The present work is in the small class of multi-authored, edited volumes that deserve a wide audience. It is readable and broadly accessible to nonspecialist philosophers and students. The essays are vibrant and confident, displaying a new maturity and discipline in the field of Buddhist ethics. While not at all intended to be a comprehensive treatment of the subject, the essays elucidate and engage with many of the active issues in the field and register important advances on several fronts. The book may therefore serve both as an engaging orientation to the topic for newcomers and a stable launching point for future conversations.

“Buddhist ethics” is a modern construction. As Damien Keown explains in his opening essay, Buddhists have of course always and everywhere taught ethical cultivation, but there is no genre of Buddhist writings parallel to those of moral philosophy in the West, and it is difficult to locate significant debates about ethical chestnuts such as the nature of “the good” or the foundations of responsibility. Much has been made, then, of the question as to what cultural or conceptual forces might explain the difference between Buddhist and Western approaches to ethics. Are the right texts still awaiting the right readers? Is the judgment that something is “missing” itself evidence of a Western bias distortion? Or, as Christopher Gowans argues convincingly, have Buddhists always had principled reasons to avoid moral theorizing?

Among the contributors to this volume, then, are some who question whether there really is, or ought to be, such a thing as the established topic “Buddhist ethics”—but of course that does not prevent fruitful and illuminating inquiry (much the same point can be made about the study of religion). As an example, the possibility of answering the question of just what a Buddhist ethics would be were it to exist is called into question by Bronwyn Finnigan’s clever essay showing that the Buddhist path is traditionally described under two quite different and, she argues, inconsistent ethical modes, which she terms instrumental and constitutive. This is not merely the obvious point that, given the diversity of Buddhist traditions, we should not expect there to be any single approach to ethics that fits them all. Rather, as I understand her, if instrumental and constitutive modes are both necessary components of the path, there may be no way at all to formulate a unified, Buddhist account of ethical conduct.

Naturally, this does not prevent a number of attempts at identifying vital (which is not to say essential) Buddhist ethical theories, positioned and individual though each may be. Jin Park’s intriguing approach extracts an ethical structure
from Zen, especially Dōgen, that might even serve as a complement to Finnigan’s disproof of a unified Buddhist ethics: Our failure to acknowledge a multiplicity of perspectives in a given scenario, Park argues, is exactly what constitutes our ignorance. Compassion emerges not from a stance of conceptual clarity and consistency, but precisely within “the space between the awareness of total reality and the limitations of one’s hermeneutic capacity to understand that reality” (p. 87).

On a quite different track, Graham Priest proposes what he calls “Buddhist Ethics: A Perspective,” acknowledging that not everyone will agree that it is “Buddhism,” but proposing that it is at least a Buddhist-inspired position consistent with modern Western scientific naturalism. Priest’s position is usefully paired with Jan Westerhoff’s piece, which argues that when modern Buddhists reject the doctrine of rebirth, they may be pulling the plug on ethics. Westerhoff’s article centers around the Suicide Argument, which is the reductio observation that, if the goal of Buddhism is the cessation of suffering and you don’t believe in rebirth, you can realize the ultimate Buddhist attainment with a bare bodkin. There does not seem to be much recourse here for the naturalist but to reject the goal of cessation in favor of a positive goal. Priest accepts the lemma and affirms a positive goal for his Buddhist ethics—choosing tranquility (upekṣā, ataraxia in Greek): a pleasant state free of attachment and aversion. This makes for a compelling integration of a Western concept with a Buddhist one, which Priest supplements with a suggestive series of responses to potential objections follows, including a thoughtful proposal that love free of possessiveness might actually turn out to be a good thing.

The study of Buddhist ethics is hardly a new field, and a number of the essays in the work are entering midstream into scholarly conversations staged between Buddhist traditions and contemporary philosophical and scientific scholarship. Personal identity and personal cultivation, the nature of consciousness, intention and freedom of the will, are conversation topics with significant ethical dimensions, so that even if Buddhist theorists did not thematize the ethical per se, their discussions illuminating these arenas may be read as significant contributions to broader concerns. These conversations are taken up in confident essays by Christian Coseru, Charles Goodman, Karin Meyers, Riccardo Repetti, and Mark Siderits. Even if Gowans is right that Buddhists had reason to eschew ethics, our current intellectual culture needs essays like these to encourage philosophers to take Buddhist thought seriously.

Some of the most surprising and illuminating contributions bring entirely new perspectives. Thus, Sara McClintock’s chapter uses an introspective reading of narratives from the Divyāvadāna to bring their intended morally transformative possibilities to light. Drawing upon how the Dalai Lama insists that the true basis of human rights is the experience of personal connection, Christopher Kelley explains this as a strategy that resonates with the realization of emptiness. And Emily McRae finds an innovative application of equanimity to be a tool for cultivating a realistic acceptance of moral imperfections in loving relationships.

With essays on eighteen different topics ranging across a very broad field, one would not necessarily expect a unifying theme to emerge—and indeed, unity is not the book’s goal. But I would point out an interesting trend, a thread of resonance, which develops especially across the last third of the book. It is repeatedly noted that Buddhist ethical cultivation is gradual and cumulative, and that for that reason an agent may be taken to operate morally at multiple time scales and targets. A key theme for Engaged Buddhism, as Sallie King’s chapter recalls, has always been the grounding of legitimate Buddhist social efforts in individual moral cultivation: one acts simultaneously for oneself and others. Jay Garfield and Jake Davis, each in their own way, muse upon the
irony that an ideal Buddhist moral cultivation (pre)conditions ethical behavior that is spontaneous and yet always mindful; trainings include virtuous actions in the present that also, crucially, condition future behaviors. And Amber Carpenter pieces apart the causal threads that serve to identify the blaming attitude within righteous rage, highlighting how a Buddhist perspective is one that acknowledges the multiple levels in the complex causal nexus in which we all participate.

It is inevitable, in a collection such as this, that numerous topics in Buddhist ethics are only minimally treated or ignored; some would prefer, most obviously, more extensive historical framing and more engagements with Continental philosophers and East Asian traditions. Nor is it possible here to detail the many twists and turns of each argument, let alone the ways each essay might be challenged, improved, or built upon. That is an engaging task for each reader. This rich work raises many questions and signposts a promising disciplinary future.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-buddhism


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