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Buddhist Moral Ethics

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Once there was an Indian prince who led an easy, protected life. Cut off from the miseries of others, he did not know obvious suffering. Of regal bearing and possessed of many talents, he likely saw himself as a relatively independent person, able to function and accomplish many things without the help of others. As yet untouched by death, he likely lived, as most of us do, as if he were going to live forever.

But sometime in his twenties, restless and sensing there was more to life than material pleasure and accomplishment, the prince left home to seek Enlightenment. For years, he wandered among people from all walks of life, awakening to others’ pain and suffering and to his own. Then one day, as he sat in deep meditation under a bodhi tree, his ordinary perceptions dissolved like a dream. With diamond-like clarity, the prince realized that no one—not even a prince—is immune to suffering, and that none of us is separate or permanent. To the contrary, we all suffer more than we realize; we are profoundly interdependent, affected by and affecting others more than we know, and nothing lasts—not our wealth, not our friends or families, not even our precious self. With this, the prince’s heart burst open to a love and compassion deeper than anything he had ever known, and for 45 years, until his death at 80, Prince Siddhartha—now the Buddha or “awakened one”—taught to others the vast wisdom-knowledge that had roused his slumbering heart and brought him indescribable peace.

The teachings of the Buddha are vast and have taken many forms in the last 2500 years, but basic to all is the notion of our potential for good. Echoing developing findings in science, the Buddha taught that everyone has the capacity for love and compassion. What is more, he taught that each of us without exception has the potential to extend love and compassion not just to friends and family, but to strangers, and even enemies. This remarkable potential is like a seed buried within us. The problem, as the Buddha saw it, is that this seed is frequently hidden from view, covered over by weeds, or negativities, rooted in ignorance. All too often, the fast-growing weeds deny this seed much needed sunlight and other nourishment, so the seed lies dormant. In rare moments, when ordinary awareness is stripped away by life-threatening events, this seed may crack open and our positive potential thrust its way to the surface: We can see this when a hurricane or tsunami drowns a city, and moved by compassion, people rush to help total strangers; we can see it, too, when cancer or some other life-threatening calamity strikes us as individuals, and
suddenly deeper priorities grow clear. \(^1\) More commonly, we unintentionally act in ways that stifle our positive potential and hide it, even from ourselves.

While it is true that tragedies can bring out the best in people, it was the Buddha’s view that we don’t have to wait for obvious life-shattering events to awaken our potential to love others and express compassion. For those with the capacity for discipline, he taught a system of moral ethics that can create the causes and conditions for it to arise and flower in the ordinary course of daily life. This ethical system involves the twin disciplines of weeding out negative actions and actively providing the positive nourishment that feeds our positive potential. Or put another way, it is the discipline of abandoning negative or non-virtuous actions that prevent us from living out this potential, and it is the complementary discipline of adopting positive, helpful actions that show us, in very concrete ways, just who we and others can be. By engaging in these inter-related disciplines of the heart, we can gradually uproot the ignorance that leads to suffering and nourish the seed of love and compassion that leads to happiness.

The chapter that follows describes the Buddhist system of ethics, drawing on classic texts and commentaries written by Tibetan Buddhist teachers and supplemented by recent renderings aimed at Westerners. \(^2\) Though I have made an effort to stay as close as possible to the most authoritative of these sources, much has had to be simplified for a non-Buddhist audience; those who seek to learn more should consult the original texts mentioned here, along with others. I also have taken the liberty of reducing the complementary ethical principles in Buddhism to “Intend No Harm,” and “Intend to Be of Benefit.” I have done this not just for simplicity’s sake, but also to draw attention to the importance of intention. In Buddhist ethics, our actions are important, but our intentions are even more important. If we lie with a negative intention, it is very different than if we lie with a purely positive one. This is of great importance.

In addition to describing this ethical system, the chapter discusses the implications and applications of Buddhist moral ethics for mass media practice and for research and scholarship. Though Buddhist ethics bears strong similarities to traditional modes of reasoning taught in media ethics classes, there are also some intriguing differences. In applying this ancient ethical system to contemporary media practice, it is my hope to broaden existing normative approaches to ethical decision making in the media and to spur comparative studies of media ethics.

This discussion of Buddhist ethics is a natural response to the call in recent years to add non-Western voices to conversations about media ethics. Although Buddhist moral ethics remains one of the least familiar areas of Buddhist thought for Westerners, Buddhism itself is no longer a stranger. Increasing numbers of Buddhist students are migrating to the West, showing up in classrooms and giving impetus to efforts to globalize our understandings and teaching of ethics. Many Westerners without religious faith have found in the teachings wisdom to guide their lives. And even people whose ethics are deeply centered in other faiths have found in the teachings of Buddha much that enhances their own abilities to minimize suffering in themselves and others, and to maximize happiness. If nothing else, perhaps this discussion of Buddhist ethics will work to enlarge readers’ understanding of their own ethical principles, deepening their awareness of their intentions and actions and the presumed effects of both on all who engage in media practice.

ESSENTIALS OF BUDDHIST ETHICS

Buddhist ethics has sometimes been boiled down to this injunction: “Help others if you can, but if you cannot, at least refrain from hurting others.” This explains in part why intending no harm is typically mentioned first in discussions of this system of ethics; intending no harm to others is the least we can do.
INTEND NO HARM

Few of us intend to harm others. And yet we do, all the time. Caught doing something we know we should not be doing, we may tell a little lie. Discovering an umbrella or borrowed book in the back seat of our car, we may decide to keep it, knowing full well it belongs to an acquaintance, but liking it so much we don’t give it back. Or cut off in traffic, we may hurl expletives out the car window. These may seem like small things, and they are, relative to other, more harmful acts chronicled every day in the mass media. But if we were honest and kept track, we might count up many such negative acts in our daily lives.

What makes these actions “negative” is the negative mind that generates them and the harm they do or suffering they cause that we often overlook. Road rage, for example, comes from a mind that wants everything to go our own way and is less concerned about others than about ourselves. Such rage may ruin the mood of the errant driver, and that person in turn may lash out at others, generating far-reaching unintended consequences. But even if our anger doesn’t irritate the other person, it may disturb any peace of mind we might have had.

And these are not the only harms that negative actions can do. If we believe—as the Buddha believed—that what goes around comes around, our actions will bring us long-term consequences. Among other things, they will increase our familiarity with anger, making it easier to get angry the next time, at another stranger perhaps, or even a partner or a friend, and that person, reacting in turn to our anger, may hurl expletives back at us. Finally, we will make it much harder for the potential for good within us to stir to life and grow.

The Buddha saw very clearly the immediate and long-range harms that people do all the time to themselves as well as to others, and so counseled those he taught to abandon actions that cause harm. The particular actions he recommended that people abandon are ones that he saw most often contribute to personal unhappiness and community disharmony. In Tibetan Buddhism, which provides the basis for this chapter, ten such actions have come down through the ages; though there are many other non-virtuous behaviors in addition to the ten identified here, most are thought to be contained inside these.

Echoing five of the “thou shalt not’s” of the Ten Commandments of Christianity, the ten actions include killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and covetousness. But in addition, they include divisive speech, which disrupts harmonious relationships between individuals and groups; hurtful speech, which hurts someone’s feelings; idle chatter or gossip, which is any talk that whiles away the time, without meaning or purpose; malice or ill will, which contrary to love, is the wish that others will come to harm; and holding wrong views, which includes (but is not limited to) ignoring or minimizing the fact that our actions have consequences (ignoring, in other words, the law of cause-and-effect, or karma).

In Tibetan Buddhism, these ten actions are placed behind three “doors” representing our connection to the outside world: the door of the body, the door of speech, and the door of the mind, and they are ordered in ways that emphasize their presumed destructiveness to self and others, as noted in the chart below.

1. Killing
2. Stealing
3. Sexual Misconduct
4. Lying
5. Divisive Speech

**BODY**

**SPEECH**
Under this ethical system, non-virtuous actions of the BODY (1–3) are generally presumed to be worse than those of SPEECH (4–7), by virtue of the relative amount of suffering they tend to cause. Of these, killing is generally regarded as the most destructive to others and ourselves and idle chatter (or gossip) the least harmful, with all those in between listed in descending order of destructiveness. A moral agent seeking to minimize the amount of harm his actions are likely to inflict on himself and others should thus seek to eliminate those actions of body and speech presumed to cause the most harm.

The last three non-virtuous actions, those of the MIND (8–10), are presumed to be causes of all the other non-virtues (1–7) and for this reason are generally considered the most destructive of all. A malicious thought, for example, can lead us to say hurtful things. And covetousness, which is the desire to possess what others have, can lead some of us to take what hasn’t been offered (or steal) or to become sexually involved with someone else’s partner (one form of sexual misconduct). Indeed, the placement of actions of the mind at the bottom of the list suggests that such actions are at the “root” of all the other non-virtuous actions that cause suffering (though, importantly, their order of destructiveness is reversed, with the top action, covetousness, considered the least destructive of the three non-virtuous actions of the mind, and the bottom action, holding wrong views, considered the most destructive). While this would appear to suggest a need to abandon these actions above all others, actions of the mind are also considered the hardest to abandon, as they are implicated, in varying ways, in all the other actions. The good news is that because they are implicated in all the other actions, the more we work to abandon the non-virtuous actions of body and speech, the more we create the causes and conditions for abandoning non-virtues of the mind as well.

Not only does the amount of destructiveness associated with each non-virtuous action vary under this ethical system, but also within each action, there can be gradations of harm. Not all lies are equal, in other words. Some lies are worse than others, depending on a variety of factors, including the intention behind our actions, the method we use in taking the action, the object of the action, how often we commit the action, and whether or not we engage in positive actions to offset the negatives.

Of all of these factors that affect the severity of a non-virtuous action, the most important is intention. In Buddhist thought, a non-virtuous action by its nature arises from a negative mind and can never be virtuous. However, some actions can be more severely negative than others as a function of the nature and strength of the intention. For example, if we kill out of jealousy or rage or with malicious delight it is a far more harmful action than if we kill with great reluctance, wishing we did not have to kill at all. Likewise, if we engage in divisive speech, which creates or reinforces a divide between people, and we do it with the explicit intention of stirring things up so people will hurt one another, it’s far more harmful than if we do it while engaging in mindless gossip.

Such statements must not be misunderstood. Just because all lies are not equal does not mean that lies are condoned in this system of moral ethics. There may be rare exceptions when lies
can be told, not out of ignorance, but with clear awareness of what is at stake and compassion for everyone involved (in which case the lies are not considered non-virtuous at all; see next section, below). However, lies that arise from the kind of mindless, negative thinking that makes us separate from and more important than others (what we might call non-virtuous lies) are never condoned. This is because such lies do harm.

If we look carefully enough, it is possible to see the harm for ourselves. If we lie about something we have done (if we have strayed, say, from a committed relationship out of desirous attachment for someone else), we deny the person we are lying to the freedom to choose a course of action based on the truth. If discovered, our lie just adds to that person’s distrust of us. Even if our lie is not found out, we know in our hearts we have lied, and we know from experience that our lying this time may make it necessary to lie again later; it may also make it easier to lie the next time, which if the lying goes on long enough can lead to a habitual tendency to lie. All this lying takes a lot of energy too, energy that might better be invested in more positive activities. Buddhist guidelines for moral conduct may not be absolutist, in the sense of prohibiting all lies, but they are clear that lies (and other non-virtuous actions that arise from a negative mind) generally do harm to ourselves and others, and if we want to minimize harm and create the causes and conditions that make it easier for our better qualities to arise, we should abandon as many of these actions as we can.

Abandoning non-virtuous actions (which is itself considered “virtuous” action in this system) is typically not something that can be done overnight. Especially if we have engaged in negative actions frequently enough to have made them into habits, it can require a great deal of discipline to change our ways. Knowing this, some Buddhists take vows for a day, or a week, or a month, to not indulge in a certain action, checking up on themselves with regularity, and if they slip, expressing regrets, taking other actions to repair any damage, and recommitting themselves to more positive actions. Others simply work to be mindful of every time they are tempted to engage in a particular negative action, and recognizing their actions could cause harm, work to find alternatives. Most people who exercise ethical restraint in these ways come to understand that even with the best of intentions they will make mistakes; all we can do is do the best we can, and over time, make improvements. To do nothing is to allow and create the causes and conditions for continued harm and suffering.

INTEND TO BE OF BENEFIT

But it would be a mistake to limit ethics to the moral injunction to intend no harm. Just as the first obligation of medical doctors has traditionally been thought to be to do no harm (primum non nocere), the larger obligation of physicians is to prevent and cure diseases, or, as we are discussing it here, to be of benefit. Likewise, in Buddhism, the least we can do to maximize our positive potential is to do no harm, but the most important thing to do is to be of help. Indeed, given the massive amount of suffering in the world, we should do everything we can to open our hearts to be of benefit, “applying steady, continuous effort” (Gyatso, 1995, p. 383).

The positive actions we can take to be of benefit are countless. Indeed, writers on Buddhist ethics often end their lists of things to do with a simple “etc.” or “and so forth.” Actions that remove others’ ignorance, especially ignorance of our deep connections to one another and our responsibilities for each other, may be especially beneficial. One writer lists, as examples of positive actions, any work that alleviates others’ suffering, removes dangers that threaten and arouse fears in others, consoles others, teaches skills that others need and do not possess, and helps others in ways appropriate to their views and customs (Gyatso, 1995, p. 454ff.). By engaging in
these and other positive actions, we nourish our own positive qualities, creating the causes and conditions for them to grow quickly and well, and for our own ultimate happiness.

As with abandoning harmful actions, our intention is critical to being of benefit. With a pure intention to be of benefit, it is possible in some circumstances to engage in an action like lying that with other motivations would be non-virtuous. In the Buddhist system of ethics, such an action can be positive, provided it is truly motivated by love and compassion for everyone involved (and not just for the most obvious “victims” in a situation).

Again, the apparent flexibility of this ethical system should not be misunderstood. Because so much of our mind tends to be rooted in ignorance, it can be easy to imagine we have the best of intentions, when in fact we may not; we may simply be striving for an outcome that will get us what we think we want, while hurting someone else along the way. Buddhism stresses that every one of us without exception wants to be relieved of suffering and to attain happiness; this is so even as we habitually chase after things that bring nothing but suffering. In this, despite superficial differences, we are alike. Given our fundamental similarities, everyone is deserving of our compassion. No one, regardless of station, is inherently more important than another. So if we do engage in an action like lying, we should make sure our intention is to benefit everyone involved.

Finally, cultivating actions that are intended to benefit others is every bit as much a discipline as abandoning non-virtuous actions. Some Buddhists make it a practice to engage in particular kinds of positive actions over a period of time; actively consoling others, for example, through volunteer activities in a hospice or hospital. In this way, they gradually nourish the seeds of love and compassion. Over time, their hearts grow warmer and more open and more and more used to attending to others’ needs as well as to their own.

IMPLICATIONS OF BUDDHIST ETHICS FOR MEDIA PRACTICE

Little, if anything, appears to have been written about the implications of Buddhist ethics for media practice. However, for media professionals, who have in their hands the power to both reflect and contribute to suffering, Buddhist ethics appears to offer general guidance for how to practice in ways that will diminish suffering and maximize happiness. It appears to offer guidance related to the type of work we choose to do and the way in which we choose to do that work. It is also flexible enough to offer guidance for making decisions when particular values clash, as they do in ethical dilemmas.

GUIDANCE FOR THE KINDS OF WORK TO DO

If we assume, as Buddhism does, that our own happiness depends on the happiness of others and that everything we do affects others, and if we further assume that we are not independent moral agents but are affected by a variety of social influences (an assumption supported by scholarship; see Voakes, 1997), then the kind of work we choose to do, and for whom, matters. If we seek to reduce suffering and generate happiness for ourselves and others, we should refrain, for example, from taking a position in a company that has a reputation for lying or stealing and in other ways cutting ethical corners. Likewise, we should refrain from using our media skills on behalf of a company whose primary products, like alcohol or cigarettes, enable people to abuse their bodies and increase the chances that they will die prematurely. And it will be beneficial to refrain from working for a firm that greedily puts profits or ratings ahead of sound ethics.

It also will be helpful to seek out work that encourages us to actively benefit others, jobs in which the primary purpose is to assist people in need, to give a voice to the voiceless, for
instance, and to promote products and services (for example, medicines and educational materials or hospice care for the dying and programs that feed the hungry) that will improve peoples’ quality of life or give people access to basic human rights.

It will be beneficial, in short, to avoid a livelihood that does harm and seek instead what some Buddhist traditions call “right livelihood,” work that avoids harmful actions and that encourages helpful actions instead.

This is not to say that we are going to always be free to choose our occupation or place of employment. If we have limited opportunities or a family to support, for example, we may not have the luxury of choosing the work we do or the company we work for. But where we can make choices in the best long-term interests of others, and ourselves, we should try to do so.

GUIDANCE FOR DOING THE WORK

Buddhist ethics not only offers useful guidance for the kind of media jobs to seek; it also offers guidance for conducting ourselves in whatever media work we choose to do.

If we seek to follow Buddhist prescriptions for abandoning non-virtuous actions in our work, we would want to think twice, for example, before:

- wrongly appropriating intellectual property off the Internet or snatching from ordinary people privacy that is not freely given (stealing);
- using sex as a mere seduction to gain access to information from a source or competitor (sexual misconduct);
- using deception to gain information from a source or competitor, or hiring actors or creating front groups to promote causes without identifying who they represent (lying);
- using labels and information that stereotype groups and magnify a divide between “us” and “them” (divisive speech);
- producing programs or writing blogs that make thoughtless use of abusive language (hurtful speech);
- generating stories about celebrities or others that are little more than titillating gossip and as a result distract us from more meaningful work and lead others to not take us seriously (idle chatter).

To the extent that these and other questionable actions arise from a negative mind, we should exercise restraint. Only with a positive mind, with the pure intention to be of benefit to everyone involved, should we consider engaging in them.

Consider an opportunity to report on the wayward behavior of a major celebrity. If we are considering such reporting out of greed—because it would gain ratings or hits from a celebrity-crazed audience or because it would keep up with or beat out the competition—it would be best to refrain from such reporting. On the other hand, if we have the pure intention to provide information that will help both the celebrity and those who feed on celebrity to understand the pressures that fame and material wealth can place on a vulnerable personality, then reporting on this wayward behavior may be justified.

The challenge is to be sure we are not fooling ourselves. As noted earlier, it is extraordinarily easy in our ignorance to pull the wool over our eyes; people can rationalize all kinds of negative behaviors. Given this, engaging in actions that are generally defined as non-virtuous (actions like lying, for example) is almost never recommended. If there is an alternative action we might take, we should definitely explore it.
Of course Buddhist ethics not only offers guidelines for the kinds of actions we should try to abandon when doing our jobs, it also encourages people to look for ways to be of benefit. This can mean finding ways to use our knowledge and talents to actively reduce ignorance and relieve others of their suffering. This might mean producing stories that give voice to those who have been deprived of basic human rights, so that solutions can be found, and relief granted. It might mean investigating dangers in the environment, so citizens and authorities can work for laws and policies that will reduce the risks. It might mean offering “news you can use”—for example, science-based stories on conflict resolution, so people can learn ways to resolve conflicts with co-workers, playground bullies, and members of their own families. If one is in PR or advertising, it might mean doing pro bono media relations work or producing television commercials for organizations that help victims of hunger, violence, or turbulent weather.

But actively working to relieve others of their suffering is not the only beneficial thing we can do. We can also actively work to celebrate the loving and compassionate deeds of ordinary people, deeds that otherwise would go unremarked. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, has expressed this in his popular book *Ethics for the New Millennium*:

> When the media focuses (sic) too closely on the negative aspects of human nature, there is a danger that we become persuaded that violence and aggression are its principal characteristics. This is a mistake, I believe. The fact that violence is newsworthy suggests the very opposite. Good news is not remarked on precisely because there is so much of it. Consider that at any given moment there must be hundreds of millions of acts of kindness taking place around the world. Although there will undoubtedly be many acts of violence in progress at the same time, their number is surely much less. If therefore, the media is (sic) to be ethically responsible, it needs to reflect that simple fact.

(Dalai Lama, 1999, p. 186)

The late Harvard University scientist Stephen Jay Gould made a similar point following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, which gave Americans a close-up look at the human capacity to inflict harm. In Gould’s words, “Every spectacular incidence of evil will be balanced by 10,000 acts of kindness, too often unnoted and invisible as the ‘ordinary’ efforts of a vast majority.” And “when an unprecedented act of evil so threatens to distort our perceptions of ordinary human behavior,” human beings have “a duty, almost a holy responsibility, to record and honor the victorious weight of these innumerable little kindnesses” (Gould, 2001, p. A23).

Put another way, if the media spew out negative information all the time, people may come to regard the world as a fearful place, full of people who are greedy, corrupt, hateful, and threatening. On the other hand, if the media also run positive stories—if they show ordinary people helping a city rebuild after a horrendous flood or if they show children organizing campaigns to feed hungry children on the other side of the globe—people may come to see the potential for the good that they and others possess. What media professionals focus on, whether it is positive, negative, or trivial, thus matters, to us all.

**GUIDELINES FOR ETHICAL DILEMMAS**

Buddhist principles also have implications for decision-making in ethical dilemmas, situations in which values conflict and there is no clear right answer.

Consider a case in which a television reporter has received a tip that institutionalized adults with developmental disabilities are being abused by their caregivers. The tipster is certain the institution will not allow in reporters. Lying in this system of ethics is generally presumed wrong.
But is it impermissible in the interests of righting another wrong for a journalist to lie about her identity to secure a staff job and then document the abuse with a hidden camera?

In Buddhist ethics, our first obligation is to do no harm. Since lying is generally presumed harmful, we should make great effort to find a way to do the story without lying. Is it possible, for example, to get the story by talking to the tipster and other staff members inside the institution that this person trusts? If there is another way to get the story, we should.9

But let’s say we discover there is no way to do the story without lying. Wouldn’t it be okay, out of compassion for the victims, to lie to the few to benefit the many? If we assume, as Buddhist ethics does, that everyone without exception is deserving of compassion, then deliberately harming one group for the sake of another, even if the second group would benefit, would be questionable. In this particular case, it might be better to ask the tipster to go to the authorities. Let government officials do the investigating. This would avoid the harm that lying presumably would do to ourselves and to those lied to, and at the same time it would benefit the victims by exposing their suffering (and, incidentally, benefit the perpetrators by interrupting their negative deeds, which will only bring them grief). We can always bring the mistreatment to the public’s attention, once it is exposed by authorities. Admittedly that will not be the kind of story we can run during sweeps week or submit for journalistic prizes (a very real drawback of this particular approach for the business of media), but if we are truly seeking to do no harm and be of benefit, we wouldn’t want to do the story just to gain audience share or garner prizes in any event, as such reasons arise from covetousness or greed, which are themselves non-virtuous actions of the mind.

But let’s imagine, for sake of argument, that the authorities are corrupt, taking bribes from the institution to not investigate the allegations of mistreatment. In such a circumstance, going to authorities is not an option. Wouldn’t refusing to do the story, when we have the opportunity to bring this mistreatment to light and the attendant corruption as well, make the journalist complicit in the continuing suffering of the victims and the ongoing corruption? Does lying remain impermissible even when it is the only way to do a story that could stop the harm that others are doing and be of benefit?

Any system of ethics that lists ten non-virtuous actions may appear on the surface to be rigidly moralistic. But in this case, it is not. As noted earlier, an action under this system can be more or less right as a function of a host of factors. Of these factors, the most important is our intention or motivation. If we are experiencing such outrage that we can’t wait to get inside the institution to film and punish the caretakers, this is not a positive mind; it is, in fact a mind seized by malice; given this negative state of mind, the use of deception would be considered non-virtuous, presumably harming not just others, but ourselves as well.

On the other hand, if our intention is to help everyone involved, including the caretakers, who presumably will suffer even more with respect to their long-term happiness if allowed to continue, the lie could be considered virtuous, and justified. Jail time for the caretakers, from this perspective, would tend to be regarded as preferable to allowing the caretakers to continue what they are doing because at least it would put a stop to actions that harm not just their victims, but themselves.

Our intention, if it is positive, will likely have direct implications for the reporting and framing of the story. Whereas traditional investigative journalism typically reflects outrage over the actions of one set of people (and for this reason is often called the “journalism of outrage”), this other kind of journalism (what might be called the “journalism of compassion”) will reflect compassion for everyone involved. More precisely, it will reflect the realization that every one of us has not only the capacity for good, but also a capacity—at varying times and in varying degrees—to get caught up in situations that lead to harmful actions. Reporting may thus include, in addition to investigation of the qualities of individual staff members, investigation of
staff-patient ratios, length of workdays, job qualifications and hiring practices, and other causes and conditions that have contributed to this sad state of affairs.10

Obviously, a report that shows caretakers beating up helpless adults is going to be shocking and generate outrage, but we can hope that the piece, if motivated by compassion, will also provide information that will enable viewers to move beyond these initial visceral reactions to an understanding of the complexity of factors that have converged to produce wrong actions and suffering. It is possible to imagine such a story garnering professional prizes and high ratings, no less than a story that is done for other reasons. It may not always be possible for our work to be both ethical as this system of ethics defines it and good for business, but if we are truly interested in using our work to help reduce suffering and generate happiness, it is a goal worth striving toward.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP**

Buddhist ethics presents challenges to both normative and descriptive scholars of media ethics.

**NORMATIVE ETHICS**

In many ways, Buddhist ethics resembles the classical ethical reasoning of philosophers steeped in Christian perspectives. However, there are also striking differences, both significant and subtle, that deserve exploration by normative scholars.

The similarities:

- Buddhist ethics shares with the utilitarian ethics of John Stuart Mill a concern for maximizing happiness and minimizing harm and a recognition that actions can have harmful (or beneficial) consequences that contribute to both.
- It appears similar to the rule-based system of Immanuel Kant, which counsels actions that conform to rules or duties that respect the dignity of all and that we would want everyone to follow.
- It shares with the ethics of Aristotle a concern for cultivating positive moral habits.

The differences lie in the details:

- Unlike utilitarian ethics (at least the version of utilitarian ethics most widely taught in our field), Buddhist ethics does not determine the moral worth of an action as a function of its calculated potential to maximize the happiness of, and minimize the harm to, the greatest number of actors in the immediate situation. Instead, on the assumption that all beings without exception deserve happiness and relief from suffering, it seeks to maximize happiness and minimize harm with respect to everyone in the immediate situation and also with respect to everyone who might be subsequently affected by the actions. In doing so, it presumes that some actions are more likely than others to maximize happiness and minimize harm now and in the future. It’s not that this system ignores the potential consequences of actions for individual actors in the immediate situation. However, it rejects choosing an action merely on that basis. In this system, of far more importance than calculated consequences is our motivation or intention. On the assumption that the mind guides all our physical and verbal actions, the emphasis is on thoughts and feelings, which can be trained and controlled over time, rather than on what arises in the moment on the outside, which in any event is usually beyond one’s immediate control.
• Although Buddhist ethics appears to share with Kantian reasoning an emphasis on universal principles that have long-range consequences for individuals and society, it does not ignore immediate consequences as Kantian reasoning does; immediate consequences do figure in this system, they simply are less important than other factors, especially intention. There are other important differences too. Kantian rules or duties are so absolutist that they make it difficult to know what to do when actions adhering to different rules or duties conflict in a given situation. Buddhist ethics, on the other hand, weighs various actions according to their general ability to inflict harm, allowing us to make choices depending upon the presumed degree of harm we might inflict with a given option. In this sense it comes closer to William David Ross’s weighing of *prima facie* rules or duties, which makes decision-making possible when rules or duties conflict. But Buddhist ethics departs in some critical ways from Ross’s system too. These include the fact that Buddhist ethics attends to *additional* factors that can mitigate the moral weight of a particular action, including (but not limited to) our intention or motivation.

• Buddhist ethics would appear to most closely resemble Aristotelian ethics with its concern for cultivating positive moral habits and character. However, it can be argued that Buddhist ethics provides more specific guides to moral action than Aristotelian ethics; at least it provides more than the simplified versions of Aristotelian ethics often taught in media ethics classrooms, which do not identify specific acts of virtue other than actions that flow out of cardinal virtues that lie between “extremes.”¹¹¹ Technically, Buddhist ethics are not concerned either, as Aristotelian ethics are, with cultivating character, for character implies a sense of self that is separate from others and stable, which in Buddhist philosophy is a distortion of a reality that is profoundly interdependent and (despite individual and collective denials to the contrary) impermanent.

• As should by now be clear, of particular importance in Buddhist ethics is restraint of non-virtuous actions of the *mind*. The actions of the mind identified in the context of moral ethics are particular forms of attachment, anger and ignorance, which arise out of our need to protect and advance a separate, permanent sense of self, and are presumed to be a root cause of suffering. In cultivating moral ethics, we assume responsibility for restraining our mental activities (which include thoughts and emotions), as well as our physical and verbal actions.

• Scholars interested in comparative ethics would do well to delineate these and other similarities and differences and to compare in given situations the reasoning and outcomes of this system against other ethical systems. Of particular interest might be comparisons to John Rawls’s veil of ignorance, communitarianism, and perhaps most importantly, the ethics of care. It could also be beneficial to compare how these differing systems fare under the ever shifting and complex conditions for moral choice.

**DESCRIPTIVE ETHICS**

For scholars with descriptive interests, at least two challenges present themselves. Although Buddhist thought is not always conceived of as religious, there are enough similarities to traditional faith systems to make scholarship on the interplay of religious and professional norms of relevance to this project. Sociological research on mass media practice on the part of those who identify themselves as Christians suggests that when professional and religious norms clash in the workplace, professional norms take precedence (Schmalzauer, 1999). But this literature, which includes a monograph by Boeyink (1998), also suggests that where there is no conflict, there is
considerable room for the application of religious ethics in one’s work; the journalists find niches and strategies that allow them to live out their religious values. When Buddhist journalists work in the media, do they likewise bow to professional norms when they conflict with Buddhist principles? And how do the niches and strategies they find for expressing their values compare with those identified by workers who identify themselves as Christians?

In a related vein, when media professionals who subscribe to Buddhist ethics encounter ethical dilemmas in the workplace, do they make different choices from those that Christian professionals make? If and when Buddhist-dominated countries adopt Western-style codes of ethics, are the provisions of the codes interpreted in different ways than they would be in the West, as one might expect based on the work of Wasserman and De Beer (2010) and others?

CONCLUSIONS

Buddhist moral ethics, while unfamiliar to many in the West, offers a measure of guidance for the kind of work media professionals may choose, for the ways they may do their work, and for ethical quandaries. While this system from the East shares similarities with ethical systems of the West, there appear to be important differences, which deserve to be explored by normative and descriptive scholars alike.

Will Buddhist ethics lead to different decisions by media practitioners? And if it does, will these decisions, in turn, affect the extent to which media content reflects and contributes to suffering?

The value of this system for media scholarship and practice in the West will depend on its perceived promise for raising new questions, offering new insights, and affecting the ethics of practitioners in positive ways. If this chapter does nothing but open the discussion of these matters, it will have served a useful purpose.

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NOTES

1. The bestselling book Tuesdays with Morrie by Mitch Albom is a good example of the latter.
2. The most scholarly source is a teaching by the late Pabongka Rinpoche based on fifteenth century teachings for monastics in the Gelupga lineage of Tibetan Buddhism by Tibetan Buddhist teacher Lama Tsongkapa. This source, which is on the stages of the path (or lamrim), comes in two translations: a

3. The thinking behind asking followers to abandon non-virtuous actions is the same across traditions of Buddhism, though the precise actions, in kind and number, vary slightly. See Landaw with Bodian (2003, p. 227).

4. The law of cause-and-effect, or karma, states that over the long run, if not immediately, positive causes will have positive effects, and negative causes will have negative effects. Because actions have consequences, how we act matters. Karma is thus not the passive thing that many Westerners mistakenly believe it to be, but something we ourselves influence with every choice we make. If we make the positive choice to abandon actions that are motivated by narrowly selfish interests and if we adopt instead actions that are motivated by genuine love and compassion and the wish to be of benefit, the law of karma says that we can have confidence that at some point (a point we may not be able to see clearly right now), we will experience the positive consequences of those choices: it will grow easier and easier to act in ways that will feed the positive seed within us, allowing it to rise up, grow, and flower. Over time, we will “reap what we sow.”

5. An important caveat is in order here: While it is generally true that actions of the mind are more destructive than actions of body and speech by virtue of their involvement in these other actions, it is also true that an action of the mind that is merely an action of the mind is going to be less destructive than an action of the mind that is accompanied by an action of the body or speech; so, for example, if we covet a person’s hat (an action of the mind), but do not actually steal the hat (an action of the body), it is going to be less destructive than if we both covet the hat and actually steal it.

6. To be more specific:
   - The intention behind our actions. For example, if we lie out of revenge, with a strong intention to hurt someone, it is presumed more destructive than if we lie just to get out of something. The method we use in taking the action. If we develop an elaborate lie, embroidered with details intended to deceive, for example, it is generally considered worse than if we lie by indirection or omission. Likewise, if we involve others in the deception, it is worse than if we alone deceive.
   - The object of the action. If we lie to people who have been especially kind to us, for example, it is presumed to be more destructive than if we lie to strangers, not because strangers are inherently less important than those who have been especially kind (they are not ultimately, all beings are equally valuable), but because the amount of suffering is likely to be greater.
   - How often we commit the action. If we lie regularly, for instance, it is much worse than if we lie only occasionally, as a last resort.

Whether or not we engage in positive actions to offset the negatives. If we engage in negative actions only, it is far worse than if we engage in negative actions supplemented by actions that benefit others.

7. Though, as indicated earlier, some may be hurt more than other by our actions.

8. One exception is a previous book chapter by the author, “A Teacher’s Last Lesson: Love Each Other or Die,” in Howard Good’s edited volume, *Desperately Seeking Ethics: A Guide to Media Conduct*. That chapter is not explicitly about Buddhist ethics, but it is based on ethical principles from this system.

9. This is consistent with many professional and organizational codes of ethics, which counsel journalists to use deception to gather a story only as a last resort.

10. From a Buddhist perspective, there would be even deeper causes to explore, but these are not causes that would be easily conveyed in the news.

11. Some scholars might argue—as one reviewer of this chapter did—that this is “too restrictive of Aristotle.” In the words of this reviewer, “some versions do limit themselves to acts of virtue constrained
by the cardinal virtues, but not all. And to claim that Buddhist ethics provides more specific guides to moral action doesn’t give enough credence to Aristotle’s phronesis, practical wisdom.” Given my own inabilities to address this critique, I regret I must leave this to scholars of ethics to sort out in future comparisons of Aristotelian and Buddhist ethics.

REFERENCES


