

# ALTRUISM IN WORLD RELIGIONS

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## Chapter 5

## Altruism in Classical Buddhism

Todd Lewis

O monks, wander! We will go forward for the benefit of many people . . . out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare, and happiness of gods and humans.

—*Catusparishad Sūtra*<sup>1</sup>

Someone may build a precious reliquary, as high as the world;  
It is said that training others to generate  
The altruistic intention is more excellent.

—Aryadeva<sup>2</sup>

In considering the case of Buddhism and the phenomenon of altruism, it is noteworthy that the sentiments expressed in the first quotation above were spoken just as the Buddha Shākyamuni began his teaching, establishing the world's initial missionary faith. This recurring trope from the earliest canonical accounts expresses the Buddha's ethos for his religious movement and his intentions for sharing his Dharma ("teachings") with the world. He often instructs his converts to spread his teachings with this same altruistic exhortation; later scholars, such as the monk Aryadeva (170–260 CE), also quoted above, have echoed the singular importance of compassion in this religion. Such prominent expressions of social engagement at the starting point of this great tradition may surprise a contemporary reader, having perhaps encountered modern treatments of Buddhism that focus on elite philosophy and individualistic soteriological practices.

## "Altruism" in Cross-Cultural Definition

From the outset, we must define the concept of altruism in the textual tradition. There is a rich vocabulary for expressing modes of human caring for others in Buddhism: *karunā*, "compassion"; *maitrī* (Pali: *mettā*),<sup>3</sup> "loving kindness"; *dāna*, "charity." In this context, we find occasional use of the canonical Sanskrit term *arthacaryā* (P. *attha-cariya*), which closely matches the English term "altruism." As used in Buddhist texts composed in early India, *arthacaryā* refers to conduct beneficial to others, almost always with a religious motivation.<sup>4</sup> Donors, ritual sponsors, and reli-

gious teachers act in ways that are *arthacaryā*. In later Buddhist documents, *arthacaryā* actions are listed as one of four means of drawing people into the religious life. In trying to work on comparisons between traditions, having an approximate emic or indigenous term in the canonical language religions is a promising discovery.<sup>5</sup>

So defined, living altruistically—benefiting religious persons, institutions, and other beings in basic needs—has been a central characteristic of Buddhism from the earliest records: in the history of the monastics, as recorded in ancient inscriptions across India by donors, in the records of the expansion of monasticism across Asia and into countries such as Burma, where today householders put out on their home porches pitchers of clean drinking water for passersby. Far from being a residual category, altruism is integral and foundational to all Buddhist traditions.

In this chapter I explore the origins of Buddhist altruism through an examination of its metaphysical foundations, surveying texts and historical precedent from the Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions; I also contextualize its role in the classical development of Buddhism and trace its evolution in East Asia.

## Historical Background

The sixth century BCE in northern India was a time of spiritual seeking unparalleled in the history of religions. Among the many individual teachers then regarded as having achieved *nirvāna*—an exalted state of salvation—was one who called himself a "Buddha": one "awakened" by having seen reality clearly and transformatively. Feeling compassion for beings who suffered on the wheel of life and death, he founded the world's first missionary religion, created a community of renunciate monks and nuns (the *saṅgha*), and shared his teachings with everyone who was interested in hearing them.

Born a prince, Gautama renounced his own line to a royal throne; his early disciples, almost all ascetics, were taught to cultivate detachment from the householder's lifestyle and so entanglements in worldly matters. For the student interested in altruism, therefore, a discussion of the Buddhist understanding of this phenomenon might seem to be a forced or barren pursuit. Such an interpretation, however, would lack a fundamental sociohistorical understanding and ignore important canonical and popular texts. As Buddhism gained ever-wider popularity beyond the ascetics and spread out of its region of origin, it developed in breadth and scope: soon after the Buddha's death, most Buddhist disciples were householders (more than 95 percent in most societies), and few—even among the monastics—were aloof from social concerns.

Although Buddhism's successful trans-Asian pilgrimage originates with an inspiring vision of conquering human suffering and bondage in the cosmos, its 2,500 years of popular support also was a result of the fact that it helped householders secure worldly prosperity and participate in a moral civilization. Buddhism was so successful in this arena that it found acceptance in almost every type of human society: from nomadic communities to urbanized polities, from the tropics to the vast grasslands of northern Asia, from the Arabian Sea to the Pacific Ocean.

Buddhism's distinctive doctrinal and institutional flexibility contributed to its success. This flexibility is based in part on the core Buddhist belief that individuals and societies are different by virtue of their different backgrounds—that is, persons have different past lives and hence inherit the past *karma* of unique and widely varying personalities, moral natures, and habits. Buddhism's characteristic acceptance of pluralism in social life is also a result of the tradition's vast collection of religious literature with no single text, canon, or institution holding universal authority. In constructing a "Buddhist view of altruism," then, it is important to note that expressions of Buddhist ethical thought and practices have varied regionally and that the treatment in this chapter necessarily entails broad generalizations. My exploration begins with the universally held doctrine of *karma*.

### Metaphysical Reality: The Doctrine of Karma and Its Implications

Unlike the western monotheisms, for which life and destiny is contained within a "one time around" reality, the Hindu-Buddhist worldview understands life as an ongoing succession of incarnations—a "wheel of life" (*samsāra*) where individual beings undergo rebirth and redeath, relentlessly suffering according to their deeds. This notion of *samsāra* includes the view that what a human does—in Buddhist reckoning, by one's body, speech, and mind—creates a causal force in the universe, *karma*, through which every action elicits a just moral retributive reaction in the future. Doing a good deed leads inevitably to reward; doing evil begets inevitable proportionate punishment. All living beings on earth therefore reside in a *karmabhūmi* ("realm of karma")—an interactive, interrelated universe that is subject to this natural moral law.

Several ideas about karma are pivotal to understanding Buddhist altruism. First, this doctrine is not fatalistic because one is continually, every moment, creating new *punya* ("merit") or *pāp* ("demerit") to change the ongoing calculus of karmic destiny. Indeed, Buddhist philosophy emphasizes that certain acts engender strong karma effects, setting off

mechanistic causal connections between past and future; the totality of a person's karma, like all phenomena, changes every instant.

Furthermore, the Buddhist understanding of causality is that not all contingencies in life are karma-dependent. In fact, events that affect individuals are more likely than not to have been caused by forces other than karma. For the future, however, the logic of the karma doctrine has motivated Buddhists everywhere to manage their fate: avoiding doing evil and making good karma. Here is the foundation for and, indeed, the necessity for individuals to do altruistic deeds.

Buddhist doctrine never held that poverty was a noble state for householders.<sup>6</sup> Even monks and nuns benefited from having enough wealth to make meritorious donations. The texts emphasize that accumulating wealth is the fruition of good past karma, and giving away one's wealth (in altruistic practices) to earn merit is the best expenditure. Every Buddhist householder knows that one's material possessions cannot be taken beyond this life—but merit as good karma can be. As one early text states:

The beings, O Brahmin, have their karma as their own, they have their heritage from the karma, the karma determines their birth, the karma is their friend and ultimate refuge, and it is the karma that divides them, relegating them either to an inferior or to a superior state of existence.<sup>7</sup>

This principle was incorporated into early canonical definitions of the good Buddhist life for householders. On several occasions the Buddha instructed householders to seek the "Four Conditions" and do the "Four Good Deeds":<sup>8</sup>

|                                 |   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Four Conditions (to seek):      | Four Good Deeds (to use wealth for):            |
| Wealth achieved by lawful means | Make family, friends happy                      |
| Good renown in society          | Ensure security against worldly dangers         |
| Long life                       | Make offerings to family, friends, gods, ghosts |
| Birth in heaven                 | Support worthy religious people                 |

These doctrinal guidelines have been as influential for the laity as the "Four Noble Truths" were for philosophers. They allow the historian to imagine early householders being "good Buddhists" by fully engaging in their social milieu: fostering family ties; cultivating the ethos of "energetic striving" for economic success; encouraging altruistic feeding of hungry ghosts and local gods; applauding rightful seeking after worldly happiness and security; supporting family, friends, and religious seekers. (I examine the record of actual Buddhist practices in a subsequent section of this chapter.)

## Doctrines of Self, Impermanence, Process, and Interdependency

Later philosopher-monks argued that altruism was a logical extension of the Buddha's metaphysical teachings. A core and universal Buddhist doctrine asserts that reality has three basic characteristics: impermanence, no-soul, and suffering. The first insists that reality is a process of ceaseless change and is not reducible to permanent things. The second concept, *anātman* ("no-ātman" or "non-self"), expresses the Buddha's rejection of any notion of an essential, unchanging interior entity at "the center" of a person. As a result, these philosopher-monks analyzed the human "being" as the continuously changing, interdependent relationship among five components (*skandhas*).<sup>9</sup> The spiritual purpose of breaking down any expectation of changeless phenomena around us or of an unchanging locus of personal individuality is to demonstrate that there is never "any thing" to be attached to or around which to organize one's primordial existential desires or attachments.<sup>10</sup>

Highlighting the universality of suffering, the third characteristic of reality, provides Buddhists with an ethical focus: Compassion is the proper human response to moral living—an ethos that underlies all Buddhist practices of altruism. The early texts often cite suffering from "illness, old age, death, and rebirth" as the baseline human reality. The benefits to the practitioner of altruistic service also are highlighted, as in an early biography of the Buddha, the *Buddhacarita*:

Those who in charity renounce their wealth  
Cleanse away avarice and attachment.  
Giving in compassion and respect,  
They drive away envy, hatred, and pride.<sup>11</sup>

The teachings of impermanence and suffering point to two additional basic facts of life in the Buddhist worldview: The universe is a vast web of connections (conditioned by karma and other causalities), and beings are linked and sustain their lives through multiple interdependencies. For millennia Buddhist teachers have instructed humans to regard all beings in their midst as having once been, in former lives, their own beloved kin: mothers, fathers, children. Accordingly, one sees that one's present life has been shaped by the past, that current actions inevitably affect one's destiny, and that all others—both now and in the future—are linked inescapably by the contingencies of karmic fruition.

## Doctrinal Voices from Monastic Libraries: Altruism in Buddhist Texts

Like all world religions, Buddhism is multivocalic and has generated vast written discourse, with shelvesful of texts regarded as authoritative. Buddhist texts also speak with different voices<sup>12</sup> as they range over common spiritual issues; given the naturally assumed range of human spiritual capacities resulting from different karma, these texts must always be read according to the intended audience. Indeed, the most common mistake in using Buddhist texts, from Max Weber until the present, has been to attempt to apply ideas, practices, and behavioral norms composed for the monastic elite (renunciants who constitute at most 5 percent of the Buddhist community) to a society centered on the householder majority. The monastic elite recorded, redacted, composed, and copied all Buddhist texts, so their male, ascetic voice is overwhelmingly that of the virtuosi renunciants. As a result, the texts provide relatively few spaces where the Buddhist householder's life circumstances or worldview are even discussed. Because altruism is construed as a social virtue and therefore is largely in this domain, treatments of it, not unexpectedly, are scattered.

As a result, caution is required in examining the selection of texts I cite in this essay. We know that ideas on altruism definitely were articulated by the Buddha and from the time of the early Buddhist writers onward; what we cannot specify well, however, is how many of these teachings made it "out of the stacks" and into Buddhist cultures and societies at different places and times over the past two millennia. Despite the fact that we know little about the culture and contexts of texts in the history of Buddhism, it is worthwhile to sample ideas on altruism from the earliest textual sources onward. Finally, there are many historical problems in dividing textual sources according to Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions as I do here; for the purposes of this essay, however, painting with a broad brush can render an apt portrait of the diversities within Buddhism.

### Altruism in Theravāda Sources and Tradition<sup>13</sup>

I have cited textual expressions drawn from the Theravādin school's Pali Canon to frame the overall formative Buddhist understanding of altruism. In texts, inscriptions, and meditation practices, altruism constitutes a common theme.

At monasteries and shrines across ancient India, Theravādin adherents left a record of their patronage gifts by having donor inscriptions made on cut stone and metal plates. The majority of these inscriptions by monks, nuns, and householders contain a common ending phrase

that records an altruistic motivation for their gift. To cite one example from fourth-century Mathura:

On this date an image of the Blessed One Shākyamuni was set up by the monk Buddhavarman for the worship of all Buddhas. Through this religious gift may his preceptor attain nirvāna, (may it also be) for the cessation of all suffering of his parents . . . (and) for the welfare and happiness of all beings.<sup>14</sup>

Early Pali texts argue that compassion for all beings should be as central to humanity's moral compass as the organic ties to one's own kin. As stated in the *Samyutta Nikāya*:<sup>15</sup>

Thus as a mother with her life  
Will guard her son, her only child,  
Let him extend unboundedly  
His heart to every living being.  
And so with loving-kindness for all the world  
Let him extend unboundedly  
His heart, above, below, around,  
Unchecked, with no ill will or hate.

The later Buddhist poet Ksemendra goes so far as to argue that compassion is natural and innate in all creatures.<sup>16</sup>

Among the many early meditative traditions inherited by all Buddhist schools was cultivation of the *Catur Brahmavihāras* ("Abiding in the Four Sublime States"): benevolence, compassion, joy, and equanimity. In the Theravāda practice, meditators begin by developing the sublime state mentally and then extending it outward, in succession, to a neutral person, a friend, an enemy, and finally toward all sentient beings. The first two *brahmavihāras* are clearly designed to train the individual to foster an altruistic mindset.

Many Theravāda texts argue strongly that compassion should be expressed by improving the world. This compassion is not left to be a general exhortation, however, but can be directed toward special recipients for the best results. (I return to the early merit hierarchy below.) The most-praised altruistic donation is best directed to aiding religious seekers and doing so, most emphatically, for the maximum merit it earns. As another Pali passage urges:

Let givers pleasant hermitages make,  
Therein let them for scholars find a home;  
And make in arid jungle water-tanks,

And where 'tis rough to go, clear passages.  
Let them with candid trusting heart bestow  
Food and water and dried meats and gear  
And lodging on the men of upright mind. . .  
Yea, wise, he scatters gladly what he hath  
And bidding: Give ye! Give ye! Doth he cry.  
And thus he thunders, raining like the god,  
His generous gifts upon the giver's self  
As rich and copious showers of merit fall.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, the Theravādin texts hold that the "good life" for a householder should be balanced between the inner life and social action. The Buddhist lay disciple should deepen his or her religious faith and spiritual understanding but balance this spiritual practice by the practices of moral living and altruistic giving. This idea is clearly expressed in the *Vyagghapajja Sutta*,<sup>18</sup> again emphasizing the personal benefits derived from charity:

The four conduce to a householder's weal and happiness in his future life. Which four? The accomplishment of faith, the accomplishment of virtue, the accomplishment of charity, and the accomplishment of insight. . . . What is the accomplishment of charity? Herein a householder feels at peace with heart free from the stain of avarice, devoted to charity, open-handed, delighting in generosity, attending to the needy, delighting in the distribution of alms.  
Energetic and heedful in tasks  
Wisely administering wealth  
One lives a balanced life,  
Protecting what has been amassed.

### Altruism in Mahāyāna Sources and Tradition

On the popular level, there are strong and important continuities between the two great streams of Buddhist history in terms of karma and other core doctrines, merit-making, and monastic tradition. Until the last centuries of Indian Buddhism Mahāyāna exponents were a small minority expounding an alternative doctrinal system, but this tradition completely dominated the central Asian, east Asian, and Himalayan diasporas of the faith. These historical facts, along with the new contexts to which the tradition had to adapt in East Asia (Confucianism, imperial states, a faith originating among foreigners and first expounded by "barbarian" missionaries), explain why common early doctrines and

practices developed as they did. Focusing on altruism also highlights how the bodhisattva doctrine of Mahāyāna philosophers was an innovative interpretation of the ideal Buddhist life.

The Mahāyāna tradition shows strong continuities with the early canons in seeing that aiding others also entails spiritual benefit to the donor. This boon is visible not only in the inevitable karmic benefit but also in the strengthening of the individual's habit of detachment. This perspective is concisely stated in the only Indic Buddhist play, *Lokānandanātaka* ("Joy for the World") by Chandragomin (c. 440 CE)<sup>19</sup>:

May you by your virtues fulfill  
The most cherished desires  
Of all sentient beings!  
May you in the desert of suffering  
Become the sea of sustenance;  
A ladder on which to ascend  
The mountain of salvation.

Because altruism is a "ladder to nirvāna," what is striking in the Mahāyāna texts is how they go into very exacting detail to specify its applications. Mindful of how an individual's wealth and personal capacities could vary and hence condition altruistic work, several texts depict the Buddha discussing how the good Buddhist should bestow charity. The *Upāsakashīla-Sūtra*<sup>20</sup> is a good example, discussing how an individual can set out to disseminate the greatest benefit when trying to help others:

Good Son, there are three fundamentals to all kinds of giving: (1) giving compassionately to the poor, (2) giving to foes without seeking rewards, and (3) giving joyfully and respectfully to the virtuous. . . . If one can teach others before giving them material things, one is called a great giver. . . . if a wise person is wealthy, he should give like that. If he is not wealthy, he should teach other wealthy people to practice giving. . . . If he is poor and has nothing to give, he should recite curative mantras, give inexpensive medicines to the needy, sincerely take care of the ill for recuperation, and exhort the rich to provide medicines; if he knows medical remedies . . . he should provide treatment according to the diagnosis. . . .

Good son, when a wise person seeks enlightenment, if he is wealthy, he should learn medicine. He should build hospitals and provide needed food and medicine for the sick. If there are holes in the road he should repair them and broaden it to clean thorns,

and other filth from it. At dangerous places, he provides needed boards, ladders, or ropes. In the wilderness, he builds wells, plants fruit trees, and builds water channels. In places where there are no trees, he erects posts and builds animal sheds. He builds guest houses and supplies necessities such as wash basins, lamps, beds, and bedding. . . . He builds bridges over rivers and provides rafts. . . . He personally helps the old, the young, and the weak to cross. . . . He does all these things himself and teaches others to do likewise.

The most striking doctrinal difference represented by the Mahāyāna exponents is their claim that all humans should aspire to become Buddhas and so live as bodhisattvas, "future Buddhas," vowing to undergo many lifetimes to perfect themselves. This ideal was worked out in greater specificity over the centuries. Exact steps in developing the bodhisattva's eventual enlightenment were regarded as balancing the person's interior spiritual understanding, *prajñā* (P. *pañña*, "insight, gnosis"), with the practice of acting selflessly with *upāya* ("skillful means") to serve all creation compassionately.

Mahāyāna exponents systematized their bodhisattva doctrine by specifying the seven (or ten) qualities necessary for reaching buddhahood, the *pāramitās*, and stages one reaches on that many-lifetime path, *bhūmis*.<sup>21</sup> What is notable for this comparative consideration of altruism is that in the latter formulations of bodhisattva doctrine, very advanced bodhisattvas who could enter *nirvāna* can choose to take further rebirths in *samsāra* for no other goal than assisting others. They do so because they have infinite merit to share and great powers to use in rescuing others. Spiritually perfected and beyond merit accumulation, such bodhisattvas are like a Buddha in performing fully selfless altruistic actions.<sup>22</sup>

Mahāyāna understanding of the full career of the bodhisattva is most fully and eloquently expressed in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, the classic treatise by the monk Shāntideva (685–763 CE)—one of the tradition's greatest scholars. The most popular treatise on the Mahāyāna path to enlightenment, this text is centered on an analysis of the human condition and the twin themes of serving the world while cultivating spiritual clarity and ultimately release from *samsāra*. Shāntideva shows in compelling language how these dual focal points are not artificially tied but that through compassionate altruism the dualism of self and world is seen as an empty set, an illusion. This text famously declares<sup>23</sup> :

May I allay the suffering of every living being.  
I am medicine for the sick.

May I be both doctor and their nurse, until the sickness does not recur,  
 May I avert the pain of hunger and thirst with showers of food and drink . . .  
 May I be an inexhaustible treasure for impoverished beings.  
 May I wait upon them with various forms of offerings . . .  
 May I be a light for those in need of light.  
 May I be a bed for those in need of rest.  
 May I be a servant for those in need of service, for all embodied beings.

Other Mahāyāna texts show a striking missionary voice, regarding altruism as a skillful tool in spreading the faith. The *Mahāvīryupatti Sūtra* lists four chief means at the disposal of a bodhisattva to that end: charity (*dāna*); persuasiveness (*priyavādītā*); altruism (*arthacaryā*); and receptivity toward all beings (*samānārthatā*).<sup>24</sup>

Even the various “pure land” sects that arose in the Mahāyāna fold lauded altruistic acts as those that could win the grace of celestial bodhisattvas and Buddhas. This perspective is stated especially emphatically in the *Mahānirvāna Sūtra*.<sup>25</sup>

Cause no affliction to living beings  
 Let your thoughts always be of compassion . . .  
 Dig good wells beside roads in the desert,  
 Plant and cultivate orchards of fruit trees,  
 Always give nourishment to beggars . . .  
 If you can give charity to the sick,  
 Even if it is just a piece of fruit  
 And giving them a pleasant, cheering glance,  
 Then you will be reborn in Akshobhya’s Pure Land.

Another voice in later Mahāyāna discourse exalts the ideal of compassion and altruistic service. Perhaps because of the belief in the Buddha’s predictions that humanity would suffer inevitable decline in its spiritual capacity,<sup>26</sup> these later treatises highlight the value of the singular pursuit of altruism. Whatever else one can do successfully in one’s own “interior” religious practice, at the very least one can serve and be transformed by dedication to altruism. This view is expressed clearly in the widely circulated treatise *Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa* by the gifted Tibetan monk Longchenpa (1308–1354 CE):

Even if the ethical impulse is not distinctly operative,  
 Compassion’s wholesome stream is rising ever higher . . .

All you do by way of body and speech will be meaningful  
 And you become a veritable shrine in all the worlds with all their gods . . .  
 The root or seed of all and everything is compassion.  
 Even in this world of fictitious being it yields many fruits of happiness . . .  
 Fearless in the world and acting for the sake of living beings,  
 By always being sympathetic and concerned with their welfare only, man’s world has become meaningful.<sup>27</sup>

Another, more contemporary, monk, the Tibetan Patrul Rimpoche (1808–1887), also argues for the priority of compassion in his treatise *Words of My Perfect Teacher*.

In everything you do, simply work at developing love and compassion until they become a fundamental part of you. That will serve the purpose, even if you do not practice the more outward and conspicuous forms of Dharma such as prayers, virtuous activities and altruistic works. As the *Sūtra that Perfectly Encapsulates the Dharma* states, “Let those who desire Buddhahood not train in many Teachings but only one. Which one? Great Compassion. Those with great compassion possess all the Buddha’s teaching as if it were in the palm of the hand.”<sup>28</sup>

The Mahāyāna tradition’s enculturation of altruism also is evident in its distinctive meditation traditions. Especially in fasting and visualization practices, the individual “takes refuge” in the Buddha/Dharma/Sangha as well as in the bodhisattvas, then vows to seek their perfections (*pāramitās*). Many of these meditation practices conclude with dedicatory pronouncements that highlight the Mahāyāna doctrine that seeking personal enlightenment entails serving others and that altruistic actions are central to the final realization of the advanced spiritual seeker. As one ritual dedicated to Avalokiteshvara concludes, the meditator repeats:

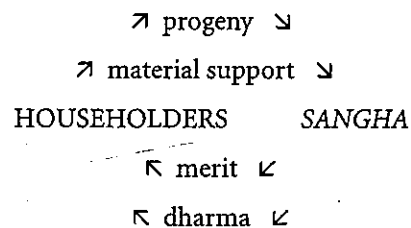
Through this virtue may I quickly become  
 A greatly compassionate one  
 And lead each and every being,  
 None excepted, to his pure land.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, it also is common for the celestial bodhisattvas in Mahāyāna meditations to be regarded as the “embodiments of compassion.”<sup>30</sup> This practice entails concentrated effort that involves visualizing the celestial bodhisattvas in the mind’s eye, repeating their *mantras*, and seeking

total existential identification with them; the effect on the practitioner is regarded as transformative. This practice yields a compassion-filled mindset, worldly assistance, and merit—all fostering the quest for enlightenment.<sup>31</sup> Although it is unclear how far beyond the monastic preaching halls the sophisticated doctrines of Mahāyāna Buddhism reached, what is certain is that everywhere this school was established, householders were drawn to the deity called Avalokiteshvara,<sup>32</sup> who embodies compassion—the celestial bodhisattva universally revered for acting on his altruistic vow to aid all who call upon him for worldly needs or spiritual aid.

### The Classical Buddhist Ideal: Civilization as Altruistic Endeavor

Built on and nurtured by these doctrinal ideas, a conception of Buddhist civilization developed from the circumstances of its Indic genesis. The tradition was sustained by exchanges between householders and renunciants—the monks and nuns whose advanced ascetic lifestyle entailed abandonment of most worldly comforts. Buddhist monasticism arose to provide refuge and support for renunciants seeking enlightenment, but the tradition survived by building multifaceted relationships with lay followers who provided for the monks' and nuns' subsistence (see diagram).



Buddhists articulated the foundations for the ideal society, one with spiritual and moral dimensions. Monks and nuns served the world through their example of renunciation and meditation, by performing rituals, and by providing other services. They become a “field of merit” that allows people who make donations to them to earn the good karma required for a better life both in the present and in future incarnations. In this way, Buddhist seekers and saints fulfilled the Buddha’s injunction to “wander forth for the welfare and the weal of the many, out of compassion for the world.”

Thus, Buddhism developed a broad vision for an integrated spiritual community and a clear sense of proper social practice. The texts speak of the devout layman’s and monks’ duty to help others grow in

faith, morality, knowledge, and charity. This “imagined community” enabling spiritual pursuits has depended on a constant altruistic effort by householders: By giving up a portion of their household’s material wealth to sustain Buddhist monastics and their institutions, they support exemplary individuals in their midst seeking refuge to realize *nirvāna*. Powered by altruistic giving, the agency of merit can benefit all individuals in society by positively affecting their path through *samsāra*.

### The Early Buddhist Hierarchy of Altruism

The conceptions of karma and merit-making shaped a distinctly Buddhist disposition toward altruism. Spiritually advanced beings were thought to possess greater increments of good karma, with humans recognized as the sole beings in the universe capable of reaching *nirvāna*. Based on this conception, the early tradition held that the higher the spiritual status of the recipient of a gift (food, clothing, shelter), the greater the return in merit to the giver. One influential listing of the resulting hierarchy from the Theravāda tradition summarizes this doctrine:

#### Hierarchy of Merit Recipients

Buddha  
 Pacceka Buddha  
 Arhat  
 One on the way to Arahatship  
 One Never to be reborn  
 A Once-returned on earth  
 One who has Entered the Stream  
 Refuge Taker on the way to the Stream-enterer  
 An outsider aloof from sensuality  
 Ordinary but virtuous man  
 Ordinary nonvirtuous man  
 Animals

Buddhists across Asia acted on the basis of the logic of this scheme. Householders have sought out individuals regarded as enlightened—or nearly so—both to experience the presence of a spiritual person as well as to make the most rewarded meritorious material gifts to them. Furthermore, one can see that there is no inherent reason—for merit-making purposes—why Buddhists would feel compelled to prioritize the eradication of poverty. Nonetheless, humans were still thought to be deserving of altruism, as the record of Buddhist charities established over the millennia makes clear.



Finally, it is noteworthy that animals and spirits have standing in the merit hierarchy. The record of Buddhists incorporating offerings to hungry ghosts in daily life is clear from the earliest days until the present. Small food items are taken from the plates and set out by monks near the monastic walls and by householders outside the front door. Buddhists also regard their rituals for departed spirits as an important altruistic practice. In the Buddhist cosmos of *samsāra*, among the six spheres of rebirth many beings are reincarnated as *pretas*—ghosts who are “stuck” in various unpleasant statuses, potentially for long time periods because they have no kin or their kin fail to perform rituals to ease their pain or send them to their next existence. Twice a year for millennia, Buddhist monasteries in east Asia performed rituals designed to feed the *pretas* and transfer merit to them, seeking to alleviate their pain and allow them to move on to another rebirth state.

### The Issue of Collective Karma

It is commonly thought that the karma doctrine of Buddhism embraces a strict nexus of individualistic retribution: What a person sows by intended action, one reaps oneself, in the present lifetime or in a future rebirth. In fact, however, there are texts that point to special circumstances in which there is collective action and collective karmic retribution. Altruistic acts by leaders can lift the whole, whereas evil plotted and done by them can lead to collective punishment.

Famous examples of both are found in the *jātakas*—stories told by the Buddha about his previous lives. Several dozen such tales clearly portray how a person’s worldly and spiritual destiny also can be profoundly affected by simple proximity to significant others, especially spouses, shipmates, monks, and kings.<sup>33</sup> The negative example is found in a narrative that recounts the collective massacre of the Buddha’s native Shākya clan and their republic late in his life—a karmic event even he could not forestall. In their previous lifetimes, the Buddha states, the Shākyas united to poison a river to punish people living in their adversary city-state; in retribution, the entire Shākya population was reborn and killed together because of this previous collective evil action.<sup>34</sup>

The positive collective example often appears in tales of kingship, such as that in Pali Jātaka 276 when the deity Indra seeks to discover why his heaven<sup>35</sup> is suddenly becoming so overcrowded. He investigates and discovers that the spiritual rule of a virtuous king is the reason: Not only does the king’s altruism lead citizens to reach the heavens, it also leads to the land’s prosperity.<sup>36</sup>

Then their king practiced the Kuru precepts and the five Virtues. And then in the realm . . . the rain fell; the three fears were allayed; the land became prosperous and fertile . . . and then with his subjects went to fill the heavens.<sup>37</sup>

I return to the role of kings in Buddhist altruistic traditions below.

### Buddhist Monasteries as Altruistic Centers

The community of monks, nuns, and devout lay followers established monasteries and shrines that rooted the faith in many localities. When Buddhist monasticism spread across Asia, it introduced independent, corporate institutions that engaged local societies and regional polities. Although monastics constituted only a small percentage of the population in Buddhist societies, they performed crucial roles in perpetuating the faith.

The typical Buddhist community had its center in a monastery (*vihāra*), where monks (or nuns) would take their communal vows, recite an affirmation of conformity to monastic rules fortnightly, and undertake meditation and/or textual study. As the faith grew, some monks specialized in performing rituals, establishing schools, preaching from popular texts, or managing the institution.

It also is clear that the early Buddhist monks were free to be innovative figures in the history of Asian medicine. Given the emphasis the Buddha put on suffering as a prime reality and compassion as the crucial human orientation to life, it is understandable that some monks would specialize in alleviating suffering by practicing the healing arts. In one incident in the monastic chronicles, the Buddha confronted monks who were allowing an elderly monk in failing health to lie in his own filth; after cleaning up the infirmed one himself, the Buddha sternly tells the assembly that caring for the sick is as meritorious as attending to him.<sup>38</sup> As a result, one of the few personal possessions allowed monks was the medicine of cow urine. Subsequent texts make clear a tradition of collecting, classifying, and case testing a great variety of medicines. As Kenneth Zysk has shown, “Buddhism played a key role in the advancement of Indian medicine through its institutionalization of medicine in the Buddhist monastery. The medical doctrines codified in the monastic rules probably provided the literary model for subsequent enclaves of medical practice, and gave rise to monk-healers and to the establishment of monastic hospices and infirmaries, and proved to be beneficial assets in the diffusion of Buddhism throughout the subcontinent.”<sup>39</sup>

In sum, then, in a development that has been common in the history of religions when institutions develop in ways not fully imaginable to

their founders, Buddhist monasteries by 800 CE across Asia had become centers of education, charity, and medical practice—that is, institutions of altruism.

### The Buddhist Tradition of Missionary Altruism

Successful monasteries expanded; the pattern was to send out monks to establish satellite institutions of that lineage. Underlying this expansion, by the time Buddhism entered China (125 CE), was a clear sense of purpose and order in spreading the faith. According to one text in the Chinese canon, Buddhists should missionize by engaging in the following services for local communities:

- Build monastic halls and temples
- Plant fruit trees and shade trees and then excavate bathing pools
- Freely supply medicines to heal the sick
- Construct sturdy boats
- Safe placement of bridges suitable for the weak or ill
- Dig wells near roads for the thirsty and weary
- Enclose sanitary toilets.<sup>40</sup>

In many places where Buddhism thrived from India to China, some monasteries in cities and towns evolved to become complex institutions that were much more than refuges for ascetics. The Buddhist monastery often was the only local school, and members of the sangha served their societies by spreading literacy. Monks and nuns thereby accumulated practical knowledge (sanitation, horticulture, road building) to serve the surrounding community.

Many *vihāras* also organized endowed charities that fed the poor and dispensed free medical care. Allied with monasteries was a common institution that unified monks and householders for religious pursuits: the lay committees (Skt. *gosthis*). These committees would stage periodic festivals (image processions, chariot festivals), arrange for regular public recitations of popular narratives, and organize other rituals designed to cultivate both devotion to the Buddha-Dharma-Sangha and material blessings for the local community. In my own research in Nepal, I have documented the survival of these institutions among Newar Buddhists who work to ensure proper cremations for everyone, regular textual chanting, and festivals of rice distribution.<sup>41</sup>

### Kingship and Altruism: The Ashokan Paradigm

The world in which the Buddha lived and early Buddhism flourished was a world in which kingship was the norm. Buddhist sources predominantly assume the reality of kingship. They also proclaim that karmically gifted persons who command wealth and power must perform the most significant altruistic activity. Buddhist texts provide religious support for the understanding of kingship as a special presence in society. Following the example of the Buddha in his last lifetime (and many births before that)—who was born as a crown prince—Buddhist doctrine considers that an individual who becomes king does so as the result of extremely good karma, a reward for almost immeasurable spiritual development in past lifetimes. Like the future Buddha in many incarnations, just kings can do great spiritual good; kingship's power also can be the cause of rapid descent into hells or lower births if wealth and power over the multitudes are used selfishly or for evil.

The texts counsel rulers to respect prisoners and appoint their punishments with compassion; invest in schools, rest houses, water systems, and medicines; be sensitive to the plight of farmers in exacting taxes; and make certain that the police truly protect the citizens. The towering figure of beneficent kingship in Buddhist reckoning is Ashoka.

When the world conquest campaign of Alexander the Great (355–323 BCE) faltered in northwest India, the small states on the Indus River that were weakened by his incursions were subdued and integrated into India's first great empire—that of the Chandragupta Maurya. When his grandson Ashoka (274–236 BCE) assumed the throne, he followed Hindu norms of rulership and consolidated his frontier regions with brute force. Most prominently, he directed an assault at Kalinga, a coastal region encompassing modern Orissa. The widespread destruction and bloodshed that his army caused in securing the victory, however, greatly dismayed Ashoka. At just this time, the emperor encountered a charismatic Buddhist monk and became a staunch devotee. Having extended the Mauryan empire across most of the Indian subcontinent, Ashoka sent ambassadors and scribes throughout his realm to explain “the Dharma” that the emperor embraced; these emissaries reached the borders of his state and beyond.

Ashoka's edicts—inscribed on rocks and tall, stone-carved pillars—were both general and specific in their explanation of “Dharma,” a principle he held as key to creating a good society. In Pillar Edict I he writes, “Dharma is good. But what does Dharma consist of? It consists of few sins and many good deeds, of kindness, liberality, truthfulness, and purity.”<sup>42</sup> Although several inscriptions allude to the value of meditation, Ashoka's chief concern was for Buddhism to be a moral force in society:

"One should obey one's father and mother. One should respect the supreme value and sacredness of life. One should speak the truth. One should practice these virtues of Dharma."<sup>43</sup>

Having stated these principles and had them placed in prominent public places, Ashoka also sought to have his bureaucracy administer the empire with reference to them: "My officials of all ranks—high, low, and intermediate—act in accordance with the precepts of my instruction. . . . For these are the rules: to govern according to Dharma, to administer justice according to Dharma, to advance the people's happiness according to Dharma, and to protect them according to Dharma."<sup>44</sup> In the capital, Ashoka had trees and wells planted to aid travelers, declared certain days when animal slaughter was prohibited, and worked to limit religious conflict.

Although Buddhists in India eventually lost awareness of Ashoka's inscriptions, they preserved memories of Ashoka's actions (with many embellishments) in extracanonical narratives.<sup>45</sup> Buddhist exponents in subsequent centuries invoked Ashoka as a model householder and ruler, whose example challenged later Buddhist kings to regard their vocation as spiritual.

The tradition's memory of Ashoka, then, established that charity, justice, concern with the common good, and generosity toward the *sangha* became the norms by which a "good Buddhist ruler" was measured. The recurring message is that political power should be wielded as a means of creating a society in which compassion flourishes. In many of the popular *jātaka* narratives, a good king's duty is likened to that of a parent caring for children or a son caring for an aged parent.<sup>46</sup> Holding political power is not just an end, the coronation of one's past good karma, but the means to an end: shaping the world with justice and kindness. As B. G. Gokhale has observed, "The state was not merely a punitive instrument but primarily an agency for the moral transformation of man as a political animal. [The Buddhists] . . . found in morality of a higher order the solution to the dilemma of power."<sup>47</sup>

Thus, like the Buddha, a just ruler in Ashoka's example should understand that in a world marked by suffering, attention to collective welfare is needed; moreover, by virtue of being in a position of wielding power, one must bear the burden of moral cultivation and detachment to dispatch one's political responsibilities fully. As the great Buddhist monk Buddhaghosa observes in his *Visuddhimagga* (IX, 124):

For the Great Beings' minds retain their balance by giving preference to beings' welfare, by dislike of beings suffering, by the desire for the various successes achieved by beings to last, and by imparting impartiality toward all beings. And to all beings they give gifts,

which are a source of pleasure, without discriminating. . . . And in order to avoid doing harm to beings they undertake the precepts of virtue. . . . They constantly arouse energy, having beings' welfare and happiness at heart. When they have acquired heroic fortitude through supreme energy, they become patient with beings' many kinds of fault.<sup>48</sup>

### Mahāyāna Buddhist Altruism: Expressions in China

Buddhism's successful domestication into China and east Asia was one of history's most significant instances of cultural diffusion, connecting India to east Asia. Over the centuries, Buddhism had to adapt to an established imperial system and the Confucian tradition that emphasized, among other things, circles of beneficent social engagement that extended from kin (including dead ancestors) to service for the wider community. What seems clear from a review of the Indic texts and the unmatched records of Chinese history is that in China the altruistic Buddhist ideals were extended and implemented as nowhere else in the world.

Chinese Buddhists defined the field of compassionate service first in the traditional Indic arena of the monastic community, or *ching-t'ien* ("field of respect"). To emphasize that its own place in society was not parasitic (a common Confucian criticism), however—and doubtless reflecting their inclination toward the Mahāyāna tradition and its greater emphasis on compassion—Chinese monastics worked hard to organize charities and therefore exhorted donors to give to the second "field," *pei-t'ien* ("field of compassion"). To shore up their service intentions, some authors even wrote an apocryphal text in which the Buddha endorses charity to both "fields":

In various sermons I have stressed the perfection of charity, for I wish that my disciples, both monks and laymen, would cultivate the compassionate heart, and give to the poor, the needy, the orphaned, and the aged, even to a famished dog. However, my disciples did not understand my idea, and only offered gifts to the *ching-t'ien* and not the *pei-t'ien*. When I speak of the field of respect, I speak of the Buddha, dharma, and Sangha. When I speak of the field of compassion, I refer to the poor and needy, the orphaned, the aged, and even the ant. Of these two categories, the field of compassion is the superior one.<sup>49</sup>

In Chinese monasteries, monastics and householders alike joined in setting up and funding charitable trusts called Inexhaustible Treasuries (*Wu-chin tsang yuan*). Across China, these Treasuries were set up to

receive money, precious metals, and goods while serving as banks—lending funds at interest to multiply the wealth they garnered. Most divided the expenditures three ways: between monastic repairs, ritual sponsorship, and charities for medical treatments and feeding the poor. In famous instances householders competed with each other to make donations to these Treasuries; nobles and commoners joined their contributions to share in the merit earned from expenditures benefiting monasteries and the needy. Some monks devoted themselves almost exclusively to altruistic campaigns, and their biographies constitute a special section in the Chinese monastic annals. The accounts mention monks organizing vegetarian feasts available for everyone; other monks specialize as road builders, bridge builders, well diggers, tree planters, and river channel diggers. As the monk Te-mei (585–648 CE) reported, “Pious foundations thus make it possible to feed the clergy and the laity at the same time, for even though the donors presented their offerings to the monks, their kindness in fact extends to all without distinction.”<sup>50</sup>

Lay associations aided in many of these monastic-led endeavors, following ancient Indian precedents. In the modern era, however, householders also established independent organizations for altruistic purposes. For example, in 1920 Hangzhou businessmen established the Right Faith Society, which ran schools, old-age homes, soup kitchens, and gifted coffins for the poor; in Shanghai, the contemporaneous Buddhist Pure Karma Society established an orphanage and free medical clinics. When missionaries introduced Buddhism into Japan, they consciously imitated the Chinese precedent—setting up trusts and monastery-administered almshouses, hospitals, and dispensaries. In the modern period, the same phenomenon of Buddhist householder organizations forming to do altruistic work is clear. The Sōka Gakkai and its global mission of fostering world peace is the most well-known example.<sup>51</sup>

### William Scott Green’s Three Questions about Altruism

I now respond to the three questions raised by William Scott Green in the introduction to this book.

What are the major categories of behavior for others? What does the religion mean by “others”?

Buddhist tradition defines any intentional bodily act, speech act, or thought as a means of significantly affecting the world and so earning karmic reward or punishment. Buddhist philosophers imagine the world as one of thoroughgoing interrelation. Every being has the material world “flowing through” it naturally. Likewise, the natural law of karma causes Buddhists

to see an ongoing and dynamic connection between humans, animals, plants, spirits of various sorts (ghosts, demons), and the deities that populate various heavens. All of these “others” have been objects of altruistic action by Buddhist monastics and householders.

How does the religion assess the meaning of behavior for the welfare of others?

Buddhist karma belief in its doctrinal context gives the Buddhist grounds to critique any proposition that would imagine divesting any conceivable altruistic action of its benefits to the individual. The natural law of karma plants the seeds of future reward in the individual’s future and does so inevitably. Because the universe as *karmabhūmi* is interconnected and interdependent, as an inextricable part of the whole every individual who performs an altruistic act that benefits the whole inevitably is a benefactor.

Does the religion create a context in which it is possible that intentional action for the welfare of others can have only a neutral or negative consequence for the actor?

Buddhists have devoted extensive thought to the mechanisms and logic of karma, especially how it adds up and leads to retribution. Given the inevitable good karma coming to the actor, unenlightened humans will always benefit from their own good deeds. The Buddha and the saints (Theravāda Arhats, Mahāyāna bodhisattvas) who have reached enlightenment can be regarded as the only Buddhist altruists under Green’s definition, however. Why? Once one has reached enlightenment, all seeds of karma have been “burned up,” and the causal mechanisms of additional karma generation have been forever “unplugged.” Yet these Buddhist saints who help others are still embodied as humans, so they are subject to nonkarma consequences, and continuing to act can still lead an enlightened individual to suffer from natural causes and the unpleasantness of disease, old age, and death. The prime example is the life of Shākyamuni Buddha: After he is enlightened, he first is inclined to enter *nirvāna* and die to the human world because of humanity’s addiction to desire and ignorance. As I note at the beginning of this chapter, however, the gods intervened and asked him to preach, out of compassion for the world. They argued that enough humans existed who would benefit from his teaching. So for the next forty-five years he took on all the natural, nonkarmic suffering that embodied life entailed. Following his example, other Buddhist saints have made the same choice.

## Conclusion

Several final observations follow from the foregoing consideration of the Buddhist tradition's understanding of altruism and its history of compassionate engagement. First, far from being a side issue or marginal to the tradition, altruism occupies a central place in Buddhist thought and for Buddhists at every level of spiritual development. In many respects, understanding altruism's role in Buddhist history provides special insight into the spiritual vision underlying the living Buddhist cultures across Asia. As an expression of compassion, altruism shaped the development of Buddhist monasticism, particularly in terms of how the monasteries became centers of medical practice, education, and humanitarian services. Monastic altruism in the development of medical care certainly contributed to the success of the tradition.

A second observation about altruism is that it clarifies the intra-Buddhist comparison between Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions and the respective cultures they formed in south/southeast Asia and east Asia. Pali texts rarely discuss the implementation of altruistic intentions in specific detail. When compassionate service is discussed, it is defined most often as an individual spiritual attitude that yields karmic benefit to the individual benefactor. Feeling compassion and lovingkindness to the depths of one's being is the focus, rather than the tireless doing of altruistic deeds. In east Asia, however—where Mahāyāna traditions dominated—adherence to the bodhisattva ideal led to more engagement with altruistic practices and extensive development of institutions to implement them.

Finally, Buddhist tradition places special emphasis on inculcating the ethos of altruism among elite nonmonastic disciples, especially affluent patrons and rulers. The early Buddhists seemed to understand clearly that given the interrelatedness of all beings, if the prosperity of a society was not sincerely and generously dedicated to serve the common good, the spiritual vitality of the community's elite inevitably would be impaired.

## Notes

1. Translation by Ria Kloppenborg, *The Sūtra on the Foundation of the Buddhist Order* (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1973).
2. Translation by Ruth Sonam and Geshe Sonam Rinchen, *The Yogic Deeds of Bodhisattvas: Gyel-tsap on Aryadeva's Four Hundred* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 1994).
3. The main Indic Buddhist canonical languages are Sanskrit (Skt.) and Pali (P.). I provide both spellings in this chapter; the absence of a Pali term indicates identical spelling.

4. Franklin Edgerton, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1953), 66. I discuss below why, in the Buddhist belief system, "altruism" cannot be defined as a phenomenon that could ever deny benefit to the donor. The term is not attested in the Hindu sources.
5. My use of the term "altruism" assumes the tradition's own definition, unless otherwise indicated.
6. For example, see the Pali Canon, *Anguttara Nikāya*. Translation in E. M. Hare, *The Book of Gradual Sayings* (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1988), vol. 3, 249.
7. Pali Canon, *Majjhima Nikāya*. Translation in I. B. Horner, *Middle Length Sayings* (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1976), vol. 3, 249.
8. Pali Canon, *Anguttara Nikāya*. Translation in Hare, *The Book of Gradual Sayings*, vol. 4, 61.
9. The five *skandhas*: the physical body (*rūpa*), which is made of combinations of the four elements (earth, water, fire, air); feelings (*vedanā*), which arise from sensory contact; perceptions (*samijñā*), which attach the categories good, evil, or neutral to these sensory inputs; habitual mental dispositions (*samskāras*), which connect karma-producing will to mental action; and the consciousness (*viññāna*), which arises when mind and body come in contact with the external world.
10. The *anātman* doctrine, however, presented exponents of Buddhism with the perpetual problem of explaining moral causality: How can the doctrine of karma—with its emphasis on moral retribution—operate without the mechanism of a transmigrating soul? Early texts show that this question was clearly posed to Buddha: If there is no soul, how can the karmic "fruits" of any good or evil act pass into the future? The standard explanation is that *karma* endures in habitual mental energies (*samskāras*) that are impressed in the fifth *skandha*, consciousness (*viññāna*). Although always evolving and hence impermanent, *viññāna* endures in this life, exits the body, and passes over to be reincarnated in the next.
11. The first biography of the Buddha, by Ashvaghosa, usually dated to about 150 CE; translation in Richard Robinson, *Chinese Buddhist Verse* (London: John Murray, 1954), 11.
12. The historian of religion must emphasize that world religions have benefited from having such wide-ranging textual pronouncements in the service of historical adaptation. Just as the Christian Bible gives us ethnic cleansing in the Book of Deuteronomy, it also exhorts us to love one's enemy in the Gospels. Textual multivocalism may discomfit textual literalists, but it provided working proof texts for historical actors involved in adapting religious institutions to new or changing circumstances.
13. The Theravādins are the last surviving school of the Staviravādins. Using the latter term is more historically accurate for the ancient era, but given the former term's greater recognition, I use Theravāda in this chapter.
14. Translation by Gregory Schopen, "Two Problems in the History of Indian Buddhism: The Layman/Monk Distinction and the Doctrines of

- the Transference of Merit," *Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik* 10 (1985): 9–48, at 31. Mahāyāna inscriptions also record this sentiment, although they consistently direct the universal good to be final enlightenment (*anuttara-jñāna*) by all beings.
15. Chapter 1:8.
  16. Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1932), 181.
  17. *Samyutta Nikāya*. Translation in F. L. Woodward, trans., *The Book of Kindred Sayings* (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1992), vol. 3, 5.
  18. *Anguttara Nikāya*, VII, 54, as translated in Narada Thera, trans., *Everyman's Ethics* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1966).
  19. Translated in Michael Hahn, trans., *Joy for the World: A Buddhist Play by Chandragomin* (Berkeley, Calif.: Dharma Publishing, 1987).
  20. "Sūtra" implies that this was an account of the Buddha's teaching. The text is known only through the extant Chinese translation by Dharmarakṣa around 425 CE. The translation is from Heng-ching Shih, *The Sutra on Upasaka Precepts* (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1994), chapter 19.
  21. A discussion of the varying textual definitions of these terms is found in Dayal 1934. See also Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (New York: Routledge, 1989).
  22. This idea is the religious foundation for the system of more than 300 reincarnate teachers that developed in Tibet beginning in the thirteenth century—the most famous of whom is the Dalai Lama.
  23. *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, III, 9–9; 18; V, 84–85, translated in Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton, *The Bodhicaryavatara by Shantideva* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
  24. Text dating to about 200 CE, as cited in Jacques Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 368.
  25. An influential text attested to in 300 CE. Quote is from Robinson, *Chinese Buddhist Verse*, 62–63.
  26. Jan Nattier, *Once upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Philosophy of Decline* (Berkeley, Calif.: Asian Humanities Press, 1991).
  27. Translation by Herbert Guenther, *Kindly Bent to Ease Us, Part One: Mind, by Longchenpa* (Berkeley, Calif.: Dharma Publishing, 1975). The passage is in chapter 8.
  28. Translation by Padmakara Translation Group, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* by Patrul Rinpoche, 2nd ed. (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira Press, 1998), 209–10.
  29. Translated in Roger Jackson "A Fasting Ritual," in *Religions of Tibet in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 271–92, at 291.
  30. In this same ritual, the focal figure is described as "Treasure of compassion who looks down//Perpetually with a thousand compassionate eyes/ On the countless tormented and protectorless beings." *Ibid.*, 291–92.
  31. From the same ritual, the transfer between the compassionate bodhisattva and practitioner is visualized as follows: "The noble, Greatly compassionate One, is . . . in the space before me, at the head of his retinue. A stream of nectar falls from his body parts. It bathes the outside, inside, and middle of my body and purifies without exception all the illnesses, demons, sins, obscurations." *Ibid.*, 290–91.
  32. Chinese: *Guan-Yin*; Japanese: *Kannon*; Tibetan: *Chenrizi*; in east Asia, this bodhisattva also is revered in female form.
  33. I discuss stories in these areas in Todd T. Lewis, *Popular Buddhist Texts from Nepal: Narratives and Rituals of Newar Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).
  34. James P. McDermott, "Is There Group Karma in Theravāda Buddhism?" *Numen* 23, no. 1 (1976): 67–80, at 78–80.
  35. Heaven is a highly desirable rebirth venue, praised as a goal of householders; it is impermanent, however, and one must eventually be reborn in other spheres. Significantly, one cannot escape the world of rebirth (*samsāra*) from heaven.
  36. Despite the universally declared individual hope for *nirvāna* in a distant time, worldly prosperity and heavenly rebirth are the two primary goals that have motivated Buddhist householders from antiquity to the present. The royal stories underline that these goals were the central concerns in the imagination of typical Buddhists in Asian societies.
  37. Number 276 in E. B. Cowell, trans., *The Jātaka* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), vol. 3, 260.
  38. "[Buddha:] If you do not look after each other, who will look after you? Let him who would look after me look after one who is sick." (Pali Canon, *Vinaya, Mahavagga*, 8:26).
  39. Kenneth Zysk, *Asceticism and Healing in Ancient India: Medicine in the Buddhist Monastery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 118.
  40. *Chinese Tripitaka*, Taisho 16, no. 683.
  41. See Lewis, *Popular Buddhist Texts from Nepal*.
  42. Source: N. A. Nikam and Richard McKeon, eds. and trans., *The Edicts of Ashoka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 41.
  43. *Ibid.*, 43.
  44. *Ibid.*, 42.
  45. See, e.g., the Sanskrit *Ashoka-avadāna*, the *Mahāvamsa* and other chronicles of Sri Lanka (Wilhelm Geiger, ed., *The Mahāvamsa* [London: Luzak and Co., 1958]), and the Thai text *Trai Phum Phra Ruang* (Frank E. Reynolds and Mani B. Reynolds, *Three Worlds According to King Ruang* [Berkeley, Calif.: Asian Humanities Press, 1982], 172–88).
  46. "Just as an aged father . . . ought to be cared for by an able-bodied son, so too ought all the people be protected by the king" (Pali Jātaka no. 432; Cowell, *The Jātaka*, vol. 9, 305).
  47. B. G. Gokhale, "Early Buddhist Kingship," *Journal of Asian Studies* 26 (1966): 15–22, at 20.
  48. Bhikkhu Nyanamoli, trans., *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga) by Bhaddantacariya Buddhaghosa* (Berkeley, Calif.: Shambhala, 1976), vol. 1, 353.
  49. Cited in Kenneth K. S. Chen, *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973).