

Chapter 1

Buddhist morality

Morality is woven into the fabric of Buddhist teachings and there is no major branch or school of Buddhism that fails to emphasize the importance of the moral life. The scriptures of Buddhism in every language speak eloquently of virtues such as non-violence and compassion, and the Buddhist version of the 'Golden Rule' counsels us not to do anything to others we would not like done to ourselves. Although newcomers to Buddhism are often struck by the variety of the different Asian traditions, as divergent in form as Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, at the level of moral teachings there is much common ground. Some might disagree, but my own view is that we can speak of a common moral core underlying the divergent customs, practices, and philosophical teachings of the different schools. This core is composed of the principles and precepts, and the values and virtues expounded by the Buddha in the 5th century BCE and which continue to guide the conduct of some 350 million Buddhists around the world today. The purpose of this first chapter is to review these basic moral teachings.

Dharma

The ultimate foundation for Buddhist ethics is Dharma. Dharma has many meanings, but the underlying notion is of a universal law which governs both the physical and moral order of the universe. Dharma can best be translated as 'natural law', a term that captures

The Four Noble Truths

Duḥkha – All existence is suffering.

Samudāya – Suffering is caused by craving.

Nirodha – Suffering can have an end.

Mārga – The way to the end of suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path.

both its main senses, namely as the principle of order and regularity seen in the behaviour of natural phenomena, and also the idea of a universal moral law whose requirements have been revealed by enlightened beings such as the Buddha (note that Buddha claimed only to have discovered Dharma, not to have invented it). Every aspect of life is regulated by Dharma, from the succession of the seasons to the movement of the planets and constellations. Dharma is neither caused by nor under the control of a supreme being, and the gods themselves are subject to its laws, as was the Buddha. In the moral order, Dharma is manifest in the law of karma, which, as we shall see below, governs the way moral deeds affect individuals in present and future lives. Living in accordance with Dharma and implementing its requirements is thought to lead to happiness, fulfilment, and salvation; neglecting or transgressing it is said to lead to endless suffering in the cycle of rebirth (*saṃsāra*).

In his first sermon, the Buddha was said to have ‘turned the wheel of the Dharma’ and given doctrinal expression to the truth about how things are in reality. It was in this discourse that the Buddha set out the Four Noble Truths, the last of which is the Noble Eightfold Path which leads to nirvana. The Path has three divisions – Morality (*śīla*), Meditation (*samādhi*), and Insight (*prajñā*) – from which it can be seen that morality is an integral component of the path to nirvana.

The Eightfold Path and its Three Divisions

1. Right View

2. Right Resolve

Insight (*prajñā*)

3. Right Speech

4. Right Action

5. Right Livelihood

Morality (*śīla*)

6. Right Effort

7. Right Mindfulness

8. Right Meditation

Meditation (*samādhi*)

Karma

The doctrine of karma is concerned with the ethical implications of Dharma, in particular those relating to the consequences of moral behaviour. Karma is not a system of rewards and punishments meted out by God but a kind of natural law akin to the law of gravity. In popular usage in the West, karma is thought of simply as the good and bad things that happen to a person, a little like good and bad luck. However, this oversimplifies what for Buddhists is a complex of interrelated ideas which embraces both ethics and belief in reincarnation. The literal meaning of the Sanskrit word karma is 'action', but karma as a religious concept is concerned not with just any actions but with actions of a particular kind. Karmic actions are moral actions, and the Buddha defined karma by reference to moral choices and the acts consequent upon them. He stated, 'It is intention (*cetanā*), O monks, that I call karma; having willed one acts through body, speech, or mind' (A.iii.415).

Moral actions are unlike other actions in that they have both transitive and intransitive effects. The transitive effect is seen in the direct impact moral actions have on others; for example, when we kill or steal, someone is deprived of his life or property. The intransitive effect is seen in the way moral actions affect the agent. According to Buddhism, human beings have free will, and in the exercise of free choice they engage in self-determination. In a very real sense, individuals create themselves through their moral choices. By freely and repeatedly choosing certain sorts of things, individuals shape their characters, and through their characters their futures. As the English proverb has it: 'Sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.' The process of creating karma may be likened to the work of a potter who moulds the clay into a finished shape: the soft clay is one's character, and when we make moral choices we hold ourselves in our hands and shape our natures for good or ill. It is not hard to see how even within the course of a single lifetime particular patterns of behaviour lead inexorably to certain results. Great works of literature reveal how the fate that befalls the protagonists is due not to chance but to a character flaw that leads to a tragic series of events. The remote effects of karmic choices are referred to as the 'maturation' (*vipāka*) or 'fruit' (*phala*) of the karmic act. The metaphor is an agricultural one: performing good and bad deeds is like planting seeds that will fruit at a later date. Othello's jealousy, Macbeth's ruthless ambition, and Hamlet's hesitation and self-doubt would all be seen by Buddhists as karmic seeds, and the tragic outcome in each case would be the inevitable 'fruit' of the choices these character-traits predisposed the individual to make. Individuals are thus to a large extent the authors of their good and bad fortune.

Not all the consequences of what a person does are experienced in the lifetime in which the deeds are performed. Karma that has been accumulated but not yet experienced is carried forward to the next life, or even many lifetimes ahead. Certain key aspects of a person's

next rebirth are thought of as karmically determined. These include the family into which one is born, one's social status, physical appearance, and of course, one's character and personality, since these are simply carried over from the previous life. The doctrine of karma, however, does not claim that everything that happens to a person is karmically determined. Many of the things that happen in life – like winning a raffle or catching a cold – may simply be random events or accidents. Karma does not determine precisely what will happen or how anyone will react to what happens, and individuals are always free to resist previous conditioning and establish new patterns of behaviour.

What, then, makes an action good or bad? From the Buddha's definition above, it can be seen to be largely a matter of intention and choice. The psychological springs of motivation are described in Buddhism as 'roots', and there are said to be three good roots and three bad roots. Actions motivated by greed (*rāga*), hatred (*dveṣa*), and delusion (*moha*) are bad (*akuśala*), while actions motivated by their opposites – non-attachment, benevolence, and understanding – are good (*kuśala*). Making progress to enlightenment, however, is not simply a matter of having good intentions, and evil is sometimes done by people who act from the highest motives. Good intentions, therefore, must find expression in right actions, and right actions are basically those that are wholesome and do no harm to either oneself or others. The kinds of actions that fail these requirements are prohibited in various sets of precepts, about which more will be said below.

Merit

Karma can be either good or bad. Buddhists speak of good karma as 'merit' (*puṇya*; Pāli, *puñña*), and much effort is expended in acquiring it (its opposite, bad karma, is known as *pāpa*). Some Buddhists picture merit as a kind of spiritual capital – like money in a bank account – whereby credit is built up as the deposit on a

heavenly rebirth. One of the best ways for a layman to earn merit is by supporting the *sangha*, or order of monks. This can be done by placing food in the bowls of monks as they pass on their daily alms round, by providing robes for the monks, by listening to sermons and attending religious services, and by donating funds for the upkeep of monasteries and temples. Merit can even be made by congratulating other donors and rejoicing in their generosity. Some Buddhists make the accumulation of merit an end in itself, and go to the extreme of carrying a notebook to keep a tally of their karmic 'balance'. This is to lose sight of the fact that merit is earned as a by-product of doing what is right. To do good deeds simply to obtain good karma would be to act from a selfish motive, and would not earn much merit.

In many Buddhist cultures, there is a belief in 'merit transference', or the idea that good karma can be shared with others, just like money. Donating good karma has the happy result that instead of one's own karmic balance being depleted, as it would in the case of money, it increases as a result of the generous motivation in sharing. The more one gives, the more one receives! It is doubtful to what extent there is canonical authority for notions of this kind, although the motivation to share one's merit in a spirit of generosity is certainly karmically wholesome since it would lead to the formation of a generous and benevolent character.

Precepts

In common with Indian tradition as a whole, Buddhism expresses its ethical requirements in the form of duties rather than rights. These duties are thought of as implicit requirements of Dharma. The most general moral duties are those found in the Five Precepts, for example the duty to refrain from evil acts such as killing and stealing. On becoming a Buddhist, one formally 'takes' (or accepts) the precepts in a ritual context known as 'going for refuge', and the

The Five Precepts (*pañcaśīla*)

This is the most widely known list of precepts in Buddhism, comparable in influence to the Ten Commandments of Christianity. The Five Precepts are undertaken as voluntary commitments in the ceremony of 'going for refuge' when a person becomes a Buddhist.

They are as follows:

1. I undertake the precept to refrain from harming living creatures.
2. I undertake the precept to refrain from taking what has not been given.
3. I undertake the precept to refrain from sexual immorality.
4. I undertake the precept to refrain from speaking falsely.
5. I undertake the precept to refrain from taking intoxicants.

form of words used acknowledges the free and voluntary nature of the duty assumed.

Apart from the Five Precepts, various other lists of precepts are found, such as the Eight Precepts (*aṣṭāṅga-śīla*) and the Ten Precepts (*daśa-śīla*). These are commonly adopted as additional commitments on the twice-monthly holy days (*poṣadha*; Pāli, *uposatha*), and supplement the first four of the Five Precepts with additional restrictions such as the time when meals may be taken. Another set of precepts similar to the Ten Precepts is the Ten Good Paths of Action (*daśa-kuśala-karmapatha*). Precepts like these which apply to the laity are comparatively few in number compared to those observed by monks and nuns, as explained below.

Vinaya

A term often found paired with Dharma is Vinaya. Particularly in early sources, the compound ‘Dharma-Vinaya’ (‘doctrine and discipline’) is used to denote the whole body of Buddhist teachings and practice. Originally, the Buddhist monastic order (*sangha*) existed as just another sect within a broad community of wandering teachers and students known as *parivrājakas* or *śramaṇas*. From these simple beginnings evolved a complex code for the regulation of monastic life which eventually became formulated in a portion of the canon known as the Vinaya Piṭaka. The Vinaya Piṭaka also contains a large number of stories and biographical material relating to the Buddha, as well as a certain amount of historical matter regarding the *sangha*.

The *Prātimokṣa*

The purpose of the Vinaya is to regulate in detail life within the community of monks and nuns and also their relationship with the laity. In its final form the text is divided into three sections, the first of which contains the set of rules for monks and nuns known as the *Prātimokṣa* (Pāli, *Pātimokkha*). The *Prātimokṣa* is an inventory of offences organized into several categories according to the gravity of the offence. It embraces not only moral questions, such as lying and stealing, but also matters of dress, etiquette, and the general deportment of monks and nuns. Many scholars now agree that the *Prātimokṣa* seems to have undergone at least three stages of development: as a simple confession of faith recited by Buddhist monks and nuns at periodic intervals; as a bare monastic code ensuring proper monastic discipline; and as a monastic liturgy, representing a period of relatively high organization and structure within the *sangha*. This inventory of offences became formalized into a communally chanted liturgy known as the *Prātimokṣa-sūtra*, which is recited as a kind of public confession at the *poṣadha*, or fast-day ceremony, on the new and the full moon days each month.

The *Prātimokṣa*

The *Prātimokṣa* for monks contains the following eight classes of offence:

1. *Pārājika dharmas*: offences requiring expulsion from the *sangha*.
2. *Saṅghāvāseṣa dharmas*: offences involving temporary exclusion from the *sangha* while undergoing a probationary period.
3. *Aniyata dharmas*: undetermined cases (involving sexuality) in which the offender, when observed by a trustworthy female lay follower, may be charged under one of several categories of offences.
4. *Naiḥsargika-pāyantika dharmas*: offences requiring forfeiture and expiation.
5. *Pāyantika dharmas*: offences requiring simple expiation.
6. *Pratideśanīya dharmas*: offences that should be confessed.
7. *Śaikṣa dharmas*: rules concerning etiquette.
8. *Adhikaraṇa-śamatha dharmas*: legalistic procedures to be used in settling disputes.

The nuns' text contains only seven categories, the third being excluded. The total number of rules cited varies in the texts of the different Buddhist schools, ranging from 218 to 263 for the monks and from 279 to 380 for the nuns.

Virtues

Although the precepts, whether lay or monastic, are of great importance, there is more to the Buddhist moral life than following rules. Rules must not only be followed, but followed for the right reasons and with the correct motivation. It is here that the role of the virtues becomes important, and Buddhist morality as a whole may be likened to a coin with two faces: on one side are the precepts and on the other the virtues. The precepts, in fact, may be thought of simply as a list of things a virtuous person would never do.

Early sources emphasize the importance of cultivating correct dispositions and habits so that moral conduct becomes the natural and spontaneous manifestation of internalized and properly integrated beliefs and values, rather than simple conformity to external rules. Many formulations of the precepts make this clear. Of someone who follows the first precept it is said, 'Laying aside the stick and the sword he dwells compassionate and kind to all living creatures' (D.i.4). Abstention from taking life is therefore ideally the result of a compassionate identification with living things, rather than a constraint imposed contrary to natural inclination. To observe the first precept perfectly requires a profound understanding of the relationship between living beings (according to Buddhism, in the long cycle of reincarnation we have all been each others' fathers, mothers, sons, and so forth) coupled with an unswerving disposition of universal benevolence and compassion. Although few have perfected these capacities, in respecting the precepts they habituate themselves to the conduct of one who has, and in so doing come a step closer to enlightenment.

The task of the virtues is to counteract negative dispositions called *kleśas* (known in the West as 'vices'). The lengthy lists of virtues and vices that appear in Buddhist commentarial literature are extrapolated from a key cluster of three 'cardinal virtues',

non-attachment (*arāga*), benevolence (*adveṣa*), and understanding (*amoha*). These are the opposites of the three ‘roots of evil’, or ‘three poisons’, namely greed (*rāga*), hatred (*dveṣa*), and delusion (*moha*). Non-attachment means the absence of that selfish desire which taints behaviour by allocating a privileged status to one’s own needs. Benevolence means an attitude of goodwill to all living creatures, and understanding means knowledge of Buddhist teachings such as the Four Noble Truths. While these are the three most basic Buddhist virtues, there are many others, one of the most important of which is compassion (*karuṇā*). Buddhist sources spend a great deal of time encouraging people to cultivate virtuous dispositions as a means of spiritual development, and some scholars feel that given this emphasis on the virtues Buddhist ethics is best classified as a form of ‘virtue ethics’, a suggestion we will consider further in the next chapter.

Dāna

One of the most important virtues for lay Buddhists in particular is *dāna*, which means ‘giving’, or generosity. The primary recipient of lay Buddhist generosity is the *sangha* – since monks and nuns possess nothing, they are entirely dependent upon the laity for support. The laity provides all the material needs of the monastic community, everything from food, robes, and medicine to the land and buildings which constitute the monastic residence. In the *kathina* ceremony, which takes place following the annual rains retreat in countries where Theravāda Buddhism is practised, cotton cloth is supplied to the monks by the laity for the purpose of making robes. The relationship is not just one-way, for in return monks provide Dharma teachings to the laity, and the gift of the Dharma is said to be the highest of all gifts. At all levels of society – between family members, friends, and even strangers – generosity is widely practised in Buddhist countries and seen as an indication of spiritual development. This is because the generous person, as well as being free from egocentric thoughts and sensitive to the needs of others, finds it easier to practise renunciation and cultivate an

attitude of detachment. The story of Prince Vessantara, the popular hero of the *Vessantara Jātaka*, is well known in South Asia.

Vessantara gave away everything he owned, even down to his wife and children! Many Theravāda sources praise *dāna*, and Mahāyāna sources emphasize the extreme generosity of bodhisattvas, who are disposed to give away even parts of their bodies, or their lives, in order to aid others. As we shall see below, *dāna* is also the first of the ‘Six Perfections’ (*pāramitā*) of a bodhisattva.

Ahiṃsā

One of the most basic principles of Buddhist ethics, and one for which Buddhism is widely admired, is *ahiṃsā*. Although the term literally means ‘non-harming’ or ‘non-violence’, it embodies much more than these negative-sounding translations suggest. *Ahiṃsā* is not simply the *absence* of something, but is practised on the basis of a deeply positive feeling of respect for living beings, a moral position associated in the West with the terms ‘respect for life’ or the ‘sanctity of life’. The principle of respect for life as understood in Western ethics holds that it is always morally wrong to intentionally cause harm or injury to living creatures (some proponents of the principle allow exceptions in cases such as self-defence, but others do not). In India, the concept of *ahiṃsā* seems to have originated among the unorthodox renouncer (*śramaṇa*) movements, in other words among non-Brahmanical schools like Buddhism and Jainism. These placed greater emphasis on concern (*dayā*) and sympathy (*anukampā*) for living creatures, and an increasing empathy with them based on the awareness that others dislike pain and death just as much as oneself. Animal sacrifice, which had played an important part in religious rites in India from ancient times, was rejected by both Buddhism and Jainism as cruel and barbaric. Due in part to their influence, blood sacrifices in the orthodox Brahmanical tradition came increasingly to be replaced by symbolic offerings such as vegetables, fruit, and milk. Many Buddhists – especially followers of the Mahāyāna in East Asia – have embraced vegetarianism, since this diet does not involve the slaughter of animals (vegetarianism is discussed further in Chapter 3).

Among the renunciators, the principle of respect for life was sometimes taken to extremes. Jain monks, for example, took the greatest precautions against destroying tiny forms of life such as insects, even unintentionally. Their practices had some influence on Buddhism; for example, Buddhist monks often used a strainer to make sure they did not destroy small creatures in their drinking-water. They also avoided travel during the monsoon so they would not tread on insects and other small creatures that became abundant after the rains. Concern is even apparent in early sources about the practice of agriculture because of the inevitable destruction of life caused by ploughing the earth. In general, however, Buddhism regards the destruction of life as morally wrong only when it is caused intentionally (in other words, when the death of creatures is the outcome sought).

Due to its association with *ahiṃsā*, Buddhism is generally perceived as non-violent and peace-loving, an impression that is to a large extent correct. While Buddhist countries have not been free from war and conflict, as we shall see in Chapter 5, Buddhist teachings constantly praise non-violence and express disapproval of killing or causing injury to living things.

Compassion

Compassion (*karuṇā*) is a virtue that is of importance in all schools of Buddhism but it is particularly emphasized by the Mahāyāna. In early Buddhism, *karuṇā* figures as the second of the four *Brahma-vihāras*, or 'Divine Abidings'. These are states of mind cultivated especially through the practice of meditation. The four are loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*). The practice of the four *Brahma-vihāras* involves radiating outwards the positive qualities associated with each, directing them first towards oneself, then to one's family, the local community, and eventually to all beings in the universe. In Mahāyāna iconography and art, the symbolic embodiment of compassion is the great bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, 'the one who looks down from on high'. He is portrayed as having a



2. The Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, the embodiment of compassion, with a thousand arms and multiple heads and faces

thousand arms extended in all directions to minister to those in need and is constantly appealed to by those in difficult circumstances. In the course of time in Buddhism there appeared a doctrine of salvation by faith according to which the mere invocation of the name of a Buddha was sufficient, given the extent of the Buddha's compassion, to ensure rebirth in a 'Pure Land', or heaven.

Mahāyāna morality

The Mahāyāna was a major movement in the history of Buddhism embracing many schools in a sweeping reinterpretation of fundamental religious ideals, beliefs, and values. Although there is no evidence for the existence of the Mahāyāna prior to the 2nd century CE, it can be assumed that the movement began to crystallize earlier, incorporating the teachings of various existing schools. In the Mahāyāna, the bodhisattva who devotes himself to the service of others becomes the new paradigm for religious practice, as opposed to the *arhat*, or saint in the early tradition, who is now criticized for leading a cloistered life devoted to the self-interested pursuit of liberation. Schools that embraced the earlier ideal are henceforth referred to disparagingly as the Hīnayāna ('Small Vehicle'), or the Śrāvakayāna ('Vehicle of the Hearers'). In the Mahāyāna great emphasis is placed on the twin values of compassion (*karuṇā*) and insight (*prajñā*), and the bodhisattva practises six special virtues known as the 'Six Perfections' (*pāramitā*). It can be seen that three of these (*śīla*, *samādhi*, and *prajñā*) coincide with the three divisions of the Eightfold Path of early Buddhism, demonstrating both continuity and reconfiguration in the evolving moral tradition.

The Mahāyāna did not reject the ethical teachings of early Buddhism but subsumed them under an expanded framework of its

The Six Perfections (*pāramitā*)

Generosity (*dāna*)

Morality (*śīla*)

Patience (*kṣānti*)

Perseverance (*vīrya*)

Meditation (*samādhi*)

Insight (*prajñā*)

own, within which three levels were identified. The first level was known as ‘Moral Discipline’ (*saṃvara-śīla*) and consisted of the scrupulous observance of the moral precepts. The second level was known as the ‘Cultivation of Virtue’ (*kuśala-dharma-saṃgrāhaka-śīla*) and was concerned with the accumulation of the good qualities necessary for the attainment of nirvana. The third category was known as ‘Altruistic Conduct’ (*sattva-artha-kriyā-śīla*) and consisted of moral action directed to the needs of others. The Mahāyāna claimed that the early followers had access only to the first level and that their moral practices were deficient in lacking concern for the wellbeing of others.

The Mahāyāna is not a monolithic system, and there is no one ‘official’ code of ethics for either laymen or monks. The Vinayas of the early schools were not rejected and continued to be observed by monks and nuns alongside the new teachings recommended for bodhisattvas in Mahāyāna literature.

Skilful Means (*upāya-kauśalya*)

An important innovation in Mahāyāna ethics was the doctrine of Skilful Means (*upāya-kauśalya*). The roots of this notion are found in the Buddha’s skill in teaching the Dharma, demonstrated in his ability to adapt his message to the context in which it was delivered. For example, when talking to Brahmins, the Buddha would often explain his teachings by reference to their rituals and traditions, leading his audience step by step to see the truth of a Buddhist tenet. Parables, metaphors, and similes formed an important part of his teaching repertoire, skilfully tailored to suit the level of his audience. The Mahāyāna developed this idea in a radical way by intimating, in texts such as the *Lotus Sūtra* (circa 1st century CE), that the early teachings were not just skilfully delivered, but were a means to an end in their entirety in the sense that they contained nothing that could not be modified to suit the demands of changing situations. This idea has certain implications for ethics. If the teachings the Buddha had given were provisional rather than ultimate, then perhaps the precepts they contain could also be of a

provisional rather than an ultimate nature? Thus the clear and strict rules encountered in the early sources which prohibit certain sorts of acts could be interpreted more in the way of guidelines rather than as ultimately binding. In particular, bodhisattvas, the new moral heroes of the Mahāyāna, could claim increased latitude and flexibility based on their recognition of the importance of compassion. A bodhisattva takes a vow to save all beings, and there is evidence in many texts of impatience with rules and regulations which seem to get in the way of a bodhisattva going about his salvific mission. The new imperative was to act in accordance with the spirit and not the letter of the precepts, and some sources go so far as to allow *karuṇā* to override other considerations, and even sanction immoral acts, if the bodhisattva sees that so doing would prevent or reduce suffering.

The pressure to bend or suspend the rules in the interests of compassion results in certain texts establishing new codes of conduct for bodhisattvas which sometimes allow the precepts to be broken. In some of these, such as the *Upāya-kauśalya-sūtra* (circa 1st century BCE), even killing is said to be justified to prevent someone committing a heinous crime and suffering karmic retribution in hell. Telling lies, abandoning celibacy, and other breaches of the precepts are also said to be permissible in exceptional circumstances. It is not always clear whether such behaviour is held up by the texts as normative and a model for imitation by others, or to make a point about the great compassion of bodhisattvas, who willingly accept the karmic consequences of breaking the precepts as the price of helping others.

In Tantric teachings, too, the precepts are sometimes set aside. Tantra, also known as the Vajrayāna ('Diamond Vehicle') or Mantrayāna ('Vehicle of Mantras'), is a form of Buddhism that developed in India in the 6th century CE and is characterized by antinomianism (the reversal of moral norms) and the use of magical techniques that aim to speed the practitioner to enlightenment in a single lifetime. One of the basic techniques of Tantra is to transmute

negative mental energies into positive ones using a form of mystical alchemy which is believed to transform the whole personality. By liberating energy trapped at an instinctual level in emotions such as fear and lust, it was thought that practitioners could do the psychological equivalent of splitting the atom and use the energy produced to propel themselves rapidly to enlightenment. In certain forms of Tantra, such practices involved the deliberate and controlled reversal of moral norms and the breaking of taboos in order to help jolt the mind out of its conventional patterns of thought into a supposedly higher state of consciousness. Examples of such activities include drinking alcohol and sexual intercourse, both serious breaches of the monastic rules. While some practitioners understood such teachings and practices literally, however, others saw them as merely symbolic and simply useful subjects for meditation.

Conclusion

We might summarize the key points of this brief survey by saying that Buddhist moral teachings are thought to be grounded in the cosmic law of Dharma rather than commandments handed down by God. Buddhism holds that the requirements of this law have been revealed by enlightened teachers and can be understood by anyone who develops the necessary insight. In leading a moral life, a person becomes the embodiment of Dharma, and anyone who lives in this way and keeps the precepts can expect good karmic consequences, such as happiness in this life, a good rebirth in the next, and eventually the attainment of nirvana. Buddhist moral teachings emphasize self-discipline (especially for those who have chosen the life of a monk or nun), generosity (*dāna*), non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), and compassion (*karuṇā*). Mahāyāna Buddhism places a special emphasis on service to others, which at times has led to a conflict between compassion and keeping the precepts. While the notion of Skilful Means and Tantric teachings have both had some influence on Buddhist ethics, the mainstream view has remained that the precepts express requirements of Dharma that should not be contravened.

Chapter 2

Ethics East and West

The last chapter set out the basic moral teachings of Buddhism, and in this chapter we reflect on these from a theoretical perspective as a prelude to addressing specific applied issues in the remainder of the book. Questions to be considered here include how we should classify Buddhism as an ethical system, the extent to which it resembles or differs from Western ethics, and the methodological problems in drawing comparisons between East and West. Another important topic is the apparent absence of a tradition of philosophical ethics in Buddhism. The chapter concludes with a summary of the history of the study of Buddhist ethics in the West, an introduction to the contemporary activist movement known as ‘engaged Buddhism’, and some reflections on whether there can be a representative ‘Buddhist view’ on moral issues.

The classification of ethics

Ethics as it evolved in the West may be said to have three branches: i) descriptive ethics; ii) normative ethics; and iii) metaethics.

Broadly speaking, the job of the first is to give an objective account of the moral prescriptions, norms, and values of a community or group and to show how action-guiding precepts and principles are applied in specific contexts. The second branch, normative ethics, proposes general rules and principles governing how we ought to act and tries to define the character and shape of the ‘good life’, or