

# A New Approach to the Buddha's Socio-Political Teachings<sup>\*</sup>

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## Abstract

I argue in this paper that Early Buddhist ethic is one of absolute values, and that we can consistently use those absolute values to interpret some early teachings that seemingly show an ethic of context-dependent and negotiable values though.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Theravāda Buddhism, Philosophy, Indian Philosophy, Ethics

## 1 Introduction

*Mode 1* Dhamma is an ethics [*sic.*] of reciprocity, in which the assessment of violence is context-dependent and negotiable. Buddhist advice to kings in Mode 1 tells them not to pass judgment in haste or anger, but appropriately, such that the punishment fits the crime. To follow such advice is to be a Good King, to fulfill ... the duties of the royal station.

*Mode 2* Dhamma is an ethic of absolute values, in which the assessment of violence is context-independent and non-negotiable, and punishment, as a species of violence, is itself a crime. The only advice possible for kings in Mode 2 might seem to be "Don't be one!", "Renounce the world!", "Leave everything to the law of karma!" ... (Collins 420)

As cited above, Collins has proposed that the Buddhist teachings as regards violence should be divided into two modes. But why? Because these two types of teaching

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<sup>\*</sup>This paper is a revised and extended version of a talk delivered at the International Conference on *Buddhism: Past and Present* held from 27th to 29th January 2011 at the History Department, Abasaheb Garware College, Pune, India.

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are seemingly incompatible with each other. Collins notes: “In systemic thought, the contradiction between violence and nonviolence is logically unavoidable, and so the conflict between Mode 2’s ‘all kings are bad’ and Mode 1’s ‘there can be a good king’ is insoluble.” (420). However, I will argue in this paper that:

1. Collins’s theory leads to ethical relativism, which I believe is not attributable to Buddhism, or for that matter, to any religion.
2. Therefore, I will offer an alternative interpretation, according to which:
  - a) The Early Buddhist Ethic has only one mode, that of absolute values, in which assessment of violence, or any other moral act, is context-independent and non-negotiable. (This is what Collins calls the Mode 2 of Dhamma.)
  - b) The same mode of absolute values can be used to explain the teachings seemingly context-dependent and negotiable.

## 2 Two Modes of Dhamma: A Critical Review

The theory of the two modes of Dhamma regarding violence, proposed by Collins, represents not a solution but a serious problem with how we understand the Buddhist ethic. Why?

Firstly, this line of thinking will lead us to see two incompatible modes also in other teachings not relevant to violence. For instance, consider the third precept of the Five Precepts (*pañcasīla*) (It 63): the abstinence from sexual misconduct (*kāmesu micchācāra*). The term “misconduct” itself implies that there exists a right conduct of sex, presumably that of an officially married couple. However, this implication is not compatible with the *Dhammacakkappavattanasutta* (SN V 421; Bodhi II 1844), which teaches that it is wrong to indulge in sensual pleasures including sex, nor with the Vinaya, which states that sex is one of the most serious offenses for monks and nuns (Pāt 8, 9, 116,117). Therefore we must also assume here two modes of Dhamma: according to one mode, presumably meant for monks and nuns, it is wrong to have any kind of sex but according to another mode, probably meant for laity, it is right to have lawful sex. In fact, this way of thinking will result in a fundamental conflict between all teachings supposed for Buddhist ascetics and those supposed for the laity. How should we explain this conflict?

According to Weber, asynchrony is the answer. Collins sums up Weber’s position thus: “ ‘ancient Buddhism’ was only and essentially ‘a religious technology’ of wandering ... mendicant monks ... Buddhist teaching for the laity ... was ‘an insufficiency ethic for the weak, which only later and gradually developed’ ” (56). In other words, these two modes of teachings appeared at different times in history, hence this conflict.

However, I think asynchrony is not a convincing explanation, because:

1. As Collins correctly notes: “[Buddhism] was ... a cultural-ideological project of ongoing collectivities, in which celibacy could only be a minority option ... in any instance, anywhere, the majority of such collectivities would have been non-ascetic.” (58).
2. Then it is not plausible that the wandering monks of the earliest times who invented the “religious technology” of Buddhism could have ignored the spiritual needs of non-ascetics, who formed the majority of Buddhist people, and on whom monks and nuns must rely upon for their survival. In other words, at any given time or place, the respective teachings for ascetics and lay persons must have co-existed.
3. Therefore, if there has been a fundamental conflict between these two modes of teachings in the same tradition at any given time and place, we should wonder why no one in the tradition has noticed and questioned it. For, as far as Theravāda Buddhism is concerned, there are no esoteric teachings meant to be kept to the knowledge of a few with the consequence that the respective teachings for monks and for the laity must have always been public knowledge.

On the other hand, Collins himself uses a pragmatic approach. He states:

Practically, in the here and now, using the law of karma in a strict and literal sense as a directive for action (or rather, inaction) would be recipe for social chaos, since it removes from human agents all responsibility and capacity for social order. It is impossible that a king (or any other ruler) should leave retribution for crime to the long term, multi-lifetime process of karma. Consequently, if Pali texts were to speak to actual rulers in the real world, something more flexible than the absolute demands of Mode 2 non-negotiable Dhamma was necessary: and that was provided by Mode 1 negotiable Dhamma, in ideas of, stories about, and recipes for the Good King. (421–422)

He focuses on kings and their usage of violence to enforce their authority. But the same logic is applicable to other conflicts between the respective teachings for laity and for monks. For instance, we can also say that the Buddha was being flexible for the sake of laity when he taught on mutual duties of husband/wife, parents/children, etc., in *Sigālovādasutta* (DN III 190 ff. Walshe 467 ff.), which contrasts with the *Dhammacakkappavattanasuta* (SN V 420 ff. Bodhi 2: 1843 ff.) in which he denounced all sensual pleasures and, consequently, all kinds of non-celibate lives.

I can see two problems with Collins’s approach:

1. The argument against Weber is applicable against Collins as well. To repeat again, if there were really a fundamental conflict between the teachings for monks and those for the laity, why has no one in the tradition noticed and questioned it?

2. There is no clear-cut boundary between the two modes of Dhamma. Even if we choose to argue that one mode is for monks and nuns while the other is for the laity, there can be borderline cases for which a morally right action is very difficult to define from the Buddhist perspective. For example, suppose I am an abbot and my temple is attacked by bandits. Should I resort to violence and wage a defensive war? Or suppose I am ready to lay down my life holding up the principle of non-violence. But is it right to leave the junior monks and novices in my charge to their fate in the cruel hands of bandits?

Here we may be tempted to answer that it depends on particular circumstances. However, such an answer is only one step away from moral relativism—according to which every action is right in its proper context—which I believe cannot be attributed to Buddhism, or for that matter, to any religion. If Buddhist morality is not moral relativism, then what is it? We can only say that we do not know. In fact, as long as this fundamental conflict stands, the Buddhist ethic is an unknown variable to us, in spite of the availability of many primary sources.

Therefore, I have attempted in this paper an alternative interpretation, using which I argue that these seemingly conflicting modes of teachings have co-existed simply because there is no *real* contradiction between them.

### 3 An Alternative Approach

First of all, I argue that Buddhist morality, at least according to Pali sources, is an ethic of absolute values, which are (to use Collins's words again) "context-independent and non-negotiable" (420). There is a clear demarcation between the good and the bad; the former can never be the latter, or vice versa, in any context. Even though wholesome and unwholesome karmas may be closely intertwined in a given moral scenario, they never mix with each other nor change their moral identities. This is what Collins has called the Mode 2 of Dhamma but I believe that this is the only mode available in Early Buddhism, and I argue that the same mode is applicable as well to all early teachings supposedly belonging to the Mode 1.<sup>1</sup>

Now let us consider a scenario of a king giving punishment to a criminal, a typical case of the Dhamma mode 1 according to Collins. A thief is brought to the presence of a king for a petty offense. The king happens to have a personal grudge against the thief, but the former controls his personal feelings, and manages to give proper punishment. How should we judge the king's action from the perspective of an absolute ethic?

<sup>1</sup>I mean by the phrase "early teachings" that I will not count the *nīṭisatthas* and *Mahāvamsa*, both cited by Collins, as part of the Early Buddhism, for the former, even though in Pali language, are actually mundane literature that orthodox Theravāda Buddhism has never recognized as part of the religion, and the latter is a historical treatise that has never been doctrinally important, at least, outside Sri Lanka.

I argue that he performs both wholesome and unwholesome deeds by his act. Firstly, he performs an unwholesome deed, for (to cite Collins again) “punishment, as a species of violence, is itself a crime.”; his royal duties cannot recuse him from the law of karma. On the other hand, he also performs a wholesome deed by controlling his anger and abstaining from giving undue punishment to the thief.

Now there can be a serious objection to this evaluation. Here we can see only a single act of punishment coming from the king; it is probably a verbal order to punish the thief properly. If we claim that the former performs both wholesome and unwholesome deeds through this act, we practically mean that the same act is wholesome and unwholesome, moral and immoral, at the same time. It appears paradoxical; how can it be possible?

I answer that we should remember how the Buddha defines karma: *Cetanāhaṃ bhikkhave kammaṃ vadāmi* (AN III 415) [“It is intention that I call karma ... ” (Gombrich, *What* 7)]. If intention is karma, then we can conclude that a single act having *more than one* intention behind it can be resolved into more than one karma. Then, in our scenario, the king’s act of punishment is actually TWO karmas, since it is the product of two intentions—one is the intention to punish yet the other is the intention to abstain from meting out undue punishment. The former is an unwholesome karma, which is the main thrust behind the act of punishment, and the latter is a wholesome karma, which serves as a brake to prevent the punishment going beyond the proper extent. So there is nothing paradoxical here.

Now let us consider the Buddha’s position when he had to meet and teach kings. The kings he met obviously could not renounce their positions to follow him into a life of homelessness, and if they were to survive as kings they also could not abstain from using violence to punish criminals or enemies. However, they could still perform wholesome deeds by abstaining from unfair punishments; this is the reason why the Buddha taught them “to pass judgment ... such that the punishment fits the crime.” (Collins 420), not because the former accepted violence in any context nor because “something more flexible than the absolute demands of Mode 2 non-negotiable Dhamma was necessary” (421–422). The same goes for other teachings on how to be a Good King (*dhammena rājā*). From the Buddha’s perspective, every dark cloud can achieve a silver lining if it is willing enough, even though it cannot help being dark, and it was the Buddha’s job to teach it how to get silver-lined. The Buddha might be a pragmatist, as Gombrich says (*What* 161ff.), but it does not mean that he ever deviated from the moral values that he believed in, nor that he was contradicting what he taught monks and nuns.

Then how should we understand the concept of a Good King (*dhammena rājā*)? It is a relative term like the phrases “a big mouse” or “a small elephant”. A big mouse is termed “big” only because it is bigger than other mice, not because it is bigger than “a small elephant.” So also a good king is termed “good” only because he is better than bad kings, not because he is a morally pure person. (The only way to be morally pure for

a king is not to be one). It is for the same reason that “the word for ‘executioner’s block’ here is *dhamma-gaṇḍikā*, the block of justice” (Collins 459). Such a killing machine is rightfully entitled to the word *dhamma* (“what is right”) if no one unworthy of capital punishment has ever been a victim of it, in contrast to others by means of which innocent people have lost their lives too; it does not necessarily imply that the act of killing itself is morally justified.

We can see the Buddha adopting the same attitude towards the military. At the time of the Buddha, all rulers, monarchic or otherwise, depended upon their military power to retain or extend their authority. This is why, I argue, the Buddha declined to persuade his royal disciples to give up their military forces, even though he openly condemned taking of life and everyone knows that the main job of an army is wholesale slaughter of fellow human beings.

On the other hand, the Buddha’s condemnation of killing does not mean that soldiers cannot do any wholesome deed in their profession; this fact is shown by the following statement of Mahosadha, who was our bodhisatta in the role of a general in *Umaṅgajātaka*:

*Nesa dhammo mahārāja, yohaṃ senāya nāyako;  
Senāgaṃ parihāpetvā, attānaṃ parimocaye.* (Ja VI 446)

O great king, it is not right (*dhamma*) if I, the commander of the army, abandoned the part of the army and escaped myself.

A soldier’s job may be wholesale slaughter of enemies, but he can still perform a wholesome deed by taking unselfish care of his men. So the passage cited above does not mean that military killing is justified by the Buddha. It is the same with the case of another commander—the one “who carries on top of his bow a strainer for filtering drinking water in order to prevent minute animals from being killed” (Schmithausen 53). I cannot see any problem with the commander if he is sincere enough in his acts. Even if he is unable, as a soldier, to abstain from killing his fellow human beings, he still gains wholesome credit by abstaining from killing animals; half a loaf is still better than none.

It is the same with other seemingly contradictory teachings that are not relevant to violence. In the case of sexual misconduct vs. normal sex mentioned in the previous section, for instance, I can argue that when the Buddha taught the lists of Five Precepts (*pañcasīla*) and Ten Evil Courses of Actions (*dasa akusalakammaṃpatha*) to the lay people, he mentioned the sexual misconduct (*kāmesu micchācāra*), instead of normal sex, as a sin to be abstained from, only because the former is a more serious offense, not because the latter is a morally pure act; so such teachings do not necessarily contradict those meant for monks and nuns like *Dhammacakkappavattanasutta* or Vinaya rules.

All in all, I conclude that the modern perception of a fundamental conflict between the teachings for the Order and that for the laity is only a misinterpretation.

### 3.1 The significance of the wheel-turning monarch *cakkavattirājā*

So far so good, but I also need to say something about the Wheel-turning Kings (*cakkavattirājā*), for from Collins's perspective, the Wheel-turning Kingship is something "compatible with Dhamma in Mode 2: the utopian paradox of the nonviolent king." (422). But I have denied the dual mode of Dhamma in my interpretation, so I need to offer a different explanation of how these mythical kings should be placed in the general picture of Buddhist morality.

In my opinion, the concept of Wheel-turning Kings is the Buddha's one political ideal; I use the term *ideal* as meaning something that cannot be actualized in real life. To make my point clear, let us look at Oliver's summary of how a Wheel-turning King conquers all other countries:

An ordinary king becomes a Wheel-rolling Monarch with the appearance of the Wheel Treasure [*cakkaratana*]. ... Then the wondrous wheel rolls onwards towards the regions of the East, South, West and North, in that order, with the king and his fourfold army .... As soon as the king takes up his abode where the Wheel stops, all the regional kings come to him and request: "Come, O Mighty King! Welcome, O Mighty King! All is yours, O Mighty King! Do, O Mighty King, be a teacher to us!": The Wheel-rolling Monarch fulfills this request earnestly by admonishing them to be ethically good. Then all the rival kings in the region become subject to the Wheel-rolling Monarch. (62)

Now let us stop and think. Suppose such a miracle king appears in our modern times. Then, how many countries or governments will voluntarily choose to give up their sovereignty and live under such a king? I think there will be very few, if not none. People in general will have great respect for such a king, I do not doubt that, but it is a different thing to abandon national pride or prejudices. What I wish to point out is: if a Wheel-turning King is, as Gombrich says, "a mythical being" (*Theravāda* 84), the people volunteering to be his subjects are no less mythical. I think what the Buddha was trying to tell us when he spoke on the the Wheel-turning Kings is: if one of our rulers becomes good and righteous enough to be awarded with a Wheel Treasure, and if we all are also good enough to voluntarily follow his lead, we will be able to build (to use a term of Collins (414) again) a Perfect Moral Commonwealth. This is obviously impossible during the Buddha's times or later; this is why his talks on Wheel-turning Kings are either historical narratives or predictions of future, clearly indicating that he had no intention to inspire the kings he met to become Wheel-turning Kings themselves.

While we are at it, I should also mention that there is another political ideal of the Buddha in *Aggaññasutta* (DN III 80 ff. Walshe 407 ff.), in which the Buddha described how the first ever king arose in this world. Gombrich gives a summarized account as follows:

[At the beginning of this world] Radiant beings, undifferentiated by sex or social status, flit around above the cosmogonic waters. In due course their idleness and greed lead them into trouble and they start living on earth. Then a being steals rice from another. Apprehended, he promises not to do it again, but he does; this is the origin of lying. Others then beat him up; this is the origin of punishment, legitimated force. They then decide to choose one of their number to keep order in return for a share of the produce. He is called ‘The Great Elect’ and is the first king and the first *kṣatriya*; indeed, that is the point of origin for the whole *varṇa* system. (Gombrich, *Theravāda* 87)

We should note that, according to that account, one single thief has called for the necessity of a king or government. The Buddha tells us, I believe, by this account that we need a king or a government only because we are not good enough for anarchy. (One corollary of this view is: any type of social or political institution is only as good as the people running it or those living in it.) However, the Buddha never advised the kings or anyone else to give up their political institutions and live in anarchy, probably because it would have been impractical in the real world of his times.

Now one possible question is: what is the use of teaching ideals that cannot be put into practice? I cannot definitely answer what was the Buddha’s actual intent in the context of each mythical discourse, but at least I can say that such mythical discourses have helped the posterity to understand the Buddha’s standpoint regarding the socio-political questions of the real world. How?

Having ideals out of the reach of people in general, the Buddha is like an mature adult, and people are like children who the former has to teach. He cannot expect children to act like as adults, but as an adult, he also cannot see any real significance in, nor entertain real preferences over, the toys that children hold in great value. What he will do is: to adapt his teaching methodology to children and teach them how to play with their toys, but with a different purpose. While children aim to get maximum fun when they play with their toys, the adult’s purpose in teaching them how to play is to develop their physical and mental faculties.

It is the same with the Buddha. He was ready to teach anyone of whatever the social status, of whatever the particular walk of life, but only with a clearly-defined objective, i.e., the full liberation from the circle of birth, for which he advocated definite means thus:

*sabbapāpassa akaraṇaṃ, kusalassa upasampadā*



*sacittapariyodāpanaṃ, etaṃ Bhuddhāna sāsanaṃ.* (DN II 49)

Not to do any evil, but cultivate the good,

To purify one's mind, this the Buddhas teach. (Walshe 219)

Does it mean that the Buddha did not bother for the secular objectives—a happy nation, a happy family, or a happy marriage, etc.—of his lay followers when he taught them? I think so. As further proof, I offer here my analysis of one typical piece of teaching for the laity.

I have chosen the reciprocal duties of a husband and a wife in a marriage that the Buddha spoke on in the *Siṅgālovāda sutta* in Dīgha Nikāya (DN III 190; 467 Walshe 232). Throughout the history, the family has been the basic unit of human societies. And a family, in turn, is generally based upon a marriage, a man and a woman sharing their lives. Therefore we can say that marriage is (where it is common practice) the basic relationship of the society. I would like to show this relationship in the light of Buddhist perspective to prove my theory, but before doing so, it would be good if we ask and try to answer the question: why do people get married? *Encyclopedia Britannica* gives one good answer:

[People get married to perform] the many basic social and personal functions for which it provides structure, such as sexual gratification and regulation, division of labour between the sexes, economic production and consumption, and satisfaction of personal needs for affection, status, and companionship; perhaps its strongest function concerns procreation, the care of children and their education and socialization, and regulation of lines of descent. (*Britannica* “marriage”)

Now let us see what the Buddha had to say on this matter:

<i>Husband's duties</i>	<i>Wife's duties</i>
Honouring the wife	Properly organizing her work
Not disparaging the wife	Being kind to the servants
Being faithful to the wife	Being faithful to the husband
Giving authority to the wife	Protecting family property
Providing adornments to the wife	Being skillful and diligent in her duties

Now I will attempt to check what the *Encyclopedia Britannica* says against the Buddha's teaching and find out what the latter has ignored:

**sex** The Buddha entirely ignored the sexual fulfillment, which may be the most significant factor in a happy marriage.

**children** He also said nothing about the creation and proper care of children, which may be the most important social function of marriage. He did speak on the mutual duties of parents and children in the same *sutta* but the image of children is absent in the general picture of marriage. Did he mean that we should treat children properly if they arrive, but never mind if they do not?

**others** All other personal and social functions outlined in *Britannica* can be performed only when both parties in a marriage relationship perform their duties properly. And the Buddha did specify the mutual duties of two parties involved, so we may be tempted to think that the Buddha did deal with other essential functions of marriage.

However, what should we do if one party is dutiful but the other is not? How should we manage to get our rights in such a situation? The Buddha did not say anything about it.

In short, anyone looking into this *sutta* to get some advice for a successful marriage will certainly be disappointed. And we cannot say that it is because the Buddha was ignorant of marriage matters, for we should not forget that he sought for enlightenment only after a period of a (seemingly) happy marriage. The question, then, is: why did the Buddha ignore the most important personal and social needs and functions in his advice? My answer is: he simply did not bother. It is good enough for the Buddha that one certainly gains merit by fulfilling these duties; everything else is trivial and not worthy of the Buddha's consideration.

We can find the same attitude in other teachings for the laity. Another example: he would teach kings how to be good kings but he would teach the Conditions of Welfare (*aparihāniyādhammā*) to republicans like Licchavis (DN III 75; Walshe). Scholars have argued loud and long whether the Buddha supported monarchy or democracy (See Oliver etc.) but from my perspective, these systems are just toys that have no real value for the Buddha; for him, it is more important to do fewer bad deeds, and more good deeds, whatever system one is using or living in.

Then is it possible to use his teachings for our secular objectives, like what the adherents of Engaged Buddhism are trying to do? Perhaps it is, but we should not blame the Buddha if we fail in such undertakings, for the Buddha seemingly never had such objectives for his teachings.

#### **4 If Intention is Karma: Implications and problems**

I have offered an alternative theory to prove that the Early Buddhist ethic is one of absolute values and that the modern perception of the fundamental conflict between the teaching for monks and that for laity is only a misinterpretation. My solution is

based upon the interpretation of *cetanā* as “intention” (*PED cetanā* s.v.). If my solution is correct, it would mean that the interpretation of *cetanā* as “intention” is good enough to let us understand the Buddhist ethics. However, we still need to account for the ethical implications of this interpretation, and I intend to do such accounting in this section.

#### 4.1 Implications

##### **Karmic effects are only part of the overall consequences of an act**

We all know that our actions, even if done with the best of intentions, may produce unforeseen and undesirable consequences. For instance, Vessantara might have a good intention when he offered his two children as slaves to a brahmin, but his act inevitably brought great suffering to the children themselves (Ja VI 540–555; K. Kawasaki and V. Kawasaki III 1240–1245). And Siddhattha the *bodhisatta* might have a good intention when he left the royal court in search of enlightenment, but it is also true that, on the very day he left, his newly-born son lost the loving care of a father (Malalasekara “1. Rāhula Thera”). A doctor may refuse, with the best of intentions, to give euthanasia to his terminally sick patient, but the deed will certainly result in the prolonged suffering of the latter.

On the other hand, karmic fruits are supposed to reflect the moral nature of one’s acts; good deeds bringing good fruits in a future life, and bad deeds bringing bad consequences, as clearly shown in the *Cūḷakammavibhaṅgasutta*, etc. (MN III 202–206; Ñāṇamoḷi and Bodhi 1053–1057). Therefore, we can say that karmic effects form only a part of the overall consequences (which we may never know or control) of our actions.

##### **Intention is only part of the input to the karmic process**

If karma means intention only, it is not coterminous with *kammaṭṭhāna* (“course of action”), another well-known concept in Buddhist ethics. Whereas karma, being the intention behind whatever action we deliberately perform, is the means by which we impart moral values, positive or negative, into our acts, a *course of action* is a complete and accomplished act, of which karma is only a part. Let us look at an instance, how the case of killing is explained by the commentators:

*Tassa pañca sambhārā honti: pāṇo, pāṇa-saññitā, vadhaka-cittaṃ, upakkamo, tena maraṇan ti.* (Sv I 69–70; Ps I 198; As 97)

There are five requisites of that (deed of killing): a living being, perceiving it as a living being, a destructive mind,<sup>2</sup> an effort (to kill), and the death (of a living being)

<sup>2</sup>Gethin translates *vadhakacittaṃ* as “the thought of killing” (172). However, just a thought of killing cannot produce the necessary effort to actually commit the deed. On the other hand, we can see

owing to that effort.<sup>3</sup>

When we look at those requisites, we can see that only three of them are wholly within our control, but not the first and the last—what we view as a living being may turn out to be a dummy despite all the appearance to the contrary, and many well-planned and well-executed murder plots have been failures (In a war, one may never know the effect of the bullets fired from one’s gun.). And there are still other factors to be taken into account:

*So guṇa-virahitesu tiracchāṇa-gatādisu pāṇesu khuddake pāṇe appa-sāvajjo, mahā-sarīre mahā-sāvajjo. Kasmā? Payoga-mahantatāya. Payoga-samatte pi vatthu-mahantatāya. guṇavantesu manussādisu appa-guṇe pāṇe appa-sāvajjo, mahā-guṇe mahā-sāvajjo, sarīra-guṇānaṃ pana samabhāve sati kilesānaṃ upakkamānañ ca mudutāya appa-sāvajjo tibbatāya mahā-sāvajjo ti veditabbo. (Sv I 69; Ps I 198; As 97)*

In the case of living beings without (moral) virtues, such as animals, that<sup>4</sup>(act of killing) is less blameworthy when the being is small, and more blameworthy when (it) has a large body. Why? Because of the greater effort (required in killing a being with a large body). Even when the effort is the same, (the act of killing a large-bodied being is still more blameworthy) because of its greater physical substance. In the case of beings that possess (moral) virtues, such as human beings, the act of killing is less blameworthy when the being is of little virtue and more blameworthy when the being is of great virtue. But when the body and virtue (of beings) are equal, (the act of killing) is less blameworthy when the defilements and force of the effort are mild, more blameworthy when they are powerful.

So according to the commentator, there are three more factors affecting the seriousness of a killing act:

**Size** In the case of virtueless beings such as animals, the bigger the animal, the more serious the act of killing it..

**Virtue** In the case of beings that possess virtue, such as humans and above, the more virtuous the person, the more serious the act of killing him or her.

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that the term *vadhaka*, derived from  $\sqrt{vadh}$  plus the suffix *aka*, can only be either an adjective, in which case it means “killing, destructive, injurious”, or a noun, in which case it means “an executioner, a hangman, a murderer, an assassin” (Apte *vadhaka* s.v). So I have chosen to render *vadhakacittaṃ* as “a destructive mind.”

<sup>3</sup>Gethin translates *tena maraṇaṃ* as “the death [of the being] as a result” (172). His version is contextually not wrong, but the referent of the pronoun *tena* is ambiguous. In my opinion, *tena* refers to *upakkamo* (“the effort”), the immediately preceding factor; so I have translated as above.

<sup>4</sup>Gethin gives “act of killing” in brackets as the subject of this sentence, seemingly implying that there is no explicit subject in the original Pali sentence. In my opinion, however, the pronoun *so*, representing *pāṇātīpāto* from the previous (omitted here) sentence, is the subject here.

**Intensity of defilements and effort** In the cases of killing animals of equal size or persons of equal virtue, the intensity of the accompanying defilements and that of the effort determines the relative seriousness of each act.

[This list is a modified version of Gethin's (172).]

Scholars have argued over how these factors should be interpreted (Keown, *Bioethics* 96–100; Gethin 172–173). However, what I wish to point out here is: out of these three factors, only the last one is entirely within our control, not the former two—one cannot always choose the size of an animal one intends to kill, and it is very difficult, if not outright impossible, to judge the degree of virtue possessed by a person to be killed.

And the situation is further complicated by a story in Vinaya (Vin II 193; Horner V 271). At that particular time, Devadatta attempted to kill the Buddha by hurling down a big rock but it was stopped by two mountain peaks (miraculously) meeting each other. Yet one splinter hit the Buddha's foot, drawing blood. Then the Buddha declared to the monks that Devadatta had committed an Immediacy Deed (*ānantariyakamma*) by drawing the Buddha's blood with a destructive mind.

Concerning the event above, we can see that Devadatta's attempt to kill the Buddha failed, so the course of killing action (*pāṇātipātakamma*) was not accomplished. The former did manage to wound the latter, but it was not intended. Yet that unintentional act of drawing the Buddha's blood was more serious than many successful murders, for the former is an Immediacy Deed, “a heinous crime which brings retribution immediately after death” (“*Ānantarika-Kamma*”). Even if a person like Aṅgulimāla, who had committed so many murders, could achieve arahatship and thereby escaped the hell after death (“*Aṅgulimāla*”), Devadatta could not.

After considering everything above, we can draw a conclusion: when we perform a moral or immoral act, we can know and control only our “investment”, i.e., our intention, efforts, accompanying defilements, etc., all of which are only part of the input factors fed into the machinery of the karmic law. Once we have made our investment to perform a deed, we may never know, and certainly cannot control, the rest of karmic factors that the law of karma will process to produce karmic effects coming back to us in the future.

## 4.2 Problems

### Why so much emphasis on intention?

After considering the possible implications of the concept of intention as karma, we come to confront an interesting question:

- If karmic effects are only a part of the consequences of our actions,

- And if, even within the framework of the karmic law, intention is only a component of input factors that the law of karma will process to produce karmic effects,

Why did the Buddha put so much emphasis on intention, by definitely stating that intention is karma?

My answer is thus. A good intention behind a certain act is what counts in the path to *nibbāna*, as Gombrich correctly notes:

... since acting is really mental [i.e., because intention is karma], doing a good act is actually purifying one's mind. (*What* 14).

A virtuous man's thoughts approach ever nearer to the experience of *nibbāna*. As he turns to meditation and realization of the Dhamma, ... the goodness ... will all bear fruit in enabling him to see his way to the final goal. (*Theravāda* 69)

Therefore, even if an act done with a good intention has evil consequences in practice, that act is still a positive step towards liberation. This is why Vessantara's sacrifice of his children and similar acts is justified from the Buddhist perspective, and also why Keown's following oft-quoted statement is, in my opinion, justified:

Nirvana is the good, and rightness is predicated of acts and intentions to the extent which they participate in nirvanic goodness. ... If an action does not display nirvanic qualities then it cannot be right in terms of Buddhist ethics whatever other characteristics (such as consequences) it might have. (*Nature* 177)

### **Is nirvana the ultimate standard of morality?**

If "nirvana is the good", as Keown states above, we should seemingly conclude that it is the ultimate measuring stick of morality in Buddhism. This conclusion is reasonable when we have to choose between wholesome and unwholesome deeds. But can we say the same when we have to choose between two *good* deeds? In other words, are we morally compelled to make the optimal choice when we have to choose one of two or more deeds which show different degrees of nirvanic goodness?

There are two alternative answers to this question and I will consider these one by one. However, I will not commit to either of them, and which of them should have been the Buddha's own answer is, I think, still open to question.

**Affirmative** Suppose we answer in affirmative and insist that we are morally obliged to choose the deed of best nirvanic qualities when we have to confront a choice between two or more good deeds. From this answer it follows that in any given moral scenario, there is only one right way to do things; all other alternatives are either outright unwholesome or still morally inferior to the right choice.

The problem with this answer is concerned with *bodhisattas* like Sumedha (Malalasekara “1. Sumedha”). If nirvana is the ultimate good and if we are obliged to make moral choices between possible good deeds depending on their nirvarnic qualities, a moral life for Buddhists would be one of persistently striving to achieve nirvana as soon as possible. The purpose to enlighten and liberate other beings may be good, but not as good as achieving nirvana oneself within a shortest possible time frame. So we must say that all *bodhisattas* make morally wrong choices when they decide to postpone the immediately available experience of nirvana so that they can become Buddhas themselves after countless eons. On the other hand, if all *bodhisattas* were to make the optimal choice, there would have never been, or would never be, Buddhas appearing to teach other beings; the Noble Path would have been lost for good.

To solve the dilemma above, we may resort to the principle of utilitarianism: “the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people.” Then we can say that even though it is good to achieve enlightenment for oneself, it is better to share it with one’s neighbor. And it would be the best to become a Buddha oneself so that one can help the greatest number of people to get liberated. Then the proper Buddhist practice for everyone would be to aspire to Buddhahood; we cannot excuse that we are not as strong as Sumedha, for in the long path of *samsāra*, everyone has enough time on one’s hands to develop oneself and achieve the qualities of Sumedha’s caliber. (I wonder if Mahayanism has evolved from such a line of reasoning.)

However, there is still a problem that cannot be explained by the Bodhisatta doctrine. If there is only one right way to do things in any given moral scenario, all different Buddhas would have worked in a consistent manner, for Buddhas are, by definition, fully enlightened beings. However, our own Buddha classified the former Buddhas into two groups (Vin III 8–9; Horner I 15–17) based upon their different teaching methodologies:

- Some former Buddhas usually read their disciples’ minds and taught accordingly, but were not inclined to teach in detail, did not prescribe Vinaya precepts, and did not appoint *Pātimokkha*; their teachings were lost soon after their death.
- Other former Buddhas taught in detail, prescribed Vinaya precepts and appointed *Pātimokkha*; their teachings lasted long after their death.

As shown above, Buddhas may choose to differ in their manners of teaching. If there is only one right way to do things, only one of these must be the right one. Given that all Buddhas are fully enlightened beings, we should wonder which kind of factors make some Buddhas work better than others. And it also means that even if we were fortunate enough to meet a living Buddha, we could not be sure whether we will get the best possible teaching from him.

This problem is beyond my ability but I hope experts on Mahayanism would be able to answer.

**Negative** Suppose we answer in negative. Even though we still agree that nirvana is the good, and that different good deeds have different degrees of nirvanic qualities, we insist that it is our moral right to choose whichever we like between different good deeds. For, no one can say that we are doing a bad deed even if we happen to make a less than optimal choice between good deeds.

There is a catch here though. In this approach, even to aspire to nirvana is only an option. Even though the Buddha did recommend that nirvana is the worthy goal, it is our right to accept or reject his recommendation, and even if we choose to agree that nirvana is worthy of our best attempts, we have the right to choose the specific path—as an ordinary disciple or as a Buddha, as soon as possible or many eons after, etc. Even a person like Māra, “who considered himself the head of the *Kāmāvacara*-world and who recognized any attempt to curb the enjoyment of sensual pleasures, as a direct challenge to himself and to his authority” (Malalasekara “Māra”), is simply exercising his rights when he refuses to aspire to nirvana (He is termed *pāpimā* (“The Evil One”) only because he tends to lay obstacles on others’ path to liberation.).

Then, we can say that *bodhisattas* like Sumedha choosing the path of a *bodhisatta* over the immediately available nirvana, and different Buddhas adopting different teaching methodologies, are only exercising their moral rights to choose. I do not mean that such choices cannot be evaluated but only that, to evaluate such choices, we must go elsewhere to find the suitable criteria, not in the Buddhist ethics.

Now one possible question is: if we choose to exercise the right of not having nirvana as our goal, how can our good deeds “display nirvanic qualities” (Keown, *Nature* 177)? The answer is: whatever may be our goals, it is still true that every good deed that we perform brings us a step nearer to nirvana, and every bad deed that we commit takes us one step away from it. Even Māra comes closer to nirvana, unwillingly, unknowingly, or both, whenever he happens to do a good deed.

However, I do not mean that our aspirations are not important, for our paths may be different depending on different goals. For a person willing to achieve liberation as soon as possible, his good deeds will take him along a straight path to nirvana but for a person aspiring to become a Buddha himself, his good deeds will have him moving along a winding, roundabout path to nirvana. For persons like Māra, who does not entertain such aspirations at all, they will come closer to, or go farther from, nirvana depending on their good/bad deeds but they will never really home in on it as long as they do not change their outlook. So, which path do we prefer? It is our right to choose. (I think this is how Theravādins have reasoned.)

### **Is intention the same as craving (*taṇhā*)?**

It is Sue Hamilton who has firstly proposed that intention (*cetanā*) in the law of karma and craving (*taṇhā*) in the Second Noble Truth refer to the same thing. She writes:



Though the two words cravings (*taṇhā*) and intentions (*cetanā*) do not on the face of it necessarily refer to the same things, it seems to me that if one understands what is being said here they must both have been used generically. One way of putting it is that one persists in the circle of lives because one's intentions produce consequences for us, and another way of putting it is that unsatisfactoriness persists because of one's cravings. But because the cycle of lives is *characterised* by unsatisfactoriness it is the same thing that is being referred to here, not two sorts of cycles of lives. Intentions and cravings are simply different words used to point to the fact that the fuel of continuity as we know it arises from the affective matrix of one's state of mind. (63)

I do not agree with her owing to the following reasons:

1. Craving mentioned in the Second Noble Truth, whatever it is, is not only the perpetrator of suffering, but also something to be abandoned:

*Taṃ kho panidaṃ dukkhasamudayaṃ ariyasaccaṃ pahātabba'nti me, bhikkhave, pubbe...pe... udapādi.* (SN V 421)

'This noble truth of the origin of suffering is to be abandoned': thus, bhikkhus, in regard to things unheard before, there arose in me vision, wisdom, true knowledge, and light. (Bodhi 1845)

If intention is identified with craving, there cannot be *good* intentions; all intentions, and consequently all karmas, are bad in terms of nirvana, and to be abandoned. Such an outlook would not be different from Jainism, which rejects all karmas, good or bad: "the earliest detectable Jaina doctrine of karma leaves no room at all for the idea of meritorious action" (Johnson qtd. in Gombrich, *What* 49). It also directly contradicts the various discourses in which the Buddha exhorts his disciples to perform good deeds.

2. If intention is the same as craving, Buddhas and arahats who have abandoned all cravings must be without any intention at all with their acts. Then their behaviors must have been random or automatic responses to the outside stimuli, no more than that; I find it difficult even to imagine such a situation. On the contrary, even a cursory look through suttas reveals a genuine intention on the Buddha's part to have his followers liberated. If we call this craving, we must conclude that the Buddha lived and died without truly achieving freedom from cravings.

In my opinion, on the contrary, intention (karma) and craving are very different things. If intention is compared to a car that we drive, craving is like the faulty GPS device that keeps us going round and round without ever reaching our final destination. And just as it would not be wise to abandon the car without which we cannot get to the final stop, so also would it not be correct to abandon karma altogether simply because it can

be helpful, in the form of wholesome karmas, in bringing one closer to nirvana. On the other hand, just as we no longer have to go round and round any more after we have repaired the GPS device, so also does intention (karma) loses the ability to produce new births in future when one has permanently removed all cravings from one's personality and achieved enlightenment:

*taṇhānirodhā upādānanirodho, upādānanirodhā bhavanirodho ...* (DN II 35, etc.)

... by the cessation of craving clinging ceases; by the cessation of clinging becoming ceases; by the cessation of becoming birth ceases ... (Walshe 212)

Then it is only natural to name craving, not karma, as the origin of suffering, as the Second Noble Truth.

## 5 Conclusion

I have argued that the Early Buddhist morality is an ethic of absolute values yet, using an innovative definition of karma as volition (intention), it has managed to give down-to-earth advice to non-celibate lay persons like kings, generals, etc., without contradicting itself. It is up to my peers to judge my solution. However, I should mention that the problem I have attempted to solve is only a symptom of the general weakness prevalent among Buddhist scholars.

The problem of two mutually incompatible modes of Dhamma has been with us for more than fifty years, without having to face a serious challenge before this paper. Weber has noted and attempted to explain this apparent contradiction in his work *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, which saw an English translation as early as (1958). Collins accepts the presence of the contradiction but gives his own explanation in his *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire*, which was published in (1998) and cited in Damien Keown's *Buddhist Ethics: A Very Short Introduction*, published in (2005).

Now I feel that this apparent contradiction should have been challenged by some else long ago. If my solution is correct, the key to this problem is the definition of karma as volition, which is a well-known, oft-cited and oft-discussed piece of text. If this problem has got the serious enough attention of competent scholars, someone or other would have surely seen the connection between the supposed conflict and the concept of volition as karma, leading to this solution.

Then why has it not happened before? Because, I think, we have been too comfortable with the notion that our sources are imperfect. Unlike science—which studies nature that never lies, and which forces us to blame only our hypotheses for similar contradictions—what we study is a religion that appeared more than two thousand years ago and has been transmitted to us through many generations in the medium of several languages. The sources we have are not perfect, and we know it. Therefore, when scholars

of Weber's or Collins's caliber tell us that there is such a contradiction, we feel not so enthusiastic to examine their theories at length; we just lay the blame on the sources and move on. This is why this problem has remained unsolved for a long time; this is a sort of intellectual laziness, which I think we have all been more or less guilty of.

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