

Buddhist Morality

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This small volume is composed of a collection of five papers that the author presented on various occasions to a variety of international conferences. At the time of the book's original publication in 1994, the author held three high-level positions in Thai educational and monastic institutions.

The first chapter, entitled, "Prominent Facets of Buddhism," is a basic and forthright exposition of some of the core teachings of the Buddha. The author does begin with a questionable definition of the term, "religion," derived from the Latin, "*religare*." He translates the word as "relation," and he interprets it to refer to "the relation between man and God." A more etymologically accurate translation of the word, *religare*, however, is "to bind back" or "bind together in a bundle." But, it should be added that the implication of the author's statement is correct. The word "religion" does bring to mind the idea of the relationship between man and God, especially in most, if not all, theistic religions.

He properly rejects the *theistic* definition of religion as being inappropriate to Buddhism but implies that Buddhism qualifies as a religion based on an *atheistic* definition. It would, perhaps, be more accurate to classify Buddhism as *non-theistic*, in strictly technical terms. The fact remains that the Buddha's dialogues are filled with references to numerous non-Buddhist, Indian deities (principally, Sakra, the King of the Gods or Indra in the Vedas, and the Creator God, Brahma). The Buddha, thus, makes explicit reference to certain Indian deities but declares that they can in no way help or hinder a person's striving toward the

achievement of the only goal in life that truly matters, i.e. the liberation from suffering and rebirth.

The author, also, speaks of the Buddha's rejection of "theistic determinism," namely, the belief that the course of a person's life is *absolutely* determined by the will of God, /and/ not by the *kamma* or *karma* a person performs." It is good that the author points out this explanation, because it draws attention to the tendency in theistic traditions to the belief that God, personally, directs, not only the course of history, but each individual's personal life. And, it is an important reminder of the importance of the doctrine of *free will* in all theological and philosophical traditions.

The author asserts that "the rationality facet of Buddhism leads it to be an ally of science," and that "in its long history Buddhism has never had *any quarrel* with science or scientists." This statement is, to a significant extent correct, for the reason that modern science developed *within* and *out of* a theistic cultural context in the western world and Buddhism never experienced the incredible conflict between science and religion that occurred in the west. However, a great many western scientists are no longer claiming, as they once did, that there is a fundamental and irreconcilable conflict between science and religion. It will be interesting to note Buddhism's contribution to this on-going debate as it unfolds in the future.

The second and third chapters, concerning Buddhist ethics and leadership, seek to bring "vitality into the bureaucratic system of civil service." The author distinguishes between "general ethics" (which he defines as "fundamental moral principles for every person") and "professional ethics," which are ethical principles that pertain to a particular profession or vocation. He argues that the Five Precepts (*panca-sila*) are "universally applicable in their implications," and "can be found in all ancient and modern systems of morality." This is a helpful statement in that it draws attention to the fact that there are

undeniably strong similarities among the world's religions with regard to ethical matters.

The author dedicates the entire fourth chapter to the subject of the "Universal Morality of Buddhism." He states that, "most of the world's problems such as wars, national conflicts, terrorism, corruption, destruction of the environment, the spread of AIDs, and drug abuse would have been solved if the Five Precepts had been upheld and sincerely practiced in daily life by everyone." Most Jews, Christians and Muslims would find themselves in complete agreement with the notion that these problems would never have arisen, in the first place, or would be solved under existing human conditions, were all people everywhere to live up to the standards of their own ethical system. They would also agree with Buddhism that it is human ignorance and selfishness that is the major cause of human suffering.

In the final chapter, "Unity in Diversity," the author attempts to isolate and define the fundamental beliefs that qualify a person to call himself/herself a Buddhist. He declares that, "if these questions are answered properly, then the problem of the identity of a Buddhist is solved."

In this chapter, the author offers a good starting point for gaining an understanding of the basic teachings of Buddhism. He constructs a list of six principles which, he believes, the whole of Buddhism shares in common: "the Triple Gem, the Three Characteristics of Existence, Dependent Co-origination, Kamma and Rebirth, the Four Noble Truths and the non-existence of a Creator God." In point of fact, these six principles do seem to represent a succinct summation of the core Buddhist beliefs and, as such, serve as a good introduction to the fundamental teachings of Buddhism.

Subsequently, he lists the Four Virtues (Faith, Morality, Generosity and Wisdom) and contends that "any person who has these virtues is qualified to be called a

Buddhist." This idea suggests the possible implication that any Jew, Christian or Muslim who embodies these virtues in their lives, could be construed, in fact, to be living the Buddhist life. This is a far more helpful approach to the interpretation of inter-religious dialogue and understanding than is an excessive emphasis on the intellectual concepts that inform the various religions. There is wonderful phrase in the Christian gospels which cogently expresses this author's sentiments, namely, "By their fruits you shall know them."

As a general exposition of some of the core principles of "Buddhist Morality," this book is a good and helpful introduction to some of the basic teachings and beliefs in the Buddhist tradition. It can be of assistance to the general lay reader in addressing a host of questions and issues that are likely to present themselves to a Buddhist in the 21st century. It may also encourage the reader to engage in deeper reflection on Buddhist thinking on a variety of issues, while at the same time, avoiding the tendency to make exclusive religious claims, based on either a cultural or a personal bias.

--J. Bruce Long