

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/>

Volume 21, 2014

# Buddhist Practice as Play: A Virtue Ethical View

Meynard Vasen

University of Ghent

*Copyright Notice:* Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to: [cozort@dickinson.edu](mailto:cozort@dickinson.edu).







# Buddhist Practice as Play: A Virtue Ethical View<sup>1</sup>

Meynard Vasen<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

The debate about which Western ethical theory is most suited to understand Buddhist ethics has been fruitful, because it places the Buddhist tradition in a light that brings out new features. In this article I take further Keown's view on Buddhist ethics by offering a virtue ethical interpretation of Buddhist ethics with *praxis/practice* as a central notion, and a form of naturalism as foundation. I draw on the notion of play, as developed by Gadamer and Wittgenstein, and on MacIntyre's view on virtues as grounded in practices, narratives, and traditions, as widening hermeneutical circles. I conclude by arguing that such an interpretation is a fruitful one, both in the sense that it increases our understanding and that it motivates to engage in Buddhist practice.

---

<sup>1</sup> With thanks to Alan Sponberg (Saramati), Bernard Stevens, and Tom Claes.

<sup>2</sup> University of Ghent. Email: [Meynardvasen@gmail.com](mailto:Meynardvasen@gmail.com).

“Only what is fruitful is true” (Goethe, *Legacy*).<sup>3</sup>

## Introduction

For more than thirty years a debate has been going on about which Western ethical theory is most suited to Buddhist ethics. Many good books and articles have been written on this subject. Highlights are Keown’s *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, which makes a strong case for virtue ethics, and Goodman’s *Consequences of Compassion*, which argues for a form of consequentialism. It is beyond the scope of this article to elaborate on the hermeneutical aspects of the matter. I think that the point of this debate is that by putting the Buddhist tradition in the context of a theory like virtue ethics or consequentialism, questions are asked of it that were never asked before. In this way, connections and correspondences within Buddhist ethics itself come to the fore that were implicitly there but never quite visible. This increases our understanding of Buddhist ethics.

I want to contribute to this greater understanding of Buddhist ethics by engaging in this debate. I will do so by presenting a virtue ethical interpretation of Buddhist ethics. The notion of *praxis*/practice as it was given by Aristotle and further elaborated on by Alasdair MacIntyre will be the main focus of my interpretation. I will continue on the path of Keown, and try to expand and deepen it; however, in my view, virtue ethics should be seen as depending less on its Aristotelian roots than in Keown’s interpretation. While remaining in debt to Aristotle’s formal notions, virtue ethics has taken many other valuable forms.

---

<sup>3</sup> “Was fruchtbar ist, allein ist wahr” (*Vermächtnis*).

My concern is not to which ethical theory Buddhist ethics “belongs” according to this or that text or body of texts. I think this can never be definitively established as if it were a matter of fact, because it is not. It is a hermeneutical matter, and as such there is more than just one way to look at it. As Goethe notes with the words I quoted above, the truth of a certain interpretation is not determined by whether or not it corresponds to the “facts” but by whether it is fruitful. My purpose is to show that a virtue ethical interpretation of Buddhist ethics is possible and that it is a fruitful interpretation. It is fruitful in the sense that it integrates many, if not all, aspects of Buddhist ethics into a coherent whole, thereby increasing our understanding of it. I believe Goodman and others have shown convincingly that a consequentialist interpretation is also possible. However, I think that a consequentialist interpretation is less fruitful than a virtue ethical interpretation. It does not give room to important aspects of Buddhist ethics because ethical practice in general, and specifically in Buddhism, is done for its own sake and not for the sake of some external goal. This will, I hope, become clearer in the article.

I will elaborate on the notion of *praxis*/practice in several “rounds,” and in each round I will point out the way in which it fits in with Buddhist ethics. In the first round (the next two sections), I will show the core of the notion of a practice—its teleological and autarkic formal structure and how this hangs together with the notion of virtue. In the second round (the following two sections) I will go into how this view relates virtue ethics to consequentialist and deontological ethics. In the third round I will indicate how such a view can be grounded in a tradition with a view on reality and human nature.

I think that the basic question of all ethics is the Socratic question: “how should one live?” (Plato 352d; Williams 2). Other important ethical questions as “What is a good deed?” “How can we be happy?” or

“What is our obligation towards other people?” are derived from this question. With ethics I mean the broad discourse that arises as an answer to this basic question. Ethics understood in this way does not have to make a distinction between ethics in the sense of morals and other practical aspects of life such as health. If I ask myself the question how best to live, it is adequate to include things such as healthy food, physical exercise, enjoyment, and so forth, as well as moral matters such as fulfilling promises and thinking of others. Thus, with morality I refer to a *part of ethics*, the area relating to norms in social life, and the praise and blame aspect that comes with it (cf. Williams 174).

## Practices

### *Teleology*

I think that the core of virtue ethics is its teleological structure, which was first described by Aristotle. Even in the opening lines of the *Nicomachean Ethics* he distinguishes between *praxis*, i.e., an act that is done for its own sake, and *poiesis*, an act done for its result. A *praxis* is teleological; i.e., the end of an act and the means by which to achieve that end cannot be described separately from each other because they constitute each other. The end is internal to the act. The end of a *poiesis*, on the contrary, can be achieved by other means and is typically wanted *because of* something else. When you have achieved the end of a *poietic* act, you stop acting because going on would be pointless. The end is external to the act.

MacIntyre developed this notion of *praxis* further. He defines a practice as a:

. . . human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to

achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity. . . .  
(187)

He gives as examples for practices such activities as chess, football, painting, music, and natural sciences. In playing chess, for instance, the end is realizing the internal goods of it: a certain kind of strategic imagination, analytic ability, and competitive intensity (MacIntyre 188). These goods can be achieved only by trying to achieve the standards of excellence that belong to chess and partly define this practice. And the qualities one needs for this are precisely the same strategic imagination, and so forth, which one develops by engaging in this practice, or the excellences/virtues of chess. The end of the practice, realizing the internal goods, is, in other words, the description of the excellences to achieve that end. In short: the virtues are the means to achieve the internal end (*telos*) of a practice, and at the same time are that end itself. The end and the means constitute one another and are mutually dependent. One could call the end of a practice the flourishing of it: it is the realization of a potential, the crown on a process of development and unfolding.

A *poiesis* is also goal-directed, but in a radically different way. An act of *poiesis* stops when the goal of an action is reached; also, its goal can be achieved by other means. MacIntyre gives the example of a child who plays chess because she gets a certain amount of candy as a reward. The candy has no inherent relation with chess, and the child could earn it, for example, by washing the dishes for her mother. A *poiesis* is, in other words, consequentialist: the success of an act is measured by whether or not it achieves certain external goals.

It is clear that both *praxis* and *poiesis* play an important role in life. Many of our actions are done because of the ends that lie outside the act itself. We make a trip to arrive somewhere or we make a chair to sit on. Both actions are instrumental to the goal and are stopped when the

goal is reached. However, in the final analysis the results of *poietic* acts point to goods that are wanted because of themselves and thus to a *praxis* one does for its own sake. You earn money in order to buy a house to live in with your family; the living is part of the *praxis* of family life. It is pointless to ask for a result of family life, because the goal of it lies in family life itself. The point of every *poietic* act lies, in the final analysis, in a *praxis*.

The distinction between a *praxis* and a *poiesis* is a conceptual one, and one that is sometimes difficult to make. Having a party, an activity typically done for its own sake and therefore a *praxis*, can partly or wholly become a *poiesis* if one does it to network for one's career, and a *poietic* act like building a house can be a *praxis* when the process of building becomes almost more important than the result. In fact, one hopes to find such a person when one is looking for someone to do a job well.

A *praxis* typically also has side effects, as, for example, the artist who earns money with his portraits. That does not necessarily disturb the *praxis*, but it may. A painter that paints *only* for money, or the football-player that plays *only* to become more famous, is not painting or playing football in its *praxis* sense.

### *Playing a game*

The concept of a practice becomes clearer when set to the background of the notion of playing of game, as Gadamer, Wittgenstein, and others have developed it. A game has its own way of existing, says Gadamer. That is expressed by the metaphorical use of the word, in for instance, "the play of light," "the play of parts of machinery," or "the play of words" (97). In each case, there is an autonomous process taking place which is non-personal. It is of secondary importance who or what is playing; the subjectivity of playing is not the one who is playing, but the

playing of the game itself. The game plays itself through the players; the players are, in a manner of speaking, the means of the game to play itself (101).

Those who are absorbed in a game have a different cognitive mode. The distinction between believing and not believing changes. Those who watch a theatrical play will be aware of the fact that what they see is not “real,” but, nonetheless, they will in a way believe what is happening and will find the question of its reality inadequate (and annoying). The same goes for the “sacred play” of a cult or the “romantic nonsense” of lovers. Those who are engaged in playing a game distinguish truth and nontruth in a way that is not valid outside of the game.

This does not mean they can believe whatever they wish. Beliefs need to be within the field of possibilities of that specific game. As Wittgenstein and Searle have made clear in the notion of language-games, each game has its own rules that constitute that game. “Constituting” rules are to be distinguished from “regulating” rules. One can trespass a regulating rule within the playing of a game but not so with a constituting rule. A regulating rule is, for instance, to make time-agreements in a game of chess, while a constituting rule determines which moves a king can and cannot make. Someone who infringes on a constituting rule will simply not be playing the game in its proper sense.

A game is a place of refuge in the world of the seriousness of external utilitarian goals. But another kind of seriousness is needed to play a game well and to engage in it. One who does not take a game seriously in this way spoils it. The seriousness that comes upon those who play a game is the seriousness of the internal goals that a game imposes upon the players. The playing person submits to this because he or she submits to playing the game while at the same time taking it on voluntarily because he or she *intends* to submit. Playing a game is an activity that is by nature freeing; the determinacy that the external effects impose upon

us are bracketed. Therefore, playing a game is characterized by a lightness that makes it look like it is going from itself. It could be compared with the phenomenon of “flow” as it has been described by Csikszentmihalyi. This lightness does not mean there is no effort or exertion. But it is the playing of the game that takes the initiative in the acting. That is why it is experienced as uplifting, and as relaxing even in the case of exertion (Gadamer 103).

All this goes for practices as well. A practice has an autonomous way of being; it is its own subject. It modifies the cognitive mode of those who are absorbed in it, and it has its constituting rules. Moreover, it brings an experience of freedom by bracketing external effects and being uplifted by the internal ends. That is not to say that the external effects are excluded, I will come back to that. Thus, it is characteristic of both playing a game and a practice that they are autarkic in the sense of meaningful in themselves. *For themselves* they do not need a justification in terms of utility, although they might of course need it in the eyes of someone outside the practice.

The virtues are the character traits that enable one to achieve the internal goods of a practice. In MacIntyre’s words:

A virtue is 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 prevents us from achieving any such goods. (191)

A good chess-player, a good gardener, a good scientist, and so forth, are persons who have made habits of the excellent qualities needed for the practice in question. The qualities are embedded in their character. In that way they not only achieve the internal goods of the practice for themselves, but also contribute to the flourishing of the practice in itself, and thereby create the conditions for others to engage in them too.

There is no radical change in meaning of the word “good” in a functional meaning as “a good gardener” and in a moral meaning as in “a good person.” In both cases, “good” is used in the sense of “suited to achieve the internal goal.” The continuity of these two meanings of the word “good” was one the main points for Anscombe and Foot when they breathed new life into virtue ethics in the 1950s.

Each practice, of course, invites the development of the virtues specific for that practice, as, for instance, “weather resistance” for a gardener, or analytical skills for a scientist. However, there are also general virtues. *Courage* is the quality that is needed to cope with the dangers or fears that come in one form or another with every practice, and *patience* is the quality needed to handle hindrances that cannot immediately be overcome. These qualities are needed for a practice as such. The most central of these virtues is what Aristotle called *phronesis*, generally translated as “practical wisdom.” Someone with practical wisdom typically has much experience in a given practice and is someone who is good at deliberating about and weighing the contingent circumstances of a given situation *without losing sight of the internal goal*. The external effects to be expected from an action are part of these contingent circumstances, so he or she will take them into account. That is not to say that the *phronimos* has become a consequentialist. That would only be the case if the external effects had *precedency* over everything. In the final analysis, it is about realizing the internal goal and the external effects can be helpful to that. The practical wise man or woman is a specialist in finding the right means to a given goal and is fully aware of the importance of that goal. In this way, he or she can handle well the contingent circumstances that determine success or failure. Aristotle compares this with an archer, who keeps his eye on the target while at the same time takes all the external circumstances into account.

The person wise in this practical sense is one who will have realized the excellences of a given practice to the greatest degree, and therefore can be used as an example, so that he or she can in a given situation ask: “what would x do in this case?” This way he or she does not have to actually exist (anymore) but can serve as a paradigmatic ideal type for a given practice.

### *Narratives*

Formally speaking, activities like sadism or the amassing of vast amounts of wealth, which are directed towards both internal and external goals, can also be called practices. That raises the question of how a practice can be criticized. A related question is how conflicts between different practices can be handled. In *poiesis* these questions are, at least in principle, quickly answered: it is about which action gives the best results (whereby of course the question needs to be answered how one should define “best”), and that is in the final analysis an empirical matter. In concrete cases it can be difficult or impossible to get these empirical data, but in principle there is no difficulty. In the case of conflicting practices it is not that clear. Should I let the practice of my family life prevail over my artistic life? There is no common denominator for the internal goods of both practices; they are incommensurable. Criticizing a given practice provides us with a similar problem: by what criteria should I evaluate an internal goal?

MacIntyre describes the narrative of a life as an overarching principle able to bring coherence between practices (204). A person is more than just a living body that is born as a blank slate, lives for a while, and then dies. It is also more than the neo-liberal individual that makes rational choices based on what he or she believes will bring the greatest happiness. A human being is essentially a story-telling being,

born into a culture and a family, and is from the first until the last moment of his or her life embedded in stories about where he or she is going to and comes from. These stories are embedded in a tradition; I will come back to that. MacIntyre uses the image of a *quest* for the narrative of a human life. Characteristics of a quest are its goal-directedness, and unpredictability. We all inevitably design our future, set our aims and have projects we are engaged in. If we do not do this ourselves, it will be done for us. The future always presents itself as one or more ends to which we are “on the way.” At the same time, we know it is entirely uncertain which way it will actually go. In this manner, we can succeed or fail in moving towards the ends. We can refuse to go, or, during the journey, forget what we aimed for, give up, or meet with insurmountable hindrances, and so forth.

Thus, life seen in this way has the same teleological structure as a practice and can be seen as a second-order practice, overarching the other, first-order practices, and creating or failing to create coherence between them. The qualities someone needs for this “practice of life” achieve its goods; if they do so excellently, they are the virtues *per se*. The narrative of an individual life indicates what is good in an individual life; what all narratives have in common is an indication of what is good in a human life as such. That is the flourishing of the practice of life, the *summum bonum* of life. Aristotle called it *eudaimonia*, which is often translated as “flourishing.” Literally it means: “having a good *daimon*.” A *daimon*, unlike the English “demon” that is derived from it, was thought of a positive spiritual being that could guide and guard a person, like the *daimon* Socrates said warned him when he was in danger of missing his life’s goal (Plato 31d). Therefore, *eudaimonia* for the ancient Greeks must have had connotations with a transcendent being, and might also be translated as “a blessed life.” It is the complete unfolding of all of a person’s qualities, social/emotional as well as the intellectual, into something that might be experienced as transcending ordinary life.

This over-arching practice of a life directed toward *eudaimona* also answers the question how a given first-order practice can be criticized. The criterion is whether a certain practice is helpful in the quest to *eudaimonia* or hinders it. Will, for example, the amassing of vast amounts of wealth be helpful? In case of conflicting goods of different practices, ideally the *phronimos* of the practice of life is able to see some aspects of the concrete situation as greater, or even as the only relevant aspects, so that the other aspects are overridden or silenced (cf. McDowell “Requirements” 84). With this it becomes clear that the next question must be how to criticize a certain conception of *eudaimonia*. I will turn to that in my discussion of a tradition. For the moment the point is that the narrative of a life can create coherence between all the different practices of life.

An often-heard objection against virtue ethics is that it is self-centered. It is objected that if an act contributes to my own flourishing, it is a “good” act, regardless whether it contributes to the well being of other people. In the best case, the flourishing of my community is included. As Aristotle says: “though it is worth while to attain the end merely for one man, it is nobler and more godlike to attain it for a nation or for city-states” (1094b10).

But it would be a mistake to assume that in Aristotle’s view I should strive for the good of the community *because my own good is dependent on that*. That would project the Darwinian assumptions with which our culture is impregnated to an age where they do not belong. Aristotle says I should strive for the good of the community because it is *nobler and more godlike*. Ethics is inherently political for Aristotle: it is directed towards the good of a community, which means that the virtues are lifted to another level by directing them from the individual to the community. Aristotle stopped at the borders of a people or a city-state, but there is nothing that says we should withhold from expanding these

borders further until they encompass all human beings or even all living beings. Thus, there is nothing intrinsically self-centered in virtue ethics. In fact, the notion of a practice allows for a transcending of the dichotomy of self and other, as I have indicated when I pointed out its non-personal, autonomous character. This theme will return when considering the bodhisattva.

### **Buddhist Ethics as Practice**

As said earlier, the core question of ethics in my opinion is “How should one live?” The Buddhist path, i.e., striving for awakening, is the Buddhist answer to that question, and is therefore Buddhist ethics in its proper sense.

As Keown argued, striving for awakening is a teleological process (“Nature” 194). The Buddhist path is a process of developing and perfecting qualities in order to achieve the end of awakening, but at the same time these excellent qualities *constitute* awakening. In Keown’s words: “the virtues are the means to the gradual realization of the end through the incarnation of the end in the present” (194). *Nirvāṇa* is not a goal “reached” as one reaches a finish line at the end of a journey, whereby the journey was instrumental and best forgotten as soon as possible. It is rather like a journey in a road movie, in which the perceived goal changes while travelling, and in which the characters typically realize, when they reach their goal, that it was really about the journey. By setting it in the context of a practice these dynamics get more perspective.

It might be objected that the Buddha described the Dharma as a raft that must be abandoned when one reaches the shore of *Nirvāṇa*, and that this is a clear example of consequentialist reasoning. As Keown has pointed out, however, the parable of the raft should not be taken to

mean that the Dharma is transcended and should be left behind upon reaching awakening (“Nature” 97). The Dharma is indeed the means for awakening; but awakening is the fulfillment of the Dharma rather than an external consequence of it, just as the Dharma is an expression of the awakened state. The parable of the raft is better interpreted as meaning that one should not be too emotionally attached to particular doctrines and views (99).

### *The Eightfold Path*

The Buddhist path to awakening is central in Buddhist life and can be seen as a second-order practice, overarching and uniting the other Buddhist practices. In the history of Buddhism this path has been described in many different ways. In narrative form, the most classical description is the life of the Buddha himself, in which all the elements of a quest can be found. In a more conceptual form, the earliest and most classical description is that of the Noble Eightfold Path, which is a description of how eight areas of life can each be brought to perfection (*samyak*). Awakening is the second-order goal, as Keown argued (“Nature” 196). It is the fruit of the perfection of all the areas taken together; it supervenes on the perfection of all these areas. Each of these areas is a (first-order) practice in itself, with the teleological structure of an internal goal. The virtues that can be developed in this practice at the same time constitute the goal.

The area of “perfect conduct” (*samyak-karmānta*), usually named as the fourth branch (*aṅga*) of the Eightfold Path, can serve as an example. Many discussions about Buddhist ethics confine themselves to this aspect, because it gives a collection of (usually) five clear “precepts” to which a Buddhist must or wants to keep him- or herself. But, as men-

tioned, in my opinion this is a too restricted a view on ethics; it looks at ethics only in the sense of morality.

What is generally translated as “precept” is the Pāli word *sikkhāpada*. *Sikkhā* means “the wish/desire to be able to do something well” and *pada* means “path.” *Sikkhāpada* could, therefore, be described as “the path one follows from the wish to be able to do something well.” It is of course handy to summarize that in one word, but to choose “precept” seems to reflect a view that ethics should be based on norms. “Rule of training” or “training-precept” would be more suited to the original meaning. This is underlined by the fact that it is not followed by “I may not . . .” or “I will not . . .” but by “I undertake . . .” (Pāli: *samādiyami*), after which the matter in case follows. These are “abstaining from the taking of life,” “abstaining from taking what is not given,” “abstaining from sexual misbehavior,” “abstaining from wrongful speech,” and “abstaining from taking intoxicants.”

The rules of training are disciplines everybody who wants to function in a reasonable society should impose on him- or herself or else expect to be imposed. It is not difficult to point out similar disciplines in other religions and worldviews. But the way they are formulated in Buddhism indicates that it is an *intention* that is to be trained and developed. It is not about an absolute norm that may not be transgressed, or about results outside of ourselves we want to achieve. Here, especially, it is clear it is about the development of qualities. They are formulated negatively in the Buddhist tradition but they point to positive qualities or virtues that evolve through the rules of training. The abstaining from taking life evolves into universal friendship (*maitrī*); the abstaining of taking what is not given evolves into generosity (*dāna*); the abstaining from sexual misconduct evolves into fulfillment (*saṃtusti*); the abstaining from wrongful speech evolves into truthfulness (*satyavācā*); and the ab-

staining from taking intoxicants evolves into *mindfulness* (*smṛti*) (Sangharakshita 87).

The goal (*telos*) of the practice of “perfect conduct” is, of course, perfect conduct: spontaneously doing that is what is helpful for the realization of the awakened state in others as well as in oneself. The excellent qualities that are needed for this goal, and which at the same time constitute it, are the mentioned virtues of *maitrī*, *dāna*, *saṃtusti*, *satyavācā* and *smṛti*. It would be interesting to elaborate more on this, as well as on the other areas of the Eightfold Path, but that would go far beyond the scope of this article.

In this way, following the path in a general sense is the overarching practice of Buddhism, bringing all other practices into a coherent whole. The *phronimos* of this general practice is, of course, the Buddha himself, but also the Arhants who brought the path to its completion as well. They serve as examples, give advice, and help to handle ethical dilemmas.

#### *A utilitarian bodhisattva?*

In Mahāyāna Buddhism the path to awakening is described as the evolution of the Bodhisattva. A bodhisattva is characterized by seemingly superhuman altruism and self-sacrifice. In Śāntideva’s words:

May I avert the pain of hunger and thirst with showers of food and drink. May I become both drink and food in the intermediate aeons of famine.

May I be an inexhaustible treasure for impoverished beings.

May I wait upon them with various forms of offering.

See, I give up without regret my bodies, my pleasures, and my good acquired in all three times, to accomplish good for every being. (20)

Goodman rightly points to the resemblance the high demands a bodhisattva makes of him- or herself to the ethical ideal of utilitarians like Peter Singer (“Consequences” 90). Singer says that no moral justification can be found for the fact I have a higher level of well-being than any other given person. Thus, it is morally demanded of someone in the affluent West to give away everything to complete strangers somewhere else in the world, until his or her level of well-being is at the level of the poorest of the poor. According to Śāntideva, a bodhisattva would go even further, bringing her- or himself to an even *lower* level. Goodman argues that the radical altruism of the bodhisattva-ideal indicates that ethics in Mahāyāna Buddhism are best seen as a form of utilitarianism, and, more generally, consequentialism (“Consequences” 90).

Consequentialism is a family of ethical theories (of which utilitarianism is the oldest) that have in common that in evaluating an act (or a rule, a character, and so forth) the consequences, or what I have called external effects, are decisive. This accommodates the ethical intuition that the consequences of our actions are ethically relevant, but it turns its back on the intuition that intentions *in themselves* also have ethical relevance. Consequentialism can only accommodate this intuition in an indirect way, i.e., by pointing out that intentions indirectly affect the consequences.

According to Goodman, a bodhisattva is a being who does everything for the welfare of as many living beings as possible, *regardless of who they are or what it takes*. The bodhisattva ideal is *agent-neutral*, which means it is not relevant *who* benefits from my acts—my child, a complete stranger, or me. And, strictly speaking, *what* is needed is not relevant: I can lie, steal, kill, and so forth, *as long as the net effects produce more well-*

*being for more living beings.* The reason lying, stealing and so forth are not permitted is merely because the net effects in the long term are better if we do not, not because they are bad in themselves.

Goodman says the Buddhist doctrine of non-self is the metaphysical base of these radical ethics. According to this doctrine, the existence of an inherently existing self is an illusion and the attachment to this illusion is the most important root of suffering. In the West, a similar critique on the notion of personal identity by Derek Parfit among others is used as a support for utilitarianism. Taking this critique seriously, there is no reason to pay any more attention to oneself than to an arbitrary other, according to Goodman, and one finds oneself in a radical altruism.

I think that it is flawed to see the bodhisattva as a Singerian being who works from a neutral third-person perspective for the maximum welfare of as many beings as possible. No doubt a bodhisattva would agree with Singer's ideal. I doubt, however, if he or she will try to achieve it by skipping the self-centered half of the apparent dichotomy of self and other and in a radical altruism step over to the other-centered half. This way of looking tries to dissolve the apparent dichotomy of self and others by denying half of it, but in so doing only reinforces the opposition. Better than declaring self-centeredness as unwanted is to take the realization of the non-difference of self and other as an end to be achieved, and to look at the bodhisattva-path as the gradual incarnation of that end into the present of concrete acting (Keown "Nature" 194). And that is precisely what teleology is.

This is put beautifully in the *Karaṇīyamettā Sūta*, the classic text about loving kindness, which, although it is not a Mahāyāna text, captures the spirit of altruistic love in Buddhism very well. In the text, the ideal of universal love for all beings is "*as a mother loves her only child.*" Thus, it is about a path of training that starts with passionate personal love and gradually expands and transcends this to immeasurable propor-

tions. The personal, agent-relative, point of view is a starting point that cannot be skipped, as a bodhisattva in Goodman's view apparently wants to. Even when brought to its end, the immeasurable love of the bodhisattva will still be "agent-relative," but that word will have lost its meaning because there will be no agent.

The *Bodhicaryāvatāra* as a whole is a description of—and a strong invitation to enter—this path of transformation that is another description of the path to awakening. The typically Mahāyāna way of using hyperboles abundantly, such as becoming a sacrifice and serving as food and drink for all living beings, should in my opinion be seen as an exercise in intention and as rhetorical means used by Śāntideva and other Mahāyāna-authors to convince and persuade readers (and themselves). As Goodman has remarked, the strong emphasis of altruistic intentions in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* seems often to be intended as a "bending backward" of our ingrained self-centeredness, rather than something to be taken literally ("Consequentialism" 623). These statements are meant as practices, not as assertions about the actual greater value of others as opposed to oneself.

### **Consequentialism and Deontology in Virtue Ethics**

From the vantage point of virtue ethics, consequentialism is flawed because it gives too much weight to external effects of an action (or a rule, a character and so forth). As mentioned, a practice in most cases has both internal and external goals. In this respect it resembles playing a game. When adults look at playing children, they often value play because a child learns from it, developing social skills in a party game, physical skills in a sport, and so forth. These are the things typically emphasized in school curricula. And games do, indeed, have the effect of

teaching many kinds of skills. But that is not why a child plays the game; a child plays just for the sake of playing itself.

That is not to say consequences are not important and should be ignored. Including the expected consequences of an action is just good sense, an aspect of practical wisdom (cf. Fink 691). It is even constitutive of a virtue, as I have tried to show in my discussion of the *phronimos*. The external circumstances of an action, such as its consequences, are important to determine what is excellent in a given situation. They are just not *decisive* in evaluating an act (or a rule, a character, and so forth), which is, however, the fundamental premise of consequentialism. Consequentialism makes the mistake of wanting to reduce a practice to its external effects. Because the internal goods of a practice are made subordinate to the external effects, the practice is corrupted; essential ethical experiences are being shut out. Education is one of the most eye-catching examples: if as a teacher I am preoccupied with the results my pupils have to achieve, or if the entire pedagogic method is aimed at delivering pupils as “products” for society, the practice of teaching is in a very essential way corrupted. From the standpoint of virtue ethics, in such cases too little consideration is being given to the intrinsic “useless” value of life.

Deontological views on ethics are based on the principle of norms. These might be norms based on our conscience, the word of God, or the pure rationality of Kant. How these norms are founded is a further problem for deontologists, but that is not our worry here. The main thing is that the fundamental rightness of the norm is more important than what is “good” in the sense of favorable, pleasant, and leading to flourishing, health, and so forth. In slogan form: “the right has priority over the good.”

In virtue ethics the right is not separated from the good, but derived from it. Right is what leads to the good, and the good is an expres-

sion of what is right. Virtue ethics also has its norms, but only in a derived sense. To achieve the internal goods of a practice you must first become familiar with the qualities needed, getting to know them and how to apply them. What is needed for that is a phase of “obedience.” In this phase you do not yet fully understand what the practice is about, but because there is an inkling that it might be important, you take on a listening, obedient attitude. You enter a phase in which you look and listen carefully, learning the rules of the game and how to apply them. Gradually you internalize them and are able to use them more freely. These constituting rules are norms; you cannot trespass them and still say you are engaged in this practice. The norms also function as rules of thumb to make decisions in everyday life, so we do not have to think too much about every little detail.

In the overarching practice of life there is a similar “phase” of learning and obeying. Just as with playing chess and every other practice this phase, in fact, never ends, but gradually morphs into the phase in which the rules are internalized. You learn the rules that constitute the good life and which you *must* follow in order to achieve this particular version of the good life. It is however a *conditional* “must”: it is derived from the good of the excellent life. If you are not interested in this goal, you do not have to feel confined by the force of the constituting rules. In this way, there is an experience of *must*, and at the same time of freedom, the freedom that is inherent in engaging in practices. This is the paradox between freedom and force in the ethical experience, which Kant explained with the categorical imperative that is free and compulsory at the same time. In virtue ethics it can be explained in a different way.

From the point of view of virtue ethics, the fundamental mistake deontology makes, in short, is that it takes out of context the constituting rules within a practice that have only conditional existence and attributes absolute existence to them. They become norms that are either

founded on a divine law, or a rational principle in the case of Kant, and cannot be meddled with. However, by placing norms and obligations in the context of practices, the basic intuitions of deontology can be integrated in virtue ethics.

### **Consequentialism and Deontology in Buddhist Ethics**

The continuity of the use of the word “good” in the moral and the functional sense I mentioned before is one of the starting points for virtue ethics and is also one of the basic ideas in Buddhist ethics. In Buddhist ethical discourse, the words “*kusala*” and “*akusala*” are standardly used, generally translated as “skillful” and “unskillful.” However, as Keown remarks, in the Pāli scriptures the words *kusala* and *akusala* are used in both senses, morally and functionally (“Nature” 191). In other words: they correspond with the use of the words “good” and “bad” in virtue ethics. There is no radical breach of meaning when we talk about “a good knife,” “a good gardener,” and of “a good person” or “a good deed.”

As said, practices also have external effects. The external effects of the path to awakening are things like a greater hedonistic quality of life, both for others and for oneself. These can be helpful in the process, but when they turn into ends in themselves one is not practicing in its proper sense. At the same time, they can be a provisional motivation to practice, as in the case of Nanda who started practicing when the Buddha promised him beautiful women in one of the Indian heavens. It reminds one of the child of MacIntyre, who is “lured” into playing chess by the opportunity to earn candy but only starts to really play when motivated by chess in itself. Thus, consequences play a similar role in both Buddhist ethics and virtue ethics: they are important but do not constitute the good.

The role of moral norms in Buddhist ethics lies in the constituting rules of the Buddhist practice of the path to awakening. The constituting rules of this practice, as of any other, are not enforced or compulsory, but simply the rules by which the practice is played. By not following the rules there is no punishment or guilt; there is no other upshot than not achieving the internal goods of this practice, which in the Buddhist case is awakening. If someone engages in the path to awakening, he or she “must” therefore keep to the rules this practice imposes. I think that all “precepts” and principles of Buddhist ethics lead back to this basic idea. This is confirmed by the way they are formulated in the original texts, as I have shown above.

### **Traditions and Naturalism**

Although everybody goes the quest to his or her *summum bonum* alone, it is more than just a matter for the individual. The virtues can only be practiced in a social context; we play the supporting roles in each other’s life-stories. However, the main reason society is involved is because the *summum bonum* and virtues are determined by one’s tradition. The good life for an Athenian general in the fifth century B.C.E. is different from that of a medieval nun or a seventeenth century English farmer (MacIntyre 186). They have a different conception of the *summum bonum* and hence will pursue other kinds of excellence. Traditions in this sense have a resemblance to Wittgensteinian forms of life and the grand narratives of Lyotard; they are historically and socially embedded ways of life and conceptions of reality and the human good, of a group individuals with common practices and language games (cf. MacIntyre 220).

Any given conception of the good is always circular. The good is determined by the tradition and *vice versa*. It is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to defend a certain conception of the good life against a radi-

cal skeptic. Thus, the objection of relativism could arise. How can one criticize a given conception? Naturalism in ethics is an attempt to respond to that objection by showing that a given conception of the good life is more than just an expression or a rationalization of one's culturally determined views. It provides a foundation of a view, while at the same time it can accommodate the phenomenon that different cultures have different conceptions of the good, of which the relativist tends to be impressed.

According to ethical naturalism, one can determine what is good for a being by looking at what is good for it *as a natural being*. The basic assumption is that every natural being potentially possesses certain qualities; to bring out these qualities and make them flourish is the good.

Aristotle was the first, as usual, to have formulated a form of naturalism in the West. That is not to say he invented it; he merely articulated the view of his culture very well. Since Aristotle many forms of ethical naturalism have been developed, each with different emphases but with the same basic structure, such as the view on *physis* and the human good of the Stoics or the Natural Law theory of Aquinas. Naturalism was criticized by Hume, Moore, and many other thinkers since the Enlightenment, but since the 1950s, Anscombe, Foot, McDowell, Hursthouse, and others have developed contemporary forms of ethical naturalism. I will briefly summarize this contemporary ethical naturalism, drawing mainly on Hursthouse and McDowell.

Hursthouse points to four kinds of goals a human being has in common with other social animals. These are: (1) survival of the individual; (2) survival of the species; (3) seeking pleasure and avoiding pain; and (4) cooperation (109). These goals, at a minimum, should be achieved in a good life. A life that ends before its time, or is full of pain, could not be called good. Our characteristic way of life is life in a group, as it is for elephants, bees and many species of apes. This implies that many social

instincts such as empathy and solidarity are ingrained in our nature, and that goals that have to do with such social instincts should be fulfilled to call a life a good life.

Ethical naturalism denies the fact/value gap that has dominated ethical thought since Hume because it can ground values in the facts of human nature. If we accept that surviving is a goal in the life of a certain individual plant or animal (in the sense of not dying before the age characteristic of its species), then it follows it is good for that individual if that goal is achieved. If we accept *the fact* that it is characteristic for a certain species, for example, elephants, to live in the context of a group, then the *value* follows that a solitary living elephant is in this regard deficient. It is, of course, clear that by accepting the goal we introduce a value, but the point is that it is an unavoidable value. One cannot coherently argue it is not a goal in a life that this life continues, nor with animals that it is not a goal that they have pleasures and avoid pain in a way characteristic of their species, nor that it is not a goal, for the relevant species, to take up a place in a group. If a quality contributes to one of these goals it can be called “good” and if it is doing so excellently it can be called a “virtue.” If it hinders one of these goals, we can speak of a “bad” quality or a deficiency, and the individual in question as a deficient exemplar of the species.

Added to these four goals is a fifth that must be fulfilled in order for a *human life* to be called good. This goal has to do with self-consciousness and reason (*logos*). McDowell, in a thought-experiment, imagines a wolf that suddenly gains *logos* (“Two” 169), and starts asking himself (I assume it will turn into a “he”) whether he still wants to hunt with the pack or would rather be a free rider that shares in the prey but does not put too much effort into hunting. His animal nature remains the same and makes the same demands; e.g., he goes on being hungry and having cooperative instincts. But because he has gained self-

consciousness and reason, he can step back from the demands his animal nature make on him and ask questions about it. He is capable of making other choices than his animal nature imposes on him. With the choices he makes, which then ingrain themselves in him and become habits, he slowly evolves a “second” nature. The second nature is the product of his reason and self-consciousness and is *unavoidable* because he cannot ignore reason once he has it.

It is true that one’s first nature (the one that can be expressed by the four goals of the social animals) sets limits on one’s second nature. The wolf cannot choose something that goes against his first (animal) nature without doing harm to himself. But his second nature is in an essential way free of these limits. Similarly, when I have self-consciousness and reason I cannot do otherwise than to step back from my first nature. I can decide to conform to the demands of my first nature, but this conforming is *necessarily* free. As Sartre said, we are condemned to be free. I always have an interpretation of my first nature and her demands, and I can conform to her demands in different ways. However, most of these decisions are based on habits from my upbringing and culture rather than conscious considerations. It is my second *nature*; it appears to be naturally given and does not involve many direct choices. It reflects the narratives of my culture, the cumulative reason of my tradition, which seem so self-evident I am hardly able to reflect on it.

From this it follows that there are many possible ways to form a second nature on the basis of the “facts” of our first nature. In other words, the second nature is underdetermined by the first nature. It is not possible to construct a second nature (a culture, a character, a form of life) *positively* on the basis of the facts of the first nature. In this way there is a fact/value gap, although not as Hume meant it. There is, however, a *negative* control of the first nature over the second, because first nature can say when its demands are *not* met. Although many forms of

life are possible, there are minimum demands that must be met if a life is to be called a *good* life. Just as one can call an elephant “good” *qua* elephant if it has firm tusks, is not afraid of water, takes care of its young, and so forth, one can call the proverbial bad guy, the mafioso drug baron who so often makes an appearance in papers about ethics, “not good” *qua human being* because he is dishonest, reckless, unjust, and so forth. With these qualities he hinders the flourishing of the practices of himself and others. Alternately, we might say that human beings are “excellent” when we develop optimally the qualities of our *first and second nature*. If we can completely unfold our physical, psychological, social and spiritual qualities, we have an excellent life.

Within this framework of ethical naturalism, many forms of virtue ethics can exist. They have different conceptions of the *summum bonum*, expressed in a different list of virtues. To use another of MacIntyre examples, the *summum bonum* for Benedict was completely different from that of Jane Austen, as was his list of virtues (186). For Benedict, the excellent life must have been a form of unification with Christ, and his virtues must have been the monkish qualities that are expressed in his vows. For Jane Austin, the ultimate good was “a certain kind of marriage with a certain kind of (English) naval officer” (186), and her list of virtues corresponded with that. Yet both of them can be seen as forms of virtue ethics, and both conceptions of the good life can be understood by looking at how their cultural traditions looked at human nature.

### **Tradition and Naturalism in Buddhism**

Can a similar naturalism be found in Buddhism? As far as I know, Buddhism does not have a view on nature that could be compared with what I described. But a comparable justification of ethics can be found in the

view on reality and human nature as it is expressed in the first three Noble Truths.

According to the Buddha, the human condition is characterized by *duḥkha* (unsatisfactoriness). Given the fundamental principle of conditioned co-production (*pratītya-samutpāda*), which implies that everything is temporary, and given that all human beings crave for permanence, *duḥkha* is unavoidable. But the third Noble Truth assures us that this is not an inescapable situation. Having a thirst for happiness in itself does not lead to suffering, but is an expression of a more fundamental striving for growth and development that all living beings share and that might be said to be the driving force of all evolution (cf. Morrison 112). Thirst in the way unenlightened beings have it (grasping for something permanent) is just a misunderstanding of how to achieve happiness. It is wrong not because it is immoral, but simply because it can never be successful. It is clumsy in the most fundamental way.

A better way to strive for happiness is to stop this way of thirsting. According to the third Noble Truth this is possible; the potential of awakening is present in everybody and “true” happiness is the realization of this potential. In the Mahāyāna, this thought has grown into the doctrine of Buddha-nature (*tathāgatagarbha*). On the basis of the naturalistic premises that reality is determined by the principle of conditioned co-production, that human nature is determined by *duḥkha*, and that liberation from *duḥkha* is possible, it is rational to follow the Buddhist path.

Thus, once again a formal resemblance can be seen between virtue ethics and Buddhist ethics. In both cases, there is a naturalistic foundation of a view on reality and human nature in general that supports the view that the *summum bonum* of life is the complete unfolding and flourishing of our potential.

## Conclusion

Does a virtue ethical perspective give us a better understanding of Buddhist ethics? Does it lead to other coherences and insights? I will highlight five ways in which I think it is fruitful to take this perspective.

In the first place it creates a context for the idea that *Buddhist ethics are about development of potential*, and that renunciation and resignation play a role only in a derived sense. Virtue ethics has a *motivational force* that is inherent to the development of qualities. Developing and growing is intrinsically motivating, as opposed to the idea that things are not possible or allowed (as is the case when precepts are seen as absolute norms), or that demands are made that you can never fully meet (as is the case with the utilitarian view on the bodhisattva-ideal). The Buddhist path of training is essentially about developing latent potential. The virtue ethical perspective brings this clearly to the fore. Renunciation plays a part when, with the evolving of excellent qualities, old habits drop away. An aspect of resignation can be sensible to help a certain quality flourish, like pruning in order to flower. The point is that, positively speaking, it is directed at the unfolding of an excellent quality.

Secondly, by setting Buddhist ethics in the context of the notion of a practice, we *better understand the dynamics of practicing the Buddhist path*, what is sometimes expressed by “going for refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.” When you practice meditation, practice conduct in the sense of *śīla*, or do any other Buddhist practice, you do it the way you play piano or a football game with friends. It essentially is about playing the game itself, training and refining your skills and gathering the rewards internal to the game. External effects are a (sometimes welcome) side effect, but if they gain the upper hand you are not playing the game in its proper sense any more. Buddhist practice is similar. “Going for refuge” is not the same as playing the piano, of course; Buddhist practice is more existentially charged, which makes it another “game.”

However, the dynamics are the same. Both are places of refuge in the world of external goals, and both have the lightness and a momentum characteristic of playing games.

In the third place, the virtue ethical perspective *clarifies the place of norms and precepts in Buddhist ethics*. Norms and precepts have a derived rather than absolute meaning. This was already clear for those who translate the original Pāli terms for “precepts” the right way, as I have made clear in my discussion of the precepts above. In virtue ethics the *good* is dependent on context and cannot be fixed in laws or rules; using this framework shows why this is also the case in Buddhist ethics. The precepts are important as rules of training and as rules of thumb in daily life decision-procedures, but they do not have an absolute existence.

A fourth gain of the virtue ethical perspective is that it *connects the Buddhist path with other ethical practices*. The virtue ethical perspective enables us to see the practices of family life or marriage, or of the arts or sciences, to stand in another relation with the Buddhist path than has traditionally sometimes been the case. It also creates room for practices such as chess or horticulture that seem to have nothing to do with the Buddhist path. The virtue ethical perspective shows it is very possible that in these practices one may develop qualities that fit well into the Buddhist path, although, because they are dependent on context and not fixed in advance, it is true that they can also hinder it.

Finally, the virtue ethics perspective shows that *Buddhist ethics has a coherence with the ethical perspective of some of Western thinking or individual thinkers*. Sometimes the similarities are quite obvious, as with Stoic thinkers like Epictetus; sometimes they need a little more uncovering, as with Nietzsche. The virtue ethical point of view can be a framework through which many differences and resemblances fall into place and can offer conceptual tools for Buddhists to partake in debates and discussions with Western philosophers.

## Bibliography

Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. Trans. Christopher Rowe.

Clayton, Barbara. *Moral Theory in Śāntideva's Śikṣāsamuccaya: Cultivating the Fruits of Virtue*. London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2006.

Fink, Charles. "The Cultivation of Virtue in Buddhist Ethics." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 20 (2013), 667-701.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*, 2nd edn. London: Sheed and Ward, 1989.

Goodman, Charles. *Consequences of Compassion: an Interpretation and Defense of Buddhist Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Consequentialism, Agent-Neutrality, and Mahāyāna Ethics." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 20 (2013), 611-643.

Hursthouse, Rosalind. *On Virtue Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Keown, Damien. *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Some Problems with Particularism." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 20 (2013), 443-460.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. London: Duckworth, 1984.

McDowell, John. "Two Sorts of Naturalism." In *Virtues and Reasons: Philippa Foot and Moral Theory*, edited by Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence, and Warren Quinn, 149-179. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Virtue and Reason." In *Virtue Ethics*, edited by Roger Crisp & Michael Slote, 141-163. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?" In *Mind, Value and Reality*, 77-94. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998.

Plato. *Complete Works*, edited by John Cooper. Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.

Sangharakshita. *Vision and Transformation. An Introduction to the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path*. Cambridge: Windhorse Publications, 1984.

Śāntideva. *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. Translated by Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton.

Morrison, Robert. "Two cheers for Tanhā." *Contemporary Buddhism: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 99-116. London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2001.

Williams, Bernard. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985.