

Ideas on Universal Ethics in Mahāyāna Buddhism

Jens Braarvig

Norwegian Institute of Philology, Norway

Diogenes
2022, Vol. 64(1–2) 52–57
Copyright © ICPHS 2022
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/03921921221080815
journals.sagepub.com/home/dio



Abstract

Buddhism in all its expressions is often characterised as a ‘World Religion’. Thus, in principle, it harbours a universal message transcending any ethnicity and national boundaries, and it may be argued that it is historically the most important common ideology for all of South, East and Central Asia. In its canonical literature and religious thinking, Buddhism presents a number of elements easily characterised as global ethics, with an egalitarian and altruistic tone. As such, with its philosophically grounded virtues and morality, Buddhism can represent a reference point and a multifaceted background for an informed discussion of global ethics. The present paper describes in brief a few topics relevant to such a discussion.

*

When considering the concept of universal or global ethics, and by implication its counterpart, we have a number of interpretative choices. Universal ethics refers to behaviour agreed upon by humans, the infringement of which is regarded as sinful or punishable. Prohibitions on killing, stealing, sexual misconduct and lying seem, in general, to be shared by all humanity, as they are the main factors causing the breakdown of societies at all levels, be they the ‘global community’, ethnic groups, nations, all the way down to families. Thus humans, as *zoa politica*, or social beings, agree to maintain rules that would prohibit such acts, which are punished by society when the prohibitive rules are broken. Most law codices, as well as the canonical laws of religions, are generated from these four prohibitions, with added rules and interpretations suiting a particular ethnicity, nation, religion or whichever group organised by agreed-on principles. These four prohibitions are integrated into all societies and their collectively accepted traditions, historically the origin of the Greek word *ethos*, laws and ideologies, and they can safely be called universal ethics.

These prohibitions, however implicit in general life, or explicitly defined by various kinds of codices, are constantly broken on all levels, as history shows, not only because of human frailty but also because the violation of these prohibitions is justified by more dominant moral principles, which sometimes lay claim to a ‘higher purpose’. Such breaches of morality are conducted by an individual promoting his or her own interests not in accordance with the interests of the community

Corresponding author:

Jens Braarvig, Norwegian Institute of Philology, P.O. Box 2709 Solli, Oslo, 0204, Norway.
Email: jens.braarvig@philology.no

at large, as well as by limited groups confronting the majority. Hence, these breaches are not considered to be global in any sense since they serve only the individual or the smaller community set apart from the greater one, although they may be praised as moral by the group they are part of – and even by others.

Another case of non-global morality is found in many religions and other kinds of groups that regard themselves as morally superior, with the right to act on other groups whom they regard as morally inferior in ways not accepted within their own group.

There are historically many attempts to generalise morality on the basis of universally valid principles, as opposed to particular ethical rules. Amongst these is the celebrated ‘golden rule’ found in most civilizations from far back in history, for example, the Chinese dictum ‘Do not do to others what you do not want others to do to you’ (*ji suo bu yu wu shi yu ren*, 己所不欲 勿施于人), although this rule is often exploited to demonstrate the imagined superiority of the Christian faith. ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you’ has amongst its philosophical formulations Immanuel Kant’s Categorical imperative. This general ethical principle in most of its formulations presupposes the equality of all human beings, at least in respect to their inherent human dignity; indeed, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which probably comprises the most important set of ethical rules in recent times, is based upon the human dignity of every individual and their equal rights.

However, to complicate matters, it may be said that a conviction of ‘having a moral duty’ to act in a particular way, even though it may be characterised as grossly immoral by others, is historically an important instance when what seems in the present to be immoral may later be evaluated as moral – and vice versa.

Thus, global ethics can be understood in two ways: on the one hand, there are behaviours that are generally accepted by all, but the practice of which is regarded as limited to members of one’s own group, whether ethnic, religious, national and so forth; and on the other hand, there are moral imperatives that are supposed to be valid for all human beings, without regard to any subgroup.

Punishment inherent in bad action

Buddhism is, of course, one of the great global traditions – with more than 2000 years in India and close to 2000 years as a Pan-Asian religion and cultural force – and as such, it contains a broad spectrum of human thinking. However, while acknowledging the existence of a spectrum, we will employ the parameters outlined above to reflect on some long lines of ethical thought in this tradition.

The ethics of Buddhism is indeed global in the sense that it shares the four articles of ethics previously mentioned, those of abstaining from killing (*prāṇātipātavirati*), stealing (or ‘not taking what is not given’: *adattādānavirati*), sexual misconduct (*abrahmacaryāvirati*) and lying (*mṛṣāvādavirati*), and to these Buddhism adds, we will add a fifth article, a warning against abuse of drink (*madyapānavirati*). The rules of the *vinaya*, the monastic codex, is in general a complex development of these four, or five, rules, with detailed rules and ways of punishing transgression with various sanctions in accordance with the seriousness of the sin admitted by the culprit. It must be said that these sanctions are fairly mild compared to other historical legal codes. The most severe punishment is the exclusion from the *Samgha*. This concept of punishment is somehow an extension of the Buddhist (and Hindu) principle that actions are punished by themselves, living on as a stain in the human psyche and manifesting themselves as a kind of suffering naturally proportionate to the bad deed committed recently, or even many aeons ago. Evil actions are punished in the same manner, at once or later, and good deeds are rewarded by good states of mind.

Thus, early Buddhist morality is built on the principle that punishment is inherent in the bad action, and consequently, there is no external punishing force or godhead taking care of this punishment. Morality is thus completely individualised, and collective morality seems to be of no concern in early Buddhism. The bad deeds people might do are their own problem, and no forgiveness seems to be possible, since the results of the actions have to burn out by being experienced by the individual; the fruits of their actions have to be reaped, as the tree metaphor goes. Buddhism did not seem to harbour the principle that one might ‘help’ the culprit to expiate his sins with torture and execution, as, for example, the *Dharmaśāstras* prescribes. In Buddhism, there is the idea that one should not inflict punishments that ‘destroy the body’, as that would deprive the culprit of the means to expiate his or her sins and progress on a religious path.

Furthermore, in early Buddhism, actions, karma, are white, black or neutral. Black actions lead to rebirth in hell or rebirth as an animal or a ghost, while white or good actions, lead to a better existence as a human or a god, but they do not lead to extinction, or *nirvāṇa*, freedom from the round of rebirth, *saṃsāra*. From heaven a god might fall down easily into hell for billions of years. Actions, then, are irrelevant for reaching *nirvāṇa*. To reach *nirvāṇa*, what is needed is knowledge (*jñāna*) and concentration (*dhyāna*), which consists of isolating oneself from any action, good or bad, generated by greed, ill will or confusion. In contrast, good actions, or morality (*śīla*), are indeed prescribed; they bring the individual into a situation where he can practice knowledge and meditation to sever all his bonds to the world and never again be reborn, thus becoming an arhat, a ‘worthy one’ who reaches *nirvāṇa* at death. This view in Buddhism is shared with many Indian ascetic movements of the ‘*śramaṇa*’ type, at the time it came into being around 400 B.C. through the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, where the aim is to reach a transcendent state of being, even of non-being, in which an individual will never again be reborn.

In early Buddhist thinking, then, a moral life is purely for the sake of reaching a stage of existence, idealised in the monastic life, where knowledge and meditation are made possible. It is a type of peaceful existence for oneself, and the morality of others, according to this ideology, is really of no concern. The morality of the lay community is their own choice and is not of much concern to the monastic elite. Historically, this individualistic sense of morality is, of course, not necessarily practiced, but at least in principle, we find an ethical view that is far from a collective morality and a concern for the actions of fellow beings. This ethical view is indeed not a global kind of ethics, apart from the aforementioned four basic sins in early Buddhism, which are more or less universally accepted as such.

Compassion and care

However, the ‘Awakened One’, the Buddha, is still described as the ‘Great Compassionate One’ (*mahākaruṇika*), as he has reached awakening, and teaches his way to others, so they also can reach *nirvāṇa* at death. But the Buddha’s *nirvāṇa* does not seem to be any different from the *nirvāṇa* of anybody – although this is a much-discussed theme of Buddhist scholasticism. The concept of compassion and care for your fellow beings represents, in a sense, another tendency in Buddhist thinking when compared to the individual aim of getting rid of the suffering of this world by attaining *nirvāṇa*. This tendency would eventually develop into the *Mahāyāna* faith, creating an historical split in Buddhism into two main traditions, *Sthaviravāda*, in Pali *Theravāda*, which spread in South and South East Asia, and the *Mahāyāna*, characteristic of Buddhism in East and Central Asia. The historical background of this split is discussed by historians, but clear divergencies of ideologies are manifest in the literature of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, which dates from about the beginning of the global calendar and was judged by the *Sthavira* as forgeries, not the true words of the Buddha. The writers, readers and adherents of the *Mahāyāna* literature would depreciatingly

brand their opponents and critics ‘the small vehicle’ (*Hīnayāna*), as opposed to their own ‘great vehicle’.

This polemical stance of the *Mahāyāna* against the *Hīnayāna* had a philosophical or ideological, religious and indeed ethical edge. One may reflect that most religions arise in a conflict, a disagreement, as exemplified by Christianity as and Islam. Disagreement was certainly the case with the split between the *Mahāyāna* and *Hīnayāna*, as also between early Buddhism of the 4th century B.C. and the Vedic tradition. The Buddha would teach that the *ātman*, the universal Self of the *Upaniṣads* and later the orthodox Hindu traditions, were the greatest misunderstanding of all, that life is only a flux of existential atoms, and that clinging to a Self or a Life Principle is the source of all suffering and the main hinderance to attaining *nirvāṇa*. Thus, while earlier Buddhism accepted that life is a continuous chain of *dharmas*, however existent, the *Mahāyāna* preached that everything is empty and devoid of essence or being. Everything, subject, object and the consciousness arising in the meeting of the two are just illusions. To cling to any self, object and experience is our bondage; to understand that all is a constructed projection of our activity of thought, is freedom.

According to the new way of thinking, it is absurd to try to reach *nirvāṇa* oneself, since freedom is to be rid of the self. The new thinking also would assert that to suppose there is a *nirvāṇa* to reach and a *saṃsāra* to be liberated from is the result of our dichotomous way of constructing an illusory world. Real freedom is to get rid of such constructed dualities, the deepest of which is the split between subject and object, all constructed by our mental activity.

The ideal of the arhat, according to *Mahāyāna* rhetoric and criticism, is no more than a role constructed so as to feel superior. This was a particularly strong criticism of earlier tradition. Indeed, to become an arhat was the goal of all ethics, knowledge and meditation, but Mahayana criticism attacked monastic life as limited in scope. The *Mahāyāna* prefers to emphasise the ideal of the *bodhisatva*, the Buddha *in spe*, who has promised to provide happiness for everybody at any cost, to sacrifice himself for the sake of all living beings, and not to strive for his own *nirvāṇa* but for all living beings instead. Rather than escaping from all living beings, one should strive to be reborn where one could help the most to alleviate the suffering of all, accepting rebirth in all places for that purpose, be one a god, a human, an animal, a ghost or in hell – all this to cultivate the endless compassion of the Buddha, whose state could be reached only after immeasurable ethical practices that could last for eternity.

Two diverging ethical orientations

We see that in the literature of *Mahāyāna*, quite another ideal was developed with great changes in ethical outlook. Compared to the personal ideals of staying away from bad actions, karma, to cultivate knowledge of selflessness and meditation, the *Mahāyāna* ethical code embodies an active morality – socially engaged with a modern turn. The new interpretation of Buddha’s teaching evolved into the postulation that the knowledge of emptiness of self and other and of subject and object can be achieved through active ethical behaviour rather than through an isolated life. Moreover, if the Buddha was a layman in most of his incarnations, why should one not emulate his behaviour rather than aspire to be an isolated monk? Thus, the preferred perfections (*pāramitā*) to live by, develop oneself by, would be generosity (*dāna*), morality (*śīla*), tolerance (*kṣānti*), courageous action (*vīrya*), with meditation (*dhyāna*) and knowledge (*prajñā*) being only the last two, meditation explained as something we always do, and knowledge of selflessness included a knowledge of emptiness, *śūnyatā*.

Thus, generosity, giving, is the way to be rid of dichotomous existence and to reach non-duality, to transcend self and other, not to construct oneself as the generous giver, not to imagine the recipient as a particularly fortunate receiver, not to construct the gift. In contrast, just to give is to realise

the emptiness of all things as it is formulated in, ‘Giving is the Awakening of the *bodhisattva*’. Thus, the bodhisattva, practicing the six *pāramitās*, should never give up his promise, his ‘thought of awakening’, *bodhicitta*, but reincarnate for the sake of helping all in endless time in accordance with his pledge.

A somewhat sophistic argument promoted by *Mahāyāna* literature is that a *bodhisattva* will stay in *samsāra* forever, for immeasurable times and uncountable periods, since the delusion and ignorance of living beings will never end. However, since time is just an illusion, awakening is really now. A corollary to this argument is that all living beings are really Buddhas, or at least potentially so; their Buddha-nature is obscured only by adventitious vices and impurities. Thus, every living being has an unborn Buddha within, a *Tathāgatagarbha*, and in this, all living beings are part of the ‘same sameness’. Furthermore, if one hurts any living being, one hurts the Buddha, at least a potential one. From these statements, there ensues a universal kind of ethics. Every bodhisattva should train himself or herself in compassion (*karuṇā*), for as one text argues, ‘It is easy to have compassion with your own family and relatives, but real compassion is to have compassion also with the inhabitants of the other side of the ocean’.

Along with this principle of compassion, absolute tolerance (*kṣānti*) is envisaged; one should tolerate any being as potentially a Buddha, even the lowest of all, such as prostitutes, or worse, apostates. One should tolerate any pain, any suffering, and one should ‘turn the other cheek’. Also, the views of others should be tolerated since no perfect truth can be expressed in words, only pointed to in many ways and languages. The highest form of tolerance is to accept existence as it is, namely as empty, without substance, and ‘unborn’.

These lofty ethical ideals, this radical altruism of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, seem unrealistic as put forth by the writers and editors of *Mahāyāna* literature about 2000 years ago. While the earlier Buddhist literature was set in a more realistic framework, *Mahāyāna* literature is more aptly described as fantasy literature, with all the fantasy worlds delineated, as well as the travel between universes billions of billions of fabulous distances apart. This fantasy element probably was conceived purposefully so as to underscore the illusory nature of existence and to describe ethical ideals far beyond what one can achieve. Still, in their more realistic interpretation, these fanciful ideals are indeed universal in most senses of the word. They are collective, of universal validity, and include all living beings, not only humans. Also, the religion that *Mahāyāna* literature created has been the most influential Pan-Asian ideology, and now it is spreading even globally.

Universality and uniqueness in Buddhism

We see that Buddhism harbours a great spectrum of ethical models, most of which we also find in some form in other religions and philosophies. However, there is one principle in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism that is arguably fairly unique, namely the construction of a very positive, altruistic and universal system of ethics on the basis of the principle of the emptiness of existence and on the basis of an ontology involving the emptiness of everything. Thus, the universalistic ethics of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism are formulated on a different ontology than that of the Golden Rule in its various formulations.

While the texts of the *Mahāyāna sūtras* may not have intended it, the relativistic attitude and scepticism about conventions and rules displayed in the literature may have the consequence of an arbitrary and individualistic ethics, or even outright bad morality, because of the lack of well-defined moral principles. Now the *sūtras* warn against nihilism and emphasise that nihilism is not the same as emptiness. That said, the philosophy in question can be easily employed to justify and tolerate any action – given the absolute tolerance previously mentioned. Morality (*śīla*), the second *pāramitā*, is described as beyond rules, and as long as it helps living beings, its form is irrelevant.

Another concept, that of expedient means (*upāya*), also gives strength to a ‘morality beyond rules’. *Upāya* is the action of the Buddhas and the *bodhisattvas* of helping all living beings in the way and form they might need, in the most efficient way, as it is argued, and thus this concept may be used to justify any action. Consequently, in Buddhist history, in several anomalous movements, such as the Buddhist Tantras and their implementation in Tibet, and some of the Chan/Son/Zen traditions, there is, apart from the monastic rules, a relativistic and very neutral relation to codices of morality.

Today, it seems that the ethics of Mahāyāna, however grandiose and sophisticated, have not been implemented institutionally to any great extent, although without a doubt, they are a great inspiration throughout the Buddhist tradition. The more sober ethics of the Vinaya, the monastic codex, however, are very long-lived, being the foundation of the continuity of Buddhism, including the *Mahāyāna* traditions, the continuity of the *Dharma* being the explicit aim of the *Samgha* in all Buddhist countries.

Bibliographic note

The above reflections on ethics in Mahāyāna Buddhism are built on the collections of the Buddhist scriptures.

Most of the topics discussed with references can be found in my work

Akṣayamatīnirdeśasūtra. Vol. i: “Edition of extant manuscripts with an index”, vol. ii: “The Tradition of Imperishability in Buddhist Thought”, Oslo 1993.

See also Braarvig JE (2014) Buddhism: inner dignity and absolute altruism. In: Düwell M, Brownsword R and Mieth D (eds) *The Cambridge Handbook of Human Dignity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.