

**A COMPARISON OF ARISTOTELIAN AND BUDDHIST ETHICS AND  
THE IMPLICATIONS FOR A “MORAL WAY” FOR YOUNG PEOPLE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The impetus for this piece of work was the question ‘What type of people ought we to become?’, which first arose with Aristotle and which became, in Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*, ‘Who are we now becoming?’. Through a comparative study of the key concepts of Aristotelian ethics, for example, *eudaimonia*, the centrality of reason, the Doctrine of the Mean, and the key concepts of Buddhist ethics, for example, karma and nirvana, the interdependence of morality, meditation and insight, the central role of mindfulness and compassion, I will present the guidelines for a "moral way" for young people.

An analysis of the differences between the two ethical systems draws out their different emphases on reason and compassion, and the separateness of self and other in Aristotelian moral agency in contrast to the inseparability of all sentient beings in Buddhism. But an examination of their similarities reveals how reason and emotion contribute to each, and how both are teleological in assuming that a person has a final end.

The interplay of Aristotelian habituation and Buddhist mindfulness is identified as a potentially transformative “moral way” for young people, and suggestions are made for how to facilitate the two practices as a pedagogical support. The main recommendation is that, subject to further research and successful pilot-studies, habituation and mindfulness practices be introduced in Primary Two and maintained into secondary education in Scottish schools.

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“For us there is only the trying, the rest is not our business.”  
(T. S. Eliot’s ‘East Coker.’)

### **Authorial Declaration**

It is hereby declared that Anne Muldoon is the sole author of this thesis.

It is further declared that it has not been submitted for any other degree.

## Introduction

The initial research proposal was to examine the notion of Aristotle's 'virtue ethics' and to find its place in formal education. The term virtue ethics has come into use in the final decades of the twentieth century with reference to any ethical system for which an agent's virtuous/vicious character is the criterion for assessing him/her as a morally good/bad person. My interest arose from reading Alasdair MacIntyre's landmark case for virtue ethics, *After Virtue*,<sup>1</sup> first published in 1981, which directed my attention to the way in which questions about moral character had recently come to occupy a central place in philosophical discussion. MacIntyre traced part of the explanation for this development to the publication in 1958 of G. E. M. Anscombe's seminal article "Modern Moral Philosophy."<sup>2</sup> MacIntyre had been influenced by the anthropological turn in this article, and his thoughts on it offered a philosophical challenge to his generation. In summoning ethicists to look at persons, he suggested as Aristotle had before him, that ethics address the question: 'What type of people ought we to become?' Instead of asking 'whether an action is right', he re-personalised ethics, and suggested that we start discussing not only what we are now doing, but more importantly, 'who are we now becoming?' The question MacIntyre raised in 1981 still challenges us to-day and continues to be important both socially and philosophically.

Firstly, the issue of what kind of people we are is relevant in to-day's globalised, highly technological world, particularly in western society, in which young people are surrounded by a culture which promotes an individualist approach to living, where hedonism is presented as the ultimate yardstick, and the advertising slogan "Because you're worth it" sums up the main motivating reason for any number of actions. In Scotland this cultural pressure is allied to a socio-economic climate which is one of the

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<sup>1</sup> MacIntyre, A. [1981] *After Virtue: a study in moral theory*.

<sup>2</sup> 'Philosophy,' vol. XXXIII, no. 124: 1-19.

worst in the United Kingdom. There is a continuing division of the population into 'haves' and 'have-nots' which translates into social deprivation and poor health, especially in larger urban areas, with unemployment and alcohol abuse more predominant at the lower end of the social scale, and substance abuse and a high incidence of personal debt at all social levels. The division within families reflected in the higher divorce rate in recent years in Scotland has been accompanied by both economic and political pressures on all adults of working age to be in some form of employment. There is nothing new in adults reporting a growing loss of respect for authority on the part of young people. Nor is the high rate of abuse of alcohol and drugs among Scottish young people surprising, when unemployment combines with peer pressure and, in urban areas, the need to belong leads them to identify with their own 'gang.' However, there is an increase across Britain in informal reports by young people of a lack of involvement with caring adults.

The following is drawn from the key findings of the most recent report on suicide in Scotland<sup>3</sup> and reveals a trend confirmed by other current research. Within the time-frame of the study (1989-2003) rates of male suicide increased by 22% and rates of female suicide increased by 6%. The highest rate among men occurred in the 25-34 year age group. The overall picture shows:

The excess of suicide deaths among males (approximately fourfold) was particularly marked in younger age groups (15-34).

While the pattern in England is similar to that in Scotland, the figures relating to younger males are significantly higher statistically in Scotland compared to England. The correlation between male suicides and class five, the lowest social group, was also statistically significant, linking suicide with social deprivation.

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<sup>3</sup> Platt, S., Boyle, P., Crombie, I., Feng, Z., Exeter, D. [2007] "Epidemiology of suicide in Scotland for period 1989-2003: an example of temporal trends and risk factors at national and local levels."

In the western world the sixties' "sexual revolution," followed the introduction of more reliable methods of birth-control, such as the contraceptive pill, and led to increasingly permissive attitudes to sexual behaviour. Trends in demographic and social changes in the UK since the Second World War continue to show decreasing figures for marriage whilst the figures for divorce increase. At present, concern is being voiced about various issues affecting young people. The sexual trafficking of young women in the UK is one. Increase in sexually transmitted diseases and ignorance among young people generally about the latter and their causes is another issue in the public domain. Likewise the premature sexualisation of pre-teen girls who are being targeted in magazines, TV, music, film, the Internet and all advertising media for the sake of the "teeny-weeny" pound. This consumerist pressure on prepubescent girls across North America and the UK is strengthened by the fact that they share a common language.

A website of the UK's Department for Education and Skills highlights differences between North America and Britain on the one hand, and mainland Europe on the other. In comparing teenage pregnancy rates over the previous thirty years it begins by stating that, in the 1970s figures in Britain were similar to the rest of Europe. It continues:

But while other countries got theirs down in the 1980s and 1990s, Britain's rate stayed high. The latest available figures show that Britain's teenage birth rate is five times that in Holland, three times higher than in France and double the rate in Germany. Other English-speaking countries such as Canada and New Zealand have teenage birth rates higher than ours. In the United States the rate is more than double that in the UK.

In 1999 the Government published a *Teenage Pregnancy Report* from its Social Exclusion Unit. It acknowledged there was no single cause, but pointed out three major factors: first, that many young people think they will end up on benefit anyway so they see no reason not to get pregnant. Second, that teenagers don't know enough about contraception and about what becoming a parent will involve. Third, that young people are bombarded with sexual images in the media but feel they can't talk about sex to their parents and teachers.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> [1999] *Teenage Pregnancy*, Stationary Office, London. Referred to on Social Exclusion Unit website.

It is recognised that the reasons for these differences derive from a complex of political and social changes that have occurred over the previous sixty years and research in these areas continues to grow and inform new and emerging policies.

Two other points are relevant to this sketch of the social malaise at work in present day Britain. Firstly, the reach of powerful vested interests is not confined only to the very young. There has been a recent “massification”<sup>5</sup> through the cult of celebrities across contemporary culture from sport and entertainment by all the print and broadcast media, which celebrates and promotes the glamour and sexual prowess of figures ‘famous for being famous,’ who have a world-wide selling power. The public is sold the aspiration of acquiring the consumerist life-style on offer in “OK!” and “Hello!” magazines. Only in the most unusual circumstances do the TV and print media feature an ‘everyman’ figure as hero; John Smeaton is one such rare example.<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, as elsewhere in Britain, in Scotland limits are not internalised but are imposed upon young people in the form of an “Anti-Social Behaviour Order.” Paradoxically, ‘Asbos’ have become a badge of honour among some young people. In the worst instances, young men and, increasingly, young women are caught up in a gang-culture which has delivered deadly consequences in recent years from guns and knives.<sup>7</sup>

From to-day’s social perspective, it is even more crucial than in 1981, when Macintyre first issued his challenge to western society, to address the question as to who we are now

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<sup>5</sup> Oxford ED definition of this term: “The action of promoting or enforcing uniformity in a society; the process of becoming a mass society, especially through development of the mass media.”

<sup>6</sup> John Smeaton, is a baggage handler who helped prevent the terrorists attempting to blow up the crowded passenger terminal in Glasgow Airport on June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2007. Subsequently, he became world headline news.

<sup>7</sup> Introducing measures to discourage violence, with children below the age of three years as target group, Strathclyde’s deputy Chief of Police reported that the week’s figures for assault using guns and knives were higher in the region than anywhere south of the border. (STV News, 18 March, 2007)

becoming, and advocated moral ‘practices’ for restoring what has been lost within ourselves and our communities.

Whilst these questions are crucial socially, they are equally important philosophically, both for our own sake as well as for the sake of future generations. It is a difficult task to motivate oneself, let alone another, to respond to the question: “Who am I now becoming?” Steadily decreasing church attendances over the past thirty years in Scotland mirror a parallel decline in the influence of the former moral framework. A return to an authoritarian mode of morality is not desirable but there is a moral vacuum presently that it would be foolhardy to ignore.

With the publication of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre gave a powerful critique of what he considered the steady deterioration in moral philosophy which followed the project of the ahistorical Enlightenment to discover rational foundations for an objective morality. With the publication of *The Gay Science* in 1882 Friedrich Nietzsche, prophetic voice of the philosophically nihilist generations to come, made short shrift of the Enlightenment project, and confronted the problem this act of destruction had created: if there is nothing to morality but expressions of will, my morality can only be what my will creates.<sup>8</sup> The twentieth century saw moral philosophy splitting off into existentialism, emotivism, relativism, and, following post-modern influences, attempts being made to jettison it altogether. Particularly in the cultural climate of the western world, which puts a constant emphasis on individual choice in everything, it is perhaps not too surprising to find that relativism prevails to-day in Britain as the main moral response among young people – “this is right for me; what’s right for you is up to you.” This presupposes that moral judgements are merely a matter of individual preference, taste, or no more than a lifestyle choice.

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<sup>8</sup> Kaufmann, W. (Trans.) [1974] *The Gay Science*, Section 335.

I will argue for the possibility of an objective moral framework that can hold across all cultures. In a pluralist society such as ours, young people are faced with conflicting and unstable moral standards. The increasingly frequent experience for young people, in an increasingly secular society such as our own, is an absence of authoritative moral guidelines; there is more evidence of relativism as has already been mentioned. So, if moral education is to have a coherent philosophical underpinning in such a society, it is important to discuss MacIntyre's question: What type of people ought we to become?

This thesis proceeds on several assumptions that are all arguable but not pursued here, for the sake of embarking and focussing on the topic: firstly, whilst social and environmental factors are indisputable in human growth and development, the origins of ethics are to be found in human nature; secondly, that living ethically does not depend necessarily on a code of ethics derived from professing a faith; and thirdly, in respect of the Buddhist content, the author will draw mainly on Mahayana Buddhism, a traditional form of Buddhism which has been highly influential in the development of Buddhist ideas.

The original proposal has developed towards a comparison of Aristotelian and Buddhist ethics, with particular application to moral education. The first major shift in focus arose when a study of MacIntyre's advocacy of a renewal of virtue ethics led me back to his source in Aristotle's ethics. Consequently, while an interest in MacIntyre's thesis is maintained in this project, the foundational text, on which the western ethical tradition in this comparison draws, is Aristotle's account of the moral life and the virtues in his *Nicomachean Ethics*.<sup>9</sup>

The second shift arose with the realisation that an examination of, and simple recommendation to adopt Aristotle's ethical system alone, would be more an imposition on any particular social group. A dialogue between Aristotle's ethical system and another

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<sup>9</sup> The work is a set of lecture notes either written for his student son, Nichomachus, or edited by him.

quite distinct moral system, and the comparison of their different metaphysical foundations, is more likely to provide an effective analysis for any useful discussion and the proposal of a moral way. Drawing on the tradition from the world religions with which I am most familiar – the Abrahamic religions – might mean the analysis would not have far to go, as all three religions are similar to Aristotle, insofar as they are grounded on a dualist metaphysics; this is the view that both material and immaterial (mental and spiritual) realities exist. The intellectual traditions of the theistic religions all hold that only substantial dualism does justice to the distinction between God and creature.

However, unlike Aristotle, the Abrahamic religions base their ethics on Divine Law.<sup>10</sup> All three monotheistic religions share the belief that the foundation of the moral code is based on God's law, as revealed or given in their respective scriptures, whilst Aristotle's ethics, is rooted in human nature. Ethics in the tradition of Catholic Christianity is an interesting exception to that of the Abrahamic religions in general. One of the major contributions of Thomas Aquinas was to draw on Aristotle (among others) and to re- create Aristotle's ethics in the light of Christian belief. This led to the development of Natural Law ethics, that is, an ethics grounded on human nature; the Law revealed in Scripture is secondary.

A more useful contrast with Aristotle emerges, when his ethics are compared with those of an Eastern world religion such as Buddhism, which is founded on a monist (from Greek *monos*, "single") metaphysics. This allows that only one being exists; all sentient beings ultimately comprise a non-theistic, interrelated network which the Buddhist monk Tich Nat Hahn describes as "Inter-being." Therefore, for the purposes of dialogue, Buddhist ethics has been selected in comparison to Aristotelian ethics in this enquiry for two reasons: it offers a unique metaphysical foundation, one quite distinct from that

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<sup>10</sup> The Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Old Testament refer to the Divine Law as the Decalogue or the Ten Commandments.

presented by Aristotle, but shares his pre-supposition, that ethics has its roots in human nature.

The aim in this thesis is twofold: firstly, to compare Aristotelian and Buddhist ethics; secondly, to examine the connections, if any, between the two, with a view to any possible interplay which may provide a “moral way” for young people, in particular those of school age. The remainder of this introduction is a short account of each of its five chapters.

Chapter One provides an examination of Aristotelian ethics.

Aristotle opens the first book of his *Metaphysics*, which will provide the foundational basis of his ethics and politics, with the sentence: ‘All men by nature desire to know.’<sup>11</sup> In his *Nicomachean Ethics* and his *Politics* he understands likewise that there is the same innate desire in human nature for the goods of justice, friendship and community as there is for the goods of knowledge. It is to the inbuilt human inclination for association with others that Aristotle attributes his description of man as a ‘social animal.’ In a similar vein, the *arête*, excellences or virtues, the presence or absence of which decide whether or not the individual and the *polis* or community enjoy the moral and intellectual goods, arise from human nature. David Carr argues that:

The question about whether ethical reflection should start from the facts of human nature is not simply a conceptual question, but a normative one: it is not a question of theory to be addressed by appeal to logical consistency or supporting empirical evidence, but one about how we ought – practically or morally – to conduct our affairs.<sup>12</sup>

Aristotle is far from imagining that human nature provides us with readymade dispositions for morally appropriate behaviour from the outset; he stresses the need for

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<sup>11</sup> Barnes, J. (ed.) [1984], *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, Princeton UP. *Metaph.*, A, 980 a, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Carr, D. [2005] ‘Psychology and Ethics in the Theory of Moral Education and Development and the Idea of a ‘Psychologised Morality.’ Paper presented at AME conference, 6<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2005, Boston, USA.

training and habituation from earliest childhood, if dispositions are to be developed, which will, in time, become spontaneous. He points out the overriding importance of such work:

It makes no small difference then, whether we form habits of one kind or another from our very youth; it makes a great difference *or rather all the difference...*<sup>13</sup>

Chapter Two is an exploration of Buddhist ethics.

The Buddha has a different conception of human nature from Aristotle but, like him, he believes that it is from our human nature that our virtues and our vices arise. Similarly to Aristotle, he places great importance on training and education, but this time unlike Aristotle, he links morality interdependently with meditation and insight: all three, morality, meditation, and insight, are required for progress on the spiritual path to enlightenment. The main emphases are on the Buddha himself as exemplar of *sila* or morality, on the centrality of *karuna* or compassion and *samadhi* or meditative culture in qualifying one as virtuous, and on the importance of leading a good life, if one is to achieve *prajna* or the insight essential for ‘awakening.’

The key-notions of *dukkha* or suffering, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the concepts of ‘emptiness,’ and ‘No-Self’ will be presented and discussed. While there are different slants in the many forms of Buddhism on the latter concepts of emptiness and No-Self, they are understood here within a metaphysical framework of dependent origination and monist intrasubjectivity (identification of subject and object) as understood in Mahayana Buddhism.

Chapter Three examines the dissimilarities between Aristotelian and Buddhist ethics.

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<sup>13</sup> NE, II, 3, 1103 b25 (my italics)

Among the many forms of Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism has been selected here as the model, since it arguably has a metaphysics, which, though complex, provides a most highly developed foundations for its ethics. As already mentioned, generally the Buddhist ideal is predicated on living many lives on the model of the Buddha; in the case of Mahayana Buddhism, it is modelled on that of the *Bohdisattva*.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, the Aristotelian ideal is based on the development of individual potential over the course of one life, where the main emphasis is on *phronesis* or practical reason, for it is that which controls our response to desire and feelings.<sup>15</sup> Only the virtuous person has this practical intelligence/wisdom necessary for exercising responsible moral choice.

In contrast, Mahayana Buddhism emphasises moral intuitionism and appeals to loving-kindness and compassion. Reason is present but assumed to be only a part of one's morality. Virtue, for the Buddhist, is more the effect of letting go of egoism through an interdependent practice of mindfulness, meditation, and morality; this reflects a metaphysical world-view which presumes the collapse of subject and object into one/self as sole determiner of thought and experience. To shape one's world, one has to think of oneself as being one with the universe through one's breathing, though thinking of oneself as a karmic force in this way is not as easy as it sounds. On the other hand, Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia* for man has an essentially societal dimension: excellence is not fixed and determined for all time, but is inextricably linked to the nature of one's society, and this in turn sets limits to the ability of individuals to 'create' their own conception of the good.

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<sup>14</sup> *Bohdisattva*: in Mahayana Buddhism, a being destined for enlightenment, who vows to refrain from entering nirvana until every being is saved.

<sup>15</sup> *Phronesis* is translated variously as practical reason/wisdom/intelligence. I will use the terms interchangeably.

Chapter Four concentrates on the similarities between the two sets of ethics.

Aristotelian and Buddhist ethics are alike formally: each advocates moderation, Aristotle by his Doctrine of the Mean, the Buddha by his Middle Way.

Both Aristotelian and Buddhist ethics are teleological. Those of Aristotle are more frankly so, in that, for him, the good life just *is* the life lived in accordance with *arête* or virtue, where virtue is to be understood against the background of a teleological conception of man – a conception according to which human beings have a specific nature which determines their proper aims and goals, that is, their end. On his account, the virtues are excellences of character which enable people to move towards their *telos* or goal, and are an essential part of the attainment of that goal.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, a person, who strives for the *eudaimon* life, participates here and now in the happiness or sense of fulfilment which a “life of activity in accordance with the virtues” affords. The *telos* or end for the Buddha calls for a more radical transformation of human nature through rigorous mental and moral training, and the exercise of compassion, if one is to escape from *dukkha* or suffering brought about by karmic rebirth in the cycle of existence. Letting go of all egoism will gain final release in post-death nirvana – a state of supra-mundane harmony/bliss. To denote the latter state of ‘Absolute Truth,’ I will use the Sanskrit term nirvana, not the Pali term *Nibbanah*. Though Buddhist terms in the literature are generally Pali, ‘nirvana’ has entered the English language and is, therefore, familiar.

For the Buddha, human perfectibility implies that the individual’s progress in meditation and morality on the Noble Eightfold Path enables participation in this liberated state to be experienced in the course of following the path to its final, nirvanic end.

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<sup>16</sup> For MacIntyre, such a conception from ancient Greek philosophy highlights the poverty of modern moral philosophy, which makes the autonomous decision of the individual the sole arbiter, thereby eschewing any final goal.

Chapter Five postulates “a moral way,” drawn in the main from the interplay of Aristotelian reason and Buddhist compassion as reflected in a comparison of their ethics. This constitutes a response to MacIntyre’s question as to what type of people we ought to become.

From the point of view of this thesis, parents are acknowledged as the primary moral educators of their children, teaching them to “be good, know the good, and do the good,” (what Aristotle considered a necessary trinity regarding virtue). However, this chapter is also intended for those involved in formal education; school teachers in particular in western society are considered responsible for encouraging children’s continuing moral development. Owing to their professional commitment to furthering their charges’ learning, they are confronted daily with the responsibility, albeit often unacknowledged or implicit, for developing and nurturing the moral education of young people in many different Scottish schools. To this end, whilst both Aristotle and the Buddha each insisted in his own way that ethics was not to be considered an exact science, supporting philosophical sources will be found in Aristotelian and Buddhist ethics which are able to provide guidelines for “a moral way” for young people in all schools. It is hoped that this form will allow a pluralist audience greater freedom in employing them, as a basis for both discussion and decision-making.

## Chapter One

### Aristotelian Virtue Ethics

Aristotle opens the first book of his *Metaphysics*, which will provide the foundational basis of his ethics and politics, with the sentence: ‘All men by nature desire to know.’<sup>17</sup> In his *Nicomachean Ethics* and his *Politics* he understands likewise that there is the same innate desire in human nature for the goods of justice, friendship, and community, as there is for the goods of knowledge. It is to the inbuilt human inclination for association with others that Aristotle attributes his description of man as a ‘social animal:’ given this claim, the strength and up-building of the polis or community must then rest on mutual cooperation. In a similar vein, the *arête*, excellences or virtues, the presence or absence of which decide whether or not the individual and the polis or community enjoy the moral and intellectual goods, arise from human nature. It should be noted, prior to the discussion (in the following section) of the goods of *eudaimonia* or leading a flourishing life, that, according to Aristotle, the conditions of possibility of the *arête* cannot depend solely on dispositions to act virtuously, but also on underlying factors, such as a certain measure of material prosperity, good health, and endowment. Though he himself never refers to these as ‘luck,’ he acknowledges the part chance plays, for example, regarding endowment:

Nature’s part evidently does not depend on us, but as a result of divine causes is present in those who are truly fortunate.<sup>18</sup>

With regard to the *arête* or virtues themselves, David Carr argues that:

The question about whether ethical reflection should start from the facts of human nature is not simply a conceptual question, but a normative one: it is not a question of theory to be addressed by appeal to logical consistency or supporting empirical evidence, but one about how we ought –practically or morally –to conduct our affairs.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Barnes, J. (ed.) [1984], *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, Metaph, A, 980 a, 1. Princeton UP.

<sup>18</sup> NE 1179b21

<sup>19</sup> Carr, D. [2005] “Psychology and Ethics in the Theory of Moral Education and Development and the Idea of a ‘Psychologised Morality’” Paper presented at AME conference, 6<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2005, Boston, USA.

Aristotle is far from imagining that human nature provides us with readymade dispositions for morally appropriate behaviour from the outset; he stresses the need for training and habituation from earliest childhood, if dispositions are to be developed, which will, in time, become spontaneous. He points out the overriding importance of such work:

But the virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, for example, men become builders by building and lyre players by playing the lyre: so do we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts. This is confirmed by what happens in the State; for legislators make the citizens good by forming habits in them....It makes no small difference....whether we form habits of one kind or another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather *all* the difference.<sup>20</sup>

The point and purpose of engaging in ethics, according to Aristotle, is to become good:

For we are enquiring not in order to know what virtue is but in order to become good since otherwise our enquiry would be of no use.

He first examines the way the most common ethical word 'good' is used and notices that every act aims at some good:

Every art and every enquiry and similarly every action and every pursuit is thought to aim at some good and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim.<sup>21</sup>

Aristotle distinguishes early on between things which are good as means, that is, for the sake of something else, and things that are good as ends, that is, for their own sake only. Regarding human activity, he asks whether there is one final end for human beings. His argument leads to the following affirmative conclusion:

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<sup>20</sup> NE 1103 b25

<sup>21</sup> NE 1103b27

If there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go to infinity so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the chief good. Will not the knowledge of it, then, have a great influence on life? Shall we not, like archers, who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what is right?<sup>22</sup>

Alban McCoy points out that this line has been criticized by modern philosophers:

[On] the grounds that, since all chains must stop somewhere..... it does not follow that there is the final end [or good] where all chains must stop.<sup>23</sup>

While this is logically plausible, McCoy takes an apparently unjustified step in his next statement:

It can also be said that if human beings are unified wholes, it is reasonable to expect to find that, just as each action has an end, so our life as a whole has an end and purpose.<sup>24</sup>

His claim is apparently unjustified because his primary assumption – our life as a whole has an end and purpose – is nowhere substantiated. However, perhaps this is too harsh; it is, after all, only a weak conditional claim (“if human beings are unified wholes”) that gestures towards, rather than concludes, that life is a unified whole. Aristotle calls his final end, where the means to end must stop, and for the sake of which everything is (ultimately) done, *eudaimonia* in Greek. This is most often translated into English by happiness, but does not equate with a sense of happiness as a state of euphoria. Various translations in English show the range of meanings of the Greek *eudaimonia*: a state of flourishing, fulfilment, well-being or contentment.

Aristotle’s first argument for happiness as the final end of human beings is known as the *ergon* argument, that is, the argument from function. Human flourishing requires the

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<sup>22</sup> NE 1994a18-24

<sup>23</sup> McCoy, A. [2004] *The Fundamentals of Christian Ethics*, p. 108

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

activity of that part of human beings which is peculiar to them, and whose right function yields a particular outcome, the good life. Thus, the *ergon* of man is to lead an eudaemonist life, a life in which Aristotle emphasises the activity of the soul or mind, as he puts forward in the following:

For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor or any artist and in general for all things that have a function of activity (*praxis*), the good and the 'well' is thought to reside in the function, so it would seem to be for man, if he has a function. ....What then can this be? Life seems to be common even to the plants, but we are seeking what is peculiar to man. Let us exclude therefore the life of nutrition and growth. Next there would be a life of perception but it also seems to be common even to the horse, the ox and every animal. There remains then an active life of the element that has a rational principle....human good turns out to be the activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there is more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete. But we must add 'in a complete life.'<sup>25</sup>

John Finnis argues that Aristotle's function argument, which is modelled on the machine, is 'not the deep structure of his ethical method; it is an erratic boulder.' This striking, but peculiar, phrase reflects Finnis' belief that the function argument sends us off course; he points rather to a series of appeals by Aristotle in *Nichomachean Ethics* to what everyone or no one would say, and to what everyone or no one would choose. This is not an argument that falls prey to the fallacy of an appeal to the majority or to what the majority thinks: Aristotle is plain in his rejection of opinions based on numbers.<sup>26</sup> Finnis notes: "The primary... function of these appeals to what we or others (or 'everyone') would say or choose is to prompt or remind us....firstly, of our own and others' pre-philosophical experience, and secondly, of our own and others' practical and pre-philosophical grasp of good(s)." [Finnis, *The Fundamentals of Ethics*, 1983, p. 17]

So Aristotle says that

No one would choose to live with the intellect of a child throughout his life, however much he were to be pleased at the things that children are pleased at....<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> NE 1097-8

<sup>26</sup> NE 1, 4:1095a22

<sup>27</sup> NE 117a1-3 (X, 3)

No one chooses to possess the whole world if he has first to become someone else.....; he wishes for this only on condition of being whatever he is.<sup>28</sup>

McCoy supports Finnis in viewing Aristotle as making us conscious of what we all know pre-philosophically, after reflecting on our common experience, about what is good and, therefore, what is wanted naturally by human beings.

With regard to the goal ‘of a complete life,’ in Book X, chapter 7, of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle concludes that *eudaimonia* is most perfectly attained in a life of activity in accordance with its highest virtue, that is, the exercise of reason in contemplation (*theoria*).<sup>29</sup> Aristotle argues that the highest good consists in contemplation or intellectual speculation, but it is only possible to agree with his conclusion, if we accept that *eudaimonia* consists of a dominant good and that, in practice, the intellectual virtue of contemplation is attainable by a minority of educated individuals. Aristotle’s conception of speculative reflection as the summit of happiness accords with his belief that the ultimate goal is to understand the world. Moreover, it fits his view of contemplation as exclusive to human beings. Indeed, to show the distinctiveness of the cognitive in human nature, he describes it as a good we share with the gods –what the gods and human beings have in common is the power to make the potential actual. Aristotle maintains that we all have dispositions to act in accordance with virtue and that it is the exercise of virtue, both moral and intellectual, which leads to *theoria* or intellectual contemplation.

It must be said that a life devoted to the greatest possible extent to speculative thought is capable of being exercised and attained by only an elite few. As satisfying as such a life might be to-day to particle physicists, or philosophers, or mathematicians, to grant his claim that the exercise of rational and rigorous thought is the chief good –the crowning

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<sup>28</sup> NE 116a19-22 (IX, 4)

<sup>29</sup> NE 1177

achievement of a flourishing life – is to acknowledge a decided tendency to intellectualism in Aristotle.

The notion of *eudaimonia* as inclusive is more convincing, with its conclusion that it is a complex of goods, ranging from many varieties of human flourishing –artistic, athletic, intellectual – to family and friendship, justice, the interconnectedness of the moral and intellectual virtues, than that of *eudaimonia* as the dominant good outlined above. Under an inclusive conception the position of reason remains central. Whilst reason may always be an end in itself, reason can also be considered as part of the good for human beings, but on a level of means rather than final end. McCoy emphasises the instrumental nature of Aristotelian reason underlined elsewhere in the *Ethics*:

Happiness and fulfilment will always involve the life of reason: that is, controlling and directing one's desires and emotions, thinking about what to do, trying to understand one's activities, making moral judgements, foreseeing the consequences of one's actions, differentiating between various subordinate ends, while keeping one's eye on the ultimate end. [McCoy, 2004, p. 111]

Aristotle points to just such an interpretation in Book X, chapter 8, where he begins by talking about 'a life lived in accordance with the other *arête*.' Here the 'other' excellence is the intellectual virtue of *phronesis*, the highest skill or virtue of the mind when applied to all one's actions, including thinking. It is the virtue of practical reason or intelligence, which knows how to apply general principles in particular situations. It is not *sophia* or the ability to formulate principles intellectually, nor is it the ability to make a logical deduction as to what ought to be done. It is the ability to act so that principle will take concrete form. *Phronesis* is not only itself a virtue, it is the keystone of all virtue and cannot be exercised in the absence of the other virtues. Aristotle points out that to conduct one's practical living well is just what one might hope a 'composite being' would

do.<sup>30</sup> Of course, one need not be famous to qualify as an exemplar of the Aristotelian ‘good man;’ participating with a fair degree of thought in one’s society is sufficient. However, to illustrate Aristotle’s eudaemonist ideal, it is helpful to use a famous public figure, such as Nelson Mandela. It must be noted that, whilst Mandela – originally a politically engaged lawyer – exhibited *phronesis*, talent and integrity, he also enjoyed a degree of ‘moral luck,’ a term popularized by Bernard Williams. Moral luck is not a term employed by Aristotle, but, as already mentioned, he does emphasise that a life of virtue requires the goods of material security, health and endowment. Mandela was freed and emerged into public life without there having been time or occasion for him to acquire the baggage that usually adheres to a practising politician. Moreover, his subsequent leadership came at a moment in the troubled history of South Africa when reconciliation, which seemed to suit his character, was called for.

Central to Aristotle’s conception of human well-being is a secular moral framework. His claim is ‘by doing certain things one becomes a certain kind of person.’<sup>31</sup> Its goal is the development of *arête*, human virtues or excellences, as shapers of human character and, therefore, of human action and behaviour. More generally, the Greek term *arête*, used of an object, refers to that characteristic of it which makes it a good example of its kind; a knife is a good, even excellent, knife, if it cuts well. When used of virtue, *arête* refers to excellence in general, mainly concerning the purpose of actions. The term *aretaic* is used of all virtue ethics which have excellence as their aim, for example, Kantian virtue ethics are *aretaic* in respect of duty. Other forms of virtue ethics, for example, those which draw on a consequentialist model such as that of Thomas Hurka, founded on results of an

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<sup>30</sup> NE 1178a20

<sup>31</sup> NE III, 5.

action, are *non-aretaic*. All references to virtue ethics in this piece of work are understood as Aristotelian *aretaic* virtue ethics, founded on the excellences of character. Moreover, Aristotle's ethics is teleological; he sees the good as consisting in some natural purpose for human beings, that is, the exercise of virtue. The virtues are exactly those things apt to promote the well-being and flourishing of human beings qua human beings. Aristotle is most insistent about human nature, that the good life is one lived in harmonious and co-operative relations with our fellow human beings. Moreover, as well as being social animals, he considers us also rational animals:

So our fulfilment will partly consist in the exercise of our rational faculties, both for practical and instrumental purposes, and for its own sake. Thus, for Aristotle, there are the moral virtues, which fit us for successful social relations within a civilized society; and the intellectual virtues, which enable a successful engagement in rational enterprises. [McCoy, 2004, p. 112]

Aristotle highlights the interconnectedness of all the virtues in his emphasis on the intellectual virtue of *phronesis* which, he says, controls and directs desire and feelings:

one cannot be morally good without practical wisdom, nor have practical wisdom without possessing the moral virtues.<sup>32</sup>

*Phronesis* and *sophia* or intellectual wisdom are interrelated. *Phronesis* needs *sophia*, but *sophia* does not imply *phronesis*. *Phronesis* leads to moral goodness but only when accompanied by the moral virtues. *Phronesis* and the moral virtues will entail moral goodness; if moral goodness is not present, this is due to the absence of one or the other, or both.

McCoy contrasts Plato and Aristotle in respect of virtue. Of Plato he says:

Virtue is largely self-control and subjugation to the point of near extinction of the emotions as disturbances of the soul. [McCoy, 2004, p.12]

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<sup>32</sup> NE VI, 13, 1144b31-32

Aristotle agrees that virtue is shown in rational control of the passions and appetites but, unlike Plato, he does not regard the passions, emotions, and appetites as intrinsically bad, or inconsistent with the moral life. In Aristotle's view, if someone were to lack certain passions and emotional responses, we would consider such a person a deficient human being.<sup>33</sup>

In Chapter 6 of Book II Aristotle develops his account of the way the emotions are involved in moral virtue. The habitual disposition to respond emotionally will be a virtue only if the pattern of emotional responses is *appropriate*. To clarify what this entails, Aristotle introduces the doctrine of the mean, suggesting that the virtuous person is the moderate person, inclining to nothing in excess. This notion is not meant to suggest that the virtuous life is mediocre and uninspiring. What it helps to avoid are the extremes of hedonism and asceticism.

The most important characteristic of the moral virtues for Aristotle is that they involve a particular pattern of emotional response to situations, for example, to criticise someone for being spiteful is to say something about a regular pattern of feeling and response which that person exhibits rather than a single responsive action on any particular occasion. The person who is virtuous has had to practise both reflection as well as the application of her practical wisdom, and at the same time take rapid account of every new situation as it arises, if she is to develop disciplined control of her emotional responses. For Aristotle it is the cognitive aspect of our nature which humanizes us; nowhere is this clearer than in his definition of moral virtue:

So, a [moral] virtue is a habitual disposition connected with choice, lying in a mean relative to us, a mean which is determined by reason, by which the person of practical wisdom would determine it.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Damasio's contemporary work supports this thesis. For example, the psychopath who is devoid of certain feelings vis-à-vis others is considered abnormal on a continuum extending to the point of madness.

<sup>34</sup> NE 106b36-1107a2

When he speaks of moral virtues as ‘lying in a mean,’ Aristotle is not saying that the virtuous person is one who is by character disposed to have only moderate emotional responses but one whose pattern of emotional response is consistently appropriate to the situation. Accordingly, in varying situations it may be somewhere on a continuum, either very low key, moderate, or intense. It is natural to feel fear in some circumstances, but we would count it a virtue where such fear is contained so as to avoid the kind of panic which might endanger the lives of others. On the other hand, if someone were to act rashly in dangerous situations, this would count for Aristotle not as courage but as foolhardiness. In his account the passions, emotions and appetites are intrinsic to the life of virtue, not inimical to it. The virtues are as much undermined by the lack of positive feelings as by the excess of negative ones. His naturalist moral virtues are in contrast to those of Kant who conceives of virtue as necessarily devoid of feeling in its adherence to a categorical law. Aristotle’s virtues are concerned with the promotion of human well-being, determined by rational judgement and choice about appropriate courses of action and conduct.

‘Lying in a mean’ is not a criterion for discovering what the appropriate response is; it is neither quantitative nor theoretical, more in the nature of a feedback-loop. Why does Aristotle use the term ‘mean?’ He explains that we often speak of emotional responses as instances of either over or under-reacting. Very often (though, he points out, not in every case) we will have two sets of words to denote the vices characterised by habitual over or under-reacting. For example, we have cowardice and rashness to contrast with bravery,<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> NE 1107b1-4

profligacy and meanness to contrast with generosity, and so on.<sup>36</sup> Gerard J. Hughes notes that for Aristotle:

There are some emotional responses which are by definition inappropriate: one cannot have just the right degree of spitefulness or envy. In these cases, there simply is no 'mean', just as there are some types of action which are by definition always wrong, such as adultery, theft or murder. [Hughes, *Aristotle on Ethics*, 2001, p. 62]

To speak then, in most cases, of virtues lying in the mean is to say what Aristotle earlier says about desires: the person with the virtue of moderation does not desire when he should not, or more than he should, nor in a way that he should not. But 'should' and 'should not' can be defined only relatively to individuals in each set of circumstances.

The question has been raised as to what 'test' of virtue Aristotle provides? It lies within the last phrase of his definition: 'reason, by which the person of practical wisdom would determine it.' Appropriate responses are the ones which are in accord with the judgement of a particular type of person – the person of practical wisdom. Moreover, virtues are to be defined in terms of a judgement. His claim implies that for an emotional response to be virtuous it must be in accord with what reason judges to be the true demands of the situation, since reason aims at truth. Feelings, then, are not simply to be accepted as given. They are subject to rational assessment and ideally to rational control. The standard by which virtuous and vicious dispositions are distinguished from one another is a rational standard. The important point in every case is to discern and, if possible, name the patterns of emotional over- and under- reaction.

Does Aristotle assume that the person of practical intelligence or wisdom would simply endorse conventional Athenian morality, so that such a person could be recognized simply by seeing who was generally regarded as living a good life? Not necessarily:

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<sup>36</sup> NE 1107b8-14

What such a person would endorse is Aristotle's claim that the account of virtue as 'lying in a mean' fits well with the individual virtues and vices with which his audience is familiar. [Hughes, 2001, pp. 66-67]

One does not have to be an ancient Greek to admire virtuous behaviour in the Aristotelian sense of the term, so people from many different cultures can respect, and aspire to become, someone who is friendly, courageous, honest, generous, temperate, possessing an ethics of virtue in Aristotle's sense.

However, given the premium Aristotle places on the rational in human nature, it is not surprising that it is the cognitive aspect in his account of each of the virtues just listed which is uppermost. So, in his view, friends are chosen because they exhibit an admirable character, and one inspires reciprocal admiration in others on account of one's virtuous character. The notions of Christian self-sacrificing love or of Buddhist compassion are in sharp contrast to the more cognitive emphasis exemplified in the Aristotelian 'good man;' the difference between Aristotle's semantic emphasis and the Buddhist somato-sensory emphasis will be discussed later.

Moreover a certain *caveat* is in order regarding certain instances of Aristotle's 'good man.' His Magnificent Man, described in Book IV, 2, and his Magnanimous or 'Great-souled' Man, described in IV, 3, evince features that would not be found wholly admirable to-day. When we consider great philanthropists of modern times, for example, Andrew Carnegie or Bill Gates, they differ markedly in emphasis from counterparts of Aristotle, which he could count on his fellow-Athenians to recognise,. The Magnificent Man spends large sums of money on the kinds of public benefactions which require such expenditure: a warship for the navy; sponsoring dramatic performances at festivals, and the like. But though Aristotle is careful to point out that the Magnificent Man is not ostentatious or vulgar, he still comes across as perhaps too much concerned with his own

credit and honour to strike us as entirely admirable. We might feel this even more so, as Hughes points out, in the case of the Magnanimous Man:

[He] justifiably sees himself as a Great Man, and is justifiably concerned with being honoured as such, and appropriately pleased when such honours are bestowed on him. He is above the petty concerns of more ordinary mortals, towards whom he is effortlessly superior; he speaks with a slow, calm and deep voice. [2001, p. 212]

He further describes the preceding sense of strangeness in the middle of much that is familiar as reinforced, when he reminds us from Aristotle's *Politics*:<sup>37</sup>

[He] thought that women were incapable of public responsibility, and that some humans were natural slaves, or that menial work was somehow dehumanizing [2001, p. 213]

How could Aristotle have got his facts so wrong? What would he have made of women doing volunteer work with recovering drug addicts, or a woman like Mother Teresa, let alone all those women financiers or barristers? Hughes makes the point that it is not simple prejudice on Aristotle's part; he suggests that, as with children, whose upbringing is inadequate, Aristotle fails to make sufficient allowance for environmental and social influences, and is too ready to assume that differences are differences in natural abilities. [2001, p. 213]

It has taken the slow maturing of the human race and growth of knowledge for our ideas about the abilities of women and children to change, just as it has our attitude to slavery. Nevertheless, some of the prejudices and beliefs of patriarchal cultures are still very alive in the contemporary world. In the developed countries, where the drive for change has been a mark of liberal democracies, great strides have been made with the founding of bodies such as the United Nations, to promote and try to safeguard human freedom and rights on a universal scale. But, despite our having greater factual knowledge than Aristotle about women, slaves, and children, as well as a gradual awareness of the need

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<sup>37</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* 1, chs 1-6, and 13.

for social justice, some of the ‘blind spots’ of his times still apply to-day. To take one example, the prevalence of abuse of economic power, this is still greater with regard to women and children than with men: in the developed world this shows in patterns of employment;<sup>38</sup> in some parts of Africa and the Indian sub-continent it is women and children, in the main, who work for a pittance in conditions akin to slave-labour, while it is women in South America who constitute the underpaid labour force of the multi-national fashion industry. Moreover, consumers in the West, while perhaps not condoning these abuses, do not favour moves to pay higher, but fairer, prices.

I have focussed on the importance of the doctrine of the mean for Aristotle as far as hitting the appropriate mark consistently is concerned. He will go on to consider how the person of practical wisdom arrives at correct moral judgements by applying the doctrine. But Hughes reminds us that Aristotle’s rationality is not any kind of moral mathematics:

Central to moral philosophy as he sees it is the ordinary, everyday experience of trying to live a good life. Aristotle is at pains to remind us that ethics is an inexact science.<sup>39</sup> He offers to give us some help; but not to give us rules or a formula which will produce solutions for practical decisions automatically.<sup>40</sup>

Aristotle placed the greatest importance on our nature as rational beings. This determines our well-being and the virtues that contribute to it. Hughes underlines that what differentiates Aristotle from other diverse conceptions of virtue ethics in our own day is his view of rationality as central to his account of human nature; he gives it the uppermost place in his ethics of virtue. It marks his virtue ethics off from that arising from feminist psychoanalytic theory in the shape of ‘care ethics.’ One example of the latter that can be no more than acknowledged here, interesting though it is, is the work of Nel Noddings,

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<sup>38</sup> Cf., ‘The Guardian’ citing most recent figures from a report dated 28/1/02: 1.3 million adults and 140,000 18-21 year olds across the UK earn the minimum wage; 70% are women.

<sup>39</sup> NE 1103b26-1104a11

<sup>40</sup> Hughes, op. cit. p. 67

who is interested in playing down the role of reason and principles in ethics.<sup>41</sup> The pivotal role of rationality for Aristotle differentiates his virtue ethics also from that of character educators who wish to renew the emphasis on the importance of moral behaviour (I shall return to the latter in Chapter Five).<sup>42</sup>

It is rationality which is central to Aristotle's account of human nature, and hence of his ethics. One's agency and reason shape one's world, a world which, for Aristotle, is founded on his dualist conception of 'Self' and 'Other.' He views human beings as individual, separate, substantial entities. (The metaphysical differences between Aristotle and the Buddha regarding self and other will be discussed in Chapter Three). The virtues consist of the moral virtues, which equip us for successful social relations within a civilized society, and of the intellectual virtues, which enable our successful engagement in rational enterprises. Aristotle compares the virtues to skills acquired through practice and habituation. They are dispositions, arising from settled states of character, acquired largely by a process of practical and reflective training; the aim is to acquire a morally ordered, yet dynamic and changing engagement with the world.

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<sup>41</sup> Noddings, N. [1984] *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education*, University of California Press.

<sup>42</sup> Hughes, op. cit, 221

## Chapter Two

### Buddhist Ethics

Almost two centuries before Aristotle the Buddha held that morality had its source in human nature.<sup>43</sup> Aristotle's dualist view of human nature and his belief in the superiority of mind over body led him to see morality as dependent largely on reason. The Buddha, on the other hand, saw morality as linked interdependently to meditation and insight or wisdom. One cannot be good without also being mindful and insightful. Similarly, according to the Buddha, in order to meditate, one must learn to be good and to seek wisdom. Wisdom for the Buddhist always includes knowledge of the inner mind (as distinct from scientific knowledge) and, in striving for it, one has to both observe the ethical precepts and learn to meditate. Development in any one of the three, morality, meditation, or insight/wisdom, goes hand in hand with development in each of the other two.

The Buddha's main emphases in his ethics are on himself as the exemplar of *karuna* or compassion and on his teaching of the Noble Eightfold Path; the list of five precepts followed later. As already mentioned, for progress to be made on the Path, all three components – *sila* or morality, *samadhi* or meditative culture, and *prajna* or insight – must be combined in practice. The key-notions of Buddhism are 'the three marks of existence': *annica* or impermanence, *dukkha* or suffering, *anatta* or no-self; together with nirvana they make up the 'four seals of existence.' These doctrines are central to its ethics and will be discussed later. Here I will begin with an examination of the Buddha's claims concerning rebirth, karma, and nirvana. Despite the Buddha's

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<sup>43</sup> Approximate dates: Buddha, 563-483 BCE; Aristotle, 384-322 BCE.

constant setting aside of metaphysical questions,<sup>44</sup> these three claims are still central to understanding his doctrines.

Reincarnation and rebirth are the starting point of Paul Edwards' *Reincarnation: A Critical Examination*.<sup>45</sup> Reincarnation is the belief that human beings do not, as frequently supposed in the West, live only once, but on the contrary live many, perhaps an infinite number of lives, acquiring a new body for each incarnation. This belief comes in many forms. Many believers in reincarnation hold that human beings always transmigrate into human bodies; all their previous incarnations were in human bodies and the same is true of all their future lives. Good examples include Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophical followers in the West, and Hindu believers in the East. However, it has also been widely held by others – Jainists, and Native Americans – that the body into which a person transmigrates is not necessarily another human body, it can be that of an animal, a plant or even an inanimate object.

The Buddha, like any Indian teacher contemporary with him, taught a concept of rebirth that was consistent with the common notion of a series of related lives over a very long period; he himself referred to his past lives. However, his notion was distinct from others; since he held the doctrine that there is no permanent and unchanging self, there can be no transmigration in the usual sense. Buddhism teaches that what is reborn is not the person but that one moment gives rise to another; it is that momentum which continues, even after death. However, the commonly assumed view of reincarnation presupposes belief in an eternal soul; it follows that, without an eternal soul there can be no reincarnation. Daniel Vokey contrasts the latter notion of reincarnation, as expressed by Edwards, with the Mahayana-Vajrayana tradition, in

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<sup>44</sup> Gowans, C. [2003] p. 30-31; Schmidt-Leukel, P. [2006] p. 40; Mikulas, W. L. 'Buddhism and Western psychology' *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 14, No. 4, 2007, p. 6.

<sup>44</sup> [2002] Prometheus, N.Y.

which there is no self to be reborn, so it does not presume a soul, eternal or otherwise.<sup>46</sup> What Mahayana Buddhism presents is the notion of energy or consciousness that is transmitted from one incarnation to the next; such a concept of reincarnation reflects the Buddhist concept of personality existing, even in one's lifetime, without a "soul," which will be discussed later in this chapter. Lynken Ghose points out that many have asked how Buddhism could have the notion that there is no permanent, independent self, and still believe in rebirth. Among the many explanations offered by thinkers, he suggests the following as one of the best:

Only energy passes from one life to the next. Buddhist literature expresses this idea in the example of the two candles. The lit candle represents this life; the unlit candle represents the next life. The lit candle lights the unlit candle and is extinguished. Analogously, karma is passing along in this stream of energy from life to life.<sup>47</sup>

It is not easy to find a clear account of the law of karma which is linked to reincarnation and rebirth. The following quotation provides a stand-alone definition:

The doctrine maintains that the world is just, and justice is equated with retribution. Everything good that happens to a human being is a reward for some previous good deed, and everything bad that happens is punishment for an evil deed.<sup>48</sup>

It is a definition which implies that for every moral question, for example, "Is this a good act?" there is a clear-cut and objectively valid answer. A person is punished for his wrong acts and rewarded for those which are right, and there can be no debate or doubt about the wrongness or rightness of the acts.

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<sup>46</sup> Vokey, personal e-mail, 20<sup>th</sup> June, 2007. He is most familiar with the Mahayana-Vajrayana tradition of Buddhism found on the West coast of North America. (Vajrayana designates Tantric teachings which were a later development in the mainstream Mahayana Buddhist tradition.

<sup>47</sup> Ghose, L. [2007] Karma and the Possibility of Purification, *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 35.2, 259-289.

<sup>48</sup> Edwards, [2002] p.35

To this view it can be objected, firstly, that many philosophers, for example, Ayer,<sup>49</sup> Stevenson,<sup>50</sup> and Mackie,<sup>51</sup> deny that moral judgements can ever be objectively valid; secondly, even if their objectivity is not open to question, it is frequently true that decent, intelligent people will disagree about what a correct answer might be. Since the difficulty of the issue of universality with regard to Aristotle's ethics has already been highlighted in Chapter One, it will now be assumed, for the sake of argument, that universality claims are generally contentious, and I will go on to confront stronger objections to the law of karma.

Firstly, though the comparison is often made, the law of karma is *not* like "natural" laws. For example, from its retrospective analysis we cannot judge the future consequences of an action, and thus it has no predictive value. Neither does Darwin's theory of natural selection. Edwards does not press the latter point but presents a more basic consideration:

Scientific laws and all statements that are not empty are not compatible with anything that may happen..... Just like Boyle's law or the second law of thermodynamics, Darwin's theory of natural selection is not compatible with anything. The law of karma on the other hand is compatible with anything ....and hence totally empty.<sup>52</sup>

'Empty' in this context refers to the law having only a non-directive capacity. It fails Popper's falsifiability criterion, so it cannot be a science. The same is true, for Popper, of Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis; both are empty.<sup>53</sup> By comparison, Boyle's law, "For a fixed mass of ideal gas at fixed temperature, the product of pressure and volume is a constant", directs us to understand our 'world' in a particular way: it refers us to a set of particulars: pressure, temperature, volume, and the notion

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<sup>49</sup> Ayer, A. J. [1936] *Language, Truth and Logic*, London: Penguin Books (reprinted 1990)

<sup>50</sup> Stevenson, C. L. [1944] *Ethics and Language*, New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press

<sup>51</sup> Mackie, J.L. [1977] *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Harmondsworth: Penguin

<sup>52</sup> Edwards, op. cit. 36

<sup>53</sup> Popper, K. R. [1959] *The logic of scientific discovery*, London : Hutchinson.

of a constant and how they react together. Edwards stresses that, when the proponents of karma “explain” the misfortunes that befall apparently decent human beings as a consequence of their sins in a previous life, such “wisdom after the event” is very different from the real wisdom after the event that we often obtain as a result of empirical investigation and the observation of causal relations. For example, if a train crashes on the West Coast line and on investigation we find evidence that sections of the line had not been in order, possibly some of the points were not in the correct position or some were lying on the line, or the last scheduled inspection of the line had finished prematurely and short of that spot, then we can say that, had we known of these circumstances, we could have predicted the crash and avoided its subsequent occurrence. But this is not generally how things happen. More usually we examine the scene after the event and draw up lessons for next time. The law of karma refers to everything, to all actions and all inactions, to all particulars and to no particulars at the same time. The karmic explanation may also be *post hoc* but it does not provide genuine wisdom after the event: we might be able to learn from the analysis of the event how and where the person had sinned, but we are unable to determine whether or not they are likely to suffer in a future life or how we might prevent them so doing. There is no information corresponding to the information obtained by the crash investigators about the points’ failure.

All adherents to the law of karma maintain that it operates autonomously. Given this is the case, Edwards raises two separate but important lines of questioning. How, in what way, and to whom are good and bad deeds registered? And, even considering the law of karma as a cosmically instantiated principle, what determines what will

happen to a person in his/her next incarnation as a result of the balance of his/her acts in any given life?<sup>54</sup>

Suppose we take a natural disaster such as the tsunami on Boxing Day, 2004. Someone who does not believe in karma would view it as a natural phenomenon that is entirely explicable in terms of geological and climatic causes. On the other hand, somebody who does believe in karma, must be ready to claim that the tidal wave was brought about in order to punish or reward the various people who suffered or benefited from its event. Since it is claimed that the law of karma is infallible, it never punishes the innocent and never spares the guilty. This gives rise to the metaphysical question: How did this non-intelligent principle determine the geological conditions, whose existence is empirically established as the “natural” cause of the disaster, so as to achieve the desired results with complete precision? The karmic law would seem to offer a flawless explanation in the absence of evidence, on every occasion one applies it.

Nirvana is the next Buddhist concept to be considered. The culmination of the Buddha’s psychological and spiritual journey, it refers to two kinds of blissful state. Firstly, the state reported by the Buddha and others who have been ‘awakened’ or enlightened in ‘this-life nirvana’ is brought about through the destruction of the ‘impurities’ and ‘defilements’ by the practice of generosity, compassion, and mindfulness in daily life, and cultivated, above all, by the exercise of insight meditation. This-life nirvana is characterised by a consciousness which is not, as frequently supposed, absent – it is altered. It resonates with the Aristotelian ideal state of *eudaimonia* in its joy, harmony and contentment but Buddhist practitioners claim to go beyond such a state of consciousness in the higher reaches of meditation;

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<sup>54</sup> Edwards, op. cit., 40

accounts of such meditation describe the dissolution of what we might conceive of as the inner and outer boundaries of consciousness.<sup>55</sup> This altered state of consciousness is the Buddhist *prajna*. The English translation of *prajna* as ‘insight’ refers to the power of seeing with the eyes of understanding beneath the surface of things, but it conveys only a partial sense of what *prajna* can be thought to mean. Another frequent translation is ‘wisdom’ but *prajna* is closer in meaning to a kind of discriminating knowledge. As the faculty which grasps the truth of Buddhist teachings, it resembles the Greek concept of ‘*nous*,’ that is, an intuitive faculty of apprehension of the fundamental principles of reality. However, the state of Buddhist meditative insight, in which the latter truths are grasped, is one of non-discursive heightened awareness rather than the Greek state of an intuitive grasp of principles by a pure intellect. The enlightened Buddha claimed that this-life nirvanic experience gave him insight into the doctrine of Dependent Origination, the Four Noble Truths, and knowledge of how suffering may be overcome by following the Noble Eightfold Path until one is cleansed of ‘the defilements.’ (All these are to be discussed later.)

The second kind of nirvanic state may be attained only by a human being who has attained this-life nirvana. In the latter case the five *skandhas* or aggregates that constitute individuality remain, and one is still subject to the possibility of suffering and the effect of previous karma. Upon enlightenment one now enjoys right understanding and right views about the truths of existence, like the Buddha. When, after possibly many lives, one maintains the state of this-life nirvana, pursuing perfectly the Noble Eightfold Path in all three dimensions (morality, meditation and insight) it is claimed that, at the moment of physical death, post-death nirvana is attained. This marks the complete end of suffering; there can no longer be karmic

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<sup>55</sup> Loy cites from experiments several experiences of ‘merging’ with *qualia* reported by non-practitioners [2001] p.83

rebirth into *samsara* or the continued cycle of existence. On death the *fully* enlightened Buddhist is said to attain *parinirvana*, the final blissful state. The account of the scholarly tradition of the Buddha's post-death nirvana is that, with no further rebirth possible, he transcends consciousness as normally understood, and grasps the 'ultimate reality of things.' It is interesting that the Buddha himself refused to answer the question as to the status of the enlightened person after his or her death; in a rather old section of the *Pali* Canon, he replies:

When a person has gone out, then there is nothing by which you can measure him. That by which he can be talked about is no longer there for him; you cannot say that he does not exist. When all ways of being, all phenomena are removed, then all ways of description have been removed.<sup>56</sup>

The conception of Mahayana Buddhism regarding nirvana has an additional slant, that of a 'non-abiding nirvana;' this is attained by the Bodhisattva path of liberating all sentient beings from suffering.<sup>57</sup> This also involves a form of nondual consciousness which cannot be described conceptually; once more it is not consciousness of some absolute reality, or some reality which is inherently self-existent. There is nothing but a 'pure radiant flow' of experiences.<sup>58</sup>

For Edwards, nirvana is a kind of 'Absolute' or 'Cosmic Consciousness.' Mikulas<sup>59</sup> refers to it as 'universal consciousness.' For Vokey, on the other hand, one of the key tenets of his Mahayana-Vajrayana Buddhist tradition is that nirvana is "beyond all concepts."<sup>60</sup> Unlike the rational knowledge of first principles attained by Aristotle's 'contemplative man,' the knowledge attained in nirvana is non-propositional and cannot be described, far less conceptualised.

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<sup>56</sup> Sn 1075b-6 Sahdatissa, [1987] p. 123 Quoted by Schmidt-Leukel, op. cit. p. 50

<sup>57</sup> Williams, P. [1989] *Mahayana Buddhism*, p. 52

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p. 94

<sup>59</sup> Mikulas, W.L. [2007] "Buddhism and Western psychology," *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 14, No. 4, p. 35

<sup>60</sup> Vokey, D. Personal e-mail, 20<sup>th</sup> June, 2007

There is a common misconception in the West that Buddhism requires an end to *all* desire, both positive and negative, and this misconception arises from the literal meaning of nirvana, ‘blown out.’ The usual Buddhist image is the ‘extinction’ of a fire or a flame. In ‘*Understanding Buddhism*’ Schmidt-Leukel emphasises that nirvana refers to the extinction of all the *unwholesome* factors in life. This means the extinction of craving and ignorance, of attachment,<sup>61</sup> greed, hatred, and delusion, of any identification with the five aggregates as one’s self as well as the extinction of all the results consequent on any of them: suffering and, on death, continual karmic rebirth into *samsara* or the cycle of existence.<sup>62</sup> While nirvana in the sense of extinction is meant to be taken literally, a metaphor often used to describe it is liberation, and this better conveys the release it offers from the suffering inherent in the cycle of transitory existence.

On his first ‘awakening’ or enlightenment the Buddha is said to have obtained insight into the doctrine of Dependent Origination. This is the principle which claims that everything arises through dependence on/conditioned by something else. This is expressed in various ways, such as, with X as a condition, Y arises; because X exists, then Y arises; and through X, Y is conditioned. The statement ‘X exists’ begs the question of how X comes to exist in the first place. Western science is prepared to raise this question and attempt several hypotheses in response, although it does not, of course, purport to have a final answer to aetiological questions.

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<sup>61</sup> For the Buddhist, ‘attachment’ only ever refers to negative or unwholesome desire.

<sup>62</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, P. [2006] p. 48 *Samsara*: literally, the wheel of existence continuing until one attains perfect non-attachment and enters enlightenment, whereupon no further rebirth is possible.

Mikulas states that the most influential model for cognitive science in the US has been an information-processing, computer-simulation model.<sup>63</sup> He offers us an alternative in behaviours of the mind, derived from the third Buddhist literary collection, the *abhidhamma*, which he argues offers stronger implications for education, therapy, sports, and art. In describing the *abhidhamma* or ‘ultimate teaching’ he likens it to ‘Buddhist psychology:’

This Buddhist cognitive science includes a detailed dissection of mental processes and experiences, plus an explanation of how they all fit together. On the practical side, it is held that this analysis can facilitate the development of *prajna* or insight, and it is the basis for some meditation practices. [Mikulas, 2007, p.22]

In the *abhidhamma* the dissection of mental processes and experiences is into *dhammas* or elementary essences of conscious reality. A *dhamma* is an irreducible atom of experience, such as a single characteristic or quality, for example, a triad of *dhammas* is related to feeling: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. What is constantly forming together and passing away is referred to in Buddhism as the five *skandhas*; the Sanskrit term is literally translated as ‘heaps’, more commonly as ‘aggregates’ or ‘building blocks’ in English. The *skandhas* are collections of *dhammas* that comprise entities such as a person. The five *skandhas* are form (elements of matter, the five physical senses and their objects), feeling, perception, (discernment of an object, beginning of concept formation), mental formations, (mental contents other than feeling and perception), and consciousness.

In the most popular version of dependent origination there are twelve links in a circular chain, with every link depending on the previous link. The twelve links are ignorance, formations, consciousness, name and form, six senses, contact, feeling,

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<sup>63</sup> Mikulas [ 2007] p.22 (More recently, this model has begun to change to a post-computational one.)

craving, grasping, becoming, birth, and death.<sup>64</sup> In summary, the Buddha teaches that everything conditioned is subject to impermanence and decay, thus reminding his followers of the inseparability as well as the mortality of all sentient beings.

Schmidt-Leukel points out that the Buddha's insight into the doctrine of Dependent Origination at the time of his enlightenment necessitates that, if nirvana is what the Buddha described as 'The Deathless,'<sup>65</sup> nirvana must be an unconditioned reality:

Only if there really is such an unconditioned reality, is liberation from the conditioned existence of *samsara* possible.

Understanding Nirvana as an unconditioned reality not only entails that it is truly deathless but implies as well that it is not simply a mental state... Thus the state of the enlightened person must be understood as the attainment or perception of an unconditioned reality which exists independently from this achievement.<sup>66</sup>

Despite describing the nirvanic state as indescribable, the Buddhist tradition has used countless positive metaphors in an effort to comprehend it. These include: liberation, ultimate bliss, freedom, unconditioned awareness, transcendence, shelter, and so on.

Vokey adds:

As a philosopher of education, I find it useful to consider the significance of different accounts of the fruition of the spiritual path for the path itself. If there is agreement on how to practice, then differences between attempts to define the undefinable I think are not so important.<sup>67</sup>

Damien Keown<sup>68</sup> and Schmidt-Leukel<sup>69</sup> both agree about Buddhist notions of attachment and non-attachment. As mentioned briefly earlier, it is often thought, mistakenly, that the Buddha wanted us to annihilate desire. On the contrary, it is a matter of distinguishing positive from negative desire. For example, non-obsessional

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<sup>64</sup> Mikulas, W. L. [2007] pp. 23-24

<sup>65</sup> MN, 26

<sup>66</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, P. [2006] pp. 48-49

<sup>67</sup> Vokey, D. Personal e-mail, 20<sup>th</sup> June, 2007

<sup>68</sup> Keown, D. [1992] *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, Macmillan

<sup>69</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, P. op. cit.

striving for nirvana always arises from a positive desire, whereas obsessional striving for nirvana arises from a negative desire. Attempts at translating the Buddhist term *tanha* into English use ‘attachment,’ ‘craving’ and ‘addiction,’ as synonyms to refer to any grasping action (including thinking) which arises from a negative desire. This is unlike the positive connotation normally associated in English usage with the term ‘attachment.’ Lust, that is, a desire for extreme sensuous pleasure, is frequently cited as an attachment to be overcome; it is to be reduced until finally rooted out. One is enjoined to strive for **non**-attachment from all negative desires such as anger or hatred, possessive clinging to an idea, a person or an object, and so on. This attitude of non-attachment is also meant to apply to the Buddha’s *anatta* or no-self teaching which underpins his ethic.

Clinging/being attached to the five aggregates or constituents of individual existence usually shows itself in the thought or attitude of ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self (*atta*).’<sup>70</sup> The Buddhist tradition relates that the Buddha, shortly after his first sermon following his enlightenment, in which he taught the Four Noble Truths, exhorted his first followers to cultivate an attitude of non-attachment towards that which we usually see as constituting our very own self by the thought, ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self (*anatta*).’<sup>71</sup>

The Buddha stresses the practical and spiritual dimension of his central ‘no-self’ teaching by highlighting that the cultivation of an attitude of non-attachment towards the notion of myself as a substantial, separate, and permanent entity leads to ‘disenchantment’ and ‘liberation.’ As conducive to non-attachment he enjoins on his followers the negative insight he gained upon his enlightenment. It has three aspects:

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<sup>70</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, [2006] p.36

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

All things within *samsaric* experience should be regarded as impermanent (*anicca*), as incapable of providing lasting satisfaction (*dukkha*), and as being ‘not the self’ (*anatta*).<sup>72</sup>

The Buddha’s “three marks” of existence are always given in this order when recited, marking an ascending scale of difficulty, with the doctrine of *anatta* or ‘no-self’ coming last, a concept that sounds most unfamiliar to western ears. The first mark, impermanence, is characteristic of both *dukkha* and *anatta* and will not be discussed separately. However, I will examine the third mark, *anatta*, before discussing the second mark of existence, *dukkha* or suffering; for the Buddha, it is precisely one’s lack of understanding of the significance of ‘no-self’ which is responsible for much of one’s suffering.

Theravada Buddhism teaches that there is no independent or permanent self/soul.<sup>73</sup> There is no equivalent idea in Western psychology; indeed work in cognitive therapy as well as psychotherapy is generally built upon the notion of a substantial, permanent entity which is referred to as the self. A notion of the self as a self-existent entity has long been held in the main in Western philosophy, from Plato and Aristotle onwards. Certainly in the twentieth century the ideas of Derek Parfit<sup>74</sup> and Galen Strawson<sup>75</sup> on the self have many points in common with the Theravada Buddhist notion of no-self. However, it is the eighteenth century ideas of David Hume on the self that resonate most strongly with this Buddhist conception of no-self. D. W. Murray expounds Hume’s notion of the self as follows: “When Hume first addressed the question of personal identity he stated:

There are some philosophers who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our ‘self’: that we feel its existence and its

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<sup>72</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, op. cit. p.37

<sup>73</sup> Theravada Buddhism is the earliest form of Buddhism and is considered the most conservative by many.

<sup>74</sup> Parfit, D. [1984] *Reasons and persons*, Oxford : Clarendon Press.

<sup>75</sup> Strawson, G. [1997] “The Self “, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 5/6: 405- 428

continuance in existence: and are certain, beyond the evidence of demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity.<sup>76</sup>

After inviting us to consider our real experience, Hume continues:

Unluckily, all these positive assertions are contrary to that very experience which is pleaded for them: nor have we any idea of 'self,' after the manner here explained. For, from what impression could this idea be derived?<sup>77</sup>

For Hume, the idea of a "continuous self" was fantastic. There was nothing beneath the ideas to connect them. When Hume speaks of perceptions, he notes:

All these are different, and may be separately considered, and may exist separately, and have no need of anything to support their existence. After what manner therefore do they belong to self, and how are they connected with it? For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call 'myself,' I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I can never catch 'myself' at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception. [1751(1758):1, VI, iv]<sup>78</sup>

Hume observes that we never experience our own self, only the continuous chain of our experiences themselves. This psychological reality leads Hume to the metaphysical conclusion that the self is an illusion, and that in fact personal identity is nothing but the continuous succession of perceptual experiences. This renders his account of the self a closer parallel to Buddhist notions of impermanence and no-self than any other western philosophical counterpart.

Mahayana Buddhism offers a critique of the Theravada notion of the five aggregates, as it warns against seeing these aggregates as representing or possessing a self/soul. This version also seems to be re-stating the Theravada doctrine of no-self differently, in that we are all said to be "empty" of a permanent, independently existing self.

Michael Barnes elucidates the Buddhist notion of 'being' as follows:

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<sup>76</sup> 1751 [1758] *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 1, VI, iv Oxford: Clarendon Press

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Murray, D. W. [Mar., 1993] "What is the Western Concept of the Self? On Forgetting David Hume." *Ethos*, Vol. 21, No. 1, pp. 3-23

For the Buddhist all of reality is interdependent, all things arising and flowing together within the single ever-transient nexus of becoming and passing away. There is no ‘moment’ of creation in Buddhism and no creator who is somehow outside or independent of the process of becoming. Indeed to speak of ‘independence’ in any way would be to contradict the whole Buddhist ethos that is so securely rooted, not in any story of origins, but in mindfulness of the here and now. Thus Buddhism seeks to avoid any account of reality which sets up a dualism of the ‘invisible’ Real somehow lurking behind the visible phenomena.<sup>79</sup>

However, the alternative for Mahayana Buddhism is not nihilism but the concept of *sunyata* or ‘emptiness.’ This too has also led to puzzlement and misunderstanding, especially in the West, perhaps because of its very succinctness. The great Tibetan philosopher Tsongkhapa says that emptiness is the track on which the centred person moves,<sup>80</sup> and by this he means that the concept of emptiness is a short-hand for the infinite depth and elusiveness of things. But rather counter-intuitively, to speak of the emptiness of things is not to speak of nothing. The question is – what are things ‘empty of’? And the Buddhist answer is ‘empty of own-being,’ that is, empty of self-existent reality. Nothing exists independent of anything else. There is, therefore, ‘no thing’, no inherently existent reality that can be separated from every other ‘thing’. Everything is part of one interdependent continuum of being.

In dealing with Buddhist notions regarding the self and no-self in Chapter 5 of *Religion and Human Nature* (1998), Keith Ward examines the claim, from a Buddhist perspective, that all sentient beings are what might be called process-selves, before he explores the latter notion from a Western philosophical perspective.<sup>81</sup> For the

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<sup>79</sup> Barnes, M. [July, 2007] ‘Expanding Catholicity and the Dialogue with Buddhism’, *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 88, 1016, p. 403.

<sup>78</sup> From rTsa she tik chen rigs pañ rgya mysho, Sarnath: 1973; p 431. Quoted by Stephen Batchelor in ‘The Other Enlightenment Project’ from Ursula King (ed), 1998, *Faith and Praxis in a Post-Modern Age*, London: Cassells

<sup>79</sup> Op. cit. 95 Ward makes the comparison with A. N. Whitehead’s similar notion in ‘*Process and Reality*’ (1929).

Buddhist, human beings do not have a special ‘soul’ that all other animals lack. But the form of subjectivity in human beings is such that it makes liberation possible, in a way that it is not for non-human animals. It is human beings who can learn the truth of *anicca* and *dukkha* who can practise right thought, action, and meditation, and who can achieve the state of no desire for anything negative or unwholesome. This is because the degree of conceptual understanding, self-knowledge, and mental control possible for humans is much greater than for non-human animals which, our knowledge to date leads us to believe, are largely bound by sense-perception and instinct.

The Buddhist thus constructs the idea that a person is a ‘process-self,’ namely:

A discrete succession of free acts, cognitive states, and dispositions, closely correlated, in continual flux, and united to one another by the logically primitive relation of co-consciousness.<sup>82</sup>

The Buddha teaches that such succession is driven by negative desire or attachment, and that it inevitably results in suffering of three main kinds –bodily pain, mental pain, and intellectual suffering consequent on the realization that impermanence and enthrallment to causal conditions are imperfections.<sup>83</sup>

When desire is extinguished, suffering ceases, and the flow of experience can be seen in a very different way, even in this life. Where this is perfected and enlightenment achieved, with no further rebirth possible, consciousness can expand to embrace knowledge and experience radiant realms of being, and comes to have that character of freedom and bliss which can be characterized as *nirvana*.<sup>84</sup>

With regard to this notion of the self as such a succession, Ward agrees that it is different from any idea of the self as a permanent and unchanging substance.

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<sup>82</sup> Ward [1998] p. 96

<sup>83</sup> A reference to Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimmago*, 16. 34 (a major work of Theravada orthodoxy) by Ward [1998], p.96.

<sup>84</sup> Ward [1998] p. 96. Earlier in this chapter the state referred to by Paul Edwards (2002) as ‘Cosmic Consciousness.’

However he asks if it doesn't presuppose the idea of the self as a subject of action and experience; if the belief that there is unconditioned awareness and freedom doesn't presuppose that there is something more to human beings than just a bundle of nameable aggregates, something 'more' which is a subject?<sup>85</sup> He answers both these questions affirmatively by arguing that the process-self is one agent which continues from moment to moment, whose continuing activity of knowing is what makes co-conscious states apprehensible<sup>86</sup> as members of one consciousness. This is comparable to Derek Parfit's notion of 'Closest Continuer.'<sup>87</sup> What is uniting the states is the subject itself.

It can be said that I, the subject and agent of knowledge, remember, intend, and feel, and thus I actively connect various events within one consciousness.<sup>88</sup> I cannot feel guilty if I have no idea of having done an act which would have been deemed wrong, and which I need not have done. Culpability involves a very complex set of beliefs, not only those imported into the interpretation of the feeling but also those social and cultural beliefs which contribute to the beliefs in the first place.

Conscious experience is essentially active, and requires a discriminating, recognizing, and evaluating agent, which is the subject of all events, which are members of one consciousness.<sup>89</sup>

Ward agrees with Hume that one cannot observe this subject enduring,<sup>90</sup> but he differs from Hume when the latter claims that, if I apprehend myself as an active element in every one of a series of mental acts, then I must conceive of myself as the same agent, to the extent that mental acts are members of the same consciousness. What grounds

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid. p. 96

<sup>86</sup> A. N. Whitehead describes apprehension as self-grasping or self-understanding in *Process and Reality*, [1929] p. 59

<sup>87</sup> Parfit, D [1984] *Reasons and persons*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

<sup>88</sup> Cf., Kant's "I" as the logical subject of experience.

<sup>89</sup> Ward [1998] p.97

<sup>90</sup> As mentioned, Hume makes this point in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, first published 1738, i. 4. 6.

are there for believing it is the same subject through all change? Process implies temporal endurance; if I have long-term intentions, for example, to write a thesis, then that intention is spread out over a long time, and it is the same subject who first forms the intention, then sustains, and at last completes it in a finished action. Ward's instance is of writing a symphony, but my own example has greater personal resonance.<sup>91</sup> Ward reiterates that where a Buddhist holds a view of a process-self, this is not equivalent either to a view that there is no self at all (annihilationism) or to a view which holds there is one unchanging and indestructible self, beyond the temporal flow (eternalism).

The process-self which lies between these two extremes is a dynamic, ceaselessly active subject, its content in constant change. It is prone to egoistic attachments, but can also be free to participate in the flow of ideas and perceptions without such attachment, acting with compassion and without self-regard.<sup>92</sup>

Such a Buddhist account of *anatta* or no-self does *not* hold that there is nothing to be egoistic about, that is, no ego. It holds that there is no permanent, inherently existing, isolated self:

There is only the transient flow of interdependent selves-in-relation..... free to move into the future by continual interaction and exchange of information – or bound by attachment to the past, by mutual hostility and isolated secrecy.<sup>93</sup>

The remaining 'mark of existence', *dukkha*, which formed part of the Buddha's negative insight on his enlightenment, is the last foundational doctrine to be examined here. In practice, it is linked to the two other marks, impermanence and the absence of an inherently existing self. The Buddhist term *dukkha* means acute poison (a literal translation), suffering, or unsatisfactoriness; suffering is one of the fundamental characteristics of everything that comes to pass in the world. Buddhist texts mention

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<sup>91</sup> Ward [1998] p. 98

<sup>92</sup> Ward, *ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

three kinds of suffering: suffering due to change, physical suffering, and an all pervasive unsatisfactoriness (the last kind of suffering is most often translated by ‘anxiety’ in western Buddhism, particularly in the United States). I will restrict myself to the use of ‘suffering’ as the most practical, all-round translation in English. Mikulas refers to the “confusions and confounding” that are part of *dukkha*; young people, for example, are particularly susceptible to these kinds of anxieties in the face of adult behaviour which contradicts what they have been taught as children. The overall cause of *dukkha* is referred to as *tanha*, literally, ‘thirst’, but it has already been pointed out previously that it is more accurately rendered in translation by metaphors such as craving, addiction, or attachment. Any prevailing desire which shows itself obsessively in regard of a person, idea, or thing, is understood by a Buddhist as *tanha* or attachment.

The overall structure of Buddhist theory and practice is the Four Noble Truths which arose as part of Siddhartha Gautama’s enlightenment on becoming a ‘Buddha’ or an ‘awakened’ one. They became known as the Buddha’s first major discourse and the fourfold structure parallels medical practice of his day:

(i) Diagnose a disease –recognizing the reality of *dukkha* or suffering due to the insecurity of life of all sentient beings.

(ii) Identify its cause –the fundamental, internal causes of suffering, which are identified as *tanha* or craving, *dosa* or hostility, and *moha* or delusion.

(iii) Determine whether it is curable –realizing the possibility of the cessation of suffering and its source.

(iv) Outline a course of treatment to cure it –following the path of spiritual purification and transformation that results in such freedom, the Noble Eightfold Path, so that one is at peace and fully in the present, not merely apathetic and unemotional. Behaviour becomes more motivated by compassion than by grasping for security.

Buddhist psychology understands that the basic nature of people is sane, clear, and good but also that it is obscured by ‘the impurities’ and ‘the defilements’ or ‘three poisons of the mind’ mentioned above: craving, hostility, and delusion. To recover our innate good nature, we have to free ourselves of the ‘three poisons.’ How does the Buddha propose we free ourselves from them and thus of *tanha* or craving? By pursuing the Fourth Noble Truth, that is, following the Eightfold Path:

**First** is right understanding, that is, understanding the situation one is in, for example, the four noble truths and three marks of existence (impermanence, suffering, and not-self), and resolving to do something about it.<sup>94</sup>

**Second** is right thought, including no lust, ill-will, or cruelty.

**Third** is right speech, including being constructive and helpful and avoiding lying, gossip and vanity.

**Fourth** is right action, including being moral, compassionate, precise, and aware, and avoiding aggression.

**Fifth** is right livelihood, not creating suffering.

**Sixth** is right effort, actually doing what should be done.

**Seventh** and **Eighth** are right mindfulness and right concentration.<sup>95</sup>

Viewing the steps on the Path as a whole, the eight components are seen as both interrelated and interdependent. All eight factors exist at two basic levels, the ordinary (for lay-people) and the transcendent (for monks and nuns), so that generally there is both an ordinary and a Noble Eightfold Path.<sup>96</sup> Most Buddhists seek to practise the ordinary Path, which is perfected only in those who are approaching the lead up to what is designated as ‘stream-entry’. At the latter point a person gains a first glimpse of nirvana and may enter the ‘stream’ leading there, the Noble Eightfold Path.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> The question arises, how are we to judge what *is* ‘right understanding,’ but the Buddha says nothing in this respect.

<sup>95</sup> Mikulas, op. cit. p.12

<sup>96</sup> The form of the Path immediately leading up to becoming an *Arahat* or enlightened saint in Theravada Buddhism has two extra factors, right knowledge and right freedom.

<sup>97</sup> Harvey [1990] p. 68

The Eightfold Path does not represent eight distinct stages through which we must pass sequentially; we become finally 'awakened' by progressive purification within each of the areas. Progress on the Path resembles movement in a spiral direction (which often bends back, recursively, on itself), rather than movement in a linear direction. The three groups, in which the steps fall, are presented to the practitioner as the three Buddhist 'jewels' or principles, which are usually ordered in the following way to denote the logical stages of acquisition as distinct from the spiral of practice: *sila*, morality, *samadhi*, meditative cultivation, and *prajna*, insight/wisdom.

I shall discuss *sila* first as it is the basis of all Buddhist practice. The first section in this threefold division of the Eightfold Path, entitled 'virtue' or 'morality', comprises three factors: right speech, right action and right livelihood. Buddhist ethics has been summarised by B. Alan Wallace on the website of his Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies thus: "Avoid inflicting harm on yourself or others, and be of service when the opportunity presents itself." The following are the five precepts attached to the fourth factor of right action: Do not kill, do not steal, do not lie, do not be unchaste, do not take intoxicants. The first four are reminiscent of four of the Decalogue's commandments; the fifth is intended as an aid to meditative practices. It is worth noting that a fixed attachment to ethical precepts is seen as a hindering 'fetter' by the Buddha.<sup>98</sup> Each Path-factor conditions skilful states, and progressively wears away its opposite 'wrong' factor, until all unskilful states are destroyed.<sup>99</sup>

The next principle to be discussed, insight or *prajna*, is always cited first, when the eight steps are named together, to show that it is the culmination of spiritual progress. However, it is always considered to be constituted as much by 'right view or thinking' as by 'right understanding.' Achieving the crowning point of insight depends on

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<sup>98</sup> Harvey, [1990] p.196

<sup>99</sup> This links with a second meaning of Aristotelian *arête*, excellence in skill.

continuing to develop *prajna* simultaneously with the other two components, morality and meditative cultivation.

Vokey's characterization of the first component, right understanding, is in terms of Mahayana non-dualistic awareness of the world, *prajna* or insight. It has been mentioned earlier that another expression used to capture its meaning in translation is intuitive wisdom ('Wisdom Mind' in North America). The question arises as to what is understood by 'intuitive' in this respect? What is understood by *nous* in the Greek philosophical tradition –the intuitive apprehension by the mind or intellect alone –is included in what is understood by 'intuitive wisdom' in a Buddhist sense. However, *prajna* is said to be attained in a state of heightened awareness which extends beyond the sphere of conceptual understanding to embrace a mystical kind of knowledge of the Buddhist truths. In discussing D.T. Suzuki's article, 'Reason and Intuition in Buddhist Philosophy,' Loy makes clear that it is unfortunate that 'intuition' has been used in the West to translate *prajna*, since this term is commonly understood as referring to some *extra* faculty.<sup>100</sup> What a nondualistic system such as Mahayana Buddhism understands as intuitive wisdom is the function of the intellect, when it is experiencing nondually in meditation, that is, when it comes to understand 'ultimate reality' in an expanded, altered state of consciousness which cannot be conceptualised.<sup>101</sup> The Buddhist meditator accepts the limits of language in attempting to convey this non-discursive state, even as it tries to express the ineffable. The Buddhist meditator does not attempt to make the inchoate choate. It was mentioned earlier in this chapter that *prajna* always includes knowledge of the inner mind as distinct from scientific knowledge.

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<sup>100</sup> D. Loy, [1988] p.181  
<sup>99</sup> Vokey. [2001] p. 136

According to Walpola Rahula, the second principle, *sati*, is better understood as mental culture or development rather than meditation. He points out that when *bhavana* or ‘meditation’ is mentioned, one too often thinks:

[O]f being absorbed in some kind of mysterious trance or having an interest as in yoga in gaining some spiritual powers..... Buddhist meditation aims at cleansing the mind of impurities and disturbances and cultivating such qualities as concentration and energy, for example, leading finally to the attainment of highest wisdom, nirvana.<sup>102</sup>

For Rahula, a disciple of the more orthodox Theravada Buddhism, Buddhist meditation is essentially an analytic method based on mindfulness, awareness, vigilance, and observation. However, a Buddhist in the Mahayana-Vajrayana tradition of Vokey describes it rather as a meditative cultivation of heart/mind. To feel that there is no difference between the suffering of others and one’s own suffering, no difference between one’s own happiness and the happiness of others, is to be purely motivated in the way referred to as *bodhicitta*, that is, ‘The Heart of the Enlightenment Mind.’<sup>103</sup> The last two components on the Eightfold Path, right mindfulness and right concentration are the steps whereby its followers acquire insight and attain enlightenment. The penultimate step, *sati* or mindfulness, is the foundation of every Buddhist tradition. The most important discourse which the Buddha ever gave on ‘meditation’ is called ‘The Setting-up of *Sati*.’<sup>104</sup> This discourse is so highly venerated in tradition that it is regularly recited not only in Buddhist monasteries, but also in Buddhist homes because right Mindfulness (or Attentiveness)

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<sup>102</sup> Rahula, W. [1990] *What the Buddha Taught*, p. 68

<sup>103</sup> Vokey, [2001], note 51, 321

<sup>104</sup> The *Satipatthana-sutta*, No. 22 of the *Digha-nikaya*.

is the keystone of meditation. One is to be diligently aware, mindful and attentive with regard to what the Buddha described as the ‘Four Foundations of Mindfulness’: (1) the activities of the body, (2) sensations or feelings, (3) the activities of the mind, and (4) the objects of the mind, namely, ideas, thoughts, conceptions, and things.<sup>105</sup> Mindfulness in respect of the four areas covers a vast range of activities of various kinds. In view of the possible audience I have in mind, aged six to sixteen years, it might be more helpful to concentrate initially on mindfulness in the areas of body and mind. I will discuss it in relation to the latter areas in detail, but discuss it only briefly in relation to the other two areas, namely sensations and ideas. I will begin with mindfulness in relation to sensations and ideas first, before focussing on mindfulness in relation to body and mind.

Regarding sensations and feelings, Rahula indicates that one should be aware of all forms of feelings and sensations, pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, of how they appear and disappear within oneself. In respect of the fourth area, ideas, thoughts, conceptions and things, one should know their nature, how they appear and disappear, how they are developed, how they are suppressed, and destroyed.<sup>106</sup>

There are countless ways of developing mindful attentiveness in relation to the body - as modes of meditation – but I will illustrate with two of the most important only. The practice of concentration on breathing is one of the most well-known exercises in mental development related to the body.<sup>107</sup> Only in this meditation is a particular posture prescribed, that of sitting. One breathes in and out as usual, without any effort

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<sup>105</sup> Rahula, [1990] op. cit. p 69

<sup>106</sup> These and following descriptions of mindfulness are largely drawn from Rahula, [1990] pp. 46-8

<sup>107</sup> Op. cit., pp 69-70

or strain. Then one brings one's mind to concentrate on one's breathing-in and breathing-out; lets one's mind watch and observe one's breathing in and out; lets one's mind be aware and vigilant of one's breathing in and out. At the beginning it is extremely difficult to bring one's mind to concentrate solely on one's breathing but, when successful, the momentary experience of having one's mind fully concentrated on one's breathing induces calm. If practised regularly, what is initially only a fleeting experience will gradually be repeated for longer and longer periods, with associated longer periods of calm.

An allied form of bodily attentiveness is to be aware of whatever one does, physically or verbally, during the daily routine: one should live in the present moment, in the present action:

Mindfulness does not mean that one should think and be conscious 'I am doing this' or 'I am doing that'. The moment one thinks 'I am doing this', one becomes self-conscious, and then one does not live in the action but in the idea 'I am,' and consequently one's work is disturbed. All great work – artistic, poetic, intellectual or spiritual – is produced at those moments when its creators forget themselves completely in their actions and are free from self-consciousness.<sup>108</sup>

With regard to the third area, attentiveness to the mind, Rahula points out that one should be fully aware of the fact whenever one's mind is passionate or detached, whenever it is overcome by hatred, ill-will, jealousy, or is full of love, compassion, whenever it is deluded or has a clear and right understanding, is distracted or concentrated, and so on. He quotes the Buddha's teaching:

One should be bold and sincere and look at one's own mind as one looks at one's face in a mirror.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Op. cit., 72

<sup>109</sup> Op. cit., 73

Rahula gives one example to illustrate how to observe one's mind, not as a judge, but dispassionately:

Suppose one is really angry, overcome by anger, ill-will, hatred, then, paradoxically, one is not really aware that one is angry. The moment one becomes aware and mindful of the state of one's mind, the moment one sees the state for what it is, it becomes 'ashamed,' as it were, and begins to subside. One should examine its nature, how it appears and disappears. Once again, as was said with regard to being mindful of the present moment, it is not a case of thinking 'I am angry' or of 'my anger.' One should only be aware and mindful of the state of an angry mind. This should be the attitude with regard to all feelings, emotions and states of mind.<sup>110</sup>

In these most basic activities of the body and mind, the practice of mindfulness is meant to cultivate clarity of mind: for one to become aware of the thoughts and feelings that flood the mind in the process of everyday experience. It is worth noting that there is more to meditative cultivation than clarity, important though that is:

But mindfulness also allows the mind to become calm, 'just as a lake becomes calm when there is no longer any wind to stir up its waters into waves'. The further purpose of this practice is to diminish harmful emotions and become more fully aware of the flow of reality that makes up the self and the world.<sup>111</sup>

On a higher level, an essential pre-requisite for the attainment of nirvana is the facility to calm the mind and allow its passions to cool. In a similar vein, in the Mahayana tradition, mindfulness is an essential pre-requisite for compassion as well as nirvana: as the mind becomes focused and calm, it is more possible to become attentive to the sufferings of others.

The preceding account of mindfulness claims that the practice of mindfulness is capable of inducing clarity and calm in body and mind; and that, where the mind is clear and stable, compassion emerges more readily. None of these claims is able to draw on substantial experimental proof to date regarding their validity. To a great

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<sup>110</sup> Op. cit., 74

<sup>111</sup> This paragraph is largely drawn from the Commentary on the 'Four Foundations of Mindfulness' in Coogan [2005] pp 168-9

extent they have depended on an attitude of willingness to 'try and see.' Recently, empirical research has begun to examine these claims and evidence is forthcoming, particularly in the medical domain. I will return to this aspect in Chapter Five.

Mindfulness is the consciousness of, and attention to, experience here and now; our innate capability in everyday life to fix attention on a single object, whether of body, feeling, mind or thought. Vokey summarises aptly the everyday practice of *sati* as "the spiritual equivalent of physical health."<sup>112</sup> *Sati* and *samadhi* (mental concentration, the ultimate step on the Path), applied together in meditation, form the essence of the Buddha's teaching on meditative cultivation. Gowans underlines the claim that much intellectual, emotional, and moral preparation is required for meditation to be effective. If we wish to acquire insightful knowledge of the most important Buddhist truths for ourselves:

We must be prepared to undertake this Eightfold Path, a long, complex and difficult programme of training that involves epistemically important practices that culminate in meditation.<sup>113</sup>

The notion of *anatta* has been mentioned already as depending on an acceptance of the doctrine that there is no substance-self, only a dependent process-self. For the Buddha the no-self doctrine undercuts the notion of 'I', 'my', 'mine' and so on, making it easier to reduce and finally let go of all negative desire, follow the ethical precepts, and be compassionate towards others. Similarly to his understanding of the *Dhammas* or truths of nirvana, dependent origination, and the Four Noble Truths, which he reached on his enlightenment, the Buddha did not consider the no-self teaching an

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<sup>112</sup> Vokey, personal e-mail, December, 2005

<sup>111</sup> Gowans, [2003] p. 55

unresolved issue. Like the preceding truths he had ‘awakened’ to it through his own experience in meditation. He taught that it would be unprofitable to speculate further on such issues, urging his followers, to take him as their model, grow in perfection through the discipline of following the Path, and thus attain insight/understanding for themselves of these truths.

Gowans first considers that:

If explicit and extensive rational argumentation were the only avenue to philosophic knowledge, then the Buddha’s teaching would fall very short of this knowledge.<sup>114</sup>

Gowans next maintains that it is difficult to depict the Buddha’s position in terms of Western notions of rationality, since the most important avenue to acquiring the knowledge he teaches, is not reason but meditation:

The idea that our ultimate well-being or salvation requires a basic metamorphosis of our beliefs, feelings and values is not unfamiliar in Western traditions (it is a basic theme of Hellenistic philosophy). But that this can be brought about fully only through the mental disciplines the Buddha calls right effort, mindfulness, and concentration – what is usually referred to as meditation in the West – is not so familiar.<sup>115</sup>

Furthermore:

Buddhist meditation has no significant correlate in Western epistemological discussions. It is not a product of subjective feelings or desires, it does not aim at a non-cognitive, dream-like condition.<sup>116</sup>

Buddhist meditation is said by its most experienced Buddhist practitioners to provide us with an objective knowledge of reality, *prajna* or insight. Whilst *prajna* includes intellectual knowledge, it is not objective knowledge in the sense that Western philosophy conceives of science, for example. Insight is a mystical kind of knowledge that enables us to overcome suffering, in which, for the Buddha, reason has a limited

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<sup>114</sup> Op. cit., 58

<sup>115</sup> Gowans [2003] pp. 163-4

<sup>116</sup> Op. cit., 58

place, only able to take us so far in the search for full enlightenment. Gowans reminds us that the knowledge meditation gives is not based on a rational grasp of self-evident truths; it is not the result of logical inferences; and it is not grounded in the ordinary experiences of the five senses; it is a very different approach to and outcome from the rational reflection of Aristotle's contemplative man on the nature of the cosmos. *Prajna* or wisdom may draw on the same epistemological sources but its meditation cannot be reduced or understood in terms of any of them individually.<sup>117</sup> As already mentioned its truths are not such as can be conceived of in propositional terms; indeed in the final analysis they are simply inexpressible.

The Buddha not only encouraged his questioners not to be confined by the limits of reason and logic, he also discouraged them from losing themselves in speculation. Though he was their model, he exhorted them not to accept doctrines on his authority; they were to follow the Noble Eightfold Path and discover the truths of his teaching for themselves. Instead of his followers considering only whether a doctrine is worthy of belief in view of its truth-aptness, he wished to emphasise to them the importance of always considering any belief from experience within a practice. The latter, he felt, would do more to show them that the doctrine was worthy of belief, insofar as it helped sustain them in believing, for example, that there is no self-existent reality.

Two kinds of meditation are to be practised in conjunction with mindfulness in its usual sense: serenity meditation (*samatha-bhavana*) and insight meditation (*vipassana-bhavana*). The aim of serenity meditation is to purify the mind of various obstacles so that, subsequently, it may reach the highest degree of concentration. The Buddha thought our minds were typically in so much turmoil that, without radical modification, they had no chance of truly understanding reality. Serenity meditation

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

involves extensive training in focusing our attention wholly and exclusively on a single object so as to end this turmoil and gain the ability to concentrate.

In comparison to the serene 'knowledge with form,' reached in the final stage of concentration meditation, the more advanced insight meditation that follows on it reaches what is called 'formless knowledge' in its final stage. Such knowledge is perhaps best described as mystical.<sup>118</sup>

It is the latter kind of meditation which gives a foundation for attaining the highest kind of understanding or wisdom. Here, the purpose for the Buddhist is to directly know reality as it truly is. Insight meditation is a matter of heightened and attentive awareness rather than intellectual or theoretical thought. It involves detailed and mindful observations of all aspects of one's person through which one comes to realize the impermanence of things, the suffering associated with this, the absence of any self, and ultimately the Four Noble Truths. Gowans attempts to describe the indescribable experience one is said to attain by insight meditation as follows:

The eventual outcome is the realization of *Nibbana*, an immediate comprehension of the unconditioned realm beyond the ordinary world of sense experience, an understanding that cannot be adequately described in language, but that liberates us from attachment and enables us to live with compassion, joy, and tranquillity.<sup>119</sup>

The Buddha's aim in his ethics is to purify mind and heart in the radical transformation that the Buddha thought was required to attain *Nirvana*. For him our unenlightened nature is deeply flawed, and only extraordinary measures can overcome this: Mahayana Buddhism, in its teachings on compassion and its meditative disciplines in particular, exemplifies such measures. Especially for Western minds, however, two important questions remain. The karma/rebirth

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<sup>118</sup> Schmidt-Leukel [2006] refers to formless knowledge as 'shamanic', p.60

<sup>119</sup> Gowans, [2003] p. 58

doctrines are problematic, compared to a Western philosophical understanding of notions of individual responsibility and culpability. Similarly, the 'no-self' doctrine poses the question as to just who is the agent of moral acts, if not an independent, self-existent entity? If the Buddhist answer is a process-self, does this not imply a self as a subject of action and experience?

## Chapter Three

### A comparison of Aristotelian and Buddhist ethics: the differences

Before embarking on the present chapter, let's just remind ourselves where this piece of work is going – what is its intended aim? With the ground-breaking work in Buddhist studies in the past twenty years there has been a slow but steady show of interest in comparing Buddhist and Aristotelian ethics by several scholars, especially in North America and Britain. My aim in the next two chapters is to use their work to examine the conceptual differences and similarities between the philosophical and ethical frameworks of Aristotle and the Buddha. These will provide the basis for the practices that I will draw together in the final chapter that might be employed to postulate a “moral way” for young people in an increasingly secular society.

There are two reasons for setting out the dissimilarities in this chapter: the differences between Buddhist and Aristotelian ethics have made the greatest impact on me; and subtly examining the nuanced similarities is a more difficult job, so that task is set aside for Chapter Four.

Whilst both the Buddha and Aristotle have in mind the need to provide their ‘disciples’ with a way to reach perfection, each of them differs in what he holds as constitutive of that perfection. Aristotle’s main aim in his ethics of virtue is to provide guidelines for attaining *eudaimonia* or the happiness or fulfilment to which only “a life of activity in accordance with virtue” gives rise. Habituation and education in the virtues are seen as the necessary groundwork, already mentioned in Chapter One, if one is to develop one’s potential (over a lifetime) and provided the set of conditions for the *arête* is met. These conditions depend on more than merely the dispositions to act virtuously. Underlying factors, such as a certain measure of material prosperity, good health, and natural endowment, are also referred to by

Aristotle as necessary for such aretaic growth. Moreover, achieving such a state is understood as applying within one's natural term of life; Aristotle thinks that well-being can be attained in the course of one's life and is complete upon death; there is no personal immortality of the soul. This resonates with Heidegger's "Being unto death" – fulfilment is possible in life but not fully attained until one enters 'the last horizon.'<sup>120</sup>

In contrast, the main aim of the Buddha is soteriological; he wishes to provide his followers with a path to salvation which, for him, is to be found in 'final,' that is, post-death nirvana or liberation, the moment when one becomes fully enlightened, enters a state of 'ultimate reality,' and is freed from the suffering of karmic rebirth. In the attainment of what Schmidt-Leukel terms this 'transcendent' end,<sup>121</sup> it can be seen that the Buddha's aim in his ethics is more radical than that of Aristotle; it is to root out the 'defilements' and transform the ego, by re-aligning it through the realization of selflessness and the meditative disciplines.

Whilst neither the Buddha's aim of nirvana, nor Aristotle's aim of *eudaimonia* is compatible with a morality founded on ethical egoism (of which more in Chapter Four), there is a definite distinction between the two in the thrust of their ethics. This is derived from their differing metaphysical notions of ipseity and alterity; the Aristotelian distinction of self and other contrasts with the Buddhist identity of self and oneness.

In the case of Aristotle, the flourishing of an individual depends on her virtuous actions being done for the sake of the other, that is, the *polis* or community. In its turn, the state acts morally on behalf of its citizens by providing conditions within which they may flourish. The focus is societal and anthropocentric, the self is dual,

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<sup>120</sup> Heidegger, M. [1962] *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, London SCM Press

<sup>121</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, P. [2006] *Understanding Buddhism*, p.51

body and mind, and inter-subjective relations are conceptualised as being between separate, substantial, individual entities. Thus, one of the most significant features of Aristotelian flourishing is that it is a dual, interdependent process between self and others.

Shaun Gallagher claims that practical wisdom, even if it is about the self, involves an implicit self-relation that is both embodied and endogenously inter-subjective:

The notion that the self is endogenously inter-subjective means that it is not just constrained or conditioned from the outside by its social environment, but is social *from the inside out*. And only by being inter-subjective from the inside out, in a primary way, is it possible for it to be significantly social *from the outside in*, and subject to the constraints and conditions of social life.<sup>122</sup>

Gallagher quotes Aristotle in support of the preceding contemporary notion of the moral self: “For what we are enabled to do by our friends, we ourselves, in a sense, are able to do.”<sup>123</sup>

When speaking of a Buddhist practitioner, on the other hand, whether of an Eastern monastic or a Western lay individual, he/she is drawn, initially, to obeying the precepts and acquiring meditative cultivation for the sake of his/her own purification and to earn ‘good’ karma. It is worth noting that there is both an ordinary and a Noble Eightfold Path and that a lay practitioner in a Buddhist culture is most likely to remain at the ‘ordinary’ level, hoping only to gain enough ‘merit’ to have a more favourable rebirth.<sup>124</sup> The ordinary Path is perfected only in those who are approaching the lead up to what is designated as ‘stream-entry’.<sup>125</sup> At the latter point a person gains what Harvey describes as ‘a first glimpse of nirvana’ and the ‘stream’ leading there, and is

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<sup>122</sup> Gallagher S. [2007] “Moral Agency, Self-Consciousness, and Practical Wisdom,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 14, No. 5-6, p. 201

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> The hierarchical distinctions between monks, nuns, and lay Buddhists are sharply drawn, especially in the East, but their implications will not be dealt with here.

<sup>125</sup> Harvey, [1990] p. 68

thereby encouraged to enter upon the Noble Eightfold Path.<sup>126</sup> To achieve what the Buddha believed was required to attain salvation, a more radical transformation is necessary than that demanded by training and education in the case of her Aristotelian counterpart, notwithstanding the high degree of discipline these entail. With gradual progress on the Eightfold Path – rooting out the ‘defilements’ by her rigorous cultivation of meditation and obedience to the precepts – she acquires compassion for all sentient beings, through experiencing her lack of a sense of a separate, independent self and a corresponding growth in awareness of the inseparable nature of inter-subjective relations; self cannot exist without other, nor other without self. Compared to Aristotle, the Buddha’s view of self and other is non-dualist; his monist concept of the inseparability of all sentient beings is the ground of his bio-centric, as opposed to anthropocentric, ethics. The permeability of Buddhist boundaries provides the greatest contrast with Aristotle’s socio-anthropocentric ethics. In the latter, whilst the individual and community are thought of as inter-subjectively involved, self and other remain, ultimately, separate entities.

The third and, in practical terms the most telling, difference between the aims of the Buddha and Aristotle, is the means by which each is to be attained. For Aristotle the aim of acquiring a morally ordered, dynamic engagement with the world is achieved by means of one’s reason. It is the agent’s reason which forms and informs both the moral virtues, which equip us for successful social relations within a civilized society, and the intellectual virtues, which enable our successful engagement in rational enterprises. Aristotle compares the virtues to skills acquired through practice and habituation. They are dispositions, arising from settled states of character, acquired largely by a process of practical and reflective training. Aristotle sets the greatest store by the initial stage of this

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

process – what he calls the ‘moral habituation’ of a child by its parents from the earliest years. The overriding importance of such work, pointed out in Chapter One, bears repeating:

It makes no small difference.... whether we form habits of one kind or another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather *all* the difference.<sup>127</sup>

When his students come to him for further education, he fully expects their comportment to show that they have already acquired a solid grounding in the moral virtues. And, even though the intellectual virtues will be the new addition at this stage of their education, Aristotle sees part of their task as continuing to develop their moral virtues. His students will acquire *phronesis* not just by ‘hanging about with the right people’ (Gallagher’s paraphrase), that is, virtuous tutors – parents, teachers, caregivers – important though these are. They must continue learning to act in the right way to equip them to take up their place in the *polis*.<sup>128</sup>

The Buddha, on the other hand, emphasises the acquiring of compassion mainly through the realization of selflessness and the meditative disciplines. Moreover, unlike Aristotle, two levels pertain here, as in several aspects of Buddhist teaching: for lay-people in Eastern cultures, such training, when it takes place, is usually concentrated in their old age; for Buddhist monks and nuns, and for Western Buddhist adherents, training is ongoing from earliest days. Thurman (1994) underlines what has been mentioned earlier concerning Buddhist thought – delusion is the root cause of suffering, and wisdom is the antidote for delusion, hence the root cause of liberation. *Prajna* or wisdom is not accumulated instrumental knowledge, but is a special kind of super-knowing, a knowing by becoming the known, by transcending the subject-object dichotomy. Thus, liberation is achieved not by believing, not by participating

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<sup>127</sup> NE 1103 b25.

<sup>128</sup> Gallagher, op. cit. p. 212

in any ceremony or belonging to any group, but by understanding in the deepest possible way. The cultivation of such understanding naturally became the task of the Buddha's teaching, and the mission of the Buddhist tradition.<sup>129</sup> Meditation was an indispensable discipline for deepening and empowering this understanding. But its practice has applied more to the monastic traditions of Buddhism until fairly recently.<sup>130</sup>

There have, of course, been many variant forms of a Buddhist tradition. Zen Buddhism, which arose in Japanese culture, has also made a significant impact in the Western world, particularly in North America. However, Mahayana Buddhist ethics has been selected here as the exemplar, with which to compare Aristotelian ethics, since it arguably has a metaphysics, which, though complex, provides a highly developed foundations for its ethics. As already mentioned, generally the Buddhist ideal is predicated on living many lives on the model of the Buddha until 'final' nirvana. This is different in the case of Mahayana Buddhism, where the Buddhist ideal is modelled on that of the *Bohdisattva*, a being who, after many lives also, is destined for enlightenment. However, out of compassion for other sentient beings, he or she vows to refrain from entering post-death nirvana until every being is saved. By contrast, the Aristotelian ideal of the *phronimos* or man<sup>131</sup> of practical reason, whilst also based on the development of potential of an independent individual – from me-as-I-am to the fulfilled me-as-I-could-be – is contained within the course of an individual's life. Death is final, marking the apotheosis of one's *eudaimona* or

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<sup>129</sup> Thurman, R. A. F. His address to a meeting of the Working Group of The Contemplative Mind in Society, September 29 October 2, 1994, Pocantico, NY

<sup>130</sup> Following the takeover of Tibet by the Chinese in the late 1940's, the exodus of Tibetan monks and lay-people from their country led to an explosion of interest in meditation in North America, particularly of the Tibetan Buddhist (that is, Mahayana-Vajrayana) tradition on its West coast, and particularly among lay-people.

<sup>131</sup> Cf., pp. 24-5 where Aristotle's view of women as "inferior beings" was discussed. His "man of practical reason" is understood throughout this piece of work in a generic sense.

fulfilment. The major difference in practice between Aristotelian and Buddhist ethics lies in what each considers of central importance in morality; simply put, Aristotle accords the prime role to reason, whereas, for the Buddha, it is compassion which has the main claim. Aristotle starts from what most of us would pre-philosophically have taken to be true and displays a concern for the truth, even though it can be argued that truth in ethics cannot be formulated exactly. Aristotle's ethics centres on the ordinary, everyday experiences that people have of trying to live a good life. For him the interplay between emotional sensitivity, rational coherence and philosophical infrastructure are the main themes of his kind of virtue ethics.<sup>132</sup> Aristotle expects his students, having been well brought up, to arrive with the ground already prepared for further training in ethics. They will be further educated in his ethics course, principally, though not exclusively, in the intellectual virtues, to prepare them to engage in lives of virtuous activity in the city-state. For Aristotle, one's agency and reason shape one's world.

He accords reason the pivotal role of controlling desire and emotions in the training and formation of the *phronimos*. Only the virtuous person has the practical intelligence or wisdom necessary for exercising responsible moral choice. Moreover, as Aristotle points out, it is not the character of the actions that make them virtuous, but the character of the agent:

The agent must also be in a certain condition when he does them: in the first place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly his actions must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character.<sup>133</sup>

Gallagher, whose notion of the endogenously inter-subjective nature of the self has been mentioned earlier, elaborates on *phronesis* as the practical, as distinct from

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<sup>132</sup> Hughes, G.J. [2001] *Aristotle on Ethics*, p.221

<sup>133</sup> NE 1105a31

theoretical or propositional, self-knowledge that we gain as we live through our situated and embodied actions:

*Phronesis* involves a practical knowledge about oneself *from the inside out*, and from within the practical situation in which one exists.

Concomitant with this Gallagher does not view this self as isolated in its practical reason:

Although this is a know-how gained from the inside out, it is not a purely subjective knowledge, since from the inside (endogenously), and from birth, we are inter-subjectively involved with others, and our self is shaped by these encounters.<sup>134</sup>

In contrast, Mahayana Buddhism draws on what Western philosophy understands by moral intuitionism, that is, we rely on our moral instincts to point us to good action and away from bad. Moreover, this form of Buddhism appeals to observing the precepts and fostering compassion. Reason is present but considered as only one aspect of morality. Virtue, for the Buddhist, is more the effect of ridding oneself of the three ‘defilements’ – craving, hatred and delusion – through an interdependent practice of mindfulness, meditation, and morality, which together will lead to a lack of a sense of a separate self. Harvey outlines the importance of the no-self doctrine for a Buddhist:

It supports ethics by undermining the source of lack of respect, selfishness. This is done by undercutting the notion that ‘I’ am a substantial, self-identical entity, one that should be gratified and be able to override others if they get in ‘my’ way. It means that ‘your’ suffering and ‘my’ suffering are not inherently different. They are just suffering, so the barrier which generally keeps us within our own ‘self-interest’ should be dissolved, or widened in its scope till it includes all beings.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Gallagher, op. cit. 215

<sup>135</sup> Harvey, [1990] p. 198

This is a metaphysical world-view that presumes the collapse of subject and object into one/self as sole determiner of thought and experience. To shape one's world as a Buddhist, one has only to think of oneself as one with the universe, that one is a karmic force through one's breathing and one's action.

Of course, a belief as simple sounding in theory is far from being simple in practice. Ambivalent positions regarding the status of women, for example may be used to illustrate just how difficult achieving oneness with the universe is. The Buddha's enlightenment and teaching with respect to oneness with all sentient beings led early Buddhism to stress the basic equality of all humans and denounce opposing tendencies in Brahmanism.<sup>136</sup> However, the history of Buddhist attitudes to women has varied across time and depends largely on the different cultures by which Buddhism has been embraced: at one time and in one culture there has been a acceptance of the equality of status between men and women as part of his insight: at another time, or in another place, the possibility of a woman attaining 'Buddhahood' has been claimed to be conditional on her re-birth as a man (usually after seven re-births). Beginning with Diana Paul's ground-breaking 'Women in Buddhism' (1979), the ensuing feminist discussion has examined the reasons for the discrepancy between basic Buddhist insights on the one hand, and the traditional restriction of 'Buddhahood' to the male gender (as well as all the other forms of gender-inequality) on the other. Schmidt-Leukel summarises:

The male perspective is dominant because men dominated the institutional structures of Buddhism. Buddhist feminists, like their counterparts in other religious traditions, are therefore not only working towards an equal access of women to a game in which men set the rules, but towards a change of the rules themselves.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> *Brahman* refers to ultimate divine reality; the adherents of Brahmanism were members of the priest-caste. Buddhist teaching partly arose out of reaction against the hierarchical teaching of the ancient Indian religion.

<sup>137</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, [2006] *Understanding Buddhism*, p.157

While the results from successful negotiation of the ‘Middle Way’ of the Buddha, or of the ‘Doctrine of the Mean’ of Aristotle, might appear similar, they conceal some radical differences. As we have already seen, Aristotle places great importance on our nature as rational beings. This determines our ultimate well-being and the virtues that contribute to it. For Aristotle the basic model is the regulation of desires and emotions by reason. Appropriate responses are the ones that are in accord with the judgement of a particular type of person – the person of practical wisdom. Moreover, virtues are to be defined in terms of a judgement. His claim implies that for an emotional response to be virtuous it must be in accord with what reason judges to be the true demands of the situation, since reason aims at truth. Emotions, then, are not simply to be accepted as given. They are subject to rational assessment and ideally to rational control. The standard by which virtuous and vicious dispositions are distinguished from one another is a rational standard. The important point in every case is to discern and, if possible, name the patterns of emotional over- and under-reaction and to be ready should they arise again. For Aristotle’s man of practical reason, deliberative, emotional, and social skills are all necessary and interweave with each other.

For the Buddha, desires and emotions are also regulated but not in the same way as those of Aristotle’s man of practical reason. Since he was more deeply pessimistic about human nature, he believed that desires and emotions needed to be reshaped rigorously from the perspective of the realization of selflessness. This depends more on the meditative disciplines than on rational inquiry as a purifying preparation for a non-dualist experience that expresses itself above all in compassion and unlimited loving-kindness. It is said to remove the film of ignorance that clouds insight into one’s own true nature and that of reality. Although Aristotle’s exemplar of the first

kind of ideal life in the ideally circumstanced situation, his intellectual contemplative, is also disciplined, the object of his reflection is quite different from that of his Buddhist counterpart. Moreover, as already argued in Chapter One, the state of *eudaimonia* is more regularly attained and understood in the second exemplar of Aristotelian ideal life, in the however-circumstanced situation of Aristotle's man of practical wisdom. In either case, Aristotle's more optimistic belief in human nature's innate capacity for rational inquiry, plus a metaphysical framework that depends on the interdependent and inter-subjective nature of a flourishing individual and community, are the two features that most distinguish his man of virtue from that of the Buddha.<sup>138</sup>

In Chapter Two reference was made to the Buddhist claim that there are three main elements in any spiritual progress: *sila* (morality), *prajna* (insight or wisdom) and *samadhi* (meditative cultivation). Basic to the core element of *samadhi* for B. Alan Wallace are two central practices: the Buddha's 'Four Foundations of Mindfulness;' and a matrix of contemplations: 'Dwelling on the Four Divine Abidings' or 'The Four Immeasurables' (I will use find the latter term here since it captures more closely the cosmic extent of the meditations). Mindfulness was already discussed in Chapter Two. I will discuss here the first two meditations on the affective states of loving-kindness and compassion; they are key to 'The Four Immeasurables' and the remaining two, empathetic joy and equanimity, depend on them, if they are to be effective.<sup>139</sup>

Wallace examines the first state, *metta* or loving-kindness, which he understands as "the heartfelt yearning for the well-being of others." He explains that the English

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<sup>138</sup> Gowans. [2003] p. 182.

<sup>139</sup> Wallace B. A. (2001) "Intersubjectivity in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism," *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 8, no. 5-7, 2001, pp. 209-30

term ‘love’, although an equivalent of the *Pali*, is usually avoided in referring to *metta* since in English ‘love’ is often used in ways that conflate an ‘I-you’ relationship with an ‘I-it’ relationship. The loving-kindness cultivated in Buddhist practice emphatically entails an ‘I-you’ relationship; one learns to be vividly aware of the other person’s joys and sorrows, hopes and fears. But in English the word ‘love’ is also used in cases of sexual infatuation, possessive personal attachment, and even strong attraction to inanimate objects and events, all of which involve ‘I-it’ relationships.<sup>140</sup>

Traditionally in each of the four meditations one applies each of the states to oneself, in the first place; then one extends it outwards through a range of people, from known to unknown, best-liked to least-liked. In cultivating *metta*, for example, one first contemplates bestowing loving-kindness on oneself, then one proceeds to extend it. Wallace points out the apparent paradox of such a movement and explains that its rationale derives from a premise of the Buddha: ‘Whoever loves himself will never harm another.’<sup>141</sup>

One begins the meditative practice, therefore, by attending to one’s own longing for happiness and wish to be free of suffering, and one generates the loving wish: ‘May I be free of animosity, affliction and anxiety, and live happily;’ it is as if one has entered into an ‘I-you’ relationship with oneself.<sup>142</sup> In the next phase one evokes in one’s mind someone else whom one loves and respects, wishing for that individual the same as one has wished for oneself. One continues the sequence by evoking in one’s mind a dearly loved friend, then a person towards whom one has been

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid. 218. Cf., reference made in Ch. 2 to the variety of Buddhist terms to distinguish desire which is negative: *tanha*, attachment as possessive love or craving; *raga*, lust or extreme sensuous desire.

<sup>141</sup> Ireland, J. D. [1990] *The Udana: inspired utterances of the Buddha.*, 47, Buddhist Publication Society, Sri Lanka.

<sup>142</sup> Wallace op. cit. p. 218

indifferent, that is, an individual seen solely in terms of function (the ticket-collector, for example?), and finally a person for whom one has felt dislike. The aim of the practice is to gradually experience the same degree of loving kindness for the dear friend as for oneself, for the neutral person as for the dear friend, and finally for the person to whom one feels hostile as for the neutral person:

In this way the artificial 'I-it' barriers demarcating friend, stranger and foe are broken down, and immeasurable, unconditional loving-kindness may be experienced.<sup>143</sup>

Attachment, in the Buddhist negative sense of obsessive or clinging love, is frequently mistaken for loving-kindness; for this reason the Buddhist calls it the 'close enemy' or counterfeit of loving-kindness. According to Buddhism, the opposite of *metta* is not indifference, but hatred, which is described as the 'distant enemy' of loving-kindness. One succeeds in the loving-kindness practice when it causes animosity to subside, and one fails when the practice leads only to selfish affection, or attachment, for this implies that one is still in an 'I-it' relationship.

*Karuna* or compassion is the second of the four 'Immeasurables' and is inextricably connected to loving-kindness. With loving-kindness one longs that others may find genuine happiness and the causes of happiness, and with compassion one longs that others may be free of suffering and its causes; they are two sides of the same coin. Wallace draws a parallel: just as attachment is frequently mistaken for loving-kindness, so righteous indignation for others can be confused with compassion. If one's compassion extends only to the victims and not to their persecutors, one risks attachment to the victims and hatred of the perpetrators of misery/violence; one is still trapped in an 'I-it' mentality. Wallace explains:

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid. 219

According to Buddhism, all the evil perpetrated in the world stems from attachment, aversion, and the ignorance and delusion that underlie both. These destructive tendencies are regarded as mental afflictions, very much like physical afflictions, and those who are dominated by them are even more deserving of compassion than those afflicted with physical diseases.<sup>144</sup>

As in the practice for the loving-kindness meditation, one follows a similar sequence in cultivating compassion. One attends first to someone who is downtrodden and miserable, wishing, 'If only this person could be freed from such suffering!' One then focuses on an evil-doer (without regard to whether the individual seems happy at present), on a dear person, a neutral person, and finally on someone for whom one has felt hostility. The goal is as before, namely, to break down the barriers separating these different types of individuals until one's compassion extends to all beings.

Wallace pinpoints the "counterfeit" of compassion as grief. When one attends empathetically to another person who is unhappy, one's own sadness may give rise to righteous indignation and the wish to exact revenge, on behalf of the victim, on the one who has made the other person unhappy. However, empathetic sadness, properly understood, is a catalyst for compassion in Buddhist terms, causing one to move from the reality of the present suffering to wishing the other the possibility of freedom from that suffering.<sup>145</sup>

The opposite of compassion is not indifference for the Buddhist, which is a passive and neutral stance. Its opposite is cruelty, whereby, despite one's acknowledgment of the inter-subjective nature of self and other, one wishes consciously, and irrationally, that the individual in question may experience misery/violence. Wallace reminds us:

It is important to emphasise that the Buddhist meditative cultivation of loving-kindness and compassion was never intended as a *substitute* for active service to others. Rather, it is a *mental preparation* for such altruistic service that raises

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<sup>144</sup> Wallace, op. cit. 219. Compassion for the persecutor does not mean that the violence is condoned.

<sup>145</sup> Op. cit., 220

the likelihood of such outer behaviour being truly an expression of an inner, benevolent concern for others' well-being.<sup>146</sup>

A Buddhist practitioner is responding to the four 'Immeasurables' as a person of faith within a living tradition rather than as an exponent of a hard-edged system of belief. It is in the former light that the testimony of many Buddhists is to be understood when they describe the format and prescriptions for meditating on the four wholesome, affective states as a most effective means of re-establishing harmony and balance within whichever state one is currently contemplating. As when Buddhist forms of mindfulness meditation (both serenity and insight forms) are properly understood and practised, similarly meditation on the four 'Immeasurables' is rather a form of discipline than a technique aimed at achieving peak experiences. That the latter aim is frequently mistaken as the true purpose of any meditation is a measure of the strength of ego-attachment. Despite the unfamiliarity of this approach to non-Buddhists, they may find it raises an essential question – where can one realistically begin to change the world except in oneself? The latter finds a parallel in Aristotle's conviction that a person learns to become responsible for her actions from earliest childhood. We might say, then, that both the Buddha and Aristotle echo Gandhi's dictum: "Be the change you want to see in the world," and this similarity will be developed more appropriately in chapter Five.

Gowans brings the difference in aim between the two sets of ethics into sharpest focus in his comparison of the moderation conveyed by Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean and the radical transformation the Buddha thought was required to attain nirvana:

For the Buddha our unenlightened nature is deeply flawed, and only extraordinary measures can overcome this. Aristotle's conception of human

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<sup>146</sup> Op. cit., 219

nature is quite different: the virtues develop our nature, but they do not radically transform it.....<sup>147</sup>

Aristotle attaches the predominant weight to reason, and the Buddha to insight. Conversely, whereas the Buddha attaches most importance to meditative cultivation, in both versions of the Aristotelian ideal life, that of the man of contemplation, as well as that of the man of practical wisdom, Aristotle stresses rational inquiry.

How are we to evaluate the differences in this comparison of Aristotelian and Buddhist ethics? It has been emphasised several times in this chapter that Aristotle's ethics is grounded on an interdependent and inter-subjective connection between the flourishing of individuals and their society. Wallace points out that Western thought is mainly anthropocentric with regard to inter-subjective relationships.<sup>148</sup> One might argue that Aristotle's social ethic is a prime example of this. It has already been mentioned that, if an individual is to flourish, her virtuous activity has always to be for the sake of the other, that is, the community (and vice-versa). On the other hand, Buddhism, as already mentioned, is bio-centric; its aim is to cultivate loving-kindness and the other three 'wholesome' or virtuous affective states towards *all* sentient beings.

More may be gained by seeking the perfection of Buddhist ethics, compassion for all sentient beings, at the present time, given our many, varied concerns about climate change, terrorism, third world poverty, and so on. At the same time, rational reflection and action, which are central to Aristotle's approach to ethics, make a complementary claim as indispensable to any worthwhile account of ethics and ethical behaviour. These themes will be developed and substantiated in Chapter Five.

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<sup>147</sup> Gowans [2003] pp.163-4

<sup>148</sup> Wallace, op. cit. 215

## Chapter Four

### A comparison of Aristotelian and Buddhist ethics: the similarities

Christopher W. Gowans, in *Philosophy of the Buddha* [2003], welcomes a comparison of Buddhist and – among others – Aristotelian ethics when he says:

Lines of communication are available by which a Western philosophical perspective might constructively encounter the teaching of the Buddha.<sup>149</sup>

In *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*<sup>150</sup> Damien Keown had already set up the kind of comparison of Buddhist and Aristotelian ethics that Gowans thinks is useful. My previous chapter signalled that the two sets of ethics represent very different approaches to the basic moral question of how we should lead our lives. Keown provides another perspective: Aristotle and the Buddha reached very similar conclusions as to how we should conduct our lives, if we wish to find happiness and fulfilment as human beings. In the section that follows, I will develop his analysis of the two approaches and advance some observations of my own on his comparison.

Notwithstanding the differences between Buddhist and Aristotelian ethics noted in Chapter Three, and in particular between the metaphysics of the Aristotelian subject and the Buddhist no-self, there are many similarities to be found between the two sets of ethics. The first of these is in terms of moral choice or judgement. The Buddhist term for moral choice, *cetana*, covers such a wide psychological continuum from intention and volition to stimulus, motive, and drive, that it is not likely that any single term in English will convey its full range of meanings.<sup>151</sup> The Encyclopaedia of Buddhism describes it as follows:

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<sup>149</sup> Gowans, C.W. [2003] *Philosophy of the Buddha*, Routledge, p. 6

<sup>150</sup> Keown, D. [2001] *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, Palgrave, New York.

<sup>151</sup> The problem with translation is a familiar one. Cf., earlier discussion of the range of English terms used to render the Greek term ‘*eudaimonia*.’

*Cetana* or the will which is conditioned by affective and cognitive elements (*vedana, sanna*) may either function as the closely directed effort on the part of the individual or it may function, as it often does, without conscious deliberation by him.<sup>152</sup>

Keown extends this definition, suggesting that it may well stand for Aristotelian *phronesis* or practical reason:

[When] *cetana* is understood in an expanded goal-seeking sense, that is, when it is considered in terms of motivation, it will be directed towards some end or other. It would then not be just the specific faculty of choice which comes at the end of deliberation, but also be present from the start as the faculty which originally intuits the good ends in connection with which practical choices will subsequently need to be made.<sup>153</sup>

So, there is a dual emphasis on both affective and cognitive aspects of effort or will and conscious and unconscious deliberation or choice, but these pairs are not separate in action for the Buddhist.

*Prohairesis*, Aristotle's moral judgement, likewise involves the cooperation – even the interplay – of reason and desire. Aristotle says that *prohairesis* is 'either desireful reason or reasonable desire' (NE VI.2, 1139b4-5). In speaking of *prohairesis* Keown uses the term 'faculties;' in speaking of *cetana* he refers to 'elements.' He explains his use of different terms as reflecting the greater ontological commitment of the Aristotelian notion of a permanent self, as distinct from the Buddhist notion of a process-self.<sup>154</sup> The most significant aspect of his comparison for Keown is the common ground they share. He notes that moral responsibility and moral choice are both determined by the total personality with its cognitive and affective faculties:

*Cetana* and *prohairesis* are defined with reference to that core of the personality which is the final resort of explanation for moral action and which is ultimately definitive of moral status.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> EB 'Cetana' p. 90

<sup>153</sup> Keown, op. cit. 218

<sup>154</sup> Op. cit., 209

<sup>155</sup> Op. cit., 221

To which aspect of the core person do we appeal, if we wish to explain moral action and ascribe moral status? As discussed previously in Chapter One, Aristotelian ethics appeals primarily to desire in its pre-reflective state, then – through an appeal to the good – pre-reflective desire is tempered by reflective reason. The involvement of reason in this process does not mean that moral choice is calculative at base: virtue is manifest most clearly in one who chooses promptly and intuitively what is right:

In such a person the desire for the good is instinctive and the choice of right means can be made immediately without the distorting influence of egoistical considerations.<sup>156</sup>

Keown draws a parallel between Aristotelian and Buddhist desire for the good:

In Buddhism virtuous choices are rational choices motivated by a desire for what is good and deriving their validation ultimately from the final good for man (*nirvana*).<sup>157</sup>

It may strike some Buddhist scholars as strange to speak approvingly of ‘desire,’ but Keown hopes to disprove an all too common view that the Buddhist stance is to seek an end to *all* desire. Keown points out that, in a Buddhist context, such an assumption regarding the total elimination of all desire:

[This] would be a suppression of the affective side of human nature and result only in apathy..... What Buddhism seeks an end of is desire for what is not good, namely things which cripple rather than promote spiritual growth.<sup>158</sup>

Buddhism aims not to eradicate all feeling but to liberate it from its attachment to false values. The goal, as with an Aristotelian “life of activity in accordance with virtue,” is to replace worthless objectives by an orientation of the entire personality towards the good. Keown points to the way in which the Buddha’s own life witnessed to the truth of this:

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<sup>156</sup> Op. cit., 221

<sup>157</sup> Op. cit., 222

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

Even the Buddha was not free of desires, although he was, of course, free from desire motivated by delusion (selfish desire). His desire for the well-being of others became his characteristic feature throughout his life before *nirvana*, and remained thereafter. He tells us that as far as others are concerned 'he desires their good, welfare and salvation.'<sup>159</sup>

To attain enlightenment and pass from being Gautama to Buddha, he had to have lost all attachment to false thinking and false desires, that is, become ego-less. 'Thereafter' in the text refers to his continuing to live a moral, compassionate life after enlightenment. Enlightenment itself must be desired as the most worthwhile goal, and in the later Buddhist Canon King Ananda rejects the suggestion that desire for *nirvana* is a hindrance to its attainment.<sup>160</sup> The need to dispel the mistaken notion that for the Buddhist desire is necessarily bad, was clarified in Chapter Two. There it was suggested that a better understanding in the West of the different shades of meaning of the Buddhist terms for desire is indispensable if, for example, one is to be able to distinguish *chanda*/'right' or positive desire from *tanha*/'wrong' or negative desire.

Keown points to a dual aspect in correcting *tanha*/wrong desire: through moderation or restraint first putting a stop to its excessive forms; and second the directing of desire towards that which is identified as good. It is in this second aspect that Keown finds a parallel between Buddhist disciplining and Aristotelian habituation and education. Buddhism needs:

a programme of correct rational analysis. What is required to overcome *tanha* is the partnership of reason and *chanda*/right desire, involving both insight into the unworthy nature of these objectives and the simultaneous education of the feelings to delight in only worthwhile (good) ends.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> *Samyutta-Nikaya*, (Scriptures), v.271ff.

<sup>161</sup> Op. cit. 224

The work of Aristotle's *phronesis* or practical wisdom is also to identify what is truly good (and therefore truly desirable) and to pursue it intelligently, that is, by acting in accordance with reason. Keown notes that, similarly for the Buddhist, where the emotional response is quite appropriate:

[K]*usala* or virtue involves both a correct identification of the good and a participation in it, and it is from this participation that arise the feelings of satisfaction and delight in the good.<sup>162</sup>

It is important to underline that, like Aristotelian love of virtue for its own sake, the feelings of delight are not dubious motivators for the Buddhist. What Keown underlines is *tanha* as an incorrect evaluation and inappropriate emotional response:

Craving stands for the kind of desire which is never satisfied. Its aim is the experience of pleasurable states, but since these are transient it can never find fulfilment. One simple example of *tanha* is like the desire of an alcoholic for one drink after another whereas *chanda* is the alcoholic's desire to give up alcohol once and for all. In the latter case the desire dissolves upon the attainment of the goal, and positive feelings of satisfaction and achievement accompany the attainment of the goal.<sup>163</sup>

Keown concludes that the kind of desire to be avoided is not the desire to attain good ends, but the addictive desire for sensory gratification, one which cannot ever be satisfied and yet refuses to let go of its objective. The need to root out the latter is a more radical notion than the Aristotelian conception of moderation of the emotions but I will return to the latter comparison when considering the 'middle way' in this chapter. The common ground I wish to highlight here is that each delights in the good. Keown concludes that both Buddhist and the Aristotelian ethics are teleological in nature, in that each has an end in view, the good in each case being seen as consisting in some natural end for human beings. For Aristotle it is *eudaimonia* or happiness as the conception of a good, human life, attained through the exercise of virtue. For the

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<sup>162</sup> Op. cit., 224

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

Buddha it is nirvana or liberation as the conception of freedom from rebirth and suffering, attained through the exercise of compassion. So, as teleological systems they are similar to each other in structure. The starting point in each case is in what Keown describes as ‘untutored’ human nature from which one moves towards the final *telos* or goal. Moral choice is the mechanism by which progress towards this goal is made. Given that Aristotelian and Buddhist ethics are so dissimilar, especially in view of their differing metaphysical frameworks, the similarity concerning moral choice and judgement is very important. I will return to the teleological parallel shortly when discussing the theme of virtue in both sets of ethics.

The Buddha and Aristotle each invite us to consider moral virtue in ways which, on the face of it, are remarkably similar. In the first *sutta* or parable, the Buddha describes the Eightfold path as a ‘middle way’ between the extremes of pursuing ‘sensual happiness’ and pursuing ‘self-mortification.’ This idea invites comparison with Aristotle’s doctrine that moral virtue is ‘a mean between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency’ (*Nicomachean Ethics*: 1107a3). One apt example of this comparison between the two may be seen with respect to temperance or moderation, the Aristotelian virtue that is an intermediate state (relative to the individual) concerning the bodily pleasures of eating, drinking and having sex. The similarity between the Buddha and Aristotle is that, for both of them, the correct avenue to moderation negotiates between the extremes of greed on the one hand, and harsh asceticism on the other. The results from successful negotiation of the middle way of the Buddha and of the doctrine of the mean for Aristotle are similar in formal terms.

Gowans agrees with Keown’s claim of similarity on teleological grounds but holds that the similarity is at the formal level only.

Agreed that Aristotle and the Buddha both advocate that we must follow a middle way, are their respective paths as dissimilar as Gowans maintains?

Keown describes Aristotle's doctrine of the mean as essentially an attempt to establish where an appropriate emotional response lies and in doing this he refers to Richard Norman who writes:

I take the doctrine to be a thesis about the proper relation between reason and feeling.<sup>164</sup>

Norman regards the Aristotelian thesis as lying midway between the extreme positions typified by Plato and D.H. Lawrence:

For Plato, reason (*logos*) must assert authoritative control over the other two parts of the soul (desire and anger). For Lawrence, on the other hand, 'reason should keep out of the way, and leave room for the free and entirely spontaneous expression of the feelings.'<sup>165</sup>

Aristotle adopts a middle position and Keown claims that, essentially, the Buddha does also. However, he qualifies this claim by admitting that the variety of Buddhist doctrines permits views closer to both extremes.<sup>166</sup> For example, in respect of Theravada Buddhism there is talk of eradicating the passions as if they had an autonomous life independent of reason; and in Mahayana Buddhism, by the time of Santiveda, *raga*, lust or craving is spoken of as a virtue, paradoxically, and becomes almost indispensable for enlightenment.<sup>167</sup> Certainly, neither of these extremes would be acceptable to either Aristotle or the Buddha, given that each of them advocates a 'middle way.' Norman usefully sums up the interplay, rather than bifurcation of emotion and reason, common to the approach of both, when he says of Aristotle:

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<sup>164</sup> Norman, R. [1983] *The Moral Philosophers*, p. 50. Quoted by Keown, op. cit. 225

<sup>165</sup> Norman, op. cit. 51. Quoted by Keown, op. cit. 225

<sup>164</sup> Keown, op. cit. 225

<sup>167</sup> *Siksa-Samuccaya*, 92. 4-10

I want to suggest that we can usefully see Aristotle as questioning the necessity of this antagonism. For Aristotle, feelings can themselves be the embodiment of reason. It is not just a matter of reason controlling and guiding the feelings. Rather the feelings can *themselves* be more or less rational. Reason can *be present in them*.<sup>168</sup>

To say that feelings are rational means that they are appropriate to the situation. For Aristotle a strong emotion such as anger may be appropriate in certain circumstances, at which time it loses its negative connotation. In Christianity there is a similar place for what Scripture describes as ‘righteous anger.’ This is perhaps more readily understood to-day as ‘justified anger,’ for example, in the face either of the increasing debt through the conditionality placed on loans to developing countries by the World Bank or of the corruption of governments in Third World countries responsible for administration of the funds.

For the Buddha, however, anger is *always* an inappropriate emotional response. If protest is called for, only non-violent protest, driven by compassion, is condoned. In late September 2007 Buddhist monks in Myanmar pleaded with lay people to leave them to protest peacefully, to ensure that any confrontation with the repressive regime remained non-violent.<sup>169</sup>

It is not disputed that the Buddha’s ‘middle way’ and Aristotle’s Doctrine of the Mean conceal significant differences behind their formal similarity, as Gowans claims. The most revealing is shown in this remark by Aristotle: ‘People who are deficient in pleasures and enjoy them less than is right are not found very much. For that sort of insensibility is not human’ (*Nichomachean Ethics*: 1119a7-9). For the Buddha, such persons were found easily; he himself had been an extreme ascetic and had lived alongside many ‘*samanas*’ or reclusive ascetics. But the similarity between

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<sup>168</sup> Norman, op. cit. 52. Emphasis in the original. Quoted by Keown, op. cit. 226

<sup>169</sup> The monks’ marching resembles epic movements of the last century, in particular, Gandhi’s salt march, Dr. King’s Civil Rights movement, and the non-violent campaigns in Lithuania and South Africa. The Burmese military crackdown evokes memories of the massacre of Tiananmen Square.

them in terms of moral (and intellectual) virtue is of central importance, despite the differences of emphasis and means – both hold that our human happiness depends on our being able to moderate our desires and emotions.

This raises the question of similarity in another guise: If both Aristotle and the Buddha agree that we must follow the middle way, how is the correct response to be interpreted? Keown points to a crucial difference between the two with regard to how the correct response is established:

For Aristotle, the correct response (the mean) is determined by the man of practical wisdom, the *phronimos*. For Buddhists the *phronimos* is the Buddha, and it is his choice which determines where virtue lies.<sup>170</sup>

The record of the Buddha's important moral choices is to be found in Buddhist sources such as the Tracts and the preceptual formulae drawn from them as the tradition developed. We find the correct role for the emotions in Buddhist ethics in the sentiments of love and concern, in the compassion, which inspired the Buddha to make the choices he did. The themes of reason and compassion will be resumed at a later point.<sup>171</sup>

Returning now to the teleological similarity between Aristotelian and Buddhist ethics, Chapter Three argued that *eudaimonia* and nirvana constitute different final ends for Aristotelian and Buddhist ethics. However, the two states are similar insofar as each is founded on a doctrine of the perfectibility of human nature. There is considerable common ground between the moral perspectives of Aristotle and the Buddha: they both advocate a moral perfection of the person that involves moral, intellectual, and emotional training.

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<sup>170</sup> Keown, *op. cit.*, 226

<sup>171</sup> *Op. cit.*, 227

The most notable Western moral theory that stresses virtue is the eudaimonism of the ancient philosophers, especially that of Aristotle. Like Keown, Gowans agrees that Aristotle's emphasis on virtue and his conviction that a life of virtue and a happy life are closely connected provide much common ground with the Buddha's moral outlook.<sup>172</sup> In their respective moral teachings Aristotle does not ignore principles, nor does the Buddha ignore rules. But of central importance in each of their ethics is the kind of character a person develops. Others interested in addressing the connections between Eastern and Western philosophy, for example, B. Alan Wallace,<sup>173</sup> and those interested in the connections between philosophy and the cognitive sciences, such as Terrell Ward Bynum<sup>174</sup> and Shaun Gallagher,<sup>175</sup> all agree with Keown and Gowans on this point. Paul Harvey also supports the claim that Aristotelian ethics is a better broad Western analogue to Buddhist ethics than any other ethics, Kantian or Utilitarian, say. He pinpoints the notion as common to both sets of ethics that what one should do is seen as enriching and rewarding.<sup>176</sup>

However, Gowans points out that it is the similarity regarding the interdependence of virtue and fulfilment in both sets of ethics which has given rise to Aristotle and the Buddha each being accused of a form of ethical egoism: the emphasis is on achieving *my* happiness or overcoming *my* suffering, and moral virtue seems only a "fortunate

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<sup>172</sup> Op. cit. p. 183

<sup>173</sup> Wallace, B.A. [2001] "Intersubjectivity in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism," *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 8, no. 5-7: 209-30

<sup>174</sup> Bynum, T. W. [2007] "Copernican Revolution in Ethics," *Computing, Information and Cognition: The Nexus in The Liminal*, Eds. Dodig-Crnkovic, G. & Stuart, S. A. J., Cambridge Scholars Press.

<sup>175</sup> Gallagher, S. [2007] "Moral Agency, Self-Consciousness, and Practical Wisdom," *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 14, No. 5-6.

<sup>176</sup> Harvey, P. [2000] *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, p. 50

by-product of this endeavour.”<sup>177</sup> But this does not hold in either case. The man of practical wisdom has considerable concern for the good of others for their own sake – his aim, according to Aristotle, is not to gratify selfish desires. As for the Buddhist, it has been mentioned that, though the initial motivation for undertaking the Eightfold Path may be focussed on one’s own suffering, by the time one becomes fully enlightened, one is understood to have a selfless compassion for all beings.

Each set of ethics is centrally grounded on virtue as forming a person’s character. For the Buddhist the first section in the threefold division of the Eightfold Path, *sila* (the three factors, right speech, right action, and right livelihood), may be translated as virtue as well as morality. With our eye on the centrality of virtue, it is significant that the other two sections include moral dimensions: right intention, classified under wisdom; right effort, classified under concentration. The interdependence of the three sections is illustrated by the Buddha’s comment that: ‘wisdom is purified by morality, and morality is purified by wisdom.’<sup>178</sup> His conclusion parallels the final view of Aristotle that one cannot be morally good without practical wisdom, nor have practical wisdom without possessing the moral virtues.<sup>179</sup>

Unlike Aristotle, the Buddha’s moral teaching functions at two levels, in keeping with his metaphysics: it is both a means to enlightenment (in preliminary form in this-life nirvana), and a product of it (in its highest manifestation in post-death nirvana). However, since the primary aim of the Buddha’s message is the achievement of enlightenment and the fully enlightened person is both virtuous and happy, his teaching centrally includes a moral teaching based on virtue. It is this latter aspect of Buddhist ethics which most closely parallels Aristotle’s ethics of virtue; *both* ethics

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<sup>177</sup> Gowans, [2003] p. 183

<sup>178</sup> The paraphrase of Buddhist virtue and the comment from *The Long Discourses of the Buddha* are drawn from Gowans [2003] p. 176

<sup>179</sup> N.E. VI, 13, 1144b31-32

resonate with MacIntyre's challenge to ethicists to look at persons, by addressing the question: What type of people ought we to become? Aristotelian and Buddhist ethics both exemplify MacIntyre's model of a re-personalised ethics, unsurprisingly in the case of the former since MacIntyre drew on the Aristotelian question 'How ought I to live?' in the first place. Rather than our first asking 'whether an action is right,' MacIntyre urges us to attend to 'not only what we are now doing,' but more importantly to, 'who we are now becoming.'<sup>180</sup> The interesting discovery for the author has been how big a role the latter notion plays in Buddhist ethics also.

At the outset of *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* Keown sets out the evidence that there has been a turning away from an earlier intellectualisation of Buddhism. This had fostered a devaluation of ethics, relegated it to a preliminary stage of the religious life, implying that we live through an initial, necessary, ethical stage, but move on to a stage where insight is primary and we can afford to let go of ethical concerns. In support of his thesis that there has been a turning away from an over-emphasis on *prajna* or insight, he cites what he calls Harvey Aronson's "landmark study," *Love and Sympathy in Theravada Buddhism* (1980). The latter work stressed the Buddha's compassion, rather than that knowledge which we associate with reason and judgement, whether empirical, aesthetic or ethical.<sup>181</sup> Keown's own work develops Aronson's thesis by suggesting that characterisation of Buddhist ethics can be resolved most successfully when more basic questions concerning their overall structure and role in relationship to Buddhist soteriology have been explored.<sup>182</sup> Though Keown has elected to go along holistic lines in his analysis, at this point he is careful to emphasise that at the same time he believes that the principles of Buddhist

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<sup>180</sup> MacIntyre, A. [1981] *After Virtue: a study in moral theory*,

<sup>181</sup> Keown, op. cit., 18

<sup>182</sup> Op. cit., 19

ethics are not *sui generis*; they are not to be understood exclusively on their own terms. This is important in relation to Aristotle's belief that ethical action is not dependent on merely subjective judgements. Furthermore, there is an objective criterion of what is ethical which ranks above conventional and cultural norms.

What Keown underlines is that the Buddha and Aristotle are in agreement about the fundamental importance of aiming at a life of human perfection by developing a person's knowledge and character, that is, both the head and the heart.<sup>183</sup> The key similarity between the Buddha and Aristotle, in respect of attaining the goal of perfection, is their view of moral virtue: both hold that our human happiness depends on our being able to control our desires and emotions. In Chapter Three I drew out the differences between them in their ends and the paths for achieving those ends. Aristotle sees the virtues as developing our nature, but not transforming it, with the emphasis throughout on rational choice. For the Buddha, desires and emotions are radically reshaped from the perspective of the realization of selflessness, with the emphasis more on the meditative disciplines. However, a significant point of similarity between them is their insistence on the foundational importance of the education of feelings, beginning with the early training of desires and emotions, if one is to lead a good life.

Keown illustrates the similarity between the two ethics by describing them in their respective terms. An Aristotelian moral life is one of development: the attainment of *eudaimonia* involves true happiness and a human flourishing in which the *psyche* is marked by excellences of reason and character. The aetiology of a virtuous action for Aristotle is that it is an action done for its own sake and any virtuous action has the intrinsic quality of bringing about human flourishing.<sup>184</sup> Though human flourishing is of direct benefit to the individual agent, given Aristotle's notion of man as a social/political

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<sup>183</sup> Keown, *op. cit.*, 209

<sup>184</sup> *Op. cit.*, 194

being, all individual flourishing also contributes to the building up or flourishing of the community – for Aristotle, the city-state or *polis*.

From within his own framework, the Buddha's moral life is one of the transformation of the individual: this is achieved by eliminating both spiritual ignorance and attachment, which feed off each other, by cultivating intellectual, emotional and moral virtues, and sharing something of the qualities of the goal towards which they move. To be virtuous, therefore, a moral action is one done primarily for its own sake and only secondarily for its results, for the Buddha as well as for Aristotle. Though the former perceives it as a transformative process and the latter conceives of it as a developmental one, in both Aristotelian and Buddhist ethics:

An individual good action embodies a virtue which conduces to and 'participates' in the goal of human perfection; over a lifetime such good actions conjoin to attain human perfection.<sup>185</sup>

Both are 'teleological' in that they advocate an action which moves towards a *telos* or goal/end with which they have an intrinsic, intentional relationship,<sup>186</sup> as opposed to their being simply 'consequentialist,' that is, the extrinsic good of Utilitarianism: judging an act by the effects it happens to have.<sup>187</sup>

Now we must ask, in respect of any link we claim between psychology and moral philosophy, how far may Aristotelian and Buddhist ethics be said to resemble each other? The existence of a relationship between morality and the emotions has been recognised for a long time by moral philosophers but the nature of the relationship has continued to be disputed. Both Hobbes<sup>188</sup> and Hume,<sup>189</sup> for example, tried to ground

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<sup>185</sup> Keown, *op. cit.*, 194

<sup>186</sup> *Op. cit.*, 184, 194

<sup>187</sup> *Op. cit.*, 23, 202

<sup>188</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1651.

<sup>189</sup> Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1739-40.

morality entirely in the emotions, while others, such as Kant,<sup>190</sup> sought to account for morality in terms of reason alone. Buddhism is commonly, and mistakenly, identified in the West with the Socratic position, which maintains that virtue is reducible to knowledge. Keown contests this view on the basis that, just as neither *vedana* or feeling, nor *sanna* or thinking are reducible to one another, so neither of the two basic values of Buddhism, *sila* or morality and *prajna* or knowledge is reducible to the other. He offers an alternative approach, previously mentioned: viewing the reason-emotion bifurcation as artificial and seeking a ‘middle way’ between them. This is the Aristotelian tradition and, for Keown, the view most congenial to Buddhism. For both of these approaches reason and feeling are complementary rather than disjunctive.<sup>191</sup> In the context of modern moral philosophy, the argument regarding the interplay of reason and feeling is one that is well established (cf. the stream of literature following its reprise by MacIntyre). However, as indicated earlier in this chapter, Keown’s thesis is innovative. In likening the Buddha’s ‘middle way’ to Aristotle’s ‘doctrine of the mean,’ it presents the opposite view to that of Gowans, who holds that the similarity between the two ways is merely formal.

I will examine the connections Keown claims between their respective psychologies and philosophies. In speaking of the Buddhist context, he describes the emotions as:

[T]hat non-rational dimension of psychic life which manifests itself across a spectrum or continuum of non-cognitive responses ranging from aversion, hostility, anger and wrath (encapsulated by *dosa* or hatred), to attachment, craving, longing and lust (encapsulated by *lobha* or greed). These are the extremes; the middle range of this continuum embraces attitudes such as benevolence, kindness, affection and sympathy.<sup>192</sup>

What is the evidence in the Buddhist context for a link between emotion and morality? Keown searches for it in the life and actions of the Buddha-to-be, Siddhattha

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<sup>190</sup> Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, 1785.

<sup>191</sup> Keown, op. cit. 72

<sup>192</sup> Ibid. 72

Gautama, in an effort to establish whether the Buddha's ethical perfection was founded on a sentiment of moral concern where 'moral concern' means non-self-referential concern for the welfare of others. By 'sentiment' is meant a non-cognitive state as distinct from the intellectual understanding or acceptance of the validity or rationality of a set of moral rules or principles. A 'moral intuitionist' approach is apt to be at the expense of reason, cf., Hume's aphorism: "Reason is the slave of the passions." As I hope to make clear, an outright appeal to the emotions is not the sole ground of Buddhist morality. But whilst the field of Buddhist ethics would be narrowed by collapsing them into a single form, in Mahayana Buddhism which is the focus here, the final emphasis is on compassion. Moral appreciation means caring about others and the effects that one's acts or non-acts will have upon them. Keown likens this regard for other persons to what, in the eighteenth century, Hume called the 'natural affections;' he characterises it in Buddhist terms as *metta* or love in the sense of 'loving-kindness.' While there is a link, it is not as strong as Keown claims.

Hume himself says that in general:

There is no such passion in the human mind as the love of mankind, merely as such, independent of personal qualities, of services, or of relation to ourself.<sup>193</sup>

Hume considered general benevolence (Buddhist compassion) possible as a 'natural virtue' for a few people only, since he thought it too remote and sublime a motive for most people. For the latter it is an 'artificial virtue;' they strive for general benevolence because, as a result of education and social expectations, they think it the right attitude to have.

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<sup>193</sup> Hume, D. [1740] (1972) *A Treatise of Human Nature, Books Two and Three*, Book III, Pt 2, sect 1, Collins, London.

In Aristotelian ‘psychology’ we do not find such a direct expression of the motive of Humean benevolence nor of Buddhist compassion at the heart of moral life. The motivating claim on the man of practical wisdom for virtuous action with regard to others derives from his leading a life of virtue: we have seen that he must choose to live it for its own sake and not for egoistic reasons. Aristotle’s high-minded view – that the life of the person who ‘presents truth’ will lead to her flourishing as well as that of her community (given their interdependence) – has been previously indicated. However, in the absence of any other-regarding sentiment it is arguable that there can be no motive for true moral action since the needs of others will fail to make any claim upon us. Aristotle’s expression of other-regarding sentiment differs in emphasis from that of Hume and the Buddha, but goodwill and friendship are as essential to his account of moral motivation as sympathy and compassion are to theirs respectively.

For Aristotle, “Goodwill is a friendly sort of relation, but is not identical with friendship.”<sup>194</sup> What distinguishes it from friendship is that one wishes the other well but would not put oneself out for her; Aristotle likens it to “inactive friendship.”<sup>195</sup> Goodwill in his sense seems the same as Hume’s ‘benevolence;’ it can be the beginning of growth into friendship where it is interrelated, for Aristotle, with two other central components, concord and beneficence.

Friendship is a signal feature of *eudaimon* individuals. However, for Aristotle, the motivation of friendship depends on a sense of reciprocal admiration for each other’s virtues, on the wish for a friend’s benefit for her own sake, rather than on a sense of mutual concern. In Book IX Aristotle argues that most people only really put themselves out for those they love, and can only love those they know. He believes

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<sup>194</sup> NE 2266b28

<sup>195</sup> NE 1167a11

that private life — the household and the small circle of one's friends — provides the best or most favorable scope for the exercise of virtue for most people. But Aristotle also believes that those who do put themselves out for the whole city do a “fine and godlike” thing;<sup>196</sup> such virtuous activity resembles Humean benevolence or Buddhist compassion more closely. Whilst he is convinced that the loss of virtuous activity in the private sphere would greatly detract from a well-lived life, Aristotle does not have a satisfactory explanation for why this would be. It might have been better if he had pinpointed the benefits of being the object of a close friend's care and concern. In the absence of friendship we would lose a benefit that could not be replaced by the care of the larger community. But Aristotle conceives of friendship as lying primarily in activity rather than receptivity. This makes it difficult for him to show that virtuous activity towards a friend is the uniquely important good he claims in Chapter IX: “Without friends, no one would choose to live, though he had all the other goods.”<sup>197</sup>

Is there any evidence of other-regarding sentiment as the ground of Buddhist ethics? Aronson's ‘Love and Sympathy in Theravada Buddhism’ (1980) provides evidence from the numerous references to Gautama's sympathy in the Theravada discourses that such a sentiment underpins the conduct of the Buddha and his disciples. The Buddha's moral concern is found in his sympathy or *anukampa* for all beings.<sup>198</sup> Aronson emphasises that the Buddha's moral concern was not a consequence of his enlightenment, it preceded it:

Gotama's *fundamental motive* in arising and coming to be was his concern for others' welfare.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> NE 1094b7-10

<sup>197</sup> NE 1155a2

<sup>198</sup> Etymologically *anukampa* can be understood as the condition of ‘being moved’ (*kampa*) ‘in accordance with [others],’ or ‘in response to [others]’ (*anu*). Keown, op. cit. 73

<sup>199</sup> Aronson, op. cit. 3 (Emphasis added.)

In further support of his view, Aronson quotes the Buddha's own words:

Monks, there is one individual who arose and came to be for the welfare of the multitudes, for the happiness of the multitudes, out of sympathy for the world; for the benefit, welfare, and happiness of gods and humans. Who is that one individual? The Harmonious One, the Perfectly Enlightened One.<sup>200</sup>

The Buddha is described in discourses as:

[S]ympathetic to all creatures. If with joyous heart he teaches others it is not from duty, but out of compassion and sympathy.<sup>201</sup>

This is the polar opposite of Kant's ethical motive and, *pace* Aristotle, not the kind of expression we associate with the *phronimos*.

In the face of the compassion attributed to the Buddha, it is clearly a misunderstanding of the doctrine of karma to view Buddhist ethics as motivated basically by the self-interested pursuit of karmic merit. The fact that sub-moral self-interest is displayed by some Buddhists is no more an argument for the claim that Buddhist ethics is 'egoistical' than is the fact that, because some Christians keep the commandments in the hope of going to heaven, Christian morality is merely enlightened self-interest. Keown points out that to require a non-moral reason for ethical action in Buddhism, for example, the incentive of karmic benefits, already shows a lack of moral concern.<sup>202</sup> Sympathy is not a reason in this sense: it is a non-rational sentiment which precedes the formulation of moral objectives. Sympathy is not a matter of the power of the will: a sentiment of concern cannot be engendered by a cognitive act.<sup>203</sup> One cannot simply **make** oneself care. The Buddha's emphasis on the need to re-align the emotions is similar to Aristotle's stress on the early training

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Sn. 693

<sup>202</sup> Keown, *op. cit.* 74

<sup>203</sup> Keown, *op. cit.* 74

and habituation of young children in appropriate feeling as the foundation of the moral virtues but to a limited degree. The radicalism of the Buddhist path distinguishes it from that of Aristotle. And it is from the Buddha's own exemplary moral life that his followers draw inspiration and a model for their conduct, with morality understood not as a means to an end but an end in itself; it cannot be adopted as a means to an end because sympathy cannot be adopted by a simple, rational decision. Either of their psychologies might be taken to an extreme, of course, transgression of the precepts might be justified on grounds of Buddhist compassion, hardness of heart on the part of the *phronimos*, but in both cases they cease to be virtues.

The emphasis in the Buddha's ethical motivation has been highlighted as very different from Aristotle's psychology. However, they do share common ground and in more than teleology. In defence of Keown's claim of the similarity between the two ethics, it is important to reiterate that emotion and reason play a conjoint part in the moral life for the Buddha and Aristotle. Moral decision derives from an integration of emotion and reason for each of them. For the Buddha, what is needed is a re-alignment of the emotions with right views through meditation, whilst Aristotle's *phronimos* is able to make rational, moral judgements spontaneously on the basis of trained dispositions of character and educated feelings. The two approaches differ in emphasis, but the common strand is that a gradual cultivation of moral and intellectual virtues must take place, in either case, if the 'middle way' is to succeed.

After examining the similarities between Buddhist and Aristotelian ethics, I am no less convinced of the differences between them. Indeed, on completing this chapter, it is even clearer, that the particular hallmark of Buddhist ethics is compassion, whereas that of Aristotle is reason. However, on account of similarities at the heart of their

ethics, the conclusion to this chapter is that the interplay between the two ethics is far more nuanced than anything the previous chapter suggested.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Implications for a “moral way” in an increasingly secular society**

My aim in this chapter is to postulate “a moral way.” It will be drawn from the interplay between aspects of Aristotelian and Buddhist ethics that I carried out in previous chapters. This endeavour presents one response to MacIntyre’s question as to what type of people we ought to become.

This chapter does not aim to present a new theory of moral education or provide an entire ethical programme for implementing at home and/or school; either undertaking would exceed the remit of this work. The author’s intention is to point to an objective moral framework with universal appeal. My suggestions are primarily directed towards a pluralist Scottish audience of parents and schoolteachers in the main, with a focus on young children. However, in the course of this research I have become more aware of the needs of undergraduate students, in particular, and have subsequently extended the remit in my introduction to include Scottish students in tertiary education. To this end, following both Aristotle and the Buddha, who each insisted in his own way that ethics was not to be considered an exact science, I will provide rudimentary guidelines for a moral way, particularly for those involved in the formal education of children. In addition, I will propose introducing students in tertiary education to mindfulness practice.

In broad terms, the comparison between Aristotelian and Buddhist ethics yielded a twofold result: they are similar in that, in both cases, the heart of the moral life is to be understood in terms of the interplay of both reason and feeling; they differ in the emphasis and perspective each has on reason and compassion respectively. The Buddha calls for universal compassion above all and attends less to reason. Aristotle founds his ethics on reason principally and compassion as a motivation is confined mainly to friends.

I have argued that the differences are due to their distinct metaphysics. For any suggested moral way I will draw on what I consider their complementary strengths.

Jan Steutel and Ben Spieker claim:

[T]he beliefs that sentimental education is a vital part of moral education and that habituation is a major part of sentimental education are at the ‘hard core’ of the Aristotelian tradition of moral thought and action.<sup>204</sup>

By ‘sentimental education’ they understand:

[T]he practice of cultivating the child’s feelings, that is, his passions, inclinations, emotions, appetites, pains and pleasures.<sup>205</sup>

The adjective ‘sentimental’ has several layers of meaning in English. It may refer to a sense of affective connection in relation to places, people, and so on. But it can also refer to an artificially contrived, affective ‘take’ in music, art, films, and relations with others. To take one example, the paintings of Joan Eardley which captured life in the crumbling post-war tenements of Glasgow’s Townhead illustrated the kind of subject matter that could be, and was, dismissed as sentimental – look at how the poor live: miserable though they are, they are still happy or something approaching it, despite their lack of goods.<sup>206</sup> The latter sense of ‘sentimental,’ often used disparagingly, contrasts sharply with the rich Enlightenment sense of the term ‘sentiment.’ For Hume the sentiments refer to the ‘natural affections,’ that is, only to an affective sense of positive connectedness in relation to places, people, and so on. For Adam Smith the ‘sentimental science’ was the science of psychology. Steutel and Spieker understand and use the term ‘sentimental education’ in their article with reference to the Enlightenment tradition, but, in order to avoid

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<sup>204</sup> Steutel, J. and Spieker, B. [2004] “Cultivating Sentimental Dispositions Through Aristotelian Habituation,” *The Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Vol. 38, No. 4, p. 532, Blackwell, Oxford

<sup>205</sup> Op. cit. 531

<sup>206</sup> Forty-five years after her death, this early opinion is being revised. Many of the reviews of the ‘Joan Eardley Exhibition’ (6 Nov’07 to 13 Jan’08 at the National Gallery, Edinburgh) emphasised the fact that her eye was sharper and more distanced than suggested by the ‘jeely-piece nostalgia’ ascribed to her at the time.

confusion with the pejorative sense in which the term may be used to-day, I prefer the phrase ‘education of feelings.’

Steutel and Spieker endorse two Aristotelian claims for according education of feelings a central role in moral education: the first is that becoming a virtuous person should be taken as the general aim of moral education; the second is that moral virtues are not only dispositions for choice and action but also dispositions towards feelings – virtuousness implies having appropriate feelings. Aristotle himself emphasises that the earlier one begins, the better; “the importance of having been trained from infancy to feel joy or grief at the right things.”<sup>207</sup> This pre-supposes that the affective life of the child not only can be influenced but can be educated. Although Aristotle locates feelings in the non-rational part of the soul, they can obey and listen to the rational part:

[N]ot just in the sense that feelings can be kept under control if they are contrary to the precepts of reason (which is typical of continence), but also, and more importantly, in the sense that they can be harmonised with the voice of reason by their being transformed, moulded or reshaped (which is typical of virtuousness).<sup>208</sup>

Steutel and Spieker list various types of educational interventions in the Aristotelian tradition through which the affective life of the child can be transformed and steered in the right direction: reading stories, taking the child to the theatre and cinema, and providing opportunities for mimetic enactment of poetry, song and dance, so as to encourage the child to emulate virtuous models and learn to discriminate.<sup>209</sup> However, the central method of cultivating feelings for Aristotle is *ethismos* or habituation. The idea that habituation is an important ingredient of education of feelings is another part of the ‘hard core’ of the Aristotelian tradition.<sup>210</sup> Habituation was referred to previously as

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<sup>207</sup> NE1104b 11-12

<sup>208</sup> Steutel and Spieker, op. cit. p. 533

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Op. cit. 534

primarily a form of learning by doing. Steutel and Spieker are only two authors among many who quote Aristotle's well-known lines in respect of this:<sup>211</sup>

By doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other men we become just or unjust, and by doing the acts that we do in the presence of danger, and by habituating ourselves to feel fear or confidence, we become brave or cowardly.... It makes no small difference then, whether we form habits of one kind or another from our very youth; it makes a great difference *or rather all the difference*...<sup>212</sup>

No child will acquire virtuous affective dispositions, if we confine our educational activities to verbal instruction or teaching moral lessons. We need only bring to mind the sentimental moralising deemed suitable for children in British Victorian life and fiction.

Aristotle left very few indications about *how* to put habituation into practice but his use of the term *pollakis*, which literally means 'many times,' implies that, to be efficacious, habituation implies doing virtuous actions frequently.<sup>213</sup> Whilst habit becomes habit only through strength of repetition, our understanding of reinforcement learning in this context is differentiated from that of conditioning by the positive context of reception advocated by Aristotle in respect of habituation. Furthermore, he points out in several places that virtuous actions should also be performed consistently, that is, one acts always in a virtuous way, and, as far as possible, never in a way contrary to virtue.<sup>214</sup> It is worth noting that frequency and consistency will not coincide with regard to certain actions, for example, those that occur only at widely spaced intervals. Here what counts in the Aristotelian tradition is consistency, in celebrating Christmas with a generous spirit every year, let's say.

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid. Cf., Peters, R.S. [1963] 'Reason and Habit; The Paradox of Moral Education,' *Moral Education in a Changing Society*, Faber and Faber, London, p. 65.

<sup>212</sup> NE, II, 3, 1103 b25 (my italics)

<sup>213</sup> NE 1103a29, 1105b4

<sup>214</sup> NE 1103 b7-22; 1104a10-28

Finally, though the child is not yet able to decide which action should be performed in the particular circumstances, she is able to perform those actions that correspond with virtuous dispositions of feeling, given the guidance of her parents in particular or other tutors, provided that they themselves possess practical wisdom.<sup>215</sup> The authors describe parents, guardians, teachers, and so on, as a child's 'tutors.' The term 'tutor' refers to any caregiver who points a child in the right direction in action and feeling in the process of habituation. To my mind, 'tutor' is a felicitous choice for anyone responsible for habituating children, and it will be used here with its implicit sense of careful steering. This is the third feature of habituation in the Aristotelian tradition. Some forms of habituation are ways of modifying what may be termed 'excessive' feelings. Cultivating the appropriate dispositions of feeling that constitute the virtue of patience, for example, is a matter of what Steutel and Spieker describe as:

[M]oderating the child's liability to respond with excessive feelings of impetuosity, irritation and boredom by accustoming him to situations in which patient behaviour is required.<sup>216</sup>

One assumes that the 'situations' are stage-appropriate to the child's developmental level, are rendered interesting, and that the young child's 'patient behaviour' is appropriately rewarded. These might be thought extrinsic pedagogical factors, but they are still apt for philosophical consideration. Admittedly, Aristotle's examples of habituation refer only to virtues of will-power, especially temperance and courage, where habituation is a matter of attenuating or getting rid of *inappropriate* affective dispositions.<sup>217</sup> To be successful, the latter, like all forms of habituation, needs to be effected in a developmentally appropriate manner. A young child who has temper tantrums is led to understand gradually, from earliest days, that this form of behaviour is socially unacceptable, by a quiet but firm

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<sup>215</sup> Steutel and Spieker, op. cit. p. 536

<sup>216</sup> Op. cit. p. 543

<sup>217</sup> NE 1104a20-b4

removal from the scene. The crucial importance of early habituation is revealed when tutors have to deal with a young teenager having temper tantrums in public. A more urgent message has to be conveyed on the spot both for the sake of others as well as that of the young person; when calm is restored it may then be possible to use the latter's verbal and social skills in order to see how the problem may be addressed.

Another important form of habituation is that of strengthening or promoting the growth of virtuous affective dispositions, a process which is arguably at the heart of the education of moral feelings. Aristotle addresses this form only implicitly in his assumption that the young child's tutors, parents in particular, themselves possess practical wisdom; they not only can guide her but can also model appropriate virtues.

According to Philippa Foot, the virtues are corrective, in that they either moderate excessive temptation (as mentioned previously) or compensate for deficiency in motivation. So, the corrective function of moral virtues such as justice and benevolence is quite different from the virtues of will-power. The former correspond rather to making good or remedying deficiencies of motivation such as a lack of respect for the rights of one's fellow-citizens or a limited concern for other people's needs, respectively.<sup>218</sup>

Aristotle does not specify how the virtuous dispositions of feeling required to be just and kind towards others are to be brought about through habituation. We must now ask ourselves if his work gives us a clue, as to how habituation establishes and strengthens the concerns and commitments that make up, for example, justice and benevolence.

The third feature of habituation mentioned previously – the reliance of the child on the practical wisdom of her tutors – points to an explanation of how habituation might work towards the growth and development of virtuous affective dispositions. Of course, the child should follow the instructions of someone who is practically wise. But the practical

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<sup>218</sup> Foot, P. [1978] *Virtues and Vices, and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, University of California Press, pp. 8-10.

wisdom required for giving the child the proper instructions is only *one* of the reasons for Aristotle's thesis that the tutor must be virtuous:

Being a virtuous person not only implies having the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom: it also implies having essentially moral virtues, and these virtues might best be construed in terms of particular *cares* or *concerns* ..... Such virtuous cares and concerns are not merely dispositions to act in certain ways..... but also dispositions to have and exhibit particular feelings or to feel and exhibit particular emotions, such as compassion, sympathy, respect, indignation, distress, relief, admiration and gratitude.<sup>219</sup>

Given the fact that the tutor is a person with virtuous cares and concerns, habituation may now be seen as a more nuanced and relational process. When the child is acting rightly, the tutor will respond in word or deed with positive feelings and emotions, exhibiting pleasure, relief or pride. And when the child is acting wrongly, the tutor will show negative feelings and emotions, such as sorrow, anger, or disappointment. Especially in respect of the latter, it is assumed that the tutor's responses are appropriate to the situation, for example, expressed to the right degree, in the right manner, *not* some public humiliation. Moreover, all the tutor's manifestations of virtuous cares and concerns serve as reinforcing or punishing stimuli:

In particular, if there is a mutual loving relationship between the child and his tutor, which will normally be the case if the tutor is his parent, the child will experience the tutor's positive affective responses as pleasurable and the negative affective responses as painful.

In more general terms, the tutor will function as a model..... The tutor's virtuous cares and concerns will be exhibited in virtuous deeds and appropriate affective responses, and given a good relationship of love and trust between the tutor and the child, the child will be inclined to imitate those actions and responses.<sup>220</sup>

So, the presence of a virtuous tutor is a key-factor in establishing and strengthening the scope of the child's cares and concerns where these are deficient.

A school can be a living embodiment of such a philosophy by encouraging pupils to perform virtuous acts "deliberately" on a daily basis. At the root of its success will not be

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<sup>219</sup> Steutel and Spieker, op. cit. p. 545

<sup>220</sup> Ibid. Cf., NE 1180b3-8

that it is brainwashing its pupils into performing acts of friendliness, kindness and fairness, but that the pupils are constantly being made aware that they can decide whether or not they want to do these things. These acts are supererogatory to acts of discipline such as observing good order in class. At every level, the pupils are made aware that they shape the school's ethos with their own collective decisions: even a simple ritual like standing up when the teacher comes into the room – something that has disappeared from many schools – can be presented as a habit that inculcates a virtuous comportment.<sup>221</sup> Within a faith school, for example, pupils might fare better (particularly at secondary level), if they were made aware that they were not compelled to take part in religious rituals but were reminded that their worship of God is their own choice. Pupils might be made aware of the choice they have in shaping their own articulations of spiritual worship by being invited to devise their own daily acts of worship, create their own assemblies, choose their own hymns, poems, readings, and so on. In this way, their “spiritual exercises” become “deliberate performances of virtuous acts” in the Aristotelian sense. Moreover, a good school recognises something that Aristotle saw as crucial in shaping a decent moral society – an understanding and appreciation of the external, cultural environment and the tradition it provides:

[I]t is difficult to get from youth up a right training for virtue, if one has not been brought up under right laws....different soils better or worse nourish the seed.<sup>222</sup>

Ultimately the policies of such a school will be shaped by an overarching philosophy, whether drawn from its own faith or other tradition, such as Rudolf Steiner, for example. This means it can withstand undesirable pressures arising from short-term government policies or driven by fashionable cultural attitudes. A school that is a living embodiment

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<sup>221</sup> The prompt behind this paragraph was an article in the “Tablet:” ‘Ancient virtue is the modern way’, 12<sup>th</sup> May, 2007. The author, returning to teaching at a girls’ comprehensive school in London, expressed his sense of pleasant shock when the pupils stood up and chanted “Good Morning.”

<sup>222</sup> N.E. 1179b 20-26

of Aristotle's idea of human flourishing will be marked by the happiness of its pupils, manifested at key moments in their celebration of the wonder of their being alive.

The educational curriculum is a specific area that comes to mind in any consideration of how the virtues may best be developed in schools. In his article, 'On the contribution of literature and the arts to the educational cultivation of moral virtue, feeling and emotion,' David Carr examines the connections between a number of claims concerning education in general and moral education in particular. He makes a convincing case on four fronts: education is about broad cultural initiation rather than narrow academic or vocational training; he recommends an education that has a prime concern with the moral dimension of personal development; emotional growth has an important role in such moral formation; literature and other arts have an important part to play in any education of feelings. In respect of the last claim, Carr argues that:

[W]hat is needed for a clear view of the moral educational relevance of literature and the arts is a conception of moral education that does justice to the interplay between the cognitive and the affective in moral life, and that a non-relativist Aristotelian ethics of virtue holds out the best prospect for such a moral education of reason and feeling.<sup>223</sup>

Carr is careful to differentiate a moral education based on Aristotelian ethics of virtue from 'Character Education.' The latter form of personal formation has been introduced into schools, particularly in North America, in the last twenty years. Its proponents claim that this type of moral education also originates from Aristotelian virtue ethics. Similarly to what Carr advocates, they too make use of literature and the arts in primary and secondary education. However, their emphasis is not so much on the education of feeling and deciding whether one wants to do these things for oneself, as on the more practical or experiential initiation into such moral dispositions as self-control, responsibility,

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<sup>223</sup> Carr, D. [2005] 'On the contribution of literature and the arts to the educational cultivation of moral virtue, feeling and emotion,' *Journal of Moral Education*, Vol. 34, No. 2, p. 137

truthfulness which assist the discipline and general ethos of the school. Thus, character educators are more inclined to draw out exemplary role models to be found in literature for emulation by students, for example, the eponymous hero of Mark Twain's satire *Huckleberry Finn*, who lies to the bounty hunters out of a sense of justice on behalf of his companion Jim, the runaway slave. The advocates of 'Character Education' concentrate more on using literature and the arts for inculcating virtuous *behaviour*. They show a less sophisticated understanding of the relation of literature and the arts to Aristotelian ethics of virtue than that of Carr, who views the relation of the two as a powerful means of cultivating moral virtue, feeling, and emotion, as well as aesthetic values.

Thus far we have two strategies for tutors to help students make good choices: raising awareness by general discussion about virtues within the school; inspiring understanding of the virtues by how literature and the arts are taught. Moreover, whilst discussion of morally pivotal moments can be integrated into everything in the curriculum – history and science spring to mind – literature and the arts are also particularly appropriate for the cultivation of moral feeling on account of their appeal to sensibilities, as Carr suggests. The latter does not happen by ignoring the complexity or beauty of the story or picture and jumping to its "moral" but by connecting the aesthetic effect of the story or picture to discussion about the feelings it evokes. General questions could include: What did this poem make you think about or feel? Tell me about X – what kind of person was she? What words does the poet use to convey the wastefulness of war?

A further strategy, clearly depending on habituation of children from a young age, if their choices are to become spontaneous later, is that of encouraging practical action for those less fortunate than themselves. Finding what can be done for the latter, whilst learning to appreciate what we have in common as fellow human beings, is a hallmark of pupil-exchange programmes under the auspices of 'Glasgow the Caring City/Global Glasgow

Youth Project.’ Pupils involved in the latter project also helped to raise funds for the most recent exchange which took place in June, 2007, between senior pupils from certain Glasgow schools and their counterparts in a South African township.

Another appropriate strategy at all levels in school and in all areas of enquiry is that of fostering reflection by the tutor’s questions. For example, students may be asked to think about and give their own responses to a question such as: Can a person be “great” (and good) and still have some character flaws?

In addition to the contributions made by one’s milieu and one’s natural endowment, Aristotle’s optimism regarding the human capacity for choice emerges in his belief that one’s attitude, given one’s position, influences the formation of one’s dispositions and character:

Even if I am brought up a wastrel who will, unless changed, end up in wretchedness and misery, it is possible for me, whatever training I have had, to recognize the facts and then retrain myself to better ways.<sup>224</sup>

In a similar vein in Buddhism the ‘depth purity’ in each individual, known in the Mahayana as the *Tathagata-garba* or the Buddha-nature, represents the potential for transformation. It is a stronger version of Aristotle’s notion that acquiring the virtues is a transforming process which enables man to make the leap from ‘man-as-he-is’ to ‘man-as-he-might-be.’ While Aristotle speaks of a settled state (of character) and Buddhism speaks, quite differently, of a changing one (of impermanence), the implication is similar: whatever people are like on the surface, they should always be respected as capable of change for the better.

The comparison of each of their ethics suggests that the practice of mindfulness may be considered as the Buddhist contribution to the task of that transformation, alluded to previously, in conjunction with the Aristotelian practice of habituation into the

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<sup>224</sup> NE 1179b23

virtues; each compensates for weakness in the other, or, to put it another way, their strengths are complementary. For this reason, my initial suggestion is to introduce mindfulness practice at *all* levels of education: primary, secondary, and tertiary. At this stage such an innovation needs further research and a pilot study, to investigate empirically the results of such practice, before it might be implemented in Scottish education. As a preliminary to such an undertaking, I will show that the results of mindfulness practice elsewhere, as reflected in research and teacher report, are helpful in respect of strengthening concentration, increasing memory potential, and reducing feelings of stress.

The main aim of the Garrison Institute's report '*Contemplation in Education*' was to "map out the current status of programmes using contemplative techniques with mainstream student populations from Kindergarten to grade 12 (4-18 years)."<sup>225</sup> The terms 'contemplation' and 'contemplative' as used in the report refer to what are more generally understood by 'meditation' and 'meditative,' both in Britain and in the United States; I shall adhere to the latter usage.

The report describes many of the programmes which aim at teaching mindfulness and training attention as "Loose adaptations of the Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction programme."<sup>226</sup> The MBSR eight-week programme was designed by Jon Kabat-Zinn who is still engaged in bringing mindfulness into the mainstream of medicine and society in his work as scientist, writer and meditation teacher.<sup>227</sup> The 'Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society' in Massachusetts was established

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<sup>225</sup> Garrison Institute Report [2005] '*Contemplation in Education*' Online text p.7 ('Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction' will be referred to by its usual acronym, MBSR.)

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Emeritus Professor of Medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, where he was founder of 'The Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Healthcare and Society,' and founder and former director of its 'Stress Reduction Clinic.'

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

to further the practice and integration of mindfulness in the lives of individuals, institutions, and society through a wide range of clinical, research, education, and outreach initiatives in the public and private sector.<sup>228</sup>

The MBSR programme uses various mindfulness meditation practices, such as silent meditations, awareness of the breath and body scans (for heartbeat, perspiration levels and so on) as well as movement practices such as gentle stretching and mindful yoga. Extensive research on the MBSR model shows that adult participants experience multiple positive outcomes including reduced stress, increased relaxation, less pain, increased tolerance of pain, and improved self-esteem.<sup>229</sup> The Centre for Mindfulness believes that students, teachers and other members of the school community can benefit from mindfulness and other meditative techniques in an effort “to become more responsive and less reactive, more focused and less distracted, more calm and less stressed.”<sup>230</sup>

In the context of the Garrison Institute’s Mapping Project, meditative programmes are those with pedagogical approaches which cultivate the conditions that create the possibility of meditative awareness:

They emphasise mindfulness and focus on improving students’ capacity for attention. In contrast, programmes that use meditative techniques –but are not meditative programmes –foster meditation in support of other, typically broader goals, such as the development of social and emotional skills.<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> Garrison Institute Report’s online text ‘*Contemplation in Education*,’ Fn. 6, p.7: Diamond, A., Taylor, C., “Development of an Aspect of Executive Control”, *Developmental Psychology* 1996:29, pp. 315-334

<sup>229</sup> Op. cit. Fn. 7, p. 7 Diamond A., Goldman-Rakic P.S., “Comparison of human infants and rhesus monkeys on Piaget’s AB task.,” *Experimental Brain Research* 1989: 74 (1), pp. 24-40

<sup>230</sup> Op. cit., 3-4

The Garrison Report cites the success of the “Mindfulness Education (ME) for Children” programme. ME is a ten-week intervention in the Vancouver School District, BC, Canada, a joint programme set up and run by the ‘Goldie Hawn Foundation’ (subsequently re-named the ‘Goldie Hawn Institute’) and the University of British Columbia’s Education Faculty. It involves scientific research on student outcomes associated with classroom-based mindfulness practices.<sup>232</sup> This primary prevention programme consists of teaching a series of simple techniques designed to enhance self awareness, focused attention, problem solving abilities, self regulation, goal setting, stress reduction, conflict resolution and pro-social behaviours in children. Participants numbered hundreds and included students and teachers from seven classes (Grades 4-7, 10-13 years), who received the ME programme and matched comparison classes. Prior to programme implementation, teachers attended a one day training session led by the programme developer. At pre-test and post-test, students were given measures assessing social-emotional competence, social responsibility, and motivation. Teachers also provided ratings of students’ school adjustment. Measures assessing programme implementation were also gathered including teachers’ and children’s evaluations of the programme and their experiences within it.

Juniper Glass has reported favourably on the ‘Mindful Awareness Research Center’ (MARC) web-site on findings from the Vancouver schools’ ME programme. Though it is still comparatively early in the life of the project, the research team of the University of British Columbia’s Educational Faculty have recently completed a controlled study of the work of the Goldie Hawn Institute in Vancouver. Their research involved children in six schools and showed some promising results,

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<sup>232</sup> Op. cit 11

particularly in the areas of children’s self-concept, ability to stay attentive, and teacher-reported behaviours. Heather Wood Ion, Executive Director of the Goldie Hawn Institute, summed up: “We had learned from the pilot project that a more research-based curriculum was needed in order to disseminate it more broadly.” Glass indicates that experts at Columbia University (United States) are now assisting the Goldie Hawn Institute to integrate its programme more closely within the curriculum, whilst researchers from UBC will now complete a second study in Vancouver public schools examining the effects of mindfulness education on children’s levels of cortisol, the stress hormone.<sup>233</sup>

Glass further reports for MARC on the organization, *InnerKids*, a California-based foundation that offers mindfulness awareness classes to schoolchildren rooted in what they call “the new ABCs”: attention, balance, clarity and compassion. The Director, S. Kaiser-Greenland, a meditation practitioner, consulted with education and mental health professionals to make the teachings appropriate for children:

The games and activities we play with the kids are informed by spiritual practices that are effective in training attention. We’ve adapted them so that they are developmentally appropriate and fun. That’s why we are able to teach in the schools – the words we use and themes we teach are secular.

One of the first things *InnerKids* teachers do with a new class is “slow and silent walking” – based on walking meditation:

At the beginning we do races. The race is to see who can get to the line *the slowest!* You have to be very aware of your body in space in order to move that slowly. Gradually the students become aware of breathing while they walk, and feeling the soles of their feet against the floor. With older students we can use

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<sup>233</sup> MARC (UCLA ) online text “*The new ABCs* ”: *attention, balance, clarity and compassion*, Fourth section.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

more traditional language for the practice, concentrating on the three phases of lifting, moving and placing the foot.<sup>234</sup>

There are lecturers' reports but as yet little substantial research using mindfulness practice /techniques in *tertiary* education. The findings of P.D. Hall's research into the effect of meditation on the academic performance of African-American college students is positive; they show participants in the meditation group as having significantly higher semester grade point averages compared to those in the non-meditation group.<sup>235</sup> My acquaintance with fellow-students while studying at university led me to ask whether such an approach might benefit tertiary-level students in the Scottish education system.

In 2001 Brother Rewatha, a Sri Lankan Buddhist monk in the Theravada tradition, established a Buddhist *Vihara* or centre in Maryhill, Glasgow. In the academic year 2006-07 he offered short sessions of 'Mindfulness Practice' in the University of Glasgow which any member of the university was free to attend. A 'drop-in' approach was adopted which was supported by the chaplaincy and advertised on the 'Events' page of the university's website. Brother Rewatha has informed the author that he will continue this innovative venture in the academic session 2007-08. Of course, it is not possible to draw conclusions from the experience of a small core of self-selecting participants over such a short period but it is an interesting sign that it is to continue. From informal exchanges with acquaintances and students of Glasgow University over the past three years (those interested in interfaith matters in Scotland but mainly with undergraduates whom I met in the 'World Religions' module on

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<sup>235</sup> Hall, P. D. [1999] *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 29, issue 3, pp. 408-15.

Buddhism) I have found many of them not merely interested in understanding the theory behind mindfulness/meditation (for examination purposes) but in getting a sense of it experientially. Admittedly, the author's source of information that some students are interested in trying an introductory level of mindfulness, without considering it as part of a total practice, is drawn from among a self-selecting group. Not unusually, their interest arises from a variety of reasons: some young people are questioning the religious tradition they were brought up in and now wish to explore their own wisdom tradition as well as that of others; others admit to feelings of stress in their lives and hope to experience through the practice of mindfulness as a meditative technique a means of reducing stress, especially before exams; a few (mature) students express an interest in finding out about mindfulness as part of their spiritual or personal "journey."

Considering these various strands, the author suggests additionally that mindfulness practice is introduced (on a self-selecting basis) at the tertiary level of education, especially for those entering the education profession. The hope is that prospective teachers in particular would find such experience useful, if they wished to introduce 'Mindfulness Education' (on the model of the Vancouver school board described previously) to improve learning in the classroom. Of course, further rigorous research is needed concerning the links between transformative learning, concentration, calming and 'Mindfulness Education/Practice,' similar to that which has already taken place in the medical field regarding the benefits of mindfulness in cases of physical, stress-related illnesses, such as hypertension, as well as with mental health problems. Vokey has argued consistently in his work for appreciation of the value of mindfulness in everyday life and its meditative practice at all levels of education. In "Hearing, Contemplating, and Meditating: In Search of the Transformative

Integration of Heart and Mind” he illustrates his thesis through his use of mindfulness with students in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia:

Doing so in a recent graduate course had encouraging results: beginning each class with *shamatha* [meditative] practice provided a point of departure for analyzing readings on spirituality and education as well as an open, non-judgmental environment for such creative activities as collective art making and collaborative poetry composition.<sup>236</sup>

Thus he claims that initial experience of the practice of mindfulness will assist students’ subsequent intellectual engagement and understanding, and we can claim, at least tentatively, that use of a meditative technique facilitates the type of transformative learning which Vokey describes by a direct quote from *Expanding the boundaries of transformative learning*:

[It] involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions. It is a shift in consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world.<sup>237</sup>

Vokey’s own experience and analysis in his chapter are viewed through the prism of his own wisdom tradition and practice in Mahayana-Vajrayana Buddhism. After an exposition of his path in this tradition he sums it up as follows: if the components of the Mahayana path are to be fruitful they must be understood and practiced within their proper larger context. From this he draws the following recommendation:

Although my focus here has been on Buddhism, I appreciate that there are many other living traditions with time-tested methods of integrating intellectual understanding with direct experience. To those who wish to explore the potential contributions of meditation to transformative learning I recommend that they remain within or find such a “wisdom tradition” with which they

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<sup>236</sup> Vokey, D. [2007] Chapter in *Cross-cultural studies in curriculum: Eastern Thought, Educational Insights*, Eppert, C. and Wang, H. (eds.), p. 308

<sup>237</sup> O’Sullivan, E. V., Morrell, A., & O’Connor, M.A. [2002] p. xvii. Quoted by Vokey, op. cit. 287

resonate personally so that the experiential dimension of their journey will receive proper direction and support.<sup>238</sup>

Vokey next recommends that any teacher, who does not wish to follow a wisdom tradition but wishes to offer her pupils the opportunity to improve their learning through use of a meditative technique, might consider opting for a Mindfulness Education programme (including training for teachers) such as is now available, after the success of several pilot-studies, in the public schools in Vancouver. However, he resumes his main thesis in his concluding suggestion that any educator who follows a wisdom tradition can draw on it when using mindfulness practice with her own students, and the effect will be to transform learning, whatever the educator's tradition.

Any consideration of Vokey's recommendations with regard to their use within an increasingly pluralist society in Scotland requires more extensive study but two points spring to mind. Firstly, whilst it is understood that every wisdom tradition derives finally from religion, a teacher using a meditative technique to aid learning must take care not to tie it to a particular set of religious beliefs or doctrines for her pupils. For example, in the case of 'Mindfulness Education' in Vancouver, no attempt is made to link the exercises which precede lessons with the Buddhist practice of mindfulness.

Secondly, if an approach such as Vokey advocates were proposed at primary and secondary levels of education, then parents, school council, head-teacher, and teachers would all need to communicate about its potential to improve learning. If such an approach were offered to prospective teachers in Universities, a similar need for information and a stress on the voluntary nature of take-up would arise.

The previous suggestions in Chapter Five dealt with the introduction into Scottish

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<sup>238</sup> Vokey, *op. cit.*, 308-09

education from earliest days of the Aristotelian practice of habituation into virtuous dispositions. These are now coupled to a second set of suggestions, encouraging teachers and students at all levels of education to 'try and see' a meditative technique such as mindfulness, in order to enhance classroom learning. It has been argued here that the two practices are complementary and that they point to a "moral way" for young people in our pluralist society. Of course, further rigorous research and pilot-studies are clearly required, if firmer recommendations are to be made.

## **Conclusions and rounding-up**

Regarding the practice which is most new to me, mindfulness of body and mind, its preliminary stages were discussed in Chapter Two and suggestions made in Chapter Five for ‘mindful’ breathing and walking at primary and secondary school levels. The author examined the connection between Aristotelian reason and virtue in Chapter One and the practice of habituation in Chapter Five; suggestions were made as to how the latter practice might be incorporated into the academic curriculum, as well as the general ethos of the school. Like the child’s early moral habituation, it would seem that the earlier mindfulness practice is introduced the better, though it may, of course, be taken up, to great advantage, at any age. A teacher who wishes to make use of these complementary practices might model herself on the virtuous tutor who draws on a wisdom tradition.

A further suggestion was made in Chapter Five that arose in the course of the research; it might also be beneficial to introduce some form of mindfulness practice on a self-selecting basis in Universities. This might apply particularly in Faculties of Education, if prospective teachers were interested in providing mindfulness education in the future. Of course, all these suggestions require further academic and empirical research in respect of their effectiveness, if stronger recommendations are to be made.

The need to prepare the next generation to play their part in society is acknowledged in all cultures; in the West we expect our children to be able to step back from our pervasive consumerist culture and make responsible choices, but we ill-equip them to do so. Based on this comparative study of Buddhist and Aristotelian ethics, the author considers that complementary guidelines for a “moral way” for children and young

people in all Scottish schools are to be found in the interplay of mindfulness and habituation, in an ethics more transformative than prescriptive.

If pilot studies are successful, the main recommendation of this thesis is that these two practices are introduced from the age of six years, that is, in Primary Two in Scottish schools, and maintained, in developmentally appropriate ways, into the teenage years. I have argued that, if all children are made aware from the outset by their tutors – their parents, care-givers, teachers, lecturers – that they can make their own choices, and learn to do so virtuously and mindfully, the use of these two complementary practices would provide them with a rudimentary “moral way.” Hopefully, such a basis would equip young people to engage more confidently, more compassionately, and more fruitfully with their and our world.

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