

BUDDHISM AND CONSCIENCE

by

George D Chryssides

To ask for the Buddhist view of conscience is rather like asking for the Church of England's view on something like space travel. Buddhists to whom I have spoken, at least in the west, understand what the concept means, but agree that it simply has no role in Buddhist ethics or religion. Every religion has its own principal concepts, which do not always find ready counterparts within another faith. In making a theme such as 'conscience' the focus of a volume such as this creates the risk of skewing an account of a religion where the theme lacks dominance, or is absent entirely. The short but accurate account of the Buddhist view of 'conscience' is that there is none. As Michel Despland, writing in Mircea Eliade's *Encyclopedia of Religion* notes:

Hindu and Buddhist philosophies have very articulate and complex theories of consciousness... But the notion of conscience as internal organ is not found outside of Christianity. (Despland, 1995, p.50.)

In Hastings' much earlier *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (1911), the various contributors of articles on 'Conscience' attribute presumed equivalences of conscience to the religions of the ancient Graeco-Roman, Babylonian and Egyptian empires, and, amongst living religions, to Jews and Muslims only. No mention whatsoever is made of Hinduism or Buddhism.

I could simply end my account of Buddhism and conscience with these few remarks. However, to do so might allow the reader to infer that Buddhism is somehow morally deficient, and that Buddhists lack a fundamental concept which is essential for moral striving and for distinguishing between right and wrong. On this line of reasoning, a Buddhist ought to be the last person with whom one should do business!

There is another line of reasoning that might be tempting. Surely, one might argue, no major religious community could be so lacking in moral awareness as to have no concept of conscience whatsoever. Although Buddhists may not use the word 'conscience', must there not be some equivalent notion which fulfils the same, or at least a very similar role?

The apparent discovery of Christian-Buddhist parallels was a popular nineteenth and early twentieth century pastime amongst western scholars. It was customary to translate the Buddhist term 'Sangha' (the monastic community) as 'Church', or to remark that nirvana (enlightenment) was the Buddhist equivalent of heaven (an assertion which still lingers on in some of the inferior children's books, mainly written by Christians). To some, the 'Ten Precepts' have looked like an equivalent of the Mosaic Ten Commandments. (Almond, p.107.)

Clearly there needs to be some common vocabulary amongst different world religions for any mutual understanding to be possible at all, but such supposed parallels are grossly misleading. Although the Sangha can be contrasted with the laity, they are not endowed with special powers, unlike a Christian priesthood or ministry, where, for example, only the priest may celebrate certain sacraments. Unlike the Christian concept of the Church, there is no distinction between a visible and invisible Sangha, nor are there notions of a Sangha militant and triumphant, whatever that would mean! By a similar line of reasoning, nirvana cannot be the 'equivalent' of the Christian heaven. Nirvana is not a 'place' — not even a metaphysical one — and, since Buddhism has typically denied the existence of an immortal unchanging self or soul, there are no individuals who ultimately exist to 'enter' nirvana. I shall comment later on the role of Buddhist Precepts, but it is sufficient to note that they have little more in common with the Ten Commandments than the obvious fact that they are ten in number.

The key question, then, about Buddhism and conscience is not how or why Buddhists come to 'lack' a seemingly fundamental moral sense, nor about what 'equivalents' to conscience can be found within the Buddhist tradition. What we must explore is the fundamental structure of Buddhism's ethical thinking which precludes the notion of conscience finding a niche.

Buddhist and Judaeo-Christian ethics — a comparison

At the risk of begging numerous important questions about religion, morality and conscience, it might, I think, be agreed that Judaism and Christianity are revealed religions in which God has made his will known to humanity through a succession of prophets, and finally — according to the Christian — through his son. (Hebrews 1.1.)

The prophets and Jesus of Nazareth were much concerned with ensuring that humanity was in no doubt about God's moral requirements. God is essentially 'other' — distinct from and superior to humanity — and hence this distance had to be bridged by such intermediaries. Thus, God gave Moses the Torah (the Law) on Mount Sinai, with promises of rewards for observance, and threats of judgement and punishment for disobedience. According to some Jews and the majority of Christians, the reward for obedience is the continued existence of the self — variously viewed as an immortal soul, distinct from the body, or else as a transformed 'spiritual body' (1 Corinthians 15.44) — in a much-desired after-death state, such as the kingdom of God or the messianic age.

Both religions teach that attainment of their ultimate goal is marred by human sin, a falling short of the standard set by this omnipotent God. Because of humankind's past sins, there will be a judgement which no-one will escape, and in which everyone's deserved condemnation for their sinful actions can only be mitigated by renewed obedience to the Law, in the case of Judaism, or — according to the Christian — by faith in the atoning work of Jesus Christ, followed by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, from which appropriate conduct is one important outcome.

Because the Talmud-Torah and the Christian Bible are works of finite length, and cannot possibly cover every ethical dilemma one is likely to meet, certain devices are needed in order to enable the follower to reach decisions about situations where the appropriate action is unclear.

Moreover, because the line of prophecy is only accessible to those within the Jewish and Christian traditions, some account is needed of where this leaves those who live outside Judaeo-Christianity. Are they of necessity morally blind, or have they some other means of access to moral truth? The notion of conscience serves to answer such questions. According to Roman Catholic teaching, for example, conscience is the inner sense which, by employing spiritual aids, such as prayer, the study of scripture and the Church's tradition, can provide an important, although not infallible, guide to the appropriate solution. (Catechism, para..1785.) Regarding the Gentiles, Paul speaks of a 'law ... written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness' (Romans 2.15), indicating that they have no excuse for failing to distinguish between right and wrong. As the Westminster Confession of Faith puts it:

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any thing contrary to his word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship. (Confession of Faith, XX, ii.)

It is worth mentioning, too, that although conscience is something possessed by the individual, the dictates of conscience are not subjective. Although conscience is the 'voice within', it by no means follows that rightness and wrongness are matters of individual feeling or decision. The truth is 'out there', and conscience's function is to determine what is objectively true and false in moral matters.

Buddhist ethics and the law of karma

The Buddhist position on ethics contrasts with this outline of Judaeo-Christianity in almost every respect. Buddhism is not a revealed or a prophetic religion: it does not hold that a god or gods either create or mediate a moral law. It is not quite accurate to describe Buddhism as an 'atheistic religion' — a characterisation that one so often finds. Buddhism quite readily acknowledges the existence of gods, but relegates them to one realm of impermanent existence among several. Someone might be reborn as a god — a pleasant enough existence while it lasts — but that god will subsequently be reborn into some other realm of existence, for example as an animal, a human or in one of the hells. While the gods can offer pragmatic benefits to those who pray to them, they have no role in affording any kind of moral guidance or spiritual progress to those who approach them. The gods, in short, are not moral lawgivers.

Just as there is no permanent underlying substance which supports the universe's existence, such as a creator-sustainer God, there is no inner substantiality in anything in the universe, including human beings. Human beings, in common with everything else, are subject to anatta, which literally means 'no soul'. According to the Buddhist, everything is anicca — impermanent — subject to constant change without there being anything substantial that exists as the subject of change. What we take to be the human self is just a bundle of sensations, known as the five khandhas ('aggregates'): form, feeling, thought, choice, and consciousness. (Some westerners, with some justification, have seen similarities between the Buddhist view of the self and David

Hume's theory of personal identity, in which he viewed the self as a fiction and nothing more

It might be asked whether it might be the Buddha who occupies the role of lawgiver in place of a supreme deity. The incorrectness of this suggestion can readily be seen from the story of the Buddha's enlightenment. According to Buddhist myth, Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha-to-be, having renounced the extremes of princely wealth and the fearsome austerities of the ascetic life, sat under a pipal tree, in Bodh Gaya in North India, until he attained the supreme goal of nirvana. The experience of enlightenment, which came to him on the seventh day of his meditation, came in four distinct stages. First, he gained knowledge of his previous lives. (It is said that there were 530 of these, and they are recorded in Buddhist tales known as the Jatakas.) Second, he 'acquired the supreme heavenly eye', through which he realised that the process of birth and re-birth depended on one's deeds, and not — as the Indians of the Buddha's time popularly believed — on the fulfilment of one's caste obligations, or on placating the gods through the Vedic sacrificial system.

Third, the Buddha perceived 'the real and essential nature of the world'. This is typically expressed as a set of twelve links in a chain, and is known as the doctrine of 'dependent origination' (nidanas). According to this teaching, each of the following links, unless it is broken, gives rise to the next: ignorance — karma-formations — consciousness — name and form — six sense fields — contact — feelings — craving — grasping — becoming — birth — decay and death. (Conze, p.187; Zaehner, p.279.) (I shall explain the meaning and significance of this list later.)

In the fourth and final stage, the Buddha gained the supreme enlightenment he had been seeking, in which he experienced inner peace and saw things 'as they really are'. His account of the true nature of the world is expressed in his first sermon after becoming enlightened, in which the Buddha taught the famous Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path — teachings which are often held to sum up the essence of Buddhism. The Four Noble Truths are:

- The existence of unsatisfactoriness (dukkha)
- The cause of unsatisfactoriness (samudaya)
- The elimination of unsatisfactoriness (nirodha)
- The path to the elimination of unsatisfactoriness (magga)

The Eightfold Path is thus the fourth Noble Truth, and consists of:

- Perfect view
- Perfect aspiration
- Perfect speech
- Perfect conduct
- Perfect livelihood
- Perfect effort
- Perfect meditation

Perfect 'absorption'¹

Buddhists typically divide this list into three unequal sections: wisdom (points 1 and 2), morality (points 3, 4 and 5) and meditation (points 6, 7 and 8).

'Perfect view' (seeing things as they really are) involves recognising the unsatisfactory nature of existence. According to Buddhist teaching, the universe is subject to three 'marks of existence': anatta ('no self' or insubstantiality), anicca (impermanence) and dukkha (unsatisfactoriness). A conative element is contained in the second point ('aspiration'). Attaining enlightenment is not simply recognition, but involves spiritual striving. This in turn entails the three points that follow on the list — perfect speech, conduct and livelihood — and these must interact with the meditative life which classical Theravada Buddhism (amongst others) enjoins.

The point that emerges from this story is that one should not accept the Buddha's teaching simply on his authority, but rather should come to see the world for oneself in the same way as the Buddha did. In such a state one apprehends the way in which the law of karma operates, and the types of action which are instrumental in bringing about release from the cycle of birth and re-birth. (Buddhists, in common with Hindus and Sikhs, call this cycle samsara.) What is right, then, is what is conducive to aspiring towards nirvana; what is wrong is defined that which is harmful towards spiritual progress. In fact, Buddhists are less inclined to talk in terms of 'right and wrong' than to use the terms 'skilful' and 'unskilful' about actions. In Buddhist thinking, a good action is rather like the action, say, of an archer aiming the arrow towards a target. Just as the skilled archer hits the bull's eye, so the morally 'skilful' person is successfully aiming towards the mark.

It is not sufficient merely to agree that the Buddha truly defined the way reality is. The first point of the Eightfold Path is 'right view' not 'right views', a confusion often incurred by western commentators who are heavily influenced by Christianity's relentless quest for 'sound doctrine'. (My use of the expression 'perfect view' in preference to 'right view' is intended to obviate this error.) There is all the difference in the world between my believing someone who says that there is a wonderful view outside my window, and my looking out of the window to see it for myself. Similarly, an enlightened person is not someone with a mental filing cabinet full of completely true beliefs, but someone who actually sees the world as subject to the three marks of existence, recognises how the law of karma operates, and thus knows directly which actions are 'skilful' and which are 'unskilful'.

All this points to a fundamental distinction between Buddhist and Judaeo-Christian ethics. While the latter is prescriptive (that is to say, it is cast in the form of numerous imperatives which must be followed), Buddhist ethics is descriptive. The law of karma dictates that actions which are in accordance with the Dharma (the Buddha's teaching) will bring about good fortune, and that evil actions bring about misfortune and suffering, if not in this life, at least in some future existence. There is no god who intervenes to ensure that one receives one's just deserts, or who has set a day of judgement on which all humankind will have to account for their lives. (Acts 17.31.) The law of karma works like a law of nature: indeed Buddhists often make a

comparison between the law of karma and natural laws such as the law of gravity. Just as letting go of an object in mid-air will have the inevitable consequence of that object's falling to the floor, so the effects of one's deeds come to inevitable fruition in due course. (Causton, pp.165-195; Cowan, pp.73-75.)

The descriptive rather than prescriptive nature of Buddhist ethics enables a somewhat relaxed attitude to the laity's observance of the Precepts. It is important to note that Buddhists typically use the term 'precept' rather than 'commandment', for two reasons. First, as we have noted, the Buddhist way of life does not emanate from a divine lawgiver. Second, a precept, being akin to a vow, is something that the aspirant assumes when he or she is ready for it. Thus, some Buddhists may not feel ready to give up alcohol, but are under no compulsion to do so. They can do so when they are ready, and if, they find themselves attending a ceremony in which the precepts are mentioned, they will remain silent when the precept that proscribes intoxicants is recited. In the meantime, of course, drinking alcohol will generate its own karma, for which the price must be paid in due course.

Lest the Buddhist attitude to morality be misunderstood, it should be emphasised that what may seem a casual attitude to the precepts does not entail that anything is tolerated within a Buddhist society. Where actions are harmful to the social order, such as theft or murder, penalties are prescribed and enforced. (Recent news reports have made it plain how little sympathy is afforded to drug smugglers in Thailand, for example.) The Sangha itself, which is a society in its own right, has to have strict and enforceable rules, and joining the Sangha presumes that all the monastic precepts have been taken on. Monks are subjected to a monthly ceremony of confession (on uposatha — 'Observance Day'), in which they are expected, in the presence of the other monks, to admit to any infringements of the rules of the vinaya (monastic precepts), and serious infringement of such rules (sanghabeda), such as fornication, is a grave offence, which merits expulsion.

To recapitulate: the points that emerge from the myth of the Buddha's enlightenment are these. First, enlightenment entails seeing and knowing how the law of karma operates. Second, karmic consequences depend on one's deeds. Third, an enlightened being sees things truly as they are — a state which encompasses the previous two points.

The doctrine of 'dependent origination' demonstrates the way in which these points are interconnected. The theory is so called because it purports to show how the arising of certain phenomena is dependent on the presence of the relevant antecedent state. Let us take one example of how one link in this chain gives rise to the next. Ignorance is held to give rise to 'karma formations'. In other words, if I lack 'perfect view' ('seeing things as they really are', which is the characteristic feature of enlightenment), the law of karma will continue to operate, and I will reap the effects of my past deeds. This will entail the arising of another conscious being — my next rebirth. And so the chain continues in motion. Unless the chain is broken, the law of karma will roll on relentlessly in this fashion.

The doctrine of the nidanas is colloquially referred to as 'the law of cause and effect'. This is somewhat misleading. In the physical sciences, a cause inevitably gives rise to its effect. Friction

inevitably causes heat, for example. The chain of dependent origination is different, because it is possible to break the links in the chain. It is possible, although difficult, to dispel ignorance, as Gautama successfully accomplished. When this occurs, the next stage in the chain will not be activated: when the Buddha finally reached his parinirvana (demise after attaining enlightenment), no further rebirths occurred. One can try to break the chain by eliminating selfish desire (*tanha*); when this is successfully achieved, no grasping will follow, and hence no becoming, no birth, decay and death.

We might therefore describe the Buddhist interest in morality as ‘forward looking’ rather than ‘past looking’. Buddhism is not so much interested in the origins of morality so much as its goal. The Buddha is said to have used an analogy which illustrates this point. A man lies dying from a wound caused by a poisoned arrow. Some of the onlookers debate amongst themselves who fired the arrow — whether he was tall or short, dark or fair, and so on. What is more important, the Buddha taught, is to pull the arrow out, thus enabling the poison (the vices which hold one back from enlightenment) to be removed. (*Majjhima-Nikaya*, I, ch.63; in Woodward, pp.202-205.)

What is important to the Buddhist, therefore, is not to ask questions about the origin of morality, or how we became subject to the state of selfish desire which is characteristic of *dukkha*. Spiritual progress will not be gained by speculating about the origins of the universe or of morality, but rather by recognising the effects of one’s deeds and how they can be skilful or unskilful in bringing the aspirant towards nirvana. Questions about whether actions are right because God commanded them or vice versa, and how members of the human race are placed spiritually placed if they have not been party to divine commandments are therefore non-questions. The Buddhist simply has no need for a theory of conscience as an attempt to explain how certain sectors of humanity are placed if they have not heard God’s decrees.

There is thus no counterpart in Buddhism to ‘doing God’s will’. One cannot ‘do the Buddha’s will’. The Buddha has ‘thus gone’, according to the Theravada tradition: he is ‘beyond recall’ (that is to say, it is impossible to speculate on the nature of his existence after parinirvana), and hence is neither pleased nor displeased at human deeds. At best the Buddha is an example to follow. As the classical text, the *Dhammapada* puts it, ‘It is you who must make the effort. The Great of the past only show the way.’ (*Dhammapada*, 276.)

It might be suggested that a possible parallel to the Christian theory of conscience lies in the fact that the Buddha’s teachings, according to the Buddhist, are not to be accepted simply on authority. The Buddha is said to have invited seekers to check out his teachings against their own experience, and only to accept them if their experience confirmed what he taught. On one occasion, the Buddha is reported to have instructed a seeker to go back and follow his own (non-Buddhist) religion, to make what he progress he could there.

Accounts such as these may be thought to suggest that the Buddha was somehow appealing to the individual consciences of men and women, even allowing them conscientiously to disagree with his philosophy. But to draw such a conclusion would be to misunderstand the Buddha’s message. The Buddha was not recommending some kind of subjective individualism or relativism. On the contrary, the Buddha, as an enlightened being, saw things as they really were.

If anyone should think, for example, that the world was not subject to anatta, anicca and dukkha, then that person would be deluded and thereby be seriously hindered from making spiritual progress. In teaching 'perfect view' as the first point of the Eightfold Path, the Buddha could hardly have meant that any view was equally acceptable.

The correct explanation of the Buddha's invitation to verify his teachings is that, if he did indeed see things as they really were, then anyone else who used the appropriate means of verification would reach the same conclusion. A universal truth can be seen by anyone who looks aright. To use an analogy: if I say that it is raining and you do not believe me, I might reasonably ask you to adopt the same vantage point as myself and look out of the window. My invitation to verification in no way means that I would expect, let alone accept, a variety of opinions regarding the weather. What I expect is that you will see a part of reality in the same way as I do, by direct experience, rather than merely taking my word for it. There is thus no subjectivity about the state of enlightenment: what the Buddha taught was a set of objective universal laws about the way in which the universe operates.

When the Buddha recommended that the seeker should follow his own religion, he was not implying that other religions were equally true, but merely that skilful means could sometimes entail making better progress on a lesser path rather than making very poor progress on a path for which one is not yet ready. In a similar way, being a poor mountaineer, I would be ill advised to tackle the ascent of Everest; hill walking, on the other hand, is well within my capability, and might be good preliminary training if Everest is my ultimate goal. Similarly, while Buddhists may appear to accept that it could be 'skilful' to practise a non-Buddhist religion, this is only a temporary measure, which will be superseded at some future time, perhaps even in some future life, when one is properly ready to assume the Buddhist path.

One further, final point of contrast is worth mentioning. Whereas Judaeo-Christian ethics (and indeed most of western ethics) tends to focus on actions, Buddhist ethics is essentially about one's intentions and one's state of consciousness. The issue of vegetarianism will illustrate this well. Those who are familiar with western ways of moral reasoning, whether Christian or not, may reason as follows. Since cruelty to animals is reprehensible, then surely one should have qualms of conscience about eating meat. Having become persuaded of the case for vegetarianism, someone might then consider how far one takes this principle of respect for all living beings. Is it sufficient, for example, simply to avoid foods that show obvious signs of being derived from animal flesh, or should one meticulously consider whether there are traces of animal products in the ingredients, such as animal rennet in cheese, or animal fat in certain biscuits? Some vegetarians have gone further and suggested that it is unreasonable simply to stop using animal products for eating. Can one in all conscience wear leather shoes, for instance? At least one vegetarian organisation has produced literature indicating where animal products are used in household goods such as glues, or where products have been tested on animals. (Farhall, McCormack and Rofe, 1993.)

The Buddhist approach to animal suffering is very different, and, although some writers have argued the case that Buddhism entails vegetarianism, this claim is actually quite wide of the

mark, and really is the result of the application of western moral reasoning to a religion that does not seek to accommodate it (Kapleau, 1983; Chryssides 1988b). The Buddhist stance on the treatment of animals is based on two important considerations: first, non-violence, which entails abstaining from killing or injuring any living being; second, purifying one's mind by cultivating non-attachment, thus fostering the elimination of selfish desire (tanha).

Although non-violence is one of Buddhism's principal precepts, the Buddhist monk has no objection to the consumption of meat or fish products. Indeed, if a lay person places such items in his alms bowl, he is obliged to accept them. To do otherwise would be to become attached to what one eats, and cultivation of the purity of mind involves rising above this. What is obligatory for the monk is to ensure that he has no direct role in the killing itself. A monk may not specify to a lay follower, if invited to a meal, that he would like a particular meat dish — or indeed any other kind of food. To express a preference would be to show attachment and deliberately to order meat would be regarded as tantamount to commissioning an animal's slaughter. If he 'hears, sees or suspects' that an animal has been specially killed on his behalf, then — and only then — does he have an obligation to refuse. (Chryssides, 1988a, p.50.)

Those who are accustomed to western ways of thinking about ethics typically find problems with the Buddhist monk's position, since they stand in marked contrast to western presuppositions about moral reasoning. For example, in the west we tend to think, encouraged by writers such as Kant, that moral principles must be universalisable: if it wrong for me to do something, it is wrong for everyone else in similar circumstances. We tend to demand consistency in the application of moral principles: if I claim to be vegetarian, I ought to be committed to avoiding all products with any trace of animal produce. We tend to assume that, if something is wrong, we ought to discourage others from doing it: when persuasion fails, critics of fast-food stores try picketing, and anti-abortionists attempt to secure legislation. It is a common assumption, too, that if we disapprove of something we should not benefit from it. (This is the underlying principle behind ethical investment, for example, since selling shares in unethical firms in no way hampers their operation.)

It is important to see how the Buddhist approach to ethics contrasts with this. Buddhism regards spiritual progress as a gradual one. Since purifying one's mind is something which is practically impossible outside the monastic life, joining the Sangha is generally viewed — by Theravada Buddhists at any rate — as essential for the ultimate attainment of nirvana. Although the Sangha requires for its continued existence a laity who have to live amidst the 'defilements' of everyday life, they may well not currently be in a position to assume the robe, but may do either later on in their lives, or else in some future rebirth. What is important to the monk is to rise above the secular life in which violence to living beings is so difficult to avoid. The following short verse from the Buddhist text *The Dhammapada* is often used as a summary of the Buddhist position on ethics:

Do not what is evil. Do what is good. Keep your mind pure. This is the teaching of Buddha. (*Dhammapada*, 183)

At first appearance, the verse may seem singularly uninformative. However, the third sentence in particular sums up very appropriately the way in which the monastic community treats the issue of right and wrong. What is important is to be free from defilements and attachments. As one Buddhist monk pointed out to me, it would not be sufficient for a Buddhist who wanted to make spiritual progress to abandon meat-eating in favour of artificial meats, such as texturised soya or imitation meats which one often finds on the menu in Chinese restaurants. To desire such foods indicates that one still possessed an attachment to meat, which is not conducive to the elimination of *tanha*.

Two case studies: Zen and Soka Gakkai

Thus far I have either generalised about Buddhist ethics, or focused on the traditional Theravada standpoint. It might therefore be useful to examine two other forms of Buddhism in the Mahayana tradition which, at least on first appearance, might seem to come close to Judaeo-Christian ideas of conscience. The examples I have chosen are, first, Zen, and, second, Soka Gakkai, a form of Nichiren Buddhism.

(1) Zen

Zen originated in China in the sixth century BCE, having been brought there by Bodhidharma — at least according to legend. Zen combined many of the basic elements of Indian Buddhism with classical Taoist philosophy. Zen is characteristically summarised in a four line verse, possibly composed by Rinzai (1141-1215), the famous Zen master, and which runs as follows:

A special transmission outside the scriptures;
No dependence upon words or letters;
Direct pointing into one's heart;
Seeing into one's own nature, and becoming a Buddha.

According to Zen, one's Buddha nature is within oneself. While traditional Theravada Buddhists might look to the Buddha as an example to follow, Zen typically teaches that using the historical Buddha as an exemplar could be positively harmful to spiritual progress. As Rinzai's four line summary implies, my own Buddha-nature in late twentieth century Britain might well be considerably different from that of Siddhartha Gautama's enlightened state in North India in the sixth century BCE.

An oft-quoted Zen parable tells of a young novice monk whom his spiritual master once found in the meditation hall, seated in the lotus position, meditating. 'What do you think you are doing?' asked the master. 'I am trying to become a buddha,' the novice replied. Thereupon the master took a brick and started to polish it. The novice, puzzled, asked what the master was doing. 'I am trying to make a mirror,' the latter replied. 'But you cannot make a mirror out of a

brick!' protested the novice. 'And neither can you become a buddha simply by meditating cross-legged on the floor,' the master replied. The point of the anecdote is that the novice thought that he could attain enlightenment by means of a set of practices that someone else had devised. Buddhahood, on the contrary, must come from 'within', not 'without'. (Watts, pp.116-117.)

This point serves to explain the practice of using koans, which is found in the Rinzai Zen school. The koan is an enigmatic question which has no logical answer, such as, 'What is the sound of one hand clapping?' A logical answer, such as pointing out that clapping requires two hands, is unacceptable; the novice must search his or her inner being for some intuitive answer that emanates from this buddha-nature within. Acceptable responses have included decisively thrusting one's hand forward, shouting a frenzied way, or uttering some seemingly irrelevant expression like 'the cherry tree in the back garden'. (Obviously, if one were simply to borrow such answers and take them to a Zen master would be unacceptable, since they would not emanate from one's own buddha-nature, but be mere attempts to copy those of others. Zen masters are reputed to be well trained and able to identify any such deception.)

The idea that one should bring out and develop one's own inner buddha-nature became popular in the USA in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when numerous beatniks and hippies took up Zen Buddhism — at least as they construed it. Those who have read the novels of Jack Kerouac will recognise the stereotype of the Zen Buddhist as someone who does as he or she pleases, letting spontaneity take precedence over the traditional rules of society. Thus, in Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*, the principal characters simply loaf around, rejecting any ideas of gainful employment, hitching illicit lifts on freight trains, getting drunk on cheap wine, and engaging in free sex with other 'bodhisattvas',² as they call themselves.

This form of Zen was subsequently known as 'Beat Zen', and popularised by such writers as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and Alan Watts, but it is generally repudiated by exponents of traditional Zen, or 'Square Zen', as it has sometimes been called. Traditional Zen involves combining what are often fairly precise rules with one's individual spontaneity and creativity. Anyone who has read works like *Zen in the Art of Archery* or *Zen in the Art of Flower Arrangement* will understand that those who have learnt such arts in the context of Zen have had to master an array of traditional methods of practising skills. Notions like individuality and spontaneity by no means imply that 'anything goes'. When Eugen Herrigel, the archery student, interposed his own innovation in archery technique, his Zen teacher instantly dismissed him as a pupil, and it was only with great difficulty that he became reinstated. (Herrigel, 1953, p.71.)

The problem about equating the buddha-nature with conscience is that Beat Zen appears to endorse subjectivism, even moral anarchy, where anything goes so long as one is pleasing oneself to best advantage. Although conscience is deemed to be 'within', following conscience is not to be equated with subjectivism. On the contrary, conscience is held to be the mechanism whereby the believer attunes himself or herself with the will of God. While Christianity has attached considerable importance to the idea of acting 'conscientiously', by which it has even meant acting against the tradition's teaching if the believers hold that they 'can do no other',

conscience is not judged to be infallible, and can sometimes be mistaken in purporting to mediate the voice of God. The possibility that conscience can err is no doubt one of the main reasons why the Roman Catholic Church officially teaches that conscience requires spiritual education.

'Square Zen' may therefore seem to have more in common with the Christian tradition, since the traditional Zen master will cause his or her pupils to undertake appropriate spiritual exercises, such as zazen meditation and (in the Rinzai tradition) koan practice. Inner promptings are to be combined with and related to traditional rules, in order to achieve the appropriate outcome. However, there are important differences which should not be ignored. First, the recognition of enlightenment in Zen is not confined to ethical decision making. The experience of satori (the Zen word for enlightenment) relates to the whole of life, and is about experiencing all of the world in an enhanced way. As the oft-quoted passage in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* puts it:

The Buddha, the Godhead, resides quite as comfortably in the circuits of a digital computer or the gears of a cycle transmission as he does at the top of a mountain or in the petals of a flower. (Pirsig, p.18.)

Second, the thrust of Zen is towards divergence rather than convergence. If Zen novices differ on how to answer the same koan, such divergence could be a signal of their enlightenment. By contrast, if two Christians have a conscientious disagreement on a matter of ethics, they cannot both be right. Pro-abortionists and anti-abortionists can claim to hold their respective positions and act accordingly as a matter of conscience, but if conscience is the voice of God within, presumably God does not speak with two contradictory voices to different Christians. The inner buddha-nature, which is so crucial to the practitioner of Zen, therefore fails to offer a true counterpart to the concept of conscience.

(2) Soka Gakkai

The second case study I have chosen is the Soka Gakkai, a form of Mahayana Buddhism in the Nichiren tradition, which took its rise in the eleventh century BCE in Japan. 'Soka Gakkai' literally means 'value creation', and, when I have asked members of Soka Gakkai International about a possible place for a notion of 'conscience' they have invariably said that, although conscience itself is not a term which they use, nevertheless their notion of 'value creation' comes nearest to it. Indeed, the only explicit Buddhist reference to conscience that I succeeded in finding is by its leader Diasaku Ikeda, in a volume entitled *Choose Life: A Dialogue*, which is a compilation of conversations between Ikeda and the celebrated historian Arnold Toynbee. Until 1991, the Soka Gakkai were known as the Nichiren Shoshu or NSUK (Nichiren Shoshu of the United Kingdom) in Britain, and were popularly known for their practice of chanting the famous mantra 'nam myoho renge kyo'. The mantra derives from the title of the movement's principal religious text, *The Lotus Sutra*, which Nichiren (1222-1282), the founder-leader of the Nichiren Buddhist schools, declared to be the definitive Buddhist scripture, which encapsulated

the entirety of Buddhist doctrine. Soka Gokkai Buddhists therefore chant the mantra, and key chapters of the Lotus Sutra, in front of a small wooden shrine known as the gohonzon.

‘Nam myoho rengo kyo’ (which literally means ‘Homage to the lotus of the true law’) is simultaneously a means of paying respect to the Lotus Sutra and a means to gaining pragmatic as well as spiritual benefits. Thus, a Soka Gakkai follower can chant for benefits which are as seemingly materialistic as passing an exam, acquiring a new car, or finding a partner of the opposite sex. In many respects, the practice of chanting bears affinities to a Christian’s intercessory prayer: literal results are not guaranteed, but at least if the practitioner does not gain the desired material boon, he or she will acquire the state of mind which is capable of accepting one’s lot without it. One important difference, of course, is that the chanting of ‘nam myoho rengo kyo’ is not addressed to any supernatural being or beings.

Soka Gakkai Buddhists share with other Buddhists a firm belief in karma. My present condition is due to deeds committed in this life and in previous ones. I am therefore responsible for my own situation, and should not hide behind excuses. Just as I am responsible for my past and my present, I am also responsible for my future. Traditional Buddhism has developed a cosmology which postulates several realms of existence into which subsequent rebirths are possible. Soka Gakkai Buddhism postulates ten such realms, but ‘demythologises’ them by viewing them as ‘basic inner states of being which we all experience from moment to moment’: hell, hunger, animality, anger, tranquillity, rapture, learning, realisation, bodhisattva and buddhahood. (Causton, p.36.): By the choices I make I can determine whether I am essentially in the world of the hells, the hungry spirits, animality, and so on, or whether I am essentially a bodhisattva or a buddha.

This is where the notion of ‘value creation’ enters the practice of Soka Gakkai Buddhism. Depending on my state of being, I can decide whether to act either out of greed or hatred, or out of love and conscience. Love and conscience, however, are not ends in themselves, for, as Ikeda points out, many of history’s atrocities have been committed in the name of both:

Only when love is directed towards all humankind and all other forms of life on earth and only when conscience is based on an unbounded respect for the dignity of life, will both manifest good aspects. (Toynbee and Ikeda, p.329.)

Conscience must therefore be directed towards bringing about what is of ultimate value to human beings generally: in particular, the Soka Gakkai desire to bring about world peace, and a significant amount of their chanting is directed to this end. Using the chant ought not therefore to be simply a means of enabling me to achieve my own selfish desires. Soka Gakkai Buddhism is not egoism or hedonism, or even subjectivism. There are things that are potentially of value outside me, but it is through exploring my own inner buddha-nature that I can come to see what is truly of value, and what is not.

There may appear to be certain similarities between ‘value creation’ (which Ikeda relates to conscience) and Christian ideas of conscience here. There is the teaching of Buddha, which is encapsulated in a portion of scripture which does not in itself provide particularly lucid and unambiguous guidance for life, apart from the power of the chant. In order to determine what is

appropriate behaviour, one has to turn inward to one's buddha-nature, which one may be tempted to equate with conscience, and which clarifies one's moral principles, applying them to uncertain situations, providing definite judgements regarding concrete acts, and thus enabling the practitioner to act responsibly. Contacting one's buddha-nature, like listening to the voice of conscience, is carried out within the context of religious practice, such as the gongyo ceremony in which followers chant 'nam myoho renge kyo'.

While there may appear to be some similarities, it is important not to overlook some very clear differences here between one's buddha-nature and the voice of conscience. According to the Judaeo-Christian tradition, conscience is the means by which God, who is transcendent, and who stands — at least in some sense — 'above' or 'outside' the human self communicates his will. This cannot, however, be the Buddhist view of the relationship between the self and the Buddha. As we have noted, there is no self, and, if there is no self, there is nothing ultimately to distinguish me from the Buddha. As Richard Causton, the late British Soka Gakkai leader has put it, there is an equality between myself and the Buddha, for the buddha-nature is none other than me. Further, since (as we have noted) Soka Gakkai Buddhists firmly believe in the law of karma, what I discover within my buddha-nature is not a clarification of some legal system which has been laid down by a transcendent God, like the law which was given on Mount Sinai, but a 'descriptive law' about cause and effect, a law that enables me to see the karmic consequences of my behaviour, and to live my life accordingly.

Some conclusions

My analysis of how Buddhist ethics works demonstrates why the concept of conscience rests uneasily with the Buddhist way of thinking. Yet it is important to note that it by no means follows that Buddhists are less concerned about ethics than Jews, Christians or secular humanists. As with their western counterparts, ethics is important both for the maintenance of social order and for making spiritual progress.

It does not follow, either, that Buddhism has no place for remorse or repentance. Indeed there are many Buddhist tales of notorious villains who have thought better of their ways and turned their lives around. One particularly well known tale is that of Milarepa, who sought revenge on his family, following a dispute about his inheritance. The story goes that Milarepa learnt black magic from a Tibetan sorcerer, and subsequently used his occult powers to kill scores of his relatives. Later he became wracked with remorse, and sought refuge in a Buddhist teacher called Marpa, who prescribed stringent physical and spiritual exercises to ensure Milarepa's commitment. As a result of his penitence and his total obedience to his teacher, Milarepa attained buddhahood, and thus avoided inheriting a large amount of evil karma, which would have consigned him to spending aeons in subsequent existences in the Buddhist hells. (Lhalungpa, 1979.)

Like Jews, Christians and Muslims, Buddhists too insist that there are sanctions for good and bad behaviour. Such sanctions are more likely to be internal rather than external, although not exclusively so. Purifying the mind of the three cardinal evils — hatred, greed and delusion

(ignorance) — are the consequences of developing loving kindness (metta) towards all beings. 'Eleven blessings' are said to follow the cultivation of this virtue:

One sleeps in comfort.

One awakens in comfort.

One doesn't have bad dreams.

One is dear to human beings.

One is dear to non-human beings.

*Devas*³ guard one.

Fire, poison and weapons do not affect one.

One's mind is easily concentrated.

One's mien is serene.

One dies unconfused.

If one penetrates no higher, one will be reborn in the world of Brahma
(Saddhatissa, 1970, p.97.)

The benefits, it will be noticed, are physical, mental and spiritual.

In common, then, with the prophetic religions, Buddhism entails adherence to a rigorous and detailed set of moral values. A moral life is conducive to peace of mind and spiritual advancement, and there is scope for confession of faults, remorse and penitence. Morality is accompanied by appropriate sanctions.

Buddhist ethics, however, has no room for the concept of conscience, as it is understood by Christians, because it is not a revealed religion. There is no God who gives his decrees to his followers, and there are no permanent enduring selves to be the recipients of any such revelations. It would be incoherent to postulate the existence of any internal faculty which sought to attune one's moral sense with that of some supreme lawgiver. Buddhist ethics is about consciousness, not about conscience, and the Buddhist's spiritual path depends on awareness of the way in which the universe operates, and how to act skilfully to develop one's consciousness in such a way as to progress towards the supreme goal of nirvana.

Bibliography

— (1994). *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. London: Geoffrey Chapman.

Almond, P. (1988). *The British discovery of Buddhism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Causton, R. (1988). *Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism: an Introduction*. London: Rider.

Chryssides, George (1988a). *The Path of Buddhism*. Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press.

- Chryssides, George (1988b). 'Buddhism goes west'; *World Faiths Insight*, New Series 20, October, pp.37-45.
- Collins, S. (1982). *Selfless Persons*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Confession of Faith, The; agreed upon by The Assembly of Divines at Westminster (1647, 1969). Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons.
- Conze, E. (1957). *Buddhist Scriptures*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Cowan, J. (ed) (1982). *The Buddhism of the Sun*. Richmond: NSUK.
- Despland, M. (1995). 'Conscience'; in Eliade (1995), pp.45-52.
- Eliade, M. (ed) (1995). *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. New York: Simon and Shuster.
- Farhall, R., McCormack, K and Rofe, A. (1993) *Animal Free Shopper*. St Leonards-on-Sea: The Vegan Society.
- Gombrich, R. (1988). *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Hastings, J. (1911). *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*. Edinburgh: T & Clark.
- Herrigel, E. (1953, 1979). *Zen in the Art of Archery*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Herrigel, G.L. (1958, 1979). *Zen in the Art of Flower Arrangement*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Hume, D. (1888, 1964). *A Treatise of Human Nature*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Humphreys, C. (1962). *Zen*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Kant, I. *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*; reprinted as Paton, H.J. (1964). *The Moral Law*. London: Hutchinson.
- Kapleau, P. (1983). *A Buddhist Case for Vegetarianism*. London: Rider.
- Kerouac, J. (1957). *On the Road*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Kerouac, J. (1958). *The Dharma Bums*. New York: Viking.

Lhalungpa, Lobsang P. (1979). *The Life of Milaprepa*. London: Granada.

Mascaro, J. (transl) (1977). *The Dhammapada*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Pirsig, R. (1974). *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. London: Corgi.

Saddhatissa, H. (1970). *Buddhist Ethics: Essence of Buddhism*. London: George Allen and Unwin.

Toynbee, A. and Ikeda, D. (1976). *Choose Life: A Dialogue*. London: Oxford University Press.

Watts, A. (1957, 1976). *The Way of Zen*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Woodward, F.L. (transl) (1973). *Some Sayings of the Buddha according to the Pali Canon*. London: The Buddhist Society.

Zaehner, R.C. (ed) (1988). *The Hutchinson Encyclopedia of Living Faiths*. Oxford: Helicon.

Notes

¹ For an explanation of the precise meaning of these points, see Woodward (1973).

² 'Bodhisattva means variously 'a buddha-to-be' (in the Theravada tradition) or one who has attained enlightenment but chooses to incarnate again in order to help other living beings.

³ i.e., gods.

This essay originally appeared in
Hoose, Jayne (ed.) (1999). *Conscience in World Religions*. Leominster, UK and Notre Dame IN,
USA: Gracewing and University of Notre Dame Press.
[pages 176-199]

© George D. Chryssides 1999, 2009.