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**Revisioning Buddhist Ethics
Prospects for an Ongoing Dialogue**

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In November 1993, I was approached by the *Journal of Religious Ethics* about the possibility of editing a focus issue on Buddhist ethics. They had previously published one in 1979, which included a number of important and provocative papers. That same year, of course, Frank Reynolds published his very useful bibliographic essay on Buddhist ethics in *Religious Studies Review*. The idea clearly intrigued me because, by the time of my initial discussion with the *Journal of Religious Ethics*, Charles Hallisey had published a 1992 update in *Religious Studies Review* called “Recent Works on Buddhist Ethics,” and his effort demonstrated not only how much the interest in Buddhist ethics had grown, but also how much the scholarly studies devoted to it had *changed!*

In the years between Reynolds’ and Hallisey’s essays in *Religious Studies Review*, the interest in Buddhist ethics had clearly shifted from an emphasis almost exclusively on Theravāda ethics to a much more comprehensive and inclusive approach. Mahāyāna ethics, Tibetan Buddhist ethics, American Buddhist ethics, and a host of subsidiary issues like the movement known as “socially engaged Buddhism” were attracting enormous attention, so much so that two highly successful conferences on Buddhist ethics were held at the Chung Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies in Taiwan.

Additionally, the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, which I co-edit with Damien Keown, was born in July 1994. This journal now has 750 subscribers in 38 countries. It has published more than a dozen useful articles in its short history, and recently held a highly successful online conference on “Buddhism and Human Rights.”

Thus, when I was approached last fall about the possibility of organizing a panel on Buddhist ethics, it seemed like a superb idea. Moreover, it provided the opportunity to include some of those people who were most involved with the developing and promoting the new focus and approach to the study of Buddhist ethics: members of the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*. Illness prevented Reginald Ray from participating, but Dan Cozort has graciously stepped in to take his place, and his recent article in the *JBE* has been extremely well received.

We called our panel “Revisioning Buddhist Ethics: Prospects for an Ongoing Dialogue” because we think the papers will reflect not only new materials on Buddhist ethics, but new approaches to ethical dilemmas. . . an entirely new way of imagining the field. Following the individual papers, Christopher Ives will offer a response.

Abstracts

[1] Dan Cozort: “Cutting the Roots of Virtue:” Tsongkhapa on the Results of Anger

Anger is the most powerful of the kleśas that not only “plant seeds” for suffering but also “cut the roots of virtue” for periods of up to a thousand aeons per instance. This article examines and assesses the exegesis by Tsongkhapa, founder of the Tibetan Gelukba order, of Indian sources on the topic of anger. It argues that, despite Tsongkhapa’s many careful qualifications, he may not be successful in avoiding the conclusion that if the sūtras are to be accepted literally, there almost certainly will be persons for whom liberation from saṃsāra is precluded.

[2] Damien Keown: Buddhism and Suicide: The Case of Channa

Suicide is an important issue in contemporary ethics. It raises basic questions about autonomy and the value of human life, and plays a pivotal role in related questions such as physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia. The consensus in the secondary literature over the past seventy years has been that suicide is regarded equivocally in the Pali canon, and that, while prohibited for the unenlightened, it is seen as morally permissible in the case of the enlightened, since they act without desire. This paper reconsiders the evidence for this conclusion with specific reference to the suicide of the monk Channa. Drawing on commentarial material, it concludes that the textual evidence on which the consensus rests is much weaker than has been supposed, and that there is no reason to assume that the case of Channa provides an exception to the general canonical position which views suicide as morally wrong.

(3) Charles Hallisey: Ethical Particularism in Theravāda Buddhism

Buddhist ethics are often interpreted with an assumption of ethical monism. Even when scholars acknowledge significant moral diversity within the different Buddhist traditions, there is still a tendency to seek some degree of consistency by identifying a general principle in Buddhist ethics, such as

that Buddhist ethics are consequentialist or are supervenient on insight into selflessness or emptiness. This paper will consider, on the basis of the Theravādin commentarial tradition which developed around the Maṅgala sutta the possibility that at some traditions of Buddhist ethics should be considered as representing not just ethical pluralism, but ethical particularism. The paper will be in two parts. First, it will quickly review the contents of the Maṅgala sutta and its importance in Theravādin thought. It will then look at sixteenth-century Thai commentary, arguing that its style seems to assume that moral decision are best made on a case-by-case basis without the discovery of general moral principles.

[4] David W. Chappell: Are There Seventeen Different Mahāyāna Ethics? (Searching for a Mahāyāna Social Ethic)

Mahāyāna ethics is characterized by its threefold emphasis on (1) avoiding all evil, (2) cultivating good, and (3) saving all beings. Most Western studies of Buddhist ethics have used Pali and Sanskrit sources to examine the first two items based on monastic codes for avoiding wrongdoing and “virtue-ethics.” Among the few studies of the third category dealing with Buddhist social ethics, East Asian Mahāyāna materials have been sadly lacking despite the Mahāyāna rhetoric about saving all beings. To correct this deficiency, this paper analyzes an early lay Mahāyāna text that survives in East Asia, the Upāsaka Precept Sūtra. The paper argues that the Upāsaka differs from earlier Buddhism and from many other Mahāyāna texts by giving supremacy to compassionate action in society rather than monastic spiritual attainment, and by asserting that helping others based on compassion is the highest practice and best way to attain enlightenment.