Buddhism as Philosophy
An Introduction

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Preface

In this book I have tried to make clear the theories and arguments of the Buddhist philosophical tradition. If I have attained any measure of success, it is due to the help of many others. And so there is a long list of people to whom I must express my appreciation and thanks. First and foremost are the students who have taken PHI 208 through the years. Their comments and questions have helped me discern the underlying logic of the Indian philosophical debates, and have shown me connections between disparate topics that I would otherwise not have seen. I am glad to have had the opportunity to learn from them.

Much of the material in Chapter 10 was first presented when I gave the Matilal lectures in Indian philosophy at King's College London. I wish to thank Professor Richard Sorabji for making this possible. And a heartfelt thanks is due to all the students who showed up for late Friday afternoon lectures at the Strand.

Much of what follows reflects things I have learned over the years from colleagues and friends in philosophy and Buddhology. I have had the great good fortune to work in an analytically oriented philosophy department whose members are willing to entertain the possibility that Buddhist philosophers might have important contributions to make to the discipline. I have especially profited from my many cross-corridor discussions with Kenton Machina and David Anderson. I have learned much about Buddhist and Indian philosophy from conversing with Arindam Chakrabarti, Amita Chatterji, Georges Dreyfus, Jonardon Ganeri, Katsura Shoryu, J.N. Mohanty, Roy Perrett and Tom Tillemans. Thanks are also due to Chris Bartley and Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad for their advice and encouragement. And I owe a special debt of gratitude to Will Rasmussen, whose upāya resulted in a much improved final draft. I also found useful the comments of several anonymous readers.

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Finally, I want to express my thanks to Esther for sharing her book at a crucial moment many years ago, an act of generosity the ramifications of which are still unfolding. And of course I owe a special debt of gratitude to Muji for keyboarding assistance.
Abbreviations and Translation Sources


BCA: The Bodhicārīyāvatāra of Śāntideva with the Commentary Pañjika of Prajñākaramati, ed. P.L. Vaidya (Dharbanga: Mithila Institute, 1960).


MPS (Mahāprajñāparāmitā śāstra): Lamotte, Étienne, translator, Le Traité de la grande vertu de sagesse de Nāgārjuna (Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra) (Louvain, 1944–80).

NS, NSB, NSV: Nyāyadarśanam of Gotama, with Vātsyayana’s Bhāṣya, Uddyotakara’s Vārttika, Vācaspati Miśra’s Tātparyatika, and Viśvanātha’s Vṛtti, ed. Taranath Nyaya Tarkatirtha and Amarendra Mohan Tarkatirtha (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2003).


CHAPTER FOUR

Buddhist Ethics

The view of persons that we discussed in the last chapter is a form of reductionism. To be a reductionist about a certain kind of thing is to hold that things of that kind do not exist in the strict sense, that their existence just consists in the existence of other kinds of things. The Buddhist view of non-self, for instance, says that the existence of a person just consists in the occurrence of a complex causal series of impermanent, impersonal skandhas. But Buddhists are not the only ones to hold a reductionist view of persons. On some interpretations both Locke and Hume held such a view. More recently, Derek Parfit has given a sophisticated defense of reductionism about persons, which he explains as the denial that the continued existence of a person involves any ‘further fact’ over and above the facts about a causal series of psychophysical elements. Here is what he says about the effects of coming to believe that the reductionist view is true of oneself:

Is the truth depressing? Some may find it so. But I find it liberating, and consoling. When I believed that my existence was such a further fact, I seemed imprisoned in myself. My life seemed like a glass tunnel, through which I was moving faster every year, and at the end of which there was darkness. When I changed my view, the walls of my glass tunnel disappeared. I now live in the open air. There is still a difference between my life and the lives of other people. But the difference is less. Other people are closer. I am less concerned about the rest of my life, and more concerned about the lives of other people. [1984: 281]

Buddhists say something similar. They say that becoming enlightened, coming to know the truth of reductionism, relieves existential suffering. They also claim that it makes us more concerned about the welfare of others. In this chapter we will explore how that might be. Ethics is concerned with questions concerning how we should live our lives, and how we should act toward others. Buddhists are reductionists about persons: they claim there is no self, and the person is only conventionally real. We will be investigating the ethical consequences of this claim.

4.1

The Buddha claims that the supreme goal for humans is nirvāṇa. We saw in Chapter 2 that this claim is based on the notion that only by becoming enlightened can we hope to permanently escape existential suffering. But it was unclear at that point whether there is anything more to being enlightened than just being without suffering. Is nirvāṇa pleasant? Is it a state of happiness? The early Buddhist texts are silent on this
point. We saw, though, that this might be part of a strategy to get around the paradox of liberation. Now that we have a better understanding of the Buddhist doctrine of non-self, we might be able to resolve some of these issues.

You will sometimes encounter the claim that Buddhist nirvana is ineffable, that it simply cannot be described or understood, it can only be experienced. If this were right, then there would be no point in our asking what nirvana is like. If we were trying to decide whether to seek it ourselves or not, we would be stuck. We would have to simply take the word of those who have attained it that it is supremely valuable. We would have to embark on the path without knowing where it went. But this claim is based on a misunderstanding of certain early Buddhist texts, such as the following:

Thus have I heard.
... Vaccha the śramana spoke to the Blessed One as follows:

'How is it, Gotama? Does Gotama hold that the arhat exists after death, and that this view alone is true, and every other false?'
'No, Vaccha. I do not hold that the arhat exists after death, and that this view alone is true, and every other false.'

'How is it, Gotama? Does Gotama hold that the arhat does not exist after death, and that this view alone is true, and every other false?'
'No, Vaccha. I do not hold that the arhat does not exist after death, and that this view alone is true, and every other false.'

'How is it, Gotama? Does Gotama hold that the arhat both exists and does not exist after death, and that this view alone is true, and every other false?'
'No, Vaccha. I do not hold that the arhat both exists and does not exist after death, and that this view alone is true, and every other false.'

'But how is it, Gotama? Does Gotama hold that the arhat, neither exists nor does not exist after death, and that this view alone is true, and every other false?'
'No, Vaccha, I do not hold that the arhat neither exists nor does not exist after death, and that this view alone is true, and every other false.'

'Vaccha, the theory that the arhat exists after death is a jungle, a wilderness, a puppet-show, a writhing, and a fetter, and is coupled with misery, ruin, despair, and agony, and does not tend to aversion, absence of passion, cessation, quiescence, knowledge, supreme wisdom, and nirvāṇa...'

'Vaccha, the theory that the arhat neither exists nor does not exist after death is a wilderness, a puppet-show, a writhing, and a fetter, and is coupled with misery, ruin, despair, and agony, and does not tend to aversion, absence of passion, cessation, quiescence, knowledge, supreme wisdom, and nirvāṇa...

'This is the objection I perceive to these theories, so that I have not adopted any one of them.'

'But has Gotama any theory of his own?'

'The Tathāgata, O Vaccha, is free from all theories; but this, Vaccha, the Tathāgata does know: the nature of rūpa, and how rūpa arises, and how rūpa perishes; the nature of sensation, and how sensation arises, and how sensation perishes; the nature of perception, and how perception arises, and how perception perishes; the nature of the predispositions, and how volition arises, and how
volition perishes; the nature of consciousness, and how consciousness arises, and how consciousness perishes. Therefore say I that the Tathāgata has attained deliverance and is free from attachement, inasmuch as all imaginings, or agitations, or false notions concerning a self or anything pertaining to a self have perished, have faded away, have ceased, have been given up and relinquished.

“But, Gotama, where is the monk reborn who has attained to this deliverance for his mind?”

“Vaccha, to say that he is reborn would not fit the case.”

“Then, Gotama, he is not reborn.”

“Vaccha, to say that he is not reborn would not fit the case.”

“Then, Gotama, he is both reborn and is not reborn.”

“Vaccha, to say that he is both reborn and not reborn would not fit the case.”

“Then, Gotama, he is neither reborn nor not reborn.”

“Vaccha, to say that he is neither reborn nor not reborn would not fit the case…”

“Gotama, I am at a loss what to think in this matter, and I have become greatly confused, and the faith in Gotama inspired by an earlier conversation has now disappeared.”

“Enough, O Vaccha! Be not at a loss what to think in this matter, and be not greatly confused. Profound, O Vaccha, is this doctrine, recondite, and difficult of comprehension, good, excellent, and not to be reached by mere reasoning, subtle, and intelligible only to the wise; and it is a hard doctrine for you to learn, who belong to another sect, to another faith, to another persuasion, to another discipline, and sit at the feet of another teacher. Therefore, Vaccha, I will now question you, and answer as you think right. What do you think, Vaccha?

Suppose a fire were to burn in front of you; would you be aware that the fire was burning in front of you?”

“Gotama, if a fire were to burn in front of me, I should be aware that a fire was burning in front of me.”

“But suppose, Vaccha, someone were to ask you, “On what does this fire that is burning in front of you depend?” What would you answer, Vaccha?”

“Gotama, if someone were to ask me, ‘On what does this fire that is burning in front of you depend?’ I would answer, Gotama, “It is on fuel of grass and wood that this fire that is burning in front of me depends.”’

“But, Vaccha, if the fire in front of you were to become extinct, would you be aware that the fire in front of you had become extinct?”

“Gotama, if the fire in front of me were to become extinct, I should be aware that the fire in front of me had become extinct.”

“But, Vaccha, if someone were to ask you, “In which direction has that fire gone: east, or west, or north, or south?” what would you say, O Vaccha?”

“The question would not fit the case, Gotama. For the fire which depended on fuel of grass and wood, when that fuel has all gone, and it can get no other, being thus without nutriment, is said to be extinct.”

“In exactly the same way, Vaccha, all rūpa by which one could predicate the existence of the arhat, all that rūpa has been abandoned, uprooted, pulled out of the ground like a palmyra-tree, and become non-existent and not liable to spring up again in the future. The arhat, O Vaccha, who has been released from what is styled rūpa, is deep, immeasurable, unfathomable, like the mighty ocean. To say
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that he is reborn would not fit the case. To say that he is not reborn would not fit the case. To say that he is both reborn and not reborn would not fit the case. To say that he is neither reborn nor not reborn would not fit the case.

All sensation ...

All perception ...

All volition ... All consciousness by which one could predicate the existence of the arhat, all that consciousness has been abandoned, uprooted, pulled out of the ground like a palmyra-tree, and become non-existent and not liable to spring up again in the future. The arhat, O Vaccha, who has been released from what is styled consciousness, is deep, immeasurable, unfathomable, like the mighty ocean. To say that he is reborn would not fit the case. To say that he is neither reborn nor not reborn would not fit the case. To say that he is both reborn and not reborn would not fit the case. To say that he is neither reborn nor not reborn would not fit the case.' [M 1.483–88]

It should be clear how passages like this might lead some to think that the state of nirvāṇa is ineffable. First we find the Buddha denying that any of the four possibilities listed by Vaccha correctly describes the situation of the arhat after death. Then he says that this situation is ‘deep’ and ‘immeasurable’. Since logic suggests that one of the four possibilities would have to be true,¹ the conclusion seems inescapable that the Buddha is calling nirvāṇa something that transcends all rational discourse. But now that we understand the distinction between the two truths we can see why this would be a mistake. As the example of the fire makes clear, the Buddha’s four denials all have to do with the fact that any statement about the enlightened person lacks meaning at the level of ultimate truth.

When a fire has exhausted its fuel, we say that it’s gone. Where has it gone? The question makes no sense. For the extinguished fire to have gone somewhere, it would have to continue to exist. The question presupposes that the fire continues to exist. Yet the question still seems to be meaningful. Since we are saying something about the fire – that it is extinguished – must there not be a real fire that we are talking about? How can you talk about something that is utterly unreal? And since this real fire is not here in front of us, must it not be somewhere else? When we encounter this sort of paradoxical situation, it is useful to stop and ask about the nature of the words we are using. How does the word ‘fire’ actually function? Consider the situation

¹Logic actually seems to suggest that there are only two possibilities, not four. There are a number of so-called disputed questions where the Buddha considers four possible answers: P, not P, both P and not P, and neither P nor not P. This general form or scheme is called the tetralemma (catuṣkoṭi). But logic seems to limit us to just a dilemma: either ‘P’ is true, or else it is false, in which case ‘not P’ is true. Scholars have disputed whether the presence of the third and fourth possibilities in this scheme indicate that Buddhists use some kind of alternative logic. One plausible answer is that the logic is standard. The third possibility (both P and not P) is meant to cover cases where ‘P’ is ambiguous, so that it could be said to be true in one sense but false in another. And the fourth possibility is meant to cover cases where there genuinely exists some third possibility besides those of ‘P’ and ‘not P’.
where we say we kept the fire burning by adding more fuel. Here we are talking as if there is one enduring thing, the fire, that first consists of flames from kindling, then later consists of flames from logs, then still later consists of flames from new logs. This should tell us that ‘fire’ is a convenient designator for a causal series of flames (just as ‘the one light that shone all night’ was really a causal series of lamp flames). And this in turn means that no statement using the word ‘fire’ can be ultimately true (or ultimately false). Any such statement lacks meaning at the ultimate level of truth. All that can be talked about at the ultimate level are individual flames, not the series of flames as a whole. This is why no answer to the question where the fire has gone is true. For a statement to be true (or false) it has to be meaningful. And statements about mere conceptual fictions are not ultimately meaningful.

When we apply this analysis to the case of the arhat after death, it becomes clear why the Buddha can reject all four possibilities without implying that nirvāṇa is an ineffable state. The word ‘arhat’ is a convenient designator, just like ‘fire’. So nothing we say about the arhat can be ultimately true. The only ultimately true statement about the situation will be one that describes the skandhas in the causal series. It is, for instance, true that at a certain point (which we conventionally call ‘the death of the arhat’) the nāma-skandhas existing at that moment do not give rise to successor nāma-skandhas. Does this mean that the arhat is annihilated — that nirvāṇa means the utter extinction of the enlightened person? No. There is no such thing as the arhat, so it lacks meaning to say that the arhat is annihilated. And for exactly the same reason, it lacks meaning to say that the arhat attains an ineffable state after death.

4.2

So it is possible to say meaningful things about nirvāṇa. What, then, would it be like? In particular, what would it be like to know that ‘I’ is just a convenient designator, that strictly speaking there is no such thing as the enduring person? Parfit said that coming to believe a reductionist view of persons made him less concerned about the rest of his life. This suggests that the enlightened person takes no care for what tomorrow will bring. Perhaps this is because they know that whatever it does bring, it will be someone else who receives it. Is this what cessation with remainder, being enlightened but still alive, is like? Is the arhat someone who lives wholly in the present moment? This is a popular interpretation of Buddhist nirvāṇa. But it is also a mistake. As we saw earlier (in Chapter 2), this Punctualist view is a form of annihilationism. And annihilationism, we know, is one of the two extreme views

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2More specifically, what would it be like to be an arhat, someone who has become enlightened by following the path laid out by a Buddha? The Buddhist tradition holds that becoming a Buddha takes an immense amount of effort expended over very many lives. So it would be natural to hold that conceiving of what it would be like to be a Buddha would be very difficult for most people. But this need not be so with the life of an arhat.
about our existence that the Buddha says should be rejected in favor of his middle path.

At this point, though, you might have begun to wonder whether this can be right. Suppose it’s true that there is no enduring self to make me the same person from one stage in my life to the next (or from one life to the next). When I get ready for bed tonight, should I brush my teeth and floss? Brushing my teeth is tedious, and sometimes flossing hurts. So why should I do it? Certainly not for any benefit that these present *skandhas* get out of it. If there’s any benefit in doing it, that benefit accrues to the future *skandhas* that avoid the pain of tooth decay and gum disease. And we now know that those future *skandhas* are distinct from these present *skandhas*. So why should these present ones make this sacrifice on behalf of those future ones? Why shouldn’t they just appreciate the present for what it is and not worry about the future? Why isn’t Punctualism the right conclusion to draw from the reductionist view of persons?

Punctualism is the view that since there is no self, and the parts of the person are all impermanent, the true ‘I’ doesn’t last very long: perhaps a day or a week, but maybe just an instant. Since they think this is the truth about us, Punctualists hold we should stop putting so much effort into planning for and worrying about the future. Once we do this, they think we will learn to truly appreciate the here and now for what it is. We’ll learn to live in the present, and our lives will be fuller and richer for it. But let’s think about what the Punctualist says is the truth about us.

The Punctualist says that the ‘I’ is something that exists only as long as a particular set of *skandhas* lasts. Now each of us has a special concern for themselves. We all take a special interest in our own welfare. And the ‘I’ represents what it is that we identify with. To say that something is part of the ‘I’ is to say that it is one of the things whose welfare I should be concerned about. This is why P has the consequence that we should only be concerned about the present moment. But now in what way is P supposed to be true? Is it ultimately true? No. What the Punctualist says we should identify with is the collection of *skandhas* that exist together at present: these present body parts, and these present thoughts and feelings. This ‘I’ of theirs is a whole. It is not the same whole as the whole that we call a ‘person’. That whole is a causal series of sets of *skandhas*. The whole that the Punctualist says we should identify with is just one set of *skandhas* – the ones existing right now – and not the series made up of such sets. Still it is a whole. And wholes are mere conceptual fictions. Since P contains a reference to a whole, it could not be ultimately true. (Nor could it be ultimately false either.)

So could P be conventionally true? Remember that for a statement to be conventionally true it must consistently lead to successful practice. Which way of thinking of ourselves leads to greater success: as things that last for just a very short while, or as persons, things that last at least a lifetime? To answer this question we need to decide what counts as success in practice. And of course different people have different ideas as to what constitutes success. But this is only because of individual differences in how people obtain pleasure and happiness. Surely everyone
could agree that successful practice is practice that brings about more pleasure and happiness, and less pain and suffering. That makes it quite clear which statement is conventionally true. There is greater overall pleasure and happiness, and less overall pain and suffering, when we think of ourselves as persons than when we think of ourselves in the Punctualist way. When these present skandhas identify with future skandhas in the causal series, they brush and floss. And that means less tooth decay and gum disease. If we were to follow the Punctualist's advice there would be more of this sort of pain and suffering. There would also be less pleasure and happiness. So P is conventionally false. As Nāgasena said, the conventional truth is that we are persons. This is conventionally true because it is ultimately true that these present skandhas do affect the welfare of those future skandhas. This is why thinking of ourselves as persons results in greater overall welfare.

Punctualism is not the right way to understand Buddhist nirvāṇa. Still someone might try to defend Punctualism against the argument we have just looked at. They might say that this argument wrongly defines success as achieving more pleasure and less pain now and in the future. Instead success should be defined as achieving more present pleasure and less present pain. Future pleasure and pain should not be included in our calculations. The Punctualist would say this is because future pleasure and pain mean nothing to the present 'I'. Only present pleasure and pain should be counted, since those are the only feelings that this 'I' ever has. Future pleasure and pain are felt by another 'I'. And when we define success in this way, P turns out to be conventionally true. If we think of ourselves as persons, then we will brush and floss. At best these result in present feelings of indifference. There are much better ways to maximize present pleasure and minimize present pain.

Does this objection to the argument succeed? Here are some things to consider. The argument was for the conclusion that P is conventionally false. The Punctualist objection is that this begs the question by assuming that future pleasure and pain should count in determining whether a theory is conventionally true or false. But the Buddhist could respond that it would be question-begging for the Punctualist to

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3 It's sometimes objected that there are times when we aim at more rather than less pain, as when someone goes through a hard workout. But the point of working out is not to experience the pain that comes from strenuous exercise. The point is to enjoy the benefits that the workout produces. These may include good health, which amounts to less pain in the long run. They may also include the pleasure that comes with the sense that one has overcome a difficult obstacle. If strenuous exercise only produced pain and no benefits, then no one would ever bother to work out.

4 The fallacy of begging the question is committed when an argument smuggles its conclusion in among its premises. Here is a stock example: 'Of course God exists. It says so in the sacred texts. And everything in the sacred texts is true, since it is the word of God.' This argument begs the question by including a premise, 'the sacred texts are the word of God', that presupposes the truth of the conclusion, 'God exists'. It is fallacious because you can't prove that the conclusion 'God exists' is true by using evidence that already assumes it is true.
assume that only present pleasure and pain should count. Is there a neutral standpoint to be found here?

4.3

We have now ruled out two views about what nirvāṇa might be like: the view that it is ineffable, and the Punctualist view that it means living wholly in the present. Is there anything positive we can say? By now it should be clear why enlightenment brings about the cessation of existential suffering. In effect the Buddhist is saying we experience such suffering because we take too seriously the useful fiction of the person. We experience existential suffering when the fact of our transitoriness undermines the belief that our lives can have meaning. But how did I come to think that my life might have meaning? This seems to be part of what it means to think of oneself as a person. And a person is just a useful fiction, like the average college student. We wouldn’t make the mistake of searching for the meaning of the life of the average college student. So when we feel despair over the seeming pointlessness of our own lives, this is because of a fundamental error in our view of what we are.

To see the Buddhist’s point here it might be useful to consider how we go about socializing small children. As adults we automatically think of ourselves as persons, so we naturally assume that we always did. But the experience of child-rearing tells us differently. Much of the work of raising a child involves getting the child to think of itself as a person. That is, the child must learn to identify with the past and future stages in the causal series of psychophysical elements. Take food issues, for instance. Eating healthy foods does not always bring immediate pleasure. But telling the recalcitrant child that eating these foods will promote long-term health has little effect. This isn’t necessarily because the child doesn’t believe what they are told. It’s because the child doesn’t identify with the healthy adult it will become if it eats the right food. Its basic attitude is, ‘Why eat something now that doesn’t taste good for the sake of someone who doesn’t even exist? Why should I care about what happens to them?’ Likewise when the child is punished for a past misdeed. Until the child has learned to identify with those past psychophysical elements, it will seem quite unfair: ‘Why make me suffer for something somebody else did?’ Coming to see itself as a person is not an easy lesson for the child to learn. We try to make it easier, though, by getting the child to think of their life as a story they get to write. To become a person involves learning to make present sacrifices for the sake of future welfare. The child learns to do this by learning to think of its present choices as having meaning for the future. It learns to think of its life as a kind of narrative. And it learns to think of itself as the central figure in that narrative. Because we learned those lessons well, we expect our lives to have significance.

Notice that the Buddhist is not recommending that we become like that small child. The lesson the child learns is important. It leads to there being less overall pain and suffering in the world. It is conventionally true that we are persons. The difficulty the
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Buddhist is pointing out comes from the way in which we learned that lesson. We learned it by coming to think of ourselves as characters in a drama, figures whose actions have meaning for the future of the story. And this bit of useful myth-making is what sets the stage for existential suffering. What we need to do is unlearn the myth but continue the practice. I should continue to identify with the past and future stages of this causal series. But I should not do so because I think of myself as the hero of the story that is my life. I should do so because this is a way of bringing about more pleasure and less pain in the world. Because I feel special concern for the future elements in the series, I brush and floss. And so there is less pain. Because I take responsibility for the past elements in the series, I acknowledge past mistakes and avoid repeating them. And so there is less pain. In one respect the enlightened person’s life is just like ours. We all identify with the past and future stages of the causal series. And we try to brush and floss. The difference is that the enlightened person does so without leaning on the crutch of a self that confers significance on the events of a life. The enlightened person avoids the pain of tooth decay, just like the rest of us. But the enlightened person also avoids existential suffering.

One common reaction to this account of nirvana is to find it hugely depressing. This often stems from the sense that the Buddhist account robs life of all meaning. If the events in my life don’t fit into some larger scheme, then what’s the point? It’s little consolation to be told that the sense that our lives each have their own unique purpose was always just an illusion. But according to the Buddhist, this reaction rests on a still deeper mistake. For there to be depression over the lack of ultimate meaning, there must be a subject for whom meaninglessness is a source of despair. When the Buddhist denies that our lives have meaning, it is not because they hold that our lives are inherently meaningless. It is rather because they hold that meaning requires something that does not ultimately exist, the subject for whom events in a life can have meaning. If there is no such subject – if there is no self – then there is equally no subject whose life can lack all meaning. There is no one whose life either has or lacks meaning. There is just the life.

This last point helps us see how there might be some truth to the claim that being enlightened means living in the here and now. We saw that being enlightened does not mean having no concern for the future consequences of my present actions. But it is one thing to consider tomorrow’s hangover when deciding how much beer to drink tonight. It is another to see that decision as defining who I am. It can be burdensome to see each event in my life as having meaning for my identity. This can detract from our appreciation of the present. And it can make bad experiences worse. Being sick or injured is painful. But in addition to the pain itself, there is the anxiety that comes from wondering what this pain says about who I am and where I am going. When the enlightened person is sick or injured they will seek the appropriate medical help to relieve their pain. But they will not experience the suffering we ordinarily feel in those circumstances. They are liberated from the burdens that come with the sense of a self. Perhaps this is why, in Buddhist art, enlightened persons are often depicted with a serene half-smile on their faces.
Let us move on to the second part of our investigation of Buddhist ethics. We have been looking at the consequences of non-self for the part of ethics concerned with how we should live our own lives. We will now examine how the doctrine of non-self affects our obligations toward others. What moral consequences might follow from the person’s being a mere conceptual fiction? If the enlightened person is someone who knows this to be true, how would this affect their moral conduct? In the passage we quoted earlier, Parfit said that coming to accept the reductionist view of persons led him to be less concerned about the rest of his life, and more concerned about the lives of others. We have seen how Buddhists could agree with the first part of this statement. Do they also agree with the second? Does enlightenment lead to moral improvement?

If we think of Buddhism as a religion, we will certainly expect Buddhists to have much to say about morality. Religions are widely seen as a major source of moral training for their adherents. This expectation will not be disappointed. Buddhist literature is rife with lists of virtues that should be cultivated and vices that should be abandoned, uplifting stories of moral exemplars, cautionary tales about the sad fates of people who went astray, and the like. But many people see a much tighter connection between religion and morality. They think of religion as belief in a transcendent power, and morality as a set of rules specifying acceptable treatment of others. The connection they see is that the rules are commands of the higher power. On this view, religious faith is actually required if one is to be moral. Only belief in God, it is thought, will move one to obey the moral law when temptation urges otherwise. But no Buddhist would accept this picture. Since Buddhism is atheist (in the sense discussed in Chapter 1), Buddhists will not think of moral rules as divine commandments. What makes it wrong to take another’s property, for instance, cannot be that the Buddha forbids it. So can Buddhism actually provide a foundation for morality? Can it give a satisfactory answer to the question, ‘Why should I be moral?’

Consider the way Plato posed this question in his dialogue Republic. Suppose there were a ring that made one invisible. Would someone with such a ring not use it to their own advantage even when doing so meant violating the commonly accepted moral rules? If you could steal from a bank in a way that was guaranteed to be undetectable, would you? The problem here is not one of moral ignorance. We know that stealing is wrong. The problem is one of moral motivation: why should I be moral? A theist has a ready answer to this question. While a magic ring might make us invisible to other humans, God would see us, and punish us for our sin. A Buddhist cannot say this. Nor can they say we should be moral out of love of our creator. Buddhists do not believe there is a being who created us. So what can the Buddhist say? Why, according to the Buddhist, should we be moral?

The Buddhist answer has three layers. Each layer answers the question of moral motivation in a way that is responsive to the abilities of people at a certain stage on
the path to nirvana. The first answer is that we should obey the moral rules because they reflect the karmic causal laws. Stealing, for instance, is motivated by a desire that causes bad karmic fruit, such as rebirth as a *preta*. Acts of benevolence toward strangers, on the other hand, are motivated by desires that cause good karmic fruit, such as rebirth as a god or a high-caste human. Since I would much rather be reborn as a high-caste human than as a *preta*, it is to my advantage to refrain from stealing and to practice benevolence toward strangers. This answer will obviously satisfy only those who accept the doctrine of karma and rebirth. More importantly, though, it works only for those whose primary aim in life is to attain pleasure and happiness. These are not people who are actively seeking nirvana. We said above that each layer represents a teaching designed for those who have reached a certain point on the path to nirvana. How can such people be said to be on the path? Does this teaching contribute to anyone's progress toward nirvana?

The answer to this question takes us into the second layer. The Buddha speaks of three poisons (*kleśa*), factors that account for our staying bound in *sālimsāra*. The three are greed, hatred and delusion. These factors have the interesting property of being self-perpetuating. This is because the three poisons tend to motivate certain sorts of actions, and these actions in turn tend to reinforce the three poisons. Here delusion is ignorance of the three characteristics (impermanence, suffering and non-self). Greed and hatred clearly presuppose such ignorance, particularly ignorance of non-self. Greed and hatred also lead us to act in ways that reinforce our ignorance, thus setting the stage for further bouts of greed and hatred. When my greed leads me to take something that is not mine, for instance, I am reinforcing the belief that there is an 'I' that can be made better off through what it possesses. The result is a kind of feedback loop that is supposed to explain why the cycle of rebirths has gone on for so long. The eight-fold path that the Buddha taught (see Chapter 2) is meant to help us break out of this loop. Recall that three of the eight factors in this path — right speech, right conduct and right livelihood — represent the basic moral virtues that lay followers of the Buddha are to cultivate. Right conduct, for instance, includes such things as habitually refraining from stealing, while right speech includes the virtue of honesty. Why are these included in the path to nirvana? Not because they generate pleasant karmic fruits. Rather because such virtues help counteract the three poisons. A certain kind of moral training is a necessary prerequisite for attaining the kind of insight that leads to nirvana.

The answer of the first layer said we should be moral because doing so will lead to a pleasant rebirth. The answer of the second layer says we should be moral because doing so is part of the training necessary for attaining nirvana. In order to counteract the three poisons, we must develop habits that serve as antidotes to greed, hatred and delusion. The virtue of honesty, for instance, will make us more likely to accept the truth about ourselves. And the virtue of habitually refraining from taking what is not ours will help diminish our desire for possessions. Of course the three poisons still have ample scope in the life of the conventionally virtuous person. I might never steal and yet covet those things I can rightfully attain. I might feel righteous anger at those
not as morally upstanding as myself. But the conventional morality that is inculcated through belief in karma and rebirth is just an early stage of the path. The point of these moral practices is to counteract the three poisons just enough to make it possible to renounce the householder’s existence and become a monk or nun. With entry into the Buddhist monastic order comes a whole new set of moral practices designed to help extinguish the three poisons. One is, for instance, required to be celibate, and the only possessions traditionally allowed the monk or nun are robes and an alms bowl. There are meditation exercises designed to counteract sensual desire, which is an especially powerful form of greed. There are exercises designed to help one cultivate equanimity and loving-kindness toward all, thereby curbing our tendency toward anger. The claim is that by following this regime of retraining our emotional habits, we will ultimately become able to fully grasp the truth about ourselves – that there is no self – and thus attain nirvāṇa.

Suppose this is right. Then the person who seeks nirvāṇa will know not to engage in immoral conduct. This is not because nirvāṇa is a reward for those who are morally pure. It is rather because immoral conduct stems from motives that interfere with the liberating insight of non-self. But what about the person who has attained nirvāṇa? Why should they be moral? Not because doing so will help them attain nirvāṇa. They have already attained it. Is there anything about enlightenment that could constitute a source of moral motivation? We have reached the third layer. What we will find here is an argument for the obligation to be benevolent: whenever we are able to prevent others from experiencing pain or suffering we must do so. So to the extent that morality consists in giving equal consideration to the welfare of others, this can be seen as an argument for an obligation to be moral. The immorality of stealing, for instance, can be explained by the fact that the thief intends to benefit while causing others pain. To be moral is to give others’ welfare no less weight than one gives one’s own welfare. Benevolence could be said to be the soul of morality. So an argument for the obligation to be benevolent would answer the question, ‘Why should I be moral?’.

This argument will not claim that being moral is a means to some other end we might want, such as good rebirth or nirvāṇa. Instead it will claim that if we properly understand what it is that we say we want, we will see that we must want to promote the welfare of others. The key to this proper understanding is, of course, becoming enlightened. What the argument will claim is that once we grasp the truth of non-self, we will see that there is no reason to prefer our own welfare over that of others. And since everyone already acknowledges that they ought to promote their own welfare, it follows that anyone who is enlightened must acknowledge an obligation to promote the welfare of others as well. But the obligation that it argues for does not apply just to the enlightened. It applies to all of us, if it is true that there is no self.

The argument begins by comparing our usual attitude toward the suffering of others with our attitude toward our own possible future suffering. It uses the assumption of karma and rebirth, and describes the attitude one might take toward one’s next life:
If I do not prevent the suffering of others because it does not hurt me, 
What is the point of preventing the suffering of a future body that likewise does 
not hurt me?

‘That will also be me then’, this is an imagined error, 
For it is one thing that dies and quite another that is reborn.
If it is thought that it is just for the one whose pain it is to prevent it, 
A pain in the foot is not the hand’s, so why should the hand prevent it?
If it is said that, while wrong, still this behavior stems from the sense of ‘I’, 
That is unwise. Suffering, both one’s own and that of others, is to be prevented to 
the best of one’s ability.
The continuant and the collective are unreal, like the row, the army, etc. 
There exists no one whose suffering this is, hence who will there be to say ‘This 
is mine’?
Ownerless sufferings are all devoid of distinction between ‘mine’ and ‘other’. 
It is just because they are suffering that they are to be prevented; how can this be 
limited?
If it were asked why suffering is to be prevented, everyone without exception 
agrees that it is.
Thus if it is to be prevented, then all of it is to be prevented; if not, then one’s own 
case is also like that of other persons. [BCA 8.97–103]

The first two verses are discussing the fact that someone who believes in karma and 
rebirth would do what they could to prevent being reborn with a very painful body. 
We think this is perfectly sensible, since if you believe in rebirth then you think the 
person with that painful body will be you. The point being made in the verses is that the *skandhas* constituting the future person with the painful body are not the *skandhas* that make up me now. Of course not everyone believes in rebirth. But as we 
saw in the last chapter, we could say the same thing about the *skandhas* making up a 
person at one stage of life and the *skandhas* constituting that person later in life. So 
we could say the same thing about the person brushing their teeth and the person 
whose cavities are thereby prevented. Consequently we could change the second half 
of the second verse to ‘It is one set of teeth that are brushed and quite another whose 
cavities are prevented.’

The third verse considers the case where my hand removes a splinter from my foot. 
We think this is equally sensible, since hand and foot are both parts of me, so I am 
acting to stop my own suffering. The verse makes the point that hand and foot are 
nonetheless distinct things. So we now have two cases where we think it is sensible to 
prevent pain, yet strictly speaking it is one thing that experiences the pain and 
something else that acts to prevent it. Yet we also think it is perfectly reasonable for 
each of us to take a special interest in our own welfare. If someone else’s suffering 
won’t affect me in any way, then I have no obligation to do anything about it. While 
we may think it would be very nice to help others, we believe it would not be 
irrational to attend to only my own pain and not that of others. The rest of the passage 
discusses the apparent conflict between this common attitude and the two cases 
discussed in the first three verses. We could put all of this as follows:
Suppose that we are each obligated to prevent only our own suffering.

In the case of one's own future suffering, it is one set of *skandhas* that does the preventing for another set that has the suffering.

In the case of one's own present suffering, it is one part that does the preventing for another part that has the suffering.

The sense of 'I' that leads one to call future *skandhas* and distinct present parts 'me' is a conceptual fiction.

Hence it cannot be ultimately true that some suffering is one's own and some suffering is that of others.

Hence the claim that we are obligated to prevent only our own suffering lacks ultimate grounding

Hence either there is an obligation to prevent suffering regardless of where it occurs, or else there is no obligation to prevent any suffering.

But everyone agrees that at least some suffering should be prevented (namely one's own).

Therefore there is an obligation to prevent suffering regardless of where it occurs.

What this argument in effect does is accuse us of irrationality if we think it's justifiable to be concerned about our own pain and not be equally concerned about the pain of other people. The crucial premise is (4). This is where non-self gets brought in. It claims that there is no ultimate fact that could back up our discriminating between our own pain and that of others. Suppose there is no self. If wholes are also unreal, then hand and foot cannot be parts of one whole, my body. This is likened to the case of an army. When the helicopter pilot evacuates the wounded soldier, it is one thing that acts on another. If wholes are unreal, then the present body and the future body cannot be stages of one thing, me. This is likened to the case of a row. The line for a movie is made up of different people at 9:00 and 9:15. The army and the movie line are just useful fictions. There are really just the parts making them up. So, as (6) concludes, there are no ultimate facts that could explain on the one hand why I should take that splinter out of my foot and I should brush and floss, but on the other hand why I need not have the same concern for preventing the suffering of others. Premise (7) then points out that there are two remaining options: that suffering should be prevented regardless of 'whose' it is, or that absolutely nothing matters. It would be consistent of me to do nothing to prevent any pain anywhere – my own or that of others. But that would be insane. So the obligation that I already acknowledge to prevent my own pain extends equally to the suffering of others. Once I overcome the illusion of a self, I will see that my desire to prevent my own pain is really just a desire to prevent pain, period.

We know that Buddhists deny the existence of a self. It is also widely known that Buddhists claim an enlightened person will be benevolent (or compassionate). It might be tempting to see these two things as connected in the following way: 'If I have no self, then you and I aren't really distinct people, we are really one, so I should...
be just as concerned about your welfare as I am about my own.’ But this is not what the Buddhist is saying. The trouble comes with the ‘we are really one’. There are Indian philosophers who actually say something like this. But they are not Buddhists; they belong to the orthodox school called Advaita Vedânta. Unlike the Buddhists, they hold that there is a self. Moreover, they hold that there really is just one self. So they would say that what we think of as distinct persons really aren’t distinct. The Buddhist argument we just looked at agrees that we are not really distinct persons. But what Buddhists deny is not the distinctness. They deny that there are persons. They deny that there are those things that could be either many or else really one. The Advaitin and the Buddhist can both argue for the same conclusion – that we should show equal concern for the welfare of all. But they argue for it in very different ways.

Does the Buddhist argument work? Here is one question to consider. In (6) it is concluded from (4) and (5) that there is no ultimate ground for the claim that we are obligated to prevent only our own suffering. Is this right? We saw (in Chapter 3) how the Buddhist defends (4). And if (4) is true, then (5) must be as well. Ultimately there is just suffering, not the person who has it. But suffering only occurs together with other skandhas, as part of a causal series of skandhas. Remember that while persons are not ultimately real, it is conventionally true that we are persons. And this conventional truth is grounded in the ultimate existence of a causal series of skandhas. Because these skandhas were caused by those earlier ones, it is conventionally true that it’s my own fault if I have cavities – I am the same person as the one who didn’t brush regularly. All of this we already knew. But here is another point that has not yet come up: there are many distinct causal series. These can be distinguished by virtue of where the effects show up. The refusal to brush in this series will not cause cavities in another causal series, only in this one. Might this not explain why we conveniently designate the one series as ‘me’ and the other as ‘you’? Might this not be the ultimate truth that makes it conventionally true that we are distinct persons? In this case perhaps there is some ultimate ground for the claim that we are obligated to prevent only our own suffering. Perhaps (6) does not follow from (4) and (5). Perhaps (6) is false. Perhaps the argument does not work.

In philosophy we often come across arguments that look convincing but make claims that seem too strong to be plausible. The Buddhist argument for benevolence is an example. If we have understood and accepted the doctrine of non-self, the argument seems perfectly simple and straightforward. But when we reflect on what it purports to prove, it starts to seem too good to be true. Philosophers in the Western tradition have long sought to establish a rational obligation to be moral, with little success to show for their efforts. Could it really be this easy? The study of philosophy will make us skeptical. This is why, when we encounter a plausible-seeming argument for a surprising conclusion, we need to be careful. We need to test the argument by looking for hidden flaws: false premises, or holes in the reasoning. We need to adopt the stance of someone raising objections to the argument, looking for ways to show that the argument does not really prove its conclusion. But our work is not over once we’ve found an objection – sometimes objections are also not as good
as they initially seem. So we need to lay out the objection clearly and carefully. And then we need to adopt the stance of someone defending the argument against that objection. Is there anything they can say that shows the argument does not really have the problem the opponent alleges it has? In the case of the Buddhist argument for benevolence, we sketched a strategy for raising an objection in the preceding paragraph. But this was just a sketch. Now the details need to be filled in more carefully. Once this is done, you should ask yourself what the Buddhist could say in response. If you have spelled out the objection with sufficient care, you may find there are still moves the Buddhist can make. Or perhaps not. What is important is that the effort be made. Philosophical arguments can be very persuasive. But we want to be sure we are not persuaded for the wrong reasons. This is why, when we encounter such an argument, we put it to the test. First we try to understand it, then we put ourselves in the position of an opponent and look for objections, then we see how those objections might be replied to. If you do this with the Buddhist argument for benevolence, you may end up more confident that the final conclusion you reach is based on good reasons.

Further Reading

For a rather different view of the overall character of Buddhist ethics, as well as a survey of Buddhist views on a variety of specific ethical questions, see Peter Harvey. *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values and Issues* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

