

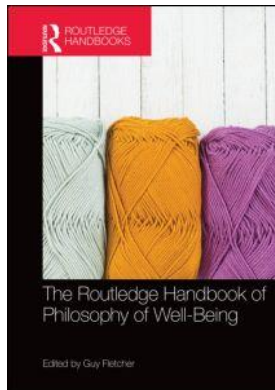
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Guy Fletcher

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Christopher W. Gowans

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6

BUDDHIST UNDERSTANDINGS OF WELL-BEING

Christopher W. Gowans

Introduction

In Buddhist traditions, a good deal was said about well-being, but rather little was said that could be considered a philosophy of well-being. Classical Buddhist thought, in India and elsewhere in Asia, did include philosophical reflection. However, this reflection pertained primarily to topics in metaphysics and epistemology. For the most part, it did not include moral or ethical philosophy similar to that developed by canonical Western philosophers such as Aristotle, Kant, and Mill. Moreover, the main theories of well-being discussed in contemporary Western philosophy were not within the purview of traditional Buddhist thinkers. Nonetheless, it might be hoped that Buddhist thought could be interpreted in terms of these theories or at least that it would be possible to develop a fruitful dialogue about well-being between contemporary philosophers and interpreters or advocates of the Buddhist traditions. In this chapter, I will briefly examine the basis for this hope and assess its prospects for success.

There is tremendous diversity in Buddhist thought and practice from its first expression by the Buddha in India, probably in the fifth century BCE, through the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism around the beginning of the Common Era, to the transmission of Buddhism to China, Tibet, and other parts of Asia in the centuries beyond. In view of this diversity, it is difficult to generalize about Buddhist thought. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify some common themes. In this discussion, we will focus mostly on Buddhist ideas in the Indian (South Asian) traditions from the thought of the Buddha, as represented in the Pali Canon, through the growth of the Mahāyāna approaches.

In contemporary debates about well-being (and related terms), it is usually supposed that well-being pertains to how well or badly a person's life is going for that person. It is commonly thought that a philosophy of well-being is a theory that purports to best explain the central intuitions people have about well-being in their ordinary lives (for example, see the criterion of descriptive adequacy in Sumner 1996: 10–13). A philosophy of well-being so understood was not explicitly articulated and defended in traditional Buddhist thought. In fact, proponents of Buddhist practice were primarily concerned to convince people that a form of well-being is available to them that is superior to any kind of well-being they ordinarily considered. In this regard, they were more interested in changing people's beliefs about well-being than they were in giving an account of the beliefs they already had. I will return to this point at the end of the chapter.

There are three main ways in which well-being is discussed in Buddhist thought. First, according to the doctrines of karma and rebirth, the moral quality of a person's life causally influences the person's future well-being in the present or subsequent lives: virtuous lives bring about greater well-being in the future and vicious lives do the opposite. Second, all lives in the cycle of rebirth are deficient in well-being to some considerable extent because they involve suffering, but it is possible to overcome this suffering by escaping the cycle of rebirth through the attainment of enlightenment. This is the respect in which a form of well-being is put forth as superior to common understandings of well-being. Finally, fundamental Buddhist virtues such as compassion and loving kindness involve a concern to promote the well-being of other people. In this chapter, we will focus primarily on the first two contexts.

There are some serious obstacles to relating these Buddhist perspectives to contemporary discussions of well-being. One of these is the Buddhist "no-self" teaching according to which there is no self in the sense of being a distinct entity with identity through time (and related to this, the Mahāyāna teaching that all things are empty of an inherent nature). Many accounts of well-being in recent debates tacitly suppose that the bearer of well-being is, or involves, such a self. A natural way to circumvent this obstacle is to appeal to the Buddhist distinction between ultimate and conventional truth. This distinction is understood differently in different traditions, but a common understanding allows us to speak of a self at the level of conventional truth, in which we employ the concepts of everyday discourse, even though we cannot speak of it at the level of ultimate truth. In this view, conventional truth is useful in guiding our lives even though it employs concepts with no grounding in ultimate truth. Many Buddhist discussions of well-being appear to be in the language of conventional truth.

Another related obstacle is that the highest stage of enlightenment, sometimes called nirvana or perfect Buddhahood, is often portrayed in terms that do not look like a human life at all. For example, it is said to be a state without consciousness, perception, action, and the like. It is difficult to comprehend how this could be a form of well-being, at least for human beings. However, many accounts, focusing on a lower stage of enlightenment or on enlightenment depicted in the language of conventional truth, portray it in terms that are more recognizably human. As we will see, by focusing on these it is easier to relate Buddhist thought to the contemporary debates about well-being. In any case, it is best to begin by considering Buddhist accounts of the well-being of persons who are not yet enlightened.

The well-being of unenlightened persons

In the Pali Canon (the earliest Buddhist texts, purporting to represent the teaching of the Buddha) and elsewhere the well-being of persons who are not enlightened is often portrayed in terms of goods such as health, long life, peace of mind, good reputation, wealth, and beauty (for example, see Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995: 1053–1057). We might call these *ordinary goods* in acknowledgment of the fact that they are widely regarded as goods by people in many cultural contexts. It is such goods that, according to karma theory, morally virtuous actions promote. Nonetheless, as long as we are in the cycle of rebirth, no matter how virtuous we are or how many of these goods we obtain, our lives are said to be fundamentally flawed. This is because, as is stated in the First Noble Truth, the lives of all beings in the cycle of rebirth are permeated by suffering or unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha* in Pali).

This is explained in a variety of ways. One common theme is that suffering is closely connected to the fact that all things are impermanent. The connection is easy to see: we suffer because we sometimes lose, and always have reason to fear losing, goods such as those just

mentioned. However, although impermanence is often the occasion of suffering, it is not clear that it is the main factor in the Buddhist analysis of suffering. What is more important is our mental response to what happens to us. In an important text, the Buddha said that both an “uninstructed worldling” and an “instructed noble disciple” experience physical pain, but the uninstructed person “sorrows, grieves, and laments” this while the noble instructed person does not (Bodhi 2000: 1263–1265). This suggests that the suffering that is said to permeate our lives is not such things as pain per se, but our aversive mental response to these events. This is in line with the Second Noble Truth and related texts, which state that the immediate cause of suffering is charged desires such as craving, attachment, greed, hatred, and the like. Suffering is the dissatisfaction that comes with strong unfulfilled desires to attain what appears positive and repel what appears negative.

However, the more fundamental source of these desires and their accompanying dissatisfaction is the mistaken belief that we are selves. It may not be obvious why this is. For Mark Siderits, Buddhism is primarily concerned with “existential suffering,” the despair that results from believing one’s life lacks meaning: the cycle of rebirth may seem pointless, and the realization that there is no self that undergoes unending lives relieves this concern (Siderits 2007a: 19–21). Another view is that it is simply the thought that *this pain is mine* that gives rise to the craving that it go away and the dissatisfaction when it does not. The realization that there is no self undermines this thought and its attendant suffering: ultimately there is no me to think that this pain is mine. At any rate, the main Buddhist teaching about the well-being of unenlightened persons is that it depends on their participation in ordinary goods such as health, good reputation, wealth, beauty, and the like, as governed by karma, but that it is always flawed on account of suffering, a mental state that involves some form of dissatisfaction rooted in delusion. What about the well-being of persons who have attained enlightenment?

The well-being of enlightened persons

The Third Noble Truth and related texts say that it is possible to overcome suffering by eliminating craving and other powerful desires. This is the state of enlightenment.

The primary characterization of enlightened persons is that they have overcome craving and suffering through the deep-rooted realization that they are not selves (or in Mahāyāna Buddhism, that all things are empty of inherent natures). According to one text in the Pali Canon, an enlightened person who is alive “still experiences what is agreeable and disagreeable and feels pleasure and pain.” However, this person has extinguished “attachment, hate and delusion” (Ireland 1997: 181). We might say that an enlightened person has many of the same experiences and sensations as everyone else, but is no longer preoccupied with them. In other texts, an enlightened person is said to be free of a variety of turbulent desires and emotions, such as lust, greed, anger, fear, and the like. Hence, a key feature of enlightenment is an overall mental state that might be called contentment. This may be understood in different ways. According to one interpretation, contentment is nothing more than the absence of suffering; what might be called non-dissatisfaction. But some texts depict enlightenment in more positive terms. It is often said that an enlightened person is in a state of peace or tranquility, and it is sometimes said that this person is in a state of bliss (for example, see Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995: 536 and 613). In view of these passages, another interpretation is that contentment involves a positive mental state that might be called joyful tranquility, something that is the opposite of dissatisfaction (not just the absence of it).

In any case, enlightened persons are commonly said to have two other features: wisdom and virtue. Wisdom is the counterpart to the delusion that is a key feature of unenlightened persons: it is centrally the realization of selflessness or emptiness. Virtue is primarily a set of ethical virtues

such as compassion, loving kindness, generosity, and patience. It is not obvious how wisdom and virtue relate to well-being. They might be features of enlightened persons that are not aspects of their well-being. In this case, the well-being of enlightened persons would seem to be mainly contentment (either non-dissatisfaction or joyful tranquility). But it is often implied that wisdom, virtue, and contentment are all good states to be in and that they go together: having any one (at least to the greatest extent) implies having the other two. This might be taken to suggest that the well-being of enlightened persons consists of a unified state involving contentment, wisdom, and virtue. On this reading, contentment, wisdom, and virtue are each constitutive features of well-being for enlightened persons.

Can these accounts be unified?

The common element in the accounts of the well-being of unenlightened and enlightened persons is that for both well-being pertains to our mental state: unenlightened persons lack well-being insofar as they are always in some state of dissatisfaction, and enlightened persons possess well-being insofar as they are always in a state of contentment. But the differences in these accounts raise some questions. Participation in ordinary goods such as health, good reputation, wealth, and beauty appears to be an important aspect of the well-being of unenlightened persons in the cycle of rebirth: do these goods play a role in the well-being of enlightened persons as well? Again, on one interpretation, wisdom and virtue are part of the well-being of enlightened persons: do they also play a role in the well-being of unenlightened persons?

It is plausible to think that the answer to the second question is yes: if the presence of wisdom and virtue contributes to the well-being of enlightened persons, then surely the absence of wisdom and virtue detracts from the well-being of unenlightened persons. Moreover, if progress from unenlightenment to enlightenment is gradual (as it is in some, but not all, Buddhist traditions), then it would make sense to suppose that this movement consists in part of a gradual transition from delusion to wisdom and from vice to virtue (as well as from dissatisfaction to contentment). In this respect, there would be a unified understanding of Buddhist well-being that applies to all persons, whether enlightened or not.

The answer to the first question, however, is not so clear. It seems evident that an enlightened person who is still alive might have more or fewer of the ordinary goods referred to in the karma doctrine. For example, such an enlightened person might have better or worse health. In an account of the Buddha's last days he is portrayed as becoming quite ill, being in great physical pain, and then dying (Walshe 1987: 244ff.). Would his life have been better, in the sense of having had greater well-being, if instead he had died a peaceful death without this illness and pain? The question does not seem to have concerned traditional Buddhist thinkers, but we can reflect on the plausibility of possible answers from Buddhist perspectives.

One prominent strand of Buddhist thought and practice is rather ascetic. The Buddha presented the Eightfold Path as a "middle way" between asceticism and a life of sensual pleasure (this is the Fourth and final Noble Truth, explaining the way to attain enlightenment). Yet he advocated a way of life that would look rather ascetic to most people. For example, he seemed to think that enlightenment required celibacy (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995: 449 and 596–597). The ascetic strand of Buddhism might suggest that the answer to the question in the last paragraph is no, the well-being of an enlightened being such as the Buddha is unaffected by such things as poor or good health. One reason for this might be that the well-being constituted by aspects of enlightenment such as contentment, wisdom, and virtue is so great that other goods such as health make no significant difference to it (just as a couple grains of sand would not make a beach larger). A very different reason might be that such things as health are merely apparent goods, appealed to in

karma theory because the belief that they are goods would motivate virtue, even though they are not actually goods at all. A common motif in Buddhism is that Buddhist teaching is an exercise in “skillful means,” discourse that is justified on the therapeutic grounds that it promotes enlightenment, not because it is a statement of correct doctrine (there is more about this below). If accounts of karma were interpreted in this light, then they would not be committed to the claim that health and the like are actual goods that contribute to anyone’s well-being.

On the ascetic reading—that health and other ordinary goods play no role in the well-being of enlightened persons—it would seem that enlightened persons would be indifferent to the pursuit of these supposed goods except insofar as they were instrumentally important for the exercise of virtues such as compassion and loving kindness (for example, caring for others is facilitated by being in good health). This might seem to strain credibility: how could health not be an inherent part of human well-being? But Buddhist teaching often suggests that the unenlightened cannot fully understand and appreciate Buddhist enlightenment, and perhaps this is the case here.

Another view would be to say that health and other ordinary goods do contribute to the well-being of enlightened persons. This would mean that the Buddha would have been better off in the sense of having more well-being if he had never been ill. In fact, it might be thought that enlightened persons would have such goods to the highest extent possible. This might be regarded as a natural extension of karma theory: if more virtue generates more of these goods, then for enlightened persons being virtuous to the greatest extent would seem to generate the highest level of these goods. However, this claim is very difficult to square with standard Buddhist teaching. After all, the Buddha is portrayed as becoming seriously ill. He is not represented as having health to the highest extent.

So perhaps some enlightened persons are healthier than other enlightened persons and have greater well-being in this respect for this reason (and likewise for other such goods). It might still be allowed that the aspects of enlightenment that are evidently regarded as most important for well-being—contentment and perhaps wisdom and virtue—are much more important for the well-being of enlightened persons than these other goods are. Maybe, in fact, they are incommensurably more important in the sense that no amount of ordinary goods could ever bring about as much well-being as that brought about by contentment and the like. This might explain why virtually no attention was paid to the role of these lesser goods in the well-being of enlightened persons.

Buddhist thought and the contemporary theories

We have now seen some of the main contours of Buddhist understandings of well-being in the Indian traditions. These accounts were presented, not as a philosophy of well-being that best explains everyday intuitions about well-being, but as crucial elements of a soteriological teaching about how to overcome suffering in human life. Nonetheless, it might be hoped that contemporary theories of well-being could be employed to interpret these understandings and that on this basis some dialogue between the two would be possible. Let us now examine this hope by focusing on the well-being of enlightened persons in relationship to four prominent contemporary theories: desire-satisfaction theories, mental state theories, objective list theories and nature-fulfillment (or perfectionist) theories.

According to desire-satisfaction theories, well-being consists of the satisfaction of a person’s desires or (in some accounts) the satisfaction of the desires a person would have insofar as he or she was well informed and/or rational. As an interpretation of Buddhist understandings of well-being, this is probably the least plausible of the contemporary theories. Buddhist writers

were very much concerned about the ways in which frustrated desires (both not getting what we want and getting what we are trying to avoid) are sources of suffering. But this is not the same as supposing that well-being consists of the satisfaction of desires. In Buddhist teaching, an enlightened person has attained the highest level of well-being, but this person is not depicted as someone who has fulfilled all of his or her desires (much less as having this well-being for this reason). Contentment, a key feature of enlightenment, is better thought of as a state in which a person is unperturbed whether or not his or her desires are satisfied. Likewise, if wisdom and virtue are features of the well-being of enlightened persons, there is no reason to think this is true simply because we desire them.

For mental state theories, well-being consists of the presence of positive mental states and the absence of negative mental states. The best-known mental state theory, hedonism, says that well-being is pleasure and the absence of pain. As we have seen, one important aspect of well-being in Buddhism accounts involves mental states: the suffering that mars unenlightened life consists of dissatisfaction, and a primary reason enlightened persons have greater well-being than unenlightened persons is that dissatisfaction is replaced by contentment, understood either as simple non-dissatisfaction or as something more positive, such as joyful tranquility. If it were argued that this is the whole story about well-being in Buddhism, then Buddhism would appear to be committed to a kind of mental state theory (see Siderits 2007b: 292, for a position close to this).

There are, however, some obstacles to this interpretation. First, it does not seem to be the whole story: at any rate, there are reasons to suppose that wisdom and virtue are part of well-being (and perhaps also participation in ordinary goods), and there is no suggestion in Buddhist thought that they are part of well-being simply because they are positive mental states. Second, contemporary mental state theories are often regarded as plausible because they account for the fact that there is considerable individual variation in what brings about well-being: kayaking may bring one person pleasure and bungee cord jumping may bring another person pleasure, but they are both sources of well-being on a mental state theory such as hedonism because they result in pleasure. For Buddhism, however, there is no aspiration to account for such individual variations in sources of well-being. It is supposed that unenlightened persons as a group are dissatisfied because of craving and delusions about selfhood and that enlightened persons as a group are content because they are free of craving and delusions concerning selfhood. The diverse ways in which different states of affairs bring about positive mental states in people is not a particular concern.

In view of this, it is natural to wonder if Buddhist thought might have more in common with theories that regard well-being as objective in the sense that it does not depend on the particular mental attitudes of different individuals. For objective-list theories, well-being consists of participation in a set of objective goods such as knowledge, friendship, achievement, and the like. Proponents of these theories disagree about which goods belong on the list, but these are common examples. The central contention of objective list theories is that participation in the goods on the list, whatever they may be, directly contributes to the well-being of all human beings—and not because or only if this participation fulfills our desires, brings us pleasure, or any other reason. It has been argued that at least some forms of Buddhism are best interpreted as objective list theories of well-being. Damien Keown has maintained that life, knowledge, and friendship are what he calls “basic goods” in Buddhism (see Keown 2001: 42 ff.), and Charles Goodman has claimed that virtue and worldly happiness are the key goods for Buddhism (Goodman 2009: 61–62 and 80–81). In light of the discussion above, it might also be held that contentment, wisdom, and virtue are objective goods in Buddhism. Since Buddhist thinkers assume that what constitutes well-being and its absence are basically the same for all human beings, there is reason to think that they accepted an objective understanding of well-being in which what brings about

well-being for a particular person does not depend on particular states of the person's mind such as what he or she happens to find pleasure in or desire. Moreover, since for many interpreters there appear to be different aspects of Buddhist well-being, an objective list approach is an attractive model for understanding Buddhist discussions of well-being (though the lists just mentioned are somewhat different than one another).

One difficulty with such an interpretation is the common assumption that objective list theories presume that there are several distinct objective goods that are at least largely independent of one another. For example, knowledge and friendship would seem to be rather different goods and it would be quite possible to have a great deal of one and rather little of the other (except in the very specific ways in which friendship might require certain kinds of knowledge, for instance of the needs of one's friend). In some respects, it might be supposed that the elements of well-being in Buddhist discussions are distinct goods. For instance, this might be thought about virtue and worldly happiness, the two items on Goodman's list (although in karma theory virtue brings about happiness in this sense, they still appear to be quite different kinds of goods). In other respects, however, Buddhism might be thought to have a more unified understanding of well-being. For example, wisdom, virtue, and contentment are three aspects of enlightenment that are thought to be closely connected with one another. Although they may be distinguished, it is not possible to fully have any one of these without fully having the other two. Thus, a person with genuine wisdom would have complete virtue, and vice versa. If these three aspects were understood as aspects of the well-being of an enlightened person, then it might be misleading to think of them as a list of distinct goods that contribute to well-being in the way that is common in objective list theories.

Another difficulty concerns the basic rationale of objective list theories in contemporary philosophy. The main argument for these theories is that we have a set of pre-theoretical intuitions that certain kinds of things are human goods and that, contrary to the claims of other theories, there is no adequate explanation as to why these are human goods beyond articulating our intuitions concerning them. As we have already observed, in Buddhist thought there are some understandings of well-being, but there is no theory of well-being that purports to make sense of everyday intuitions about well-being. Hence, even if the Buddhist understandings of well-being could be represented as a list of objective goods, the list would not be an account of what most people would think are goods. In fact, it would probably sharply diverge from this. The well-being of an enlightened person, by Buddhist standards, is arguably a state that many and perhaps most unenlightened persons would not recognize as a form of well-being, much less the highest form. This is both because of the diminished role of ordinary goods and because of what may appear to be an esoteric insistence on the importance of a distinctive conception of contentment (and perhaps of others features of enlightenment such as virtue and wisdom). Whatever may be said in favor of the Buddhist approach, it is not likely to be evident on the basis of commonsense intuitions.

If Buddhism is committed to an objective understanding of well-being, but cannot easily be assimilated to an objective list approach, then the main contemporary theory that it might be thought to resemble is a nature-fulfillment theory (sometimes called a perfectionist theory). According to this approach, well-being consists of the fulfillment or at least development of the most unique, central, or important features of human nature. A proponent of a nature-fulfillment theory might agree with an objective list theorist about which specific aspects of human life contribute to well-being. But the nature-fulfillment theorist would maintain that these aspects contribute to well-being *because* they fulfill significant features of human nature. Hence, a nature-fulfillment theory has a unified explanatory structure that objective list theories lack. Yet it is still an objective theory in that what contributes to a person's well-being depends in an important respect on facts about human nature and not simply on particular mental attitudes such as what that person happens to desire or find pleasurable.

Although nature-fulfillment theories can take different forms, they are commonly associated with Aristotle's eudaimonistic virtue ethics. For Aristotle, well-being—or, at any rate, eudaimonia—consists in significant part in the fulfillment of our nature as rational beings, meaning specifically the development and exercise of a set of practical and theoretical virtues (all of which involve reason). Several commentators on Buddhist thought have suggested that it has significant similarities with Aristotle's ethical theory or with similar theories in the Hellenistic philosophers (for example, see Cooper and James 2005: ch. 4, Flanagan 2011, and Keown 1992: ch. 8; for discussion of such interpretations, see Gowans 2014: chs 5–7). On this interpretation, the well-being of an enlightened person is understood as the fulfillment or completion of the person's nature.

Although this is a common way of interpreting Buddhist thought, it faces an important objection. It has been claimed that nature-fulfillment theories depend on an understanding of human nature that Buddhism rejects, namely, that there is a self or a person with an inherent nature. If, as Buddhism claims, there is no self, or the person is empty of an inherent nature, then it does not make sense to say that our well-being consists in the fulfillment or completion of this self or nature (see Goodman 2009: 70–71 and Siderits 2007b: 292). One response to this objection draws on the aforementioned distinction between conventional and ultimate truth. In this view, although in ultimate truth there is no self or person with an inherent nature, at the level of conventional truth we can speak of such a self or person. Hence, a nature-fulfillment theory interpretation may be plausible as long as it is expressed in the language of conventional truth. Since many discussions of well-being in Buddhism are conducted in the language of conventional truth, this would appear to be a plausible approach. Moreover, a nature-fulfillment interpretation appears to capture a central theme in Buddhist discourse, namely that, though the ordinary condition of human beings makes us prone to suffering, we have the capacity to achieve enlightenment and overcome suffering. Hence, the highest form of well-being in the Buddhist analysis, the well-being of enlightened persons, involves the fulfillment of what is arguably our most important human capacity (or at least an important human capacity).

In Mahāyāna Buddhism our capacity for enlightenment is sometimes described as our Buddha-nature or *Tathāgata-garbha*, meaning the embryo of the Buddha (for discussion, see Williams 2009: ch. 5). On this view, the three unwholesome roots that (in standard Buddhist teaching) preclude enlightenment—greed, hatred, and delusion—are surface defilements that hide our real nature, namely our Buddha-nature, the fact that there is a sense in which we are always already Buddhas. Enlightenment on this understanding is the realization of what we already are, and this might be expressed in the language of fulfilling or completing our nature. If enlightenment is the highest form of well-being, then well-being in this sense may be thought of as the fulfillment of our Buddha-nature. This might be supposed to have some kinship with Aristotle's contention that *eudaimonia*, interpreted as a life of virtue, is the fulfillment of our nature as rational beings. Of course, it would have to be acknowledged (as it typically is) that there are significant differences in the two understandings of what our nature is or what is most important about it. Buddhist thought does not feature rationality in the way that Aristotle does, and Aristotle does not accept anything that resembles Buddha-nature. Moreover, the ways of life thought to exemplify well-being are very different in Aristotle and Buddhist thought. Nonetheless, it may be said, they are both nature-fulfillment theories, and this is enough to provide a framework for discussing their respective merits.

There is, however, a further obstacle to this interpretation. Although the language of Buddha-nature and *Tathāgata-garbha* was very common in some forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism, especially in several Chinese traditions of Buddhism, many of the texts employing this language were not primarily philosophical texts. Statements that we all have a Buddha-nature or *Tathāgata-garbha* were not so much expressions of a metaphysical theory as they were forms of encouragement in promoting spiritual practice. They were ways of saying to followers (or potential followers)

of Buddhist practice that, despite evident obstacles on account of the three unwholesome roots, enlightenment is really possible because of our Buddha-nature or Tathāgata-garbha. However, although the overall aim was pragmatic, sometimes the language employed to achieve this aim appeared to be metaphysical assertions. For example, in one text, Tathāgata-garbha was said to possess the “perfections” of “permanence, bliss, self and purity” (King 1991: 12). This may seem rather surprising. In view of the Buddhist emphasis on impermanence and no-self, how could Tathāgata-garbha possess permanence and self?

On account of such language, there have been controversies among Buddhists about discussions of Buddha-nature and Tathāgata-garbha (Hubbard and Swanson 1997). These discussions might seem to presuppose precisely what Buddhism is fundamentally concerned to deny: that there is a self or person with an inherent nature. There are different kinds of response to this objection. Some might appeal to the distinction between conventional and ultimate truth, resolving the conflict by restricting apparently conflicting statements to different kinds of truth. Others might resolve it by developing a more elaborate metaphysics. Still others might reaffirm the point made earlier: these discussions are not really statements of a metaphysical theory, but expressions of encouragement that enlightenment is indeed possible. They are forms of skillful means that are valuable in promoting spiritual practice and are not to be understood as assertions of correct doctrine. According to Sallie B. King, “Buddha-nature thought does not constitute an ontological theory.” Rather, it is “a soteriological device” (1997: 188).

This response, however, would seem to substantially undermine the nature-fulfillment interpretation of Buddhist well-being, especially insofar as Aristotle’s ethics is considered a paradigmatic example of a nature-fulfillment theory. At least as commonly interpreted, Aristotle assumed a rather robust metaphysical understanding of human nature in claiming that a life of virtue fulfills our nature as rational beings. If Buddhist writers were not assuming a comparable metaphysical understanding, then there is a considerable difference between the two. In order for a nature-fulfillment theory to be plausible as a philosophical theory it must identify some genuine feature(s) of human nature and explain why our well-being consists of the development or fulfillment of that feature. This is a challenge for Aristotelian theories and there would be a similar challenge for Buddhist thinkers if they were committed to a comparable theory, say, that our well-being consists of the fulfillment of our Buddha-nature. However, it is not evident that they were so committed or saw the need to confront this challenge.

There is another objection, not simply to the interpretation, but to the intelligibility of the stance of writers who employed the language of Buddha-nature or Tathāgata-garbha in this way. The objection is that this stance is basically incoherent because this language could encourage the belief that enlightenment is possible only if it was understood to convey a basic truth about the way human beings really are, namely that by nature we all have the capacity for enlightenment. How could we be encouraged unless we understood it in this way? Hence, it might be said, either this discourse was understood as asserting such a truth (in which case it conflicts with Buddhist teaching about no-self and emptiness) or it was not so understood (in which case it is hard to see how it could have its intended result). From this perspective, it might be argued, the metaphysical issues cannot be avoided.

Does Buddhism need a philosophy of well-being?

We now have a brief resumé of the prospects for interpreting Buddhist discussions of well-being in terms of some of the prominent contemporary philosophies of well-being (for a somewhat more detailed account, see Gowans 2014: ch. 5). The prospects are by no means empty, but in any approach there are significant challenges. It was observed at the outset that traditional

Buddhist thought has much to say about well-being, but little that could be considered a philosophy of well-being. By way of conclusion, it is worth pondering why this is.

One answer may be found in a well-known conversation in the Pali Canon, in which Mālunkyāputta asked the Buddha a series of philosophical questions (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995: 533–536). For example, he asked about whether the world is eternal, whether the body and soul are the same, and whether a Tathāgata (someone who is enlightened) exists after death. Mālunkyāputta said he would follow the Buddha's teaching only if the Buddha first answered these questions. The Buddha responded with a story. A man wounded by a poison arrow would not let the doctor care for him until the doctor answered questions about who shot him, whether he was tall or short, etc. The Buddha said that in order to be healed the man did not need to know the answer to these questions. He simply needed to accept the care of the doctor. Moreover, he might well die if he refused this care until his questions were answered. Similarly, the Buddha said, it was not necessary to know the answer to the aforementioned philosophical questions in order to attain enlightenment and overcome suffering. So the Buddha declined to answer the questions. He said that he taught only what was beneficial for the purpose of achieving enlightenment and eliminating suffering. Hence, rather than answering whatever philosophical questions might be posed to him, he simply taught the Four Noble Truths.

This text may be interpreted in different ways. On most any reading, it suggests that the Buddha's orientation was quite pragmatic in a very specific way: he was interested in teaching only what was necessary to promote the pursuit of enlightenment. This need not preclude answering some philosophical questions, but knowing the answers would need to be important to attaining enlightenment (in terms of the story, it would have been helpful to know what poison the shooter put on the arrow). The Buddha was frequently compared to a physician and his teaching was regarded as analogous to a medical diagnosis (Gowans 2010). This brings out his pragmatic orientation and the limits of his philosophical aspirations.

Of course, some Buddhist schools subsequent to the life of the Buddha did develop rather extensive metaphysical and epistemological theories. Perhaps these were thought to be important in promoting enlightenment. But then we might expect that comparable ethical theories would have been developed for the same reason. Yet there is little in the tradition that looks much like an explicit and systematic ethical theory (for discussion of this, see Gowans 2014: ch. 3). With regard to well-being, there was no interest in developing a philosophical theory that accounts for everyday intuitions about well-being *and* there was no evident concern to develop a philosophical theory of Buddhist understandings of well-being either. Perhaps such theories would have been developed if it had been thought that they were important for pursuing enlightenment. But apparently traditional Buddhist thinkers did not believe this.

In light of this, it might seem that from a Buddhist perspective there is little reason to interpret Buddhist discussions of well-being in terms of any of the contemporary philosophical theories of well-being. However, I would suggest that there might still be a basis for conversation between proponents of traditional Buddhist outlooks and adherents of contemporary philosophical theories of well-being. From the Buddhist side, the primary interest in this conversation would be the commitment to promote enlightenment. Though in the tradition it might have been supposed that there was no need to develop a theory of well-being as a way to encourage enlightenment, it could be that there is such a need in the current context. In recent years Buddhist perspectives have penetrated the Western world in significant ways and to a limited extent Buddhist thought has now reached the attention of some Western philosophers. In this context, Buddhist thinkers might now have reason to engage Western philosophers on topics such as well-being as a way of promoting Buddhist enlightenment to this specific audience. From this point of view, however, Buddhists might well be looking to shift the subject of the debate.

As noted at the beginning, contemporary theories of well-being are primarily concerned to give an adequate account of everyday intuitions about well-being. From a Buddhist perspective, the debate about these theories might be regarded as a distraction from what is really important: realizing first that no matter how well we might think our lives are going, they are probably still marred by suffering, and second, that a superior form of well-being is available to us through Buddhist enlightenment. In this view, what most people think will provide well-being is flawed, and it is important to convince them of this and to bring them to see that there is a better form of well-being that we can attain. The conversation we should be having, then, is one about the most adequate form of well-being available to human beings, not one about how best to account for everyday intuitions about well-being. In fact, the concern about what genuine human well-being would be, where this is not established simply on the basis of commonsense intuitions, is not entirely absent from the contemporary philosophical debate about well-being (for example, it is usually an implicit aspect of nature-fulfillment theories). This might provide an entrée for Buddhists to change the direction of the discussion to a topic they would regard as more worthy of our attention. From a Buddhist standpoint, everyday intuitions about well-being might be a place to begin, but the ultimate aim would be to transform those intuitions.

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