



# Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005  
Volume 4 1997:184-188  
Publication date: 24 March 1997

A Response to Kevin Schilbrack

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Response

My essay, “Ethical Particularism in Theravāda Buddhism,” originally presented at an annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion as part of a panel on “revising Buddhist ethics,” was intended to raise two points of general interest. It was my hope to prompt, with a minimum of specialized information, some discussion about how we can better understand Buddhist ethics. I am happy that the subsequent publication of the original presentation in the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* has given it another chance to stimulate discussion and I am grateful to Kevin Schilbrack for taking the time to respond so carefully to it.

Kevin Schilbrack's close reading of my essay helps to clarify its two main concerns, especially in that the title refers to only one of them and has been the source of some confusion. He is right to say that I am convinced, first, that the only general statement that one can make about the Theravāda Buddhist tradition as a whole is that, with respect to moral theories, it is pluralist, and, second, that some texts or traditions (such as the commentarial tradition on the *Maṅgalasutta*) approach ethics in a manner that might be called ethical particularism.

If Schilbrack improves my essay by clarifying these two general points, at the same time he introduces new confusions, as when he conflates the distinction I adapt from Audi and Chisholm between methodism and particularism with an opposition between “the general” and “the particular” and when he argues against my interpretation of Buddhaghosa's commentary on the *Maṅgalasutta* by unintentionally quoting a line from Dharmasena's *Saddharmaratnāvaliya* which does not appear in Buddhaghosa (I confess that I am ultimately responsible for this new confusion because in my original oral presentation, I intentionally avoided citing the title of every text mentioned out of concern for the non-Buddhologists in the audience).

I am struck by Schilbrack's desire “to defend the legitimacy of general statements about the nature of Buddhist ethics.” Obviously Schilbrack is referring to general statements about the nature of Buddhist ethics other than the one I made, however inchoately, that the Theravādin tra-

dition as a whole is pluralist.

Although Schilbrack and I may make quite different arguments, his intent here is still certainly significant for all of us involved in the study of Buddhist ethics. I think he and I agree that it is important for all of us to discuss the legitimacy of global generalizations about the family to which large-scale constructs, like the Theravāda or Buddhism, belong, and I think both of us would like to see this issue become a topic of sustained collective reflection and argument.

With tongue in cheek, given Schilbrack's observation that "one should note how many disagree with Hallisey here," let me note that in taking the high ground, Schilbrack is at odds with Sizemore, whom he marshalls as a guide and ally. Sizemore says in his essay, "Comparative Religious Ethics as a Field," which Schilbrack quotes, that "there is no need to characterize Buddhism or any other religious tradition as exclusively employing one particular type of ethical reasoning" (97).

If there is no need for global characterizations, I think we must then specify both how and why we might want to make them. Let me take up the question of how first. It is difficult for me to see how one can hope to defend the legitimacy of general statements about the nature of Buddhist ethics by appeals to evidence if an initial hypothesis is made, as I have, saying that the tradition as whole is ethically pluralist. If I were to adopt his suggested model of interpretation for the moment, I might say, "Hallisey says the Theravādin Buddhist tradition is generally pluralist in its ethical reasoning; Schilbrack then responds that you overlook this particular text or aspect of a text which itself isn't pluralist." Following this model of generalization-building, I don't see how I would ever feel any compulsion to change my initial hypothesis about the tradition as a whole based on any individual text that Schilbrack could point out to me. From another perspective, however, the model itself is perhaps rather naive about the problems of identifying the contours of "traditions" in history, especially those which have lasted for long periods of time and for which we frequently have only "bad evidence."

If I cannot imagine how I would ever be dissuaded from a hypoth-

esis about the Theravāda's ethical pluralism by any discrete bit of overlooked evidence brought to light by Schilbrack, neither can I see *why* I should want to be dissuaded. Just what is at stake for the student of Buddhist ethics in the notion of “the tradition in general?” What does a statement about “the nature of Theravāda ethics in general” help me to do, whether I am interested in comparative religious ethics or Theravādin ethics?

My doubts about the legitimacy of global generalizations about Theravādin ethics are not only because the process Schilbrack defends seems fruitless since I cannot see how it could be resolved, but also because I think this search for global generalizations, identifying “the family of ethical theory to which Buddhism belongs,” actually can distract us from learning things about Buddhist ethics as well as ethics more formally that we do not already know. Perhaps this is another point of disagreement between Schilbrack and myself since it is not clear to me whether Schilbrack thinks that he and I can learn *from* Buddhist ethics or whether we can only learn *about* Buddhist ethics.

It is important to be careful about what we are talking about here. Schilbrack conflates “general” and “formal” in his discussion, but I hope it is clear that my suspicions about privileging “the general” in the interpretation of Buddhist ethics is hardly a disinterest in “the formal.” As I say in my last paragraph, my use of terms like “consequentialism” and “ethical particularism” indicates my sense of the real value of formal descriptions in the study of Buddhist ethics. Such formal descriptions enable us to pursue comparative research on the commonalities of moral thought across cultures. They also serve, as I said in “Ethical Particularism” as “interpretive bridges” by which the resources of the Buddhist traditions can enter broader academic discussions about ethics. I don't know if Schilbrack shares my optimism on this point, but I do think that he and I have no disagreement about the value of formal descriptions derived from the Modern West for the study of Buddhist ethics.

Nor, to judge from his last paragraph, do we have a substantial

disagreement about the reality of the ethical pluralism of the Theravāda tradition. If this is not at issue, then I cannot see why I or anyone else should want to join “the quest for the nature of Theravāda ethics in general.” As I said in “Ethical Particularism,” I think we should give up this quest because it actually causes us “to misconstrue or ignore some of the very material that we hope to understand.” Why should I get excited about thinking about things in the way Schilbrack does?

*Note:* I would like to thank Laurel Simmons for her helpful comments on an earlier draft of this response.