

# TEACHING BUDDHIST ETHICS THROUGH THE LIFE OF THE BUDDHA

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper proposes a new approach to teaching Buddhist ethics through interpretations of the Buddha's life from the perspective of virtue ethics and meditation. Teaching Buddhist ethics in this way will improve the Buddhist contribution to global education in ethical matters. The paper is divided into two parts. The first part contends that Buddhist ethics is best understood as a form of virtue ethics that encompasses the entire Buddhist path, not just the "sīla" section of the path. The second part proposes to interpret the life of the Buddha from the perspective of virtue ethics and meditation.*

## 1. A BROADER UNDERSTANDING OF BUDDHIST ETHICS

In order to maximize the Buddhist contribution to global education in ethical matters, it seems necessary to revise the way Buddhist ethics is often portrayed in many books and articles. In order to render Buddhist ethics as relevant as possible for global education in ethics, it is best to understand it as a form of virtue ethics (Damien Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*).

Virtue ethics "is currently one of three major approaches in normative ethics." (Rosalind Hursthouse, *Virtue Ethics, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, p.1) The other two major approaches in normative ethics are "deontology" and "consequentialism." Whereas

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virtue ethics emphasizes moral character and virtue, deontology emphasizes rules and duties, and consequentialism emphasizes the consequences of actions. In the case of Buddhist virtue ethics, it emphasizes the virtuous character traits that constitute the minds of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

It would be a mistake to think that only virtue ethics is concerned with moral character and virtue, or that only consequentialism is concerned with the consequences of actions, and that only deontology is concerned with rules and duties. Buddhist ethics also takes into account the consequences of actions as well as rules and duties. Conversely, consequentialism and deontology also deal with the concepts of virtue and character. The distinction between the three main forms of normative ethics is not whether they contain discussions of virtues and moral character but rather whether such concepts are central and fundamental.

The foundations of Buddhist ethics are the virtuous character traits that constitute the minds of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Consequently, the primary concern of Buddhist ethics is to cultivate virtuous character traits, that is, mental development. Such virtue cultivation and mental development require the contribution of all sections of the Buddhist path. Buddhist virtue cultivation and mental development is achieved through the three trainings of the Buddhist path: training in “*sīla*” (moral conduct), training in concentration (*samādhi*), and training in wisdom (*paññā*). If it is the case that Buddhist ethics is primarily interested in virtue cultivation and mental development, and if such things require the contribution of the entire Buddhist path, then Buddhist ethics is inseparable from meditative practices intended to promote not only good moral conduct but also wisdom and concentration.

One of the most important concepts to properly understand Buddhist ethics is “*bhāvanā*.” The term “*bhāvanā*” literally means “bringing into being,” and it is often translated as “mental development” or “mental cultivation.” The term “*bhāvanā*” may also be used to translate the term meditation provided that we understand meditation in a broad sense, that is, as including different cognitive and devotional practices. The diverse practices

that fall under the umbrella term “*bhāvanā*” are necessary to develop virtuous character traits (*kusala dhamma*, Sanskrit *kuśāla dharma*).

Meditation in this broad sense of mental development leads to the performance of good actions through body, speech, and mind, which in turn lead to the cultivation of virtuous character traits. Thus, in Buddhist ethics, mental development or meditation, the performance of good actions, and the cultivation of virtuous character traits are intertwined.

Unlike consequentialism, Buddhist ethics does not claim that good actions are good because they lead to good consequences. Rather, actions are good because they are rooted into virtuous character traits such as generosity, friendliness, and wisdom. Unlike deontology, Buddhist ethics does not say that actions are good because they are consistent with a universal moral law. Rather, actions are consistent with the Dharma because they are rooted into virtuous character traits. In other words, the foundations of Buddhist ethics are the virtuous character traits and the mental development of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

If it is the case that Buddhist ethics is best understood as a form of virtue ethics in which the primary concern is virtue cultivation and mental development through meditation and the performance of good actions, then Buddhist ethics should not be portrayed as a form of deontology or consequentialism.

Both consequentialism and deontology tend to understand ethics in legalistic terms, that is, as lists of rules and precepts that can be subsumed under one universal moral law or overarching moral principle, for instance, the principle of utility, the categorical imperative, or the golden rule. Consequentialism and deontology conceive ethics primarily as a matter of following rules, observing precepts, and complying with a universal moral law. Virtue cultivation exists within consequentialism and deontology, but always subordinated to compliance with rules and the moral law.

In Buddhist ethics, however, compliance with rules and precepts is always subordinated to the cultivation of virtues and mental development. In other words, Buddhists do not become virtuous

to better comply with rules and precepts but rather they follow rules and precepts to develop their minds with virtuous qualities.

Yet, many books and articles portray Buddhist ethics in terms of rule following and compliance with lists of precepts. The problem with this understanding of Buddhist ethics is that it undermines the possible Buddhist contribution to global education in ethical matters. If Buddhist ethics is primarily a matter of following rules and complying with lists of precepts, then Buddhist ethics is likely to be understood as similar to Jewish, Christian, and Muslim ethics, and the unique contribution of Buddhist ethics to global education, namely, its emphasis on virtue cultivation through mental development will be neglected.

An unfortunate consequence of overlooking the relationship between virtue cultivation and mental development is that Buddhist ethics is often reduced to “*sīla*.” This reductionism can be seen in translations of “*sīla*” as “virtue.” For instance, Bhikkhu Nyanatiloka translates “*sīla*” as both “morality” and “virtue.” (*Buddhist Dictionary*, p.170) Likewise, Bhikkhu Bodhi translates “*sīla*” as “virtue” (*The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, p. 1375, p. 1399), although, to be fair, Bhikkhu Bodhi also translates “*sīla*” as “habit,” “rule,” and, in his latest translations, as “good behavior” or “behavior” (*The Suttanipāta*, p. 1340, p.1579). Even Peter Harvey in his widely acclaimed introduction to Buddhist Ethics translates “*sīla*” as “moral virtue” (*An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, p. 19).

Buddhist ethics cannot be reduced to “*sīla*” because the term “*sīla*” refers to external moral conduct. More specifically, “*sīla*” has to do with rules and precepts that regulates external verbal and bodily actions. However, Buddhist ethics regulates both external and internal actions. In other words, Buddhist ethics applies to bodily, verbal, and mental actions, not just bodily and verbal actions.

The Buddhist concept of moral action does not allow us to reduce Buddhist ethics to “*sīla*.” By moral action it is meant “*kamma*” (Sanskrit *karma*). The key text to properly understand the Buddhist concept of moral action is found in (AN.III.415). There the Buddha defines moral action as follows: “*It is intention, monks, what I call action. Having intended, someone acts through body,*

*speech, and mind.*” Two things can be inferred from this definition of moral action. First, without intention (*cetanā*) there is no moral action. Second, intentional actions are threefold: mental, verbal, and bodily.

If ethics has to do with intentional moral actions and if for the Buddha intentional actions can be bodily, verbal, and mental, then Buddhist ethics cannot be reduced to “*sīla*” because “*sīla*” does not deal with mental actions. Thus, portraying Buddhist ethics in legalistic terms as having to do primarily with “*sīla*” or different lists of rules and precepts distorts the nature of Buddhist ethics.

The Buddhist concept of virtue cannot be reduced to “*sīla*” either. In Buddhist ethics, the concept of virtue is best conveyed by the term “*kusala*.” The term “*kusala*” is commonly translated as “skillful” or “wholesome,” but “virtue” or “virtuous” are also legitimate translations.

The key text to properly understand the Buddhist concept of virtue is found in (MN.I. 47). There, the Buddha distinguishes between “*kusala*” and “*akusala*” actions, and between their roots “*kusalamūla*” and “*akusalamūla*.” The ten unvirtuous actions can be divided into bodily, verbal, and mental actions. The bodily actions are three: (1) killing living beings, (2) taking what is not given, and (3) misconduct in sensual pleasures. The verbal actions are four: (4) false speech, (5) malicious speech, (6) harsh speech, and (7) frivolous speech. The mental actions are three: (8) covetousness, (9) ill will, and (10) wrong view. The roots of unvirtuous actions (*akusalamūla*) are three unvirtuous character traits: greed (*lobha*), hate (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*). The virtuous actions are defined as abstaining from the ten unvirtuous actions and the three roots of unvirtuous actions are three virtuous character traits: generosity (*alobha*), friendliness (*adosa*), and wisdom (*amoha*). If the Buddhist concept of virtue (*kusala*) is applicable to bodily, verbal, and mental actions, then the Buddhist ethics cannot be reduced to “*sīla*” because “*sīla*” only applies to bodily and verbal actions.

Another argument against the reduction of Buddhist ethics to “*sīla*” is the fact that the entire Buddhist path has to do with ethical considerations. Each one of path factors can be right or

wrong, complete or incomplete. In this sense, the three path factors of the “*sīla*” section, namely, right action, right speech, and right livelihood, are not different from the factors in the other two sections, that is, the sections of concentration and wisdom. There is right and wrong action, right and wrong speech, right and wrong livelihood, but there is also right and wrong view, right and wrong intention, right and wrong effort, right and wrong mindfulness, and right and wrong concentration. If Buddhist ethics were reducible to “*sīla*,” then only the path factors that fall under “*sīla*” would be subject to ethical considerations. But that is not the case. The truth is that all path factors relate to ethics because they all can be right or wrong, complete or incomplete.

The Buddhist concept of perfection (*pāramitā*) also demonstrates that Buddhist ethics cannot be reduced to “*sīla*.” The perfection of “*sīla*” is just one of the ten perfections. The entire Buddhist path, whether formulated in terms of the ten perfections or the threefold system of training, seeks the cultivation of virtuous character traits and mental development. This emphasis on virtue cultivation and mental development is the cornerstone of Buddhist ethics; its primary concern. If we teach Buddhist ethics in terms of virtue cultivation and mental development, we will prevent the reduction of Buddhist ethics to “*sīla*,” the unique nature of Buddhist ethics will be better understood; and the Buddhist contribution to global education in ethical matters would improve.

## 2. TEACHING THE BUDDHA’S FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF VIRTUE ETHICS AND MEDITATION

The Buddhist contribution to global education in ethics could also improve with a new approach to teaching the life of the Buddha, an approach that is consistent with understanding of Buddhist ethics in terms of virtue cultivation and mental development. If Buddhist ethics is best understood as a form of virtue ethics inseparable from mental development, then we should teach the Buddha’s life accordingly, that is, from the perspective of virtue ethics and meditation.

This approach to teaching the life of the Buddha involves three steps. The first step consists in describing the main events

of the Buddha's life from an inclusive, non-sectarian perspective. This means that we use textual sources from different Buddhist traditions without privileging any of them. Describing the life of the Buddha according to the sources of just one tradition would alienate members from other traditions.

More specifically, this approach focus on the *Nidānakathā*, the earliest Theravāda attempt to provide a comprehensive biographical account of the Buddha, and the *Lalitavistara*, which is considered an "extended" (*vaipulya*) *Mahāyāna Sūtra*. This approach is open to other sources such as the *Mahāvastu* and the *Buddhacarita*. However, preference will be given to the *Nidānakathā* and the *Lalitavistara* because of their importance for *living* Theravāda and Mahāyanā traditions. This first step is descriptive and inclusive, it lets the narratives about the Buddha's life speak for themselves without adding anything that is said in such narratives and without favoring the ideas of any Buddhist school.

The description of the main events of the Buddha's life according to early Theravāda and Mahāyanā sources is not intended to search for the "historical" Buddha. That is, this approach does not try to determine which events of the Buddha's life are historical and which ones are legendary. Whether the narratives about the life of the Buddha are based on historical facts or legendary accounts is not a concern of this approach. This approach avoids the modernist assumptions of many western scholars and authors influenced by historical-critical methods. The question of whether the narratives about the Buddha's life are historically true is beyond the scope of this approach. This approach is interested in the ethical significance of the Buddha's life and its relevance for virtue cultivation and mental development.

The goal of this first step is to know what the earliest narratives say about the life of the Buddha and to realize that despite belonging to different traditions and disagreeing on some doctrinal matters, they all share a common admiration for the virtuous actions and the virtuous mental qualities of the Buddha. In sum, this approach to teaching the Buddha's life begins by describing the main events of his life according to early Theravāda and Mahāyanā sources without passing judgment on their historicity.

The second step of this approach examines the ethical significance of the Buddha's deeds. We ask about the ethical lessons that can be learned from the Buddha's deeds and explain their relevance for virtue cultivation and mental development.

This approach considers the Buddha an ethical role model because he is a paradigm of virtue cultivation and mental development. Other approaches, however, consider the Buddha an ethical role model because he is a paradigm of renunciation to the world and society. The contrast between renunciation and worldly life is obviously a central part of the Buddha's teachings and we are not saying anything against the ideal of renunciation exemplified by the Buddha. What this approach proposes is that the life of the Buddha can also be understood as an example of virtue cultivation and mental development. If the life of the Buddha is seen mainly as a symbol of renunciation to the world and society, then it unavoidably becomes less appealing to lay people, and then the Buddhist contribution to global education in ethics is not likely to increase. On the contrary, if the Buddha's life is seen as a symbol of virtue cultivation and mental development, then it may appeal to a greater number of people, and then the Buddhist contribution to global ethical education will increase.

This approach does more justice to the Buddha's life because his mental development and his cultivation of virtues did not begin after his renunciation to his life as a prince. By emphasizing the concepts of virtue cultivation and mental development, the entire Buddha's life becomes ethically relevant, not just his life after renunciation. In conclusion, in order to maximize the Buddhist contribution to global education in ethical matters it is best to interpret the Buddha, not as an ideal of renunciation to the world and society, but rather as an ideal of virtue cultivation and mental development.

The third step of this approach consists in interpreting the Buddha's life from the perspective of meditation. We have already said that in Buddhist ethics virtue cultivation is inseparable from mental development because cultivating virtuous character traits requires the practice of various methods to train the mind. By interpreting the Buddha's deeds from the perspective of meditation, we make his life even more relevant for virtue cultivation and mental development.

It is undeniable that Buddhist meditation have transcended the borders of Buddhism. More and more people are practicing meditation techniques that have their origins in Buddhist traditions. These practitioners can be divided into four main groups: Buddhist practitioners, members of other religions, spiritual seekers without religious affiliation, and secular meditators that are neither religious nor spiritual seekers. What these four groups of people have in common is that they all find meditation useful to cope with or to alleviate various forms of suffering. Whether people meditate for religious, spiritual, or just for health related reasons, they all could benefit from interpretations of the Buddha's life that relate his deeds to diverse aspects of meditation.

Practitioners of meditation who are non-Buddhists will be more interested in the Buddha's life if some of their events are interpreted from the perspective of meditation. Likewise, Buddhist practitioners will benefit from new interpretations of the Buddha's life from the perspective of meditation because they will see his deeds in a different light.

The new meditative light that this approach sheds on the Buddha's life enhances rather than hinders beams of light that may come from other ethical and spiritual interpretations. Interpreting the Buddha's life from the perspective of meditation (third step) does not need to contradict interpretations of the Buddha's life from the perspective of virtue ethics (second step). Rather, the two types of interpretations complement each other because they both foster virtue cultivation and mental development.

As an example of how this approach sheds new light on the Buddha's life and improves the Buddhist contribution to global education in ethics, we now apply the three steps to one of the Buddha's deeds, namely, to the Buddha's descent from Tusita heaven.

The Buddha's descent from Tusita heaven is often ignored in many contemporary discussions of the Buddha's life. Due to the influence of modernist assumptions, many people dismiss the Buddha's descent from Tusita heaven as a non-historical event and, therefore, as something that has no place in a "biography" of the Buddha. This modernist assumption is problematic because it

fails to appreciate the ethical significance of the Buddha's descent from Tusita as well as its connection to the Buddha's entire ethical project, an ethical project that, according to Buddhist narratives themselves, began many eons ago. Modernist assumptions are also problematic because they forget that the narratives about the Buddha's life are hagiographies, not biographies. That is, narratives about the Buddha's life are irreducible to history, not because they are non-historical but rather because they are much more than history. Unlike approaches based on modernist assumptions, this approach respects the hagiographical nature of the Buddha's life, and preserves the link between his descent from Tusita and subsequent deeds.

### 3. NARRATIVES ABOUT THE BUDDHA'S DESCENT FROM TUSITA

According to the *Nidānakathā*, when the Bodhisattva was living in the city of Tusita heaven, the guardian deities of the world proclaimed that a Buddha, an Enlightened One would appear in the world on the elapse of one thousand years. The deities of the ten thousand world spheres heard the proclamation and decided to gather in order to ascertain whether the Bodhisattva was qualified to become the future Buddha. After determining that the Bodhisattva was qualified, the gods decided to visit him in Tusita. There, the gods reminded the Bodhisattva of his intention and encouraged him to fulfill it for the sake of liberating beings.

Then the future Buddha looked for "the Five Great Considerations." That is, the Bodhisattva considered whether the time, the region, the country, the family, and the mother were all suitable for his final rebirth within samsara. First he considered the time and saw that it was suitable because the lifespan of beings was neither too long nor too short. When the lifespan of beings is too long - more than one hundred thousand years, beings are not really motivated to think about their next rebirth, old age, and death, and they are not likely to be interested in a teaching that speaks about impermanence, suffering, and selflessness. When the lifespan is too short - less than one hundred years, beings with many mental defilements do not have enough time to remove them and attain liberation. However, when the lifespan of beings is neither too long nor too short - around one hundred years, then it is a suitable time for the Bodhisattva's final rebirth.

Afterwards, the Bodhisattva considered the region and the country in which he could be born. He realized that Buddhas are not born in three of the four continents that comprise the world. He saw that he could only be reborn in the southern continent (Jambudīpa, the Indian subcontinent), in the Middle Country, because that was the region where Buddhas, Pacceka Buddhas, leading disciples, universal monarchs, wealthy and powerful families are born. Then the Bodhisattva decided to be born in the city of Kapilavatthu, which was situated within a suitable region and country.

After considering the time, the region, and the country, the Bodhisattva considered his future family. He only surveyed families of the higher two classes because Buddhas are not born in lower classes, that is, in families of merchants (*vessa*) and servants (*sudda*). Buddhas are born in families of either noble-warriors (*khattiya*) or brahmins (*brahmana*) depending on which one is more prominent at a given time. The Buddha chose a family of noble-warriors, that of king Suddhodhana, because noble-warriors were more important at that time.

Finally, the Bodhisattva considered his future mother. He saw that queen Mahāmāyā, Suddhodhana's wife, had been cultivating many virtues for a hundred thousand eons, and had observed the five ethical precepts since she was born. The Bodhisattva saw that her mother would live for ten months and seven days, which was also suitable because the pregnancy of future Buddhas lasts ten months.

Once the Bodhisattva considered the time, the region, the country, the family, and his mother, he then told the gods visiting Tusita that it was time for him to become a Buddha. The Bodhisattva dismissed all the visiting deities and, together with just the gods from Tusita, he went to the Nandana Gardens. In the Nandana gardens, deities go about reminding one another of the opportunities they had to perform good actions in the past. In other words, the Bodhisattva prepared for his death by remembering his past good deeds. Then, the Bodhisattva passed away and descended into the womb of queen Mahāmāyā.

According to the *Lalitavistara*, the Bodhisattva dwells in Tusita heaven and bears the name of Śvetaketu. He is more than ready

to be born again in the human world to attain the perfect and complete qualities of a Buddha. He is already endowed with the eye of wisdom, and he is said to have cultivated many virtuous qualities including skillful means, the six perfections, the four *brahmavihāras*, mindfulness, non-attachment, etc. The compassion of the Bodhisattva is also exalted and said to derive from his higher intention. The Bodhisattva's morality and wisdom are said to be always balanced and abundant. He is imbued with the Dharma, with the difficult teaching of dependent origination. He is clothed in virtue. His virtue is unshakeable because he has practiced for seven kalpas and followed well the ten courses of virtuous actions. He has attended and served thousands of Buddhas and Pratyekabuddhas in the past.

While the Bodhisattva is seated at ease in the greatest celestial palace of all, a palace where joy, serenity and mindfulness are born, melodies of encouragement begin to sound. The melodies exhort the Buddha to reflect upon the abundant merit he has accumulated and the prediction of Dīpaṃkara. The melodies encourage him to recall all the good things he has done and all the virtues qualities he has cultivated during hundreds of millions of *kalpas*. The melodies ask him to remember his compassion for all beings and to prepare to be born.

Moved by such melodies, the Bodhisattva decides to leave his crystal palace called *Uccadhvaja* and goes to another palace called *Dharmocaya* in which he often teaches the gods of Tusita. The Bodhisattva is followed by thousands of gods, and fellow bodhisattvas from the ten directions are summoned. They all sit on lion thrones and when all were united in the same thought of meditation, the Bodhisattva announces that he will enter the womb of a mother in twelve years. Gods rejoice.

The Bodhisattva has four great visions during his stay in that palace. He has a vision of the time, the region, the country, and the family in which he is going to be reborn. A vision of the time because the Bodhisattva does not enter the womb of a mother at the beginning of a world when beings are still developing, but rather when the world has evolved and beings are subject to old age, sickness, and death. A vision of the region because the Bodhisattva

are not born in barbarian lands. Bodhisattvas are born only in the southern continent, in *Jambudvīpa*, the Rose-apple island.

A vision of the country because Bodhisattvas are not born in countries where people are ignorant and unable to differentiate between right and wrong. They are born in the middle countries. A vision of the family because Bodhisattvas are not born in the lower classes. They are born in families of either noble-warriors or brahmins, depending on which one is most respected. Families of noble-warriors are most respected now, so the Bodhisattva will be born in one of them. After the four great visions, the Bodhisattva remains silent.

Children of gods and bodhisattvas begin to consider various families for the future Buddha, but they see that all royal families in the sixteen great kingdoms are unsuitable. Then they go to ask the Bodhisattva about his future family and his future mother. The Bodhisattva explains that he will be born within a family with sixty-four kinds of qualities including good reputation, wealth, power, high ethical standards and great knowledge. Likewise, the Bodhisattva tells them that he will descend into the womb of a woman endowed with thirty-two qualities during the full moon of the month Puṣya. After learning about the qualities for the Bodhisattva's family and his mother, the children of gods and the other bodhisattvas begin to consider once again which family would be most appropriate. They determine that the Bodhisattva's family and his mother would be found in the city of the Śākya, in the family of king Śuddhodana and queen Māyādevī. The Bodhisattva's mother is praised for her beauty and moral character.

After the four great visions of the time, the region, the country, and the family of his last rebirth, and after considering his future mother, the Bodhisattva returns to the *Uccadhvaja* crystal palace to teach for the last time. Once the instruction to the great assembly of gods and bodhisattvas is concluded, the Bodhisattva says that he will go now to the land of Jambu. The children of gods cry and ask him to stay. The Bodhisattva tells them that the Bodhisattva Maitreya will teach them the Dharma, and after placing the diadem from his own head on the head of the Bodhisattva Maitreya, he affirms that Maitreya will be the next Buddha after him. And in the

sight of all the gods and accompanied by millions of bodhisattvas, the Bodhisattva begins his descent from Tusita heaven.

#### 4. THE BUDDHA'S DESCENT FROM TUSITA FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF VIRTUE ETHICS

The narrative about the Buddha's descent from Tusita teaches two main lessons about Buddhist ethics. First, ideal Buddhist ethics presupposes a compassionate intention. Second, such compassionate intention leads to the cultivation of virtuous qualities called perfections (*pāramitā*).

According to the *Nidānakathā*, the Bodhisattva is visited by gods while dwelling in Tusita heaven, and they remind him of his compassionate intention behind his virtue cultivation and mental development. This is what gods tell the Bodhisattva: “*Sir, when you were fulfilling the ten perfections, you did not do so with a view to attain the state of a Sakka or a Māra, a Brahmā or a Universal Monarch; but you have fulfilled them with the intention of gaining the fullness of understanding in order to liberate humankind. Now Sir, the moment has come for your Buddhahood. Sir, it is now the time for your Buddhahood*” (N.A. Jayawickrama. *The Story of Gotama Buddha*, p.64). What gods say to the Buddha presupposes an ethical concern for the Bodhisattva. The gods want the Bodhisattva to do the right thing, what is best for him and others, that is, what is good from an ethical standpoint. The right thing to do is not to be satisfied with anything less than becoming a Buddha. Becoming a powerful god, be it Sakka, Māra, or Brahmā should not be the ultimate goal of the Bodhisattva. Similarly, becoming a universal monarch fall short of the highest ethical ideal, which is becoming a Buddha. Failing to become a Buddha would be morally wrong, unethical for the Bodhisattva because he made a vow many eons ago. It is now that he is in Tusita that the time has come for finally fulfilling his vow. It is important to note that gods serve an ethical purpose, i.e., encouraging the Bodhisattva to do the right thing. Gods are also relevant from the perspective of virtue ethics because they illustrate two key virtuous qualities when they encourage the Bodhisattva to fulfill his intention. The gods care about the Bodhisattva's ethical development and wish him the best for him, which is to become

a Buddha, not just a god or a universal monarch. This wish for the ethical development of the Buddha illustrates the virtue of loving-kindness (*metta*, Sanskrit *maitrī*), which consists in wishing happiness and wellbeing, in this case the happiness and wellbeing associated with attaining awakening and realizing Nirvana, the highest possible happiness. The gods also care about the liberation of humankind, they want the Bodhisattva's fullness of understanding to have a practical purpose, namely, to liberate humankind from suffering. This wish to liberate beings from suffering illustrates the virtue of compassion (*karuṇā*). Loving-kindness and compassion are two indispensable virtues to develop the mind of all living beings. They are the first two *brahmavihāras* or divine-abodes. The Bodhisattva is precisely described in the *Lalitavistara* as being endowed "with great loving kindness and great compassion, with great joy and great equanimity." (Gwendolyn Bays, *The Voice of the Buddha*, p.17).

It is interesting to note that in the *Lalitavistara* the compassionate intention of the Bodhisttava is extensively praised, but gods do not remind him about his intention like in the *Nidānakathā*. In the *Lalitavistara* melodies, not gods, ask the Bodhisattva to remember his compassion and his past actions, thus encouraging him to descend from Tusita: "Reflect upon all you have done during hundreds of millions of kalpas! Remember, remember, you whose renown is boundless, the hundreds of millions Buddhas you have honored. Reflect you're your compassion for all; remember your great actions. Now is the time! Do not let it slip away! Prepare to be reborn..." (Gwendolyn Bays, *The Voice of the Buddha*, pp. 23-24).

Both Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions portray the Bodhisattva as having a compassionate intention, but Mahayana Buddhism emphasizes more the idea of compassionate intention through the concept of "bodhicitta." The term "bodhicitta" literally "enlightenment-mind," is commonly translated as "mind of enlightenment" and refers to the aspiration to reach "unsurpassable, complete and perfect enlightenment" (Sanskrit, *anuttarasamyaksambodhi*), that is, enlightenment as a Buddha (*sammāsambuddha*, Sanskrit *samyaksambuddha*). The *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* defines "bodhicitta" as an intention that has two aims, to become a Buddha and to liberate beings from suffering. Thus, we can define the Bodhisattva's

compassionate intention as the aspiration to attain enlightenment as a Buddha in order to better help sentient beings to attain liberation from suffering.

This compassionate intention is worthy of the utmost respect and admiration because it arises out of unselfish concern for the suffering of other beings. Bodhisattvas could have chosen a shorter path to attain enlightenment as disciples of a Buddha, but they prefer to spend more time practicing the perfections and become Buddhas themselves. The beginning of the Bodhisattva path is marked by the arising of this compassionate intention. In the case of the Buddha Gotama (Sanskrit Gautama), the first time he expressed his compassionate intention to become enlightened as a Buddha, thereby starting his journey as a Bodhisattva, was before the Buddha Dīpaṃkara. At that time the Buddha Gotama was an ascetic called Sumedha. When he saw the Buddha Dīpaṃkara approaching, Sumedha realized that he could attain enlightenment in that very life if he were to become his disciple and follow his teachings. Instead, Sumedha made a vow or resolution to become a Buddha at a later time, when there were not Buddhas in the world. The Buddha Dīpaṃkara saw the future and confirmed that Sumedha would become the Buddha Gotama.

The cause of the Bodhisattva's intention is compassion. Like compassion, the Bodhisattva's intention or "*bodhicitta*" needs to be cultivated so that it becomes more than a mere intention and leads to the actual mental development of virtuous qualities, especially the perfections. The Indian Mahāyāna thinker Śāntideva distinguishes between two aspects of the mind of enlightenment or "*bodhicitta*." The first aspect is the arising of *bodhicitta*, that is, the arising of a compassionate intention, which Śāntideva compares to the decision to undertake a journey. The second aspect is developing the compassionate intention so that it leads to the practice of perfections. Śāntideva compares this second aspect of "*bodhicitta*" to the actual setting out on that journey.

Before becoming the Buddha Gotama, the Bodhisattva had to develop his compassionate intention and practice the perfections over many lives in different realms of existence and planes of rebirths.

The Buddha's descent from Tusita illustrates how ideal Buddhist ethics begins with a compassionate intention that leads to goods actions and the gradual cultivation of virtues called perfections.

Both Theravāda and Mahāyāna speaks about the cultivation of perfections, though they offer slightly different lists of ten perfections. According to Mahāyāna traditions, the six main perfections are giving (*dāna*), moral conduct (*śīla*), patience (*kṣānti*), energy (*vīrya*), meditation (*dhyāna*), and wisdom (*prajñā*). The *Daśabhūmika Sūtra* adds four perfections and in that way the Bodhisattva fulfills one perfection at each one of the ten Bodhisattva grounds or stages. The four added perfections are skillful means (*upaya*), vow/resolution (*praṇidhāna*), power (*bala*), and knowledge (*jñāna*).

The ten perfections of Theravāda Buddhism are giving (*dāna*), moral conduct (*sīla*), renunciation (*nekkhamma*), wisdom (*paññā*), energy (*vīrya*), patience (*khanti*), truthfulness (*sacca*), determination (*adhiṭṭhāna*), loving-kindness (*mettā*), and equanimity (*upekkha*). The commentary to the *Brahmajāla Sutta* attributed to Dhammapāla states that the ten perfections can be reduced to six, the same six perfections characteristic of Mahāyāna traditions.

It is fair to say that the cultivation of the six perfections and the emphasis on the development of a compassionate intention called "*bodhicitta*" is not unique to Mahāyāna traditions, but rather characteristic of Mahāyāna traditions. The important point, however, is that both Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions consider the Buddha and the Bodhisattva path as the most exemplary way of life leading towards enlightenment. Likewise, both Theravāda and Mahāyāna agree that the Bodhisattva path requires a compassionate intention and the cultivation of the six main perfections.

## 5. THE BUDDHA'S DESCENT FROM TUSITA FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MEDITATION

From the perspective of meditation, the Buddha's descent from Tusita heaven can be fruitfully compared to mindfulness practice. Specifically, what the Buddha did while dwelling in Tusita can be interpreted as diverse applications of mindfulness. In the first

application of mindfulness, the Bodhisattva became mindful of conditions conducive to further practice in his last rebirth as human being. Specifically, the Bodhisattva became mindful of the time, the region, the country, the family, and the mother for his future and last rebirth. Similarly, practitioners of meditation may find inspiration in the Buddha's descent from Tusita and apply mindfulness to their respective conditions conducive to further practice in the immediate future. Obviously, we are not the Buddha and we are not in Tusita, so we are not suggesting that we apply mindfulness in exactly the same way as the Buddha did and consider the exact same things that he considered. Rather, we are saying that we can follow the Buddha's example and adjust what the Buddha did in Tusita to our own practice. We can all remember what the Buddha did in Tusita and we can all apply mindfulness to our conditions for future practice. Just like the Buddha continued his practice after considering the ideal conditions for it, we can all become mindful of the time, the place, and other conditions for our practice. The purpose of this preliminary application of mindfulness to the conditions for our practice is to make sure that they are suitable and conducive to fruitful practice.

First, we consider whether the time we are going to devote to mindfulness is suitable. A suitable time does not have to be the right, the best or the perfect time. A suitable time is just a right time, a good time, a time in which we can actually devote some time to practice fruitfully. What makes a time suitable is not the amount of days or hours or minutes we can spend practicing mindfulness. A time is suitable whenever it allows for meditation practice, be it a few moments, a few minutes, or a few days.

After considering the time, we consider the place in which we are going to practice. The Buddha surveyed the region and the country most suitable to fulfill his Bodhisattva path, we just need to be mindful of the place to make sure it is suitable for our meditative needs.

Third, after considering the time and the place for mindfulness practice, we should consider the "family" of other conditions that may make our practice as fruitful as possible. We may think about objects that may facilitate our meditation including timers, bells, incense, gongs, music, cushions, benches, chairs. The purpose of

considering these “family” conditions for practice is, like in the case of considering the time and the place, to make sure they are suitable and conducive to a fruitful practice.

In the second application of mindfulness, the Bodhisattva became mindful of his intention and his past good actions as preparation for further practice. Similarly, we can become mindful of our intention for practice as well as the virtuous actions (deeds, words, and thoughts) that were conducive to practice in the past. We recall what the Buddha did while dwelling in Tusita and try to emulate him by remembering our intentions for practice, that is, we mindfully bring to our mind our goals and the reasons for doing what we are doing. We all need to revisit and, if necessary, to reset our intention for our mindfulness practice.

Just like the Buddha remembered and became mindful of his intention while in Tusita heaven, we should also remember and become mindful of our intention before we start a substantial period of practice. We are free to choose our own intention. However, once we set an intention for our practice, there is no harm in remembering it and becoming mindful of it from time to time. By remembering and becoming mindful of our intention right before we start our practice, we are likely to feel energized and more motivated to keep our practice going. In case we have diverted from our intention, remembering it and becoming mindful of it can help us to redirect our practice. Whether we practice mindfulness to become enlightened as a Buddha, or to liberate ourselves from suffering, remembering our intention and becoming mindful of it will always be a good way of keeping our practice focused.

Perhaps it would be useful to divide our intention into a general long term aspiration and specific short term goals. The Buddha’s general aspiration was to become enlightened as a Buddha to better alleviate the suffering of beings. The Buddha’s specific goals changed over time and adjust to the circumstances he encountered, but it seems plausible to suggest that they were all related to virtue cultivation and mental development, first in himself and, after his enlightenment, in his disciples. Similarly, our intention for practice could be understood as having a general long term aspiration and specific short term goals that may change over time given our

personal circumstances. The general aspiration is the overall goal for our practice in the long term, the main reason why we practice mindfulness. Specific goals are short term intentions we set for particular times, days or periods of practice.

Having one general, long term aspiration for our meditation practice is compatible with having at the same time several specific short term goals for particular moments, times, and days of practice. It is easy to forget the main reason why we are practicing meditation. That is why we need to remember and to become mindful of our general aspiration for practice, resetting it from time to time if we have neglected it or diverted from it. Being mindful of our intentions and contemplating them on a regular basis is a good way of making sure we do not forget them.

From a Buddhist perspective, the ideal intention is symbolized by the Bodhisattva's aspiration to become a Buddha out of compassion for the suffering of others. However, mindfulness does not require an altruistic intention to be effective. We can practice mindfulness for health related reasons, i.e., to reduce stress, anxiety, or depression, to cope better with chronic pain, or just to increase our overall wellbeing.

Besides becoming mindful of his original intention, the Bodhisattva became mindful of his past good actions. Similarly, after becoming mindful of our intention, we can also remember our actions, specifically deeds, words, and thoughts that were conducive to our practice in the past. The Buddha was reminded and became mindful of his past good actions in order to reinforce his motivation for further practice in his last rebirth as a human being. Similarly, we should remember our past good actions to feel encouraged and continue practicing in the present.

Perhaps some people may find it useful to remember wholesome qualities, character traits, healthy dispositions that they have developed over time and that are helpful for practicing meditation, for instance, resilience, patience, determination, self-confidence. Perhaps other people may want to recall positive emotions derived from doing something good for others in the past. Still others may choose to become mindful of something beneficial they said

to someone. If memories of past good bodily, verbal, and mental actions are difficult to remember, we can always become mindful of something positive that allows us to practice now, for instance, the simple fact that we are human beings, that we are alive, breathing, and able to practice right now. Whatever memory or present quality that empowers us and makes us feel capable of further practice would be useful for this practice of Tusita-like mindfulness.

In conclusion, this paper has argued that the Buddhist contribution to global education in ethical matters can improve with a broader understanding of Buddhist ethics and more nuanced interpretations of the life of the Buddha. The first part of the paper has tried to demonstrate that Buddhist ethics is best understood as a form of virtue ethics that encompasses the entire Buddhist path, and that Buddhist ethics is primarily concerned with virtue cultivation and mental development. The second part of the paper have proposed an approach to teaching the Buddha's life that is consistent with the aforementioned understanding of Buddhist ethics, and that helps to foster the cultivation of virtues and the practice of meditation.

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