

## Chapter 8

# Ethics

### Dharma

Morality (*sīla*) is the first of the three divisions of the Eightfold Path and the foundation of the religious life. Moral development is a prerequisite for the cultivation of Meditation (*śamādhi*) and Wisdom (*paññā*). To live a moral life is to live in accordance with Dharma. The term 'Dharma' has many meanings, but the underlying idea is of a universal law which governs both the physical and moral order of the universe. Dharma is neither caused by nor under the control of a supreme being, and the gods themselves are subject to its laws. In Buddhism the term is used to denote both the natural order, and - as already noted - the entire corpus of Buddhist ethico-religious teachings. There is felt to be a correspondence between the two in the sense that Buddhist teachings are thought to be objectively true and in accordance with the nature of things.

Dharma may be translated as 'Natural Law', a term which 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 discovered by enlightened beings such as the Buddha (note that the Buddha discovered Dharma, he did not invent it). Every aspect of life is regulated by Dharma; the physical laws which regulate the rising of the sun, the succession of the seasons, the movement of the constellations. In the moral order,

Dharma is manifest in the law of karma, which governs the way moral deeds affect individuals in present and future lives. Living in accordance with Dharma and implementing its requirements leads to happiness, fulfilment and salvation; neglecting or transgressing against it leads to endless suffering in the cycle of rebirth (*samsāra*).

## Buddhist Precepts

There are five main sets of precepts in Buddhism:

1. The Five Precepts (*pañcasīla*)
2. The Eight Precepts (*aṭṭhaṅgasīla*)
3. The Ten Precepts (*dasasīla*)
4. The Ten Good Paths of Action (*dasakusalakammāpatha*)
5. The Monastic Disciplinary Code (*pātimokkha*)

The most widely observed of these codes is the first, the Five Precepts for laymen. The Five Precepts forbid (1) killing, (2) stealing, (3) sexual immorality, (4) lying, and (5) taking intoxicants. The core of Buddhist morality is contained in the first four. These are supplemented by more rigorous precepts according to the status of the practitioner or to suit particular ceremonial occasions. The fifth precept, against taking intoxicants, for example, is thought to be particularly relevant for layfolk, while the Eight and Ten precepts, which supplement the basic five with additional restrictions such as on the time when meals may be taken, are commonly adopted as additional commitments on holy days (*uposatha*). The Monastic Disciplinary Code (*pātimokkha*) contained in the Monastic Rule (*vinaya*) is a set of over two hundred rules (the exact number varies slightly between schools) which set out in detail the regulations for communal monastic life.

In common with Indian moral tradition as a whole, Buddhism expresses its ethical requirements in the form of duties. The most general moral duties are those found in the Five Precepts, such as the duty to refrain from killing, stealing, and so forth (see text box on p. 98). These apply to everyone without exception. On becoming a Buddhist one formally 'takes' (or accepts) the precepts in a ritual context, and the form of words used acknowledges the free and voluntary nature of the duty assumed.

## Virtues

Although the precepts are of great importance in Buddhist morality, there is more to the moral life than following rules. Rules must not just be followed, but followed for the right reasons and with the correct motivation. It is here that the role of the virtues becomes important, and Buddhist morality as a whole may be likened to a coin with two faces: on one side are the precepts and on the other the virtues. The precepts, in fact, may be thought of simply as a list of things which a virtuous person will never do.

Early sources emphasize the importance of cultivating correct dispositions and habits so that moral conduct becomes the natural and spontaneous manifestation of internalized and properly integrated beliefs and values, rather than simple conformity to external rules.

Many formulations of the precepts make this clear. Of someone who follows the First Precept it is said in the texts, 'Laying aside the cudgel and the sword he dwells compassionate and kind to all living creatures' (D.i.4). Abstention from taking life is therefore ideally the result of a compassionate identification with living things, rather than a constraint which is imposed contrary to natural inclination. To observe the first precept perfectly requires a profound understanding of the relationship between living things (according to Buddhism, in the long cycle of reincarnation we have all been each others' fathers, mothers, sons, etc.) coupled with an unswerving disposition of universal benevolence and

compassion. Although few have perfected these capacities, in respecting the precepts they habituate themselves to the condition of one who has, and in so doing come a step closer to enlightenment.

The virtues, as Aristotle, points out, are about what is difficult. The task of the virtues is to counteract negative dispositions (or vices) such as pride and selfishness. The lengthy lists of virtues and vices which appear in later literature are extrapolated from a key cluster of three virtues, the three Buddhist 'Cardinal Virtues' of non-attachment (*arūgo*), benevolence (*adosa*), and understanding (*amoha*). These are the opposites of the three 'roots of evil' mentioned in earlier chapters, namely greed (*rūgo*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*). Non-attachment means the absence of that selfish desire which taints moral behaviour by allocating a privileged status to one's own needs. Benevolence means an attitude of goodwill to all living creatures, and understanding means knowledge of human nature and human good as set out in doctrines such as the Four Noble Truths.