

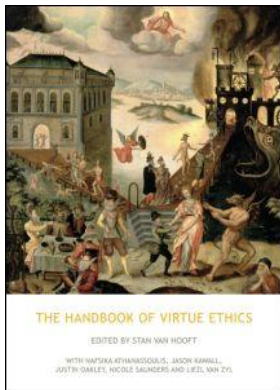
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## **The Handbook of Virtue Ethics**

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### **Mindfulness, non-attachment and other Buddhist virtues**

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## Mindfulness, non-attachment and other Buddhist virtues

Leesa S. Davis

Attachment is the origin, the root of suffering, hence it is the cause of suffering.

Dalai Lama (1988: 37)

Buddhism, as a system of thought and practice, is centred on the resolution of one all-pervasive problem – the eradication of suffering. Like a physician, the Buddha is traditionally thought to have diagnosed an illness, identified the cause and prescribed a cure. The insight of the Buddha’s realization is expressed in the formula of the Four Noble Truths: (1) the human condition is characterized by suffering (*duḥkha*); (2) suffering is caused by grasping or desire; (3) suffering can be extinguished by eliminating its causes; (4) the way to extinguish suffering is to follow the Middle Way (*madhyamā pratipad*) in the form of the Noble Eightfold Path. Although different Buddhist schools have developed various ways of putting this “prescription” into practice, the Eightfold Path of right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration is the fundamental starting point of all Buddhist ethical life.

This chapter will offer an introduction to Buddhist ideas of the ethical life by outlining key Buddhist virtues and situating them in the broader framework of Buddhist metaphysics. Although Buddhism displays some similarities with the ethical system of utilitarianism and, perhaps to a lesser extent, some parallels to forms of deontology, many contemporary scholars regard the virtues approach to interpreting Buddhist ethics as the most fruitful entry point (see Keown 1992, 2005, 2007; Whitehill 1994). Even though there are significant parallels between Buddhist ethics and contemporary neo-Aristotelian forms of virtue ethics, it should be noted that the two moral frameworks are based on very different metaphysical presuppositions and operative assumptions.

In the voluminous Buddhist philosophical literature much attention is paid to the idea of cultivating virtuous or “wholesome” states of character, to defining virtuous and non-virtuous actions, and to highlighting exemplars of virtuous lives. Buddhism is replete with lists of virtues and vices, and practices designed to cultivate the former and transform the

latter. Furthermore, Buddhist scriptures place a great deal of importance on the cultivation of individual virtues as a means to spontaneous moral action and spiritual insight. In general, Buddhism ties in very well with the idea of virtues and vices as motivational features. It echoes the virtue ethic approach of cultivating a virtuous character rather than following a set of moral rules or ethical obligations to duty.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to note, however, that there is no structured exposition of philosophical ethics in Buddhism in the sense of formulating a system of moral norms. Buddhism does not set out to advance a systematized moral theory – Buddhist teachings offer few or no guides to moral obligations or arguments for or against rights. Therefore, any consideration of Buddhism as an ethical system in the Western sense must take into account the fundamental concepts that animate Buddhism as a system of thought and practice and address the key presuppositions of Buddhist metaphysics. Central to the concerns of this discussion are the pivotal metaphysical underpinnings of dependent co-origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), and the three marks of existence: impermanence (*anitya*), suffering (*duḥkha*) and no-self (*anātman*).

The discussion will begin by outlining key Buddhist metaphysical ideas and then proceed by giving an overview of the basic structure of the Buddhist ethical life: the Eightfold Noble Path. The discussion will also include an analysis of the role of karma, an overarching ethical operative assumption that is at the heart of Buddhist ideas of ethical behaviour. From this groundwork, drawing on the two main Buddhist schools, we move to examine core Buddhist virtues: the Divine States from the Pāli Canon of Theravāda Buddhism and the Six Perfections from the Mahāyāna Sūtras. The virtues of mindfulness and non-attachment will then be outlined and discussed as primary virtues that inform the cultivation of all pivotal Buddhist virtues. In conclusion, to illustrate the dynamic interplay of Buddhist virtues, and as a heuristic tool for future comparative purposes, key Buddhist virtues are categorized into a table of primary virtues, moral virtues, meditation virtues and insight virtues.

Over millennia Buddhism has developed numerous philosophical approaches and varied ethical elaborations on its key doctrines. In the light of this we cannot speak of “Buddhist ethics” as a homogenous whole. However, Damien Keown makes a convincing case for “a common moral core ... composed of the principles and precepts, the values and the virtues expounded by the Buddha in the 5th century BCE that continue to guide Buddhists today” (2005: 3). For the purposes of this chapter, we will follow his lead and discuss key Buddhist virtues and values in a broad sense. In this way, we will give an overall view of the nature and presuppositions of Buddhist ideas of virtue.

### METAPHYSICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The Sanskrit word *duḥkha* (Pāli: *dukkha*), most often translated as “suffering”, has the nuanced meaning of “that which is difficult to bear”. The standard translation “suffering” is, in many ways, not indicative of the full import of the concept. *Duḥkha* takes in every shade of pain and dissatisfaction from outright anguish and despair to general stress, displeasure and dis-ease. The basic meaning is that human existence is pervaded and coloured with *duḥkha* in all manner of gross and subtle forms and that not addressing this is the fundamental “problem” of human life. This all-pervasive “suffering” has a causal arising:

it is caused by grasping or craving. This “grasping”, in the Buddhist sense, is predicated on a misunderstanding of the nature or the qualities of existence.

In Buddhist analysis the hallmarks of conditioned existence are: impermanence (*anitya*), suffering (*duḥkha*), and no-self (*anātman*). In other words, things and selves are impermanent, tinged by suffering and without enduring essence. In effect, the problem arises when we attempt to ignore the impermanent, interdependent nature of selves and things and identify with (false) ideas of permanence and stability. This identification is grasping in the Buddhist sense and the problem is compounded when we form attachments to these mis-identifications and reify them into substantial ontologies. The most damaging of these reifications and the strongest form of attachment is to the self. Hence Buddhist enquiries into the nature of “things” inevitably begin with the self. The maxim “know thyself” is at the heart of Buddhist enquiry but it is a very different idea of “self”. Selves, like all things, are not static, substantial entities but are without enduring essence and without permanency.

No-self is not only the denial of a substantial, fixed entity we call the self but also a recognition of the self and reality as processes in immanent relationship with one another in their dynamic unfolding. The “great chain of being” is dynamically linked in a stream of creative processes in which nothing persists or endures. Since both impermanence and no-self rely on a conception of reality as a non-directional flux as opposed to a static, linear phenomenon, the doctrine of dependent co-origination is their necessary presupposition. Buddhist spiritual and philosophical enquiries into the nature of “selves and things” are thus undertaken to uproot and undo static and linear conceptions of reality and to experientially disclose to the practitioner “things as they are” (*yathābhūtam*).

In sum, the key philosophical implications of Buddhist teachings are contained in the doctrines of the non-substantiality of things or impermanence (*anitya*), the all-pervasiveness of suffering (*duḥkha*) and the non-substantiality of self or “no-self” (*anātman*), which are in turn underwritten by the doctrine of dependent co-origination (*pratīyasamutpāda*): the teaching that all things are interdependent and in constant flux.

A Buddhist practitioner should “seek to avoid evil” and “do good” or, in other words, practise to overcome the three poisons (*kleśas*) or vices: *raga*: attachment and greed; *dveṣa*: aversion and hatred; and *avidyā/moha*: ignorance and delusion. These “poisons” are overcome by cultivating the three cardinal virtues of *arāga*: non-attachment and selflessness; *adveśā*: loving-kindness and benevolence; and *amoha*: wisdom and understanding.<sup>2</sup> In light of this, the Buddhist practitioner’s approach is very close to the key guiding questions of modern virtue ethics: not “What moral rules are right or wrong?” but “How should I live?” and “What are the appropriate inner states of character to cultivate?”

## THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH AND THE ROLE OF KARMA

The Noble Eightfold Path is the earliest formulation of Buddhist ethical practice and represents the basic framework for the Buddhist ethical life. It is a practical guide to the cultivation of a virtuous life and, importantly, it should always be thought of as a comprehensive path to be practised and not a set of sequential steps to be followed or commandments to be adhered to. In Buddhism, the path, like reality, is dynamic and interdependent.

The Noble Eightfold Path consists of a series of dimensions of conduct or standards of right living. The eight components are: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. Underlying these eight components are the three principles of the path: *śīla* or moral conduct (speech, action and livelihood); *samādhi* or mental discipline (effort, mindfulness and concentration); and *prajñā* or wisdom (view and intention).

It is important to note that the Pāli word *sammā* most often translated as “right” means “integral”, “complete” and “perfect”, and is related to the English word “summit” (Allan n.d.). Here it means “perfect” or “complete” in the sense of being the most complete and perfect form of practice. In English, the use of “right” implies a dichotomous way of thinking: right as opposed to wrong. In effect, *sammā* does not have that connotation, as the components of the path are subject to the practitioner’s sense of evolving understanding in an “awakened” sense. Focusing on polarized ideas of “right” and “wrong” would contradict Buddhist ideas of non-duality and, more importantly in terms of practice, not be in accord with the Middle Way. Some modern Buddhist teachers translate *sammā* as “appropriate” which can give practising the path a dynamic dimension and highlights the basic epistemic fluidity and interdependence of the norms (Korematsu 1999; Yamahata 2001). The Middle Way is somewhat comparable to Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean in terms of ideas of balance and appropriateness, but the comparison should be made with caution as the underlying substance ontology of Aristotelian metaphysics supports a far more static set of virtues and values than Buddhist ideas can admit to.

The division of the Eightfold Path into the interdependent and mutually supporting overarching principles of moral conduct (*śīla*), mental discipline (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*prajñā*) is illustrative of the core concerns of Buddhist practice: purifying motives, speech and action with moral conduct to stem the flow of craving and attachment; deepening ongoing meditative insights with mental discipline; and overcoming ignorance through wisdom or seeing things “as they really are”.

Ethical conduct is predicated on compassion for all sentient beings. This compassion springs from cultivating wisdom that addresses attachment (*raga*), aversion (*dveṣā*) and ignorance (*avidyā*) as the causes of suffering, while mental discipline or meditation evolves deepening penetrative understandings of the intentions behind ethical actions and their consequences. These dimensions of conduct or core concerns of Buddhist practice serve as a practitioner’s “road map”: a practical guide to work towards eliminating or transforming attachment, aversion and ignorance. The practice of the Eightfold Path is closely tied to the cultivation of virtuous qualities of character for it is through refining or purifying our state(s) of mind, intentions and motivations that ethical insight is “awakened”. Once insight into these qualities is awakened the practitioner’s concerns are expanded from the inner concentration of mental discipline to a deep affinity for all sentient beings.

Key to this awakening of ethical insight is the understanding of the workings of “karma”: the fundamental moral law of the universe in early Buddhism and a pivotal Buddhist ethical operational assumption. As is well known, karma (Pāli: *kamma*) literally means “action”, but action embedded with moral consequence. As developed in the early Buddhism of the Pāli Canon and elaborated in the Mahāyāna Sūtras, the concept of karma is grounded in the interdependent co-origination of all things and focuses attention “on the qualitative dynamics that characterize the relationship among actions undertaken with purpose, intention or motive (*cetanā*)” (Hershock 2005: 2).

The Buddha identified karma as intention: “It is intention (*cetanā*), O monks, that I call karma; having willed one acts through body, speech, or mind” (*Anguttara Nikāya: Nibbedhika Sutta* VI 63).<sup>3</sup> In keeping with the metaphysics of dependent co-origination, “Buddhist moral assessment and reasoning ... takes into account a number of dimensions of action” (Garfield n.d. [a]). Accordingly, karma does not operate in a strictly linear way. It is not a deterministic straight line of “action equals consequence” or a kind of cosmic balance sheet of positives and negatives that cancel each other out, but a more dynamic consequential process wherein the interdependence of intention and outcome generates complex karmic “traces” both for the agent and the affected target. Indeed, combinations of karmic consequences arise from the action, the intention, the nature of the act itself (mental, verbal, physical and so on) and the final state of affairs resulting from the act. Although neutral in itself, in that there is no “God” or “Absolute” overseeing the process, the process of karma does not generate some kind of simplified “balanced” neutral state. It too is subject to causes and conditions in dynamic interplay.<sup>4</sup>

Karma is well described as “Buddhist action theory” (Garfield n.d. [a]) and it should be noted that the Buddhist conception of karma differs from the (arguably) more deterministic Hindu conception of karma and the popular appropriations of karma as “what goes around, comes around”. In Buddhism, karma is not necessarily fatalistic or deterministic. There is always the possibility of transforming karma through the practice of purifying intentions and deepening understandings of the impermanence and interdependence of all things. Indeed, for the practitioner, the “field of possibilities” is immense: “rather than being victimized by an arbitrary fate or will over which I have no influence ... this understanding of action as inherently intentional suggests that existence is not only the facticity of the circumstances in which I am born but a field of possibilities in which I can act, speak, and think otherwise” (Nelson 2005: 6). In this sense, the doctrine of karma “places one’s fate in one’s own hands”. “By oneself is wrong done, by oneself is one defiled. By oneself wrong is not done, by oneself, surely, is one cleansed. One cannot purify another; purity and impurity are in oneself” (*Dhammapada* XII: 165).

Further to this, because of the presupposition of dependent co-origination, the moral choices that we make and the karmic results that ensue are not discrete events in the past but are never lost and continuously shape us in the present. In Buddhism, karma operates “in feedback loops, with the present moment being shaped both by past and by present actions; present actions shape not only the future but also the present ... indicating a constant opening for input into the causal process” (Thanissaro n.d.). Ultimately, karma, in the Buddhist sense, is dynamic and interdependent as is our connection to and even responsibility for all sentient beings. In this way of thinking, we are not only accountable for our own actions but, in the light of Buddhist metaphysical dynamics and the non-substantiality of selves, we are also fully connected to and responsible for all beings in the dynamic interconnectedness of dependent co-origination.

For our purposes, the implications of this dynamic view of karma as an approach to moral assessment and reasoning reveals that in this “framework there is no morally significant distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding actions. Nor is there any limit to the domain of the ethical. Karma is ubiquitous, interdependence is endless ... responsibility can only be universal” (Garfield n.d. [a]). Universal responsibility is a key Mahāyāna moral idea but we also see it in the Pāli scriptures as deep concern for all sentient beings. The overriding aim of cultivating virtues in Buddhist practice is to transform



the “poisonous” states of character (*kleśas*) of attachment (*raga*), aversion (*dveṣa*) and ignorance (*avidyā*) that foster suffering and obscure the “real and true” nature of reality.<sup>5</sup>

### KEY BUDDHIST VIRTUES

In Buddhism, one of the practice frameworks for cultivating virtue, for both lay practitioners and monks, is the taking of precepts, with the most general moral aspirations being outlined in the Five Precepts (*pañcaśīla*) that every Buddhist avows in the formal “going for refuge” ceremony.<sup>6</sup> The Five Precepts are expressed in the negative: “to refrain from harming living creatures; to refrain from taking what has not been given; to refrain from sexual immorality; to refrain from speaking falsely; and to refrain from taking intoxicants” (Keown 2005: 9). According to Keown, the precepts “may be thought of as a list of things that a virtuous person will never do” (*ibid.*: 12). The cultivation of virtue through Buddhist practice aims to internalize key moral dispositions and virtues so that ethical conduct spontaneously and naturally manifests in appropriate situations. This suggests that the precepts become a list of things that, by definition, a virtuous person *can* never do.

This perspective is illustrated by the two differing paradigms of moral ideals or embodied virtue advanced in the Theravāda and the Mahāyāna schools. Briefly, in the Theravāda tradition the ideal figure of the *arahant* (“worthy one” or “destroyer of enemies”) represents the culmination of the Eightfold Path and the overcoming of the three poisons of attachment, aversion and ignorance. The *arahant* (Sanskrit: *arhat*) is a practitioner who has attained spiritual perfection and, as a consequence of this, will not be reborn. The *arahant* “has nothing further to add to this moral and spiritual perfection, but his or her virtue is not constrained by ideas of what he or she *ought* to do: he or she just naturally acts in a virtuous way, without being attached to virtue” (Harvey 2000: 45).

In the Mahāyāna tradition the moral ideal is the *bodhisattva* (“enlightenment being” or “being-for-enlightenment”).<sup>7</sup> The *bodhisattva* represents the key orientations of the Mahāyāna tradition: all-encompassing selfless compassion and the aspiration to practise for the liberation of all sentient beings. The *bodhisattva* is a being that has achieved enlightenment who then forgoes or postpones his own enlightenment to remain in this world and help relieve the suffering of others. Although both schools recognize that practising for the liberation of all beings is more “perfectly virtuous” than working for solely for one’s own liberation, the Mahāyāna tradition extends the altruistic notion of practising for the liberation of all beings into the *bodhisattva* path formulated and codified by the Mahāyāna sage Śāntideva (fl. 8 c. CE) in his *Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life* (*Bodhicaryāvatāra*).<sup>8</sup>

Although the two main schools of Buddhism, Theravāda and Mahāyāna, share a common basis in the key teachings of the Pāli Canon, the elaborations of the Mahāyāna tradition offer a different emphasis on the priority of virtues and, as briefly seen above, different exemplars of moral ideals. For the purposes of this discussion, we will focus on the ethical practice frameworks of the Four Divine States (*brahma vihāra*) from the Theravāda Pāli Canon and the Six Perfections (*pāramitā*) from the Mahāyāna Lotus Sūtra (*saddharma puṇḍarīka sūtra*). In addition to this, the virtues of mindfulness and non-attachment will be discussed as pivotal virtues for both traditions.

From the Pāli Canon the Four Divine States (*brahma vihāra*), along with their “near enemy” or “that which masquerades as the virtue” and their “far enemy” or opposing vice, are:<sup>9</sup>

- *Mettā*: loving-kindness towards all; loving-kindness is “the wish that all sentient beings, without any exception, be happy” (Pannyavaro n.d.). Near enemy: selfish affection/attachment. Far enemy: ill-will/hatred.
- *Karuṇā*: compassion; the hope that a person’s sufferings will diminish; compassion is the “wish for all sentient beings to be free from suffering” (Pannyavaro n.d.). Near enemy: pity. Far enemy: cruelty.
- *Muditā*: altruistic joy in the accomplishments of a person, oneself or other; sympathetic joy – “the wholesome attitude of rejoicing in the happiness and virtues of all sentient beings” (Pannyavaro n.d.). Near enemy: hypocrisy/insincerity. Far enemy: resentment/envy.
- *Upekkhā*: equanimity, or learning to accept both loss and gain, praise and blame, success and failure with detachment, equally, for oneself and for others. Equanimity means “not to distinguish between friend, enemy or stranger, but to regard every sentient being as equal. It is a clear-minded tranquil state of mind – not being overpowered by delusions, mental dullness or agitation” (Pannyavaro n.d.). Near enemy: indifference. Far enemy: craving/clinging/greed.

It should be noted that the Four Divine States each have a “near enemy” and a “far enemy”. These distinctions serve to give a clearer definition of the nature of the virtue that is to be cultivated. The “near enemy” represents the negative aspect most readily mistaken for the given Divine State whereas the “far enemy” is the virtual opposite of the virtue in question. Loving-kindness, therefore, should be free of attachment; compassion should be without pity; altruistic joy should be sincere and not tainted by hypocrisy; and equanimity does not entail indifference.

The Four Divine States are virtues to be “worked on” in meditative practice; the practitioner internalizes these attitudes not only for herself but for “all sentient beings”. In this way the qualities or virtues become “boundless” and take on broader social implications.

The cultivation of loving-kindness, compassion and altruistic joy begins with focusing on oneself and then extends to encompass all sentient beings. Given the presupposition of dependent co-origination and the need to address the overriding problem of suffering, this is a natural extension that, in many ways, overcomes the problem of the cultivation of virtues being only for self-interest. In keeping with the Buddhist focus on liberation or “liberating insight” in meditative practice, the cultivation of these qualities is said to “serve as a firm basis for the liberating insight into the true nature of all phenomena, as being impermanent, liable to suffering and unsubstantial. A mind that has achieved meditative absorption induced by the sublime states will be pure, tranquil, firm, collected and free of coarse selfishness” (Thera n.d.).

As well as fostering the kindred virtue of generosity, focusing on these first three virtues of loving-kindness, compassion and altruistic joy supports cultivation of the accompanying virtue of nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*). Based on compassion (*karuṇā*), concern (*dayā*) and sympathy (*anukampā*) for all living things, the virtue of *ahiṃsā* is one of the foundational ideas of Indian ethical thought. In addition to the cultivation of a “deeply positive respect



for all living things”, the cultivation of *ahimsā* also entails a deeply engaged “sense of empathy with all life based on the awareness that others dislike pain and death as well as oneself” (Keown 2005: 14). These virtues reinforce the deep concern for all sentient beings and assist in undermining the attachment to a reified sense of self or “I”.

Furthermore, working with the fourth virtue, equanimity (*upekkhā*), also reinforces the pivotal virtue of non-attachment. In the cultivation of equanimity attachments to dichotomous polarized ways of thinking and substantialized ontologies that can strengthen the “I” attachment are undermined. The cultivation of equanimity also further emphasizes the equality of all beings by not fostering preferences for self over others. In Buddhist thought as soon as there is a preference for “mine” as opposed to “not mine” there is reification that leads to mistaken identifications precluding “real” understandings and perpetuating delusion. A practitioner who has cultivated these virtues at a deep level has the potential to act virtuously habitually and spontaneously because she is flourishing in a dynamic understanding of the three marks of existence: impermanence (*anitya*), suffering (*duḥkha*) and no-self (*anātman*).

Mention must be made of the loving-kindness aspiration that all beings be “happy”. The wish that all sentient beings be happy is a common aspiration in Buddhist thought, often advanced by the current Dalai Lama, but it is a concept subject to some misinterpretation. Happiness, in Buddhism, is most often understood as “flourishing”. Indeed, there are some similarities to the nuanced meaning of eudaimonia in Greek thought. To be “happy” in this sense is not to experience subjective contentment, but to be in accord with “how things are”: that is, to be flourishing in the understanding of the impermanent interconnectedness of all things. If basic Buddhist metaphysics are kept in mind, perhaps there are also comparisons to be made with the Stoic “good flow of life”. In this sense, we can say that Buddhism has a eudaimonistic orientation.

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, moral attention is focused on the cultivation of a set of perfections (*pāramitā*) or virtues. The Sanskrit *pāramitā* is an ancient word with obscure etymological origins. In Buddhist thought it is a central ethical term that denotes particular ideals of human character that guide self-cultivation. The standard translation of “perfection” is somewhat misleading, at least as far the Mahāyāna tradition is concerned, for it gives the idea of a “permanent” and “fixed” goal of Buddhist practice that has a final end point. As Dale Wright points out, this is countered by Buddhist ideas of wisdom that insist “that all things change in complex ways, that nothing is fixed or static, and that, like everything else, the path of enlightenment is open and ongoing, without end” (2009: 7).

The six perfections as outlined in the Mahāyāna Lotus Sūtra are:

- *Dāna pāramitā*: generosity, giving of oneself
- *Śīla pāramitā*: virtue, morality, discipline, proper conduct
- *Kṣānti pāramitā*: patience, tolerance, forbearance, acceptance, endurance
- *Vīrya pāramitā*: energy, diligence, vigour, effort, perseverance
- *Dhyāna pāramitā*: one-pointed concentration, contemplation
- *Prajñā pāramitā*: wisdom, insight (Bodhi n.d.).<sup>10</sup>

Although the Mahāyāna tradition also sees the Four Divine States as important virtues to be cultivated, especially the virtue of compassion, the emphasis of the Six Perfections is centred around the cultivation of dimensions of character that give rise to and support

the “thought of enlightenment” which, to the practising Buddhist, is somewhat akin to what “the idea of the Good” or “the good life” was to the ancient Greeks. To this end, the *pāramitās* emphasize virtues that are supports for the overarching effort and concentration that is required to generate insight. The *pāramitā* path hinges on three key orientations: openness and giving of oneself; the discipline involved in purifying and transforming intentions and conduct; and the patience, energy and diligence required to concentrate and generate insight into “the nature of things”. The overriding intention is “to practice in accordance with selflessness and non-attachment, and for the dual benefit of self and others” (Shen 2001: 4). This aspiration highlights the key virtues of selflessness and non-attachment that, in the Mahāyāna tradition, are the foundations of wisdom.

### PRIMARY VIRTUES: MINDFULNESS AND NON-ATTACHMENT

In addition to the virtues discussed above, both traditions stress the importance of the virtue of mindfulness (*smṛti*, Pāli: *sati*) and non-attachment (*arāga*). In terms of practice, these “virtues” can be identified as “primary virtues” because they represent the orientations required to cultivate understandings that support the fundamental platforms of Buddhist metaphysics: impermanence and dependent co-origination. In this sense they can be said to underlie and inform the cultivation of all other Buddhist virtues.

Central to the Buddhist quest is the need to cultivate clarity of mind (insight). The key to this is to awaken penetrative awareness of dependent co-origination and the cultivation of mindfulness. Equally important is the need to fully undo the key vice of attachment and to realize “no-self” or the non-substantiality of all things. The key to this is the cultivation of non-attachment. In short, the virtue of mindfulness fosters dynamic attentive clarity, and the virtue of non-attachment is an antidote to the substantializing tendencies that result in ontological reification.

The concept of “mindfulness” resonates through Buddhist discourse. It is the subject of one of the earliest suttas on meditative practice, *The Foundations of Mindfulness Sutta* (*Majjhima Nikāya: Sattipatthāna Sutta*) and is one of the dimensions of moral conduct in the Noble Eightfold Path. According to Garfield, the term “mindfulness” “denotes the joint operation of . . . two cognitive functions: attention (*smṛti*) and introspective vigilance (*samprajanya*)”, with attention involving “the fixation of attention on an object” and introspective vigilance being “the careful maintenance of that attention and of the attendant attitudes and motivations” (Garfield n.d. [b]). This is a succinct description of the manner in which the two attentive functions support and, to use Garfield’s term, “enable” each other. Thus, meditative attention is a cultivated focusing of awareness that enables the practitioner to be more aware of their mental states, especially their intentions and motives.

In a simple description of the Buddhist approach to cultivating virtue, Tibetan Lama Khamtrul Rinpoche points out to his students the importance of mindfulness: “easy it is to practice the Buddhist path perfectly for one second – just for one second, right action, right speech, right livelihood, etc. . . . and easy it is to continue it for one more second – but . . . only with mindfulness can . . . practice be preserved continuously, moment after moment” (Garfield n.d. [b]).

Along with mindfulness, a virtue that is pivotal to the overall cultivation of virtue in Buddhist practice is the virtue of non-attachment (*arāga*). Often translated as “detachment”,

the term is better rendered as “non-attachment” as, in English, the idea of being detached has the implication of not caring. In both traditions – with the Theravāda deep concern for all sentient beings and the Mahāyāna imperative of universal compassion – this is not the case. Just as the virtue of equanimity should be distinguished from indifference, non-attachment should be distinguished from the negative connotations of detachment.

In Buddhist thinking, the danger of reification is ever present. Beginning with the self, human beings habitually cling on to ideas of permanence and constancy and then form attachments to these reifications. To achieve insight into “the nature of things” it is crucial to break down these ontological and epistemological attachments by cultivating a deeply penetrating attitude of non-attachment. Forming attachments to self and things is akin to “putting the brakes on” the dynamic interdependent flow of reality that, in Buddhist thought, fosters the twin vices of aversion and ignorance. Importantly, the practitioner also must not form attachments to the path itself and it is this directive that generates many of the well-known paradoxes in Buddhism. Buddhist conundrums such as the path of no-path; spiritual cultivation cannot be cultivated; and the practice of no practice are pointers to not forming attachments to any reified aspect of Buddhist practices or teachings because to do so is to practise from ignorance and confusion and not to be in accord with “things as they are”.

In sum, the cultivation of non-attachment is primary to understanding the Buddhist worldview, not only in a metaphysical sense but also for the practical application of Buddhist ethical imperatives. In a public teaching, the Dalai Lama underscores the importance of cultivating non-attachment in support of the pivotal virtue of compassion, stating that:

the cultivation of detachment takes the sting out of discriminatory emotions toward others that are based on considerations of distance or closeness. You lay the groundwork on which you can cultivate genuine compassion extending to all other sentient beings. The Buddhist teaching on detachment does not imply developing an attitude of disengagement from or indifference to the world or life.

(Dalai Lama: 1998)

### CATEGORIZING BUDDHIST VIRTUES

In ancient Greek philosophy, the roots of virtue ethics lie in three concepts: *aretē* (excellence or virtue), *phronēsis* (practical or moral wisdom) and eudaimonia (happiness or flourishing). In very simple terms, the virtues are cultivated by employing practical wisdom and this cultivation, ultimately based on reason, results in human happiness or flourishing. In Buddhism, we can posit a similar framework: the Eightfold Path consists of three underlying principles: moral discipline (*śīla*), meditation (*samādhi*) and liberating insight (*prajñā*). Virtue is cultivated through moral discipline (e.g. the precepts), and virtuous aspects of mind are cultivated and non-virtuous aspects of mind are transformed in meditative practice. Liberating insight is both a quality to be cultivated and the “result” of practice. Therein lies the difference: at heart, ancient Greek philosophy relies on a primarily dualistic and linear substance ontology while Buddhism relies on an essentially non-dualistic, dynamic, process ontology. This orientation is the underlying thrust of one of Buddhism’s most famous paradoxes: “The path is the goal”.

In Buddhism, the cultivation of virtue is based on the need to overcome the spiritual and moral defilements of attachment, aversion and ignorance, which are the roots of unwholesome actions and the fundamental causes of suffering. As with all components of the Buddhist path, the virtues support each other. Their cultivation is not a step-by-step progression and nor do they flower in isolation. In Buddhism, moral virtue (*śīla*), meditation (*samādhi*) and liberating insight (*prajñā*) are intimately interconnected: “wisdom and virtue support each other like two hands washing each other” (*Dīgha Nikāya: Brahmajāla Sutta* 1.124). Based on the presuppositions of Buddhist metaphysics, the “goal” of Buddhist virtuous practice is by necessity very different from Greek ideas of the cultivation of virtue.

In this chapter we have identified mindfulness and non-attachment as “primary” Buddhist virtues. The importance of mindful focused attention or focused awareness is central to meditative practice. The quality of non-attachment is essential in avoiding the dangers of ontological reification. In practice, mindfulness keeps the practitioner focused “in the present” and non-attachment is the “remedy” for grasping, which is the cause of suffering. In this sense, we can say that mindfulness and non-attachment inform and support all Buddhist virtues.

To illustrate the interplay of the virtues in Buddhism, it is useful to categorize Buddhist virtues thus:

Primary virtues mindfulness – non-attachment		
Moral virtues	Meditation virtues	Insight virtues
loving-kindness	patience	concentration
compassion	effort	wisdom
altruistic joy	equanimity	
generosity		
nonviolence		
moral discipline		

This rubric correlates with the overarching principles of the Noble Eightfold Path, and serves to illustrate the dynamic nature of the practice. It also offers a useful heuristic framework for comparative purposes.

In the umbrella category of primary virtues are qualities that underlie the cultivation of all Buddhist virtues: mindfulness and non-attachment. Moral virtues are virtues that are cultivated with a view towards action in the world and extending the cultivation of virtue beyond self-interest. Meditation virtues are virtues that inform and support Buddhist meditative practice. The insight virtues of concentration and wisdom are virtues that are both the mainstay and “fruit” of meditative practice. The Buddhist emphasis on the dynamic nature of all things is reflected in the interrelated dynamic nature of the virtues themselves: like all “steps” on the Buddhist path they are interrelated and necessarily presuppose each other.

In Buddhism, human flourishing is predicated on a penetrating awareness of the empty, impermanent and interdependent nature of all things. “Happiness” or “the good life” results from understanding the nature of suffering and eradicating its cause: grasping. Philosophically, Buddhist thought focuses on examining the dynamic processes of reality

and highlighting the misunderstandings of ontological and epistemological reification. As we have seen in this discussion, the cultivation of virtue plays an important role in Buddhist practice and there are fruitful comparisons to be made with the various forms of virtue ethics that spring from Aristotle. However, in any comparison, Buddhist operative assumptions and metaphysical presuppositions must be taken into account.

#### NOTES

1. As noted above, Damien Keown has made a compelling case for Buddhist ethics being comparable to Aristotelian virtue ethics but there are other views. For an insightful discussion on Buddhist ethics and consequentialism see C. Goodman (2008, 2009). For a discussion that points out the difficulty in equating Buddhist ethics with Western ethical systems, see Adam (2005).
2. It should be noted that the Buddhist terms are nuanced and difficult to offer in simple translations. I have given standard variations. It should also be noted that in the Mahāyāna tradition *avidyā* (ignorance/delusion) tends to mean fundamental ignorance whereas *moha* is ignorance of causes and conditions. Contemporary Buddhist teachers tend to explain ignorance in the *avidyā* sense.
3. This emphasis on intention has led some scholars to see Buddhism as an ethics of intention or an agent-based form of virtue ethics and although there are some grounds for this it should be noted that the early Buddhist scriptures (Pāli Nikāyas) also offer a variety of complex grounds for moral action that are not necessarily intention based. See Vélez de Cea (2004).
4. The non-substantiality of selves presents some questions for the Buddhist theory of karma that are beyond the scope of this chapter. The basic question is two-fold: “If there is no-self what does karma attach to and who (or what) is reborn?” Very simply put: Buddhism does not deny the existence of selves – just the idea of an enduring essence or a substance self. In this sense Buddhist “selves” are process selves. The self is a composite of the five aggregates (*skandhas*) and the complex karmic traces attach to these aggregates in the rebirth process. This too is subject to the laws of dependent co-origination. See Gowans (2003) and Finnigan (2011) for useful discussions that address these issues.
5. The connection between karma and rebirth is an important aspect of Buddhist thought, which, for reasons of space and relevance, must be omitted here. The traditional doctrine of rebirth presents some interesting challenges and problems for Western Buddhists and is often not emphasized in contemporary Western Buddhist discourse. For an insightful article that questions the link between karma and rebirth, see Wright (2005).
6. There are various lists of precepts in Buddhism, some of which supplement the five given above, and a list of Eight Precepts (*pratimokṣa*) especially for monks (seven for nuns). For reasons of space, the Five Precepts have been chosen as the most representative.
7. In the *Jātaka Tales*, a collection of morality tales in the Pāli literature about the Buddha’s past lives, the Buddha is referred to as a *bodhisattva* in his previous lives.
8. The path of the *bodhisattva* emphasizes the virtue of skilful means (*upāyakaūśalya*) in which an enlightened being can transgress “ordinary” moral guidelines out of selfless compassion and a heightened spiritual awareness. Skilful means is found in the Pāli Canon, and is a virtue usually attributed to the Buddha, but it is developed into a predominant teaching with the moral ideal of the *bodhisattva*. See *Upāyakaūśalya Sūtra* (Tatz 1994), *The Bodhicaryāvatāra* (Crosby & Skilton 1995) and Clayton (2006).
9. Original terms in Pāli.
10. The Flower Ornament Sūtra (*Avataṃsaka Sūtra*) (chapter 26) lists four more *pāramitās*: *upāya pāramitā*: skilful means; *prañidhāna pāramitā*: vow, resolution, aspiration, determination; *bala pāramitā*: spiritual power; *jñāna pāramitā*: knowledge (Bodhi n.d.).