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Case, Peter, and Brohm, René (2012) *Buddhist belief and living ethics: challenging business ethics*. In: *Belief and Organization*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, UK, pp. 51-68.

<http://www.palgrave.com/products/title.aspx?pid=487529>

## 4

### Buddhist Belief and Living Ethics: Challenging Business Ethics

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#### Introduction

'Business ethics' can be problematized in a number of ways. The challenge to business ethics postulated in this chapter entails a questioning of received opinion regarding the temporal, geographical and intellectual predicates on which it is founded as an academic discipline and offered as a putative mode of engagement with the world. An examination of mainstream texts on business ethics suggest that, taken as a discipline, it emerged around the middle of the last century in the United States of America (Aasland 2009) and draws on a variety of moral and ethical philosophical positions all of which can trace their origins to Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment interpretations of classical schools (Parker 1998, Parker et al. 2005). Academic business ethics thus draws, predominantly, from one or more forms of deontological, utilitarian/consequentialist or virtue ethics (taken singularly or in combination). These ethical positions all assume the self as the location for an ethical standpoint, or moral considerations. In contrast, we want to outline an alternative position, based on Buddhist ethics, developing the question: 'What would an ethical position entail that paradoxically cannot be located with the self?'

In an attempt to address the relative neglect of oriental philosophical traditions, we seek in this chapter to introduce Buddhist ethics into extant academic conversations concerning business ethics with the purpose of thinking about how the discipline might be modified or reconstituted in the future. As Buddhist philosophy has the concept of no self (Pali: *anattā*) as a central tenet, we therefore emphasize what Buddhist ethics has to say about *living* an ethical life in contrast to abstract principles and, more particularly, what implications this might have for the enactment of roles and interaction within contemporary workplaces. In short, we set out to enquire how Buddhist ethics may or may not articulate with contemporary business and organizational practices in the west. Both authors have an abiding interest in Buddhism, one of us being primarily a practitioner and student of the *Theravada* school while the other having studied and received training in the Tibetan tradition of the Nyingma school, a variety of Mahayana practice. These forms of Buddhism both entail commitment to regular meditation which, in turn, requires observance of ethical principles in daily life. Our purpose in this paper, then, is to draw connections between what might be seen as *private* ethical convictions and *professional* interests in the fields of organization studies and business ethics. The ever present danger of such a move is that we stray from a scholarly account of Buddhism's philosophy of ethics into a proselytizing exercise. We should stress from the outset that nothing could be further from our intention and that it is the theme of *dislocating* business ethics which remains our primary concern in introducing and discussing Buddhist ethics. We leave it entirely to the reader to decide the extent to which this is a helpful philosophical intervention on our part.

The main scholarly source we draw on for the present chapter is the so called *Pali Canon* of the *Theravada* school, Pali being the ancient language in which the earliest forms of Buddhist discourse were recited and eventually recorded. One of the many problems faced in studying a non-European philosophical system is, of course, that of translation and the complex relationship between oriental texts or practices and interpretation on the part of non-indigenous observers and scholars. It is not only a matter of the technical intricacies entailed in translating (in this case) the Pali language, which itself comes with a legacy, but also placing these acts of translation and interpretation within a wider historical context. The problem of translation in itself raises a series of ethical concerns which require some attention. It is with this in mind that we preface a more detailed consideration of Buddhist ethics with some remarks on the history of Pali scholarship and its relationship to colonialism.

### **Pali Scholarship and Orientalism**

Buddhism, as a set of spiritual practices, way of life, and world religion, finds its origins in the teachings of Gotama Buddha (Gotama the 'Enlightened one'). Gotama was born on the full moon day of May in 623 B.C. in a region of what is now northwest India that borders Nepal (Nānamoli 1984, Nārada 1980, Rahula 1985). The son of a local Sākyan warrior king, he led a privileged aristocratic life, married and had a son before renouncing worldly life and setting off as a mendicant in search of spiritual fulfilment. At the age of thirty-five, he is said to have realized 'Enlightenment' and, after overcoming his own reluctance, began teaching others how to come to the same understanding. He founded a fledgling monastic order shortly after his realization and spent the next forty-five years wandering the Ganges valley teaching to groups monks and lay followers until his death, probably from accidental food poisoning, in 543 B.C. (Nānamoli 1984, Nārada 1980, Rahula 1985).

The monastic order established by Gotama exists to this day, descending from an unbroken lineage that dates back to the original order, mainly in southeast Asia and Sri Lanka. Over the course of the intervening 2,500 years, the teaching and order spread northward to Tibet and across to China, where it became *Chan*, then down into Japan giving rise to the *Zen* (both *Chan* and *Zen* being phonetic adaptations of the Pali word *jhānam* – Skt. *dhyana* - meaning simply 'meditation'). While these latter traditions, known collectively as the *Mahayana* schools, passed on the teachings using a mixture of Sanskrit and local languages, the earliest teachings are preserved within the *Pali Canon*. Now available in textual form, the Pali teachings are arranged in three so called 'baskets' (*tipitaka*) as follows: (1) the *Vinaya Pitaka* (numbering 5 books) which deals with the rules governing the monastic order and training; (2) the *Sutta Pitaka* (15 books) which record the Buddha's discourses to monks and lay people; and (3) the *Abhidhamma Pitaka* (7 books) which consists in a detailed phenomenological analysis of human consciousness and conditionality. This combined corpus stretches to over forty bound volumes in English translation, many of them quite sizeable.

Pali is an Indo-Aryan language closely related to Sanskrit and now, rather like classical Greek and Latin in Europe, extinct as a spoken language except for its use in religious chanting, scholarly discussion and recitation of Canonical teachings (Warder

2001). It is widely held that Magadhan, the language most likely spoken by the Buddha, was a Pali vernacular. Pali does not have an exclusive script (largely because the Buddha's teachings were orally transmitted) but has been transliterated in scripts that adopted the Buddhist religion, notably Sinhalese, Thai, Burmese, Lao and Cambodian. Nineteenth century western scholars of Pali also undertook the task of rendering Pali into Latin script so that it would be accessible for wider western readerships.

Formal 'Councils', at which the entire *Pali Canon* has been systematically recited by its custodians since the first one barely three months after the Buddha's demise, have been held at agreed locations every one hundred years. The earliest written record of the Canon appeared in the form of palm leaf texts made in about 80 B.C. at a monastery named Aluvihara in Sri Lanka. Not that writing was unknown in the Indian subcontinent prior to that date. On the contrary, as Rhys Davids (1993 [1903], p.109) has noted of writing in his study of the Pali record, it was used for the publication of official notices, for personal correspondence, as a respected means of livelihood and in gaming. Moreover, literacy was not the restricted privilege of certain social classes or a specific gender. It appears to have been a ubiquitous skill at the time of the Buddha. This might lead one to conjecture that the original custodians of the *Pali Canon* put more faith in its preservation through the *spoken* rather than the written word. If done systematically in groups (there are still monks whose task it is to memorize and recite the Canon), oral preservation is arguably less subject to corruption than the copying of written records.

But what of the role of early western translators of the *Pali Canon*, in particular their positioning historically within a colonial nexus? Said (1978, p.6) defines Orientalism as a 'system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness', and a broad body of scholarship – for example, in the field of Subaltern Studies<sup>18</sup> - has attempted to build on Said's initial critique by offering postcolonial accounts of colonial historiography. With respect to India studies, Sharma (1999, pp.5-30) produces a convincing summary of the manner in which the Orient is exploited in western discourses to generate concepts, models and categories that make the east familiar, unthreatening and thereby malleable to colonial power interests and forms of administrative domination. The concept of 'caste', deriving from the Hindu religion which predated Buddhism, has played a particularly prominent role in this form of Orientalism. According to Sharma, western scholarship helped to fix and reify the notion of a timeless non-modern social order; a rendering that conveniently ignored the fluidity and continuing historical development of an anthropologically complex set of micro- and macro-processes. Fixing the caste system in such a way that it mirrored the rigidity and non-permeability of the British class system greatly enhanced and eased the task of colonial rule (Sharma 1999).

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<sup>18</sup> See the introduction to Chaturvedi (2000), pp.viii-xix, for a comprehensive summary of the history of this emerging field. Spivak (1988) also offers some interesting insights into the Subaltern Studies project.

By way of illustrating Orientalism's dubious origins, Batchelor (1994, p.233) reports on an address given by Lord Curzon, at the time a former Viceroy of India, to the British House of Lords on 27 September 1909: 'our familiarity, not merely with the languages of the people of the East but with their customs, their feelings, their traditions, their history and religion, our capacity to understand what may be called the genius of the East, is the sole basis upon which we are likely to be able to maintain in the future the position we have won'. This statement of purpose typifies both the attitude and *raison d'être* of Orientalists and is indicative of the intimate relationship between scholarly work and the practical needs of colonial administration.

Certainly, when viewed from a present day understanding of the functioning of caste in India, Gotama Buddha's monastic order was quite 'revolutionary'. Whether it was so historically in the socio-political context of the Buddha's region and time or whether it now appears 'revolutionary' because of the way in which caste has become colonially distorted is, of course, a moot point. According to the historical record, however, individuals of any caste ('Untouchable' to 'Brahmin') were permitted to take on the rules of monastic training and, in so doing, had to renounce the imperatives of social division associated with caste (Rhys Davids [1903] 1993). Seniority was (and, within the Theravada tradition, still is) based purely on length of time spent in the order. Thus a former Brahmin monk could well be junior to an Untouchable and so forth. The detailed rules of training, designed in large measure to promote harmonious community living, combined with this simple hierarchical principle resulted in the creation of an organization that still exists to this day in much the same form as it did at the time of its founding.

With respect to Pali scholarship more generally, we contend that the case for attributions of Orientalism is perhaps less clear-cut than in the case of the evolution of the caste system. To mount a defence of this field's history would require a dissertation in its own right, so for present purposes the reader will have to take us at our word when we claim that Pali scholars – even those such as T.W. Rhys Davids, co-founder of the London-based School of Oriental and Asian Studies, and who started life as a colonial administrator in Sri Lanka - had a genuinely empathetic interest in Buddhist practice. As is apparent from introductions to their various translations, despite growing up with Victorian imperialism, the likes of, *inter alia*, I.B. Horner, F.L. Woodward, T.W. and Caroline Rhys Davids were eager to convey what they considered to be the philosophical sophistication and edifying value of the texts that they worked on. And while there is unquestionably a sense in their footnotes and commentaries of the ideas and practices being 'other' or 'alien' in both time and space, it is hard to imagine how they could have sustained the enormous and meticulous efforts involved in Pali translation had they not thought their projects would benefit others. The huge body of nineteenth and early twentieth century *Pali Canon* translation is testimony to a great spirit of generosity, philosophical fascination and scholarly dedication.

It may be that, through retrospective interpretation, this corpus can be recovered as part of a broader Orientalist project of the sort epitomised in Lord Curzon's

declaration, but we would offer two mitigating considerations by way of contemporary defence of early Pali scholarship: (a) such an explanation fails to account adequately for the individual motivation of the scholars concerned, that is, it is hard to see that *they* would construe their work as contributing to colonial domination, and (b) whatever the historical, sociological and psychological conditions that prompted these acts of translation, the English speaking world is left with a unique body of literature comprising a detailed account of the Buddha's life and teaching; of social and political conditions prevalent in India of the sixth century BC; of rules governing the establishment and running of a monastic order that has survived for over 2,500 years; and of a psychological phenomenology of remarkable sophistication and comprehensiveness. That extraordinary legacy may be in itself enough to raise the question, how this elaborate body of texts would allow for alternative interpretations to bring important assumptions to the forth in the contemporary Western debate on ethics, economics, and the combination thereof.

### **Theravada Buddhist Ethics**

Buddhist ethics is not an end in itself but, rather, a means to an end. The purpose of following the Buddha's teaching is to realize *nibbāna* (*Nirvana* Skt.), Enlightenment, and thereby to eradicate suffering. The answers Buddhist ethics proffers with respect to the philosophical question 'how should I act?' thus play a central *enabling* role within the spiritual or mystical teachings of Buddhism as well as providing moral guidelines for those following its religious precepts. Common to all forms of Buddhism are the core teachings of Gotama summarised as the four Noble Truths: (1) there is suffering (*dukkha*); (2) there is a cause of suffering, namely, all forms of craving and attachment; (3) there is the cessation of suffering (*nibbāna*, which means literally 'extinction'), and; (4) there is a path to the cessation of suffering, known as the Buddha's 'Eightfold Path' (cf. Hosking chapter on *Mahayana* Buddhism in this volume). With respect to the fourth and final Noble Truth, as its name suggests, the Eightfold Path contains eight path factors: right understanding, right thinking, right action, right speech, right livelihood, right concentration, right effort and right mindfulness. These are grouped into three sections as follows: *paññā* (wisdom), *sīla* (ethical discipline), and *samādhi* (meditation). The classical Buddhist scholar Buddhaghosa (c.400 A.D.), wrote a comprehensive compendium of the Buddha's teaching which classifies these three elements as 'paths of purification', that is, the 'purification of bodily conduct' through ethical discipline, the 'purification of mind' through meditative discipline and the 'purification of view' through insight and wisdom (Nānamoli 1979). Buddhist ethics thus entails following a code of virtuous conduct that settles the mind by eliminating 'guilty dreads' and preparing it for the subtle task of meditation. By following meditative disciplines, various forms of truth become accessible.

Unlike many modern western philosophies which, in general, take Truth to be a monadic quality of the universe standing in opposition to Falsity, Buddhism adopts a more nuanced approach to questions of veracity. It identifies three forms of truth corresponding to three forms of reality: (1) conventional truths (*voḥāra-sacca* in Pali) that relate to consensus reality as socially conditioned and constructed; (2) so called

‘ultimate’ truths pertaining to ultimate reality (*paramattha-dhammā*), which reduce human experience to constituent phenomenological events and processes of consciousness, and; (3) *nibbāna* or *Nirvāna* (Skt.) which refers to an intuitive experience of truth and reality that transcends duality and representation (and, in so doing, is said to remove all the personal suffering that results from attachment to conventional things.)<sup>19</sup> Although forms (2) and (3) are immanent in (1), Buddhism maintains that it makes no sense to conflate the three. Form (3) is literally unspeakable. It is beyond representational duality and therefore by definition ineffable. Investigation of form (2) through meditative discipline and practice reveals that the conventions of form (1) are illusory; that selves, authors, *personal* intention, trees, mountains, cars, organizations, management, critique, writing are not sustainable or meaningful categories in any ultimate or absolute sense. All that exists in form (2) are transient sensory phenomena, reducible to bare serial experiences of shape and colour, sound, taste, touch and a complex host of psychological concomitants (of which volition, feeling, perception and discursive thought would be discernable elements.) All these phenomena, moreover, are entirely ephemeral and void of self. Repeated and patient meditative observation of experience with respect to form (2) in time prepares the mind for a mystical realisation of form (3) – *nibbāna* – which is the ultimate purpose of life, according to Buddhist teachings.

So ethics forms one important part of the Eightfold Path and, as such, is common to virtually all forms of Buddhism. What, then, does it mean to live ethically according to Buddhist principles? Here we find a degree of relativity which, typical of Buddhism, is responsive to specific circumstances and conditions. The straight answer to this question is: ‘it depends’. Those undertaking full time training as a monk or nun are required to observe the many rules (227 for a monk) which are set out in the *Vinaya*. This is a large body of principles that the Buddha began developing more or less on a ‘case law’ and precedent basis as the monastic order began to expand rapidly and he was no longer in direct contact with all members of the community. These rules govern everything from serious misconduct (which would result in expulsion from the order) such as, killing a human being, sexual intercourse, stealing, or falsely claiming meditative states, through to the most minor regulations that govern times of eating, robe length and so on. Maintenance of the rules is accomplished formally within the order by recitation and confession every two weeks, following the lunar cycle (Bechert & Gombrich 1984).

Lay Buddhists, by contrast, agree to abide by five precepts. These are rules of training to refrain from: killing or harming living beings, stealing or taking that which is not given; harmful speech; sexual misconduct; indulgence in intoxicating drink or drugs which confuse the mind. These ethical precepts are also reflected in three of the Eightfold ‘path factors’ which promote ‘right action’, ‘right speech’ and ‘right livelihood’. The ‘right’ in this context is based on a general principle that promotes non-harming and compassion in actions of body, speech and mind whatever the specific circumstances one is faced with.

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<sup>19</sup> See Nyanatiloka (1972, pp.124-5), Bodhi (1993, p.25-6).

All the ethical principles of Buddhism are aimed at reducing self-importance through the restraint of selfish impulses. They are intimately linked to the law of *kamma* (*karma* Skt.) which, in contrast to western systems of ethics, maintains that there is a *causal* link (albeit an extremely complex one) between actions and results. *Kamma* translates as 'action', while the result of action is *vipāka* (often in the west we mistakenly take *karma* to refer to the results of action, as in the phrase 'bad karma'). To put this law in simple terms, if one acts selfishly one can expect results that are detrimental to one's welfare, whereas selfless action has beneficial consequences. According to Buddhism, we inhabit a universe which is made up of interdependent conditioned and conditioning phenomena. Human actions of body, speech and mind form an integral part of this cosmic whole. Thus one's actions in what we might call a 'participatory universe' will have material and psychological consequences for oneself and others. By keeping the five precepts one can expect, in line with Buddhist teaching, to avoid the 'guilty dreads' which, according to the law of *kamma*, will inevitably follow from acts of killing/harming, stealing, harmful speech (lies, gossip, slander and the like), sexual impropriety and intoxication. Moreover, there are a series of benefits to oneself and the wider social community that accrue from the pursuit of virtue and living ethically.

Surrounding each of the ethical injunctions with respect to 'inefficient' (*akusala*) action, are detailed sets of conditions. To take as an example the first precept of refraining from killing, there are five necessary conditions associated with this act. These are: (i) a living being, (ii) knowledge that it is a living being, (iii) intention to kill, (iv) effort to kill, and (v) death of the being. If any one of these conditions is not present (e.g., there is no actual intention to kill) then *in kammic terms* killing does not take place (Nārada 1980, pp.374-5). Hence if one steps accidentally on a snail in the dark, even though a being dies, there is no *kammic* resultant from the action. Within Buddhism there is also acknowledgement of a hierarchy of life whereby the killing of 'higher order' beings (humans, mammals, etc.) carries a higher *kammic* significance and consequence than the killing of, say, microbes. If one does kill a higher level sentient being, for example, then certain resultants will follow inevitably (although the complexity of conditionality in the universe make it virtually impossible to predict when and where these will arise). These consequences might include suffering ill-health or untimely death oneself, fear and anxiety, or separation from loved ones leading to personal grief. In practice, of course, it is impossible to live as a human without killing. There thus has to be a certain pragmatic acceptance on the part of the Buddhist trainee of the relativity of this principal injunction not to harm or kill living beings.

Nonetheless, the sanctity of life is central to Buddhist ethics and one is urged to 'tread lightly' through the world causing as little harm and damage as possible. Indeed, Buddhism embraces something akin to a Kantian deontological position with respect to responsibility toward others, a point that can be illustrated by citing one of the verses from the *Dhammapada* (part of the *Pali Canon*) verse 129 in which the Buddha states: 'All fear punishment, to all life is dear, let one neither hurt nor kill [other sentient creatures]'.



Most of us probably manage to avoid killing on a routine basis. It might be useful, therefore, to include an example of 'wrong action' which is closer to home to illustrate the practical application of Buddhist ethics, namely, 'right speech'. The 'right' Eightfold Path has as its corollary a 'wrong' Eightfold Path, so for each of the path factors 'right action', 'right speech', 'right livelihood' and so forth, there are the opposites of 'wrong action', 'wrong speech', 'wrong livelihood', etc. So 'wrong speech' would include lying, slandering, harsh speech, and 'frivolous' talk or gossip. As with the precept governing killing (and all the other precepts) there is a set of legalistic conditions that determine whether or not one has engaged in 'wrong speech'. For example, lying occurs if and only if the following four conditions are satisfied, namely, there is: (i) an untruth, (ii) intention to deceive, (iii) utterance of the lie, and (iv) actual deception of another party. If one's action fulfils these criteria and one lies on a habitual basis then the *kammic* consequences outlined in the *Pali Canon* include being disbelieved by others and considered untrustworthy, attracting abusive speech, vilification, and 'bad breath'. Similarly habitual slandering is said to result in the dissolution of friendships without apparent cause while harsh speech attracts ill will from others and results in a harsh voice (Nārada 1980, p.376). As may be seen from these examples, Buddhist ethics insists that there is a universal system of justice which operates beyond (but also through) culturally conventional systems of social justice.

Thus far we have emphasised the negative aspects of 'wrong action' so, in order to redress the balance, let us give some attention to the benefits of 'right action' within the Buddhist ethical scheme. Good *kamma* (*kusala kamma*) or 'efficient action' would include, inter alia, acts of generosity, keeping the precepts, meditation, practicing 'loving kindness' towards beings and taking sympathetic pleasure in others' good fortune. These are said to bring material and psychological benefits to the individual such as relative happiness, well being, the reduction of fear and anxiety, and so forth (Nārada 1980, p.378-9). Ethical conduct (*sīla*) in the form of restraint of selfish action and enactment of unselfish action is rooted in the core Buddhist practices of developing compassion, which leads to welfare of oneself and the wider community, as well as cultivating wisdom. In this context 'wisdom' (*paññā*) refers both to an ability to act wisely in the conventional everyday world *and* to 'supra-mundane' access to non-conventional truths which meditative training opens up.

Training in the arts of meditation effectively refine ethical disciplines further to the extent that observance and restraint move beyond physical action and verbal utterance to the subtler realm of the mental (volitional) actions that condition them. The meditator discovers that the law of *kamma* (action and resultant) operates every bit in the mental sphere as it does in the everyday world of action. For example, 'thinking' is a form of *doing* in its own right and Buddhist ethics invokes a hierarchical ordering of *effects* that various forms of action have in the world. Within this scheme, thinking is, as it were, weaker in terms of *social* enactment than is 'speaking' which, in turn, is weaker than 'physically acting'. We are making a tautological but nonetheless important point: that in order for thinking to become speech or physical action, it has to be expressed and acted upon. Without such

*translation* St. Paul's cathedral and the A-bomb would have remained thoughts in the minds of Wren and Oppenheimer, respectively. This hierarchical ordering is also inscribed in social norms that frequently hold individuals more accountable for their physical actions (e.g., taking someone's life) than for speech or thought acts (threatening someone with murder or simply thinking about murdering someone). With training in meditation, one can observe precisely what conditions and volitions give rise to certain forms of thought and emotional responses. This, in turn, enables conscious discrimination between what might be deemed generally unhelpful passionate responses (hatred, covetousness, worry, depression, jealousy, and so forth) and those that are conducive to personal happiness, joy, contentment, equanimity, etc. Indeed, with the requisite mental skill and desire to pursue virtue, the 'inefficient' can be restrained and the 'efficient' pursued.

### **Buddhist Ethics and the Art of Living**

Let us return now to the central concern of this chapter. How does Buddhist ethics allow us to rethink business ethics? The first part of the answer is that Buddhist ethics is different from the three dominant perspectives in business ethics; utilitarian ethics, virtue ethics and deontology. Despite the large numbers of monastic rules and precepts for the layperson, Buddhist ethics is no deontology. *Pannā*, wisdom, is emphasized above moral rules about conduct and duty. The rules are considered as 'skillful means' (*upāya*) employed in the search for Enlightenment and not an end in themselves. It is entirely possible to understand the law of *kamma* as offering a pragmatic view of how the world works rather than as a religious dogma. In its simplest form, it merely indicates that the actions that we take shape the way that we are as well as the circumstances that we find ourselves in.

If we kill, for instance, it shapes our being as someone with a self which is strongly separate from the other and who confirms this by a weighty and irreversible act (Gyatso & Thupten, 1995). It is not that the act itself is inherently *wrong*, as would be concluded from a deontological position. Nor is it that we should consider the results or consequences in order to *judge* the action in the manner required by utilitarian ethics. First of all, the greater good, is not a sum of the benefits for single human beings, as there is no essential self. Secondly, intention, as described above in the explanation on *kamma*, does matter, since thinking is already a display of action. Buddhist ethics is primarily concerned with pragmatism; killing (along with all other forms of selfish 'wrong action') estranges us from our natural ability to experience the interconnected universe (*Buddha Nature*) that we are inescapably part of. In short, it creates an obstruction to Enlightenment, giving rise to further frustration and suffering as it shapes identity into something that is separate, alone, loveless. It is for this reason that the vocabulary of Buddhist ethics and *kamma* speaks of 'skillful means' and 'efficiency' in relation to the search for Enlightenment (see above).

Now, if we would consider the difference from virtue ethics, again the question from a Buddhist perspective would be, where would you locate virtue? Buddhist ethics is not to be located in one place and thereby dislocated from another place. To explain

this and make the distinction between Buddhist ethics and western traditions of virtue ethics clearer we should explore the concept of *paññā*, wisdom, a little further. *Paññā* is concerned with the realization of *sunnatā* (Skt. *Shunyata*), a term that can roughly be translated as 'voidness' or 'emptiness'. It is the core Buddhist claim that self, others, things, are empty of essence and lack independence. There is no fundamental separation between self and other, which is not the same as saying that there is unity. *Sunnatā* manifests in terms of the world overflowing, escaping, not fitting our concepts or, indeed, any attempt to represent it (Hagen, 1998a). When you consider things as separate or different (thing-like), you will simultaneously notice their interdependence and vice versa: when you consider their interdependence you will notice that there are irreducible differences (Hagen, 1998b).

*Sunnatā* is an experiential awareness that apparent phenomena are without origination or basis; it is freedom from conceptuality. Though fundamentally indescribable, literally ineffable, one could *try* to describe it as the realization of threefold purity: that there is no 'I' as actor, no action, and no 'other' to be acted upon. In the words of Robert F. Thurman (1993, p. xii):

[V]oidness does not mean nothingness, but rather that all things lack intrinsic reality, intrinsic objectivity, intrinsic identity or intrinsic referentiality. Lacking such static essence or substance does not make them not exist - it makes them thoroughly relative.

The illusion of an essential self has been a recurring theme of what we might loosely term 'postmodern philosophies' that developed toward the end of the Twentieth century, be it in terms of deconstruction, constructed identity, or a crossroads of discourses (Olson, 2000). However, for Buddhist philosophy this has meant that we are fundamentally connected, being neither separate nor one.

Despite the efforts of, for instance, Henryk Skolimowsky (1994), John Heron (1997), Peter Reason (1994), the implication of the claim that the human world (and universe more generally) is *participatory* has generally been overlooked, and has especially been lacking in discussions on business ethics. It is at this point that we can indicate the difference from virtue ethics most clearly. While in conventional terms it may appear that Buddhist ethics bears a family resemblance to western systems of virtue ethics, it is not ultimately concerned with the development of individual virtues. It cannot be as, in ultimate and absolute terms, there is no essential self. What Buddhist ethics does encourage in every sense is an *opening up to the other* as well as a gentle acknowledgment of the relative conditions in which we find ourselves. The implication is that Buddhist ethics is not located in a particular place, time, constellation of responsibilities or role. There is an all pervading connectedness and interdependence. Each moment can serve to actualize this awareness.

If there is a fruitful comparison to be drawn between Buddhist philosophy and Western traditions of ethics, it is with the 'art of living literature' (Foucault, 1988,

2005; Irigaray, 2002; Schmid, 2004). One illustrative parallel can be found in Hadot's description of classical Greek philosophy and science as attending to 'care of the self' (Hadot 1995, 2002). In Hadot's account of classical Greek society, for example, Plato is not concerned with 'pure' knowledge, that is, an epistemology which can be parcelled out from questions of ethics, ontology and aesthetics. Science and philosophy are about knowledge that *serve* the soul. Knowledge is inseparable from passion and affinity; it is thus concerned with the transformation of the self and inextricably connected to the spiritual disciplining (Gk. *askesis*) of the self. The privileged, educated classes of classical Greece displayed a care for themselves that entailed assessing who they were in their social, political, economical context. It was about developing knowledge and practices to act well. This development of practical knowledge was not separate from *personal development*; the practice of spiritual exercises as well as mental or physical training or, according to Hadot (2002), a combination thereof. The separation between the spiritual and mundane matters was not at all rigid. *Care* thus entailed not merely satisfying egocentric interests, but a concern for the self in relation to its environment and *community* (Hadot 1995). In many of the Greek *scholae* the self was treated not as a given, but something to develop and transcend.

By contrast, in business ethics literature we find a more or less Kantian distinction between an empirical self or a construed identity, on the one hand, and a 'transcendental self' of pure apperception, or the source of the sense-making process on the other. As we have seen, from a Buddhist perspective the idea of a transcendental self that establishes coherence in our perceptions, or is even viewed as the source of sense-making processes would have no *ontological* status. This is because, according to its philosophical tenets, there is no essential, permanent, non-conceptually-constructed difference between self and other (see also Hosking, this volume).

### **Discussion: Buddhism and Business Ethics**

What might be the implications for business ethics and conduct in the workplace generally of the Buddhist teaching with respect to ethics? We should stress, once again, that the purpose of our introducing a Buddhist perspective is to introduce an alternative vocabulary and attitude toward acting in the everyday world and to consider the potential contribution of non-western forms of philosophy to fundamental ethical questions. Buddhism offers a form of ethics that could be of value to those who find the instrumentality of utilitarian ethics and essentialism of deontology unsatisfactory or inadequate to the problems faced daily when occupying organizational roles. Its *pragmatic* advice concerning how to act efficaciously, we suggest, would sit well with the practical demands faced by those working in contemporary organizations.

Within Buddhism, ethical ideals are replaced by 'rules of training' which act as a set of ethical heuristics that have to be applied intelligently within any given social context. These ethical parameters are, we suggest, as potentially valuable to, and applicable by, someone occupying a managerial or leadership role in a contemporary western organization as they were to recluses and laypeople following the Buddhist

path in pre-modern India 2,500 year ago. As we have tried to argue, the principles of Buddhist ethics are not restricted to any particular place, time, society or sub-culture. They are, instead, endlessly adaptable to the here-and-now demands of human life. We recognize that this is a bold claim, being premised on the idea that human consciousness has universal characteristics which are trans-historical, trans-cultural and trans-temporal. If accepted, however, it does allow us to contribute to ethical debates and conversations regarding contemporary business ethics.

Dag Aasland makes an important and helpful distinction between 'business for ethics' and 'ethics in business' which has implications for our discussion (Aasland 2009). Developing a Levinasian critique of utilitarian approaches to business ethics he comes to much the same conclusion that a Buddhist ethicist would, namely, that any 'self-centred perspective [with respect to business ethics] can hardly be viewed as ethical at all' (2009, p.20). In other words, the dominant discourses of business ethics are rooted in economic individualism and a form of utilitarian thinking whose grasp it is difficult to escape. Thus programmes of Corporate Social Responsibility, for example, which seeks to mitigate the excessive and deleterious effects of capitalism are, however well intended, still embedded within a neo-classical economic imperative to maximize profit and shareholder return. Aasland compares an 'ethics for business' based in utilitarian reasoning with 'ethics in business', by which is meant a genuine concern to act with the welfare of others in mind:

The first is not an ethics (because it is for oneself) but instead a part of business administrative, instrumental knowledge, while the second (that is, 'ethics *in* business'...) is an ethics (2009. p.20).

Managers or leaders in a business context are often driven by capitalist logic to pursue actions which test and stretch existing limits in order to achieve better performative results. It is unsurprising that cases of corporate misconduct abound because, as seems more or less self-evident, so much of the corporate world is held in thrall by economic imperatives. The question that Aasland asks is not why ethical *failings* in business occur but, rather, why there is any motivation to place others' interests before those of oneself in the business world (2009, p.79). Aasland locates answers to this question in Levinas' radical claim that 'ethics precedes ontology'. Sociality is a defining characteristic of human existence that is *a priori* to any individual birth or existence and thus, from the very outset humans are confronted with the face of the Other. This, by necessity, calls forth an ethical response to that Other. Buddhist ethics arrives at similar conclusions but from a very different philosophical starting point. Questions of the form 'why is it good to act selflessly', or 'why is it good to pursue the good' are answered at a conventional level by the law of *kamma*.

Why, then, is it 'good to be good'? Commenting on the idea of the good, G.E. Moore (1903) suggested that: "'good" is a simple notion, just as "yellow" is a simple notion; that, just as you cannot, by any manner of means, explain to any one who does not already know it, what yellow is, so you cannot explain what good is' (§7). He argued for the philosophical value of the notion of 'good' in ethics in terms of a more

experiential engagement with it. This is precisely the kind of pragmatism that Buddhism endorses with respect to ethical questions. It just so happens that the universe, and human consciousness within it, is configured in such a way that 'good' (relatively selfless) action brings benefits for self and others while 'bad' (selfish) action has deleterious effects.

So in answer to the question what would a Buddhist-inspired business ethics entail we are now in a position to offer a tentative response. It would understand and appreciate the conventionally constructed, conditioned and conditioning nature of identities in terms of the principal sources of human suffering, that is, ignorance<sup>20</sup>, craving and hatred. The grasping and attachment which these 'inefficient' proclivities engender is expressed through workplace identity and action as much as in any other form of human activity. Buddhist ethics invites restraint with respect to the selfish motives that manifest as a result to grasping after role and identity. Another important element of this ethical nexus is a recognition of the interdependence between the environment and the identities we embody and express (Varela et. al. (1992). The Buddhist ethical universe is intimately *participatory* and requires that we restrain actions that harm ourselves, others and the wider environment. Steve Hagen sums this point up quite elegantly when he emphasizes the importance of developing a non-clinging attitude toward, and acceptance of, interdependency within a complex world:

Volition's proper place is in directing us toward *seeing* the work of Chaos and in adjusting our living to fit the grand symbiosis, rather than striving to make everything fit the whims and fancies of small and contradictory propositions called 'myself' or 'us' (Hagen 1995, p.199, original emphasis).

The purpose of Buddhist ethics is to provide a pragmatic basis from which meditation and insight can be pursued, facilitating the realization of *nibbāna* (*Nirvana* Skt.). *Nibbāna* exists in the here-and-now and is merely masked by wrong ideas about self-existence. Once experientially apprehend (non)action is, to borrow from Nietzsche, 'beyond good and evil'. Paradoxically, the culmination of Buddhist training in ethics is liberation from ethics entirely. While this may seem to imply a dislocation of ethics ('business' or otherwise) from the quotidian demands of life, it is precisely in the 'everyday' that Buddhist ethics are to be practiced and the resulting freedoms experienced. This is a *living ethics*.

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<sup>20</sup> 'Ignorance' (*avijā*) in this context does not refer to a deficiency with respect to intellectual understanding or knowledge. It implies a 'turning away' from or 'refusal to look at' the realities which present themselves to us. It is an active notion which might be rendered helpfully as 'ignore-ance'.

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## 5

### Organising a Buddhist Way

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#### **Introduction**

In the last 30 or 40 years, the field of organisation studies has been marked by discussion of what have variously been called paradigms, discourses of science, thought styles or cultures of inquiry (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Bentz & Shapiro, 1998; Chia, 1995; Guba and Lincoln, 1994). These, lets call them 'cultures', differ in their assumptions about what exists, what we humans can know about what exists and how that knowledge can be produced. They also differ in whether they centre