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The Nature of Emptiness and Buddhist Ethics

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Summary

Buddhist ethics can be compelling by the sheer force of its principal doctrines. It focuses on the nature of the elusive but dynamic nonself (*anātman*) doctrine and brings together such concepts as the middle way (*madhyama-pratipad*), relational origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*) and the nature of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). But more basic to the understanding of these concepts is the need to practice the well known Eightfold Noble Path that finally caps in meditative discipline (*samādhi*) that breaks open into the perception of things under the aegis of emptiness. The result is a rare vision, an insight (*prajñā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*) for all living and nonliving creatures.

The dynamic nonself is important in that it exhibits the contemporary significance of the content of a doctrine expounded by the historical Buddha. Without this doctrine, it would not be possible to develop Buddhist ethics. It compels us to perceive our contacts, association and actions in a group or social setting in a broader, deeper and flexible ways. The nature of emptiness allows this perception. More specifically, the awareness of others in mutually binding and dynamic ways give rise to a unique form of moral sense. It binds people together in ways that are gainful and harmonious, thus perpetuating and sustaining a healthy and productive society.

Keywords : 1.Dynamic Nonself 2.Emptiness 3.Ethics 4.Middle Way
5.Relational Origination

Buddhism is at once both a religion and a philosophy. The fact that it has this dual nature is one of the wonders in the ideological world. It is even more surprising when one considers the fact that as a religion there is no deity or a higher being to speak of and as a philosophy there is the inclusion of meditative discipline as a necessary ingredient in the way of life. To the westerner, this poses an awkward situation, but my perception of this dilemma is that such a situation arises because the viewer has a limited understanding of Buddhism rather than seeing it in its fuller and deeper implications. It is often said that it takes a lifetime to understand Buddhism because its tenets are not only for the intellect alone, but it also challenges one to truly implicate its doctrines into one's own way of life. In this sense, Buddhism is profoundly practical in its deeper nature of things. Historically, it would seem that at the beginning, there was neither a religion nor a philosophy sharply distinguished and with a distinct following of either. The quest for the enlightened life was a general quest by all Indians of whatever persuasion. It crossed ideological borders facily and there was no restrictions set up to prevent or restrict any devotee from moving about freely to achieve his goal. There were freelance truth seekers (sadhus) everywhere in what may be called an especially open and tolerant ambiance. It was in such a world that Siddhartha Gautama appeared.

The historical Buddha's enlightenment (nirvāṇa) revealed a surprisingly new message to the world. He taught the well known Fourfold Noble Truth: (1) Life is suffering, (2) there is a reason for the suffering, (3) there is a cessation of suffering, and finally (4) there is a way to the cessation of suffering. The teaching was very simple and direct: life is a bundle of suffering from the minute one is born, but there is a way out of suffering. Later on, the teachings were committed to writing (sūtras) and commentaries on them (śāstras) as well as disciplinary rules of conduct (vinaya) appeared, especially at selected places of gathering for instruction and

training called the sanghas. For a long time, the sanghas were the centers of Buddhist learning and propagation. It promoted vigorous training for the ideality of life, a life geared for the ultimate salvation through self-enlightenment. As the sanghas grew in size and number, correspondingly and in time, the notion of an unlimited content of self-enlightenment arose to inject new perspective and meaning into the ideality of life. Now the content included not only matters on sentient beings but nonsentients as well. Thus, perception was no longer limited but unlimited or open in terms of taking in the grand sweep of things. In many ways, this was really a return to the original enlightenment of the Buddha who probed into the profound content as it really is in the dynamics of life itself. So now the mere truth seeker has become a participant in the grand scheme of things, although he may not be cognizant of his real situation as yet. From the ideal of truth seeking, we now see a movement toward a grander perspective of things that takes in the whole world as the grounds of human function. This perspective is known as the Bodhisattva Ideal. For those who understand fairly well the doctrines of Buddhism, it becomes a further challenge to incorporate greater and deeper realms of beings and nonbeings. In this essay we will probe into this challenge as a way of bringing forth a viable Buddhist form of ethics.

The Foundation of Buddhist Ethics

In a nutshell, the Bodhisattva Ideal expresses the foundation of Buddhist ethics. The Mahāyāna texts are replete with reference to the so-called “Twin Doctrines” of supreme insight (prajñā) and compassion (karuṇā), the essence of the Bodhisattva nature. These two doctrines then depict what the Bodhisattva is and ought to be. Literally, Bodhisattva refers to the “enlightened being,” but more philosophically it projects to a being whose efforts are geared toward the enlightened realm of existence. Thus, when a text makes a simple statement that the “streets are full Buddhas,” it

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really refers to the fact that the community is full of potentially enlightened beings or that the way to enlightened existence is open to anyone. The statement also reminds us that Buddhism is an open, catholic, and natural way of life. There is nothing foreign or alien in terms of its quest for the enlightened realm of existence. Anything alien, in brief, would not fit into the natural scheme of things. Thus, all masters or great figures in Buddhism, such as Nāgārjuna, Asaṅga, and Vasubandhu, are referred to as Bodhisattvas and not Buddhas. Each of them, or all collectively have taught us the way of life that brings us closer to what a Bodhisattva is or ought to be. It is then as much a challenge to achieve Bodhisattvahood as it is to work diligently to embody the doctrines of insight and compassion. These doctrines manifest in the following ways:

- (1) They depict a complete and holistic presence of a potentially perfect being in humankind.
- (2) They are inter-penetrative and mutually involving doctrines, such that to speak of one is to introduce the other. In this sense, they are mutually defining each other.

Let us explore the implications further. Insight (prajñā) is of course intuitive, clear, sharp and sustaining. Technically, prajñā is contrasted with vijñāna, where the latter term refers to knowledge that is the result of analysis or discrimination but the former is not the result of desultory or indirect function. Thus prajñā is direct and vijñāna is indirect knowledge. This difference is carried over to its sister doctrine, compassion (karuṇā).

Compassion is of the nature of direct contact and direct knowledge. If it were not direct, it would not be compassion but something less, indirect and limited. Thus compassion cannot apply to one’s own existence or to one’s one-way

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contact with another or others. This shows plainly that compassion, true to its word, is a total, all-involving phenomenon. To be compassionate, then, is to be aloof from any discriminative knowledge and be in contact with all beings, including nonbeings, without drawing any borders in existence. The contact must be resilient and pliable so that it could at any time expand and include new or novel elements and situations. The Buddhist masters have been keen over the ages to keep these twin or dual natures as a goal of the aspirations to become the Bodhisattva.

As it should be clear by now, Buddhist ethics is total involvement of all beings, inclusive of nonbeings, in constructing an ideal life of harmony among humankind in the here and now. In this respect, there is no necessity of involving alien forces, small or large, into the picture. If anything, Buddhism abhors the alien forces, just as science abhors a vacuum. Indeed, any alien force would be a burden imposed on the way in which we understand the nature of things. Here is a good example where Buddhism and science have a common ground and goal: take nature for what it is and seek an understanding within the realm of what is there——no more, no less.

Buddhist ethics is then a quest for the supreme dual nature of Bodhisattvahood in a dynamic sense. It is the realization of an ideal humankind within the proper setting of a viable community of human beings surrounded by nonsentient beings of all kinds. As a result of his enlightenment, he saw reality for what it is, i.e., without the exterior trims imposed by human contrivance which only brings on suffering in all its dimensions, physical as well as mental. The conquest of suffering was most natural in the sense that it was derived through wholly natural means. Critics may differ here and argue that the meditative discipline of the times had awkward, if not unnatural, elements that cannot be understood in natural terms. I believe this is an area that needs to be explored and discussed further by those who are adept and learned in the area of meditation, but I still pin hopes that meditative elements are purely natural and the results of its utilization must be considered to be natural phenomena.

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The Three Marks

Let us now return to certain principles that taken together sharply distinguish Buddhism from other prevailing systems of thought. More specifically, they are called the three marks (*trilakṣaṇa*) which are (1) the universal nature of suffering (*duḥkha*), (2) the impermanent nature of things (*anitya*), and (3) the doctrine of nonself (*anātman*).

These three marks are like three poles of a tent tied together that support and firm up each other. To know them in this mutually supportive roles or functions is to really know Buddhism in its true form. But for many of us, even to know just one of them is a huge task and thus to know all three at once in the interconnected sense is quite a monumental task. Moreover, the mutually supportive function means that they define each other's role or status. Yet, the further implication here is that in the supportive and defining function, they are dynamically involved in ways that defy our imagination and, much more, our understanding.

The universal nature of suffering is unique to Buddhism. It specifically refers to the uncommon fact that just to be born is the beginning of all kinds of suffering. Why? It is because the creature born is already engaged in a phenomenon of grasping after things, i.e., the function of the sense faculties, in order to sustain itself or the life process. In Buddhism, the concept of the ordinary self is generally referred to in terms of the five aggregates of being (*pañca-skandha*). The term, *skandha*, refers to the

aggregating phenomenon, a notion that exhibits the dynamic and continuing nature of a being.[1] At any rate, the grasping phenomenon (trṣṇā) is

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the initial or first aspect of a being, but there is a second aspect that germinates directly from the first. That is to say, in the grasping phenomenon there resides innately, but in a damaging way, another phenomenon known as attachment (upādāna). In brief, each grasping entails an attachment to the thing grasped.[2]

So now, it can be seen that the creature born is a bundle of grasping-attachment or a series thereof. The normally acceptable life sustaining process has now been shown to have the subtle, invisible origin or “cause” of suffering. Naturally, it can be argued that without grasping and attachment there will be no organism or creature to speak of. This is true on the biological level, but human beings must be considered to be more than biological beings since they are distinguished from other beings by the unique function of the mind. I firmly believe that the Buddha’s enlightenment revealed the difference between mere biological creatures and creatures that could rise above the physical nature. At the same time, it revealed the continuity that exists from the biological to the so-called higher realm of the mind and its function. Thus it can be deduced that the grasping-attachment phenomenon continues to function from the biological to the conscious realm.[3]

The second mark is impermanence. It flows directly from the discussion we have just gone through on suffering. The

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phenomenon of grasping-attachment reveals that it impedes the flow of existence in the sense that each instance of the phenomenon exhibits a holding pattern, however small or short. This occurs regardless of whether one is conscious of it or not, but in most cases it is too subtle and invisible for the average mind to contend with it. It can be said that the holding pattern is the initial stage wherein the notion of a graspable entity occurs and from which a more refined idea of an object becomes a reality. This initial pattern or patterning is, to be sure, a boon for the mind and its function. It is now able to go further in its objectification or substantialization process. But the truth of the matter is that no object or substance exists in and of itself. It comes into being and goes out of being perpetually and does not stand still for any moment of time. It cannot be manipulated so as to serve the mind at its command, except in abstraction and in terms of subsequent abstract understanding of things in process. Thus as the nature of things is in process at all times, the notion of an object or substance is never permanent but always impermanent. And, the connection between suffering and impermanence is that suffering occurs each time treating things as permanent disturbs the impermanent nature of things. Put another way, Attachment is a form of permanence in that attachment to a thing is a form of permanence and this phenomenon, in turn, hinders or obstructs the natural flow of existence. In brief, then, rather than attachment, the desideratum is non-attachment at all times. This is, however, an unachievable task by the average person and this opens up the discussion of the next and final mark of nonself.

It can be said that the concept of nonself is not in the vocabulary of the average person. It is more than an anomaly since the average mind cannot accept it however hard the mind tries to cope with it. However, by the discussion so far on the marks of suffering and impermanence it should suggest to us that the notion of a self in and of itself is impossible. Since everything is on the

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move, there is nothing—an object, a substance or a self—that can persist or endure. If a thing cannot endure within the impermanent nature of things, then, a perdurable self that grasps after things is not possible. If an entity were to exist, it must exist as part and parcel of the dynamics involved. That is to say, it is possible only in terms of achieving the status of a dynamic nonself, the ultimate goal in Buddhism.

The Dynamic Nonself

We have now seen that the ordinary conception of the self is not advanced in Buddhism. This is not to say, however, that the self does not exist at all in everyday practical affairs. The so-called conventional self is admitted, but it is classified as unreal. It exists only in an apparent world where experiences are understood in “abstract” ways. As discussed earlier, a thing or an object is not real but exists only as an abstraction because it has been abstracted from the dynamic nature of experience. In this sense, the abstracted thing or object, if grasped and clung to, disrupts and impedes the flow of experience. As shown previously, Buddhist experience is free flowing at all times. This means that there should not be any obstruction to the flow in any way.[4]

The conventional nature of the self is not admissible for another reason. The inception of the self, so-called, is at once the inception of a dichotomy. That is to say, the fact that a self appears means that it has separated itself from the rest of the realm of perception. This is not easy to detect or to know. Indeed, for the most part, the dichotomizing self is not apparent, but it becomes a necessary ingredient in our perception of things. Coupled with this

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dichotomy, the thing or object is projected on our perceptual screen, and thus the abstracted nature of the thing or object becomes a part, indeed a content, although unrecognized in the perceptual process. In consequence, dichotomous perception becomes a normal way of our experiences. But it took the Buddha’s enlightenment to unravel the question of abstracted things and objects in our understanding of things by going to the inception of perception that is dichotomous to begin with.

Buddhist doctrines then do not refer to discrete fragmental things or elements, especially those derivable from dichotomous perceptions. Instead, the reference is always on the holistic content of experience in which things happen. It is because of this condition, i.e., doing away with discrete elements, that the Buddha’s enlightenment proffered a unique dynamic nonself doctrine. The doctrine is unique

but difficult to grasp since it strains our minds to merely understand what it really means. It sounds like an oxymoron to speak of a nonself that is at the same time dynamic. Again, it has been said earlier that the mind is not capable of grasping the nature of a dynamic phenomenon, except by way of referential elements, which had already expired as abstractions. In a way, we do get to know things perceived by reference to things already transpired. But reality resides in the present dynamic state and not in a past state. This is the ultimate dilemma we face in trying to seize the nature of the dynamic in terms of the temporal flow. In the dynamic nature of things, moreover, how can we reconcile the nature, so-called, of a nonself? Furthermore, it taxes our imagination to understand the notion of a dynamic nonself. Is there a way out? The answer is definitely positive but it behooves us to be patient, understanding and honestly try to accommodate novel but nascent phases of our ordinary experiences. In other words, there is much “hidden” in our experiences that need to be explored and utilized in very intimate ways.

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The first step is to have an open attitude and accommodate the traditionally proven method of meditation. Needless to say, meditation has been overlooked, if not denied by the general public who think that it is solely in the preserve of the monks or other religious aspirants who practice it merely for religious purposes. The gap between the priesthood and laymen has been rendered so wide that today it seems almost impossible to bridge. Although meditation has become a near sacrosanct commodity, it is time to take a second look at it since there are elements in it that are quite applicable and contributory to solving present day problems.

For the Buddhist, meditation (*samādhi*) is a vital and necessary ingredient in everyday living, although this is not obvious to most people. The two principal facets of meditation are calm or tranquillity and insight (*samatha-vipaśyanā*). Calm or tranquillity is something we aspire for in a troubled life. But the irony of it all is that human nature is basically calm or tranquil. It is our contrivance, ignorance and delusion that occlude and prevent us from revealing the naturally inherent tranquil nature. The Buddha’s own use of meditative discipline was to seek salvation from his troubled life, but his enlightenment (*nirvāṇa*), preceded by calm and superceded by insight, exhibited a purely natural means of resolving the travails of humankind. It was not beyond human effort although later writings seem to attribute his feat as beyond it. It was, in truth, a human resolution achievable within human means, a meditative discipline that resulted in the eradication of human suffering that at once opened up new vistas in human existence.

The Nature of Emptiness

Let us now return to the third and fourth aspects of the Fourfold Noble Truth that state that there is cessation of suffering and the way to the cessation of suffering. Cessation means that suffering states can be alleviated and eventually terminated. More

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specifically, it points to the eradication of the desire or thirst (tṛṣṇā) and the consequent attachment (upādāna) to the object(s) of thirst. In more technical terms, it refers to the repetitive nature of life process due to one's own making or the continuation of the nature of re-existence and re-becoming.[5]

The thirst of or lust for life is present always, to be sure, but to either overdo or underdo things by manipulation of the thirst of life is, of course, wrong. Indeed, manipulation requires things that are set up as steady and enduring prior to any action. The natural dynamic states must however be preserved or maintained at all times. Thus the way to the cessation of suffering begins by developing and sustaining very normal but disciplined behavior: right view, right thought, right speech, right action and right livelihood. They seem to be quite ordinary and easy to implement, but it can be quite difficult to maintain and sustain for a long period of time.[6] Yet, it should be noted that they are a very important and necessary prelude to the way to end all suffering.

The ultimate test of the disciplined life comes next: right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. They refer to the deeper nature of the meditative discipline that would finally carry the proponent to the last stage, i.e., to arrive at the stage of rare perception or insight into the nature of things as they really are. Here then we see the fruition of the so-called middle way or the middle doctrine where the nature of things is seen in its fullness and dynamic relationship in a continual, uninterrupted sense. The

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concept of middle is not a figurative middle but one that transcends designation or symbolism of all kinds. It is ironically a middleless middle! More on this puzzling concept later.

Here it would be well to recall Nāgārjuna's (c.150~250 A.D.) famous verse[7] where he equated the middle way (madhyamā-pratipad) with relational origination (pratītya-samutpāda) and emptiness (śūnyatā). By bringing together these three doctrines, in one grand swoop, he expressed the Buddha Dharma (the truth of existence) to cover the whole of existence and in turn to lay open the possibility of human endeavor to capture it.

Relational origination refers to the basic but subtle dynamics at play in all experiences. It explains the nature of the rise of experiential events in terms of mutually relational nature.[8] In this process, as stated earlier, the dichotomy between perceiver and perceived cannot be sharply distinguished, nor can the objects thus perceived endure in any permanent sense. The evolving of experiences is constant, thus giving rise and substance to the assertion of a nonself doctrine. Moreover, it should be noted that relational origination is normally referred to as the incessant process carried out by unenlightened beings, technically known as the perpetuation of the realm of samsara, the figurative spinning of the mundane wheel of life. This spinning is based on the earlier mentioned thirst and attachment to the objects of thirst. The wheel is popularly described by the 12-linked cycle that starts with ignorance (avidyā) and goes through the empirical or sensual processes, and finally ending in old-age and death (jarā-

maraṇa).

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But the cycle is never-ending so long as one is mired in desires and attachments. The whole cyclic process is at times referred to simply as the life-death cycle (saṃsāra).

The middle way is sometimes said to exist between the nature of existence and nonexistence. But this is not only misleading but also inaccurate. How in the world can there be a middle straddling between the two extremes? Ontologically, this is an impossibility. We have already made reference to the middle way concept. It is a middle without a middle, figuratively or otherwise. It is aloof to symbolism and points directly at the nature of reality beyond all human machinations. In essence, it refers to the full existential nature that is beyond polarization into the extremes of existence and nonexistence. In this sense, then, it can be said that the middle way is an ontological principle that focuses on the nature of realizing a full being. It is, in brief, reference to the nature of ontological clarity and perfection.

We now go to the third concept of emptiness as equating to relational origination and the middle way. These concepts refer to the selfsame nature, but the concept of emptiness is most difficult because it is gained or realized only by the successful incorporation of meditative discipline. Texts, at times, describe two kinds of emptiness, i.e., (1) emptiness of the self and (2) emptiness of things or dharmas (elements of existence). This division, I believe, is arbitrary. The reason for this is that the second kind of emptiness owes its nature to the first because, once the emptiness of the self is realized (i.e., attainment of nonself), the perception of the emptiness of things or dharmas is a necessary consequence. The self and everything else are totally eclipsed in emptiness. There is no exception and the empty condition prevails.

Like the concept of the middle way, the term “emptiness” has suffered in translation. For example, it is equated with vacuity, void and nothingness, all of which distorted in some way to mean literally total eradication or nonexistence as such. This

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misinterpretation must be corrected. Emptiness, in the true sense, refers to an existential nature derived from experiences that had undergone a “cleansing” process by way of meditative discipline. It still has an experiential content, albeit a unique form that now sees everything indiscriminately fresh and whole. Consequently, the three concepts of relational origination, middle way and emptiness are nothing but a focusing of the selfsame reality. They refer to the subtle aspects of experience each is going through, albeit without actually cognizing the evolving process of any or all three of the aspects. This is of course expected since they are unique concepts that can only be known or unraveled as an aspirant begins to develop the novel and inordinate nature of one’s perception through patient and steady practice of meditative discipline. We must keep this in mind as we move on to the final section on the nature of Buddhist ethics.

Buddhist Ethics

We will now concentrate on the concept of emptiness and how it plays a central role in implementing a decidedly Buddhist form of ethics. In doing so, we must not forget that the concept of emptiness involves vitally the other two concepts of relational origination and the middle way.

Buddhist texts constantly harp on the need to “seeing the Buddha-nature” or “seeing into one’s nature,” especially in Zen (Ch’an) texts, such as, The Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch.^[9] The reference to “Buddha-nature,” or “one’s nature” is the state of pristine, clear and unblemished nature of experience successfully derived as a result of meditative discipline. By contrast, we are blindsided by taking perceptual objects as real and attaching to

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them, all of which become fodder for the conceptual mill. As stated earlier, we become accustomed to the abstract nature of perceptual objects and have given them unwarranted experiential status.

Be that as it may, the next important step is to explore and seek an understanding of what we mean by seeing relative to the Buddha-nature and one’s nature. “Seeing” undoubtedly is a perceptual function and thus the question arises, “How are we seeing (the Buddha-nature or one’s nature)?” But this is precisely the point where the concept of emptiness becomes prominent. It was stated that perception is done under the aegis of emptiness which seems to be a rather innocuous statement but one greatly nuanced and not as easy to understand.

Perception under the aegis of emptiness is not the same as emptiness of perception. The difference is that the latter is devoid of anything, a negated perception, whereby nothing really exists, literally. It is simply a nullity or non-existential assertion. We casually make these kinds of statements or assertions but the truth of the matter is that there is no such perception. Simply put, a perception is either open or closed, or operative or inoperative. If closed, then nothing happens; but if open, then there is some kind of perceptual content involved. It is this very content that we are interested in pursuing.

As a meditative resultant, emptiness then plays the central role in delineating the perceptual content clearly and participating in its involvement in important ways. It provides our perceptions to move freely, accommodating any and all objects in their purview and secures them firmly as if it were glue. Furthermore, it is at the bottom of changes because it provides the characteristics of resiliency, receptivity, amorphous nature and succession of perceptions. These characteristics are difficult to describe because we can only work with the results of our perceptions, however vague and unclear the actions might be.

In terms of our three concepts, emptiness is “full” because it

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pierces the middle way and lies at the bottom of perception described as relational origination. These three concepts are, as stated earlier, three aspects of the same perceptual process from the enlightened standpoint. It is within such a context that perceptions of all kinds, whether blemished or unblemished, occur but, most importantly, emptiness refers to the plenum, the fullness of perceptions. The lesson to be learned here is that we must emulate the perceptual process envisioned from the enlightened nature of things.

Human relations or relationships also occur in the fullness of perceptions. It depicts an ontological solidity in the dynamic relationship created by the individuals concerned. Such terms as inter-relations and mutuality are already inherent in any relationship but added to them is the most vital notion of dynamics. Dynamics is more easily said than understood. In brief, we usually gloss over this concept just as we gloss over such concepts as action, process, change, speed and motion.[\[10\]](#) Nevertheless, we need to focus on these concepts, however elusive and irritating they may be, so that we could focus on and get a handle on the nature of ethics.

Ethics is, in brief, the dynamic realm in which human beings relate to each other and perpetuate its value in an ongoing way. In this respect, principles and edicts that dictate do's and don'ts on human behavior are not the makings of true ethics; they are merely suggestions for certain behavior approved or disapproved, or codified or uncoded in any society, to perpetuate a status quo and conditions for advancement. But the dynamic realm of human relationship is entirely different from the set rules of behavior in any society; this is because it gets to the very bottom of being a

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human in the situational momentary nature of things.

The question that inevitably arises here is this. Where or how does the notion of virtue arise? Or, what can be said of a moral nature? These are tough questions, indeed. Why? Because although the dynamics of human relations is the place to focus on a virtue or moral nature, the sense of it is difficult to describe or delineate, especially in any binding way that pertains to human behavior. But delving deep into the situation, it seems quite plausible that it is in the so-called dynamics of mutuality that human relations are kept together; it is emptiness as a glue, as mentioned earlier, that provides the constant togetherness of relations to continue in a self-and-other reflective phenomenon. The constant togetherness is equable and supportive of each other's presence. There is of course no confrontation but only silent concern and regard for each other. All this may sound outlandish and bizarre, but the truth of the matter is that we have not really probed deeply enough into the very inception of what it is to be a human being in the presence of others. In other words, to be a human being is to sense the natural dynamic bond of the self-other relationship prevailing at all times but that which is taken for granted for the most part.

In consequence, when we refer to terms, such as, kindness or respect, there is a so-called ontological basis for its actual relational state and the consequent realization of

its presence. The optimal nature of kindness is, of course, one that is bestowed on another but that which is unconcerned regarding any response. A feigned kindness is one that becomes the object of manipulation by the provider, but then, it no longer can be considered kindness. All virtues in truth should be beyond human contrivance, pure and simple.

Again, love is a virtue realized between two or more individuals but, in the strictest sense, it requires no response. The highest form of love is compassion (karuṇā) whose very word describes a

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passion that covers all beings without exception, including even nonsentients. In this respect, clear vision or insight (prajñā) is merely another side of compassion, and vice versa.[\[11\]](#)

What our discussion has brought forth is the fact that the foundation of Buddhist ethics is unique, stemming from the Buddha's original enlightenment and relating it to the ordinary samsaric life of individuals. It requires the achievement of perceptual clarity by way of meditative discipline that allows individuals to see things as they are in a borderless and boundless realm of existence. This is another way of saying that perception is now in the total nature of emptiness. This realm is dynamic as well as a guarantor of the possibility for the generation and continuation of harmonious human relationships now and forever.

Perception must then be an open phenomenon. This openness is of course a two-way street, for if not open it would not be possible to sweep the wider dimension in the perceptual field. Indeed, without openness, there would be no mutuality, and without mutuality, there would be no dynamic nature. Without this open, mutual and dynamic play and interplay among so called individual selves, there would be no full and meaningful relationship whatsoever, and this means, in turn, that no ethical consideration is possible at all. And thus this unique relationship is the foundation for such common and primary ethical virtues as concern, closeness, respect, decency, honor, duty, responsibility, comradeship, integrity, truthfulness, and humaneness.

In a paper written some time ago,[\[12\]](#) I categorized human

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contacts into two types, i.e., soft relationship and hard relationship. Soft relationship refers to the eastern perception and attitude in which individuals are not treated strictly by law and order. It does not lend to codification or rules of conduct but is based on the very nature of what it is to be a human being. By contrast, hard relationship refers generally to western perception and attitude in which individuals are treated by law and order. It is amenable to codification and thus the punishment fits the crime, for example.

Finally, Buddhist ethics in sum entail the following:

- (1) The situation in which at least two individuals are present and they are aware of each other's presence.
- (2) The awareness also includes a sense of an inner dynamics of individuals within the holistic nature that is undefined initially but allows participation by all concerned.
- (3) The inner dynamics means that there is mutual involvement in the holistic nature. This is possible because the Buddhist perception of things has introduced the concept of emptiness realizable by meditative discipline. Emptiness provides the flexibility, absorbability and extensiveness to the relationship.
- (4) Mutual involvement, in turn, reveals openness and invites active participation by all concerned.
- (5) Openness at once gives rise to the nature of sensitivity in regard to all parties involved.
- (6) Both sensitivity and openness become firm and generate the very fiber of what we understand as the moral sense, i.e., the intimate concern for one another.

The moral sense is the beginning and the basis upon which not only human actions but also, more importantly, all humane actions are possible; moreover, it provides the vital sustaining nature to all human relationship. And thus we have seen that the nature of emptiness is very much alive and should actively be involved in our normal dynamic activities as ordinary human beings.

空的本質與佛教倫理

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提要

佛教倫理隨其主要教理的大力影響而令人矚目。它的焦點集中在本質為瞬間消逝而呈動態的無我（anātman）哲學，以及伴隨而來的中道（madhyama-pratipad）、緣起（pratītya-samutpāda）概念與空（śūnyatā）的本質。但是，比理解這些概念更為根本的是親身力行眾所周知的八正道，終而歸結於正定（samādhi），從此在空性的支撐下開啟對事物的認知。最後的結論是一珍貴的觀點：以智慧（prajñā）與慈悲（karuṇā）對待一切有情與無情。

動態無我的重要在於它展示了教理內涵的現代性意義，而此教理是歷史上的佛陀所親口宣說。沒有這項教理，就不可能發展佛教倫理。它促成我們得以以更寬闊、深入與有彈性的方式，去認知在團體或社交場合之間彼此的接觸、交際與活動。空的本質使得這種認知成為可能。更明確地說，覺察到他人與自己是彼此依存且互動的關係，有助於發展出一種獨特的道德感。它將人們以更為互利與和諧的方式緊緊繫屬在一起，因此能維繫並永續發展一個健康而且欣欣向榮的社會。

關鍵詞：1.動態無我 2.空 3.倫理 4.中道 5.緣起

[1] The five aggregates are corporeality (rūpa), feeling (vedanā), sense awareness (samjñā), sense function (saṃskāra) and consciousness (vijñāna). They are not the equivalents of the five sense faculties. They rather depict the Buddhist way of showing the biologically progressive functions from mere corporeal nature to the higher form of consciousness. As an aggregate, it informs us of the nature of the ordinary self, which also has a natural and developmental character.

[2] Ordinarily, there should be no hesitation concerning the acceptance of the natures of grasping and consequent attachment to things since they are necessary and natural functions of biological creatures. However, the problems arise when these functions become obstacles or hindrances to the normal perception of things in the natural flow of existence.

[3] This accounts for the reason that Buddhists consider the mind to be just another sense faculty. It is a bold and novel position to uphold since, by contrast, the mind is always taken to be above the senses and uniquely superior to them. But the Buddhist position is quite sound, biologically speaking.

[4] The principle of non-obstruction and interpenetration of the elements in the world is clearly and convincingly argued in the Avatamsaka Sūtra (Hua-yen Ching). The world is a realm of dharmas (dharmadhātu, fa-jie), a perfect non-interrupted harmony at all times. Only human intervention disrupts or changes the components.

[5] Repetitive nature is indeed boring and absurd. Although the flow of existence is natural, human contrivance and manipulation enter to disrupt, distort and even speed up or slow down the flow. For example, we manipulate our existence by ingesting certain drugs to either force or impede the flow itself in very unnatural ways.

[6] The first five components, prefaced by the term, “right,” such as, right view and right mindfulness, are training in strict disciplinary behavior. They can also be seen to be the development of certain virtues and, in this sense, they reveal the beginning of an ethical stance.

[7] Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (Verses on the Fundamental Middle) by Nāgārjuna. XXIV, 18

[8] There are other more popular translations of the concept, such as, dependent origination, dependent co-arising or co-origination, inter-relational origination, etc. I do not see any problems with the translations so long as they are focused on the impermanent dynamics of experiential events. Indeed, this concept is taken to be the major concept taught by the historical Buddha.

[9] See The Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch, the Text of the Tun-huang Manuscript with Translation, Introduction and Notes. Translated by Philip Yampolsky. New York: Columbia University Press, 1967.

[10] These terms are simply too much for ordinary minds to capture in their natural flow. Yet, we casually use them without knowing that they are used as abstractions to derive the sense of the activity involved. This is of course strictly indirect knowledge by way of abstractions.

[11] Other virtues can be delineated but they must all fall within the Buddhist dynamics of reality. The relationship between two individuals is the basic inception of ethical or moral sense and later on such relationship can well be expanded to cover larger groups and the society at large.

[12] “The Buddhist Response to the Nature of Human Rights,” in *Asian Perspective on Human Rights*, ed. Claude E. Welch and Virginia Leary (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990). 91-103. Reprinted in *Moral Issues in Global Perspective*, ed. Christine Koggel (Petersborough, Canada: Broadview Press, 1999). 22-29.