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# The Cessation of Suffering and Buddhist Axiology

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# The Cessation of Suffering and Buddhist Axiology<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article examines Buddhist axiology. In section 1, the article argues against the dominant interpretations of what the ultimate good is in Buddhist ethics. In section 2, the article argues for a novel interpretation of Buddhist value theory. This is the *Nirodha* View, which maintains that for at least the Pāli Buddhist tradition, the cessation of suffering is the sole intrinsic good. In section 3, the article responds to objections and briefly suggests that even non-Buddhists should take the *Nirodha* View seriously.

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## Introduction

Axiology is the study of the good. What is good? What makes something good? What is the ultimate good—the *summum bonum*? In this article, I examine Buddhist axiology while focusing on this final question: What is the ultimate good according to the Buddhist tradition? The Buddhist tradition is of course vast. To make this task manageable, therefore, I focus on the Pāli Canon. I will not argue that the Pāli Canon represents original Buddhism or that all Buddhist traditions share a common axiology, but I do believe that identifying the core axiology found in the Pāli Canon will move us forward in our understanding of the Buddhist tradition as a whole.

In section 1, I review the most promising contemporary interpretations of Pāli Buddhist axiology and argue that they fall short in important but understandable ways. In section 2, I argue for what I call the *Nirodha* View, which maintains that, at least according to the Pāli Buddhist tradition, the cessation of suffering is the sole intrinsic good. In section 3, I defend the *Nirodha* View against objections and suggest that even non-Buddhists should take the view seriously.

### Section 1: *Nirvāṇa* and the Good

In traditional axiology, philosophers have focused on questions about what counts as intrinsically good. What is *good in itself*? Money is good, for instance, but not intrinsically. Money is not good in itself; it is only instrumentally good because it is good only insofar as it leads to (or is perhaps constitutive of) a more fundamental good, the most fundamental of which is good, not because it leads to something else, but because it is good in itself—because it is intrinsically good.

In the Western tradition, philosophers have endorsed many different views about what is intrinsically good. As an example, consider hedonism. On a rough and ready version of hedonism, only pleasure is intrinsically good and only pain is intrinsically bad; everything other than pleasure is good only insofar as it leads to or contributes to the experience of pleasure and everything other than pain is bad only insofar as it leads to or contributes to the experience of pain. In other words, pleasure is good in itself, whereas everything else is good instrumentally or extrinsically good.

Classical Pāli Buddhists are not hedonists, but according to the standard view, they endorse a similarly straightforward axiology. This is the “*Nirvāṇa* View”:

**The *Nirvāṇa* View:** *Nirvāṇa* is the ultimate good. In other words, only *nirvāṇa* is intrinsically good; everything else that counts as good is only instrumentally good to the extent that it contributes to the attainment of *nirvāṇa*.

Classical Buddhists distinguish between two levels of *nirvāṇa* (Pāli: *nibbāna*): (i) *nirvāṇa-with-remainder* (*sa-upādhisesa-nibbāna*), better known as *nirvāṇa-in-this-life*, and (ii) *nirvāṇa-without-remainder* (*nirupādhisesa-nibbāna*), better known as *parinirvāṇa*. Roughly, *nirvāṇa-in-this-life* is a state of moral and spiritual perfection and serves as a precondition for *parinirvāṇa*, which one achieves only at death (when no life remains). Western scholars have focused their attention on *nirvāṇa-in-this-life* as the ultimate good in Pāli Buddhism.

Damien Keown is the most sophisticated proponent of the *Nirvāṇa* View, but it is typically the default view among western scholars as

far back as William James and Arthur Schopenhauer.<sup>3</sup> This is what Keown himself says:

By “nirvana,” I understand the *summum bonum* of Buddhist soteriology. To avoid any confusion, I am concerned . . . only with that nirvana in terms of which ethical goodness can be predicated of a human subject, namely “nirvana in this life.” (19)

Nirvana is the good, and rightness is predicated of acts and intentions to the extent which they participate in nirvanic goodness. (177)

Keown also links *nirvāṇa* with the Aristotelian concept of *eudaimonia*, where *eudaimonia* is a technical term that means “human flourishing.” As Keown puts it, “*eudaimonia* and *nirvāṇa* are functionally and conceptually related in that both constitute that final goal, end and *summum bonum* of human endeavor” (195). Other scholars, such as Owen Flanagan, have also made this suggestion. Following Flanagan, we can say that “Buddhist *Eudaimonia*” is a stable sense of serenity and contentment caused or constituted by wisdom and virtue. Let’s call this the “*Eudaimonia* View”:

**The Eudaimonia View:** Buddhist *Eudiamonia* is the ultimate good. In other words, only Buddhist *Eudaimonia* is intrinsically good; everything else that counts as good is only instrumentally or constitutively good to the extent that it contributes to the attainment of Buddhist *Eudaimonia* or constitutes Buddhist *Eudiamonia*.

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Batchelor summarizes the standard view nicely: “For an orthodox Buddhist, the highest good is a transcendent state of nirvana located beyond the conditioned world” (307).

The *Nirvāṇa* View and the *Eudaimonia* View are strikingly similar, especially if we understand the *Nirvāṇa* View naturalistically in terms of “*nirvāṇa*-with-remainder,” as Keown and Flanagan do. In light of this, we can combine these views to form the “*Nirvāṇa*-In-This-Life View”:

**The *Nirvāṇa*-In-This-Life View:** *Nirvāṇa*-in-this-life is the ultimate good. In other words, only *nirvāṇa*-in-this-life is intrinsically good; everything else that counts as good is only instrumentally or constitutively good to the extent that it contributes to the attainment of *nirvāṇa*-in-this-life or constitutes *nirvāṇa*-in-this-life.

We can read the *Nirvāṇa*-In-This-Life View as emphasizing personal achievement or as emphasizing collective achievement. On the former reading, what matters most is the individual attainment of *nirvāṇa*-in-this-life, while on the latter reading, what matters most is that everyone ultimately attains *nirvāṇa*-in-this-life. My view is that the most charitable interpretation of the Pāli tradition is that everyone matters and so the collectivist interpretation seems right to me. Interestingly, however, we do not need to settle this interpretive question to make progress here, because the *Nirvāṇa*-In-This-Life View runs into the same problem, either way we read it.

According to Flanagan and Keown, *nirvāṇa*-in-this-life is a stable sense of serenity and contentment caused or constituted by wisdom and virtue. As Keown emphasizes, this is the ultimate good—the *summum bonum*. If this were true, then the Pāli Buddhist tradition would not recognize anything as good that doesn’t in some way contribute to or somehow constitute this final goal. As Charles Goodman has recently argued, however, this is not the case. In various texts, including the discourse on “Fools and Wise Men” (*Balapandita Sutta*, *Majjhima Nikāya* 129), the Buddha tells his followers that a heavenly rebirth provides happiness:

32. “Were it rightly speaking to be said of anything: ‘That is utterly wished for, utterly desired, utterly agreeable,’ it is of heaven that, rightly speaking, this should be said, so much so that it is hard to finish describing the happiness of heaven.”

49. “Bhikkhus, suppose a gambler at the very first lucky throw won a great fortune, yet a lucky throw such as that is negligible; it is a far more lucky throw when a wise man who conducts himself well in body, speech, and mind, on the dissolution of the body, after death, reappears in a happy destination, even in the heavenly world. This is the complete perfection of the wise man’s grade.”

The problem, as Charles Goodman has pointed out (64-65), is that, if *nirvāṇa-in-this-life* or even *parinirvāṇa* is the *summum bonum*, a heavenly rebirth should not count as good in any way, because a heavenly rebirth does not lead to either *nirvāṇa-in-this-life* or *parinirvāṇa*; in fact, it often leads one away from both. As Goodman himself puts it,

For the most part, it is true that the happier one’s situation is, the better our opportunities for spiritual practice will be. But there is an important exception: the heavens. Early Buddhist texts consistently tell us that going to heaven is, in one important way, inferior to being born as a human Buddhist: life in the heavens does not usually bring one closer to Nirvana. (65)

This is insightful. If the ultimate good explains why everything other than itself is good, then we have to look beyond *nirvāṇa* of either sort. Of course, this does not mean that *nirvāṇa* lacks value completely or even that it is not fundamentally important to Pāli Buddhism, but it does suggest that something is wrong with the standard view.



In response to problems like this,<sup>4</sup> Goodman argues for a different view, claiming that classical Buddhists endorse a two-class objective list axiology, according to which both worldly prosperity (or happiness) and moral virtue are intrinsically valuable:

**The Objective List View:** Both worldly prosperity and moral virtue are ultimate goods. In other words, only world prosperity and moral virtue are intrinsically good; everything else that counts as good is only instrumentally good to the extent that it contributes to the attainment of worldly prosperity or moral virtue.

Although Goodman is right to look beyond *nirvāṇa*, I think his own view misses the mark. One reason Goodman's Objective List View falls short is that the Pāli Buddhist tradition cares about more than worldly prosperity and moral virtue. In the *Majjhima Nikāya*, for instance, we hear of a monk with a very bad memory who might also be a little intellectually slow. We have no reason to think he's a bad person, but we also have no reason to think he's either virtuous or prosperous.

As he neared a grove of trees, he met the Buddha coming from it. The Buddha smiled and took his hand. Together they went to a temple where two old monks were sweeping the floor. The Buddha said to them: "This young monk will live here with you from now on. Continue your

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<sup>4</sup> According to Goodman, other problems loom (65-66). For instance, the Buddha has little to say about either *nirvāṇa*-in-this-life or *parinirvāṇa*, other than that we can't really talk about them adequately, and when the Buddha does talk about *nirvāṇa*, he often explains it in amoral terms, saying in the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, for instance, that *nirvāṇa* is "neither black nor white," lying outside the boundaries of conventional designations. If *nirvāṇa* is the ultimate good, moreover, then we face an action-guidance problem: How can we know whether we're doing the right thing if we don't really know what the good is?

sweeping, and as your brooms move back and forth, say the two-syllable mantra that I will now give you. Don't stop until I come back." The young monk sat down and listened to the movement of the brooms, to and fro over the floor. He heard the whispered rhythm of the mantra as it was repeated over and over again. This went on for many weeks, and before the Buddha came back, the young monk had found full liberation and so had the two old monks.

This young monk achieves *nirvāṇa*-in-this-life, and the story gives us every reason to think that this is intrinsically good; yet, the story never emphasizes moral virtue, even if it implies that the monk was also dedicated, disciplined, eager, energetic, and good. Relatedly, we hear stories about very bad people, like Angulimāla, a highway murderer who reforms himself with the Buddha's help. Angulimāla's story is about redemption, and of course Angulimāla dedicates himself to the Buddhist path after his conversion, a path that requires him to cultivate virtue over time. The story also highlights that he renounces violence, just as the Buddha himself has, but the *Majjhima Nikāya* emphasizes that, after Angulimāla had, "gone alone into seclusion, [he] experienced the bliss of release," even though he was neither prosperous nor virtuous at the time.

The stories of the Sweeping Monk and Angulimāla, among countless others in the Pāli Buddhist tradition, put pressure on Goodman's Objective List View, if only because these stories *seem* to support some version of the *Nirvāṇa* View. Yet, as I have indicated, Goodman has raised serious doubts about any interpretation of Buddhist axiology according to which *nirvāṇa* of either sort is the ultimate good. So we face a potential impasse. Some texts seem to support the Objective List View, whereas many others seem to support some version of the *Nirvāṇa* View. How can we make progress?

I think we can make progress by pressing an important question. What *makes* worldly prosperity and moral virtue good, according to the Pāli Buddhist tradition? Goodman doesn't press this question, but it's important. Why would a Buddhist as represented in the Pāli canon think virtue and worldly prosperity are good? The easy answer is that they contribute, in some way, to *nirvāṇa*, but of course Goodman has shown that the easy answer is technically wrong, and that's why he holds that moral virtue and worldly prosperity are intrinsically good. Another answer is simply an appeal to common sense—we ordinarily believe that virtue and worldly prosperity are good, and that explains why they appear on the Objective List. This is an inadequate answer, however, if only because the Pāli Buddhist tradition often resists common sense notions and so it would seem that we need a distinctively Buddhist reason to accept that virtue and worldly prosperity are good if we are to include them in the Buddhist's Objective List. So this leaves us with our question: Why else might Pāli Buddhists think that virtue and world prosperity are good? I want to argue that virtue and worldly prosperity are derivatively good in a very specific sense: they contribute to and are sometimes constitutive of *the cessation of suffering*.

## Section 2: The *Nirodha* View

My view is that the Pāli Buddhist tradition endorses a distinctive negative axiology, according to which only the elimination of suffering (i.e., *dukkha/duḥkha*) is ultimately good. In this view, *x* is good if and only if *x* either (i) contributes to the elimination of *duḥkha* or (ii) consists in the absence of suffering. Let's call this the "*Nirodha* View," after the third noble truth: the truth of the "*cessation*" (*Nirodha*) of suffering (*Samyutta Nikāya* 56).

**The *Nirodha* View:** The cessation of suffering for beings that can suffer is the ultimate good. In other words, only the cessation of suffering is intrinsically good; everything else that counts as good is only instrumentally or extrinsically good insofar as it contributes to the cessation of suffering.

To clarify the *Nirodha* View, let me first point out that suffering, which translates the Pāli term *dukkha* and the Sanskrit term *duḥkha*, means more than what the ordinary English would suggest. *Dukkha* is a rich and nuanced technical term that means something like existential suffering rather than suffering as mere pain (Siderits 19-21). *Dukkha* is the ‘dis-ease’ we have with ourselves and the world, the deep and gnawing un-satisfactoriness that pervades our normal lives; it is the psychological result of ignorance, aversion, and attachment, not the physiological result of nerve stimulation. Rather than being mere pain, suffering is the painful dissatisfaction, “that accompanies pressing and often unfulfilled desires that particular states of affairs that are regarded negatively disappear or do not arise, and that states of affairs that are regarded positively continue to arise” (Gowans, *Buddhist Moral Philosophy* 107). This is admittedly an incomplete analysis of the nature of suffering in the Pāli Buddhist tradition, but for present purposes, it should suffice.

Another important feature of the *Nirodha* View is it does not simply state that the cessation of suffering is the ultimate good. It says the cessation of suffering *for beings that can suffer* is the ultimate good. The ultimate good is defined both *negatively* as cessation and *relationally* with regard to certain kinds of beings—namely, those and only those that can suffer. This means that the *Nirodha* View tells us sentient beings, such as human beings like you and me, serve as the supervenience-base

for goodness. In this sense, we are the natural facts on which (at least some) moral facts supervene.<sup>5</sup>

In what sense, however, do human beings count as “natural facts?” After all, according to the Buddhist doctrine of no-self (*anātman*), human beings lack both an intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) and an immutable, eternal essence (*ātman*). So it seems as though human beings (as persons) are not ontologically basic in the way the *Nirodha* View requires. In fact, this is the thought behind Paul Williams’ contention that Śāntideva’s later Mahayana ethics is incoherent. As Williams puts it, “pain has a necessary connection with a subject who is in pain,” but Śāntideva and the earlier Pāli Buddhist tradition deny the existence of such a subject (140). Since the idea of “free-floating” pain makes no sense, Śāntideva’s ethics are incoherent insofar as it appeals to pain. This is a challenge to the viability of the *Nirodha* View, as long as we replace “pain” with “suffering.”

Of course, it is true that Buddhists deny the existence of the self, and it is equally true that human beings are not ontologically basic, but the Pāli Buddhist tradition has the resources to explain how persons nonetheless serve as the supervenience-base for goodness. To see how, consider two views with which the doctrine of no-self is associated: (i) Buddhist reductionism and (ii) the Doctrine of Two Truths (Siderits). The classic Buddhist source for these two views is the *Milinda Panha* in which the monk Nāgasena addresses difficult questions about the nature of persons and the doctrine of no self. Buddhist reductionism is the view that human beings are persons who are themselves ultimately reducible to their constituent parts—namely, the five *skandhas* or aggregates.

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<sup>5</sup>This means that the *Nirodha* View is committed to a version of what Kieran Setiya calls *Ethical Supervenience*, the view that, when anything, such as an action, event, or agent, “falls under [a specific] ethical concept E, it does so in virtue of falling under the non-ethical concept(s) N such that, necessarily, what falls under N falls under E” (10).

Strictly speaking, the person is a conceptual fiction and only impersonal micro-level objects (i.e., the *skandhas*) ultimately exist. This is how the *Milinda Panha* puts it:

Then King Milinda spoke to the venerable Nāgasena as follows: “Nāgasena, I speak no lie: the word “chariot” functions as just a counter, an expression, a convenient designator, a mere name for pole, axle, wheels, chariot-body, and banner-staff.”

“Thoroughly well, your majesty, do you understand a chariot. In exactly the same way, your majesty, in respect of me, “Nāgasena” functions as just as counter, an expression, convenient designation, mere name for the hair of my head, hair of my body . . . brain of the head, . . . feeling, perception, the volition, and consciousness. But ultimately there is no person to be found.”

(*Milinda Panha* 26-27; as quoted in Siderits 53-54.)

Picking up on this, we can see how the doctrine of two truths is related to Buddhist reductionism. There are two ways a statement might be true: conventionally and ultimately (Siderits 56). A statement is conventionally true if and only if it appeals to and coheres with common sense and reliably promotes “successful practice.” A conventionally true statement is a “convenient designation,” as Nāgasena phrases it. A statement is ultimately true if and only if it corresponds to how the world really is and makes no use of any “conceptual fictions.” For example, as King Milinda himself grasps, to say that there are persons or chariots or apartment buildings is to say something conventionally true, whereas to say that there are only *skandhas* and that there is no-self is to say something ultimately true.

With this in mind, we can explain how persons can count as the natural facts on which at least some moral facts supervene. At the conventional-level, persons exist and facts about them count as facts about the natural world. At the ultimate-level, of course, persons do not exist, but that's irrelevant. What is relevant is that talking about persons coheres with common sense (because we commonly recognize that persons exists) and reliably promotes successful practice (because even the Buddha has to communicate his teachings with reference to persons). As a result, goodness supervenes on facts about persons who count as natural in the special sense that they reflect how we effectively talk about both the world and ourselves. It might seem best to avoid talking of natural facts and talk instead of conventional facts, but this would suggest a constructivism and relativism not present in the Pāli Buddhist tradition. Whatever the conventional facts about persons might be, they hold for *all* persons. We all share in the human condition. We are all empty. We all share in suffering, at least initially, and we must all strive to eliminate suffering. In these important respects, we are all the same.

Another way to put the point is in terms of the classical doctrine of *samsāra*. Instead of talking about our ultimate nature, whatever that might be, we can talk instead about our *samsāric* nature, which is such that we are all suffering in the round of death and rebirth. What's important to note is that, although beings that can suffer (sentient beings like us) are not ontologically basic according to the Pāli Buddhist tradition, they are morally basic according to the *Nirodha* View.

The moral primacy of persons is another important feature of the *Nirodha* View because it helps us understand the often puzzlingly ways in which the Buddha talks about *parinirvāṇa* in particular. According to the early Buddhist tradition, *parinirvāṇa* is, at the very least, (a state?) beyond *samsāra*—that is, beyond the conventional realm in which we suffer and with which we are conceptually familiar. This means that sentient

beings as we know them cease to exist and that moral goodness itself loses its conceptual ground. And this explains how *parinirvāṇa* can be “neither white nor black,” for instance, and how it alone can be “unconditioned,” and why the Buddha refuses to explain its nature; *parinirvāṇa* is beyond morality and beyond our ability to talk about it because unlike *nirvāṇa*-in-this-life, *parinirvāṇa* does not supervene on persons—it transcends them. Perhaps surprisingly, all of this also helps us understand how *parinirvāṇa* can nonetheless remain a moral and spiritual *achievement*. The state of *parinirvāṇa* is beyond morality in the sense that *parinirvāṇa* is the completion of morality, but not in the sense that it has nothing to do with morality. This might sound odd. So perhaps an analogy will help: *parinirvāṇa* is like graduating from college and become an alumna. Being an alumna is a state beyond college, a state in which the requirements of student life no longer apply. Being an alumna is a state that transcends the state of being a student, not in the sense that it has nothing to do with college, but in the sense that it is the successful completion of college

The *Nirodha* View also explains why *parinirvāṇa*, understood as final release from the cycle of death and rebirth, is valuable and desirable. It is often difficult for Western scholars and students to understand why *parinirvāṇa* is so desirable especially since those who achieve *parinirvāṇa* either enter into a conceptually ineffable state that is, “neither black nor white” or they seem to cease to exist altogether, at least according to the Pāli Buddhist tradition. As the *Nirodha* View makes clear, however, *parinirvāṇa* is good and therefore valuable because only the achievement of *parinirvāṇa* guarantees that one will never again suffer; only *parinirvāṇa* is the complete cessation of suffering since it is the absolute eradication of not only suffering but also the conditions that make suffering possible.



The *Nirodha* View also explains why some version of the *Nirvāṇa* View seems right, but nonetheless misses the mark. What matters is the cessation of suffering, according to the *Nirodha* View, and since *nirvāṇa* is liberation from suffering, it seems perfectly reasonable to equate *nirvāṇa* and *Nirodha*. In fact, this is what scholars (Buddhist and otherwise) have often done in their commentaries on the Four Noble Truths (*catvāri āryasatyāni*), the third of which is the Truth of Cessation:

Now this, *bhikkhus*, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: it is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, nonreliance on it. (*Samyutta Nikāya* II 1844)

The Pāli term for *nirvāṇa* (*nibbāna*) does not appear in the third noble truth, even though *Nirodha* does. Most commentators agree, however, that the third noble truth is obviously about *nirvāṇa*. For instance, this is what Christopher Gowans says:

In this and related formulations of the Third Noble Truth, the term “*Nibbāna*” does not appear. But there is no question that *Nibbāna* is what this truth concerns. This is evident in the Buddha’s description of a person who, having seen the aggregates as impermanent, suffering, and not-self, “turns his mind away from those states and directs it towards the deathless element thus: ‘This is the peaceful, this is the sublime, that is, the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, *Nibbāna*’” (M [=Majjhima Nikāya] 540). To destroy craving is to attain *Nibbāna*, and this undermines suffering, which has its origin in craving. *Nibbāna* is the state of health that is the complete cure of the disease of suffering: “The greatest of all gains is

health. Nibbāna is the greatest bliss” (M 613). Nibbāna is clearly the focal point of the Buddha’s teaching. He says he teaches the Four Noble Truths because they lead, “to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna” (M 536). We are told that the Buddha, “has attained Nibbāna and he teaches the Dhamma for attaining Nibbāna” (M 330). (*Philosophy of the Buddha* 135)

It is easy to see how the “Truth concerning *Nirodha*” has become the “Truth of *Nirvāṇa*.” *Nirodha* is the cessation of suffering and the cessation of the causes of suffering, while *nirvāṇa* (or *nibbāna*) is the extinguishing of suffering. The subtle difference between them, however, is that *Nirodha* remains negative, in the sense that it means “cessation,” whereas *nirvāṇa* has come to define a positive state of perfection, a kind of moral and spiritual, “state of health that is the complete cure of the disease of suffering,” as Gowans puts it.

The *Nirodha* View also has interesting implications for Buddhist conceptions of well-being, where, “well-being pertains to what is good for a person or what has intrinsic value for a person” (Gowans, *Buddhist Moral Philosophy* 98). According to the *Nirodha* View, the cessation of suffering is what is good for a person. This means that the *Nirodha* View allows for a continuum view of well-being with *nirvāṇa*-in-this-life serving as a regulative ideal toward which we aspire, but with many stages of genuine well-being along the way, some of which are not causally or conceptually related to *nirvāṇa*-in-this-life. For instance, a heavenly rebirth counts as a state of well-being on the *Nirodha* View because it is a state relatively free of suffering even though it is not a stage on the path to *nirvāṇa*. We can say the same, perhaps, for worldly prosperity. Being wealthy and content counts as a kind of well-being because it is a state relatively free of suffering, even though it is not a stage on the path to

*nirvāṇa* and even though being wealthy is not a necessary condition for *nirvāṇa*-in-this-life. What this means is that the *Nirodha* View explains the puzzling texts that Goodman uses to put pressure on any version of the *Nirvāṇa* View. It supports the Objective List View while maintaining a monistic account of the ultimate good while allowing for multiple conceptions of well-being. Instead of calling this a continuum view of well-being, we might label it a pluralist conception, as long as we keep in mind that it is always and only the cessation of suffering and its causes that explains why someone is in a state of well-being.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>To see just how explanatorily powerful the *Nirodha* View is, consider how nicely it resolves an apparent conflict in the later Buddhist tradition. On the one hand, the traditional Buddhist “paths” to enlightenment (such as the Eightfold Path and the Six Perfections) require moral discipline, which suggests that ethical behavior is a necessary condition for the attainment of *nirvāṇa*. On the other hand, Buddhist parables sometimes tell stories of people who achieve *nirvāṇa* in an instant, perhaps upon hearing the Buddha’s words or by performing a simple task like sweeping the floor. In the later Chan and Zen Buddhist traditions, the notion of instant enlightenment gains even surer footing, with the legendary *Flower Sermon* telling how the Buddha himself transmitted enlightenment directly and wordlessly to his disciple Mahākāśyapa simply by holding up a flower. The problem is that ethical behavior and spiritual enlightenment seem both connected and independent. How do we explain this?

The *Nirodha* View explains the problem elegantly. This is because, according to it, the cessation of suffering is always desirable no matter how one achieves it. Typically, we reduce our own suffering by practicing compassion, loving-kindness and the like, but sometimes our suffering simply disappears in unexpected moments of clarity. Yet the only way that we can help others to reduce their own suffering is by being compassionate, lovingly-kind, and the like—that is, by being virtuous and ethical. As a result, the *Nirodha* View helps clarify that ethical behavior is a necessary condition for eliminating the suffering that others experience even though it is not a necessary condition for personal enlightenment or for the (perhaps) momentary cessation of our own suffering. If this is right, then it means that, at least in a certain sense, moral behavior is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for attaining the ultimate good in Buddhism. This might seem counterintuitive, but I think a medical analogy will help.

### Section 3: Objections

So far, I have argued that the Pāli Buddhist tradition endorses a distinctive negative axiology, which I have called the *Nirodha* View. I have provided textual evidence for my interpretation, I have motivated it over competing interpretations, and I have shown how explanatorily powerful the *Nirodha* View is while teasing out some interesting implications. In this section, I want to address some potential objections.

The first objection concerns methodology. Throughout my discussion, I have appealed to primary texts and secondary literature, but I have yet to identify any Pāli Buddhist terms that translate into English as

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Think about how we cure cancer. The optimistic oncologist will claim, like the Buddha, that she has a path for us to follow that will (likely) lead us to a state of health. Nonetheless, she will emphasize that this path is neither necessary (since one can recover without treatment) nor sufficient (since one can receive all possible treatments without recovering). Yet, it's true that she has offered a path that leads to recovery, and our best bet is to follow our doctor's orders, respect the evidence, and follow the path. This is how the *Nirodha* View suggests we understand the relationship between moral behavior and the cessation of suffering. The Buddha has in fact offered a path, but it is not simply a moral path. The path involves wisdom, meditation, a proper rebirth, and other factors—and if those factors align in just the right way, as in the case of cancer, then all is well.

In light of this, we might modify the *Nirodha* View slightly to reflect that, although the cessation of suffering is still the only intrinsic good, we can pursue that good in two different ways: the first is by seeking *nirvāṇa*, which is ultimate *nirodha* or what we might call spiritual value, while the second is by seeking to eliminate suffering in the world by any means, which is *samsāric nirodha* or what we might call moral value. The pursuit of moral value, then, is good, not because it leads directly to spiritual value, even though it is a good bet that it will (not just for us but also for others) but because the cessation of suffering is good in itself. Nonetheless, as I indicated earlier when talking about *parinirvāṇa*, ultimate *nirodha* still counts as a moral *achievement*, at least in the broad sense, insofar as it is the complete eradication of suffering and the causes of suffering.

“ultimate good,” “intrinsic good,” “complete good,” or even “good.” This might suggest that the Pāli Canon does not, in fact, address questions about the ultimate good and that my approach has not uncovered the *Nirodha* View, but has rather projected it in a culturally inappropriate way. For that matter, it might suggest that the very project of searching for what the Pāli Buddhist tradition has to say about the ultimate good is importantly misguided.

In the Pāli Canon, we can identify various terms that we could translate using the English word “good,” including, for instance, *sucarita*, which is commonly translated as “good conduct,” and *avyāpāda*, which is commonly translated as “good will.” Yet, to my knowledge, no Pāli Buddhist term translates easily into English as “ultimate good;” indeed, the only term anyone in the scholarly literature has even suggested as an equivalent term is *nibbāna* (*nirvāṇa*).

We might take this to mean that the Pāli tradition simply lacks the concept of an ultimate good, but I think this would be a mistake for at least three reasons. The first is that it is not at all obvious what the relationship is between concepts and language. If it is possible to have a concept without being able to express it in ordinary language or without having an ordinary language word for it, then we have some reason to believe that the Pāli Buddhist tradition could have had the concept of the ultimate good without ever naming the concept (Pinker). This would explain not only why no Pāli Buddhist term translates easily into English as “ultimate good,” but also why we cannot infer from the absence of such a term that the Pāli tradition lacked the concept. The second reason is that we need to be careful to distinguish between *conceptions* of the ultimate good and the *concept* of the ultimate good. A conception of the ultimate good is an interpretation of the concept. The Pāli Buddhist tradition might very well lack the kind of conceptions of the ultimate good that Western scholars, in particular, might have expected, but the tradi-

tion might nonetheless possess the concept, make use of it, and even represent it in distinctive ways. This is precisely my view. The Pāli canon uses and represents the concept of the ultimate good in ways that are strikingly unfamiliar to Western scholars, and this has contributed to wide-ranging disagreement about what the Pāli conception of the ultimate good is. As a final point, we need to keep in mind that the Pāli tradition never managed to develop any systematic (philosophical) accounts of ethical concepts, and so we should not expect the Pāli canon to have carefully analyzed the concept of the ultimate good, even if it has made use of it and represented it in various ways, as I claim (Gowans, *Buddhist Moral Philosophy* 54). For these reasons, we needn't worry too much about whether any Pāli Buddhist terms translate easily into English as "ultimate good," unless of course we have independent reasons for thinking that the Pāli Buddhist tradition lacks the concept itself.

This brings us to a related objection about my use of texts. Throughout my discussion, I've considered a limited number of sources and I've obviously highlighted those sources that support the *Nirodha* View, while interpreting potentially problematic sources in ways that conform to it rather than conflict with it. This could be cause for concern because it might suggest that my interpretations suffer from confirmation bias. I have to concede that I might have overlooked evidence against the *Nirodha* View while overemphasizing the evidence that seems to support it, but in the absence of hard textual evidence against it, the *Nirodha* View seems to me the best way to understand Pāli Buddhist axiology.

This worry about evidence points to another objection. The Buddhist tradition is not only vast—it is also very old and very sophisticated. How plausible is it, then, that everyone but me has managed to misinterpret Pāli Buddhist axiology? I have two responses to this concern. The first is simply a reminder that, "as far as we know there is little in Indian

Buddhism, or other traditional forms of Buddhism, that could be considered straightforward, systematic works of moral philosophy” (Gowans, *Buddhist Moral Philosophy* 54). This means Western scholars, in particular, have only recently begun to analyze important Buddhist moral concepts, leaving room for both misunderstanding and progress.

My next response is to emphasize how closely related the *Nirodha* View is to the standard *Nirvāṇa* View. By overemphasizing the positive aspects of *nirvāṇa*, scholars have managed to miss the central role that the cessation of suffering plays not only in the Buddha’s teaching, but also in Buddhist axiology. The third noble truth is about the cessation of suffering, but it is easy, as we have seen, to conflate the cessation of suffering (*nirodha*) with final liberation (*nirvāṇa*).

The *Nirodha* View also makes room for the importance of *nirvāṇa* in two significant ways. The first is that *nirvāṇa*-in-this-life is an ideal state (and counts as a regulative ideal toward which all might aspire) because it is a state wherein one has eliminated one’s own suffering. The cessation and elimination of suffering are what *make nirvāṇa* valuable. The second way the *Nirodha* View makes room for *nirvāṇa* is that *parinirvāṇa* becomes a spiritual and moral achievement in virtue of being the complete cessation of suffering. So, according to the *Nirodha* View, *nirvāṇa* can even remain a regulative ideal for Buddhists—the end at which they aim—but we should understand *nirvāṇa* in terms of the cessation of suffering.

Anything positive we can say about *nirvāṇa* is related to the cessation and elimination of suffering. Why is someone who has achieved *nirvāṇa*-in-this-life compassionate and wise? The answer is that compassion and wisdom are reliable correctives to suffering. Why is *parinirvāṇa* “neither black nor white?” The answer is that, when we can no longer aptly describe reality in conventional terms, the language of morality itself ceases to apply. Why is *parinirvāṇa* unconditioned, even though all

of reality is supposedly conditioned? The answer is that *parinirvāṇa*, whatever it is exactly, is beyond suffering precisely in the sense that the conditions for suffering have dissolved.

Another objection looms. This is that the *Nirodha* View seems to have implausible implications. In particular, the *Nirodha* View might seem to imply that, at bottom, the Buddha taught only, “suffering and the end of suffering.” As Bhikkhu Bodhi has recently pointed out, however, the Buddha never said that. What the Buddha actually said is this: “In the past, monks, and also now, I teach suffering and the cessation of suffering” (Bodhi 89; *Majjhima Nikāya* 22). Rather than teaching *only* suffering and its cessation, the Buddha’s, “words are not always tied to the theme of ‘suffering and its cessation’” (89). Does the *Nirodha* View imply otherwise? Does it require that the Buddha’s words always be tied to the theme of, “suffering and its cessation?”

The *Nirodha* View seems to entail that the Buddha’s words are, in fact, always tied to the theme of “suffering and its cessation,” at least when the Buddha is talking about what counts as good for sentient beings (who are capable of suffering). But this leaves room for Buddhist teachings that are not closely tied to the theme of “the cessation of suffering,” since the *Nirodha* View in no way implies that the Buddha talks only about what counts as good for sentient beings. Rather than implying that the Buddha taught *only* suffering and its cessation, the *Nirodha* View tells us simply that the cessation of suffering is the ultimate good. As a result, the *Nirodha* View leaves it an open question whether the Buddha teaches anything besides “suffering and its cessation.” What is interesting, however, is that when the Buddha does claim that he is teaching suffering and its cessation (in *Majjhima Nikāya* 22 and again in *Samyutta Nikāya* 22), he does so to shift, “attention from speculative hypotheses” about *parinirvāṇa* back onto considerations about what counts as good for sentient beings (Bodhi 89). On my reading, then, these pas-



sages provide yet further evidence against any version of the *Nirvāṇa* View while providing provisional support for the *Nirodha* View. What matters is not *nirvāṇa per se*, the Buddha seems to be saying, but the cessation of suffering.

Even if we can agree that the *Nirodha* View explains Pāli Buddhist axiology better than competing views, we might still worry about its philosophical viability. For instance, we might ask, if the world is full of suffering, and the cessation of suffering is the only intrinsic good, then why not just destroy the entire world and end suffering permanently? This is the Null Bomb Objection to Negative Utilitarianism, the view that everything is either intrinsically bad or value-neutral, but nothing is intrinsically good. Negative Utilitarianism seems not to have a response to the Null Bomb objection, because the elimination of all suffering *by any means* would seem to qualify as the best possible state of affairs. Does the Null Bomb Objection have the same devastating force when we level it against the *Nirodha* View?<sup>7</sup>

As I see it, the *Nirodha* View has the resources for a meaningful response. Consider first a medical analogy. An oncologist strives to eliminate cancer in her patients, but she does not succeed when they die. Likewise, the Buddhist strives to eliminate suffering, but does not succeed by destroying the world because she can no more cure the world of suffering by annihilating it than the oncologist can cure cancer by killing her patient. The Buddhist problem of suffering is not the Negative Utilitarian's problem of pain. The cessation of suffering is the only intrinsic good, but it is the cessation of suffering for beings capable of such, not merely the elimination of suffering, that is valuable. As I have articulated it, then, the Buddhist problem of suffering is a problem that requires the

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<sup>7</sup> Goodman (101-102) has an insightful discussion of negative utilitarianism and how Śāntideva might respond to the Null Bomb Objection.

treatment of a patient and what is intrinsically good is reducing, easing, and ultimately eliminating suffering *for those capable of suffering*. Of course, it might be true that, in extreme cases, the only way to treat suffering is by means of euthanasia. I cannot settle that difficult issue here. My point is simply that the *Nirodha* View has the resources to resist the Null Bomb Objection precisely because it recognizes that the cessation of suffering is intrinsically valuable in a relational sense: it is not the unqualified cessation of suffering that is intrinsically valuable, but the cessation of suffering in those capable of suffering.<sup>8</sup> Of course, traditional Buddhists have another response to this objection since they endorse karma and rebirth. Destroying the entire world cannot do anything to eliminate suffering because everyone would simply be reborn in the round of rebirth according to his or her karmic desert. Even if we don't accept the doctrines of karma and rebirth, however, the *Nirodha* View has resources that Negative Utilitarianism does not—and for that reason alone even non-Buddhists should take the view seriously.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For what it's worth, I think this insight helps explain an unappreciated reason for which the Buddha himself resists *annihilationism*, the view that those who achieve *parinirvāṇa* are destroyed at the moment of death. On the standard account, of course, the Buddha resisted annihilationism because the view presupposes that there is a substance-self (an *ātman*) that is destroyed at the moment of final liberation. I think that's right as far as it goes, but I also think the *Nirodha* View allows us to see that there is more to the story than this. The Buddha also resists annihilationism because it implies that, in seeking to eradicate suffering and in striving to achieve *parinirvāṇa*, we work toward the goal of total extinction, not merely the extinction of the living flames of suffering or even the fuel that conditions suffering, but the extinction of the very preconditions of suffering—the extinction of sentience itself.

<sup>9</sup> Of course, I would need to do more than I have to develop and defend the *Nirodha* View's relational account of the cessation of suffering's intrinsic goodness. It might turn out that the view faces insurmountable philosophical problems. My goal here has been more modest than a full-scale philosophical defense. I have tried to articulate and

## Conclusion

There's this joke. Maybe you've heard it? The Dalai Lama is in New York City, getting ready to give a big talk in Central Park. He's off walking by himself when he finds that he's feeling powerfully hungry. So he saunters up to a hot dog vendor, who asks, "What can I get ya, pal?" Without missing a beat, but with a twinkle in his eye, the Dalai Lama says, "Make me one with everything."

On YouTube, you can watch an Australian television show host try to tell a version of this joke to the current (14<sup>th</sup>) Dalai Lama.<sup>10</sup> It's a disaster. The Dalai Lama has no idea what the guy is talking about. Like a scene from *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, it's joyously painful to watch. The Dalai Lama never does manage to understand the joke—even when the reporter tries to explain it to him two years later at their televised reunion.

Why doesn't the Dalai Lama get the joke? One reason is obvious: humor often doesn't translate well. But that's not the problem here. The problem is that this just isn't a Buddhist joke at all. It's a joke whose humor requires that we *misunderstand* Buddhism to appreciate it. If we think Buddhists strive to become "one with everything," then we'll think the joke is kind of funny. (Maybe.) But of course, that's not the goal of Buddhism. It's not even a Buddhist doctrine. To me, it sounds more like an Advaita Vedāntin or maybe even a Neo-Platonic joke. Replace the Dalai Lama with Śāṅkara or Plotinus and the joke sort of works.

It does make some sense, however, that the television host would think Buddhists strive to become one with everything. After all, the early

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motivate the *Nirodha* View as an interpretation of Pāli Buddhist axiology. I hope to develop and defend the view further in future work.

<sup>10</sup> This is a link to the original interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GogjFO8GNEo>

Buddhist doctrine of no-self and the later Mahayana doctrine of emptiness tell us that there is in fact no principled distinction between others and ourselves. The doctrine of dependent origination also tells us that everything depends on everything else. Given this, it's not too hard to understand why someone might think that Buddhists would want to become one with everything.

It is just as easy to understand why scholars would endorse some version of the *Nirvāṇa* View. *Nirvāṇa* is final liberation, and so it *must* be the ultimate Buddhist goal, which means that it *must* be the Buddhist *summum bonum*. And the third noble truth sure seems like it's about *nirvāṇa*, and so that's probably what the word "*nirodha*" is referring to. And of course, *nirvāṇa* is intriguing and elusive, and so it is a prime candidate for popular and even scholarly fixation. Yet, as I have argued, it is not the positive state of *nirvāṇa* that counts as the ultimate good according to the Pāli Buddhist tradition, but it's negative counterpart—the cessation and elimination of suffering. In fact, *nirvāṇa* of either kind is valuable only because it represents a very specific achievement—the utter eradication of suffering. I'd wager that the Buddha himself would be just as puzzled about any version of the *Nirvāṇa* View as the Dalai Lama was about that bad joke.

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