-being and joy in my body, in my consciousness, and in the collective body and consciousness of my family and society. I am determined not to use alcohol or any other intoxicant or to ingest foods or other items that contain toxins, such as certain TV programs, magazines, books, films and conversations. I am aware that to damage my body or my consciousness with these poisons is to betray my ancestors, my parents, my society and future generations. I will work to transform violence, fear, anger and confusion in myself and in society by practicing a diet for myself and for society. I understand that a proper diet is crucial for self-transformation and for the transformation of society. (Thich Nhat Hanh 1993)

6.3 THE BASES FOR MIND-TRAINING. Training in moral virtue and mind-training are intimately related for two reasons:

(1) The motivation behind the violation of the precepts are *psychological*.

(2) Mind-training can only yield its benefits in a harmonious physical and social environment.

The five precepts or precept-training in general only *suppress* the three unwholesome roots (greed, hate and delusion). Although you may not *show* signs of greed, hate and delusion, it does not necessarily mean that you do not have them. They lie latent in you, and can only be reached by mind-training into order to be transformed into their wholesome opposites, that is, generosity, goodwill and wisdom.

At this point, we need to know in operational terms, what meditation really is. There is a common misunderstanding that *meditation* is only "sitting meditation," and it is taken as almost a duty or ritual, like other "Buddhist ritual" that one *must* do (hence, the question, "Do you meditate?"). The point is that there are two operational aspects of Buddhist mind-training, traditionally called "mindfulness" (*sati*) and "full awareness" (*sampajañña*).[143]

Sati or mindfulness refers both to *the method and content of mind-training*. Technically, it refers to a narrow focus on an object of meditation (such as the breath), on which the mind (that is, the attention) is

[143] See **(Mahā) Satipaṭṭhāna S** (D 22.4/2:292; M 10.1/1:57) = SD 13.2-3; see also Intro (3.6).

directed constantly until it becomes second nature. When the meditation-object and the attention overlap, there is samadhi or mental concentration, the most profound of which is known as dhyana (*jhāna*). This is *the* extrasensory state, as it can only occur at the purely mental level. Its power, however, extends beyond that, so that it profoundly refines and truly "sensitizes" the senses, so that they are no more filters and coloured glasses, but precision instruments for seeing true reality.

Sampajaññā or full awareness is a broad focus or general mindfulness that should always be present in one's waking moments. It should also be present during mindfulness practice, when it serves as a sort of back-up against any lapse of focus. For example, while you are meditation on the breath, there is some noise nearby: you then direct your attention to the noise accepting it in a non-judgemental manner, taking it purely for what it is, a "noise." You let it come, you let it go; in that way, the noise does not stay to distract you. In fact, as **the Māluṅkya,putta Sutta** (S 35.95) instructs, "in the heard there is only the heard,"[144] that is, you should note the sound merely as sound, without any comment or narrative.

Simply put, *sampajañña* is "present-moment awareness," that is, keeping your attention on what is going on before you (*parimukha*),[145] right here and now. In other words, to gain mental concentration, you need to let go of both the past (it is gone) and the future (it has yet to come), and keep your attention in to the present mental states. On this level of meditative awareness, the external world only exists when it impinges on one of the six sense-doors or sense-faculties (the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, and the mind). Even then, as soon as it impinges itself, it is gently relegated to where it belongs, the external world. The mind stays focussed internally, bringing together all the beautiful attentional energies that will calm and clear the mind, leading to a profound extrasensory joy, peace and liberation.[146]

6.3 THE THIS-WORLDLINESS OF MEDITATION. From what has been described of meditation so far, it should not be construed that it is a mystical trance or "religious experience" (at least, that is *not* what it merely is).[147] All the Buddhist texts and traditions agree that *meditation should be a natural part of one's daily life*. Done in this manner, meditation *is* an ethical activity, but more of this later [6.4]. At this point, it is expedient to understand the two aspects of moral virtue (*sīla*).

In simple terms, moral virtue *is* ethical conduct, that is, how we relate with others—humans, non-humans, and the universe—through our actions and speech. The beginning of lay Buddhist training is embodied in the five precepts, sometimes called the "negative precepts," because they constitute "the morality of omission" (*vāritta sīla*): one does *not* kill, one does *not* lie, etc. The other integral aspect of this moral training comprises the "positive precepts" or virtues (also termed *sīla*), that is, the "morality of commission" (*cāritta sīla*): one cultivates those qualities contrary to the five negative ones. This table summarizes the relationship of the two kinds of precept training and the values they embody:[148]

	Precept	Practice (Virtue)	Value (goal of precept & practice)
1	not killing	lovingkindness	life (including health and productivity)
2	not stealing	generosity	happiness (including property)
3	no sexual misconduct	contentment	freedom (including respect)
4	not lying	truthfulness	truth (beneficial communication)
5	no intoxicants	mindfulness	inner calm

[144] *Sute suta,mattaṁ bhavissati.*

[145] See eg **(Mahā) Satipaṭṭhāna Ss** (D 22.2/2:29; M 10.4/1:56) = SD 13.2-3, esp Intro (3.9d).

[146] Dreyfus (1995:31) adds that Buddhist meditation is "a technique of the self" as envisioned by Michel Foucault ("Technologies of the self," in L Martin, H Gutman & P Hutton (eds), *Technologies of the Self,* Amherst, MA: University of Massachussetts, 1988:16-49.

[147] Dreyfus very usefully discusses this point: 1995:30 f.

[148] In the Thai Buddhist tradition the relationship between "precept" and "practice" is called *pañca,sīla pañca,-dhamma,* "the five precepts, and the five virtues." For a comparative study of the Tibetan *lam-rim* system, see Dreyfus 1995:40 f.

Table 6.3 The interconnection of the Buddhist ethics

In other words, the basic Buddhist training consists of five things *not* to be done, five things *to be done,* the specific goals or qualities each of the pairs of training entail. In this sense, one's moral virtue reflects one's *social development.*

We can also apply a western philosophical framework to this schema for a comparative study so that there is better understanding of how the whole system works. At first glance, the Buddhist ethical schema appears to be **deontological***,* that is, primarily concerned with rules, injunctions and their application. This seems to be true at least in the case of the "precepts." In a sense, the five precepts are "duties" (*vatta*) that Buddhist should keep to, or in this case, they should *not* do.

The "morality of omission"—the five precepts—consists in what we should *not* do, and as such are incomplete in themselves. In other words, they are **utilitarian***,* in that they help you to choose the right course of action for the benefit of the many (*bahu,jana hitāya*). Keeping to the precepts helps us direct our actions towards qualities (lovingkindness, generosity, etc) that are of general good.

Both the "precepts" and the "practice (or values)" together sustain the five "values" (life, happiness, etc). In this sense, the (the precepts and practice) are **consequential.** *Consequentialism* concerns the instrumental quality of an action: it is good if it brings about a good result. Both the precepts and their practice are instrumentally good because they bring about the five "values."

Now there is a finer point in the *instrumentality* of the precepts as a whole (that is, the precepts, their practice, and the values they entail). On this level, the precepts are **teleological,** that is, the precepts, their practice, and the values are constitutive: they are good because they the constitute a desire end. **Dreyfus** gives an helpful explanation here:

> Teleology sees the relation as constitutive: an attitude is good because it constitutes the desired end. This is where teleology is closer to deontology than to consequentialism. Virtuous actions are chosen for their own sake, not for their instrumental values. This is clearly the case of the virtues involved in the practice of meditation. Buddhist meditation is not, at least normatively, a technique that can be mechanically applied, and will lead automatically to greater happiness. The practice that constitutes virtue inasmuch as it is practiced according to the norms of the tradition. Thus, our definition of virtue is compatible with our assertion that meditation is best understood as a practice central to and constitutive of the good life. (Dreyfus 1995:43)

Let us recapitulate the main ideas. The precepts are not merely rules and injunctions, and they not merely instrumental in preparing the suitable conditions for meditation. *The precepts as a whole are good in themselves:* their practice constitutes wholesome action (*kusala kamma*). Furthermore, they prepare the physical, social and mental environment conducive for mind-training—which is also a wholesome process.

6.4 MEDITATION *IS* AN ETHICAL ACTIVITY.

6.4.1 Wise attention. Meditation, that is, mind-training, is also an ethical activity; it is a wholesome process because it will only work when the meditator is motivated by generosity, lovingkindness and wisdom. The key factor in mind-training (that is, the practice of meditation and mindfulness) is *attention*. In a sense, mind-training is *how well* you direct your attention towards the mental state. When we are mindful, we are present in the situation: we *are* the situation.

Wholesome mindfulness is sometimes called "**wise attention**" (*yoniso manasikāra*), where ***yoniso*** literally means "as regards the womb" and ***manasikāra*** means "mental working" or mentation. In practice, the term refers to not merely looking on the surface of things, but directing one's attention to the root of the phenomenon. Behind all phenomena (whatever that can happen) there are the three universal characteristics impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self. It is sufficient initially to focus one's attention on *the impermanent nature of the phenomenon* by way of preparing the foundation of seeing it as unsatisfactory and not self.

Take for example, when anger arises in you, you are *conscious* of it (which means, it is karmically potent), but you are always not aware or mindful that it is *unwholesome,*[149] as it will somehow hurt both yourself and others as a result. Your anger is fuelled by two conditions, internal and external. *The internal condition* is your own latent tendencies of lust, aversion and ignorance. *The external condition* is the memory or impression of the other person that you have directed you attention to. (Strictly speaking, this is also an internal condition, but the other person is the stimulus, as it were.) The attention here is, of course, wrong attention, that is, unwise attention (*ayoniso manasikāra*), since the whole process is fuelled by the unwholesome roots of greed, hate and delusion.[150]

6.4.2 Being mindful, being mindless. One of the benefits of mindfulness is that it empowers us with positive emotion and motivation. Very often, our problem in behaving ethically is not that we are not well informed of the situation—"behaving ethically does not come from cognitive difficulties"[151]—but *from an emotional inability to see the ethically relevant features of the situation*.[152] Dreyfus, in his paper on "Meditation as ethical activity," gives this example:

> For example, I see a homeless person. I know that this person is in trouble. I also know that I could help this person, but that would involve some trouble. I decide to remain uninvolved. This decision is not due to a cognitive deficit, but an emotional inability to overcome my fear, as well as an inability to feel strongly enough for the person. This fear and indifference lock me into a certain vision in which I focus on the aspects of the situation that threaten me. This prevents me from considering other perspectives, particularly the ethically salient aspects of the situation, the fact that a fellow human being requires help that I can provide.
>
> In particular, this precludes me from engaging in what Strawson describes as "the range of reactive feelings and attitudes that belong to involvement or participation with others in interpersonal human relationships."[153] (Dreyfus 1995:47; reparagraphed)

This is where, says Dreyfus (as would any Buddhist familiar with meditation), mindfulness is especially relevant. Our present-moment awareness and wise consideration make us alive to the external situation as it arises outside us, and to our mental reactions as they unfold inside us. The mindfulness training here is to allow ourselves to be aware of our present attitudes and emotions. It is clear that *attention is not introspection.* While introspection is an active searching or examination of one's thoughts and feelings, attention (in mind-training) is simply a *non-judgemental reflective awareness of events both inside and outside us.*

> As both a state of heightened receptivity as well as a starting point for further action, mindfulness is both active and passive. Mindfulness also brings together emotion and cognition, acting as the basis of both, and thereby enabling and keeping together these aspects of the human psyche.
>
> Mindfulness is also directly relevant to the development of basic moral sensitivity. If we go back to our example, we can see that the development of mindfulness would have helped me to deal with the situation more appropriately. It would have given me the awareness of the emotional obstacles, here fear and indifference, that prevented me from helping a fellow human being. It would have allowed me to notice the limitations of my perception, and shift to another more compassionate perspective. Being mindless, however, I was carried away by my emotions. I was led to act unethically, not because I did not know what needed to be done, but because I was un-

[149] That is, you might be aware that your anger *is* unhealthy, but you are incapable of stopping it anyway, and are driven on by it.

[150] For an Abhidhamma model for overcoming anger (wise attention), see SD 19.14(5.1).

[151] Dreyfus 1995:47.

[152] See Ronald de Souza, "The rationality of emotions," in Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (ed), *Explaining Emotions*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980:127-151.

[153] P Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment,* London: Methuen, 1974:9. (Dreyfus' fn)

> able to resist my impulses. I walked away from the homeless person displeased with my inability to help and yet unable to do anything else. (Dreyfus 1995:48; emphases added)

It is therefore clear that mindfulness (or meditation in general) does not work by itself. It cannot be truly effective in a lasting and wholesome way when it is divorced from its ethical framework. Mindfulness, in other words, is an enabling virtue only in relation to other virtues. Not any form of attention is wholesome; *only those forms of attention that enables us to see closer to the true reality of things and empowers us with positive emotions are virtuous*. It is only in this context is meditation an ethical activity.

7 A non-religious Buddhism

7.1 A NON-RELIGIOUS BUDDHISM. In this paper, we have discussed the first two dimensions of the Buddhist life, namely, ethical training and mind-training, which in an important way, constitute *the whole of Buddhist practice*, which would in due course lead to the spiritual fruit of wisdom and liberation. What is interesting is that, throughout this study, there is no mention of any need for a transcendental or supernatural idea or practice. Indeed, the rejection of supernaturalism has been advocated [4.5]. If religion is defined as a system meaning and worship that centres around the supernatural, then early Buddhism (on which this study is based) is clearly not a religion. Or, we can say that we are talking about a *non-religious* Buddhism. We may even say that this is the form of Buddhism that existed in the Buddha's time; for, there is no mention whatsoever in the early texts for the need of the supernatural in one's spiritual quest for awakening.

The early Buddhist Suttas are full of accounts about how the Buddha *ethicized* and *demythologized* the various prevalent brahminical and other Indian terminology, ideas and practices. In **the Sigāl'ovāda Sutta** (D 3), for example, the Buddha *demythologized* the six directions (originally, Vedic tutelary gods), but the Buddha reinterpreted them as the six reciprocal social duties [5.3].[154] Similarly, in **the Kūṭa,danta Sutta** (D 5), the Buddha *ethicized* the notion of Vedic sacrifice (*yajña*) into various forms of charity, culminating the threefold training for spiritual liberation.[155] In **the Tevijja Sutta** (D 13) and other Suttas, the term *ti,veda* (the three Vedas),[156] which originally referring to the sacred texts of the brahmins, is *ethicized* to refer to the three direct knowledges (*abhiññā*) of rebirth, of karma, and the destruction of the defilements, that is the attainment of arhathood. Even such attainments (as the *abhiññā*) are not supernatural powers, but extensions of normal human faculties: in fact, they are taken to be the human faculties at their spiritual best as "direct knowledges," without any intermediary, divine or psychological. In the same Sutta, the theistic brahminical notion of "union with Brahmā" in high heaven is *demythologized* as the cultivation of the four divine abodes (*brahma,vihāra*) within oneself.

The point again is that the early Buddhist path is free of any reliance on the supernatural. The Buddha however accepted the Vedic and indigenous pantheons, *where they serve a didactic and contextualization means,* that is, his teachings are more effectively communicated and readily accepted as a way of life. **AK Warder's** remarks on early Buddhism's non-theistic nature are worth noting:

> It would be possible to suggest that the theology of the Buddha was intended as wholly fictitious, as anti-theistic, edifying stories like [those] about God. Two points may be made here.
>
> Firstly the theology seems to reproduce quite accurately the popular or Brahmanical theology and mythology of the Buddha's day (which would be appropriate procedure in edifying fiction).

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[154] D 3/3:180-193 = SD 4.1, see also Intro (2-3).

[155] D 5/1:127-149 = SD 22.8.

[156] **The Veda** is a collection of religious literature in Sanskrit dating from approx 1200 BCE and which forms the foundation of the orthodox scriptures of Brahmanism and later, Hinduism. The word Veda is derived from the Sanskrit root √vid, "to know," and the texts are believed to be the store of ultimate truth as revealed by the devas [divine beings] to the ancient seers. During the Buddha's time, only three Vedas: the Ṛg-veda (the oldest of which go back to 1500 BCE), the Sāma-veda, and the Yājur-veda. See SD 1.8 Intro (1).

> Secondly, the arrangement of the gods in certain spheres fit them into the universe of meditation of the Buddhist way which must be taken seriously as at the level of philosophical truth.
>
> The proper conclusion would seem to be that that Buddha conceded a certain reality to the Brahmanical or popular conception, as if accepting that they were based on genuine recollections of previous existences as gods, but absolutely rejected the idea that the gods differed essentially from men in having creative or controlling powers in the universe. They may exist, but they are as subject to the laws of nature as men are. (Warder 1970, 1980:155; emphasis added)

7.2 BUDDHIST PSYCHOLOGICAL ETHICS. Early Buddhism is essentially *psychological ethics*.[157] The early Buddhist conception of spiritual training is the abandonment of unwholesome mental states (*akusala dhamma*) and the cultivation of wholesome one (*kusala dhamma*). Such a training has nothing to do with neither the metaphysical nor the theistic. As **AK Warder** has noted in his book, *Indian Buddhism*,

> The principles of good conduct…have nothing to do with theology: they derive from the study of conditioned origination, ie of the nature of the universe, of transmigration, and from the study of society. (Warder 1970, 1980:155)

So how is early Buddhism *naturalistic*? According to Dreyfus, it is the Buddhist teaching of dependent arising (*paṭicca,samuppāda*):

> What makes the Buddha's *dhamma* naturalistic is that his suggested therapy for religious transformation falls entirely within the natural, causal framework of dependent arising (*paṭicca-samuppāda*)—this, in fact, was his greatest insight and revolutionary idea. Dependent arising describes not only the arising of factors within the personality that lead to suffering, but it is also the prescription for achieving religious liberation through taking control over those same causal factors. The religious life in simplest terms is a matter of taking hold of those factors which produce suffering and changing them towards freedom and happiness. In offering his description of the emergence of religious experience, the Buddha demonstrated the continuity of religious experience with normal, unenlightened modes of experience—emergentist continuity, I repeat, not identity. (Dreyfus 1995:21; emphases added)

The rebirth process (*upapatti bhava*)[158] of the cycle of **dependent arising** is the karmically passive side of existence, consisting in the arising and developing the karma-generated and therefore morally neutral mental and physical phenomena of existence. It is the karmic-resultant side of present existence.[159] This is also the sector of the dependent arising cycle where perception (*saññā*) occurs.

The perceptual process is clearly defined in **the Madhu,piṇḍika Sutta** (M 18).[160] An understanding of how one perceives things is helpful in understanding and managing how one's mind works. Understandably, a significant part of mind-training is the control of the causal factors of one's perceptual process. When one does not adversely react to pleasant or painful sense-stimuli (*phassa*), or ignore neutral feelings, one is less likely to feed the latent tendencies (*anusaya*) of lust, aversion and ignorance. Hence, mental calm and clarity do not arise through avoiding perception, but rather through mindfulness as an ethical activity [6].

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[157] The term probably first appeared in CAF Rhys Davids' *A Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics,* London: Pali Text Society, 1900, being a tr of *Dhamm,saṅgaṇī (Compendium of States or Phenomena),* the first of the 7 books of the Pali Abhidhamma. Download from http://www.archive.org/details/ABuddhistManualOfPhychological-EthicsOfTheFourthCenturyBC.

[158] Also tr as "karma-produced rebirth or regenerating process" (BDict: Bhava).

[159] See **Dependent arising** = SD 5.16.8.

[160] M 18.16/1:111 f = SD 6.14, esp Intro (4-6).

Another important early Buddhist teaching is that of **the five aggregates** (*pañca-k,khandha*), that is, we are nothing more than a composite of form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness.[161] The most pervasive of the aggregates is *consciousness* (*viññāṇa*) which underlies all the other four aggregates, including form (that, the sense-faculties). The psychology of consciousness is another attractive area of study for the naturalistic Buddhist.

A very interesting aspect of the aggregates is their *emergent* nature: our personality and sense of identity arise from the interdependence of the aggregates. Through the wholesome keeping of the precepts, the form aggregate is cultivated in a wholesome manner; in other words, we are in control of our sense-faculties. This in turn helps us master the other non-physical aspects of our being: our feelings, perception, formations, and above all our consciousness. Moral virtue has such a powerful effect on spiritual training. In fact, in **the Soṇa,daṇḍa Sutta** (D 4), the Buddha declares thus of the threefold training:

> Wisdom is purified by moral virtue, and moral virtue is purified by wisdom. Where one is, so is the other. The moral man has wisdom, and the wise man has moral virtue, and the combination of moral virtue and wisdom is called the highest thing in the world. (D 4.22/1:124)

7.3 THE FOUR SELF-ASSURANCES. At the start, I stated this paper will examine the question: *is it possible to practise Buddhism if one has difficulties with accepting the doctrines of karma and rebirth*? Indeed, what has been discussed so far would have answered it, but let me give the last word to the Buddha himself. **The Kesa,puttiya Sutta** (A 3.65) closes with remarkable statement by the Buddha, by way of what is known as the four "self-assurances" (*assāsa*).[162]

The Buddha's four self-assurances are the best spiritual insurance that any religious or philosophical system can ever give. They are best not in the theoretical or philosophical sense (although this may well be the case, too), but in a practical and beneficial way. They are the ground rules by which one can live together as a healthy family, community and society. Unlike Pascal's wager,[163] the four self-assurances or spiritual solaces, have a gentle and compassionate tone, giving the thinker a free choice of what to believe. At the same time, the Buddha emphatically affirms the central place of moral virtue.

Moral virtue and ethical living make communal living and society possible. In the Buddhist view, morals and ethics are founded on the principle of the "world protectors" (*loka,pāla*), that is, moral shame and moral fear, where one's actions are neither "blamable," entailing bad karma (one has moral fear), nor "censured by the wise" (one has moral shame) [5.2].[164] Without moral virtue, neither civilization nor society is possible. Without some level of social organization, no God-idea is possible: for the God-idea is always closely associated with political power. Moral virtue is necessary for social order and personal development, whether one believes in a God or not. Understandably the four self-assurances clearly stand way above Pascal's wager[165] which does not allow one any choice at all!

The Buddha closes the Kesa,puttiya Sutta with a guarantee that whether one believes in rebirth and karma or not, as long as one's "mind is without enmity thus, without ill will thus, uncorrupted thus, purified thus," one would enjoy four self-assurances or spiritual solaces (*assāsa*) (A 3.65.17). Summarized schematically, we can more clearly see the guarantee of the benefits of the spiritual life:

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[161] See SD 17.1-8.
[162] A 3.65/1:188-193 = SD 35.4.
[163] See SD 35.4 Intro (7).
[164] See SD 35.4 Intro (3b.2).
[165] See SD 35.4 Intro (7).

For one whose "mind is without enmity thus, without ill will thus, uncorrupted thus, purified thus" (ie without greed, hate or delusion through the practice of the four divine abodes):	
(1) if karma and rebirth are true	one will have a good rebirth;
(2) if karma and rebirth are false	one will be happy right here;
(3) if there is karmic result for evil-doers	one faces no evil karmic result;
(4) if there is no karmic result for evil-doers	one remains pure and unaffected anyway.

Table 7.3 The four self-assurances (A 3.65.18)

The "Buddha's wager" is that of a proposal of a single positive choice in the face of four uncertain situations. The Buddha argues that *regardless of whether the teachings of karma and rebirth are valid, even taking as if they are, brings one positive rewards here and now*.

John J Holder closes his paper on "A naturalistic theory of religious experience" on a cautionary note, which reflects the sentiments of those who think that a naturalistic Buddhism is possible, that it is *a sort of "middle way" stands above the traditional Buddhist and the anti-religionist*, and his words are worth pondering over:

> From my point of view, there is no denying that even the possibility of a naturalistic reconstruction of the term "religious" is controversial and, as such, bound not to satisfy the traditional religionist or the hardcore opponent of religion. On the other hand, neither of these individuals is likely to find the premise of this lecture acceptable, anyway. The fully committed religionist already has his or her truth (make that "Truth"—with a capital "T") and the militantly anti-religious person is probably not looking for a way to develop a religious approach to life that is consistent with naturalism. But I am certain that there are others who, like me, are trying to find a way to develop religious kinds of meaning, but simply cannot part ways with empiricism and naturalism. To this end, I propose the possibility of a naturalistic theory of religious experience.
> (Holder 2004:24)

Let me summarize the key ideas for naturalistic Buddhism, or more simply, "**mere Buddhism**."

Firstly, if we accept that the natural purpose of the Buddha's Teaching is to awaken to reality, then the idea of a naturalistic Buddhism is in order. The reasoning for this is very simple, too. According to early Buddhism, there are only two states: samsara and nirvana, conditioned existence and the unconditioned. Whatever exists must be conditioned and as such impermanent, which would include any supernatural state or being.

Secondly, in early Buddhism, there is practically no mention of the need to depend on any supernatural reality or any ritual, indeed, on anything other than a personal understanding of the Dharma, for one's spiritual liberation. "Personal understanding" here refers to first having a working knowledge of the Teaching, which one then puts into practice, usually through some kind of mindfulness training.

Thirdly, naturalistic Buddhism, by focussing on *early Buddhism as taught by the Buddha and his saints*, provides us with the purpose and wisdom to avoid misconceptions, superstitions, and religious materialism that are widespread in Buddhism today, and to transcend sectarianism and scholasticism. In this way, we truly empower ourselves to work towards reducing suffering, and attaining spiritual liberation here and now.

After the Buddha, philosophy, politics and personalities began to obscure the direct way to the Dharma by trying to bend it to fit one's weaknesses, rather than the other way around. Samsara will never fit into nirvana. To say samsara is nirvana, and nirvana samsara is clever, but this does not help overcome suffering for the unawakened. The point is, and let me repeat this: if we accept that the natural purpose of

the Buddha's Teaching is to awaken to reality, then the idea of "mere Buddhism" is workable.[166]

THE MERE BUDDHIST VISION

The Minding Centre (TMC) aspires to learn, teach and practise mere Dharma, or "non-religious Buddhism," that is, Buddhism as simply as possible, so that it is open to all who seek true stillness and liberating wisdom. We aspire to joyfully proclaim the possibility and necessity of gaining spiritual liberation in this life itself (at least as a stream-winner, with or without dhyana), in keeping with the teachings of the Okkanti Samyutta (S 25).

Mere Buddhism is easy: live it and be free.

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[166] I do not wish to sound fundamentalistically naturalistic; for, I believe that when teaching the Dharma, there is a need to use various skillful means to help the audience understand it. As long as we are mindful of the vision of the Dharma, the path to awakening is clear and direct.

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