Distinctiveness of the Unseen: Buddhist Identity

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Abstract:

All major systems of belief claim to have a distinctive understanding and relation to whatever they may consider the unseen divine entity. Present neuropsychological theories are divided between the possible existence of "God-modules" hardwired in the brain, on one hand, and God as a construction of the brain's incapacity to explain unknown and unidentified events. In Theravāda Buddhism there is no personal deity; one experiences the ultimate as impersonal. The idea of self is also rejected and a Buddhist identity is pointing out towards "othoproxy", "the right practice", what could be called "action identity".

Keywords: action identity, neuropsychological theories, religion, Buddhism, reality.

Motto:

[The] spirit of tolerance and compassion has been one of the most highly regarded ideals of the Buddhist culture and civilisation from the outset. This is why there is not one single example of persecution or of one drop of blood being shed either in the conversion of people to Buddhism or in the spread of Buddhism over its two thousand five hundred year history[1]. (Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 1959).

As contradictory as it may seem, all major systems of belief claim to have a distinctive understanding and relation to whatever they may consider

[1] Faure, B., *Unmasking Buddhism*. Wiley-Blackwell: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication, 2009, p. 85.

the unseen divine entity. These two aspects, the specific understanding and the relation that holds, would subsequently yield distinctive beliefs, rituals, practices, and ethical values that would eventually bind together its followers into separate religious traditions. It seems therefore that the distinctiveness we attribute to the divine is our cognitive, affective and phenomenological construction and has little, if at all, to do with the unseen itself. These constructions typically, but not necessarily, center on a maximally great, highly esteemed being, God. The subjective awareness of God experienced by a seer, a prophet or a saint becomes collectively accepted and attempted as a means of verification, re-experience. As in the case of scientific theories, repetition of an experiment becomes the proof, proving it true or accurate. Each of these subjective experiences has been experienced by someone and each one of them had a particular way of explanation for what had happened to them. As Dummett (1973: 227) puts it, "in saying what the reference is, we have to choose a particular way of saying this". This could be the reason of the distinctions constructed upon the unseen divine entity.

If, as Eliade (1958: 12) claims, the history of religions is "constituted by a great number of *hierophanies*, manifestations of the sacred realities", then with each one of them we add different meanings to the unseen entity. Moreover, if we are to connect ourselves to them, then we could attempt to do it through understanding and relating ourselves to whatever they would represent. These *hierophanies* – the manifestation of the sacred in a stone, or a tree, or, for a Christian, in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ – would have to reveal something beyond what they apparently seem to be – a stone different from all other stones, a tree being more than every other tree, a human being different from others, etc. What relates us to them could be our recognition of their special attributes of sacredness, as seeing them standing apart from the rest of the empirical profane realities. There would be hence, on one hand, the manifestation of the sacred and, on the other hand, us, who would attempt on understanding and relate to them. The idea of the religious identity seems to rise from this specific endeavor of understanding such a manifestation and from the specific relation we would posit ourselves concerning it. It is therefore not surprising that the concept of religious

identity is shared by the individual as well as the groups of individuals. Individually, it is the construction of one's personal beliefs, practices, actions, and values. Collectively, it creates communities of individuals sharing similar beliefs, performing similar practices and deeds, holding similar axiological attitudes, building together a different tradition in their advantage, around their version of "truth". At the same time, both, our understanding and relation we posit ourselves, are social constructions, historically related to one's surrounding.

If, as Damasio (1999) puts it, "in antiquity, the unknown factors were called gods and destiny"[2], then the divinity could be merely a construction of our unfeasibility of explaining unidentified factors. Dawkins (1989:172) considers that the idea of God, generated probably by "independent mutations", have been replicated by written or spoken word, as well as the arts.

> The survival value of the god meme in the meme pool results from its great psychological appeal. It provides a superficially plausible answer to deep and troubling questions about existence. It suggests that injustices in this world may be rectified in the next. The "everlasting arms" hold out a cushion against our own inadequacies which, like a doctor's placebo, is none the less effective for being imaginary. These are some of the reasons why the idea of God is copied so readily by successive generations of individual brains. God exists, if only in the form of a meme with high survival value, or infective power, in the environment provided by human culture.

If, on the other hand, we are the upshot of a divine entity, as most religious doctrines claim, then we could hope to establish a connection between us and our creator, whoever she/he might be. Ramachandran (1998) hopes that future research would provide a way to approach religion from a scientific perspective and a "God module" in the brain that could be genetically specified.

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[2] Damasio, A., *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1999.

In this broad context, we shall try looking at what might constitute a religious identity in Buddhism, which exists in many forms, some of which recognize no personal divine entity. In Theravāda Buddhism there is no personal deity; one experiences the ultimate as impersonal. The idea of self is also rejected and the Buddha, 2500 years ago, claimed that it is the clinging to the false idea of a self that produces all human sufferings.

The proposed "private inner space" of St. Augustine (1991), where man and God would meet to reconcile, would not bear much significance in Buddhism, as the sense of identity as a separate autonomous self is absent.

In Western philosophical thought, Hume thought that the self is not an entity. He considered that the individual's self is a memory of series of impressions, nothing more than a "bundle of sensations". Parfit (1987) thus refers to the Buddha as the first bundle theorist.

A religious doctrine defines itself in relation to its "other." Christianity is defined by its dogma and orthodoxy and has asserted itself during the course of its history through its constant fight against heresy. Unlike Christianity, Buddhism does not strictly speak of dogma or orthodoxy; at most it speaks of "orthopraxy" or "correct practice."[3] It could be argued that there is not one Buddhism, but rather several. This plurality is due, in part, to the absence of a central authority in contrast to Christianity (and to a lesser extent Islam). It is also linked to the belief that the conventional truths of Buddhism are adapted to individual capabilities and that their value is therefore purely pragmatic, as a kind of "skillful means" (*upāya*). It is therefore rare to find a spirit of sectarianism or fanaticism in Buddhism[4].

Some prefer to call the teaching of the Buddha a religion, others call it a philosophy. Still others think of it as both religion and philosophy. It may, however, be more correct to call it a "Way of life". But that does not mean that Buddhism is nothing more than an ethical code. Far from it, it is a way of moral, spiritual and intellectual training leading to complete freedom of mind. The Buddha himself called his teaching *"Dhamma-vinaya"*, the

[3] "Actions exist, and also their consequences, but the person that acts does not".
[4] Ibid., pp. 87-88.

Doctrine and the Discipline. But Buddhism, in the strictest sense of the word, cannot be called a religion, for if by religion is meant

> Action or conduct indicating belief in, reverence for, and desire to please, a divine ruling power; the exercise or practice of rites or observances implying this…; recognition on the part of man of some higher unseen power as having control of his destiny, and as being entitled to obedience, reverence, and worship.

Buddhism certainly is not such a religion[5].

In Buddhist thought, there is no awareness or conviction of the existence of a Creator of any form who rewards and punishes the good and ill deeds of the creatures of his creation. A Buddhist takes refuge in the Buddha *(buddham saranam gacchami)* but not in the hope that he will be saved by the Master. The Buddha is only a teacher who points out the way and guides the followers to their individual deliverance[6].

In Buddhism, wisdom is of the highest importance; for purification comes through wisdom, through understanding. But the Buddha never praised mere intellect. According to him, knowledge should go hand in hand with purity of heart, with moral excellence (*vijjacaranasampanna*). Wisdom gained by understanding and development of the qualities of mind and heart is wisdom par excellence *(bhavanamayapanna).* It is saving knowledge, and not mere speculation, logic or specious reasoning. Thus it is clear that Buddhism is neither mere love of, nor inducing the search after wisdom, nor devotion (though they have their significance and bearing on mankind), but an encouragement of a practical application of the teaching that leads the follower to dispassion, enlightenment and final deliverance[7].

The Buddha's teaching

The first part, wisdom, instructs us to acquire a thorough comprehension of the Four Noble Truths and all that they involve. However,

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[5] Piyadassi, "The teaching of Buddha", Kolkata: The Bengal Buddhist Association, Chowdhury, H. B. (ed.) *Jagajjyoti 2550 Buddha Jayanti*, Volume 2006, p. 25.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid., p. 26.

it does not require us to answer philosophical questions unrelated to attaining *Nibbāna*. In fact, this is discouraged, as we saw in the story of the man wounded by the arrow.

Comprehension of the Four Noble Truths requires more than intellectual cultivation. We also need a fundamental commitment to understanding them, and our emotions and desires must be disciplined so that they do not distract us or lead us astray. Hence, the Buddha said we must renounce sensual desire, ill will, and cruelty. In this respect, he thought thinking and feeling, the mind and the heart, were closely connected.

The second part of the path concerns morality or ethics. Enlightenment requires moral as well as intellectual and emotional preparation. The Buddha spoke of morality at length, and he expected much more of members of the *sangha* (monks) than of lay followers. But there are basic precepts that apply to all persons. These fall into three categories. Right speech requires that we speak in ways that are truthful, friendly, useful, and productive of harmony. Right action dictates that we do not kill any living beings (human or animal), nor steal, nor have illegitimate sexual relations. Right livelihood says we should not earn our living by harming others (for example, by selling arms). Violation of these precepts, the Buddha thought, would only reinforce self-centered desires and would hinder attainment of *Nibbāna*.

The third part of the path – concentration, or meditation – is the least familiar to persons in the West, but the most significant for the Buddha. Later we will need to consider the epistemological importance he assigned to meditation in understanding the Four Noble Truths. Though the Buddha taught many forms of meditation, the general aim of these mental disciplines is twofold: first, to purify the mind of disturbances so as to bring about a peaceful, concentrated, attentive and mindful mental state; and second, to know reality as it actually is by observing that all things in our ordinary experience are impermanent, involve suffering, and are empty of any self. The ultimate aim is not to escape from the world nor to acquire special powers: it is to attain *Nibbāna*.[8]

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[8] Gowans C. W., *Philosophy of the Buddha: An Introduction*, London & New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 39.

Albahari (2006) puts the question, "is the ordinary self an illusion and, if so, is it constructed in such a way that could potentially allow for its dismantlement (such that consciousness could *possibly* become liberated)?", and he bestows illusory status to the self as a whole, but a non-illusory status to several features that are ascribed to the self, features that, he argues, are intrinsic to consciousness. He argues that

> […] the self is an illusion contributed to by two strands or tiers. One tier is naturally unified consciousness – itself non-illusory. The other tier is grounded in a stream of desire-driven thoughts, emotions and perceptions. The content of these thoughts (and so forth) merge with native consciousness to create the impression of a conscious, unified, *separate* self. The illusion lies in the fact that while this self purports to think up the thoughts, the thoughts, in fact, help think up the self.

Distin (2005:5) mentions a relevant question put forward by Daniel Dennett and Susan Blackmore:

> If our mental and cultural lives are the result of a mindless evolutionary algorithm, how can we claim autonomous identity as independent "selves", with freedom and control over what goes on in those lives?

Practical identity is a complex matter [...] You are a human being, a woman or a man, an adherent of a certain religion, a member of an ethnic group, a member of a certain profession, someone's lover or friend, and so on. And all of these identities give rise to reasons and obligations. Your reasons express your identity, your nature; your obligations spring from what that identity forbids.[9]

The Buddha denied the existence of the self as an ontological distinct entity, separating one from another, and endowed with essential and unchanging properties. Generally, the self is considered as possessing properties such as the capacity to experience, imagine, feel, think,

[9] Korsgaard, C., *The Sources of Normativity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 101.

remember, decide, and act, as well as being reflective upon itself. The Buddha's concept of the self is nothing else but five aggregates: material form (sense organs), feeling and sensations, perceptions or cognitions, mental formations, and consciousness[10].

> Just as a dog, tied by a leash to a post or stake, keeps running around and circling around that very post or stake; in the same way, an uninstructed, run-of-the-mill person – is not well-versed or disciplined in their *Dhammā* – assumes [*khandhās* (form, feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness)] to be the self, or the self as possessing [*khandhās*], or [*khandhās*] as in the self, or the self as in [*khandhās*].
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> He keeps running around and circling around that very form […] that very feeling […] that very perception […] those very fabrications […] that very consciousness.
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> He is not set loose from form, not set loose from feeling […] from perception […] from fabrications […] not set loose from consciousness.
>
> He is not set loose from birth, aging, and death; from sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, and despairs. He is not set loose, I tell you, from suffering and stress.
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> [The mode to aspire is where one] doesn't assume [*khandhās*] to be the self, or the self as possessing [*khandhās*], or [*khandhās*] as in the self, or the self as in [*khandhās*]. He doesn't run around or circle around that very form […] that very feeling […] that very perception […] those very fabrications […] that very consciousness.
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> He is set loose from form, set loose from feeling […] from perception […] from fabrications […] set loose from consciousness. He is set loose from birth, aging, and death; from sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, and despairs. He is set loose, I tell you, from suffering and stress. (*Samyuttā, Nikāya* XXII. 99).

A close examination of each one of these *khandhās*, the Buddha thought, would show their changing character, their impermanence. Seen from this perspective, the soul is thus not ontologically different from one another and unchanged since none of the components that is made up of is

[10] Gowans, C. W., *Philosophy of the Buddha*: *An Introduction*, New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 33.

permanent. Through this state of change of everything, everything in the universe, except *Nibbāna*, is interconnected.

The most distinctive and yet counter-intuitive feature of the Buddha's message is the doctrine that there is no self (*anattā*)[11]. Our experience tells us that the sun rises each morning in the east, travels across the sky through the day, and sets in the evening in the west. This is as obvious as can be. It is a matter of common sense. But it is also completely false. The sun only appears to be going through these motions because, unbeknown to ordinary experience, the earth revolves. Likewise, the Buddha maintained, it seems obvious that we are selves, but this belief is an illusion[12].

In the first discourse, addressed to the ascetic *samanas*, the Buddha described the Eightfold Path as a "middle way" that avoids two extremes: "The pursuit of sensual happiness in sensual pleasures, which is low, vulgar, the way of worldliness, ignoble, unbeneficial; and the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble, unbeneficial." Though the Buddha portrayed the Eightfold Path as a middle way between seeking sensual happiness and undergoing self-mortification, it clearly involves a rigorous regime that is supposed to radically transform us. This path, the Buddha said, "leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to *Nibbāna*." (C II 1844)[13].

Since the Buddhist identity cannot be said to be related to the concept of the self, it could, however, according to the Buddha, be related to the basic principles that apply to all Buddhists, both monks and lay followers. These principles fall into three categories: right speech, right action and right livelihood and comprise eight steps. These eight steps of the path are to be pursued not in sequence, but all together, with each step reinforcing the others (though the last two, right mindfulness and right concentration, are the culmination). The Buddha divided these steps into three parts: *wisdom* pertains primarily to intellectual development and conviction (right view and intention), *virtue* concerns moral or ethical

[11] Ibid., p. 33.
[12] Gowans C. W., *Philosophy of the Buddha*, London & New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 33.
[13] Ibid., p. 38.

training (right speech, action, and livelihood), and *concentration* – often rendered as "meditation" – involves a set of mental disciplines (right effort, mindfulness, and concentration)[14].

The Four Noble Truths

(1) *Duhkha* – All existence is suffering. (2) *Samudāya* – Suffering is caused by craving. (3) *Nirodha* – Suffering can have an end. (4) *Mārga* – The way to the end of suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path.

Every aspect of life is regulated by Dharma, from the succession of the seasons to the movement of the planets and constellations. Dharma is neither caused by nor under the control of a supreme being, and the gods themselves are subject to its laws, as was the Buddha. In the moral order, Dharma is manifest in the law of karma, which, as we shall see below, governs the way moral deeds affect individuals in present and future lives. Living in accordance with Dharma and implementing its requirements is thought to lead to happiness, fulfillment, and salvation; neglecting or transgressing it is said to lead to endless suffering in the cycle of rebirth (*samsāra*).[15]

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

[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid., p. 4.

The Eightfold Path and its Three Divisions

Three Divisions	Insight/Wisdom (Sanskrit: *prajñā*, Pāli: *paññā*)	Morality (Sanskrit: *śīla*, Pāli: *sīla*)	Concentration (Sanskrit and Pāli: *samādhi*)
Eightfold Path	*Right view* *Right resolve/intention*	*Right speech* *Right action* *Right livelihood*	*Right effort* *Right understanding* *Right meditation*
Purpose	Understanding of the nature of a thing; In psychology, awareness of one's own nature	Behavior, conduct	Focus

Table 1. The Eightfold Path and its Three Divisions

The Four Nobel Truths followed by the Eightfold Path, the Buddha believed, lead to the cessation of suffering.

Cause and Effect

Buddhist dialectics have to evolve a new conception to causality. Buddhism has no interest in God or in His revelation. For Buddhists the test of good and bad deeds is "Good for many or bad for many" (*Bahujanahitaya-Bahujanasukhai*). In the same way, the test for any real thing is its effectiveness which can be realized by direct perception. There is no physical link between cause and effect, because the moment the cause appears, there is no effect, and, when the effect appears, the previous cause is no more. Nothing is transferred from cause to effect. The same process follows and effect, in its turn, becomes the cause of another effect. This is discontinuous continuity of the things which make the inner and the outer world. About cause and effect the Buddha said: "This was (in being), then it becomes" *("asmin-sati idam bhavati").* The cause is the thing which was present before the effect came into being. This is the nature of the elements *(Dharmas)* which in their totally make the world.

Buddhist philosophy does not recognize the authority of the scriptures or the word of the prophets. It recognizes direct perception as the only means of real knowledge. Even inference is not accepted as a reliable source of knowledge. Its authority is accepted if it is supported by direct

perception. Buddhists believe reasoning is not the main criterion of finding the truth, but that truth should be experimentally proved by its effectiveness.[16]

Doctrine of Karma

In Theravāda Buddhism the fundamental basis of practical life is based on the doctrine of karma. The doctrine of karma is concerned with the ethical implications of Dharma, in particular those relating to the consequences of moral behaviour. Karma is not a system of rewards and punishments meted out by God but a kind of natural law akin to the law of gravity. In popular usage in the West, karma is thought of simply as the good and bad things that happen to a person, a little like good and bad luck. However, this oversimplifies what for Buddhists is a complex of interrelated ideas which embraces both ethics and belief in reincarnation. The literal meaning of the Sanskrit word karma is "action", but karma as a religious concept is concerned not with just any actions but with actions of a particular kind. Karmic actions are moral actions, and the Buddha defined karma by reference to moral choices and the acts consequent upon them. He stated, "It is intention (*cetanā*), O monks, that I call karma; having willed one acts through body, speech, or mind" (A.iii.415)[17].

Moral actions are unlike other actions in that they have both transitive and intransitive effects. The transitive effect is seen in the direct impact moral actions have on others; for example, when we kill or steal, someone is deprived of his life or property. The intransitive effect is seen in the way moral actions affect the agent. According to Buddhism, human beings have free will, and in the exercise of free choice they engage in self-determination. In a very real sense, individuals create themselves through their moral choices. By freely and repeatedly choosing certain sorts of things, individuals shape their characters, and through their characters their futures. As the English proverb has it: "Sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny." The process of creating karma may be likened to the work of a potter who moulds the clay

[16] Ibid., p. 26 and p. 16.
[17] Ibid., p. 5.

into a finished shape: the soft clay is one's character, and when we make moral choices we hold ourselves in our hands and shape our natures for good or ill. It is not hard to see how even within the course of a single lifetime particular patterns of behaviour lead inexorably to certain results. Great works of literature reveal how the fate that befalls the protagonists is due not to chance but to a character flaw that leads to a tragic series of events. The remote effects of karmic choices are referred to as the "maturation" (*vipāka*) or "fruit" (*phala*) of the karmic act. The metaphor is an agricultural one: performing good and bad deeds is like planting seeds that will fruit at a later date. Othello's jealousy, Macbeth's ruthless ambition, and Hamlet's hesitation and self-doubt would all be seen by Buddhists as karmic seeds, and the tragic outcome in each case would be the inevitable "fruit" of the choices these character-traits predisposed the individual to make. Individuals are thus to a large extent the authors of their good and bad fortune[18].

Not all the consequences of what a person does are experienced in the lifetime in which the deeds are performed. Karma that has been accumulated but not yet experienced is carried forward to the next life, or even many lifetimes ahead. Certain key aspects of a person's next rebirth are thought of as karmically determined. These include the family into which one is born, one's social status, physical appearance, and of course, one's character and personality, since these are simply carried over from the previous life. The doctrine of karma, however, does not claim that everything that happens to a person is karmically determined. Many of the things that happen in life – like winning a raffle or catching a cold – may simply be random events or accidents. Karma does not determine precisely what will happen or how anyone will react to what happens, and individuals are always free to resist previous conditioning and establish new patterns of behaviour[19].

What, then, makes an action good or bad? From the Buddha's definition above, it can be seen to be largely a matter of intention and choice. The psychological springs of motivation are described in Buddhism

[18] Ibid., p. 6.
[19] Ibid., pp. 6-7.

as "roots", and there are said to be three good roots and three bad roots. Actions motivated by greed (*rāga*), hatred (*dveśa*), and delusion (*moha*) are bad (*akuśala*), while actions motivated by their opposites – non-attachment, benevolence, and understanding – are good (*kuśala*). Making progress to enlightenment, however, is not simply a matter of having good intentions, and evil is sometimes done by people who act from the highest motives. Good intentions, therefore, must find expression in right actions, and right actions are basically those that are wholesome and do no harm to either oneself or others. The kinds of actions that fail these requirements are prohibited in various sets of precepts, about which more will be said below[20].

The most general moral duties are those found in the Five Precepts, for example the duty to refrain from evil acts such as killing and stealing. On becoming a Buddhist, one formally "takes" (or accepts) the precepts in a ritual context known as "going for refuge", and the form of words used acknowledges the free and voluntary nature of the duty assumed[21].

Buddhist Morality

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

[20] Ibid., p.7.
[21] Ibid., p. 8.

continue to guide the conduct of some 350 million Buddhists around the world today[22].

Dharma

The ultimate foundation for Buddhist ethics is Dharma. Dharma has many meanings, but the underlying notion is of a universal law which governs both the physical and moral order of the universe. Dharma can best be translated as "natural law", a term that captures both its main senses, namely as the principle of order and regularity seen in the behaviour of natural phenomena, and also the idea of a universal moral law whose requirements have been revealed by enlightened beings such as the Buddha (note that the Buddha claimed only to have discovered Dharma, not to have invented it)[23].

The Five Precepts (*pañcaśīla*)

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

They are as follows: (1) I undertake the precept to refrain from harming living creatures. (2) I undertake the precept to refrain from taking what has not been given. (3) I undertake the precept to refrain from sexual immorality. (4) I undertake the precept to refrain from speaking falsely. (5) I undertake the precept to refrain from taking intoxicants.[24]

We might summarize the key points of this brief survey by saying that Buddhist moral teachings are thought to be grounded in the cosmic law of Dharma rather than commandments handed down by God. Buddhism holds that the requirements of this law have been revealed by enlightened teachers and can be understood by anyone who develops the necessary insight. In leading a moral life, a person becomes the embodiment of

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[22] Damien, K., *Buddhist Ethics: A Very Short Introduction*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 3.
[23] Ibid., pp. 3-4.
[24] Ibid., p. 9.

Dharma, and anyone who lives in this way and keeps the precepts can expect good karmic consequences, such as happiness in this life, a good rebirth in the next, and eventually the attainment of nirvana.

Buddhist moral teachings emphasize self-discipline (especially for those who have chosen the life of a monk or nun), generosity (*dāna*), non-violence (*ahimsā*), and compassion (*karunā*). Mahāyāna Buddhism places a special emphasis on service to others, which at times has led to a conflict between compassion and keeping the precepts. While the notion of Skilful Means and Tantric teachings have both had some influence on Buddhist ethics, the mainstream view has remained that the precepts express requirements of Dharma that should not be contravened[25].

Buddhism does not *impose* moral obligations on anyone. However, this overlooks the fact that Dharmic obligations exist whether or not one formally acknowledges or accepts them: bad karma will follow a misdeed regardless of whether or not one has formally taken the precepts. It would appear, therefore, that there is a subsisting deontological obligation to live morally incumbent on us all[26].

Compassion

Compassion is an important Buddhist moral value, and some sources reveal an increasing awareness of how a commitment to the alleviation of suffering can create a conflict with the principle of respect for life. Compassion, for example, might lead one to take life in order to alleviate suffering, and indeed is one of the main grounds on which euthanasia is commonly advocated[27].

[25] Ibid., p. 20.
[26] Ibid., p. 26.
[27] Ibid., pp. 110-111.

Buddhism and modernity

The encounter between Buddhists and modernity has produced several significant developments with respect to how the Buddhist religion is represented and practiced[28].

This disruptive effect of globalization has contributed to distinctively modern reworkings of what it means to be Buddhist and how one can model and develop this identity in practice. And consequently, it becomes ever more important for scholars to recognize that totalizing and essentialzing claims made on what constitutes Buddhist identity and tradition are, at root, historically contingent and differently authorized within the shifting grounds of contemporary debates over issues such as politics and religion (*Abeysekara* 2002, 15-16). In other words, it has become increasingly easy for people to contest and revise notions of authenticity and legitimacy in Buddhism – to differentiate between that which is Buddhist and that which is not – because there are a plurality of authorities and interpretations on which to advance and sustain such claims[29].

The Four Noble Truths comprise the assertions: (1) life in the cycle of birth and death (or *samsara*) is characterized by suffering (*dukkha*) or dissatisfaction, (2) *dukkha* is caused by ignorance and desire for sense pleasures that cannot be maintained without end, (3) one can put an end to the pain and dissatisfaction normally experienced in life, and (4) the way to put an end to *dukkha* is to follow the Noble Eightfold Path. While these assertions do offer a concise summary of some important Buddhist insights, the importance of the Four Noble Truths in the modern period is founded equally on the conviction that they reflect the Buddha's original message and on their rationalistic assessment of the human condition[30]. The Four Noble Truths are the centerpiece of the Buddha's message, an important commentary in the *Theravāda* tradition[31].

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[28] Berkwitz, S. C. (ed.), *Buddhism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO Inc., 2006, p. 5.
[29] Ibid., p. 7.
[30] Ibid., p. 14.
[31] Gowans, C. W., *Philosophy of the Buddha*, London & New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 31.

Modern discussions of the Four Noble Truths often link this concept with the notion of the Buddhist path as the Middle Way between sensual indulgence and self-mortification. While this same connection is made in the *Samyutta Nikaya* of the Pali Canon (*Bodhi* 2000, 1843–1844), the ascetic moderation preached by the Buddha has been greatly expanded in recent decades to include a wider range of ordinary lay behavior. Strenuous religious practice and prohibitions can be relaxed if one's intentions are generally good and one maintains whatever standards for religious practice are recognized within one's own cultural environment. Modern practitioners are likely to emphasize the importance of intention in determining the moral quality of one's actions, as some Buddhist texts assert. Thus, if karma is determined by the relative wholesomeness or unwholesomeness of the intention behind one's deeds, Buddhist practitioners can be expected to focus at least some of their efforts on trying to purify their minds and motivations. Barring complete success in this endeavor, however, people may also try to earn merit, or the unripened fruits of morally beneficial deeds, in the hope of canceling out the potential negative fruits of deeds they performed out of selfish or malicious intentions. The flexibility built into the notion of the Middle Way in Buddhism may be adjusted to speak to both monastic and lay communities, permitting new interpretations of what comprises Buddhist practice in the modern period[32].

The full existential ramifications of the related Buddhist notions of *anatta* (no-self) and *śunyata* (emptiness), however, are not always recognized in everyday thought and practice. People frequently retain conventional notions of their continuing identity and personhood, instead directing their efforts at weakening feelings of selfishness and egotism. This ambiguity is also reflected in Buddhist writings. Many Buddhist narratives, including the Jataka stories, promote the notion of an enduring personality that either enjoys or suffers the effects of karmic deeds done in previous lives. At the same time, however, Buddhist teachings clearly state that there is no equivalent to a permanent soul that transmigrates from one lifetime to the next. Not only do many texts argue that there is nothing permanent

[32] Ibid., pp. 14-15.

about one's individuality, many philosophical works also claim that conventional notions of one's individuality are mistaken and empty in the sense that there is no existence that is not conditioned by other equally empty factors. Dependent Arising is a significant Buddhist idea because it reinforces the notions that life is impermanent, subject to change and dissolution, and radically interdependent with other factors. While some Buddhists in the modern world are willing to accept and embrace these ideas, others may simply maintain the continual change and interconnectedness of all life[33].

More generally, modern representations of Buddhism often stress the pragmatic nature of the religion. In keeping with humanistic and utilitarian values, modern practitioners frequently emphasize the practical steps that may be taken to bring people closer to Awakening. In these instances, the Buddha is represented as a role model whom modern practitioners can fully imitate, particularly when it comes to following the Noble Eightfold Path. The eight steps of this path ought to be practiced concurrently to put an end to suffering and attain the transcendent, indescribable, and unconditioned state of nirvana. This path (*marga*) that the Buddha is said to have taught comprises (1) right view, (2) right intention, (3) right speech, (4) right action, (5) right livelihood, (6) right effort, (7) right mindfulness, and (8) right concentration. When practiced together, the Noble Eightfold Path works to purify one's bodily, verbal, and mental acts, weakening the negative factors that promote suffering in oneself and others and strengthening one's ability to make progress toward nirvana. These steps are held to develop morality, meditation, and wisdom, leading to clear vision and blameless conduct[34].

Buddhists everywhere revere as a source of wisdom and guidance the *Dhamma* of the Buddha, his teaching about the ultimate nature of reality and the way of life that accords with this[35].

Another form of this objection is the assertion that the Buddha taught a religion and not a philosophy. The first part of this contention

[33] Ibid., p. 15.
[34] Ibid., p. 16-17.
[35] Gowans, C. W., *Philosophy of the Buddha*, London & New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 5.

presumably is correct, depending on what we mean by the term "religion". The Buddha did not believe in God and hence did not regard his teaching as divine revelation. But in many respects it is appropriate to consider his teaching a religion – for example, it centrally involves a notion of transcendence. However, that the Buddha's teaching is a religion in these respects does not entail that it is not, or does not include, a philosophy. The terms "Christian philosophy" or "Jewish philosophy" are not ordinarily considered oxymorons, and the existence of God is an important part of the theories of many canonical figures in Western philosophy[36].

The Buddha challenges the belief, so typical in Western philosophy, that rational reflection is the main means of attaining this knowledge. The Buddha thought reason was valuable but insufficient for enlightenment, and he thought meditation was crucial. The meditation techniques he taught were intended to develop our powers of concentration and, in a special sense, observation[37].

A morally ordered universe

The Buddha believed every human being could achieve enlightenment because he thought human nature and the universe have certain objective features we can know. There is no motif more central to the *Sutta Pitaka* than that the Buddha acquired knowledge of reality that resulted in liberation – and that any of us, with great effort, can do the same thing. It is true that the Buddha's teaching stresses the impermanence of things, but this goes hand-in-hand with an emphasis on the law-governed nature of the universe. Though the world is in constant change, it is very far from being in a state of chaos. Knowledge of the order of the universe is the key to enlightenment.

The world depicted by modern science is often said to be morally neutral or meaningless. By contrast, the universe portrayed by the Buddha is morally ordered. This need not mean the Buddha's teaching is incompatible with modern science, but it does mean the Buddha would regard the world of modern science as incomplete insofar as this world was taken to be

[36] Ibid., p. 6.
[37] Ibid., p. 7.

morally neutral. For the Buddha, the moral order of the universe is contained first and foremost in the doctrines of *kamma* and rebirth.

The doctrine of *kamma* is a simple idea: each action is good or bad, primarily on account of the moral quality of the intention it expresses; and, sooner or later, a good action brings well-being to the person who performs it, while a bad action brings the opposite. Put in these terms, the idea is one form of a commonly accepted belief in cosmic justice, and as such it is compatible with many religious traditions. What distinguishes the Buddha's doctrine of *kamma* from classical monotheistic traditions, however, is that the causal relationship between good or bad actions and happy or unhappy results is not understood as the effect of a just god dispensing rewards and punishments. For the Buddha, this causal relationship is an impersonal feature of the natural world: even as a plant flourishes when it receives appropriate amounts of light, moisture and nutrition, so our lives flourish when we perform morally good actions. Our present state of well-being is always a causal result of our past actions. However, past actions do not determine future actions: we are always free to choose well or poorly in our current situation. Past actions determine how happy we are, and to some extent our character, but they do not directly determine the morality of what we do.

The Buddha also believed that each person lives a series of lives that extends indefinitely into the past and could extend indefinitely into the future. These lives could take the form not only of human lives, but also of animals at the lower end of the spectrum and of deities at the other end. The causality is the result of my past actions in this and all previous lives; and my actions of *kamma* operate through the entire series. Hence, my happiness in this life will affect my future happiness in this and all lives to come. The doctrine of *kamma* and rebirth is closely connected, and they are the framework of much popular Buddhist belief in the world today. But the Buddha also thought it was possible to escape the series of rebirths: achieving full enlightenment in any one life permanently brings the series to an end. This is *Nibbāna* – the ultimate state of happiness. The central

instruction of the Buddha focused on attaining *Nibbāna* and thereby escaping rebirth.[38]

Co-Existence

Good conduct is the first requirement for an individual's progress. The five principles or *Panchashila* were conceived by the Buddha, and although they originated in India, with the disappearance of the Buddha they ceased to be mentioned here. But in Buddhist countries a child is sometimes taught *Panchashila* by hiss parents or preceptors. The Buddha was a man of peace, and among the world religions only Buddhism can claim that it never employed violent means for its propagation. Buddhist missionaries practiced the doctrine of co-existence. China, Japan, Korea, Tibet, Mongolia, Ceylon, Burma, Thailand and Indo-China are still predominantly Buddhist countries and a thousand years ago, India, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Java, too, followed the Buddha's teachings. In the history of these countries you find no instance where faith was propagated with the intentional destruction or humiliation of other faiths. When Chinese Turkistan was converted to Islam, Nestorians and Buddhists lived peacefully side by side. But a new faith came with fire and sword and the followers of these two religions were forced to flee. The Nestorians had no asylum nearby, while the Buddhists had a country of their faith-Ladakh, across the mountains, to which place they took the Nestorians who were allowed to build their monasteries. Later they were assimilated among the people, or perhaps they were unmarried monks and nuns, so that their faith passed with that generation. But the cross of the Nestorians remained in Ladakh to show how brotherly love and the doctrine of co-existence were practiced.[39]

The five precepts or *Panchashila* of Buddhism are: (1) Thou shalt not kill. (2) Thou shalt not steal. (3) Thou shalt not make improper sex indulgence. (4) Thou shalt not tell a lie. (5) Thou shalt not use intoxicants.

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[38] Ibid., p. 28-30.

[39] Sankrityayana, R., "What the Sakyamuni Preached", in Chowdhury, Hemendu Bikash (ed.) *Jagajjyoti 2550 Buddha Jayanti*, Volume 2006, Kolkata: The Bengal Buddhist Association, pp. 15-16.

The ethical teachings of the Buddha are summed up in an ancient stanza: "Avoiding all sins; practicing meritorious deeds; control of one's own mind". These are broad-based and rational.

Buddhists, however, believe in the principle of co-existence, and Buddhism did not discharge the "God" of different faiths. It allowed the people to have their idols and venerate them, since it thought that the Buddha's philosophy needed higher development of the mind to appreciate.

The mundane and the sacred overlap as the precepts set down by the Buddha were more concerned with how one treats the other in every day life.

The motivational state is precept-based and influences one's affective, cognitive and behavioral states.

Athymhormia: a neurobehavioral syndrome

Athymhormia, coined in 1922 by two French psychiatrists, Maurice Dide and Paul Guiraud, is a neurological disorder that reveals the influence of motivation and affect on perception, cognition and action. It is more often associated with other cognitive deficits, especially memory, attentional and other behavioral changes.

Athymhormia, etymologically derived from Gk. *a* + *thumos* + *hormê*, indicates the absence of sensations, sentiments, feelings, impulse, appetite and tendencies. Habib (2004) proposed a tentative model of how a subset of the basal ganglia (i.e. the limbic part) subserves in humans motivational functions. By observing bilateral lesions of this system and the behavioral changes produced by them, Habib studied two cases admitted with "recent and abrupt behavioral changes" and "decrease in interest", both presenting athymhormia in striatal lesions. Both patients were apathetic, inactive, prostrate, abulic, making no plans, showing no evidence of needs, will, or desire, with decrease in spontaneous activity, loss of appetite and food preferences. Moderate slowing of movements, poor spontaneous verbal expression, no personal complaint, decrease in activity and motivation, inertia and passivity, not thinking of anything, were common to both of them. Both patients showed a striking reduction in spontaneous motion and speech, with subjacent "mental emptiness", a loss of interest for previously

motivating activities and an apparent flatness or poor expressiveness of affect. The patients were not depressed, since there was no sadness in any of them and no negative thoughts.

In one case of carbon monoxide poisoning and another of a wasp sting, a French group of neurologists of Laplane in Paris reported similar behavioral syndrome, which was ascribed to damage to another subcortical structure: the globus pallidus. Both cases showed major motor and behavioral inertia and loss of spontaneous mental activity.

Habib (2004) observed that a similar neurobehavioral picture emerged from two separate lesion sites and concluded that there must be in fact a disrupting of a neural system which included both brain sites: "the frontal-striatal-pallidal loops, especially the limbic loop", seeing thus the syndrome linked to the emotional brain. Cummings (1993) offered a neuroanatomical model of the connections between the basal ganglia and frontal cortex. Cortico-subcortical connections are organized in several loops functioning in parallel, according to their functions. Alexander et al. (1990) described five functional domains represented by basal ganglia-thalamocortical circuits: "motor" or "oculomotor" circuits, two "prefrontal" circuits and a "limbic" circuit (tentatively related to emotions and motivational processes).[40] The limbic loop referred to by Alexander et al. is very similar to the limbic loop postulated by Nauta (1986) to be involved in motivational and emotional control in rat. Apicella et al. (1991), working on responses to reward in monkey, indicated that the limbic (ventral) striatopallidum to be the "interface between motivation and action", the site of "conversion of motivational processes into behavioral output".

The limbic system and its influence on action

Habib (2004) thinks that considering the disorder as 'a fundamental defect in converting past or present emotional experiences into an actual action' is not sufficient. He searched for a mechanism that would connect long-term memory with the retrieval of affective value of a given stimulus

[40] Miller, R., *A theory of Basal Ganglia and their Disorders*, London, New York: CC Press, Taylor & Francis Group, 2008, p. 19.

as well as for the systems in charge of controlling movement initiation, mental activity and emotional expression.

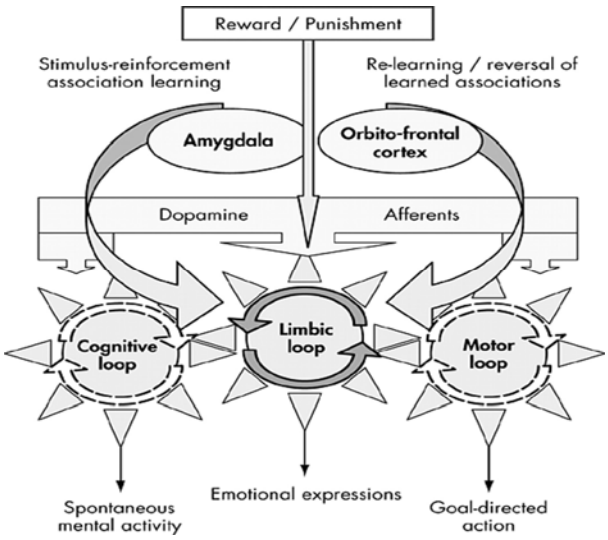

Figure 1.
The Limbic Loop: An Interface Between Emotion and Action[41] (Habib, 2004)

He proposed a limbic loop as the interface between emotion and action. At the emotional level (top part of the figure), the stimulus reinforcement association, which takes place in the amygdala, continuously reformulated and evaluated by the orbitofrontal cortex, determines goal-directed behaviors (bottom of the figure) by informing the ventral striatum (including accumbens), which drives the rest of the system by a mechanism best represented by interlinked gears. The dopaminergic afferents would play the role of "fueling" the system.

[41] At the emotional level (top part of the figure), the stimulus reinforcement association, which takes place in the amygdala, continuously reformulated and evaluated by the orbitofrontal cortex, determines goal-directed behaviors (bottom of the figure) by informing the ventral striatum (including accumbens), which drives the rest of the system by a mechanism best represented by interlinked gears. The dopaminergic afferents would play the role of "fueling" the system.

Each loop possesses a specific output (motor acts for the motor loop, emotional expression for the limbic one and spontaneous mental activity for the associative one), accounting for the three main symptoms of the athymhormic syndrome. According to this representation, damage to the limbic loop, while leaving intact the other two, would result in impaired spontaneous cognitive and motor activity, giving rise to the characteristic symptoms of athymhormia: lack of spontaneous action (but intact motor functioning) and poverty of spontaneous thinking (but relatively preserved intellectual capacities). This model provides a plausible framework for the curious association between loss of motor and mental activity, as well as their reversibility upon external stimulation. According to the model, however, blunting of emotional expression would be, unlike the other two symptoms, a nonreversible phenomenon, but this does not preclude possible preservation of emotional experience itself. (Habib, 2004: 521)

Habib, through his research on athymhormia, provided a model of motivational deficiency. As a disorder, athymhormia points out to a link between motor activity and cognitive processes through the limbic system. The link is provided by the dopamergetic afferents that would play the role of "fueling" the system.

Unseen Identity Loop

Based on Habib's proposed mechanism, we suggest that a similar mechanism would apply in the case of the Buddhist identity. The Eightfold Path, as we considered them divided into levels of cognition, action and attention processes, are supposed to be practiced all at the same time. This proposal matches too the present theories of neuroscience.

According to the Buddha, the world is not stable in any way. There are no things with identity. Everything is in a constant process of change in every respect. We consider that the attention processes, which in the Eightfold Path corresponds to the right effort, right understanding and the right meditation, function similarly to the limbic loop proposed by Habib. The attention would thus behave as a gear between the other two gears cognition and action. They could be seen as working in tandem and continuously influencing each other.

Three Divisions	Insight/Wisdom (Sanskrit: *prajñā*, Pāli: *paññā*)	Morality (Sanskrit: *śīla*, Pāli: *sīla*)	Concentration (Sanskrit and Pāli: *samādhi*)
Eightfold Path	*Right view* *Right resolve/intention*	*Right speech* *Right action* *Right livelihood*	*Right effort* *Right understanding* *Right meditation*
Level	Cognition	Action	Attention

Table 2. The Eightfold Path and its Three Divisions

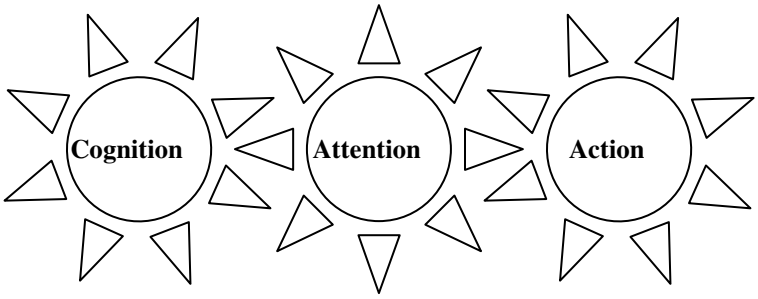

Figure 2. *The Identity Loop*: Attention as the connections link between cognition and action. Affective states contribute to the arousal of attentional processes which further influence cognition and action.

Cahn and Polich (2006) refer to meditation as "describing practices that self regulate the body and mind, thereby affecting mental events by engaging a specific attentional set". Davidson and Goleman (1977), regarding the regulation of attention as central to all methods of meditation, divided the meditative types into two: mindfulness and concentrative. Mindfulness methods allow thoughts, feelings and sensations to arise while maintaining a specific attentional stance. Concentrative methods involve focus on specific mental or sensory activity. Mindfulness methods involve maintenance of attention in a state of open perception, awareness of the phenomenal field, open perceptivity while concentrative methods would require narrowing of attentional resources. (Cahn and Polich, 2006).

Austin (2000), Forman (1990), Travis et al.(2002), and West (1987) refer to traits born of long-term meditation as heightening awareness of the sensory field, and a shift in the relationship to thoughts, feelings, and

experience of self. States of awareness sometimes referred to as "the witness" or "transcendental experience" are also claimed to ensue over time. This experience consists of contentless awareness that is independent of mental activities, can be present during deep sleep, and produces the perception of an altered self-identity wherein the separation perceived between the observer and the observed grows ever fainter. As the perceived lack of separation develops, the sense of self seems to shift from mental thought centered in the body to an impersonal *beingness*. This awareness is related to the essential emptiness of a separate and isolated self-identity.

It seems thus, that the sense of identity shifts continuously and probably one could speak of a Buddhist identity only in terms of outcome actions: right speech, right action and right livelihood.

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