

INVESTIGATING PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

BUDDHISM

A CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATION



DAVID BURTON

ROUTLEDGE

Buddhism: A Contemporary Philosophical Investigation

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Buddhism, in its diverse forms and throughout its long history, has had a profound influence on Asian cultures and the lives of countless individuals. In recent times, it has also attracted great interest among people in other parts of the world, including philosophers. Buddhist traditions often deal with ideas and concerns that are central to philosophy. A distinctively Buddhist philosophy of religion can be developed which focuses on Buddhist responses to issues such as the problem of suffering, the purpose and potential of human existence, life after death, freedom and moral responsibility, appearance and reality, the nature of religious language, attitudes to religious diversity and the relationship between Buddhism and science.

Buddhism: A Contemporary Philosophical Investigation examines some of the central questions that such ideas raise, drawing on ancient and more recent sources from a variety of Buddhist traditions, as viewed from a contemporary philosophical standpoint.

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Introduction

Buddhist philosophy of religion

This book is a contribution to Buddhist philosophy of religion. Philosophy of religion is the analysis, from a philosophical perspective, of the concepts, arguments and practices of religious traditions, in this case those traditions that are commonly called Buddhist. Other methods of studying religion include the historical, the textual, the sociological, the psychological, and so forth. Philosophy of religion is interdisciplinary because it draws on these other approaches; questions about the philosophical significance of religious concepts cannot be fully answered without reference to their history, their texts, their sociological impact and their psychological importance, for instance. However, philosophy of religion is distinctive because it places emphasis on the conceptual analysis of religious worldviews and the rational assessment of the arguments and evidence for and against these worldviews. Philosophy of religion draws on all areas of philosophy, including ontology, epistemology and ethics. It includes, for example, an investigation of religions' understanding of reality, their views about knowledge and belief, and their attitudes to human conduct and behaviour.

Any nuanced philosophy of religion will be mindful of religious diversity. Different religions have different ontologies, epistemologies and ethical attitudes, but there is also internal diversity; different people and traditions from the same religion can have divergent beliefs, and may address the issues raised by philosophy of religion in a variety of ways. While the awareness of difference is vital for a successful philosophy of religion, this does not preclude comparative analysis as well; concepts from different religions, or different denominations of the same religion, often overlap in interesting ways.

This book seeks to be sensitive to the variegated nature of Buddhism. Buddhism has developed over about 2,500 years in numerous Asian cultures and recently in non-Asian parts of the world as well. The form that Buddhism takes varies depending partly on the cultures in which it has taken root.

There were many schools of Buddhism with diverse beliefs and practices that emerged in India within a few centuries of the life of the historical Buddha. Contemporary Theravāda Buddhism, now dominant in much of Southeast Asia, is the only extant tradition that can be traced back to these early times, although it has

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gone through many subsequent developments and transformations. While this book will refer to Theravāda teachings, it will also reflect on philosophical views expressed by some other early, no longer extant Buddhist traditions such as Sarvāstivādins, Mahāsāṃghikas, Sautrāntikas, and so on. In addition, Mahāyāna Buddhism began gradually to emerge in India, probably from around the first century BCE, and subsequently became prevalent in cultures such as China, Korea, Japan and Tibet. Mahāyāna Buddhism is itself extremely diverse, and encompasses many different traditions with a wide range of philosophical views, many of which will be discussed in this study. Furthermore, this book will sometimes reflect on Tantric beliefs and practices that have had a strong influence on the development of various Buddhist traditions, most notably in the Tibetan cultural region.

It is now commonplace to assert that Buddhism has no identifiable essence; there are numerous different teachings and traditions in a wide variety of cultures. There is a plurality of Buddhisms rather than a single Buddhism. In many cases, it is problematic to identify a single Buddhist view about any particular philosophical issue; numerous examples of this diversity will be discussed in this study while not neglecting that some philosophical ideas and attitudes recur in many different Buddhism traditions, which often overlap and share a great deal of common ground.

Philosophy of religion has usually been investigated from a predominantly monotheistic, Christian perspective. This has included, among other things, questions relating to the nature of God, arguments for and against ‘his’ existence, the nature of faith and belief, the problems of free will and evil, the implications of Christian belief for ethical life, discussions about the nature of religious language, Christian attitudes to religious diversity, and the relationship between Christianity and science. Yet, recent work in the philosophy of religion has sometimes been broader, recognising the need for a global approach that goes beyond only a narrowly Christian vantage point, which many people find increasingly parochial in our interconnected and post-colonial world.

Given the Western monotheistic focus of most traditional philosophy of religion, a Buddhist approach is inevitably going to have a rather different orientation, even though there are inevitably points of similarity and comparison. The most obvious difference is that the preoccupation with God’s nature and proofs of his existence are absent from Buddhism; indeed, there are sometimes Buddhist arguments refuting his existence. Instead, concepts of ultimate reality or truth, as well as discussions about the nature of Buddha, among other topics, are central to Buddhist philosophy of religion. Nevertheless, sometimes issues arise in these Buddhist discussions that have some parallels to monotheistic considerations of God. For example, there are important Buddhist reflections on Buddha’s omniscience and the extent to which ultimate reality or truth is accessible to language; these often have similarities to Christian deliberations about the nature of the divine.

This book is a *contemporary* philosophical investigation of Buddhism; it explores in some depth traditional Buddhist worldviews but seeks to explain them in a way that is accessible, philosophically interesting and unburdened by excessively detailed analysis of linguistic technicalities as well as the minutiae of

the social and historical contexts in which these ideas and practices arose. While it necessarily devotes serious attention to the historical texts, ideas and practices of Buddhism, it also considers their current significance, including the challenges that traditional Buddhist perspectives face due to modernity, secularism and the rise of science. Whether traditional Buddhist worldviews can withstand or adapt to contemporary critiques and concerns is a question that will be addressed throughout this study in various ways. This book attempts philosophical assessment of Buddhist teachings; it does so from a twenty-first century perspective informed by modernity, while attempting to remain aware of the cultural and intellectual expectations and biases that this entails.

It may be doubted that Buddhist philosophy of religion can even exist. While some may regard Buddhism as too religious to be a proper topic for philosophical analysis, others may contend that Buddhism is a philosophy rather than a religion. Yet others may argue that neither the term ‘philosophy’ nor the term ‘religion’ should be applied to Buddhism at all. These words are, after all, of Western provenance with no precise parallels in Buddhist languages. Moreover, there is seemingly endless dispute about their definition.

Even so, there do seem to be meaningful ways in which Buddhism can be referred to as both philosophical and religious, so that Buddhist philosophy of religion becomes tenable. Buddhism is arguably philosophical because central to it are ontological, epistemological and ethical reflections. Buddhism is replete with ideas about the nature of reality, knowledge and ignorance, the way to human fulfilment and how to live a morally good life. Moreover, Buddhism often seeks to justify these ideas and defend them against opponents; surely these are hallmarks of a philosophical approach. In addition, philosophy derives from the Greek for ‘love of wisdom’, an attitude that is clearly central to Buddhism. However, Buddhism can equally be described as having a religious orientation; for instance, Buddhism has rituals, institutions, material culture (temples, monasteries, images, etc.), a social organisation (monks, nuns, laity, etc.) and offers moral guidance; these are all typical identifiers of what might be described as ‘religion’.

Indeed, the boundaries between philosophy and religion are arguably more porous than is sometimes assumed, with religious beliefs and practices inevitably entailing ontological, epistemological and ethical views that overlap with philosophy. Buddhism has beliefs about matters such as the nature of ultimate reality (such as the not-self and emptiness teachings), the existence of extraordinary, supernatural beings (Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, various gods and so forth), life after death (karma and rebirth), and methods for attaining salvation or liberation. Beliefs about such issues are often associated with religion but are also clearly of interest to philosophy, broadly construed, and require analysis and critical scrutiny by Buddhist philosophy of religion.

An overview

Many Buddhist traditions begin with an investigation of suffering, which they view as the fundamental existential problem that they seek to solve. They present

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an explanation of suffering, its causes and methods intended to bring about liberation from suffering. Therefore, chapter 1 of this book investigates Buddhist analyses of suffering, which Buddhists often claim is caused by the psychological proclivities of craving and ignorance. The chapter also examines various Buddhist techniques for overcoming suffering. Finally, the chapter considers a number of possible challenges to Buddhist accounts of suffering. These include doubts that Buddhist traditions have paid sufficient attention to the body and the physiological causes of suffering; the possibly too sanguine Buddhist attitude to our capacity to overcome suffering; concerns about the common Buddhist emphasis on non-attachment as the solution to suffering; and the apparent traditional Buddhist neglect of the social causes of suffering.

Chapter 2 turns to the Buddhist ideas about karma and rebirth, which are sometimes accused of contributing to Buddhist apathy towards social injustice; if people suffer social inequalities and other sufferings, this can arguably be rationalised as being the result of their misdeeds in past lives. The chapter evaluates this criticism and also considers a number of other philosophical issues raised by the karma and rebirth teachings. For example, the chapter explains the ethicisation of karma that occurs in Buddhism, which focuses on the moral quality of the intentions that motivate actions. Furthermore, it assesses the coherence of the Buddhist claim that rebirth occurs without a self that is reborn. It also considers the problem that the teaching of karma sometimes seems to be in tension with Buddhist values of selflessness and compassion; karma is often taught in an individualised way, where the results of actions are rewards or punishments for the individual agent who perpetrates them. In addition, the chapter discusses whether karma is a rigid moral law or can be flexible, and whether it is meant to explain all good and bad things that happen to people or is more limited in scope. The problem of the lack of evidence and proof for the Buddhist belief in rebirth is also examined, as is the tendency among some contemporary Buddhists to present a ‘naturalised’ version of karma, decoupled from the problematic rebirth teaching.

Chapter 3 focuses on several other ethical issues that Buddhist philosophy of religion needs to address. Traditional, theistic philosophy of religion devotes considerable attention to the nature of evil. The chapter discusses what place, if any, there is for the concept of evil in Buddhist ethical outlooks. In addition, the chapter investigates where Buddhist traditions stand in the perennial debate about free will and determinism, a discussion which has been a central concern of philosophy of religion. Philosophers of religion also discuss the relationship between religious ethics and various prevalent ethical theories in Western philosophy such as deontology, consequentialism and virtue ethics. This chapter asks whether Buddhist ethical attitudes can be fruitfully compared with these theories. Furthermore, philosophers of religion often consider what contribution religions can make to discussions in applied ethics about current practical moral problems. This chapter concludes with some reflections on Buddhism’s place in contemporary debates about topical moral issues; special attention is given to Buddhist attitudes to the natural world and their possible implications for contemporary environmental ethics.

Chapter 4 examines some of the complexities of the concept of Buddha as it occurs in various Buddhist traditions. Buddha is sometimes viewed from a modern, Westernised perspective as simply a wise and compassionate human being; however, Buddha, in most Buddhist traditions, is usually seen as having various superhuman, extraordinary qualities and abilities. This has been true in Mahāyāna but also in non-Mahāyāna traditions including Theravāda Buddhism; this is despite a popular misconception to the contrary about the Theravāda Buddha. This chapter also discusses Buddhist critiques of a theistic God and whether these criticisms are entirely compatible with Buddhists' own beliefs about Buddhahood, which sometimes seem to ascribe 'God-like' qualities to Buddha. In addition, the chapter assesses the meaning and nature of Buddha for Buddhists in light of common Buddhist practices involving visualisation of Buddhas as well as the worship of Buddha images and relics. The contemporary relevance of traditional Buddhist attitudes to Buddha is also considered, and to what extent some of the enchanted, magical and superhuman aspects of Buddha have become problematic from the perspective of disenchanted, scientifically informed modernity.

Chapter 5 investigates Mahāyāna Buddhist concepts of emptiness, which is a common label for ultimate truth or reality in these traditions. The main contention of the chapter is that emptiness has various meanings in Mahāyāna Buddhism; we should not be misled by the use of this single term into assuming that it always has the same philosophical implications. The chapter discusses some prominent meanings of emptiness in Mahāyāna Buddhism and highlights some important interpretive disputes and philosophical problems. In particular, the chapter examines some interpretations of emptiness in the Mādhyamika, Yogācāra and Tathāgatagarbha strands of Mahāyāna thought.

Chapter 6 presents a range of Buddhist views about the capacity of language to express reality. The extent to which language can describe God has been an important area of enquiry in monotheistic philosophy of religion. In Buddhism, there is a parallel discussion of the ability of language to describe how things really are. Buddhist traditions exhibit a persistent suspicion of the ontological abilities of language; still, some Buddhist philosophies are more pessimistic than others about the describability of reality. While the ineffability of reality is a common theme in many Buddhist traditions, it can be construed in various ways and as having different strengths. The chapter explores the relationship between language and reality in a variety of Buddhist philosophies and also reflects on some of the non-descriptive, non-ontological ways in which Buddhists employ language as part of their religious practice.

Chapter 7 explores Buddhist attitudes to Buddhist teachings and practices from outside their respective traditions (intra-religious diversity) and to the religious views of those who are not Buddhist (inter-religious diversity). Religious diversity is a pressing contemporary issue for philosophy of religion. There is heightened awareness of the extraordinary variety of religious traditions and sometimes a desire to find common ground; this inevitably raises questions about how religious people do, and should, regard one another's beliefs and practices. The chapter

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demonstrates that there is a wide range of Buddhist views about religious others, which can be situated in the spectrum from religious exclusivism through religious inclusivism to religious pluralism, including those Buddhists who adopt multiple-religious identities.

The book concludes with some final reflections on the contemporary philosophical challenges facing Buddhism, with particular reference to the relationship between Buddhism and science. Whether Buddhism is, or can be, compatible with science is a question that requires a complex response, given that there are both conflicts and similarities between the two worldviews. This is a fitting end to a study that wrestles throughout with the sometimes problematic, but always fascinating, dialogue between Buddhism and modernity.

1 The problem of suffering

A good starting point for Buddhist philosophy of religion is the issue of suffering. From the outset, in the Buddha's first sermon (*Samyutta Nikāya* v, 420), early Buddhist texts identify suffering as the fundamental existential predicament and claim to provide the solution to this problem. The Pāli term here translated as suffering is 'dukkha' (Sanskrit: *duḥkha*); other common translations include unhappiness, unsatisfactoriness, dissatisfaction and frustration. Buddhist traditions make clear that suffering is a pervasive experience that is rooted in the transitoriness of phenomena and insecurity of existence; things are by their very nature imperfect and limited (Harvey 2013: 55). Most obviously, old age, sickness and death result in suffering; one's mortality and vulnerability to the ravages of time and illness commonly cause anguish. One experiences actual physical pain but also the psychological distress associated with declining faculties and the prospect of sickness and death. However, suffering also includes the frequent experiences of not getting what one wants and of losing what one cherishes. One feels disappointment when one's desires are frustrated, fear that one will lose what one already has, and anger when life does not work out as one wishes. While Buddhist traditions do not necessarily deny the existence of worldly pleasures, they typically claim that such pleasures always end and are thus ultimately unsatisfying. Suffering encompasses a range of experiences from the most extreme distress to the unsettling intuition that the finite and transitory worldly experiences that one yearns for are not really fulfilling. The traditional Buddhist belief in rebirth means that these sufferings will be perpetuated in future lives as long as one does not free oneself from the cycle of birth and death.

A prevalent Buddhist solution to this problem of suffering is to remove the ignorance (Pāli: *avijjā*; Sanskrit: *avidyā*) and craving (Pāli: *tanhā*; Sanskrit: *trṣṇā*) that are said to cause suffering and fuel the cycle of rebirth. Buddhist traditions provide copious and quite varied practical guidance to achieve this end. Buddhism in its various forms may be regarded a therapeutic in intent because it provides many strategies and techniques to overcome suffering by eradicating ignorance and craving. Buddhist texts often view suffering as akin to a disease with Buddhism providing the diagnosis and the cure. Indeed, the Buddha is likened to a doctor who offers a medicine to cure the spiritual ills of the suffering world. In the Pāli tradition, one of the epithets of the Buddha is 'the Great Physician' and the

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therapeutic regimen or healing treatment is his teaching (*Theragāthā*, 1111; *Milindapañha*, 334–6). This metaphor also occurs in other Buddhist literature, most famously in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* (*Lotus*) *sūtra* (chapter 16), where the Buddha is said to be like a benevolent doctor who attempts to administer appropriate medicine to his children.

A central and early Buddhist teaching about the problem of suffering and its solution is the four noble truths, taught in the Buddha's first sermon. The Pāli term '*ariyasacca*' has long been translated as 'noble truth' and I follow this convention here. However, there is a venerable Buddhist commentarial tradition that states that those who understand the truths are noble (*ariya*) rather than the truths themselves. So, a more accurate translation may be the four truths (*sacca*) of the noble ones. The reference here is to spiritually noble persons who have attained, or are destined to attain, awakening (*bodhi*) due to their advanced progress along the Buddhist path. It is these spiritually advanced people who deeply recognise that the four truths are indeed true (Lopez 2008: 81–3). Furthermore, it has been argued that '*sacca*' may be more accurately translated as 'reality' rather than 'truth'. The four *ariyasacca* are most fundamentally realities; that is, they are how things really are. In contemporary philosophy, truths are often regarded as propositions; the Buddhist teaching of the four *ariyasacca* is a statement, regarded by Buddhists as true, describing these four realities (Harvey 2013: 51–2). The realities exist whether or not the true propositions that describe them occur.

The four noble truths, as we will call them, are popularly explained in modern scholarly sources in the form of a medical diagnosis, although it has been pointed out that there is a lack of scriptural evidence that the Buddha employed this medical analogy (Anderson 1999: 189). Nevertheless, the medical model makes considerable sense. The first truth, that there is suffering, is the diagnosis of the disease. The second truth, that suffering arises from a cause, identifies the root source of the disease to be craving. The third truth, that suffering can be ended, is a prognosis that the disease is curable. The fourth truth describes the Buddhist path to end suffering, and is the prescription of an effective treatment (Gethin 1998: 59–84; Gombrich 1988: 59). It is this treatment – that is, the Buddhist path to awakening – that transforms one into a spiritually noble person who has deep experiential insight into the effectiveness of the Buddhist teachings for overcoming suffering.

While the second truth explains that craving is the cause of suffering, some Buddhist analyses tend to stress ignorance as the basic source of suffering. In addition, we will see that a common, and perhaps most compelling, Buddhist view is that craving and ignorance are inextricably linked, mutually dependent, causes of suffering. Furthermore, craving and ignorance give rise to a variety of subsidiary harmful mental states such as anger, avarice, jealousy, lust, and so forth. A closely related Buddhist analysis identifies greed, hatred and ignorance or delusion as the mental defilements that cause suffering (Lopez 2015: 59); greed and hatred plausibly may be viewed as sub-species of craving, with hatred arising when craving is frustrated and when one desires to harm others.

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate in more detail Buddhist views about the problem of suffering, its psychological causes and the methods for

ending suffering. What follows is a philosophical reconstruction that draws on a range of Buddhist texts but expresses these ideas in a contemporary manner. This investigation relies fairly heavily on Theravāda sources, but will also cut across a variety of Buddhist traditions. The umbrella term ‘Buddhism’ is admittedly an abstraction and convenient shorthand that refers to a wide variety of diverse beliefs and practices. Despite the variations, it is arguably legitimate to generalise in this case insofar as there are recurring Buddhist attitudes to suffering, its causes and its overcoming. Hopefully this can be achieved without doing violence to the differences that undoubtedly exist between, and even within, Buddhist traditions. The views discussed here are prevalent enough in Buddhism, and sufficiently philosophically interesting, to warrant an extended treatment.

How are ignorance and craving the causes of suffering and how do Buddhist traditions propose that they are to be removed? This chapter will argue that, for many Buddhists, ignorance and craving are intimately intertwined; thus, Buddhist techniques for ending suffering pay close attention to both causes and their inextricable connections. The ignorance that Buddhist traditions often seek to remove is primarily the failure to understand how things really are. Ignorance here means a deeply entrenched misperception of reality rather than a simple lack of information (Harvey 2013: 67). Moreover, craving as a particular type of desire rather than desire *per se*, is often the focus of Buddhist disapproval. Buddhist texts also recognise the deep-rooted nature of ignorance and craving and that they are very difficult to remove. Hence, Buddhist traditions provide a host of methods for rooting out these entrenched psychological tendencies and also tailors these methods to people’s specific needs. Buddhism in its various forms provides a cogent and sophisticated account of the psychological causes of suffering; however, there are also possible problems with this Buddhist analysis of suffering that Buddhist philosophy of religion must address. These problems concern Buddhist attitudes to the role of the body as a cause of suffering, the common Buddhist ideal of nonattachment as the antidote to suffering, the apparent prevalent Buddhist optimism about our capacity to eventually overcome suffering, and the accusation that traditional forms of Buddhism neglect social injustice as a principal cause of suffering. These criticisms are the focus of the concluding sections of this chapter.

Ignorance and craving

A Buddhist theme that occurs in numerous traditions is that all things that constitute the world are impermanent and lack independent existence. All such entities are insubstantial in the sense that they have no autonomous and unchanging or enduring essence. The world is an unceasing flux of interconnected phenomena. However, unawakened people do not understand that impermanence and insubstantiality are the way things really are (*yathābhūta*). A Theravāda Buddhist text, for instance, provides extensive catalogues of the numerous ways in which people’s ignorance about the way things really are manifests in wrong views (*micchāditthi*) which overlook or deny the reality of impermanence and insubstantiality (*Dīgha Nikāya* i, 1–46).

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Such erroneous opinions have a deleterious effect on one's desires, so that one grasps for things which, if one really understood their insubstantial nature, one would not endow with such significance. One finds them desirable, sometimes highly desirable, and gets caught in a web of attachments to them. So, one Mahāyāna Buddhist text declares, "as a child with his notion of truth, falls in love with a mirror image, worldly people, due to delusion, are trapped in a thicket of objects" (*Yuktisastikā*, 53. Trans. Loizzo 2007: 203). Given that things are transitory, this reliance on them inevitably leads to suffering. This includes craving for sensual things, dependent as it is on objects that are especially unreliable. The Pāli scriptures concur: "The Blessed One has stated how sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering, and much despair, and how great is the danger in them" (*Majjhima Nikāya* i, 130, 224. Trans. Nānamoli and Bodhi 1995: 224). Craving and the resultant attachment can also be to wealth, fame, friends, family, and so on. But it is not just craving for external things that is problematic. Buddhists typically contend that one's self is actually a concatenation of transient events; it is one's failure to recognise this fact and to adjust one's values accordingly that often causes suffering, as one fails to come to terms with sickness, ageing and death. Indeed, most Buddhists regard the false belief in a lasting, substantial self as a fundamental attachment that humans find exceptionally hard to give up and which is so deep rooted that it often seems to persist even when one acknowledges the misguided nature of the belief. One feels, subconsciously or consciously, that one has an autonomous self which directs and coordinates one's thoughts, emotions, feelings and perceptions and that this self remains the same while one's thoughts, emotions, feelings and perceptions change. One's erroneous sense that one has a lasting, substantial self also stimulates other cravings; one seeks to appropriate things and experiences for the self, which is granted excessive importance and whose needs must therefore be prioritised.

Buddhists recognise various other wrong views that cause suffering. Notably, materialism is often the focus of Buddhist critiques. For example, there was a materialist ancient Indian philosophical tradition known as the Cārvākas. This school arose after the time of the Buddha but had a precedent in the philosophy of Ajita Kesakambalī; in the early Buddhist scriptures he was an opponent of the Buddha and claimed that there is no rebirth and that human beings are simply composed of the material elements that we return to after death (Williams, Tribe and Wynne 2012: 14). Cārvākas and their predecessors did not believe in an eternal unchanging self or soul and accepted the transitoriness of one's life and other phenomena. Buddhists agree with the Cārvākas this far. However, the Cārvākas and other materialists commonly believed that there is no post-mortem existence, that the truth of impermanence means we should live simply for the here and now, and that the human person is reducible simply to material components. The ethical implication of the Cārvāka philosophy is hedonism. One should enjoy the pleasures of this world for the limited time that one exists as a material being (King 1999: 16–22). In these respects, Buddhists generally part company with them. Cārvākas and other materialists clearly had a strong conviction about the transitoriness of life; however, Buddhists would not regard

them as awakened and they are still liable to suffering. A typical Buddhist explanation would be that such people have the wrong views that there is no rebirth and no law of karma whereas Buddhism in its various traditional forms claims that right view is that there is rebirth (but without a permanent, unchanging self or soul) and karma (Harvey 2013: 83). For Buddhists from many traditions, the human person is made up entirely of impermanent causally connected events but is not reducible to material phenomena. The karmic consequences of one's actions can occur in future lives that are causally connected to the present life, even though there is no permanent, unchanging soul or self that transmigrates (see chapter 2). So, materialistic hedonists do not recognise that their intentional actions will have proportional consequences in subsequent lives and that the hedonists' actions motivated by sensual desire will cause future suffering. Cārvākas and their ilk (who would doubtlessly also include modern materialistic hedonists) have wrong views that perpetuate craving and hence suffering.

Buddhists usually appeal to rebirth and the law of karma as an explanation of suffering, and it is precisely this that the materialists' wrong views overlook. Bad things happen to people who are currently good because of past actions motivated by ignorance and craving in this life or previous lives, and good things happen to people who are currently morally bad because of past actions motivated by wisdom, kindness and generosity in this life or past lives. One indulges in selfish desire, anger, etc., because one fails to recognise the deleterious consequences this will have on us in this life but also in future lives. Moreover, one fails to realise that suffering is inevitable in the process of life and death, and thus the final solution to suffering can only be the eradication of the ignorance and craving that fuels the process of rebirth. The complexities and philosophical puzzles associated with Buddhist views about rebirth and karma will be discussed at length in chapter 2.

Another example of a cognitive attitude that contributes to suffering is one's lack of conviction that suffering can be overcome by removing its causes and one's failure to understand that Buddhism successfully identifies these causes and provides adequate techniques for achieving this eradication of suffering. Failure to assent to the Buddhist analysis of suffering and its solutions would mean that one has wrong rather than right views; such a misguided cognitive attitude would inhibit one from having the motivation, and taking the necessary action, to end suffering. Hence Theravāda Buddhism, for instance, identifies assent to the four noble truths as right view (Harvey 2013: 83). The early Pāli scriptures record the Buddha as having rejected a range of alternative philosophies that taught versions of fatalism and extreme scepticism that contradict the early Buddhist contention that one can definitely change one's mental states and actions so as to transcend suffering (Williams, Tribe and Wynne 2012: 14–15).

Desires and views

It seems that an implication of this Buddhist analysis is that desires are not brute forces and it would be incorrect to consider them to be entirely non-cognitive. Rather, one's desires are responsive to one's views. Desires have a close

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relationship to views about what is valuable. For instance, one considers possessions, wealth, fame and one's self to have more value than they actually have; thus one craves and gets attached to them. Given the reality of impermanence and insubstantiality, Buddhists deem this as harmful to one's well-being. Moreover, one does not realise that, given the law of karma, such craving will inevitably bring suffering in this life or future lives. By not assenting to the four noble truths, one continues to crave because one does not accept the causes of suffering and the solutions that Buddhism offers.

Buddhist traditions often consider suffering to be a result of craving for, and attachment to, uncontrollable and unreliable things. Buddhist practices are, in this respect, about cultivating an attitude of 'letting go'. The things that one thinks matter so much are not worth being anxious, unhappy, and angry about. This solution to the problem of suffering is cognitive, in the sense that the ignorance needs to be removed in order for the emotional relaxation to occur. One indulges in craving, and the anger or hatred that can result from disappointed desires, because one fails to recognise that such attitudes will bring future sufferings. One fails to follow the Buddhist teachings about suffering and its eradication because one fails to recognise that they will be efficacious.

Consequently, there is great emphasis in many forms of Buddhism on removing wrong views. This should help to rectify one's values, so that impermanent, insubstantial things are no longer relied upon for comfort and security, which, in fact, they cannot give. Moreover, replacing wrong views with right views will enable one to recognise the karmic repercussions of the cravings which cause one to rely on impermanent, insubstantial things. One will then assent to the Buddhist analysis of suffering and its eradication as a correct depiction of the way things really are. Emotions and desires are expressions of our interpretation of the world; if one's interpretation is out of accord with the way the world really is, then unhappiness will result. Buddhist teachings from various traditions therefore aim to align one's interpretations with reality, thereby diminishing, and eventually stopping, the discontentment that results from unrealisable expectations.

Mutual dependence

This account indicates that the relationship between desires and views is causal. Moreover, the causal relationship between views and one's affective states is not one-way. While views influence desires, it is also the case that desires have an impact on views. There is a psychological tendency for one to believe what one wishes to be the case and not to accept views that one finds unattractive. Desire often leads to rationalisation. For instance, it may be that one wants to believe that things are permanent and substantial, and thus one is inclined to form this view. It may be that one's enjoyment of these things inclines one to overlook the karmic repercussions of one's craving. It is because one wants one's desires for these things to be a source of happiness that one overlooks the painful consequences of one's craving and attachment. One is reluctant to believe things to be impermanent and insubstantial because one would then have to modify one's emotional

attachments to them. Even if one does assent to the truth of impermanence and the folly of one's attachments, one tends to ignore or marginalise this view. One pushes it to the periphery of one's awareness, because it is an inconvenient and uncomfortable truth that contradicts one's wishes. Furthermore, desires can blind one to the way things really are; they make one forgetful of the truth, distracted by the objects of one's passions. One may either reject or pay insufficient attention to the Buddhist analysis of suffering and its techniques for overcoming suffering precisely because one wants to enjoy the objects of one's desire; this enjoyment would be disrupted by assent to, and serious reflection on, the Buddhist views.

Ignorance and craving (with hatred and greed as sub-species of the latter) are thus mutually assisting causes of suffering. They are intertwined and reinforce one another. This point is made most vividly in the Buddhist Wheel of Existence (*bhavacakra*) paintings, which, at the hub of the wheel, depict ignorance as a pig, hatred as a snake and greed as a cockerel, arranged in a circle and chasing each other by the tail to symbolise that they are inseparably connected (Gethin 1998: 158–9). Consequently, the Buddhist solutions to suffering are intended not only to inform one of the way things really are, but also to provide techniques to stop one's misguided desires from rebelling against the truth that one may already know.

Good and bad desires

It is arguable that, for many Buddhists, the intention is not to remove desire *per se*, but rather the particular type of desire that cause suffering. There is evidence from various Theravāda Buddhist texts, for instance, that desire is considered to be a complex phenomenon, with both positive and negative forms. This complexity is evident in a verse from the *Udāna* in which the authentic monk (*bhikkhu*) is described as simultaneously desireless (*nirāso*) and desiring the goal (*atthakāmo*) of awakening:

Who lives by no craft, unburdened, desiring the goal,
With restrained faculties, wholly released,
Wandering homeless, unselfish, desireless,
Conceit abandoned, solitary – he is a bhikkhu

(Udāna, 3, 9. Trans. Ireland, 2007: 48)

Buddhist texts use many different terms for the varieties of desire. One of the most common is *chanda*, which the Pāli commentarial tradition classifies as ethically variable, meaning that it can have both ethically unvirtuous or unwholesome (*akusala*) and virtuous or wholesome (*kusala*) forms (*Abhidhammattha Sangaha* ii, 9). For example, *chanda* is considered to be unvirtuous when directed at sensual objects (*kāmachanda*) whereas it can be virtuous when focused on ethical behaviour and progress towards the awakened state (*Visuddhimagga* iv, 85). Thus, *chanda* is identified as a basis of power (*iddhipāda*) which the Buddha claims to be necessary in order to achieve awakening (*Samyutta Nikāya* v, 254–93).

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Similarly, the Mahāyāna philosopher Śāntideva (eighth century CE) states that: “The powers of desire [*chanda*], perseverance, delight, and letting go, all lead to the fulfilment of the needs of living beings. Out of the fear of suffering . . . one should create desire” (*Bodhicaryāvatāra* vii, 31. Trans. Crosby and Skilton 1998: 69). As Śāntideva indicates here, not only is the desire to eradicate suffering to be encouraged, but the desire to help other sentient beings is a central Mahāyāna Buddhist aspiration.

This means that the supposed paradox of desire – that is, that the Buddhist is encouraged to desire to end all desire – is not arguably real (Herman 1979; Alt 1980). Buddhism often does not promote the ending of all desire, just those desires that are manifestations of selfish craving. Awakened people “may be said to have desires, primarily for the welfare of all beings, but they have no ego-volitions, cravings, and the like” (Repetti 2010: 289). Buddha’s altruistically orientated actions are often said to be spontaneous rather than requiring deliberation or an act of will (Makransky 1997: 361). Desire to help others has presumably become so deeply engrained that compassion is an automatic response to others’ suffering.

Although various terms are employed to refer to desires that are unvirtuous, one of the most widely used and best known in the Theravāda literature is *tanhā*, the Pāli equivalent of the Sanskrit *trṣṇā*, which I have been translating as craving. *Tanhā* is a particular way of desiring that is productive of suffering and rooted in ignorance. As an impulse to possess the objects towards which it is directed, it is inherently selfish and appropriative, latching on to the object and being unwilling to let go. Thus, *tanhā* gives rise to attachment (*upādāna*). Most obviously, *tanhā* occurs in relation to mundane things such as sensual objects, wealth and fame. However, the dangers of craving and attachment to non-sensual objects and experiences – such as various (wrong) views and sublime but unawakened states of meditative absorption (*jhāna*) – are also warned against (*Majjhima Nikāya* i, 228–38). A traditional classification divides *tanhā* into three types (Webster 2005: 130–1). First, there is the craving for sensual gratification (*kāmatanhā*). Second, there is the craving for self-preservation (*bhavatanhā*). This form of craving is closely connected to “the need for self-assertion, power, fame, wealth, recognition, etc.” (de Silva 2005: 36). Third, there is the craving for non-existence or destruction (*vibhavatanhā*) which lies at the root of aggressive impulses such as anger and hatred as well as being a common motivation for suicide.

However, Tantric forms of Buddhism sometimes give a positive role to even sensual desires, recognising that their energy can be harnessed and sublimated in pursuit of awakening (Williams, Tribe and Wynne 2012: 150–1). Moreover, there is evidence in the Pāli sources that even *tanhā* may have a positive role at the beginning of the Buddhist path, given that craving after spiritual truths is presumably better than craving after sensual objects, fame and so forth. Craving for awakening might be the initial motivation for adopting Buddhism and engaging in its practices. Even so, *tanhā* must eventually be replaced by, or transformed into, an unselfish, unattached form of desire, perhaps best described as an aspiration, and ultimately, of course, by the attainment of awakening itself, so that one no longer needs to desire it (Webster 2005: 139).

Good and bad affective states

In addition to this complex analysis of desire, Buddhist traditions often distinguish more broadly between various affective states that are ethically unvirtuous and lead to suffering – such as hatred, jealousy and avarice – and those that are ethically virtuous and have a positive role in the pursuit of awakening and are, in some cases, constitutive of the awakened state itself. For instance, in the Theravāda commentarial literature, there are psychological states with an affective dimension that are said to be very important on the path to awakening. These include faith or confidence (*saddhā*) and the feeling of agitation, thrill or anxiety (*saṃvega*) produced by the realisation that liberation is an urgent requirement, given the extreme miseries of this world (*Abhidhammattha Sangaha* ii, 5; de Silva 2005: 50). A positive role is also attributed to moral shame (*hiri*) and fear of doing wrong (*ottappa*), as emotions of conscience that deter one from performing morally unwholesome acts (*Abhidhammattha Sangaha* ii, 5). These affective states may be psychologically uncomfortable and entail a degree of suffering but they provide motivation to pursue the Buddhist path and eventually overcome suffering once and for all. There are also the four divine abodes (*brahmavihāras*): a group of mental states which seem to be emotions or at least have some emotional content. They are friendliness (*mettā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), compassion (*karunā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*), all of which are highly valued and considered to be perfected in awakening (*Dīgha Nikāya* i, 235–52).

It might be objected that *upekkhā* at least is not rightly named an emotion, given that it is described as a state of peaceful neutrality and impartiality, neither pleasant nor painful, and without either joy or grief (*Visuddhimagga* iv, 155–97). It is equanimity which enables the awakened person to treat others, whether stranger or friend, equally, without bias (Goodman 2009: 50). If this is an emotion, it is of an unusual, pacific and steady type. Alternatively, it might be characterised as the absence of emotion. Regardless, the other three divine abodes are recognisably akin to what we think of as emotions, or at least have an affective dimension. So, it seems plausible to claim that the awakened person is not devoid of emotions, but has used the Buddhist practices only to eradicate those affective states that are rooted in delusion and selfish desire and that therefore cause suffering.

Affective and cognitive dispositions

There are numerous Buddhist critiques of the mistaken views in the permanence and substantiality of the self and other things. Nor do Buddhists tire of pointing out the irrationality of reliance on that which is transient. They reiterate the law of karma and their analysis of suffering, its causes and the solution to the problem of suffering. In addition, they devote considerable energy to positive demonstrations of the coherence and rationality of their own views (see Siderits 2003). These are attempts to persuade using reason and to replace error with truth in order to remove both the ignorance and the craving that cause suffering.

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However, the rehearsal of arguments alone can be a fairly ineffective way of changing views and desires that are, in many cases, deeply engrained. Simply announcing Buddhist views – that all things are impermanent and insubstantial, and that one should not grasp them, that these cravings will cause eventual unhappiness, and that the Buddhist path is the way to solve this problem – is unlikely to result in liberation from suffering. Nor does listening to a logical argument necessarily have great existential impact. Such rational analysis alone can have relatively limited effect on one's attitudes and personality. One's convictions and desires are often unruly, and not so easily convinced by reason. They may cause one to reject these Buddhist teachings. Even if one assents to these Buddhist views, one may do so in a relatively weak and superficial manner.

Of course, it may be that one is resistant to these Buddhist views not out of psychological stubbornness but because there are genuine philosophical problems with them; it may be that the Buddhist teachings are not as rational or convincing as is claimed. It may be right to reject the Buddhist analysis or elements of it, or only assent to it in a provisional and weak way. However, from the perspective of a committed insider who accepts that the Buddhist analysis is rational and convincing, the failure to accept Buddhist right views can be due to deep-rooted psychological proclivities which are obstacles to the overcoming of suffering.

This recalcitrance is recognised in numerous Buddhist sources, which claim that our minds are under the sway of entrenched emotional and cognitive habits which can be extremely difficult to remove or transform through straightforward rational considerations. For example, in fourteenth and fifteenth century Tibet, it was claimed that there are two forms of ignorance, one which is non-linguistic and unlearned, and the other linguistic and acquired through learning. This is a distinction made by Tsong kha pa, Sakya chog ldan and others (Cabezón 1992: 456–7). A particularly articulate exposition of the difference between these two types of ignorance is found in mKhas grub rje's *Stong thun chen mo*:

There are two kinds of mistaken conceptions: the philosophical (*kun brtags*) and the innate (*lhan skyes*). The philosophical [kind] refers to the philosopher's belief (*dam bca' ba*) regarding the variety of ways in which things could inherently exist [that is, have substantial existence], arrived at through the invention (*sgro brtags*) of a host of reasons that [they claim] prove that things inherently exist. The innate kind is something that has been part and parcel of every sentient being without distinction since beginningless time (*Stong thun chen mo*, 132, Trans. Cabezón 1992: 128–9. Slightly modified)

Philosophical misconceptions are the theories and doctrines developed by philosophers and religious thinkers who posit the existence of permanent and substantial entities such as the soul, God and eternal atoms. They are the intellectually worked out views that a minority of human beings hold. Most people are not philosophers, and many do not have any explicitly held and elaborately developed beliefs of the aforementioned type. Yet they do possess a deeply

engrained innate misconception even if it is not, in many cases, made explicit through language and conceptuality. And the philosopher's mistaken theories are simply explications and rationalisations of this innate ignorance which he or she shares with all other unawakened sentient beings.

mKhas grub rje claims that, while it is important to eradicate both philosophical and innate misconceptions, the chief object to be removed must be the innate misconception, because it is this which is the fundamental cause of sentient beings' suffering. In other words, the philosophers' misguided theories are a relatively superficial problem; at best, mKhas grub rje says, refuting them through various arguments can be a stepping stone to the more important eradication of the innate misconception (*Stong thun chen mo*, 132–40). The philosophical misconceptions are perhaps more symptom than cause of our predicament, although they can clearly reinforce the already existing innate misconception by making it an explicit, self-consciously held view and supporting it with (misguided) arguments. mKhas grub rje quotes an amusing passage by the Mahāyāna philosopher Candrakīrti (seventh century CE) who writes:

The refutation of the view that there is a permanent self will not destroy one's attachment to the ego. To claim otherwise is comparable to the absurd belief that the realisation that there is no elephant in a room will destroy all fear of a snake that is lurking along the far wall! (*Madhyamakāvatāra* vi, 140–1).

Cited in *Stong thun chen mo*, 134. Trans. Cabezón 1992: 130).

mKhas grub rje evidently interprets this passage to mean that the refutation of the rather obvious philosophical misconceptions (the elephant) will not on its own eradicate the less obvious and deep-rooted innate misconception (the snake).

The notion that there are entrenched cognitive and emotional habitual tendencies that contribute to suffering was not new to Buddhism in fourteenth and fifteenth century Tibet. On the contrary, the idea has ancient roots. In the Pāli scriptures, the term '*anusaya*' is used to refer to dispositions which, it is claimed, initially lie dormant in the mind. The dialogues of the Buddha identify various *anusayas* including dispositions to sensuous desire or lust (*kāmarāga*), aversion (*patigha*), conceit (*māna*), wrong view (*ditthi*), attachment to rules and observances (*sīlabbataparāmāsa*), doubt (*vicikicchā*), desire for existence (*bhavarāga*), and ignorance (*avijjā*). They are all forms of ignorance and selfish desire. They represent the potential and tendency for the corresponding active emotional and cognitive afflictions or defilements (*kilesa*) to arise. The *anusayas* are “basically dormant passions which become excited into action by suitable stimuli” (de Silva 2005: 73). They constitute our inclination to respond to certain types of stimulation in habitual ways. For instance, lust and aversion are said to be the inveterate responses to pleasant and painful feelings respectively (*Majjhima Nikāya* i, 303; iii, 285).

What is the origin of these *anusayas* in one's mind? It seems likely that they are in part the result of a long history of socialisation, responses to experiences that have been learned since early childhood. It is also highly plausible that tendencies

to aggression, lust, etc., are due in part to our genetic inheritance. However, the Pāli scriptures state the Buddha's view that the *anusayas* exist even in small children, as a result of karma (*kamma*) from previous lives. A very young child, the Buddha contends, has not yet developed concepts such as 'self', 'lust' and 'hatred', and has not yet started to respond to the world in terms of these ideas and emotions. Nevertheless, they exist within the child as dispositions ready to be activated once the child's cognitive capacities have developed and the appropriate stimulus occurs (*Majjhima Nikāya* i, 432–33). Moreover, he claims that without removing these dispositions, liberation from suffering cannot be achieved (*Majjhima Nikāya* iii, 285).

This notion of underlying psychological tendencies is also developed by the Sautrāntika Buddhists. They distinguish between the psychological defilements (*kleśa*) as latent dispositions (*anuśaya*), which are a hibernating karmic residue from past existences, and the manifest *kleśas*, which are the actual occurrences of the afflictions of greed, hatred, delusion, and so on. A latent disposition when stimulated by an appropriate object causes a manifest affliction to occur. The Sautrāntikas' most significant and suggestive innovation was the introduction of the seed (*bīja*) as a metaphor representing the latent dispositions (*Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* v, 1d–2a). It appears that this metaphor developed into the Yogācāra notion of the storehouse consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*), a subterranean torrent of mental events which functions as a repository for the seeds which are the latent dispositions (Waldron 2003: 89–169).

For the purposes of this chapter, the most important point is that liberation from suffering is said to require that the seeds be eradicated. The awakened person's "destroyed afflictions will not be able to sprout again" and that the afflictions have been destroyed completely "like seeds burned by fire" (*Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* ii, 36d. Cited and translated by Waldron 2003: 75). So, the task according to this Buddhist analysis, is to eradicate not just the active manifestations of greed, hatred and delusion, but also the dispositions which give rise to them.

Techniques for removing suffering

Buddhist traditions employ a range of methods intended to remove the harmful, stubborn dispositions which cause suffering. Many of these techniques are forms of meditation or ethical practice, which work on the mind to root out these entrenched harmful psychological tendencies. For instance, the noble eightfold path is one of the most common formulations of the Buddhist path; while the importance of right view is recognised as the first limb of the path, this needs to be combined with right intention, as the resolve to practice the Buddhist path and root out the recalcitrant psychological dispositions. The means to do this include ethical techniques (right speech, right action and right livelihood) and meditative practices (right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration). Moreover, meditation and ethical practice are seen as mutually assisting. Meditation calms and concentrates the mind, and focuses the mind on Buddhist truths, making it easier to adhere to ethical precepts. The practice of ethics itself is intended to

make the mind less distracted by cravings and facilitates the concentration required for meditation.

Meditation techniques take numerous forms and vary depending on the Buddhist tradition. For instance, memorisation through recitation is commonly practised as a form of contemplative meditation: teachings are chanted in rituals often as a means of reflection and with the intention of lodging them firmly in the practitioner's mind. Frequently repeated views about impermanence and the harmfulness of craving, etc., are less likely to be forgotten, and more likely to be brought to mind when they are needed to combat the onslaught of the psychological defilements. Moreover, there is often no strict divide between meditation, ethics and devotional practices; recollection and veneration of the qualities of the Buddha is itself a means to purify and transform one's mind (Crosby 2014: 55–9, 61).

A common Buddhist formula, found in various Buddhist traditions, identifies three levels of wisdom: hearing, thinking and meditation. The wisdom of hearing refers to reading and listening to Buddhist texts and the truths they communicate. The wisdom of thinking is discursive contemplation of these truths, a careful and systematic reflection of teachings such as impermanence, insubstantiality and not-self. The wisdom of meditation combines the resulting understanding of Buddhist truths with deep serene concentration (*śamatha*), producing insight (*vipaśyana*). This technique is meant to penetrate the deeper layers of delusion and craving which cloud the mind, removing the psychological proclivities that continue to cause suffering. In some forms of Buddhism, this meditation entails a great deal of systematic reasoning, as arguments in favour of Buddhist truths are rehearsed and are the object of reflection; in other cases, contemplation on Buddhist views is undertaken in a less discursive fashion. Either way, the final result of such meditation is sometimes described as a direct perception of Buddhist truths; one no longer has a merely theoretical or reasoned understanding of these truths; one sees them face-to-face, as it were, and it is this knowledge by acquaintance which removes the causes of suffering once and for all (Lopez 2008: 145–6).

One of the most important Buddhist methods for tackling suffering is introspection and self-analysis. In Pāli sources, terms such as mindfulness (*sati*) and thorough attention (*yoniso manasikāra*) are commonly used to refer to the ability to be aware of the desires, emotions, and beliefs that arise in the mind. The Buddha recommends the application of constant mindfulness to one's body, sensations and thoughts (*Dīgha Nikāya* ii, 290–315). He compares the capacity to introspect to the reflective power of a mirror. Just as a mirror will reveal the true appearance of the face with all its blemishes, so introspective awareness allows one to examine the mind and notice its imperfections, that is, the afflictions of craving and ignorance in their myriad forms. Presumably, by devoting sustained attention to the contents of the mind, those dispositions of which we may have been previously unaware will become apparent. He goes on to advise that, having reflected in this way, only those actions of body, speech and mind that are harmful to neither oneself nor others should be performed (*Majjhima Nikāya* i, 415–20).

The *Abhidharmaśabdhāya* (v, 34) says that it is the lack of this thorough attention (*ayoniso manaskāra*) that allows outbursts of the afflictions to occur.

Without mindfulness, the afflictions will go unnoticed, and there will be no possibility of taking effective action to remove them. With mindfulness, the opportunity arises to exert oneself to restrain and abandon ethically unwholesome states of mind, and to cultivate and maintain those that are wholesome. In this respect, the Buddhist techniques for removing suffering have both a purgative and a tonic aspect. The afflictions are vices to be purged from the mind like poison that needs to be completely expelled from the body; their opposites are virtues to be actively encouraged and strengthened, like muscles that need to be toned up (*Dhammapāda* xvii, 13). Mindfulness “is understood to play an active role in strengthening one’s ‘moral brakes’, checking unwholesome habits and tendencies, and allowing greater spontaneity and scope for the wholesome” (Gilpin 2008: 229). Mindfulness enables the Buddhist practitioner to identify the various feelings (*vedanā*) that are experienced and to stop them giving rise to affective responses of greed, aversion, etc.

A frequent Buddhist teaching is that pleasant and painful feelings are reactions to contact with objects. Once contact with the object has occurred, the feeling experienced is not in our control. However, pleasant feelings normally arouse in us the greedy desire to possess the object whereas unpleasant feelings give rise to aversion and hatred. It is precisely here that the mind can intervene by stopping the habitual responses of greed or aversion. These responses are strong dispositions, so it is difficult to change them. But it is possible to remove them over time through attentiveness and effort. In this sense, unlike feelings of pleasure and pain, greed and aversion are voluntary and, with sufficient mindfulness and self-restraint, one can stop them from arising. The challenge is to be sufficiently self-aware and mentally disciplined to do this. When successful, the Buddhist severs the link between feeling and greed or aversion (*Samyutta Nikāya* iii, 127). Recognising the impermanence of all feelings, the practitioner learns to respond to them with neither greed nor aversion, thus averting the consequent suffering.

Buddhist meditation is typically coupled with a resolve to observe ethical precepts intended to prevent future ethically bad behaviour and thoughts. Psychological proclivities towards greed, hatred, etc., can be diminished by taking vows not to harm others, to be kind and truthful in one’s speech, to refrain from taking what is not given, and so forth. Ethical practice often becomes ritualised in Buddhism in the form of recitation of precepts and vows. There are also many examples of confession used as an important aspect of this ethical practice. The Theravāda Vinaya requires the monastic community to undertake confession in which individuals make public their transgressions of monastic precepts and rules (*Mahāvagga* II, 27. Trans. Horner 1971: 167–71; *Cullavagga* III, 33. Trans. Horner 1963: 88). In Mahāyāna Buddhism, confession of one’s evil (*pāpadeśanā*) is one of the key elements of the liturgy referred to as ‘the Supreme Worship’ (*anuttarapūjā*) (*Bodhicaryāvatāra* II, Trans. Crosby and Skilton 1998: 9–13). Śāntideva laments the seriousness of the various evil deeds he has committed, and uses this confessional mood to commit himself more firmly to the Buddhist path (*Bodhicaryāvatāra* II, 27–66). Confession, then, is viewed as a means for honest recognition of the grip that the defilements of ignorance and craving have upon one’s mind as a first step to removing them.

Context sensitivity

A good doctor varies the medicine in relation to the precise nature of the disease, and a similar flexibility is found in many Buddhist traditions' approach to the problem of suffering. The Buddha did not teach the same thing to all people but adapted his message depending on the specific needs, capacities and interests of his audience.

For instance, the efficacy of personal communication between teacher and pupil is highlighted. Buddhist teachings were originally preserved in an oral form. Many of the Buddhist scriptures are purportedly records of dialogues that took place between the Buddha and various disciples. In these conversations, the Buddha is represented as responding to the particular questions and spiritual needs of his interlocutors. The importance of spiritual or beautiful friendship (*kalyāṇa mitrata*) is emphasised, particularly between an experienced teacher and pupil (Harvey 2000: 97). The teacher, in intimate communication with the student, can formulate guidance in dependence upon the student's particular requirements.

Buddhist writings also make copious use of literary forms such as parable, metaphor, and contextualised descriptions. Some of the most popular Buddhist scriptures in the Theravāda tradition are the *Jātakas*, colourful and often poignant stories about the Buddha's previous lives which teach lessons about Buddhist virtues such as wisdom, generosity and compassion. The parables of the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* (*Lotus*) *sūtra* and the *Avataṃsaka* *sūtra* as well as various stories of exemplary Buddhist saints play a similar role in Mahāyāna traditions. Buddhist teachings commonly incorporate familiar imagery from everyday life. Images such as streams and rivers, local flora and fauna, agricultural husbandry are used to explain various Buddhist ideas. These metaphors would have been especially rich in meaning for the intended audience, living in a predominantly agrarian society and thus in close association with the natural environment. For example, the Buddhist view of consciousness is frequently illustrated by means of the metaphor of the stream or river and, as we have seen already, the image of the seed is employed to elucidate the notion of underlying dispositions (Collins 1982: 165–76; 218–24; 247–61). Such literary styles are effective ways of making abstract teachings comprehensible and pertinent, thus making it more likely that they will have a transformative effect on the personality and root out craving and ignorance.

In the Pāli scriptures there are numerous examples of this context sensitivity of the Buddhist teaching. For instance, the *Udāna* (3, 2) recounts the story of the monk Nanda, who considers returning to lay life because of his infatuation with a beautiful woman. Attempting to dissuade Nanda from this course of action, the Buddha guarantees him "five hundred pink-footed nymphs" as a reward if he remains a monk under the Buddha's tutelage. Unsurprisingly perhaps, Nanda agrees. He subsequently realises *nibbāna*, extinguishes craving, and thus no longer requires the Buddha to supply the promised nymphs. One is left wondering whether the Buddha had any intention of keeping his promise or whether he simply told a compassionate lie. Perhaps the five hundred pink-footed nymphs

function here as a metaphor for the bliss of awakening, so superior to the sensual enjoyment that was enticing Nanda to renounce the monastic life. What is certain is that the story shows, in a particularly colourful fashion, the willingness of the Buddha to adapt his teachings as required by the situation.

Another prominent example concerns the graduated teachings given to the laity and monastics, with the latter receiving higher teachings than the former. A common presumption in Theravāda Buddhism is that lay followers will not seek awakening in this lifetime, but will work to ensure a good rebirth by living a good and just life in society and as family members. So, the Buddha gives instructions to the lay followers about living harmoniously by behaving with appropriate respect and consideration for other people. By contrast, the task of the monastics (in theory at least) is to gain awakening, and thus sermons about the means for achieving this goal tend to be reserved for them. The post-canonical *Netti Prakarana* divides the *suttas* hierarchically into two primary types: those for the laity, dealing with the lower teachings about morality and those for the monastics, dealing with the higher teachings about insight (Bond 1993: 29–45).

Moreover, the Pāli scriptures identify various character types, notably, the type whose conduct is dominated by greed (*rāgacarita*) and the type whose conduct is dominated by hatred (*dosacarita*). Someone with a particularly strong propensity to greed will need a different solution to suffering than someone whose primary disposition is towards hatred and anger (de Silva 2005: 38). Thus, the practitioner who experiences strong lust may be directed to reflect on the loathsomeness of the human body or the decomposition of a corpse. By contrast, an appropriate solution to suffering for someone dominated by aversion will be a meditation which aims to develop loving kindness or friendliness (*mettābhāvanā*) (Lamotte 1992: 21). The Buddha also distinguishes between the character type dominated by a greedy temperament (*rāgacarita*) and the character type dominated by a deluded temperament (*dīthigarita*). The primary solution to suffering prescribed for the greedy temperament is ‘calming’ meditation (*samatha*), which quietens the mind through developing a highly concentrated and absorbed state of consciousness. For the deluded temperament, the Buddha prescribes insight (*vipassanā*) meditation, which entails systematic reflection on Buddhist truths such as impermanence (de Silva 2005: 30). While insight meditation is primarily aimed at combating ignorance the other major form of meditation, calming or tranquillity (*samatha*), works directly against greed or lust:

If tranquillity is developed, what benefit does it bring? The mind becomes developed. And what is the benefit of a developed mind? All lust is abandoned. If insight is developed, what benefit does it bring? Wisdom becomes developed. And what is the benefit of developed wisdom? All ignorance is abandoned (*Anguttara Nikāya* i, 61, Trans. Nyanaponika and Bodhi 1999: 42).

In addition, the Buddha sometimes teaches the existence of the self or soul as an enduring entity that, in future lives, reaps the consequences of its action. This teaching is intended for hedonists and nihilists, who do not believe in karma and

rebirth, in order to motivate them to live moral lives. It is only at a higher stage of the spiritual path that they will be able to comprehend that there is no such self but that this does not negate the need to lead an ethical life. In the meantime, it is better that such people lead moral lives motivated by the misconception that there is an eternal self that will be rewarded or punished (Lamotte 1992: 21; Ganeri 2012: 107–15). This will not bring about the eradication of suffering but will at least allow these people to avoid some of the worst forms of moral evil and the concomitant suffering.

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, this adaptability of the Buddhist teachings is developed into the explicit doctrine of ‘skilful means’ (*upāyakausalya*). The Buddha is said to have skilfully adapted his teachings to suit the level of understanding and needs of those to whom he was teaching (Pye 1978). The malleability entailed by the skilful means teaching leads to and justifies considerable doctrinal diversity. However, which of the myriad Buddhist teachings represent the Buddha’s final view that will bring about the total eradication of suffering? Unsurprisingly, the answer to this question varies depending on Buddhist tradition. This is an issue to which we will return in chapter 7.

Suffering and the body

It might be objected that this Buddhist analysis focuses too much on the psychological causes of suffering and overlooks the role of the body. Buddhists may be right that overcoming ignorance and craving will alleviate the suffering caused by bodily pains associated with accidents, natural calamities, illnesses and old age; one would become accepting of these pains as the inevitable consequence of having a vulnerable, impermanent body. In this sense, the suffering would be diminished, as one’s feelings of disappointment and frustration would no longer occur. But surely it is implausible that this would remove bodily suffering altogether?

However, the Mahāśāṃghika school of early Buddhism idealised the Buddha’s physical form and considered it to be pure. The Buddha did not really have normal human needs such as sleep, food and rest (Williams, Tribe and Wynne 2012: 96). The Buddha’s illness, discomfort and fatigue were a mere display; the Buddha did not really experience pain (Xing 2005: 60). Thus, he had transcended even suffering associated with the body. This understanding of the historical Buddha as a magical appearance is continued in Mahāyāna Buddhist texts; the additional claim is sometimes made that his chief disciples in the traditional narrative of his life are also magical appearances (Griffiths 1994: 90–7). Perhaps the Buddha and his closest followers are a special case; others who attain awakening by following the Buddha’s teachings continue to have a body that is subject to pain. Then again, Mahāyāna philosophies often see the physical processes which make up the body as lacking intrinsic existence or as an unreal construction by consciousness; this raises the possibility that any awakened person who has deep experiential insight into this truth would no longer be afflicted by ultimately unreal bodily pains.

Pāli scriptures present a different picture of the Buddha as really subject to fatigue, illness, ageing and death; the accounts of the Buddha’s final days describe

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his body as wracked by pain as the result of dysentery (Xing 2005: 8). The Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda Buddhist schools often concurred that the Buddha's physical body is subject to bodily vulnerabilities such as backache, headache, even if some later Theravāda literature disputes this possibility (Xing 2005: 66; Crosby 2014: 39). Moreover, Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda ontologies see the physical processes that constitute the body and cause pain as real, so presumably awakened people would continue to experience the real pain associated with having an unreliable body. Awakened people may still experience the suffering associated with having a body for the remainder of their final life.

This is often explained in Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda traditions to be the result of residual past karma from the awakened person's pre-awakened life. However, some sources resist the notion that the Buddha, at least, has any remaining bad karma. Instead, his physical pain is caused simply by natural bodily events associated with imbalance of the physical humours. Or it is caused by external factors, such as Devadatta, who treacherously sought to kill the Buddha, and the impact of the shard of rock from the boulder that Devadatta threw and which injured the Buddha's foot (Walters 1990: 75–91; Xing 2005: 106–18). Overcoming of craving and ignorance surely cannot be the complete solution to the problem of suffering, if even Buddhas experience pain?

One answer to this objection is that craving and ignorance fuel the process of rebirth. When they are absent, then rebirth will end. Whatever else the post-mortem nirvāṇa may entail, it clearly means that one will no longer experience bodily pains. The eradication of an awakened person's ignorance and craving will bring an end to even bodily suffering once he or she departs this life and achieves the post-mortem nirvāṇa.

Another response relies on the distinction between pain and suffering. It may be that awakened people do continue to experience the physiological pains inevitably associated with having a body, for the remainder of their final life at least, but this does not mean that such people suffer. Pain can be regarded as a physiological sensation whereas suffering is a mental attitude which occurs when one fails to accept such pains; awakened people experience *pain* but do not *suffer*, because they are mentally unperturbed by pain. They fully accept pain as an inevitable bodily reality rather than being psychologically disturbed or bothered when such pain occurs (Goodman 2009: 31).

Further questions can be raised about the role of the body in Buddhist accounts of suffering. The various meditation and ethical techniques that Buddhist traditions employ for overcoming craving and ignorance are largely cognitive and behavioural in orientation. Suffering is removed by changing our mental attitudes and actions. Yet it can be argued that our psychological tendencies are deeply rooted in our biology. Aggression and desire clearly have some physiological causes; this can be admitted even without accepting the materialist's reduction of consciousness and psychological processes entirely to material, biological factors. This may mean that the ethical and meditative techniques favoured by Buddhist traditions to overcome harmful psychological proclivities may be insufficient because they do not address adequately the biological roots of these tendencies.

Even so, it would be inaccurate to accuse Buddhist traditions of ignoring the significance of the body and its impact on one's psychology. Physical well-being is often viewed as a prerequisite for effective spiritual training, as exemplified by the Buddha's famous rejection of extreme forms of asceticism such as self-mortification. Early Buddhist sources devote considerable attention to medicines, physical exercises and dietetics (Tatz 1985; Zysk 1998) and recognise that bodily illnesses can have physical causes that need treatment through physical interventions (Ghose 2007: 282). In conjunction with traditions such as Āyurveda as well as Chinese and Tibetan medicine, Buddhist traditions often advocate a holistic approach to physical illness and psychological difficulties (Burang 1974; Salguero 2007). Buddhist sources often also commonly stress the inter-relatedness of body and mind, an influence that cuts both ways (Harvey 1993). Buddhaghosa likens the mind and body to two sheaves of reeds which rest against one another for mutual support (*Visuddhimagga* xviii, 32). Tantric Buddhism in particular harnesses the body in pursuit of awakening and re-evaluates the body in more positive terms than is usual for other forms of Buddhism. The yogic manipulation of the subtle anatomy of the body through energy channels and centres is used to bring about heightened awareness and ultimately awakening itself (Ray 2008; Williams, Tribe and Wynne 2012: 149).

However, even if many Buddhists take the interrelatedness of body and mind very seriously, and recognise that the body can affect the mind, there is often a tendency to see the mind as foremost. In the most extreme case, there are Buddhists who advocate ontological idealism, notably some Yogācārins. Presumably they cannot ultimately view the body as influencing the mind given that the body, like all other physical phenomena, is considered to be a mental fabrication. Another example is the *bShad rgyud*, a work of Tibetan tantric medicine, which identifies the unawakened psychological proclivities of desire, hatred and ignorance as the causes of physical ailments. "The *Shedgyud* [*bShad rgyud*] clearly states that the 'psychological' ills of hatred, ignorance, and desire are responsible for the 'physiological' ills of the three humors [air, bile and phlegm], thus making the mental primary and the physical secondary" (Ghose 2007: 265). This attitude arguably places too much emphasis on the power of the psychological over the physical; even if some physical illnesses have a psychological component, it seems implausible from a modern scientific vantage point that this is always the case or that psychological shortcomings are the primary cause of most physical illnesses.

Indeed, it seems that some harmful psychological tendencies themselves need to be treated primarily by physiological intervention, such as medical drugs, and cognitive and behavioural modification may have only a limited role to play in these cases. If this is true, then the Buddhist would need to acknowledge cognitive and behavioural techniques in some cases can be relatively powerless, and that physical medicines may be more effective in overcoming some harmful desires and emotions that cause suffering. And the deeply embodied nature of our negative desires and emotions also raises the possibility that some of them may be intractable, rendering the Buddhist ideal of awakening unrealisable.

Can suffering be eradicated?

There are thus serious questions about the feasibility of the Buddhist endeavour to transcend suffering. Human psychological traits such as selfishness and aggression are at least partly explainable in terms of genetics and evolutionary theory. Psychological egoists declare that all human behaviour is inherently selfish. However, one does not need to accept the psychological egoists' reductionist analysis of human motivations in order to recognise that the Buddhist claim that psychological tendencies such as anger and greed can be entirely eradicated is very optimistic; it arguably entails a rather far-fetched transcendence of our biological (and social) conditioning. Buddhist techniques may be effective in reducing our tendencies to be angry, greedy, etc., but it may seem unrealistic to believe that such tendencies can be eradicated once and for all.

This is perhaps an issue to be addressed by psychologists rather than philosophers, as empirical data may be required for the capacity of human beings to undergo such a radical transformation of the personality and whether Buddhist techniques are efficacious in bringing about such changes (Bronkhurst 2012: 80). What is clear is that Buddhist sources are replete with examples of people who are said to have achieved the goal of complete and irreversible awakening. But this apparent Buddhist optimism about the possibility of transcending the psychological proclivities that cause suffering needs to be seen in the context of frequent claims that it is extremely difficult and requires enormous effort. Moreover, it is usually maintained that awakening is the result of numerous lifetimes of endeavour. This long and arduous process is recorded, in the case of the historical Buddha, in many stories of his previous lives as a Bodhisattva, when he worked towards the attainment of awakening. Thus, Buddhists think that awakening is much more difficult and rare than might first seem to be the case. There is evidence that some early Buddhist schools believed that the awakened followers of the Buddhas, the arhats, had not achieved perfection and still had a variety of shortcomings, a view that perhaps indicates an acceptance of a more realistic vision of the goal of the Buddhist life (Williams 2009: 18–20).

Indeed, the interpretation of Buddhism as a path of self-effort by which one's suffering is eradicated is rather idealised and unrepresentative of the realities of Buddhism as it is often practised. For instance, Mahāyāna Buddhists of most varieties commonly appeal to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas for assistance (Williams 2009: 209–66). The reliance on the compassionate power of Buddha through, for example, his images and relics is also often a feature of Theravāda Buddhism, despite the simplistic stereotype that Theravāda teaches only an austere path of self-reliance (Crosby 2014: 43–68). Moreover, there is a common Buddhist belief that we live in an age of decline, in which awakening by following the Buddhist path of self-effort is no longer achievable, because selfishness and ignorance have become too deep-rooted (Nattier 1991). In Shinran's Japanese Pure Land tradition, this leads to the conviction that the traditional Buddhist teachings relating to ethical conduct, meditation and other methods of self-transformation have become ineffective. We can no longer achieve spiritual progress, let alone awakening, by

our own efforts, and must rely on the saving grace of a celestial Buddha (Bloom 1965). A less extreme view is that the Buddhist path of self-effort is worth pursuing, but that, given the intractable nature of some of our craving and ignorance, its transformative power has limitations. In the latter case, awakening is to be striven for but is unlikely to be attained in any final and complete sense by one's own efforts. A Buddhist with only moderate faith in the human capacity for positive change may accept that one will have shortcomings and will not achieve by one's own efforts the Buddhist ideal of the total eradication of ignorance and craving. The transcendence of suffering cannot be fully achieved or, if it is to be achieved, the help of a powerful and wise Buddha or Bodhisattva may be required.

The ideal of nonattachment

It is also questionable whether Buddhists are right to claim that the awakened state of nonattachment is an ideal to be admired. In ancient India, the aforementioned materialist and hedonist Cārvākas objected to the emphasis placed on suffering by Buddhism and other Indian religious traditions; Cārvākas viewed life as containing a great deal of pleasure. For them, focusing on suffering rather than pleasure is equivalent to overlooking the grain for the husk. Far from pursuing nonattachment, the Cārvākas sought to enjoy the things of this life as fully as possible (King 1999: 18–19). This is, of course, an attitude that is shared by many people in the modern world.

The disagreement between Buddhists and Cārvākas (and their modern counterparts) is undoubtedly a result of different evaluations of the extent of suffering relative to the happiness that human beings experience. These different evaluations are themselves a result of differing metaphysical assumptions; the Cārvākas believe that there is no life other than the present one and that the only happiness available to us is to be achieved by enjoyment of the things of this world. Earthly joys and pleasures are seen to have more value because this is the only lifetime that we have to enjoy them, inculcating a ‘seize the day’ mentality. By contrast, even if Buddhists were to concede the contentious point that worldly pleasures sometimes outweigh the suffering that they cause in this life, these pleasures will be outweighed by the further suffering in future lives caused by the karmic consequences of indulging in these pleasures. Without the beliefs in karma and continuing existence after death, the Buddhist analysis of suffering is arguably much less convincing. Moreover, the Buddhist attitude to suffering is underpinned by a belief, not shared by the Cārvākas, that there is a state of higher, unconditioned happiness (*nirvāna*) that far exceeds any incomplete and transitory pleasure that sensual experiences may bring.

But it is also not entirely clear that Buddhists necessarily have to deny themselves all enjoyment of worldly things. If Buddhists claim that the cause of suffering is that we overvalue worldly things because of craving and ignorance, this implies that such things may still have some value, if the inappropriate motivations are removed. It might be the case that these things could be valued through a non-acquisitive appreciation, where they are enjoyed without being the

object of craving. For example, Japanese Buddhism often exhibits an aesthetic attitude that focuses on the beauty of phenomena but fully acknowledges their transitory, contingent nature (Wicks 2005). The appreciation of their impermanence, and the realisation of the futility of craving them, is central to the aesthetic experience. Furthermore, Mahāyāna and Tantric teachings about the non-duality of *samsāra* and *nirvāna*, and Tantric positive reappraisals of the body and sensual desires, sometimes seem to challenge the notion that emancipation is to be achieved by relinquishing one's attachments to worldly things. They may be read as a warning about the dangers of attachment to the ideal of non-attachment. Then again, many Buddhist traditions often give the impression that all enjoyment for the things of this world will lead to craving and attachment, even if in very subtle forms. This world of impermanent things is often disparaged as a prison to be escaped, rather than something to be enjoyed and appreciated.

A serious concern is that the equanimous existence that Buddhist traditions often advocate as an ideal may entail sacrificing many of the desires and emotions that make life worth living. For example, the Buddhists arguably neglect the positive value of the passion of the lover, sensual desire in its manifold forms, the strong attachment and devotion to family and friends and righteous anger in the face of injustice and discrimination. A life without love, lust, grief and anger may be calm and unperturbed but arguably it is also incomplete and emotionally impoverished. It is tempting to think that Buddhist traditions have misdiagnosed the problem facing human beings and perhaps even invented a disease that does not exist and for which, therefore, a cure is not required. Buddhists' mistrust of basic human instincts appears to be an example of life-denying asceticism (Nietzsche 1996: 95–97). Perhaps Buddhist nonattachment would make us less than fully human, alienating us from deeply held beliefs, desires and emotions that make our lives meaningful.

Of course, a common Buddhist response is that Buddhist nonattachment is not cold and unemotional; indeed, we have already seen that loving kindness and compassion are central virtues of the awakened person. It is only selfish love that is to be removed and replaced by impartial empathy and concern for others. However, the concern remains that this sort of high-minded unattached love, as noble and important as it may seem, is insufficient; human beings have particular attachments to friends and family members which undoubtedly entail vulnerability to suffering but are perhaps indispensable for a fulfilled human life nonetheless.

Aristotle (fourth century BCE) is critical of the ideal of nonattachment on similar grounds. He claims that detachment does not lead to true human happiness and a genuinely fulfilled human existence is one “rich in attachments to people and things outside the self – friendships, family loves, political ties, ties of certain sorts to possessions and property. Thus it is a life rich in possibilities for emotions such as love, grief, fear, and even anger” (Nussbaum 1994: 42). The self-sufficient and tranquil life – advocated in ancient Greece by Stoics and Epicureans – which is impervious to these emotions, may be relatively safe and secure but sacrifices many of the things that make human life potentially so fulfilling. For Aristotle, the best human life is one that is always vulnerable to loss and requires good fortune,

because many of the things on which happiness depends are to some extent beyond one's control. Bad luck can undermine human flourishing (*eudaimonia*). But it is better to take the risk of disappointment and separation and to experience the joys of appropriate attachments to family and friends, than to make oneself invulnerable through nonattachment (Nussbaum 1994: 42–101).

On the one hand, the claim that attachments can enrich life enormously is difficult to resist and probably accords with most people's common sense intuitions. It is arguable that it is appropriate to value greatly things such as the love for a sexual partner and that of the parent for a child, the close bond with a friend and the enjoyment of the delights of the senses. Indeed, the very fragility of these desires and emotions, and their objects, possibly contributes to their beauty and worth. On the other hand, common sense is not always a reliable guide. The consequences of attachments can be devastating, which might give one reason to doubt the reliability of the dominant view. Bereavement and betrayal can shatter one's life, and attachments to tribe, race, country, ideology and territory often cause war and genocide. If one reflects seriously on the terrible suffering that attachments can cause, it is hard to dismiss outright the attraction of a life of nonattachment with its promise of peace and freedom from emotional vicissitudes.

A plausible way forward might be to condone attachments to certain things (for example, one's family) and in certain respects (for example, in moderation). In effect, this is what Buddhist lay ethics seeks to achieve, as opposed to the more strenuous pursuit of nonattachment by monastics. Furthermore, even if one rejects the ultimate Buddhist goal of complete nonattachment, the Buddhist meditation and ethical techniques may prevent one from forming excessive or inappropriate attachments. These techniques may also be useful when dealing with the painful consequences of one's attachments. For instance, Buddhist-inspired reflections on impermanence may ameliorate somewhat the suffering of loss; loving kindness meditation directed impartially towards all, including one's enemies, may help alleviate anger and hate. This can be the case even if one does not agree that a life without any attachments and free from all cravings would be best. In other words, these Buddhist techniques can be of value even when divorced from the ideal of human perfection that they were originally intended to help one realise.

The social causes of suffering

There is another way in which the Buddhist analysis of suffering may be thought to have important limitations. Its focus tends to be primarily on the inner motivational changes that are required to overcome suffering. Ignorance and craving in one's own mind need to be removed and the Buddhist path provides techniques for achieving this.

It may be objected, therefore, that Buddhist traditions tend to neglect the role that broader social problems play in causing human suffering. Buddhist teachings strive to make the individual independent of material and economic factors by stopping the craving and attachment that one has for comfort, food, sex and wealth. Buddhists aim to withdraw from society rather than seeking to improve it.

But surely this is naïve, given that the individual's inner world of desires, emotions and beliefs is at least in part a product of the environment which he or she inhabits? Would not Buddhist teachings be more effective if they turned their attention more to the social and economic conditions that shape individual attitudes? The emphasis in Buddhist teachings has usually been placed on treating the individual rather than society, and this has led to accusations that Buddhism has too little to say about solutions to social and political problems. As John Cobb (1982: 133) remarks: "On the whole, Buddhism does not encourage attention by its adherents to critical evaluation of social and political programs or exhort them to be in the forefront of movements of social protest."

One venerable Buddhist response is that such social problems are inevitable given the nature of samsāra, and thus it is not naïve but realistic for the Buddhist to concentrate his or her efforts on transcending rather than reforming this world of suffering. Thus, there is a stress in many forms of Buddhism on monasticism as a withdrawal from family and politics. This world is built by ignorance and craving and cannot be meaningfully improved but only escaped. Moreover, the Buddhist emphasis on self-cultivation rather than social action stems from a deep-seated conviction that suffering and its overcoming is fundamentally caused by one's own mind rather than external causes:

Your worst enemy cannot harm you
 As much as your own thoughts, unguarded.
 But once mastered,
 No one can help you as much,
 Not even your father and mother

(*Dhammapāda* iii, 42–3. Trans. Byrom 1976)

A different response is that Buddhist traditions have not always been, and should not be, silent on the social causes of suffering. Even these verses from the *Dhammapāda* do not deny that external causes can have an impact on one's well-being; it is just that they do not matter as much as the purity of one's mind. Furthermore, a central Buddhist teaching in many traditions is to transcend selfishness by encouraging individuals to cultivate attitudes of loving kindness and compassion. Buddhists think that we should extend our empathy and benevolence to include as many others as possible (*Sutta Nipāta*, 143–52; *Visuddhimagga* ix, 295–315; *Bodhicaryāvatāra* x, 1–58).

Sometimes this cultivation of empathy and benevolence has been confined to meditation practice. The focus in this case is on purifying one's mind rather than altruistically acting in the world based on one's pure intentions. Monastics have often not been social activists and this is no doubt motivated in part by the perceived futility of trying to reform samsāra. However, it is arguable that empathy and compassion should entail, or at least encourage, an interest in social and political improvements; even if samsāra cannot be perfected, some of its injustices and cruelties can be ameliorated. There are examples of Buddhist thinkers, such as Nāgārjuna, dispensing advice to rulers about how best to govern for the benefit

of society as a whole (*Ratnāvalī*, 301–400. Trans. Hopkins 1975: 62–77). Scriptural accounts depict the Buddha offering laypeople guidance on how to build a harmonious society through living in accordance with ethical precepts (*Dīgha Nikāya* iii, 180–93). There is often recognition that supportive political and social conditions are required in order for the Buddhist teachings to be transmitted and practised effectively. As reputedly exemplified by Aśoka (third century BCE), rulers have sometimes sought to create societies governed in accordance with the ethical principles of the Buddha's teaching and in a way which supports the flourishing of the Buddhist community (Thapar 1997).

Moreover, given the Buddhist claim that there is no autonomous self, and that one's inner world is not separate from what lies outside it, it would seem to follow that Buddhists should recognise the influence of society on one's psychology. Who we are as persons, and the sorts of mental states that we experience, is partly a result of our social environment; Buddhism, which endeavours to transform our mental states, would be naïve to neglect the social influences on our inner lives.

Nevertheless, this social reformist aspect of Buddhist teaching in pre-modern times perhaps has been relatively undeveloped. Indeed, Buddhism has often tacitly or explicitly supported social injustice and discrimination. Buddhism has frequently been part of the ideology of rulers that is used to justify their authority and privilege and the Buddhist community has often been close to emperors, kings and other rulers. When near the centre of political power, Buddhism has often supported the status quo rather than advocating social transformation. In other cases, there has been apathy about social and political concerns, often motivated by the belief that monastics in particular should not be involved with such mundane matters.

However, it is also the case that this perceived deficiency is addressed by the contemporary movement widely referred to as 'socially engaged Buddhism'. Prominent recent Buddhists – including the Dalai Lama, Sulak Sivaraksa, Thich Nhat Hanh and many others – have stressed in various ways the need to treat both the individual's ills and those of the wider society; these ills are mutually dependent. They contend that the ultimate aim of Buddhism may be liberation from *samsāra*; however, this does not preclude the Buddhist from endeavouring to make *samsāra* less painful and more conducive to the practice of Buddhism through addressing issues such as injustice, lack of education and poverty. They adapt central Buddhist teachings – such as those about interconnectedness, selflessness, compassion, giving, right livelihood – to develop social therapies that admittedly go beyond anything done or said by the Buddha himself (King 2005).

An interesting example of a socially engaged Buddhist is B.R. Ambedkar, the influential mid-twentieth century leader of the socially oppressed dalits (the ex-untouchable community) in India and a convert to Buddhism. He saw in Buddhism an indigenous Indian tradition that teaches human uplift and the rejection of social exploitation through caste distinctions. Ambedkar's socially orientated Buddhism does not emphasise teachings such as rebirth, monasticism, ritual, meditation and the worship of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. He goes so far as to reject the traditional understanding of the four noble truths as a monastic

misinterpretation of the Buddha's teaching. For Ambedkar, suffering is rooted in economic and social exploitation and the poverty that it causes. He believed this to be the true message of the Buddha (Queen 1996: 47). In other words, it is the ignorance and craving of people with economic and political power that causes the suffering of others who have no such advantages. This is clearly a significant reinterpretation of what is commonly taken to be the Buddhist teaching, not least because the Buddha's attitude to caste appears to have been nuanced and not the total rejection that Ambedkar advocates (Lopez 2008: 76–91).

Some other socially engaged Buddhists take a less radical view, recognising that in this interconnected world, one's suffering can be the result of both one's own psychological shortcomings and the injustices of an oppressive social and economic system; equal attention needs to be given to both causes. As noble as these sentiments may appear to be, doubts remain about the compatibility of socially engaged Buddhism with some traditional Buddhist teachings. In particular, there is a common Buddhist view that pleasant and painful experiences that occur to us are the result of karma; given the inevitability of karmic consequences, perhaps it is futile to seek improvements in people's lives and to alleviate their suffering through social and political reform? Whether the Buddhist views about karma really have this implication needs to be investigated; it is to these teachings that we will turn in the next chapter.

2 Karma and rebirth

The previous chapter demonstrated that, for Buddhism, ignorance and craving are morally serious primarily because these defiled mental states are the root causes of suffering. This needs to be seen in the context of Buddhist teachings about karma (Pāli: *kamma*) and rebirth; actions motivated by defiled mental states lead to negative consequences – that is, cause suffering – for the perpetrator either in this or future lives. Indeed, karma functions as an explanation for why bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. Those who are virtuous in this life can experience suffering in this life because of their bad actions in previous lives whereas people who are unvirtuous in this life may still reap the benefits of virtuous actions that they have done in previous lives. Good things happen to people who are currently bad, but eventually their bad actions will catch up with them, either in this or subsequent lives. Those who are virtuous in this life will eventually, often in subsequent lives, experience the good consequences of their actions while those who are unvirtuous will eventually suffer the deleterious effects of their actions. In this sense, the Buddhist teachings of karma and rebirth are reassuring because they function as a natural cosmic law that ensures moral justice, which so often seems to be lacking in this life. Eventually, people will reap what they sow and the all too common experience that virtue is unrewarded and vice unpunished in this life is corrected in the longer term; the moral balance will be redressed over the course of lifetimes.

The teachings of karma and rebirth require further discussion and they will be the focus of the current chapter. For example, Buddhists are said to have ethicised the earlier Vedic understanding of karma, but what does this mean? Furthermore, a puzzle about the Buddhist teaching is that rebirth is said to occur without a self that is reborn; how can it meaningfully be claimed that moral justice occurs in subsequent lives when there is no enduring self to reap the rewards or punishments in those subsequent lives? Moreover, Buddhism emphasises acting with compassion and without (excessive) concern for one's self; is this not in tension with the teaching of karma, which claims that the Buddhist should perpetrate good and avoid bad deeds because these actions will have good and bad consequences respectively for the individual who perpetrates these actions? Do karma and rebirth, as traditionally taught, not encourage an individualised, selfish understanding of the consequences of moral action? Does this not conflict with

common Buddhist altruistic ethical ideals and the ontological claim that there is no separate, independent self that will be the recipient of the rewards or punishments of actions? Furthermore, the teaching of karma is sometimes presented as a rigid, unwavering moral law but is this always the case? Buddhists, we will discover, sometimes construe karma in a more flexible way. In addition, is karma meant to explain all of the bad and good things that happen to people or is it more limited in scope? Also, while the karma and rebirth teaching is intended to provide long-term moral justice, is it not the case that it actually undermines justice in the social, economic and political spheres by rationalising inequalities and disadvantages as the inevitable effects of past actions? Moreover, it is not clear that the Buddhist belief in future lives is plausible let alone provable. Is it rational to believe in rebirth? Contemporary Buddhists sometimes seek to decouple the teaching of karma from what they consider to be the dubious idea of rebirth; can such a ‘naturalised’ version of karma, shorn of the metaphysical baggage of the rebirth teaching, provide a persuasive moral philosophy which is still recognisably Buddhist? This chapter will discuss these and related philosophical issues associated with the teachings of karma and rebirth.

The ethicisation of karma

The term ‘karma’ in early Brahmanical tradition seems to have referred to action in the limited sense of the correct performance of the Vedic rituals and sacrifices which was the duty (*dharma*) of priests (Collett 2009: 125). However, in the late Vedic text, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (4.4.6), this ritual-orientated teaching about karma is contrasted with an alternative view that the cause of transmigration to the next world is a person’s actions in this life based on desire (*kāma*). Karma is both broadened and reinterpreted in terms of the motivation; it is actions in general, and the desires that lie behind and prompt these actions, that fuel reincarnation.

This tendency to de-emphasise external ritual action and to focus on the psychological springs of action is a central feature of the teaching of karma in early Buddhism. Buddhism ethicises karma in that it is moral and immoral acts that have consequences (Gombrich 2009: 14). And a major determinant of whether an action is moral or immoral is volition or will. The Buddha famously declared: “It is volition [*cetanā*], monks, that I declare to be kamma. Having willed, one performs an action by body, speech, and mind” (*Āṅguttara Nikāya* vi, 63. Trans. Thera and Bodhi 1999: 173). The karmic quality of an action depends on the intention that lies behind it. This means that even volitions that do not lead to physical actions – such as the unenacted and unspoken wish to kill someone – have karmic effects. For Buddhism “it is possible to ‘sin in one’s heart’ without the performance of a physical act” (Keown 1996: 336). Nevertheless, enacted volitions are presumably stronger in many cases and hence often have more serious karmic repercussions than those that remain as just thoughts.

This Buddhist definition of karma as intention also means that only willed or deliberate acts have karmic consequences, positive or negative. So, Buddhism

claims that unintentional acts are karmically neutral. This means that there is a class of actions – such as the bodily processes associated with the nervous system and hunger – that are considered to have no karmic repercussions because they are automatic rather than willed. However, for Buddhism actions are still intentional even if they are badly thought out or *careful* deliberation is entirely absent; “the threshold for ‘intentional’ is quite low here” (Carpenter 2014: 93).

The Buddhist equation of karma with intention might seem to entail that if, for example, I unintentionally kill someone when driving my car, then I am not morally culpable and no bad karma is created. However, the Buddhist would surely want to consider what previous decisions might have led to me unintentionally killing the person. For example, perhaps I had decided to drink alcohol and then drive home in my car. Or perhaps I had driven too fast or paid insufficient attention to my surroundings, both of which I could have avoided by deciding to take more care. These intentional actions would in this case have led to the death of the pedestrian and be karmically significant. My bad choices made the death of the pedestrian more likely, even though the death of the pedestrian was entirely unintended. This would be akin to the culpable carelessness of the monk who, according to an account in the Pāli scriptures, threw a stone off the Vulture’s Peak and unintentionally killed someone. The Buddha determines that an offence has been committed but not as severe an offence as the intentional killing of a person (Harvey 1998: 410). The monk should have foreseen that his intentional action might have led to harm or death.

Is it possible that simply the decision to drive a car at all – knowing that there is always a small risk because it can cause death to other people even if one is careful – might have some karmic weight? In this scenario, the improbability that one would cause death would surely severely mitigate any karmic effect. Perhaps there would be no, or a negligible, karmic result from unintentionally killing someone while driving responsibly, given the lack of intention to kill and the care taken to avoid causing death. Then again, the regret or guilt that a person is likely to feel in this situation would seem to indicate that there could be an immediate negative karmic consequence. At any rate, it seems clear that the karmic repercussions (in this life or future lives) of unintentionally killing a pedestrian when driving carefully should be much less weighty than the serious karmic effects of unintentionally killing the pedestrian when driving carelessly. And the karmic impact of intentionally killing a pedestrian should be still more severe.

Although only intentional acts create karma, is it the case that all intentional acts create karma? Buddhism recognises that volitions can be good, bad or morally neutral (Jayatilleke 2009: 110). Some intentions seem morally innocuous; for example, the decision to open a door would presumably create good or bad karma dependent on one’s motivation for opening the door. However, it does not seem that all reasons for opening the door would have ethical weight and create karma. Perhaps I decide to open the door simply because the doorbell has rung. It does not appear that this would necessarily be karmically productive. However, maybe I decide to open the door motivated by the desire to go to the kitchen to get the piece of chocolate cake I am craving; or perhaps I decide to open the door

motivated by the desire to help a child in the next room who is in need of my assistance. In these cases, it seems more obvious that the decision to open the door would be karmically productive, as the choice is motivated by greed or kindness respectively. It would seem that some mundane, everyday decisions can be morally neutral, but equally some such decisions can have karmic significance, even if this is sometimes very small.

Moreover, the intentions behind even the smallest acts can often be quite complex. A person can have mixed motives. Perhaps I open the classroom door to go into my next lecture, where I teach out of a sense of responsibility to my students but also out of desire to get paid. Perhaps my decision to open the door for someone else may be motivated both by kindness and the desire for them to think well of me. Whether the good karma is outweighed by the bad in such complex situations is unclear, but presumably this must depend on the relative strength of the motives at play here.

The ethicisation of karma in Buddhism is also evident in another way. In Vedic times, karma was originally caste-specific and referred primarily to the ritual actions of the Brahmin class who performed the Vedic sacrifices. By contrast, in Buddhism karma is universalised, so that the same fundamental ethical values apply to all people no matter what their social class and gender (Gombrich 2009: 26, 169). Skilful or wholesome volitions create good karma and unskilful or unwholesome volitions create bad karma for all human individuals, no matter what their social status. The same ethical standards and laws govern us all.

This universalization is highly significant because it entails that human beings are all deemed responsible for their own volitions and will eventually reap the benefits or suffer the consequences of those volitions and the actions that result from them. This is a moral philosophy of individual accountability. The Buddha explains: “Student, beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions; they originate from their actions, are bound to their actions, have their actions as their refuge. It is action that distinguishes beings as inferior and superiors” (*Majjhima Nikāya* iii, 204). Even so, we will see later in this chapter that this teaching of strict individual responsibility for actions is often not adhered to in Buddhism. Furthermore, in the next chapter, some doubts will be raised about the possibility of free will and moral responsibility in Buddhism.

It might also be objected that the Buddhist preoccupation with intention is ethically naïve and simplistic. It may be that in determining the moral rightness of an action consideration of motivation is important, and perhaps necessary, but it is not clear that this is sufficient. Surely good intentions are not enough and wrong actions can be performed even with good motivations? For instance, I may give you a cake motivated by generosity, but if you have an allergy to the nuts the cake contains, my gift may harm you in a way that seems to compromise the moral status of my action.

One response to this problem is that factors other than intentions, such as the consequences of one’s actions, often come into consideration in Buddhist moral decision-making (see chapter 3). My gift of the cake had harmful consequences; this means that it was a morally flawed action, despite being motivated by

generosity. Robert Florida (2000: 142) points out, in relation to Buddhist attitudes to abortion as expressed in the *Vinaya*, that a monk who succeeds in performing an abortion is punished more severely than one who intends to carry out an abortion but is not successful. This seems to indicate that results, and not just intentions, matter in determining the ethical status of an action.

Another plausible Buddhist response to this objection is that many unawakened people may sometimes act with relatively good motivations characterised by *a degree* of kindness and awareness but *not entirely free* from craving and ignorance. By contrast, the actions of an awakened person, who has perfect (and not just good) intentions, would be entirely free from craving and ignorance. This may mean that the awakened person has the wisdom and kindness always to act appropriately, that is, in ways that do not produce unnecessary bad consequences. In my state of unaware generosity, I give you a cake containing nuts that is actually harmful to you because of your nut allergy. My intentions were good but flawed; they were still affected by unawakened ignorance. By contrast, the awakened person, with pure, undeluded motivation, would be aware of your nut allergy and would refrain from giving the inappropriate gift.

But why would the awakened Buddhist have this unimpeded awareness? As will be explored further in chapter 4, for many Buddhist traditions, a characteristic of awakening is omniscience. Although views about omniscience in Buddhism are complex, this is sometimes taken to mean that the awakened person sees and knows everything in the past, present and future. So, the omniscient awakened person would act entirely without ignorance in the sense that they would literally see and know everything, including that you have a nut allergy. Given that the enlightened person would also be motivated by kindness, they would refrain from giving you the inappropriate and harmful gift of the cake. So, *good* intentions may be insufficient and morally flawed, but *perfect* intentions, unaffected by ignorance, would transcend these ethical limitations.

Of course, this depends on the contentious claim that omniscience is possible. But a more down-to-earth point is that even the unawakened mind can have motivations that are *more or less* clouded by morally culpable unmindfulness. I may decide to give you the cake while thoughtlessly not even considering that you may be allergic to nuts. My gift is generous but lacking in awareness and thoughtfulness, especially if I have reason to believe that you are prone to allergies. Alternatively, I may be mindful enough to check whether you have a nut allergy before giving the gift, or warn you that the cake contains nuts after giving the gift. The unintended negative consequences of my gift would be prevented in a way that seems morally admirable; I am not omniscient but my generous motivation is coupled with a proper, mindful consideration of the potential dangers of giving such a gift.

Karma and not-self

Another central feature of the karma and rebirth teaching in Buddhism is its connection with the not-self idea. Hindu and Jain notions of karma and rebirth

typically maintain that there is a permanent self or soul (*ātman*, *jīva*, etc.) which accrues karma and transmigrates, so that the same self is reborn but in a different body. It is this self that suffers or enjoys in subsequent lives the consequences of its actions in the present life. In these traditions, the notion of a permanent self provides the explanation of enduring personal identity and continuing responsibility for previous actions.

Buddhism typically rejects this view because what we conventionally refer to as the ‘self’ is actually a complex conglomeration of causally connected impermanent events. Thus the person that I am today is a cluster of mental and physical events that is not the same as the person that I was yesterday, last year or in a previous life and is not the same as the person I will be tomorrow, next year or in a future life. Nevertheless, the person I am today is causally connected, often in very important and close ways, to the person I was in the past and the person I will be in the future.

The Buddhist not-self teaching can be construed as the rejection of a static substance model of the self and the affirmation of a process model of the self. We each exist as continua of causally connected events rather than as unchanging entities which endure behind the changes that our bodies and minds undergo. My personal identity and continuing responsibility for my actions over time is explained by the particularly strong causal connections between my present process self and the process self I was in the past and will be in the future. It is of particular importance in the current discussion that the causal links between past, present and future process self are sufficiently strong that the karmic repercussions of the past process self’s actions are incurred by the present and future process self and the present process self’s karma has effects on the future process self, including the process self as it exists in future lives.

Critics sometimes see logical problems in the Buddhist adherence to both the not-self teaching and rebirth (Flanagan 2011: 132). How can there be rebirth if there is no self to be reborn? However, this paradox is perhaps apparent rather than real. There is arguably no logical contradiction in the Buddhist view that personal identity across lives is to be understood as the continuation of a complex causal process rather than the enduring existence of an unchanging substance. A common Buddhist metaphor to explain rebirth without a substance self is that of light being transmitted from one candle to another (Williams and Ladwig 2012: 182). The light that burns on the original candle is not the same substance as, but is intimately causally connected to, the light which burns on the second candle.

Charles Goodman (2014: 222) observes that rebirth can exist in a world without enduring, unchanging selves so long as causal processes exist that transmit “large amounts of information from a dying sentient being into a sentient being that is coming into existence.” Of particular importance for the new sentient being would be the karmic information communicated from the previous existence which would provide an explanation of various features of the new sentient being’s life such as some personality traits and psychological propensities. Goodman (2014: 222) remarks that the causal connections between the new sentient being’s life and the previous sentient being’s life would have to be “particularly tight in order

to preserve personal identity across lives, tighter, for example, than those between me now and how my daughter turns out . . . even though my actions and characteristics have many consequences for how my daughter turns out.” Goodman’s daughter is a different process self from Goodman. While the causal continua which are process selves can clearly have effects on one another, and sometimes very powerful effects, these effects are typically not as intimate and closely woven as the effects that an early stage of the same continuum will have on a later stage of the same continuum, including a later stage that occurs in a future life. This is why the effects of intentional actions will be felt by the same agent – that is, the same process self – who performs the actions. The tight causal connections with the process self in the future life also presumably explains why the current process self should be self-interestedly concerned about the impact of his or her actions on that future process self.

However, a problem that faces this Buddhist, or Buddhist-inspired, account is that it seems difficult to see how the causal connections with the process self in the future life actually could be sufficiently tight for the present process self to be self-interestedly concerned about the repercussions of its actions on that future process self. This is because the future life process self will have a different body and typically no memory of the present life process self. Even those comparatively rare people who claim to have some memories of past lives often only have glimpses, even assuming that these memories are reliable. Indeed, many of the character traits of the future life process self presumably may be different from that of the present life process self. Even if there may be some character trait continuity due to karma, such as, for example, a propensity to greed due to greedy actions in a previous life, it seems that some character traits that are central to who I am would not normally continue into the future life. For example, I have particular feelings of loyalty, affection and love for particular people in this present life. These feelings for specific people are important aspects of my personal identity in the present life. Even if, as some Buddhist believe (see below), I may be born again, because of good karma, in the same community as the people for whom I have these special feelings, there is no guarantee that this would be the case. Nor is it clear that I would forge the same relationships and have the same feelings, even if we were born again in close proximity. “Without memory, continuity of physical identity, [sufficient] continuing character traits and so on, does it really make any sense to talk of ‘the same individual’ undergoing a multiplicity of lives?” (Griffiths 1982: 284).

In these circumstances, the future life process self may be insufficiently connected to the present life process self for the present life process self to be self-interestedly incentivised to take care that its actions have a positive rather than a negative impact on the future life process self. And yet, the traditional karma teaching is formulated to discourage bad actions and encourage good actions because of the impact they will have specifically on the process self who is the agent. Why should the agent have any self-interested concern for a future life process self which seems so tenuously connected to the current process self that the future life process self will have no memory of the present life process self and

even will have a different body? The suspicion is that Buddhists have not taken sufficient account of the role that memory and corporeality play in providing personal identity over time. Perhaps some of the psychological propensities, some of the bodily features of the future life process self, and various fortunes and misfortunes that occur to this future life process self are explained by the karma of the present life process self; however, this may not be a sufficient connection to the present life process self to warrant the present life process self's self-interested concern for the future life process self.

The Buddhist can respond that Buddhism encourages action that is not self-interested and is other regarding, so the present life process self should care about the impact of its actions on the future life process self even if that self will be very different from the present self. Even if the future life process self is insufficiently connected to one's current life process self to feel like the same person, one should be concerned for the future life self because one should be concerned about the impact of one's actions on others. However, this is to change the argument and seems to be in tension with the traditional Buddhist teaching that the effects of karma are effects for the perpetrator of the action and this is primarily why the agent should avoid bad actions and do good actions. Treating the future life process self as another person for whom one should be altruistically concerned undermines the idea – central in Buddhism to the maintenance of moral justice – that the consequences of actions will rebound on the same person who performed the action.

This means that the traditional Buddhist teaching of karma is presented in a way which promotes action with a self-interested motivation which is in conflict with the Buddhist ideal of altruistic behaviour. In other words, is not the traditional Buddhist teaching of karma troublingly selfish in orientation? One's actions clearly have an impact on one's self but also on others, and yet the teaching of karma often focuses solely or largely on the repercussions on one's self. In the Buddhist teaching of karma, "what is emphasized is the way moral deeds enhance or prejudice the personal circumstances of the actor, and little is said about the effect of moral action upon the world at large" (Keown 1996: 344). And yet, moral actions can clearly often have a highly significant impact on those other than the moral agent; for instance, "if I break the First Precept, *someone* is killed" (Keown 1996: 344) and that someone is usually not me.

Some Theravāda Buddhists in the twentieth century have focused on the notion that karma overflows the individual, that is, when a person acts "the good he does will not only benefit himself but all others who live with and around him, that is, all sentient beings. And vice versa, evil will not be suffered by himself alone" (Dr. Luang Suriyabongs cited in McDermott 1976: 67). However, James McDermott (1976: 80) claims that there is a tension with tradition here because the teaching of karma had not usually been taught in this way in Buddhism, which has focused more on the impact of actions on the perpetrator. Dale Wright (2004: 85) concurs and argues that the traditional Buddhist karma teaching is inadequate because it largely conceives of karma "as a consequence or destiny that is individual, as opposed to one that is social or collective." He claims:

If karma is to be a truly comprehensive teaching about human actions and their effects, extensive development of all of the ways in which the effects of our acts radiate into other selves and into social structures will need to be grafted onto the doctrine of karma as it currently stands (Wright 2004: 91).

However, it is possible that traditional understandings of karma do not need to be transformed as radically as Wright contends. The Pāli scriptures do sometimes acknowledge that ethically unwholesome or unskillful actions have a deleterious effect not just on oneself but on others as well, whereas actions that are ethically wholesome or skillful beneficially impact both self and others (*Majjhima Nikāya* ii, 114–15). And Jonathon Walters (2003) has argued against the common scholarly view that Buddhists have thought of karma largely in an individualised way. His view is based on his observations in Sri Lanka and various canonical sources that indicate that Theravāda Buddhists have acknowledged numerous cases of communal or group karma. He contends that “society is seen as an explicitly karma-constituted-entity, while the social dimensions of karma are explicitly emphasized” (Walters 2003: 22) so that, for instance, those who make good karma together can be expected to be reborn together in the same community.

At any rate, it seems that the privatised understanding of karma is at odds with other Buddhist teachings such as not-self and interdependence. The claim that the consequences of my actions remain individualised as consequences for me alone, in this and subsequent lives, rather than impacting others in important ways “reinforces a picture of the world as composed of a large number of discreet and isolated souls, a view that a great deal of Buddhist thought has sought to undermine” (Wright 2004: 85).

The limitations of the individualised interpretation of the karma teaching may be one reason why Buddhist sources, such as the *Abhidharmakośabhaṣya*, claim that awakened people (*arhats*) have eradicated craving and ignorance and therefore their actions no longer produce karmic results (Clayton 2005: 6). “Some interpreters put forth the possibility that awakened beings do not produce karmic fruits because their actions are completely non-egocentric and void of greed, hatred, and delusion” (Ghose 2007: 284). The awakened have a deep understanding of the interconnected nature of the world and no longer see themselves as separate selves to whom karmic consequences accrue. They act skillfully for the sake of others rather than for rewards that such actions may bring to themselves. In this sense, their actions are karmically neutral. Another plausible and compatible suggestion is that they have become so thoroughly virtuous that their skillful actions are spontaneous rather than requiring the deliberation associated with intentional acts; hence their actions produce no karma (Harvey 2000: 40).

A further example from traditional Buddhism of the individualised concept of karma being stretched and challenged occurs in the concept of merit transfer. This is a belief and practice that particularly has appealed to Mahāyāna Buddhists, who employ merit transfer as a means of enacting the Bodhisattva vow compassionately to assist other sentient beings (Williams 2009: 203) However, merit transfer is not an exclusively Mahāyāna phenomenon, and there are many examples of such

practices in Theravāda Buddhism (Harvey 2013: 45–6) and early Indian non-Mahāyāna schools (Williams 2009: 203). The central idea here is that the merit (*punya*) accrued by one's good actions can be ritually transmitted or given away to another sentient being or sentient beings who may be in greater need of this merit. The good consequences of one's intentional actions can be experienced by others. This merit transfer would seem to re-orientate the karma teaching away from its apparently self-centred, privatised formulation.

This arguably makes the teaching of karma more compatible with the Buddhist ethical ideal of selflessness and compassion as well as the Buddhist ontology of not-self and interdependence. There are no inherent owners of the consequences of actions in a deeply interconnected world. Merit transfer could be construed as “simply a rather nice metaphor to indicate what happens to the effects of one's good actions when the illusion of self is overcome. Since both one's actions and their effects are no longer understood to be owned, they are ‘shared’, and in this sense an awakened being can give away his or her ‘merit’” (Clayton 2005: 10). Indeed, one's intentional actions are having an impact on others even prior to the illusion of self being removed; the merit transfer practice, if understood metaphorically, could signal one's open acknowledgement of this reality and one's aspiration to ensure that one's actions have only a positive effect on those beyond oneself.

Yet caution is required here. Merit transfer often occurs in meditation and rituals primarily as a way of purifying the mind of the one who wishes to transfer the merit; the compassionate intention to give away one's good karma for the benefit of others has positive effects on one's own mind, and thus creates good karma for oneself whether or not it is really possible to transfer merit to other individuals. Thus, the benefits of merit transfer can still be (partly) self-orientated.

Moreover, merit transfer often has been construed literally as one individual accruing merit as the result of good intentional actions and then deciding to give this away to other individuals. This literal understanding of merit and its transfer implies a highly individualised earning of merit which is stored and then, by some supernatural or magical process, transmitted to another individual or individuals. “One effect of this teaching was that it tended to picture the karma or the goodness of an act as a self-enclosed package that was theirs alone, and that could be generously given away at some later point if circumstances warranted” (Wright 2004: 86). Such a literal understanding of the merit transfer teaching may go some way towards softening the self-interested orientation of the karma teaching because one does after all give away one's merit for the benefit of others; however, it lacks the arguably deeper insight that our intentional actions are constantly having an impact on others, whether we recognise this or not, and that these continual consequences of our actions on others is a matter of deep ethical significance. This impact on others occurs not by a mysterious ritualised transfer of the effects of good karma from one individual to others, but because of our inevitable interconnectedness.

How rigid is karma?

The teaching of merit transfer also throws into question the rigidity of the karmic law and inevitability of karmic effects. There is significant diversity in Buddhism about this issue. The strictest view of the law of karma, expressed in various places in the Pāli Canon, sees intentional actions as inexorably having consequences for the perpetrator of the actions. There is no escape and individual responsibility is absolute: “Not in the sky, nor the middle of the ocean, Nor in a mountain cave; Though terrified, there is nowhere on earth where one might escape from an evil action” (*Dhammapāda*, 127. Cited and translated by Attwood 2014: 507).. Each individual is responsible for their own actions and must be a refuge unto themselves. There is consequently no place for merit transfer in this strict view of karma. Every bad and good action has a consequence for the agent and this is unavoidable. The results of a good or bad action cannot be eradicated so that the agent of the action does not experience them: “I declare, monks, that of the intentional deeds done and accumulated there can be no wiping out without experiencing the result thereof. . . I declare, monks that there is no ending of ill as regards intentional deeds done and accumulated without experiencing the results thereof” (*Ānguttara Nikāya* v, 292. Trans Ghose 2007: 275–6). The best that one can do if one has performed bad actions is to perpetrate good actions in the present and future as well as practice Buddhism. The results of the bad actions cannot be avoided but the current good actions will at least bring the benefit of future good results; the practice of Buddhism should also make one more understanding of, and mentally resilient to, the inevitable suffering that will be caused by one’s previous misdeeds.

However, to say that it is inevitable that intentional actions will have consequences for the agent is not to say that these consequences are necessarily predictable. Indeed, early Buddhists, as recorded in the *Katthāvatthu*, debated whether every intentional act has a specific, invariable and identifiable result with some opponents of the Theravādins arguing that this is the case. The Theravāda view expressed in that text is that only in some specific cases – such as matricide, which results in retribution in hell in the next life – are the precise consequences of bad actions prescribed or fixed as part of the natural moral order. And only in the case of the stream enterer (a highly advanced Buddhist practitioner) is it prescribed or fixed that good actions will necessarily result eventually in the attainment of *nibbāna*. Most good and bad actions are not of these two varieties; although they will inevitably have consequences the precise nature of these consequences is not fixed (Mcdermott 1975: 429–30). Presumably the karmic effect of such actions will vary depending on many, complex variables, such as the character of the agent, the worthiness of the recipient of the act and the strength of the volitions motivating the act. For example, a generally kind person who commits an unkind act will suffer less severe karmic repercussions for their unkind act than a generally unkind person who commits the same unkind act (Harvey 2000: 25–6). And giving a gift to a worthy person such as a monk is generally deemed to be more karmically fruitful than giving the same gift to an unworthy person (Harvey 2000: 21). The detailed, complex workings of the law of karma

are often proclaimed to be inscrutable to the unawakened and only known by Buddha as a result of his omniscience (Griffiths 1982: 289).

While the strict view of karma as a rigid moral law is prevalent in the Theravāda scriptures, there are examples, particularly in popular stories from the Theravāda narrative tradition, of deviation from this position, where people sometimes do not suffer the consequences of their bad acts (Main 2005). Moreover, the teaching of merit transfer softens the law of karma by allowing that the results of good karma, at least, need not be experienced by the perpetrator of the act and can be passed on to others. In addition, some sources express the view that previous bad karma can effectively be cancelled or purified. One example is that of lapsed karma, which occurs when the *arahat*, who will not be reborn again and thus only experiences in the current life the results of previous karma, may die before all of these results have come to fruition (Main 2005: 2). There is also a controversy in early Buddhism about whether the attainment of Buddhahood can cause all past karma to become lapsed, so that Buddhas will no longer experience the results of past actions for the remainder of their final life (Walters 1990). Moreover, it is also sometimes said that weak karma can be lapsed in the sense that it does not bring about a result when overpowered by stronger karma of the opposite type; that is, strong bad karma can cause weak good karma to become lapsed or strong good karma can cause weak bad karma to become lapsed (Obeyesekere 2002: 137).

Another relevant consideration is that confession and repentance are employed in Buddhism; this can be a means of acknowledging one's past misdeeds and resolving not to do bad actions in the future. It may also be a method for mentally preparing oneself for and being less troubled by the inescapable painful consequences of one's past bad actions (Attwood 2014: 506–8). However, with the emergence of Mahāyāna Buddhism, confession, repentance and other Buddhist practices become mechanisms for actually cancelling past bad karma. This is evident, for example, in Śāntideva's *Śikṣāsamuccaya* (eighth century), which includes excerpts from Mahāyāna texts that claim that the fruits of defiled actions can be removed by the Tathāgata; confession and other practices – such as mantra recitation recollection of the name of the Buddha, taking refuge in the Buddha, and developing the bodhisattva's aspiration for awakening (*bodhicitta*) – purify the bodhisattva of the effects of bad karma. "In the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* the escapability of karma is normalized" and it becomes possible to "dodge the bullet of karma" (Attwood 2014: 526, 528).

This attitude is developed further in Tantric Buddhism as exemplified by the chanting of the Vajrasattva mantra, which is popularly believed to be able to eliminate all bad karma, even that accrued because of the most heinous crimes that would normally result in lengthy stays in hell realms (Attwood 2014: 526–7). In Tantric Buddhism, "the neutralizing of bad karma, that is, the sidestepping of inevitability, becomes an increasingly important theme" (Attwood 2014: 505). And in medieval Japan, Nichiren explains that past bad karma can be eradicated through confession. Moreover, Nichiren has faith in the power of chanting the *Lotus sūtra* or just its title to destroy past bad karma before it brings results (Ghose 2007: 268). Another case from medieval Japan is Shinran who claims that

surrendering oneself to Amida Buddha and giving up all self-power purifies all karmic taints by means of Amida's grace (Ghose 2007: 267–8).

These are examples of a tendency in various forms of Buddhism to rely on an external, higher power to remove bad karma, due in part to the recognition that the weight of one's misdemeanours and the prevalence of human moral weakness make salvation through one's own efforts a remote and unrealistic option. This is a far cry from the strict view of karma that teaches that there is no escape for the agent from the effects of bad actions. There is clearly a wide spectrum of views in Buddhism about the rigidity of the law of karma and the inevitability of karma's effects.

How much does karma explain?

A further point of contention occurs concerning the range of karma as an explanatory cause of phenomena. There is not unanimity amongst Buddhists about how much karma is intended to explain. However, what is clear is that Buddhists historically have commonly seen karma as an important cause of one's physiological, social and material and psychological circumstances. Due to karma, human beings are "healthy, ugly and beautiful, uninfluential and influential, poor and wealthy, low-born and high-born, stupid and wise" (*Majjhima Nikāya* iii, 202–3. Trans Ghose 2007: 281). Very specific effects in future rebirths are sometimes attributed to particular types of karma with, for example, stinginess leading to poverty, injuring beings leading to illness, and anger resulting in ugliness (Harvey 2013: 39). Buddhist texts sometimes devote considerable attention to the mechanics of karma, describing factors that make karma more weighty or serious and the likely outcomes of particular acts (Harvey 2000: 14–23, 52–58; *Lam Rim Chen Mo* 2000: 227–46).

On the physiological level, Buddhists contend that the kind of bodies into which one is reborn is influenced by previous karma. For example, previous good or bad intentional actions determine whether one is reborn as a human, an animal, a god, as a male or a female. Buddhism is replete with narratives about rebirths as animals as the result of bad karma and patriarchal warnings that rebirth as a woman is an effect of previous wrong actions. Moreover, one's previous good and bad actions are thought to have an impact on health and sickness, beauty and ugliness. One's longevity is commonly said to be determined at conception on the basis of previous karma (Harvey 2000: 14–16, 369–70; Ghose 2007: 281).

On the material and social level, one's status in society and wealth are typically identified as effects that past karma can have. Moreover, how other people and animals act towards us (for example, whether they attack or are kind) can be an effect of karma, and the effects of inanimate objects in the environment upon us (for example, whether we are affected by a natural calamity such as an earthquake) can be the result of past karma. Life's manifold material and social fortunes and misfortunes can be due to the influence of good and bad karma respectively.

On the psychological level, karma is thought to result in emotional and cognitive dispositions. One's previous actions mould one's moral and intellectual character; for example, acting on greedy motivations reinforces greedy tendencies, making

one more likely to act from a greedy intention in the future and making it harder for this greedy proclivity to be resisted. And one's intellectual capacities are thought to be affected by past actions; for instance, one's prior actions motivated by ignorance are likely to lead to a duller and less able mind, detrimentally affecting one's intellectual capacity in the future. Buddhists contend that this is true not just in this life but also across lives, so that the dispositions to greed or ignorance, hatred, generosity, etc., can cause the re-born person (or non-human sentient being) to have similar psychological traits.

The *Katthāvatthu* records an early Buddhist dispute about whether the results of karma are purely psychological or whether they are also physical and material. James McDermott (1975: 425) argues that the Theravāda interlocutor in the *Katthāvatthu* wants to "spiritualise" karma by taking the former view; however, Buddhism, including many Theravādins, has usually adopted the latter view, that is, that karma has results which are not only psychological but also physiological, social and material.

There is also dispute in Buddhism about whether everything that happens to us – or even everything that happens – is the result of karma. Are one's past moral and immoral actions solely responsible for one's mental, physical, and material circumstances? Or is karma one cause, albeit an important one, among many? And is the very existence of the world a result of karma?

A prevalent Buddhist view is that karma is only one type of causality, and that there can also be other types of causes of the physical world, of one's current situation, and one's fortunes and misfortunes. For example, the orthodox Theravāda position is that karma is only one form of dependent origination and does not provide a complete explanation of one's present material and mental conditions (McDermott 1975: 428–9). Thus, in the *Samyutta Nikāya* (iv, 230–1), the Buddha is recorded as having refuted those who claim that everything that a person experiences is due to actions done in the past. Here the Buddha contends that suffering can be caused by factors that have nothing to do with karma, such as the action of bodily humours and seasonal changes.

The fifth century Theravāda commentator Buddhaghosa identifies five *niyamas*, which are fixed causal rules, necessities or constraints; these are types of dependent origination that govern phenomena. Significantly, only one of these five forms of inevitable dependent origination is karmic. The other four *niyamas* are the causal laws governing: 1) climate and the fruiting and flowering of trees at particular times; 2) the production of seeds, ensuring that particular seeds always produce plants and flowers of their own kind; 3) the mental processes that ensure that a preceding momentary mental event always produces and conditions the succeeding momentary mental event; and 4) archetypal events that are believed to inevitably occur during the life of a Buddha such as the earthquakes which are said to have accompanied his conception and birth and the departure of his five disciples prior to his awakening (Jones 2012). In addition, the *Milindapañha* accepts physiological causal factors of illness, such as bile, phlegm, and wind, as well as external causes such as the weather (Ghose 2007: 282). The thirteenth century Japanese Buddhist Nichiren also explains that according to the (Mahāyāna) *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra*,

there are six causes of illness: “1) disharmony of the four elements; 2) improper eating and drinking; 3) inappropriate practice of seated meditation; 4) attack of demons; 5) the work of devils; 6) the effects of karma” (Ghose 2007: 283). The implication is that karma is not always the reason for misfortunes.

It would seem, then, that many Buddhists events happen as a result of one or a combination of types of dependent origination. This leaves open the possibility that good and bad things may happen to people sometimes because of karma, sometimes as a result of other causes, and sometimes as a result of both karma and other causes. For instance, an earthquake is evidently a result of the physical type of dependent origination and yet the fact that a particular person is adversely affected by this earthquake may be the result of their previous bad karma or possibly is simply an unfortunate coincidence.

If the power and scope of karma is restricted in this way, then it follows that some suffering is undeserved. Nevertheless, even if bad karma is just one cause of misfortune, most Buddhists regard it as a very significant cause; moreover, rebirths occur because of karma, and once one has been reborn one is subject to various sufferings, even if some of those sufferings are not directly caused by karma. Without rebirth fuelled by karma, one would no longer be subjected to the various sufferings that occur in embodied existence, whether those specific sufferings are themselves simply caused by bad luck or are the result of previous bad actions.

It remains undetermined exactly which events that occur to one are the result of karma and which result from other causes. Given that Buddhists commonly think that the precise and extensive workings of karma are inscrutable to all but Buddhas, this is an unsurprising and irresolvable difficulty. What is striking is that, if karma only explains some good and bad fortune, and we cannot know precisely which good and bad fortune is explained by karma, then its power as an explanation of bad things which happen to people is significantly weakened. It would seem that some, or possibly many, of the sufferings that people encounter are due to accidents, bad luck and adventitious factors rather than being related directly to their past moral conduct. It may be that we have no means of telling which specific sufferings are the result of which specific karma or even whether specific sufferings are the result of karma at all. In which case, J. E. White’s (1983: 228) claim that the vagueness of Buddhist claims about the effects of karma renders these views vacuous seems to have some weight. The theory of karma becomes unfalsifiable because it is flexible and imprecise enough that whatever happens can be made consistent with the theory; in this sense, nothing could prove it wrong. And a theory for which there is no possible falsifying evidence arguably lacks explanatory power.

A different attitude is exhibited by some Buddhists who seem to argue that karma is the only form of causation that explains our psychological, physiological, social and material circumstances. The contemporary Tibetan Buddhist teacher Geshe Gyatso is a recent example of a Buddhist who “tends to take the side of karma being the sole causal factor for our present condition”, including both our physical and mental well-being and suffering (Ghose 2007: 280). This attitude appears to have a long pedigree. The *Katthāvatthu* attributes this view that karma

is the sole cause of our present circumstances to the Rājagirika and the Siddhaththika schools of early Buddhism. As a Theravāda text, it regards this interpretation of karma to be erroneous (McDermott 1975: 428).

Some Buddhist sources appear to attribute an even more far-reaching range and power to karma; they suggest that karma explains not just the psychological, physiological, social and material circumstances of individuals but also the very existence and development of the world (Griffiths 1982: 280–2). This is a position that sits most comfortably with the idealist ontology of some Yogācāra philosophers for whom the world is a fabrication of the mind; they attribute the experience of the apparently physical, apparently external world to the maturation of metaphorical seeds (*bīja*) in the subterranean storehouse consciousness. These seeds are often said to be the result of karma, although not all Yogācārins claim that all of the seeds are karmic in nature. For instance, some Chinese Yogācārins claim that some or all of the seeds that give rise to the world have been present in the storehouse consciousness eternally or *a priori* rather than arising there because of previous intentional actions (Petzold 1995: 329–30). In this case, the apparently physical, external world may be partly or wholly a product of seeds in the storehouse consciousness that are not karmic in origin. Moreover, it is not clear that all Yogācārins were ontological idealists who claimed that the external, physical world is simply a mental fabrication (see chapter 5). But for a Yogācārin ontological idealist for whom all the seeds are karmic, it would seem to follow that the entire mentally constructed world of apparently physical, apparently external objects is caused by karma.

The claim that the world itself is in some sense caused by karma is not confined to Yogācārins. In the *Abhidharmaśabdhāśya* (iv, 1) Vasubandhu writes from a Sautrāntika perspective and declares: “The world (*loka*) in its varied forms arises from action.” Moreover, in the Pāli scriptures, the *Samyutta Nikāya* (12:44; ii, 73–4) describes the karmically fuelled dependently arising process of rebirth as giving rise not just to sense consciousness, craving, attachment and so forth but also as the origin of the world (*loka*). In such passages “it is not just one’s situation in a world or even into which world (of all the possible realms) one might be reborn, but the world itself that is a product of karma” (Mackenzie 2013: 203). Moreover, the Theravāda *Aggañña sutta* contains a myth that the origin and development of the physical world is the result of craving; if taken at face value, this story regards the evolution of the cosmos to be the product of karma (*Dīgha Nikāya*, 27).

It is difficult to know how to interpret this material. A literal reading would mean that the physical, external world is brought into being and evolves solely through the influence of intentional actions; there would simply be no external, physical world without karma. This calls into question the view of some interpreters who contend that Buddhists do not commonly hold the view that the physical, external world itself is dependent on karma for its existence and development (White 1983: 224–6).

The view that the existence and development of the physical world is entirely caused by karma seems to be at odds with those previously discussed accounts

that see karma as only one form of causality, alongside other forms of dependent origination that govern the physical world. Moreover, it is a belief that is incompatible with the findings of modern science, which indicate that the material universe has existed for far longer than any beings capable of volitional activity (Griffiths 1982: 281). It is tempting therefore to offer a non-literal reading of such passages.

For instance, Matthew Mackenzie interprets the term ‘world’ (*loka*) here as having a phenomenological sense, that is, the *world-as-we-experience-it*. This subject-related experiential world is dependent on the specific sense consciousnesses, feelings, cravings and attachments which we develop on the basis of our previous karma. It is the world as we interpret it through the lens of our subjectivity. The *world-as-we-experience-it* originates in dependence on our karma; the very sense modalities that we acquire in our rebirth to perceive the physical, external world, and the sort of mind that we have to interpret the information received through the senses, are influenced by past karma. For instance, our previous karma might determine whether we might have a bat’s or a human’s senses and mind; hence the world as we experience will vary dramatically. If we are reborn as humans, our karma may also affect our experience of the world by influencing whether our senses and mind are bright or dull. Karma also affects the *world-as-we-experience-it* by influencing which people, objects and events we encounter, and whether we are inclined to react to them with aversion, attraction or indifference. But this does not entail that there is literally no world that exists independently of our karma. “The term *loka* does not denote an absolutely objective world of entities whose existence and properties can be specified independently of a subject; rather, a *loka* is a world of experience, activity, and meaning – that is, a *lifeworld* (*Lebenswelt*)” (Mackenzie 2013: 204). Buddhists’ contention is that this lifeworld is heavily affected by previous karma, though this does not mean that there is no physical, external world or that the causality governing that physical, external world is reducible to karmic causality. This would also be a view favoured by those scholars of Yogācāra philosophy who do not see it as a form of ontological idealism (see chapter 5). The world as experienced is perception only or cognition only (*vijñaptimātra*) because whatever subject independent world may exist is heavily filtered through the interpretive framework that the experiencing subject imposes on this reality. And this interpretive framework is influenced by the experiencing subject’s karma.

Karma and social justice

As mentioned in the previous chapter, one of the most troubling aspects of the Buddhist teaching of karma and rebirth is that it seems to offer a moral justification for apparently unwarranted social inequality and individual hardships. If the psychological, physiological and social and economic circumstances of an individual’s life are the result of karma from past lives, then this means that poverty, social disadvantage, and physical and mental disabilities can be regarded as deserved because they are the consequences of previous misdeeds. This attitude

can lead Buddhists to acquiesce in the face of social inequality and disability. The karma and rebirth teaching can support the status quo, on the basis that current power hierarchies are the justified result of past actions; those with more influence, wealth and opportunities are reaping the deserved benefits of their good actions in past lives while those who are disempowered, economically deprived and socially excluded are suffering the consequences of bad actions in past lives. The inequalities that people suffer or enjoy are of their own making. What in this life appears to be socially unjust is in fact the working out of cosmic justice when seen from the longer term perspective of multiple lives. Of course, for those who do not accept the metaphysical belief in rebirth, this is a case of blaming the victims for their sufferings and undermines the struggle for social justice in this life.

This problematic issue arises for all Buddhists but is particularly acute for those who claim that karma explains *all* (not just some) circumstances into which one is born. In this case, all inequalities and disabilities must be the result of one's previous actions. There is no undeserved suffering. Ghose (2007: 279–80) starkly states the implications of this view:

If we say that karma is the sole factor behind one's current state of being, then this gives the morality of one's previous actions the entire responsibility for such conditions as poverty, cancer, bipolar depression, schizophrenia, and AIDS. Millions of children have died of starvation in Africa over the last 100 years, and over a million children died in the Holocaust; also, millions of people suffer from mental illnesses across the globe.

Buddhists who have a more complex view of causality may claim that other causes – perhaps including biology and social conditions – can explain some inequalities and disabilities. Moreover, given the indeterminacy and unpredictability of karma, it is perhaps not possible to determine which precise inequalities and disabilities are caused by actions from previous lives. Even so, such Buddhists still seem to be committed to the unpalatable view that some inequalities and disabilities are the effects of past life karma, even if we cannot know precisely which inequalities and disabilities are caused in this manner.

There is certainly evidence that Buddhists have used the teaching of karma to justify disabilities. For instance, Tine M. Gammeltoft (2008) demonstrates that in Vietnam disability is often considered to result from an ethical flaw thus “collapsing bodily and moral universes”. Disabled children are commonly regarded as inferior and as incapable of being full persons. This “reading of morality into the body … seems to be grounded in a karmic interpretation of human embodied existence”. In other words, it is because of bad karma in previous lives that children are born with disabilities, commonly regarded in Vietnam as ‘defectiveness’. Interestingly, however, in Vietnam it is believed that it is the bad actions of ancestors and parents, and particularly the mother, in previous lives that result in the physical disability in the child. This is an example of kinship karma whereby the sins of past generations are visited on the subsequent generation. In the Vietnamese communities that Gammeltoft observed “children born with

congenital malformations were considered to be innocent victims of parental or ancestral misdeeds, carrying the burdens of the moral transgressions of their elders" (Gammeltoft 2008: 834). This is in effect a transfer of demerit from parent or ancestor to child, presumably unintentionally. The most salient point here is that the teaching of bad karma from a previous life is used to justify the disability and encourages a negative attitude to those who have disabilities.

Brian Victoria gives further examples of the Buddhist teaching of karma and rebirth being used in a socially reactionary way. He observes that, in East Asian countries, physical impairment is commonly a source of shame for the impaired individuals and their families. They face discrimination on the basis that their disability is due to evils performed in past lives. He also cites the *Lotus sūtra*, which warns that those who criticise the followers of the *sūtra* will be afflicted by blindness, leprosy, and physical deformity for "generation after generation" (Victoria 2005: 1). And he recounts a conversation he had with a senior Thai monk who explained that child sexual slavery in Thai cities must be the result of evil actions performed by the children in past lives (Victoria 2005: 2). He gives various examples of Japanese Buddhists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who justify inequalities on the grounds that such inequalities are the reward or punishment for the individual's actions in past lives rather than being the effect of economic oppression or social and political exploitation (Victoria 2005: 2–12).

In the light of such evidence, it is tempting simply to condemn the Buddhist teaching of karma and rebirth as contrary to social justice. If Buddhists think that karmic justice operates over numerous lifetimes, and that, therefore, the situations of inequality that people experience are of their own making through their moral or immoral actions in previous lives, then it may not seem important or even right to attempt to assist those who are disadvantaged and in difficult circumstances.

However, such a blanket condemnation is arguably too hasty. While Buddhists have often used the theory of karma to legitimise social injustice, this does not have to be the case. Victoria says that it is time to detach karma from the social reactionary attitudes which it has all too often been used to support. Indeed, he predicts that

failure to do so suggests a bleak future for Buddhism in an increasingly globalized world where people of good will can hardly be blamed for rejecting a religious faith that for centuries has engaged in one of the classic rationalizations for justifying oppression and social discrimination: "blame the victim" (Victoria 2005: 13).

There is not a necessary connection between karma and apathy to, or rationalisation of, social injustice; moreover, contemporary Buddhism needs to sever the supposed link. But how can Buddhist views about karma be presented in a way that does not lead to victim blaming and indifference to inequality and discrimination? There are a number of possibilities.

We have seen that many (though not all) Buddhists regard karma as only one reason for people's present circumstances. This means that some of the difficulties

that people experience may be the result of causes other than karma. This should mean that it is open to Buddhists to acknowledge that there could be biological, social, political and economic factors that influence people's present circumstances. Furthermore, given the common Buddhist claim that it is often not possible to ascertain which precise disadvantages are the consequences of karmic influence, it is open to Buddhists to argue that efforts to address inequalities are warranted because it is always possible that particular cases of inequality are not the result of karma.

Moreover, Buddhists can argue that, even where present disadvantages are the result of karma, the correct Buddhist response is compassion rather than acquiescence or blame. "Karma does not necessitate the further step of reconciling oneself with the evil and injustice present in the world. Suffering calls for a compassionate response rather than acceptance" (Nelson 2005: 9). To blame rather than assist people in such difficult circumstances, or to remain indifferent to their plight, would itself produce bad karma for the person who does the blaming or who is indifferent.

In addition, earlier in the chapter it was pointed out that actions have consequences not just for the perpetrator but for others as well. And Buddhists attempting to live in accordance with the ideal of compassion would surely be more concerned about the effects of their actions on others than any reward or punishment they themselves might receive for those actions. When karma is decoupled from self-interest in this way, the Buddhist should intervene to help those who are suffering inequality and discrimination. They would do so simply because of the good results on those who are suffering and regardless of whether this suffering may be attributable to some deeds in past lives.

This reformulation of the teaching of karma focuses on the impact of one's actions on others. This should make Buddhists aware that social, political and economic oppression can be seen as the negative impact of actions, motivated by greed, hatred and ignorance, of those who are empowered on those who are disempowered. This can provide a strong justification for working for social justice.

We have also seen that the Buddhist explanation of the causal continuity between lives is arguably not strong enough to provide a sense of continuing personal identity across lives, given that the process self in the present life typically has no memory of the past lives and has a different body. So, even if the process self in the present life is suffering disadvantages because of bad actions done by the process self in past lives, why should the process self in the present life be blamed, given that the present life process self is so tenuously connected to the process self in the past life? This encourages the thought that the correct response to people in states of disadvantage is to assist them rather than hold them responsible. Their current circumstances may be the result of actions performed by the past life process self with which the present life process self has a karmic causal connection; however, the present life process self is so different in many respects from the past life process self that regarding the present life process self as blameworthy for the past life process self's misdeeds makes little sense.

Finally, even if people's current social, economic and physical difficulties can be attributed to their actions in past lives, this need not lead to fatalistic acceptance. Indeed, Buddhist scriptures commonly reject fatalism as a wrong view, although Buddhists themselves have sometimes been guilty of construing karma in this way (Harvey 2013: 41). The Buddhist teaching of karma emphasises that one is responsible for one's actions and that these actions make a difference to one's present and future circumstances. The karmic effects of one's past actions on one's current life may provide the context – or part of the context – in which one currently acts, but this does not prevent one from acting now in ways that will make a difference to one's present and future situation in this or future lives by generating good karma. There is no need for resignation in the face of hardships even if they may have karmic causes. Harvey (2013: 40) comments that what matters for Buddhism is how one acts now, rather than dwelling on past life misdeeds that may have contributed to one's present circumstances.

For these reasons, the karma and rebirth teachings do not necessarily entail a socially reactionary attitude even if there has been a tendency for these ideas to be used to justify injustice and inequality. Nevertheless, the unpalatable rationalisation of social injustice that is sometimes associated with the coupling of karma and rebirth is one reason why some recent Buddhists reject the traditional Buddhist teaching of rebirth while retaining the teaching of karma (Wright 2004: 89). When karma is severed from rebirth, the notion that people suffer inequality and disability because of their bad actions in past lives becomes untenable. And, without rebirth, there can no longer be acceptance of current inequalities and unfairness on the basis that virtuous but disadvantaged people will be rewarded in future lives. When the notion of karma is retained without rebirth, there is great scope for linking disadvantaged people's experience of inequality with the greedy, hateful and thoughtless actions – the bad karma in the present life – of their fellow human beings. For a socially engaged Buddhist who accepts karma without rebirth, a principal area of concern is the negative effects of powerful human beings' selfish actions on those who are oppressed; those with such influence should instead create good karma by unselfishly using their power to bring about social justice. In addition, socially engaged Buddhism seeks to empower the oppressed, helping them to develop a sense of agency and recognition that they need not be victims. They can thereby realise that their own actions, their own karma, can have a positive effect on their own lives, the lives of others, on society and on future generations.

Rebirth and proof

Rebirth is also a questionable belief because of the apparent absence of convincing empirical evidence to support it. A common Buddhist claim is that such proof is provided by the testimony of the awakened, who are said to perceive the previous births of themselves and others. The scriptural accounts of the Buddha's awakening experience relate that he remembered his own previous lives and also saw, with

his divine eye, the continuous rise and fall, death and rebirth, of all sentient beings in accordance with their karma (*Majjhima Nikāya* i, 248).

The problem is that such testimony is unlikely to be persuasive for those who are not already convinced of the veracity of the Buddha's awakening experience. It is an insider's appeal to the truthfulness of perceptions which those outside the Buddhist fold, or those who are Buddhists of a more sceptical inclination, may justifiably doubt. The Buddhist scriptures clearly record the Buddha's recollection of past lives, but we are entitled to wonder whether these experiences actually occurred as recorded; did he really have such recollection experiences? And if the Buddha did indeed have such recollection experiences were they of actual past lives? That is, were they authentic recollections, or were they merely fantasies or hallucinations? The Buddha may well have thought that he had recollections of past lives, but it is possible that he may have been self-deceived, and there seems to be no good reason to accept the trustworthiness of his vision. It is therefore difficult to give such testimony about extraordinary perceptions of rebirths much philosophical weight; they are neither verifiable nor falsifiable.

It may be objected that there are many examples of individuals who are able to remember their past lives; this is not a phenomenon that is confined to Buddhas and other awakened individuals. There have been studies that claim to document such memories of previous births (Stevenson 1988) although they have been heavily criticised. As Griffiths (1982: 286) remarks, gullibility and wishful thinking may play a big part here and make supposed evidence of past lives very problematic. Other sociological, psychological and biological explanations of apparent memories of past lives may be as or more plausible than the explanation that there actually are past lives that the individual is remembering. Such supposed recollection experiences may be the result of neurological causes, (self-) deception and also social conditioning in societies where belief in rebirth is prevalent. Compelling evidence is in short supply that such recollections do correspond to actual past lives; alternative explanations are available.

It therefore seems that empirically based efforts to justify the rebirth teaching are unlikely to be very convincing. A different sort of attempt sometimes employed by Buddhists to defend the rebirth teaching relies not on evidence but on the conceptual distinction between the mental and physical. The argument is that mental phenomena cannot be caused by physical phenomena. Like must come from like so mental effects can only have mental causes. Thus, the first consciousness which arises in a new life must have a prior cause which is itself mental rather than physical, and this cause is plausibly the last moment consciousness that existed in the previous life (Cokelet 2005: 2).

However, this reasoning begs the question because it assumes rather than proves a dualism of the physical and mental that renders impossible physical causes of mental events. The claim that mental phenomena cannot be caused by physical events is clearly contestable. Contemporary neuroscience, for instance, attempts to provide physiological explanations of consciousness. At any rate, this sort of dualistic argument would not be palatable to those Buddhists who reject a strict

separation of mental and physical phenomena. Furthermore, even if it is accepted that mental effects must have mental causes, it is not clear that the consciousness in this life would have to be caused by the consciousness in a previous life. There may be some other mental causality (for example, a divine being's mind) that brings the consciousness into existence at the beginning of this life.

Critics of Buddhist accounts of the functioning of karma across life times can highlight difficult questions about the details of this process. For instance, how exactly does the karma from a previous life get sent to a specific embryo at conception and what enables it to be sent only to one embryo rather than being split and sent to a number of recipients? Moreover, how does the fertilised egg store the karmic information and where is the evidence for this? (Goodman 2014: 224). Indeed, why should we accept a karmic explanation of our inherited character traits, for which there is no persuasive evidence, when a genetic explanation, for which there is significant scientific evidence, may be sufficient?

There are clearly significant explanatory challenges for the Buddhist here. Faced with these problems of evidence and plausibility, another strategy for defending rebirth relies on pragmatic considerations (Cokelet 2005: 2). The claim here is that it may not be possible to prove that rebirth is true but the belief in rebirth is beneficial in important ways for the people who believe in it.

Blaise Pascal and William James offer the best known pragmatic defences of theistic belief; they argue that it is rational for people to believe in God even if no proof of his existence is available (Pojman 2001: 112–17). Pragmatic theists contend that it is prudent to have the belief in God and the afterlife in case it turns out that God and the afterlife do indeed exist and that entry into the afterlife depends on one's belief in the existence of God. Pragmatic theists can also argue that belief in God and the afterlife is good for people's psychological well being, giving them a sense of meaning and hope.

The Buddhist equivalent would be that it is good for people to believe in rebirth because it gives them hope that there is cosmic justice and that ethical and unethical actions will be rewarded or punished respectively in the long run. Buddhist moral theory depends on the premise that happiness is proportionate to virtue. This is evidently often not the case in the present life; therefore, in order for Buddhist ethics to make sense, the Buddhist needs to believe in future lives where the correlation of happiness with virtue is achieved. Moreover, the lofty Buddhist ideal of awakening includes a moral and cognitive perfection that, Buddhists often acknowledge, is highly unlikely to be achieved in one lifetime. In this case, Buddhists have a practical need to believe in rebirth in order to make intelligible and realisable their fundamental commitment to the ideal of awakening.

However, there are three problems with pragmatic justifications of rebirth. First, to the extent that, as we have seen, the rebirth teaching can be used to undermine social justice in this life, it could be claimed that it can be a harmful rather than beneficial belief. However, this problem can be addressed, as explained above, because there is no necessity for the belief in rebirth to undermine the pursuit of social justice in this life. Second, to hold a belief for which one has no or little evidence on the basis that it gives one hope or meaning seems

indistinguishable from wishful thinking. A possible Buddhist response might be that the ideal of awakening is so important and meaningful that it is not irresponsible to uphold the belief in rebirth – which makes the ideal of awakening eventually realisable – even in the face of (considerable) risk that it is not true. It is worth the risk. But this raises the third difficulty. It is not clear that human beings have the freedom to choose what they believe; can someone who is aware of, and troubled by, the lack of evidence for, and implausibility of, rebirth really override this concern and decide to believe nonetheless on the grounds that it would bring pragmatic benefits to have such a belief? Are our wills powerful enough to bring about such a belief? This is primarily an issue for empirical psychological investigation. Perhaps such a person could *hope* that rebirth is true but it is not clear that they would necessarily be able to muster the conviction that is commonly associated with *belief*. Alternatively, if they did manage to have the belief, it might be one that is weakened by significant doubt. A final possibility is that in some cases the effort of will required to assent to such a belief would require the person to forcibly ignore or override their doubts and hold the belief in a dogmatic, unquestioning manner. Acceptance of rebirth as an article of faith unsupported by evidence and argument may be possible, but this is unlikely to appeal to anyone of a philosophical disposition who seeks to take account of plausibility and rationality in the formation of their beliefs.

Naturalised karma

The various problems associated with the traditional rebirth teaching lead some contemporary Buddhists to reject or remain agnostic about it while retaining the belief in karma, albeit in a modified form. Such a ‘naturalised’ theory of karma focuses on the empirically verifiable effects of intentional actions and no longer relies on metaphysical assumptions about one’s past and future lives. Karma is brought down to earth, as it were, by focusing on intentional actions and their effects in this life. This is a perspective that appeals to some Buddhists who are strongly affected by modernity and the post-Enlightenment, scientific worldview.

Proponents of naturalised karma point out that intentional actions have an impact on the agent’s character in this life, with good actions improving one’s character and bad actions detrimentally affecting one’s character. For instance, an intention to hurt others harms the agent’s character by making him or her a more hateful sort of person, who is more likely to act from a hateful motivation in the future; the intention to help others benefits the agent’s character by making him or her a more benevolent sort of person, who is more likely to act with a kindly intention in the future. As Wright remarks:

Intentional actions shape the sort of person that one becomes and influence the choices that one is inclined to make. This is the internal, natural consequence of karma. When we act generously, we do something incremental to our character – we shape ourselves slightly further into a person who understands how to act generously, is inclined to do so, and does so with

increasing ease. We etch that way of behaving just a little more firmly into our character, into who we are (Wright 2004: 82–3).

Good karma does not necessarily bring about economic and social advantages in this life, the only life that one has for proponents of naturalised karma. But perhaps it brings about psychological well-being because those who become virtuous lead a more fulfilled life. Those who are unvirtuous lead a diminished life, with, for example, a distorted desire for material things and unable to feel compassion and true intimacy, thereby alienating them from their fellow human beings (Wright 2004: 83–4). Indeed, there is even a Theravāda Buddhist scriptural source which acknowledges the *possibility* that there is no rebirth and that, in this case, good karma would nevertheless bear positive psychological fruit for the agent in this life: “But if there is no world after death, if there is no fruit of actions rightly & wrongly done, then here in the present life [by performing good karma] I look after myself with ease – free from hostility, free from ill will, free from trouble” (*Kālāma sutta*. Trans Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1994).

However, while there are strong grounds for this assertion that good or bad intentional actions often have a strong effect on character, it would be going too far to assert that there is a necessary connection. For instance, no matter how virtuous one’s character has become due to repeated intentional virtuous actions, this can be undone by severe personality changes brought about by physiological causes such as serious mental illness or dementia. The effect of intentional actions on moral development championed by the naturalised karma theory is at least occasionally vulnerable to such (sometimes catastrophic) reversals. Good karma may tend to lead to the development of a virtuous character, but there is still a risk that it will not. Indeed, it may be argued that in some cases recalcitrant personality traits may not be dislodged, even by repeated intentional actions that seek to counteract them. Psychological tendencies may sometimes have causes that it is very hard, and perhaps impossible, to remove.

Despite this risk, proponents of naturalised karma often argue that the real reward for the agent of good karma is not external goods such as money, power or status but the cultivation of internal goods such as compassion and wisdom. The internal, psychological effects – that is, one’s intentional actions contribute to the formation of a virtuous or unvirtuous character – are what matter most. They are also more reliable effects of karma than are the external goods that traditional accounts often over-emphasise.

Even so, naturalised karma is compatible with the claim that there is some correlation between an agent’s virtuous actions and external goods which might accrue to the agents as a result of these actions. Human beings are social animals and virtuous people are sometimes recognised and rewarded by their fellow human beings for their virtuous behaviour (Goodman 2014: 224–5). This is, however, a contingent rather than a necessary relationship between virtuous actions and external goods. There is no guarantee that virtuous actions will lead to external goods, and it is not uncommon for virtue to go unacknowledged by one’s fellow human beings. Indeed, human beings can exploit for their own advantage other

people's virtue. "Sometimes unscrupulous businessmen thrive; on occasion, kindness and honesty go completely unrewarded" (Wright 2004: 84). Any supposed necessary connection between one's intentional actions and external goods must rely on rebirth, given that there is clearly no such necessary connection in the present life. But this option is not open to the proponents of naturalised karma.

The lack of a necessary connection here between virtue and external goods in this life means that, for a naturalised account of karma, if the virtuous person is to be materially and socially successful, some luck is required. How much luck is necessary is debatable and depends on how strong or weak the contingent relation between virtue and worldly success and recognition is deemed to be. Do unscrupulous businessmen *sometimes* or *often* prosper and is virtue only *occasionally* or *often* unrecognised and unrewarded by one's fellow human beings? Optimistic or pessimistic responses to this question are both possible, given the difficulties of accurately measuring the connection between virtue and worldly success. Either way, the virtuous Buddhist will presumably not be swayed by misfortune and will not become attached to good fortune; his or her virtue will be its own reward.

Supporters of naturalised karma also highlight that intentional actions clearly have an effect on people other than the agent (Wright 2004: 89). We have already seen that karma often has consequences, good or bad, for other people and this is an aspect of the karma teaching that perhaps has not been sufficiently developed in traditional Buddhism. Belief in karma decoupled from the preoccupation with the effects of karma solely on one's self can be employed in the service of social justice; this is especially the case when karma is also detached from the rebirth teaching, so that the focus of one's actions becomes their impact on others in this (one's only) lifetime.

However, critics of this reinterpretation of Buddhism see it as introducing a secular worldview that is at odds with core Buddhist beliefs about the repeating cycle of birth and death from which Buddhism plots an escape through awakening. Naturalised karma does not simply eradicate troublesome metaphysical assumptions from Buddhism; it replaces a key Buddhist metaphysical assumption, that repeated rebirths exist, with a different and incompatible metaphysical assumption, that the current life is the only one that the individual has.

Moreover, the ideal of human perfection that Buddhists seek to realise is very lofty and in this respect rebirth has explanatory power; through it, the quest for awakening can be extended beyond this lifetime and made more plausible as an ideal that can actually be realised. Decoupling karma from rebirth would seem to make it likely that the prospects for attaining awakening are dim. Critics would maintain that this means that Buddhism loses its rationale; the reason for treading the Buddhist path is undermined (Deitrick 2005: 7–9).

Defenders of naturalised karma might uphold the more sanguine view that complete human perfection is indeed possible in this very lifetime. More plausibly, they might maintain that what is required is a more modest understanding of what awakening is, so that it can be attained in this lifetime, or an acknowledgement that the traditional Buddhist view of human perfection is at best an ideal to be

(distantly) approximated rather than fully attained. With the acceptance of naturalised karma, the ideal of nirvāṇa as complete cognitive and moral perfection over many rebirths may be replaced by the pursuit of an improved but always fragile moral character, the ability to have a positive impact on others and – if one is fortunate – the attainment of external goods in this finite life. It is a debatable point whether such a serious modification of traditional Buddhist beliefs remains recognisably Buddhist and it seems very doubtful that it would be sufficiently fulfilling for those seeking complete liberation from suffering.

3 Evil, freedom and other ethical issues

The previous chapters explored suffering and karma in Buddhist traditions. Both of these themes are broadly ethical in nature, because ethics is concerned with the ways of being and acting which constitute a good human life. Buddhist teachings encourage intentional actions that alleviate suffering, produce good karma, overcome the character traits of craving and ignorance, and move one closer to awakening. Yet this analysis raises various additional questions that are typically of concern to both ethicists and philosophers of religion. These questions will be addressed in this chapter.

First, a major issue in traditional philosophy or religion is the problem of evil; what place, if any, is there for evil in Buddhist accounts of ethics? Second, another central enigma in ethics and the philosophy of religion is freedom and determinism. Do Buddhist understandings of the universe and human action leave any room for free will and human agency or does the teaching of universal dependent origination amount to strict determinism? Third, Buddhist teachings about suffering and karma invite comparison with the various ethical theories that have been prevalent in Western philosophy. For example, is Buddhism in its various forms best understood as a form of virtue ethics, consequentialism, or deontology? Fourth, what can Buddhist ethical perspectives contribute to contemporary debates in applied ethics about pressing moral issues of practical concern? This final question will be considered in this chapter with special reference to Buddhist attitudes to the natural world and the significance they may have for current environmental ethics.

The problem of evil

The explanation of the existence of evil is a major concern of the philosophy of religion. For monotheistic traditions, evil is a puzzling phenomenon; how can evil be accounted for given the existence of an omnipotent and benevolent creator deity? This question has given rise to a variety of theodicies, that is, explanations of why an entirely good and all-powerful creator God permits evil to occur. Moreover, philosophy of religion is concerned with religious attitudes to the overcoming of evil. Can evil be transcended and, if so, how is this to be achieved? In the context of monotheism, this question is answered by a variety of soteriologies, that is, theories of salvation. Controversies arise, for example, about

the role of individual human effort versus dependence on divine grace in achieving salvation from evil.

How do Buddhist traditions address the problem of evil? For many Buddhists, evil is arguably not a conundrum in the same way that it is for monotheistic traditions. Given that in Buddhism there is no omnipotent, omnibenevolent creator divinity, the puzzle of how such a God would permit evil to occur does not arise. Indeed, many Buddhists would argue that the impossibility that an omnipotent, entirely compassionate creator God would allow evil and suffering to occur is one reason why they reject the existence of such a divinity (Cabezón 2003c: 26; Jackson 1986: 320, 335). However, Buddhists from many traditions claim that Buddhas are omniscient, maximally compassionate and have extraordinary powers; this makes one wonder why Buddha or Buddhas do not intervene more effectively and frequently to prevent evil and alleviate suffering (see chapter 4). Nevertheless, Buddha or Buddhas are commonly not presented as all powerful and creators of the universe and to the extent that this is true there is not a need for a theodicy in the Christian sense, even though the existence and transcendence of evil is arguably of fundamental concern to many Buddhists.

Evil has sometimes been regarded as a supernatural force that infects the world and people's actions. This is evident, for example, in some Christian notions of the devil or in dualistic forms of religion such as Manichaeism that envisage a cosmic conflict between a good and evil deity. This notion of evil has its place in various forms of Buddhism. For example, malicious spirits and capricious demonic forces appear in numerous Buddhist narratives; belief in such malign supernatural beings and their destructive capacities is widespread in Buddhist texts and cultures. A prime example is the depiction of Māra as a devilish personification of evil who unsuccessfully tries to prevent Siddhārtha Gautama from achieving awakening, attempts to lure him away from his awakened state, and confound monks who are listening to the Buddha (Bodhi 2000: 79). While Māra is often interpreted as a metaphor for the evil of death and the psychological defilements of greed, hatred and delusion, he has also been understood literally as an external demonic force that needs to be vanquished. Buddhists frequently employ protective chants and apotropaic devices such as amulets to ward off evil forces that would otherwise cause harm (Tambiah 1984; Sweare 2003). The conviction that Buddha or Buddhas (and Bodhisattvas for Mahāyāna Buddhists), relics and charms have the ability to shield people from supernatural sources of evil is also common in various Buddhist traditions (Wickremaratne 2006: 246; Lyons, Peters and Chang 1985: 39). Alongside these beliefs in evil as an external and dangerous force, there is also a Mahāyāna Buddhist narrative about the ultimate unreality of evil, given that it, like all other phenomena, is empty of intrinsic existence, and has only conventional ontological status. The duality 'good and evil' is ultimately unreal like all other dualities (Anbeek 2007: 107–8).

These various views about evil have an important place in the complex tapestry of Buddhist belief and practice. However, perhaps the best-known Buddhist analysis of evil is psychological in orientation; Buddhism focuses on particular mental states and proclivities as evil. We are already familiar with this from

chapter 1. In particular, Buddhism refers to ignorance and craving as evil or bad states of mind which are the root causes of unethical actions. As we have seen, craving can be analysed into greed and hatred as its principal sub-species, where greed is selfish, appropriative desire and hatred is the result of frustrated selfish desires. Craving and ignorance give rise to a host of unvirtuous subsidiary states of mind such as anxiety, hostility, jealousy, pride and fear. The mind is said to be morally defiled and impure to the extent that it is afflicted by ignorance and craving and morally pure when these mental states are eradicated. Moreover, a common Buddhist attitude (though certainly not the only Buddhist attitude) is that the presence or absence of evil depends on self-discipline and control of one's own mind rather than any external forces:

By oneself, indeed, is evil done; by oneself is one defiled. By oneself is evil left undone; by oneself, indeed, is one purified. Purity and impurity depend on oneself. No one purifies another. (*Dhammapāda* XII, 165. Trans. Buddharakkhita 1996)

The Pāli and Sanskrit word '*pāpa*' is translated here as evil, although translations such as morally wrong or morally harmful are sometimes preferred. The word 'evil' may be considered to have theistic connotations and associations with specifically Christian notions of sinfulness and a broken relationship with God, so it is sometimes avoided or used with caution in the Buddhist context. Another Sanskrit word Buddhists often employ in describing states of mind afflicted by ignorance and craving is *akuśala* (Pāli: *akusala*), which might be translated as evil, but translations such as ethically unvirtuous, unskilful or unwholesome are usually favoured. The latter three translations have the benefit of avoiding any Christian theological connotations as well as emphasising that the overcoming of ignorance and selfish desire is a skill or virtue that can be learnt, improved and eventually perfected by means of Buddhist practices. Still, the translation of *pāpa* and *akuśala* as 'evil' is effective in communicating the moral seriousness of the mental defilements of ignorance and craving.

This Buddhist psychological account of evil connects it closely with the themes of suffering and karma as discussed in the previous chapters. Unvirtuous mental states lead to suffering because of the craving and ignorance inherent in them. And this suffering can occur both in present and future lifetimes. These mental states are negatively regarded, and can perhaps be labelled as evil, because they result in suffering, both for oneself and others.

In the philosophy of religion, the term 'evil' is used quite promiscuously and commonly has a number of other connotations. Evil may be regarded relatively tamely as an absence of goodness. In this case it is a moral lack rather than a substantive moral force. However, it is also sometimes used to refer to particularly perverse and deep-rooted badness. One can behave morally badly without necessarily being evil. For example, we might say that a shoplifter was bad but not evil whereas Hitler was not just bad but evil. Buddhist ethics can surely acknowledge the existence of evil in both these senses; Buddhists

recognise that people's actions often exhibit a lack or absence of wisdom and compassion. Moreover, sometimes people's actions are so deeply affected by craving and ignorance that they act from motivations which are extremely morally depraved.

Evil can also connote wilfully and maliciously doing wrong even when one knows that one is doing, and should not do, wrong. A Buddhist could explain this state of moral failure as the result of strong dispositions towards greed and hatred that overpower one's understanding, thereby causing one to act in a way that one knows is unethical.

Evil can additionally refer to someone who is so morally bad that they have no scruples about doing bad things; such a person has no ethical misgivings or conscience. This is the situation of psychopaths and sociopaths. If Buddhists accept that evil in this sense exists, then they must think that in some cases, craving and ignorance are so deeply engrained that all moral sensitivity is missing from a person. Whether a moral sense can be developed by all people, even those for whom it seems to be absent, is an interesting question. Indeed, the use of the word 'evil' to describe someone can also indicate that they are irredeemably bad. This latter sense of evil is perhaps not commonly accepted in Buddhism. There is a quite prevalent view in Buddhism that no one is ultimately beyond redemption from craving and ignorance and that awakening is a universal, if often distant, possibility. There is also a strand of Buddhism, associated especially with the Mahāyāna Buddha nature teaching, which declares that we are all already awakened, and thus morally good, but that we fail to realise this. This would entail that even the most morally unscrupulous individuals have the capacity to discover their Buddha nature, even if it is very deeply concealed.

Nevertheless, the belief that some people are so morally bad that they are beyond final redemption is not entirely absent from Buddhism. For example, the earlier sections of Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* identify the *icchantika* as a type of person so deluded and immoral that he or she will never be able to gain awakening and thus not all people have Buddha nature; later sections of the text disagree, however, and claim that even the *icchantika* can attain nirvāṇa eventually (Williams 2009: 107; King 1991: 13).

Freedom and determinism

Another issue that has preoccupied philosophers is free will. Do people have the ability to make choices or are their apparent choices actually constrained entirely by causes beyond their control? In the context of monotheistic philosophy of religion, the debate about free will and determinism has focused on whether choice and moral agency are possible given the existence of an all-powerful and all-seeing divinity. Outside of this theological context, strict determinists have maintained that our apparent choices are the result of biological and/or social, environmental conditioning and our cherished free will is an illusion. By contrast, the libertarian view is that our choices are not caused, but this position runs into

the problem that it seemingly renders our choices entirely random; if choices are uncaused, they “are no more ‘up to us’ than a seizure or the toss of a coin” (Repetti 2012b: 132). A compromise position is presented by compatibilists, who acknowledge that our choices must be caused but seek to preserve the notion that one nevertheless can make genuinely free choices; for instance, some compatibilists would argue that a free choice may have as its immediate causes deliberation and freedom from coercion whereas actions which are not freely chosen have different sorts of immediate causes, such as external force and internal compulsions. However, it is a moot point whether this sort of compatibilism is ultimately distinguishable from strict determinism; determinist opponents may push the analysis further and argue that the deliberation that leads to a supposedly free choice may itself be explained as due to causes beyond the control of the agent, such as genetics and social conditioning.

It is striking that traditional Buddhist philosophies contain no developed discussion of free will and determinism. Given this lack of systematic consideration of the issue, it is not surprising that “Buddhism has mixed feelings, unanalyzed ideas, or even inconsistent ideas about determinism and freedom” (Repetti 2010: 293–4). Recent scholars of Buddhism, by contrast, have devoted considerable attention to this topic, teasing out the possible implications of various Buddhist teachings for the freedom versus determinism debate.

Evidently, Buddhist sources often seek to inculcate a sense of individual moral agency. Hence the teaching of karma makes agents responsible for their intentional actions, that is, actions which they have chosen or willed. Moreover, the Buddha is recorded as having rejected the teaching of fatalism – that is, that all actions are predetermined and thus inevitable – on the grounds that this view undermines moral responsibility by encouraging a paralysis of the will (*Dīgha Nikāya* i, 249–53; Repetti 2012b: 154). And Buddhism teaches people to make morally good choices so as to prevent suffering to themselves and others. Thus, it is sometimes argued that in Buddhism “the individual is autonomous”; decisions about how to act are up to the individual and thus “people are wholly responsible for themselves” (Gombrich 2009: 13, 22).

Even so, there is recognition in Buddhism that unawakened people often fail to exercise their moral autonomy because they are enthralled and enslaved by craving and ignorance, which act as internal compulsions depriving people of freedom. Buddhist practice can be construed as enabling people to develop the powers of introspection and mental discipline required to free the mind from craving and ignorance; Buddhist practitioners can thereby make choices unencumbered by harmful internal compulsions. Those who successfully practice Buddhism gain increasing control over their volitions. The Buddhist practitioner understands which causes – such as mindfulness and ethical practice – will bring about the end of suffering and puts them into place. “The Buddha emphasized the knowledge of cause and effect and the cultivation of mindfulness of beliefs, volitions, and actions as his basic prescription for what an agent may do to foster her own liberation and bring about the end of her suffering” (Repetti 2012b: 135).

Philosophical problems

Despite the common Buddhist emphasis on individual responsibility and decision making, Buddhist teachings render the notion of free will problematic in at least two distinct ways, even if Buddhists historically do not usually seem to have identified and discussed these problems.

The first problem arises because Buddha is often thought to have knowledge of all phenomena, including all future events (see chapter 4). If Buddha already knows what people will do in the future, how can people have genuine freedom of choice? It would seem that their choices have been predetermined, if Buddha already knows, or can know, what these choices will be. The parallel here with theistic discussions about the relationship between freedom and God's omniscience is very strong.

One way out of this problem is to limit Buddha's power, so that the traditional claims that Buddha was omniscient are not deemed to include total knowledge of the future. Indeed, this would be consistent with certain scriptural passages which indicate that the Buddha's knowledge was limited and that he failed to foresee certain events (see chapter 4). Moreover, it is in line with the Buddha's rejection of fatalism on the grounds that actions are not inevitable.

Another possible solution is to contend that freedom of choice exists but only from the point of view of non-Buddhas. This approach relies on the distinction between conventional truth and ultimate truth. The conventional perspective is the one from which the future has not been foreseen and people who are not Buddhas experience themselves as making choices. This is the world as it appears to those with limited knowledge rather than the world as it actually is. However, from Buddha's ultimately true vantage point the future, including all supposed choices, has already been foreseen and thus is presumably predetermined. This is the world as it actually is as seen by someone with complete knowledge.

This approach effectively bites the bullet and accepts that Buddha's omniscience entails the predictability of the future for the Buddha (but not for us) and that ultimately determinism is the way things really are. Buddhist sources often attribute complete knowledge of the future to Buddhas; if they also believed in free will as ultimately true, then this would give rise to a philosophical difficulty akin to the contradiction between divine omniscience and human freedom in Christianity. Yet Buddhists do not even mention this problem. This may be because Buddhists were implicitly determinists who accepted that free will is not ultimately true; hence the conflict did not arise for them (Goodman 2009: 151). Then again, it may be that this particular philosophical puzzle was simply overlooked and remained unanalysed by Buddhists.

The second way in which free will is problematic in Buddhism is because of the teaching of dependent origination; that is, all events are the effects of causes. If intentional actions are caused – as they must be if dependent origination is universal – how can there be genuine free will and autonomous decision-making? Universal dependent origination seems to imply determinism; if determinism is true, all mental events, including intentional actions, must be causally determined

and there can be no genuine free will. And if there is no free will, how can one have moral responsibility for one's actions?

One common response to this problem is to claim that the Buddhist law of causality is not rigid. It states that beings are dependent on others for their existence; however, this interconnectedness does not amount to strict determinism. The decisions that individuals make are always influenced by their circumstances and environment but cannot be entirely predicted from them: "the margin of free will may be very slight but it is always present" (Ratanakul 2002: 119). There is some slack in the causal system. This soft causal determinism leaves some room for free will because there is always some uncertainty about which decisions individuals will make, even in the hypothetical situation that all of the causal factors that may influence their decisions are known. In effect, this means that the agent can override the causes that influence decision making and one can make different decisions from those that the causes are driving one towards.

While this solution is appealing, there is an apparent difficulty. To the extent that decisions are not explainable by causes, they would seem to be the result of chance; it then appears to be difficult to distinguish free will from random and inexplicable decision making. This is, of course, a problem which confronts all defenders of free will. Decisions may be uncaused because the causes that influence decisions may be overridden; however, any attempted explanation of why this happens in any particular case would apparently have to introduce a cause or causes for the supposedly uncaused act motivated by free will: I decided to do x rather than y *because of* z. Therefore, it would seem that acts motivated by genuinely free will cannot be explained. Moreover, if the causes that influence decisions can sometimes be overridden by acts motivated by free will, this seems to compromise the universal scope of the Buddhist teaching of dependent origination; some decisions can occur in spite of – rather than because of – causes. Furthermore, Buddhism also teaches that there is no abiding, unchanging self and that what we commonly regard as the self is simply a complex process of causally connected events. Therefore, it would seem that the person who is supposedly a moral agent who can autonomously override causal influences does not really exist and thus cannot make such choices: "If there is no autonomous self, there is no autonomy" (Goodman 2009: 149).

Another strategy would be to appeal once again to the Buddhist distinction between the two truths. Determinism is ultimately true, but free will, moral agency and the concomitant moral responsibility are conventionally true (Siderits 2013: 73–4).

According to Abhidharma philosophy, the ultimate truth is that everything is constituted by vast numbers of momentary events (*dharmas*); each event is caused by previous events and exists in complex patterns of dependency. This is the way things really are. Only the momentary causally connected events ultimately exist. From the perspective of ultimate truth the mental event of choice or willing is, like all other events, caused by other events. Thus, determinism is ultimately true, and free choices made by autonomous moral agents are not ultimately true.

By contrast, the conventional truth is the world as we ordinarily experience it, as made up of entities such as trees, mountains, tables and chairs. This is not the world as it really is independent of human perceptions and needs, but it is the world as it appears to us. From the perspective of conventional truth, there are people, selves, who are autonomous moral agents; they deliberate on alternative paths of action and make choices about how to act. References to autonomous moral agents who have free will and are thus responsible for their actions remain useful as ways of describing the world as it is experienced conventionally. This is the perspective of common sense and everyday, ordinary life. We need the notions of moral agency, free will and the concomitant moral responsibility in order to function in the everyday world. However, ultimately these moral agents and their supposed free choices are just a concatenation of causally produced events and are not really autonomous.

It might be objected that conventional talk of moral agents making autonomous choices may be useful in everyday life but is not *truth* because it does not describe the way things really are: “if pragmatically valid descriptions are technically false, we do not seem to have ‘two truths’, two correct descriptions of reality” (Repetti 2012a: 42–3). Conventional truth is only truth if truth is measured by pragmatic criteria. The single correct description of reality is that even supposedly self-directed decisions are causally determined. The conventional notion of self-directing people who make choices independent of causes is a conceptual construct:

To see myself as capable of acting freely, I must view myself as the sort of entity that can endorse the actions it performs. This requires that I take deliberating and willing as abilities or faculties that I possess. This possibility is denied us at the ultimate level of truth. At that level there are events that correspond to what we ordinarily call deliberating and willing; but there are no persons who are the authors of those events, for a person is a mere conceptual fiction that is constructed out of those and other events (Siderits 1987: 155).

Still, talk of ‘free will’ is arguably not *entirely* misguided. When we refer *imprecisely* to free will, we are actually picking out a particular sort of causally produced and ultimately true event – that is, a psychological episode of willing that is preceded and causally produced by, for example, conscious events of introspection and deliberation on alternative courses of action. This can be distinguished from a psychological episode of willing that is preceded and causally produced by external events – for example, a gun pointed at one’s head – or negative internal compulsions – such as greed and hatred – that force a particular course of action that leads to suffering.

Of course, the conscious introspective and deliberative events that precede and produce so-called free choices are themselves causally produced; however, the causal series that results in free choices is different from the causal series which precedes decisions necessitated by external or negative internal compulsions.

References to free will, despite their imprecision, can be regarded as potentially helpful in making this distinction between two different varieties of causality that produce willing. The so-called free choice event is preceded by a different chain of causes than any psychological event that is not labelled as a free choice. But references to free will are ultimately misleading if they are thought, as is often the case in conventional discourse, to imply an entirely autonomous agent whose choices are free in the sense that they are not causally produced.

The person who is successfully practising Buddhism is actually a continuum of causally connected mental events that can, in a very specific sense, be said to be increasingly free. This is because this continuum is increasingly composed of mental events of willing that are caused by introspection and mental control developed through ethical practice and meditation. Such a mental continuum achieves freedom from negative internal compulsions rooted in craving and ignorance. It has autonomy in the strictly limited sense that it is no longer compelled by these internal, harmful forces that it previously could not control. However, its ability to be free from craving and ignorance occurs as the result of causes – the introspection and mental control brought about by Buddhist practice – and thus it does not have autonomy in the sense of being independent from causes. Buddhism values freedom from craving and ignorance but does not acknowledge the ultimate existence of freedom in the sense of choices that are undetermined by causes. Awakened Buddhists would see things as they really are, and would thus see free will – in the sense of choices that are independent of causes – as the illusion that it is.

Nor does Buddhism value freedom in the sense of the freedom to do as one pleases, where ‘what one pleases’ may be motivated by craving and ignorance. Awakened Buddhists have no free will in the sense of the ability to choose other than what is morally right: “[I]t no longer seems to them that they can do anything other than what would be best” (Goodman 2009: 120). Awakened Buddhists are arguably compelled to do what is compassionate and will automatically seek to alleviate suffering; the disposition to do what is morally best has become so engrained because of Buddhist practice that it occurs spontaneously. The ultimate result of Buddhist practice is that the awakened Buddhist can no longer decide to do anything other than what is virtuous. Buddhists value freedom from the mental enslavement which is caused by craving and ignorance. This occurs, ironically, when one’s volitions become highly controlled through sustained mental discipline, thereby ruling out the possibility of alternative choices motivated by craving and ignorance. “According to Buddhism, it is regulated will that leads to the central Buddhist goal of liberation or mental freedom – freedom precisely from the sort of mental bondage caused by unregulated will” (Repetti 2014: 286). Negative internal compulsions rooted in craving and ignorance are replaced by positive internal compulsions fuelled by compassion and wisdom.

There is a further twist to Buddhist views that has implications for the free will and determinism issue. The Abhidharma two-tiered ontology of ultimate and conventional truths is rejected by the Mādhyamika tradition of Mahāyāna Buddhism (see chapter 5). According to Mādhyamikas, even the causally

connected *dharma*s are only conventional truths. All things lack intrinsic existence, including even the multitude of momentary dependently arising events that are the components of the objects of our experience. This presumably means that the deterministic account of the world as made up of casually connected events no longer has privileged epistemic status as ultimately true; it too is reduced to being conventionally true, like accounts of moral agents who have free will.

The consequences of this ontological levelling are not entirely clear. One possibility is that the Mādhyamika teaching of emptiness has the relativist implication that the views that there are causally autonomous moral agents and that there are only causally determined events are simply two different and *equally valid* conventional discourses, neither of which is ultimately true. A second possibility is that there are qualitative differences among conventional truths, so that some conventional truths – for example, the account of actions as made up of causally produced events – are *more precise* than other conventional truths – for example, the account of intentional actions as freely instigated by moral agents who are not causally determined. Maybe talk of autonomous moral agents and free will is a looser, less exact sort of conventional truth than talk of causally dependent events, even if those causally produced events are themselves ultimately empty of intrinsic existence? Nevertheless, both conventional discourses meet particular human needs; for example, talk of moral agents and free will is needed for everyday pragmatic communication and interaction whereas talk of causally determined events meets the human need for a more precise and scientific explanation of phenomena. But even this more precise explanation is still only a conventional truth, because the phenomena that it seeks to explain are conceptual constructs, that is, they are empty of intrinsic existence. And Mādhyamikas can presumably accept that autonomy – in the specific sense of freedom from craving and ignorance – can be achieved, while also acknowledging that such freedom is brought about by causes, and also that craving, ignorance, freedom and causes all lack intrinsic existence and are thus merely conventional.

Ethical theories

Another much-discussed question about Buddhist ethics is which moral theory or theories underpin Buddhist ethical decision-making? In other words, what general justifications does Buddhism give regarding why actions are right or wrong? What considerations determine moral goodness and badness?

The three most common Western ethical theories are consequentialism, deontology and virtue ethics and sophisticated debates have occurred about which ethical theory best expresses the way in which Buddhism understands moral rightness and wrongness (for example, see Keown 1992; Goodman 2009). This often has been coupled with an awareness that Buddhism does not conform entirely to any of the prevalent Western ethical theories. There are, in Buddhism, arguably elements of each of the three major contenders, without Buddhist ethics being reducible to any one of them. Buddhism has typically not expressed a systematically developed ethical theory, leaving contemporary interpreters with

room to construe its attitudes to moral rightness and wrongness in a variety of ways. A degree of philosophical reconstruction and extrapolation has to take place in such endeavours. Moreover, Buddhism in this respect, as in so many other matters, is internally diverse. There arguably cannot be a single Buddhist ethical theory because Buddhists throughout history and from different traditions have expressed a range of views about what makes moral goodness good (Davis 2013: 275; The Cowherds 2016: 8). A further complication in any comparative analysis of Buddhism and Western ethical theories is that the Western ethical theories are themselves very internally diverse. There are many different varieties of consequentialism, deontology and virtue ethics. To say that Buddhism displays similarities to these theories, broadly construed, is not to dismiss important differences between Buddhist ethical attitudes and specific forms of Western consequentialism (for example, Bentham and Mill), deontology (for example, Kant) and virtue ethics (for example, Aristotle). The following analysis will explore ways in which Buddhism may be seen to exhibit ethical attitudes suggestive of virtue ethics, consequentialism and deontology.

Virtue ethics

There are some significant parallels between Buddhism and virtue ethics. Virtue ethics can take many forms but these theories are united in viewing the development of moral character as the heart of the ethical endeavour (Rachels 2004: 242–3). To be a genuinely moral person, one needs to have virtuous dispositions that motivate one to act virtuously. The focus here is on becoming or being a good person, that is, the sort of person who is inclined to act in a morally good rather than a morally bad way. A person who is very virtuous becomes a moral exemplar, whose actions and attitudes are to be imitated, and from whom others can learn how to be virtuous in a way that is often more effective than ethical prescriptions and proscriptions (Mayo 2004: 427–8).

Often, lists of virtues include obvious candidates such as kindness, courage, temperance, loyalty, honesty. However, there are disputes about whether there are universal, trans-cultural virtues or whether all, or some, virtues are culturally relative (Rachels 2004: 244–50). Disagreements about which characteristics are virtues and why is also evident in the dispute between egoist virtue ethics, that claims that selfishness is a virtue, and altruistic versions of virtue ethics, that would argue for (extreme) selflessness as a virtue (Rand 2004). A moderate position would be that a healthy self-regard coupled with a concern for others is virtuous; by contrast, self-loathing – that leads to the complete sacrifice of one's own interests for the sake of others – and self-importance – that blinds one to the needs of others – are extremes to be regarded as vices.

Virtue ethicists may also disagree about whether virtues are agent relative or agent neutral. Virtue ethicists who are ethical egoists see virtue as agent relative; one should only act in ways that are in one's own self-interest and this is the only morally justified reason for actions. But even many virtue ethicists who are not ethical egoists would argue against agent neutrality; an important reason for being

virtuous is that it enables the moral agent to be a happy human being. Virtues such as temperance, honesty, kindness, courage, wisdom tend to lead to a fulfilled human life whereas their absence is stultifying of the agent's human potential (Rachels 2004: 249). But it is also possible to be a virtue ethicist who is agent neutral. In this case, it is ethically important to be virtuous but being virtuous means being equally concerned for everyone's happiness and fulfilment; the virtuous person should not be especially concerned with their own happiness and should be willing to sacrifice it if the benefits to others are greater. From this perspective, being virtuous can sometimes entail being self-sacrificing without any resultant happiness for oneself. A more extreme form of altruistic virtue ethics would be entirely agent disregarding; virtue entails only being concerned for the happiness of others so that one's own welfare is ethically irrelevant. There can also be disputes about whether virtue ethics needs to be coupled with other theories such as consequentialism or deontology or can be a free-standing ethical theory. Perhaps what makes a virtue virtuous is that it enables one to produce the best consequences (consequentialism) or to perform one's duties (deontology). Alternatively, maybe it is not possible to give such universal criteria for how a virtuous person would behave; moral situations are so complex and varied that the virtuous person would need to be morally perceptive and sensitive to context rather than relying on any universal moral framework, such as consequentialism or deontology, in making ethical decisions. This latter form of virtue ethics makes it a form of ethical particularism which eschews moral rules and stresses the uniqueness of situations (The Cowherds 2016: 12). Thus, there is plenty of disagreement and diversity within virtue ethics but the common ground relates to the ethical significance of character, dispositions and therefore motivations.

The similarities between virtue ethics and Buddhism are not difficult to find. The Buddhist emphasis on intention as vital in determining the karmic consequences of actions indicates that one's dispositions matter enormously. The sort of person that one is, and whether one's motives are compassionate and wise, determines the quality of one's karma. Buddhism seeks to inculcate specific characteristics such as friendliness, compassion, generosity, patience and wisdom that may be described as virtues. It seeks to weaken and ultimately transcend specific characteristics such as greed, hatred and delusion, which may be described as vices. Chapter 1 explained how Buddhism identifies various unskilful or ethically unwholesome dispositions that are deeply rooted in our psychologies and cause us to habitually act in unethical ways; the purpose of Buddhist ethical and meditational techniques is to remove these unskilful dispositions and replace them with skilful or ethically wholesome dispositions that will lead to habitually ethical ways of acting. The culmination of this training is the awakened individual, whose skilful dispositions have been perfected; such a person becomes a moral exemplar whom Buddhists seek to emulate and who exhibits all of the Buddhist virtues without flaws.

Whether a Buddhist virtue ethic needs to be coupled with other theories such as consequentialism or deontology or can be a free-standing ethical theory is an interesting question. We will see below evidence in Buddhism for both

consequentialism and deontology, so that what makes a virtue virtuous for some Buddhists is arguably that it enables one to act in ways that produce good or the best consequences (consequentialism) or to perform one's duties (deontology). However, Buddhist teachings such as skilful means also acknowledge that ethical decision-making has to be context-sensitive. Moreover, the Buddhas' skilful means are sometimes said to be inconceivable. Some interpreters find here scope for a strongly particularist reading of Buddhist virtue ethics. The awakened person, who fully possesses the virtues, would make moral decisions in a way that is aware of the uniqueness of each situation. His or her moral decisions cannot be justified by general moral rules such as those provided by consequentialism and deontology. Such a fully virtuous person has the wisdom and perceptiveness to make correct moral decisions; however, the messiness and complexity of specific real-life moral situations means that these decisions cannot be explained by an overarching ethical theory (The Cowherds 2016: 12, 127–8).

Furthermore, if Buddhist moral outlooks are in some respects akin to virtue ethics, they are not akin to egoist versions of virtue ethics. Selfishness is not a virtue for Buddhists, and Buddhists would generally baulk at the claim that one should act selfishly or only act in ways that are in one's self-interest. Egoist virtue ethics contradicts basic Buddhist tenets about the value of genuinely other-regarding, non-self-referential compassion and loving kindness. However, many Buddhists would surely accept, without being egoists, that an important reason for being virtuous is that it enables the virtuous person to be a happy human being. A basic aim of Buddhism is after all to eradicate one's own suffering by removing the vices, such as greed, hatred and delusion that are its causes. Being virtuous is necessary for the fulfilment of one's human potential, understood in Buddhism as awakening. Even so, there are also strong tendencies in Buddhism towards agent neutrality, where it is considered virtuous to care impartially for all sentient beings including but not especially oneself, and possibly even agent disregard, where it is considered virtuous to care equally for all other sentient beings but one's own welfare is ethically irrelevant. These latter two attitudes are perhaps most evident in the vows of the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva and some of the extreme acts of self-sacrifice that they are encouraged to perform (Williams 2009: 199). Moreover, if Buddhism is construed as a form of virtue ethics, it is a different sort than some Western versions of virtue ethics which are based on the metaphysical belief in a real, substantial self that is able to acquire the virtues. (The Cowherds 2016: 11–12).

Consequentialism

In addition, consequentialist tendencies are clearly present in Buddhism. In general terms, the consequentialist defines moral goodness entirely in terms of the consequences of actions (Rachels 2004: 102). One form of consequentialism would claim that one's actions are morally good only if they produce optimal consequences, that is, the best possible consequences in any given situation. An action is good if it produces better consequences than alternative actions in the same context. A

different type of consequentialism would accept that an action is good if it produces good consequences but morally best if it produces optimal consequences.

Consequentialism is often considered to be morally demanding because, in many of its formulations at least, it promotes impartiality and agent neutrality (Rachels 2004: 109–10). In considering the consequences of one's actions, everyone needs to be taken into account and taken into account equally; the consequences of one's actions for oneself or one's family, for instance, should have no extra weight in one's calculation of consequences.

What counts as a 'good consequence' is contentious. Some consequentialists have construed good consequences in terms of happiness; an action is morally good if it produces happiness, or even maximal attainable happiness, in any given situation. This, of course, raises questions about the nature of happiness and whether, for example, it can be equated with pleasure or has some further, long-term meaning, such as human fulfilment, contentment or equanimity. Other consequentialists have defined 'good consequence' as preference fulfilment rather than happiness or pleasure, partly in acknowledgment that what people prefer can be extremely varied. While some consequentialists have identified a single type of good consequence (such as happiness or pleasure) as determining the moral worth of an action, others have admitted a plurality of types of good consequences. For instance, actions productive of happiness, virtue, beauty and friendship may all be deemed to be morally good because they produce good consequences that are not reducible to any one category (Rachels 2004: 104–5). Actions that produce friendship, beauty or virtue may also lead to happiness but not necessarily; even when such actions do not bring happiness these consequences of one's actions may be deemed to be morally good.

A further distinction is often made between rule and act consequentialism (Rachels 2004: 112–14). The rule consequentialist thinks that following specific ethical imperatives – for example, tell the truth, do not steal – tends to produce good or the best consequences. The act consequentialist is more sensitive to context and ethical variability; given the complexity of lived experience, each particular situation needs to be considered in order to determine which course of action will produce good or the best consequences. The exceptions to ethical imperatives are numerous enough that it is not sufficient to follow a rule, except the very general rule that one should always act to produce good or the best consequences.

It is plausible to argue for the compatibility of consequentialism and virtue ethics. The development of a virtuous character in oneself and others can be one of the good consequences of actions that a consequentialist can acknowledge as having moral worth. Furthermore, the disposition to act in ways that produce good or the best consequences can be the sign of a character that is virtuous. Theories such as character consequentialism combine elements of both perspectives by arguing, for example, that the production of virtuous individuals through one's actions is the way to maximise the good of society (Ivanhoe 1991).

What signs of consequentialism are there in Buddhism? Whether the Buddhist teaching of karma is consequentialist is a debatable point. A consequentialist

reading must claim that good karma is good because it produces good consequences. Good consequences are what make the karma morally good. A non-consequentialist interpretation would say that good karma produces good consequences because this karma is good. The good consequences are an effect of good karma but they are not what make the karma morally good.

There is other less contentious evidence of Buddhist consequentialist tendencies. For Buddhists, one of the principal good consequences of actions is the production of virtue. One's action is good if it encourages virtue in others by teaching them how to be virtuous or by setting a moral example for them. One's action is also good if it has the good consequence of strengthening one's own virtuous character; for example, acting in a generous way may help to inculcate a generous disposition in one's mind, so that acting generously becomes more common and habitual. There is also a consequentialist preoccupation in most Buddhist traditions with actions that enhance or even maximise the welfare of sentient beings. Moral approval is given to actions that produce such well-being as their consequence. The Buddhist ethical orientation, starting with the four noble truths, is towards actions that remove suffering and that have the effect of producing genuine, lasting happiness or contentment. The *result* of these actions matters morally. Moreover, Buddhism often encourages a demanding and idealistic impartiality that resembles many forms of consequentialism. This is particularly evident in the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva ideal. One should care equally for all sentient beings and consider the impact of one's actions on them (Williams 2009: 194–200). One is encouraged to overcome the strong egoistic proclivity to value oneself more highly than others. Impartiality sometimes commits Buddhists to the notion of self-sacrifice; in some situations even the loss of one's own life may be warranted if it will produce better or the best consequences overall, when others' well-being is taken into account and not just one's own. The well being of others is more important than one's own (Williams 2009: 198). This radical altruism is supported by the insight that ultimately there is no separate, autonomous self, so that sufferings do not belong to anyone and one should eradicate them wherever they occur, without discrimination (Goodman 2009: 90–3).

There is evidence of both rule and act consequentialist attitudes in Buddhism. Buddhists clearly regard ethical precepts against killing, lying and so forth as moral rules that, if followed, tend to alleviate suffering. Yet there is also evidence of different and even contradictory ethical guidance being given by the Buddha depending on the individual's specific circumstances (Hallisey 1996: 39). In some forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism, even basic precepts, such as the prohibition against taking another person's life, are considered to be breakable by the compassionate and wise Bodhisattva if the outcome of doing so will be beneficial and alleviate suffering overall (Williams 2009: 152); this demonstrates sensitivity to context that is consistent with act consequentialism. This act consequentialist reading of Buddhist ethics is a form of ethical particularism, although not quite as strong as forms of ethical particularism that eschew general moral rules altogether; after all, the precept-breaking, act consequentialist Bodhisattva does still follow the maxim that suffering must be alleviated through his or her actions.

Deontology

Finally, deontological attitudes are also detectable in Buddhism. Deontology considers duties and obligations as ethically primary. There is a sense in which consequentialism could itself be seen as a form of deontology insofar as consequentialism requires us to perform a duty, that is, to produce good or the best consequences. However, deontologists often criticise consequentialism for simplistically reducing our ethical obligations to this single duty (Ross 2004: 320–2). Deontologists often object that consequentialism can lead to the violation of other important duties; while the impartial production of good or even optimal consequences through one's actions is arguably an important obligation, it is not the only obligation that we have, and sometimes other duties may take priority.

For instance, some deontologists may uphold the duty not to take innocent people's lives. By contrast, consequentialists may seek to justify the death of innocent people in situations where this will be of overall benefit to humanity (Nielsen 2004). For many deontologists, however, the duty not to kill innocent people has an ethical importance that is not necessarily overridden by the duty impartially to produce better consequences.

Some deontologists argue that some duties are absolute, such as the duty not to kill innocent people, and need to be respected no matter what the consequences. For such deontologists, the duty impartially to produce better consequences cannot be absolute, because this duty can be overridden by other duties that are absolute. For instance, we should never kill innocent people even when to do so would be beneficial overall. The violation of the right to life is not to be compromised.

Other deontologists may argue that no duties are absolute and all duties can on occasion be overridden by other conflicting duties. Such non-absolutist deontologists may accept that the duty impartially to produce better consequences *sometimes but not always* overrides other duties if they come into conflict with it. For instance, some non-absolutist deontologists might reluctantly accept as morally justified the inevitable killing of some innocent people in the prosecution of a war against a genocidal tyrant if this will protect many more innocent people who would otherwise be murdered. However, the non-absolutist deontologists must also argue that there are other situations in which we should uphold the duty not to kill innocent people even when killing innocent people may produce better consequences overall. Otherwise, the duty to impartially produce better consequences overall would be absolute and the deontologist would effectively become a consequentialist; all other conflicting duties would be overridden by this one absolute consequentialist duty.

A stock example is that I could be killed in order for my organs to be used to save many other people; this is arguably justifiable on consequentialist grounds because only one person is killed and many are thereby saved. Non-absolutist deontologists might argue that this is a case where the duty to impartially produce better consequences overall is trumped by the duty not to kill an innocent person and the duty to respect their right to life. Of course, the non-absolutist deontologist

is confronted by the complicated, messy problem of determining in which circumstances particular duties are overridden by other specific duties. And every particular duty must in some circumstances be overridden; otherwise, there would be at least one absolute duty.

Deontologists also often criticise the tendency among many consequentialists to stress impartiality and agent neutrality; it is argued that this overlooks the important agent specific duties that we have to particular people – for example, family, friends, employers, employees and customers – that sometimes need to be maintained at the expense of impartiality. The over-emphasis on impartiality is too demanding and also does not do justice to, and alienates us from, the actual duties that we have in everyday life to those with whom we are in closest relationships. Some duties are highly personal in nature (Ross 2004: 322; Williams 2004: 262–3).

Deontology and virtue ethics are not necessarily incompatible (Frankena 2004). Fulfilling one's obligations with the right intentions or virtuous motivations, rather than by external compulsion or for some ulterior motive, is morally important for the deontologist. The disposition to act in ways that accord with one's duties is arguably a sign of a character that is virtuous. Our obligations arguably inform us as to why certain character traits are virtues. It is because we have duties to be benevolent, honest, patient, etc., that the character traits of benevolence, honesty, patience and so forth are virtues. Moreover, the development of a virtuous character arguably can be an effect of doing one's duty because doing one's duty can instil moral attitudes and habits.

The importance of obligations is evident in the various ethical precepts and vows that are emphasised in Buddhist traditions. Deontologists disagree about the specific duties that one should fulfil; similarly, Buddhists from various traditions have different vows and precepts that they undertake, even if they often overlap in significant ways and with some duties – such as not harming others, not lying, not stealing, etc. – being pervasive. Buddhism also exhibits gradualist ethical attitudes, where less demanding and less numerous ethical duties are required of some practitioners (such as laypeople) than of others (for example, monastics). And some duties can be agent or role specific; for instance, the duties of laypeople include giving to the monastics whereas the duties of monastics include teaching the laity and setting a moral example for them. Monastics have duties relating to their membership of the monastic community, as outlined in the Vinaya, whereas the laity has obligations relating to family and livelihood. However, other obligations associated with Buddhism stress impartiality or self-negation, such as the requirement to extend loving kindness and compassion to all sentient beings and to treat them as important as, or more important than, oneself.

There is evidence of moral absolutism in Buddhism, that is, that some duties (such as the ethical precepts) should never be violated. This is perhaps particularly evident in Theravāda Buddhism (Goodman 2009: 56). However, some Mahāyāna Buddhists, such as Asaṅga and Śāntideva, have accepted that Buddhist moral rules can be overridden when motivated by wisdom and compassion (Goodman 2009: 79–82; 98). Neither of these positions is necessarily finally distinguishable from consequentialism. Is the only consideration in deciding whether always to

keep, or sometimes to violate, one's obligations whether they have the consequence of reducing or increasing suffering? Perhaps some Buddhist deontologists would claim that certain duties should never be violated because violations will lead to suffering whereas others would argue that duties should sometimes be overridden because not to do so would produce suffering. In either case, Buddhist deontology would be ultimately underpinned by a broadly consequentialist justification.

However, Goodman (2009: 56) points to examples from Theravāda Buddhism of saints who uphold the precepts as absolute rules even when doing so has terrible consequences, so Buddhist deontology is not always ultimately reducible to consequentialism. It is perhaps not difficult to imagine situations in which this might be the case.

Take the example of a Buddhist who could kill a serial murderer to prevent the murderer from killing many other people in the future. Some Buddhists would argue for the violation of the first precept here on consequentialist grounds; but it is also plausible to argue that the Buddhist should not be required to violate the moral rule against killing. To require the Buddhist to compromise their moral integrity by killing in this situation arguably makes them responsible for too much, that is, the prevention of the bad actions of another moral agent by doing something bad, but less bad, themselves. Arguably, the Buddhist here should not be required to violate a duty and thus do something wrong in order to prevent someone else from doing something even worse.

Another example would be a Buddhist monastic with whom someone has become sexually infatuated. Suppose the infatuated person threatens to kill themselves or kill the Buddhist monastic unless the Buddhist monastic breaks the vow of celibacy. Let us suppose that the monastic refuses. And let us also suppose that the infatuated person carries out the threat successfully. Would the Buddhist monastic then have been wrong not to compromise their moral integrity by breaking the precept against sexual misconduct? Some Buddhists might argue in favour of breaking the precept in this situation in order to avoid terrible consequences; others might argue that the moral principle outweighs the bad consequences and that the Buddhist monastic should not do something bad in order to stop someone else doing something worse. The Buddhist monastic cannot be held responsible for the bad actions of the infatuated person and the Buddhist monastic's moral commitment, the obligation to be celibate, is important enough that it should not be violated to prevent the infatuated person from acting in a way that has terrible consequences.

Applied ethics

In addition to questions about the nature of Buddhist ethical theory, the Buddhist philosopher of religion needs to consider the significance of Buddhist ideas in relation to the host of contemporary moral problems that exercise philosophers and non-philosophers alike. What contribution can Buddhism make to current debates in applied ethics about issues such as abortion, euthanasia and suicide, war and violence, genetic engineering, the environment, economics, sexuality, etc.?

The answer to this question is complicated because there is no uniform Buddhist attitude to any of these issues in applied ethics; as in so many other areas of philosophical enquiry, Buddhist views regarding often knotty moral problems are diverse. So, some Buddhists support and others oppose suicide and euthanasia (Keown 1998; Becker 1990). Some Buddhists have been pacifists whereas others have sought to justify warfare and violence (Bartholomeusz 1999). Attitudes to homosexuality have been negative in some Buddhist cultures but sometimes more accepting in others (Harvey 2000: 411–34). There has often been strong Buddhist disapproval of abortion but also more liberal, compromising Buddhist attitudes can be found (Florida 2000). And so on.

Moreover, many of the moral issues that in contemporary society are the focus of rigorous debate and analysis were not historically given sustained attention in Buddhism. This is partly because of developments in technology and the very different problems that now confront us as a result of modernity; it would be absurd and anachronistic to expect pre-modern Buddhism to have explicit views about genetic engineering, nuclear deterrents, selective abortion, or widespread ecological degradation and pollution.

However, it also seems that Buddhist reflections on what is now referred to as applied ethics were historically fairly piecemeal and unsystematic anyway. Attitudes to the practical moral problems of life are expressed in Buddhist sources but often not defended at length. This means that the contemporary Buddhist philosopher of religion should take into account the ethical views expressed in traditional sources but will often need to extrapolate from them in order to contribute to sophisticated current debates about wide ranging practical moral problems.

Given the diverse attitudes in traditional Buddhist textual sources and cultures, the lack of developed positions on many moral issues as well as the different exigencies of modern life, it would not be realistic to expect a single Buddhist attitude to most contemporary ethical problems. Buddhism may be able to contribute to contemporary debates in applied ethics; in part this debate will be an internal discussion amongst Buddhists about Buddhist ethical principles and how they are to be best applied to concrete moral dilemmas, some of which are of recent provenance.

Buddhism and the environment

An instructive case study in Buddhist applied ethics concerns Buddhist attitudes to the natural world. Increasing population, industrialisation, technological advances and the globalisation of a consumerist mentality have led to unprecedented human-created pressures on the environment, evident in habitat and species loss, pollution, climate change, and so forth. This has led to widespread anxiety about the unsustainability of the current human relationship to the natural world.

It is sometimes claimed that the modern devaluation, exploitation and degradation of the environment is rooted in the extreme anthropocentrism of Western religious and philosophical traditions. This is said to be exemplified by

the biblical divine proclamation that the natural world was created for human beings' use and the Cartesian dualism which views mind as separate from matter, and only human minds have freedom, rationality and (self-) consciousness. Non-human animals are regarded as organic machines devoid of (self-) awareness; the material world is without inherent value and only has worth in relation to human beings (White 1967: 1205–6; Cheng 2002: 159–60). The prevalent Western attitude to the environment has regarded it simply as a resource to be exploited and as separate from human beings.

In recent times this dominant perspective has been challenged by environmentalists who argue that we have often neglected responsibilities in relation to the natural world. The field of environmental ethics has developed in response to the current ecological crisis and argues that we should take the natural world into account when deciding how to act.

A distinction can be made between ecocentric and anthropocentric environmental ethics. Ecocentric environmental ethics argues that the natural world has intrinsic value; it has moral worth independent of its usefulness to human beings. In its strongest form, ecocentric environmentalism attributes moral respect to all *natural* things as having value in their own right. Milder forms claim that all *sentient* or *living* things warrant moral consideration. Some ecocentric environmentalists are strictly egalitarian, claiming that all living, sentient or natural things have the same intrinsic right to exist and flourish. Other ecocentric environmentalists attribute intrinsic moral value to all living, sentient or natural things, but claim that some living, sentient or natural things (for example, humans) may have more intrinsic moral value than others.

By contrast, anthropocentric environmental ethics is thoroughly human-centred and claims that the natural world has only instrumental value; humans need to care for, and act responsibly towards, the natural world because not to do so will ultimately be (and already is) harmful to human beings. The natural world has value only because it has value for human beings and in relation to human interests. Even though only human beings have inherent moral worth for the anthropocentric environmentalist, respect for the natural world and careful management of its resources is vital for the well-being of human beings in the present and future. Both ecocentric and anthropocentric environmental ethics recognise the interconnectedness of human beings and the natural world and that our (mis)treatment of the environment has serious repercussions for later generations and ourselves.

Inevitably, religious thinkers have been drawn into the discussion about environmental ethics. People from many faiths seek nowadays to find resources from their own traditions to confront current environmental problems. For instance, although Christianity has sometimes been maligned as a cause of the current environmental malaise, a more positive contemporary Christian attitude is possible by stressing the stewardship of the world that God's grace granted to human beings and the value of the natural world as a divine creation (Jenkins 2008).

Buddhism in particular is often regarded as offering an environmentally friendly worldview which sees human beings to be deeply connected to the non-human

natural world. The Buddhist teaching of dependent origination is commonly interpreted as supportive of a modern environmentalist perspective which stresses the interdependence of humanity and the natural world (Macy 1991; Tucker and Williams 1998). The Huayan (Hua-yen) school of Chinese Buddhism employs the image of the ‘Jewel Net of Indra’; in this infinite net, a jewel is placed at each knot, so that each jewel reflects every other one (Cook 1977: 2). This is a simile for the interpenetration of all phenomena which can be interpreted to entail that we are deeply related to our environment and that we have responsibilities towards the natural world. Moreover, Buddhism stresses personal awakening through insight into this interconnectedness of all phenomena. This seems broadly similar to the form of environmental ethics referred to as deep ecology, which is sometimes presented as a philosophy of self-realisation, according to which individuals gradually overcome their sense of a separate ego from the natural world (Deval and Sessions 1992: 132).

Buddhism arguably does not place human beings above the natural world. The natural world, including animals, is not created by a God for the use and enjoyment of humans. The importance of harmony with nature is particularly evident in East Asian Buddhism, which stresses the inter-relationship of all things. This is apparent in many examples of Zen painting and poetry, in which the natural world is often the focus (Awakawa 1970). The teaching of Buddha nature is a feature of Mahāyāna Buddhism. All sentient beings are said to have or be Buddha nature and, in some Buddhist traditions, even non-sentient nature is said to be Buddha nature (Williams 2009: 103–28). This supports the contention that Buddhists acknowledge the intrinsic value and moral worth of non-human sentient beings and possibly even non-sentient natural beings. The Mahāyāna view that nirvāṇa and saṃsāra are identical can also be interpreted as supporting an environmental ethic which sees the sacred as immanent in the natural world rather than separate from it.

Peter Harvey (2000: 154–5) argues that “attunement with nature” is also evident in Theravāda texts, where various arahats express delight in, or contentment with, living in forests, caves and mountain environments. Such natural environments are said to be conducive to non-attachment and the attainment of awakening. Sentient beings are believed to be reborn through multiple forms, including non-human animals (Harvey 2000: 150). Furthermore, in the birth stories about the Buddha’s previous lives as a Bodhisatta, he sometimes appears as a non-human animal (Grey 2002).

It could be argued that this means that Buddhism provides an account of sentient existence that is not ‘speciesist’; that is, it does not discriminate in favour of human beings. Indeed, for Buddhists, animals are sentient beings. They are capable of feelings of pleasure and pain. Consequently, Buddhists claim that we should not intentionally harm animals, just as we should not harm humans. The *Lankāvatāra sūtra* (chapter 8) argues in favour of vegetarianism as an expression of the Mahāyāna ideal of compassion, an attitude that has a significant impact on the Chinese Buddhist diet, particularly in the monastic community (Harvey 2000: 164). A similar support for vegetarianism is found among some Western

Buddhists; this is often bolstered by animal rights and welfare arguments from the contemporary ethical debate (Kapleau 1981; Bodhipaksa 2005). Animals have intrinsic moral worth, even if Buddhists commonly regard rebirth as a human being as special and superior because of humans' capacity to make spiritual progress and ultimately gain awakening (Harvey 2000: 150).

These aspects of Buddhism seem to support the claim that Buddhism is compatible with contemporary environmentalism. The Buddhist recognition of interdependence could be seen as indicative of an anthropocentric environmental ethics, that is, our own welfare is dependent on the well-being of the natural world; however, many of the Buddhist ideas discussed above seem to point towards an ecocentric environmental ethics that acknowledges the inherent value of the non-human world.

In recent times, various Buddhists have been turning their attention to issues such as pollution, resource depletion, erosion, deforestation and environmental sustainability. Examples of Buddhist environmental activism include Bhikkhu Bodhi, the Ladakh ecological group, Thich Nhat Hanh, the Sarvodaya Sramadana movement in Sri Lanka, the Thai forest monk Phra Ajahn Pongsak Tejadhammo, the Dalai Lama, and so on (Harvey 2000: 178–85). Environmentalist Buddhism can also point out that the Buddhist analysis of how craving leads to suffering also provides a critique of the rampant consumerism which is a major cause of the current environmental crisis (Barnhill 2004); they encourage us to live simply and in harmony with nature. A Buddhist environmental ethic will highlight how ecological destruction is rooted in the dysfunctional human psychological proclivities to greed, hatred and delusion; the solution must lie in the cultivation of Buddhist virtues such as compassion, self-discipline, temperance, mindfulness and wisdom (Keown 2007: 101).

Nevertheless, the compatibility of traditional Buddhism with modern environmentalism has been challenged. Damien Keown (2007: 97) points out that the contemporary ecological debate is a response to distinctively modern problems, such as global warming and pollution, many of which only make sense given a scientific understanding of the world which is alien to pre-modern Buddhism. Any Buddhist engagement with contemporary environmental ethics would need to be adapted to the modern scientific worldview. Moreover, Ian Harris (1994) argues that Buddhism historically was basically an anthropocentric religion focused primarily on the liberation of human beings from suffering. He contends that, for Buddhists, liberation has been from the world, *from nature*, which is incapable of providing ultimate satisfaction. The natural world is something to be overcome, transcended, and does not possess inherent value. Early Buddhism in particular was a world denying religion that focused on the impermanent, insubstantial and unsatisfactory nature of existence. Keown (2007: 97) concurs, arguing that, in pre-modern times, there is little evidence of environmental concern amongst the Buddha and his followers: "If anything, there is more evidence of a negative presupposition about the value and status of the natural world in Buddhism."

The goal of the monk was to escape this world and achieve *nirvāṇa*. Buddhism has viewed the cosmos, the natural world, as having no purpose and as simply

repeating *ad infinitum*. This is the nature of samsāra, which the Buddhist monk seeks to renounce (Harris 1994: 11). Moreover, animal existence is perceived as miserable and animals are usually considered to be incapable of practising Buddhism. For Buddhists animals “belong some way down the hierarchy of beings” and are inferior to humans (Harris 1994: 20). Harris concludes, “Buddhism does not provide the kind of doctrinal foundation from which environmental concerns can be easily developed” (Harris 1994: 16). Indeed, theistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam may provide more support for ecological concern because the natural world is seen as the purposeful, meaningful creation of a loving God (Harris 1994: 16; Keown 2007: 97).

Pāli sources encourage meditation to cultivate loving kindness (*mettā*) towards all sentient beings. However, Harris (1994: 18–19) argues that in early Buddhism the benefits of loving kindness (such as good karma) are primarily felt by the practitioner rather than the living being to whom the loving kindness is directed. He also claims that loving kindness is not commonly directed towards animals, and when it is, it is usually employed as a protective mechanism to ward off dangerous creatures. Hence Harris (1994: 19) contends that the traditional Buddhist attitude to animals has often been “essentially instrumental”. He also points to the evidence of the early Pāli scripture, the *Cakkavattisīhanāda sutta*, which describes a much happier time in the future when the countryside will have all but disappeared with the growth of cities. The wilderness induces fear and is a source of danger, so taming it is seen as a positive advance for humanity (Harris 1994: 21–22). This contrasts with the contemporary situation, where the wilderness itself has become scarce and threatened, so the fear and danger is that it will disappear, with devastating effects on humanity which ancient Buddhists could not have imagined. Contrary to Harvey’s evaluation, Harris claims “Buddhist sources are rather light on glowing descriptions of the natural world” (Harris 1994: 22). This is because the natural world is intrinsically unsatisfactory and without inherent value. Again, the contrast is with a tradition like Christianity for which nature is meaningful and reveals God as its creator. Harris concludes “Buddhism cannot uphold an environmentalist ethic” because

There is nothing within the sphere of nature which can be aid to possess any meaning or purpose. There can be no Buddhist justification for the fight to preserve habitats and environments. Everything, without exception, is subject to decay. It is not clear that change, within the natural world, can be positively affected by human interventions. (Harris 1994: 25)

Harris’s sceptical comments can be supported by the absence of vegetarianism in various (but certainly not all) forms of Buddhism. For example, in Theravāda Buddhism, a monk may eat meat provided as alms by the laity if the monk has not seen, heard or suspected that the animal has been killed specifically for him. The monk must avoid killing but may eat an already dead animal. Not to accept such a gift of meat from laypeople would be to deprive them of the merit accrued by providing alms to monks and such aversion to a particular type of donated food

would display craving and attachment that is inappropriate for a monk. The restrictions on the layperson's diet are less severe with animals commonly eaten, even if there can be a stigma associated with making one's livelihood in a way that entails killing animals (Harvey 2000: 159–63). In Tibetan Buddhism, the harsh, cold climate has meant that most people eat meat (Harvey 2000: 165). This reveals an instrumentalist view of non-human animals, because it is considered legitimate to use them for human consumption. If such animals have some inherent moral worth for non-vegetarian Buddhists, it is insufficient to require a prohibition against eating them.

Moreover, we have already seen that Buddhist ontology often reduces objects of the everyday natural world – trees, animals, mountains, rivers – to conceptual fictions constructed out of vast numbers of causally connected momentary events; it is not clear how such natural phenomena, devoid of intrinsic existence, could be granted inherent moral value, except perhaps at the level of conventional, everyday discourse. In addition, some Yogācāra Buddhist ontology is arguably a form of idealism; the entire physical external world is regarded as a fabrication by consciousness (see chapter 5). Nature's very existence is merely imagined and is entirely dependent on the minds which fabricate it. It is difficult to see how this perspective could be compatible with modern environmentalism.

This case study demonstrates the point that pre-modern Buddhist ideas can be employed to support diverse contemporary attitudes to issues, such as environmentalism, that are central to current applied ethics. In some respects, traditional Buddhist ideas conflict with recent trends to impart inherent value to the natural world; to ignore this fact does injustice to the complexity of Buddhism. The easy assimilation of Buddhism to recent environmental ethics is problematic. Nevertheless, Buddhism is not static; as we have already seen, many Buddhists understandably seek to respond to contemporary ethical challenges. Some of these ethical issues, such as the current ecological crisis, could not have been anticipated in pre-modern times but that should not prevent current Buddhists from searching for solutions to them. Moreover, the emergence of recent Buddhist ecological thinking is in some ways a development of, and not simply a departure from, tradition. As Keown (2007: 98) observes, "Buddhism is not a monolithic structure, and some strands or traditions may be more or less resourceful than others in addressing environmental issues." Buddhist attitudes may need to be updated and modified but there is arguably room for significant continuity between contemporary environmentalism and certain venerable Buddhist ideas such as the interconnectedness of all things and Buddhist virtues such as non-violence, moderation, kindness and compassion.

4 Concepts of Buddha

God is the focus of much philosophy of religion. Attention is devoted to various arguments for the existence of God, particularly in traditional Christian-centred philosophy of religion. Moreover, philosophers have identified a vast array of concepts of God that vary as to his, her or its (gender is one of the variations) nature and the relationship between God and the world. God can be construed as singular or plural (two or more divinities) and as omnipotent or limited in power. Notions of the divine construe it as transcendent, immanent, or both transcendent and immanent in the world. God can be the creator of the universe, but there are disagreements about whether God is just the efficient cause, designing and shaping pre-existent matter, or the material cause as well. If God is the material cause, the universe may be created out of nothing or may be a manifestation or evolution of the divine's own nature. Alternatively, God may not be regarded as creator of the universe. There are also differences of opinion about the extent to which God can be described using words and concepts and whether the divine takes an interest in the world, individuals within it, and may be active in their salvation or liberation. These and other issues relating to the nature of God are often at the heart of philosophy of religion.

Buddhism, arguably, does not share the preoccupation with God. While Buddhists typically accept the existence of numerous gods, usually adopted from local indigenous religions, they are generally considered to be mortal and unawakened inhabitants of heavens within samsāra; they exist there because of previous good karma but will eventually die and be reborn elsewhere in the cycle of birth and death once their good karma has been exhausted. Moreover, there is a long tradition of Buddhist critiques of the concept of a monotheistic God, which refute the notion of a creator and designer divinity; Buddhism claims that the existence of the universe is beginningless and that its order and structure can be explained by the natural law of dependent origination, including karma. Buddhists sometimes also highlight the contradiction between belief in a really existing eternal deity and the Buddhist teachings of impermanence and insubstantiality.

However, at the centre of Buddhist belief and practice is the concept of Buddha. It is arguable that some concepts of Buddha share a great deal in common with God, especially when the concept of God is flexibly and broadly construed. The assertion that Buddha is not God is perhaps not as straightforward as is sometimes claimed.

Buddha literally means ‘awakened one’ and, of course, is an epithet of Siddhārtha Gautama who lived in ancient India; the story of his waking up from the sleep of spiritual ignorance is one of the world’s great religious narratives. There is also a longstanding convention of translating Buddha as ‘the enlightened one’ and his awakening (*bodhi*) as the enlightenment. The Buddha is sometimes represented as a wise and truly remarkable human being who, after many struggles and much striving, achieved insight into the nature of reality, and extinguished suffering. He subsequently, motivated by compassion, taught others for several decades, and then passed away in old age, never to experience the torments of birth and death again. This is certainly an understanding of the Buddha that has been favoured by many Western and Asian Buddhist modernists, who see Buddhism as a rational philosophy or way of life (rather than religion) which eschews notions of God.

While there is some evidence of this human Buddha in early Buddhist scriptures, the concept of Buddha has been commonly viewed throughout the history of Buddhism as entailing much more than this. Even in the early scriptures superhuman and miraculous abilities are attributed to the Buddha. Moreover, various Buddhist traditions express beliefs about Buddha as eternal, omniscient, powerful, entirely compassionate, and so forth; Buddha’s attributes are often depicted as maximally great (Griffiths 1994), which seems similar to some characterisations of God. This is especially obvious in various forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism. However, Buddha is rarely seen just as an awakened human being, and this is true also of the Theravāda tradition, despite a common tendency to simplistically contrast Theravāda and Mahāyāna concepts of Buddha in this respect.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore some of the complexities of the concept of Buddha as it occurs in Buddhist traditions. It will also include a consideration of Buddhist critiques of a monotheistic God and whether they are in tension or veritable contradiction with Buddhists’ own beliefs about Buddhahood. In addition, this chapter will analyse the philosophical implications of widespread Buddhist practices involving visualisation of Buddhas as well as the worship of Buddha images and relics. What do these practices reveal about the meaning of Buddha for Buddhists? Finally, the chapter will discuss the potentially problematic nature of these traditional beliefs and practices about Buddha for some contemporary Buddhists, who are often shaped by the forces of secular modernity and rationalism.

Buddha in early Buddhism

The earliest Buddhist scriptures are preserved in the Pāli Nikāyas and Chinese Āgamas. It is worth bearing in mind that even these earliest written sources date from centuries after the life of the Buddha, which inevitably raises serious questions about the historical accuracy of their accounts of his life. However, as hagiographies, they reveal much about how the Buddha was regarded in relatively early times and why the Buddhists who compiled the accounts considered him to

be so important. These earliest sources present a complex picture of Siddhārtha Gautama, the historical Buddha. On the one hand, there is evidence of the Buddha as a wise but fallible and vulnerable human being. On the other hand, the Buddha is frequently described as having various extraordinary capacities which mark him out as superhuman.

The superhuman aspect of the Buddha's nature evidently became accentuated over time in the various early Buddhist schools, sometimes even to the exclusion of the human dimension. However, it would be simplistic to reduce the concept of Buddha, as it occurs in the earliest available sources, to either of these tendencies, and a degree of tension between them seems to be present.

From a psychological point of view, the Buddhist inclination to glorify the Buddha may be partly the result of a deep-rooted human need for a powerful and protective being, surely an understandable response to an uncertain and dangerous world (Anālayo 2006: 15). It is plausible that the need for a superhuman Buddha may have grown over the generations as Buddhists felt less connected with, and more distant from, the historical Buddha. It may also be that there was a psychological and political need to emphasise and enhance the Buddha's greatness in the face of competition from rival religious traditions in ancient India's crowded spiritual marketplace (Anālayo 2006: 11). Of course, the existence of such needs is not in itself a proof that such a superhuman being does not exist; it may be that the needs exist and, happily, there exists a being to fulfil those needs. But the sceptic will worry that, in the absence of reliable evidence that such a superhuman being exists, the belief may simply be based on wishful thinking.

The human Buddha

Guang Xing (2005: 7–13) examines the evidence in these early sources for the human characteristics of the Buddha. For example, we get glimpses of the Buddha as susceptible to normal bodily afflictions; he is depicted as having back pain and stomach ailments (*Majjhima Nikāya* i, 354; *Vinaya* ii, 210). The eighty-year-old Buddha declares that his aged body is like a worn-out cart (*Dīgha Nikāya* ii, 100). He is described as performing ordinary human bodily functions such as sleeping at night, washing and eating (*Samyutta Nikāya* i, 106), with food poisoning leading to his final illness and death. The Buddha's final terminal illness in old age is described, as well as the tremendous pain which it caused him (*Dīgha Nikāya* ii, 127–8).

Moreover, the early scriptures reveal the Buddha's community of monks and nuns to have been far from harmonious, with the Buddha having an imperfect ability to overcome dissent and deal with disputes (*Vinaya* ii, 262, 271; *Majjhima Nikāya* ii, 153; *Samyutta Nikāya* ii, 208). That he did not foresee these problems, and often had to introduce new monastic rules to deal with them after they arose, indicates limits to his powers. There are also various accounts of disciples who became disillusioned with the Buddha and his teaching (*Samyutta Nikāya* ii, 13, 50) and people who encountered him and listened to his teachings but did not convert due to scepticism about his claim that he had achieved the awakened state (*Majjhima*

Nikāya i, 170–1; *Ānguttara Nikāya ii*, 36–7). Xing (2005: 10) makes the good point that such uncomplimentary stories may provide a genuine glimpse of the life and times of the historical Buddha shorn of the exalted status attributed to him by later hagiographies; they are unlikely to have been later fabrications by redactors who presumably would have had no interest in stressing the fallibility and imperfections of the founder of their tradition. The Buddha is also recorded as sometimes experiencing people's indifference to his sermons, hunger due to villagers' unwillingness to provide alms, as well as slander and attacks from disaffected followers (*Majjhima Nikāya I*, 6; *Samyutta Nikāya i*, 112; *Udāna iv*, 8).

Early accounts of the Buddha also indicate that he experienced the very human emotion of delight in human and natural beauty (*Dīgha Nikāya ii*, 96; 102). More controversially, Xing (2005: 11–12) contends that there is some inconclusive evidence that the Buddha may have experienced righteous anger when confronted by various misguided and malicious followers, most notably the treacherous Devadatta (*Vinaya ii*, 188; *Ānguttara Nikāya iii*, 401), despite the orthodox view that he had transcended such negative mental states.

The superhuman Buddha

While it is true that the early scriptures depict the Buddha in such human terms, this is not the complete picture and various aspects of the Buddha seem truly extraordinary and superhuman. Indeed, when the Buddha is asked whether he is a god (*deva*), a nature spirit (*yakha*), a heavenly deity (*gandhabba*) or a human, he replies that he is none of these, because he has destroyed the spiritual defilements (*kilesa*) which cause rebirth as a sentient being of any type (*Ānguttara Nikāya ii*, 36–7). This statement implies that he will not be reborn again in human or any other samsaric form, including that of a divinity in the samsaric heavens, for in the Buddhist cosmology even gods are unawakened and subject to eventual death and rebirth. It also indicates that a Buddha is a rare, separate and special category of being. In ancient India, the attribution of divine qualities to beings was common, with trees, mountains, cows, kings and spiritual teachers often considered to be gods; the boundaries between being human and being divine were porous (Williams 2009: 174). The Buddha's claim not to be a human or a god is an assertion that his status is unique and mysterious; his achievement cannot be understood simply as just another case of unawakened divinisation. Buddha's awakening is comparable to a deep ocean that is hard to fathom and immeasurable (*Majjhima Nikāya i*, 487). If the Buddha is a divinity he is regarded as vastly superior to the various unawakened deities that inhabit the Buddhist cosmos.

The Buddha's exalted status is also marked by the occurrence of natural phenomena such as light and earthquakes that mark significant points in the Buddha's career, such as his birth, awakening and death (Xing 2005: 16). The universe literally lights up and shakes due to the enormous significance of the Buddha and his achievements. In addition, the Buddha frequently interacts with gods and goddesses who are often supportive and protective of the Buddha and his teaching. For example, the god Brahmā Sahampati persuades him to teach the

dhamma to others (*Majjhima Nikāya* i, 168–9). This purported interaction with deities clearly reveals that the Buddha was regarded as having an extraordinary status and that divinities recognised the enormous importance of his awakening.

The birth story (*jātaka*) genre of Pāli Buddhist scriptures make it clear that the Buddha had been working for countless lives as a Bodhisatta towards the attainment of Buddhahood and that he was predicted to Buddhahood prior to his final life (Crosby 2014: 29). The Buddha is distinguished from his awakened followers by being a trailblazer who rediscovers the path to awakening after it has been forgotten by human society and who expounds it for others to follow (*Samyutta Nikāya* ii, 105–7). In what are probably the later parts of the early scriptures, he is believed to be the latest in a long lineage of Buddhas stretching back into the distant past, who were similarly trailblazers in their own times, and with the promise of another Buddha, Metteyya in the future. The historical Buddha thus becomes one of a type (Crosby 2014: 22, 34), all of whom repeat the same archetypal lifestory. The appearance of a Buddha is an event of cosmic significance and the periodic occurrence of this event is a structural feature of the universe itself, rather than simply being the unique achievement of a single, merely human individual.

The hagiographies of the Buddha stress that he is no mere human being and relate the extraordinary happenings associated with the Buddha's life. For example, the post-canonical *Nidānakathā*, an important Theravāda biography of the Buddha, is replete with details about the truly superhuman life of the Buddha. For instance, it recounts that prior to the Buddha's final birth while he is still an unawakened Bodhisatta, the gods visit him in the Tusita heaven, where he has been reborn for his penultimate rebirth, and persuade him that the appropriate time has arrived for him to be reborn in order to become a Buddha. He then chooses the place, time and family for his final rebirth. Miraculous occurrences accompany his conception and birth and the precocious newborn baby takes seven steps and proclaims that he is the chief of the world (*Nidānakathā* 1878: 144–55). This story also features in the canonical *Mahāpadāna sutta* (*Dīgha Nikāya* ii, 12–15) and is also applied to six past Buddhas who are all said to undergo precisely the same events in the process of being born.

The Buddha is also described in early scriptures as having physical attributes such as great beauty and skin with the hue of gold on the night of his awakening and at the attainment of the *parinibbāna* (Crosby 2014: 36). His physical powers are formalised into the thirty-two physical characteristics of a great man (*mahāpuruṣa*), later supplemented by a list of eighty further minor characteristics, which distinguish him from human beings, or ordinary human beings (Xing 2005: 24–35). This concept of the great man appears to be inherited from pre-Buddhist Brahmanism (Xing 2005: 14) and includes very distinctive and recognisable features such as one thousand-spoked wheels on his soles and palms, webbed hands and feet, skin shining like gold, and long arms that reach to his knees without bending (*Dīgha Nikāya* iii, 143–4). The Sarvāstivādins also declare that the Buddha has a halo of light extending for one fathom that perpetually emanates from his body (Xing 2005: 23, 34). The attribution of such remarkable

characteristics to the Buddha indicates a tendency to elevate his status beyond that of merely a wise and compassionate teacher.

Xing (2005: 14–15) remarks that this is in conflict with other passages from the early scriptures, which make no reference to these thirty-two marks and in which the Buddha appears physically like the other monks and people fail to recognise him (*Majjhima Nikāya* iii, 238–47, 155). However, Crosby (2014: 36) notes that the Buddha explains in the *Mahāparinibbāna sutta* that he is able to transform his appearance when teaching so that he is not recognised. The Buddha apparently sometimes chose not to reveal his physical splendour, which provides a possible explanation of passages in which his extraordinary body with its distinctive marks is not mentioned. Of course, another explanation is that the claim that the Buddha had such exceptional physical features is a relatively later development, or one that was not universally accepted early on, so does not feature in many of the scriptural accounts of the Buddha's life.

The Buddha is also described as having extraordinary powers of knowledge. One common formulation is that the Buddha has six higher knowledges (*abhiññā/abhijñā*): miraculous powers (*iddhi/rddhi*), clairaudience, knowledge of the minds of others, knowledge of his former lives, knowledge of others' karmic destinations, and knowledge that the defilements that prevent awakening are extinct in him (Xing 2005: 16). The miraculous powers said to have been performed by the Buddha are numerous; they include the ability to emit fire and water from his body, transport his body over distances at great speed (Xing 2005 16–17; Crosby 2014: 37), and physical healing powers (Harvey 2013: 26). Perhaps the most interesting is the Buddha's ability to extend his lifespan to an aeon (*kalpa*) or to the end of an aeon if he desires (*Dīgha Nikāya* ii, 103). This power of the Buddha over the length of his own life and the possibility of the Buddha's extreme longevity reveals an attitude in early Buddhism that was dramatically extended by the Mahāyāna Buddhist claim that Buddhas are eternal.

The *Samaññaphala sutta* (*Dīgha Nikāya* ii) claims that these six higher knowledges are not unique to Buddhas; the first five can be achieved by unawakened meditators who master the four states of higher concentration (*jhāna*), although the Buddha warned that the display of the associated miraculous powers is dangerous because they can lead the meditator to self-promotion and pride (Harvey 2013: 26). The sixth knowledge is even attained by the Buddha's awakened followers (Pāli: *arahats*; Sanskrit: *arhats*), and the solitary awakened *pacceka-buddhas*, who do not teach others. Indeed, the differences between the Buddha and other awakened people were a matter of controversy in early Buddhism (Dessein 2009) with distinctions sometimes becoming accentuated over time (Crosby 2014: 39). There is arguably evidence of a tendency among some Buddhists in the centuries after the Buddha's life to lower the status of arhats, attributing flaws and limitations to them, while also increasingly exalting the Buddha and attributing more extraordinary capacities to him (Williams 2009: 19–20).

The Buddha is deemed to have more extensive abilities than other awakened people. For example, the *Mahāsihanāda sutta* (*Majjhima Nikāya* i, 69–72) lists

ten supernormal powers and four confidences or fearlessnesses of the Buddha that the Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda schools came to consider to be exclusive to him (Crosby 2014: 36; Xing 2005: 17–18). These powers and confidences give the Buddha total knowledge of various issues such as the workings of causality, karma and rebirth and the path to liberation as well as fearless certainty about his own total awakening and the efficacy of his teaching. The ten powers give the Buddha “understanding of the spiritual situation and needs of other beings, developed over multiple lifetimes”, including, for example, knowledge of their karma, rebirth, and state of spiritual development; by contrast, a list of ten powers of the arahat that developed in the Theravāda tradition “all relate to the individual’s realization of the Enlightenment, a possibility in a single lifetime” (Crosby 2014: 36). So, not only does the Buddha’s knowledge come to be regarded as more extensive, but also more orientated towards others. This is an altruistic trait that is also recognised by the Sarvāstivāda and Theravāda claim that the Buddha alone has great compassion (*mahākaruṇā*) that exceeds the ordinary compassion experienced by non-Buddhas, awakened or unawakened; the Buddha’s compassion is more extensive, potent and profound (Xing 2005: 40–44; Crosby 2014: 37–38). The Sarvāstivādins explain in considerable detail that the Buddha’s awakening is of a special and superior variety in terms of his power, wisdom and compassion and he is elevated above other awakened individuals, the *arhats* or *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas* (Xing 2005: 50–52). The Sarvāstivādins also claim that the Buddha has the magical capacity to manifest his body wherever and whenever he wishes, presumably as a way of helping others (Williams 2009: 175).

Omniscience in early Buddhism

Further proof that the Buddha was regarded as truly extraordinary is that the Sarvāstivādins, Mahāsāṃghikas and Theravādins all claim that the Buddha has the superhuman power of omniscience (Xing 2005: 45; 53–54; Crosby 2014: 35). The Sanskrit term here is *sarvajñatā* (Pāli: *sabbaññutā*), which is a compound of *sarva*, meaning all, and *jñatā*, meaning knowledge. These schools asserted that the Buddha has knowledge of everything, that is, all aspects of existence in the past, present and future.

However, it seems that the claim that the Buddha is omniscient is in conflict with some passages from the Pāli Nikāyas and Chinese Āgamas; it was possibly a relatively late development in the evolution of early Buddhism (Anālayo 2006: 10–11). The Buddha in the early scriptures sometimes claims that he knows everything that is relevant to the eradication of suffering and the attainment of awakening rather than that he knows, or can know, every fact about the universe. The Buddha famously declares those who waste their time pursuing metaphysical questions about the beginning and end of the universe, etc., are like a man who has been shot by a poisoned arrow and dies because he wants to know everything about the arrow – where it was made, who shot it and so forth – rather than concentrating on removing the poisoned arrow from his body (*Majjhima Nikāya* i, 426–32).

The Buddha's purported omniscience is also problematic because there are events recorded in the scriptures that the Buddha apparently fails to foresee. For instance, it is not clear why the Buddha ordained the treacherous Devadatta, who caused schism in the monastic community, if the Buddha was omniscient. Furthermore, there is a story of the mass suicide of some monks who misunderstood the Buddha's teaching about detachment from the body (*Samyutta Nikāya* v, 320–22); if the Buddha was omniscient he would surely have foreseen and prevented this tragedy (Anālayo 2006: 4).

This difficulty is most acute if the Buddha is thought literally to see all past, present and future events. A possible solution to this problem is presented by the Theravāda commentaries, which make a distinction between the omniscience attributed to Mahāvīra by the Jains, who contend that the Jina knows everything all the time, and the more limited omniscience of the Buddha. The Buddha's omniscience means that he can know anything in the universe – past, present or future – to which he advertises his mind. The Buddha does not literally know everything in one moment, but he can know anything to which he turns his attention (Crosby 2014: 34, 38). Perhaps the Buddha did not foresee events such as Devadatta's treachery and the mass suicide of monks because he did not advert his consciousness to them (Crosby 2014: 38). He could have foreseen these events if he had turned his attention to them but he did not. There are a limited number of events of which an omniscient being of this sort can be aware, given a finite time and the infinite number of past, present and future objects to which the mind could attend.

Buddha's two bodies

In the Pāli scriptural account of the Buddha's last days and death, the Buddha reminds his followers that all conditioned things, including his body, are impermanent. The Buddha's passing away was, in fact, a poignant confirmation of this fundamental truth. He advises his followers that his teaching (*dhamma*) and the monastic discipline (*vinaya*) will be their master after his decease (*Dīgha Nikāya* ii, 154). The Buddhist teaching and practice must be preserved, because their efficacy continues, even when the original teacher is no more. In the *Vakkali sutta*, the Buddha's disciple Vakkali is worried because he is ill and lacks the strength to visit the Buddha. The Buddha advises that seeing his “vile body” is not the point and that to truly see the Buddha is to see Dhamma. He famously declares: “He who sees Dhamma, Vakkali, sees me; he who sees me sees Dhamma. Truly seeing Dhamma, one sees me; seeing me one sees Dhamma” (*Vakkali sutta*. Trans. Walshe 2007).

Passages such as these from the early scriptures suggest the distinction which developed between the *kāyas* of the Buddha, where the term ‘*kāya*’ has a similar ambiguity to the word ‘body’ in English, which can mean the physical body or a collection (as in an author’s ‘body of work’).

On the one hand, there is Buddha's physical body, the *rūpakāya* or body of material form. On the other hand, there is the body or collection of his teachings, the *dharmakāya*, which remains even when the physical body is no more. In

addition, the term ‘*dharma*kāya’ came to refer to the Buddha’s body or collection of spiritual qualities (*dharma*s) exclusive to him, or which he has to the greatest extent, which are pure in the sense that they are untainted by moral or cognitive faults (Williams 2009: 175). The Sarvāstivāda school enumerated these qualities as the aforementioned ten powers and four confidences, the three foundations of mindfulness (relating to the Buddha’s perfection of equanimity in the face of approval or disapproval), and great compassion (Xing 2005: 35–6). The Theravāda school also distinguished between the *rūpakāya* and *dhammakāya*, where initially the *dhammakāya* referred to the Buddha’s body of teaching but later came to include his spiritual qualities (Xing 2005: 69–71; Crosby 2014: 39). Buddhists take refuge in the Buddha, as the first of the three jewels which they revere. A common view is that, as extraordinary as the Buddha’s physical body may be, it is not the true refuge. In worshipping the Buddha, the Buddhist really should be relying on his teachings as well as the spiritual qualities which he exemplifies and which Buddhists are encouraged to emulate. They should not rely on his impermanent physical body (Williams 2009: 175). However, we will see that there is some tension between this teaching and the widespread veneration of Buddha images and relics, which arguably elevates Buddha’s *rūpakāya* as a source of continuing sacred power.

Pure and impure bodies

The Sarvāstivādins claimed that the Buddha’s extraordinary and wonderful physical body is the result of the great merit he has accumulated in previous lives through his virtuous deeds (Xing 2005: 27–8). They nonetheless claim that the Buddha’s physical body must be impure, because all physical bodies are the result of the defilements of ignorance and attachment, and are subject to the old age, sickness and death. The Buddha’s body still suffers the effects of previous bad karma from his bad deeds in his pre-awakened existences (Xing 2005: 106–112). By contrast, the *dharma*kāya consists only of pure, undefiled, awakened spiritual qualities (Xing 2005: 23, 49).

The Mahāsāṃghikas challenged this view of the Buddha’s physical body. They pointed to a passage from the early scriptures that refers to the Buddha as “unstained by the world” (*Ānguttara Nikāya* ii, 37) and concluded that the Buddha’s physical body must be entirely pure (Xing 2005: 54; Eckel 1992: 127). According to the Mahāsāṃghika text, the *Mahāvastu*, the Buddha’s conception occurred without sexual intercourse and his birth involved no pain; the infant Buddha emerged from his mother’s right side without any damage to her body and took the obligatory seven steps before declaring that he was foremost in the world and this would be his last birth. He is declared to be omniscient, extremely strong and in perpetual meditation. He suffers no effects of bad karma and has a body that is free from blemishes and unpleasant scents (Xing 2005: 115). The Buddha’s walking, sitting, lying down, wearing of robes, eating and bathing are declared to be supramundane (*lokottara*); he speaks the dharma spontaneously and does not sleep. Even his old age is said to be a show. He does not need to create karma and

his numerous actions are said to be simply an appearance that is in conformity with the conventions of the world (Williams 2009: 21; Xing 2005: 55, 60–1).

Scholars often interpret the Buddha's supramundane nature to mean that the Mahāsāṃghikas thought that the Buddha's physical body is only an unreal manifestation in the world to assist others and that "he made a display of being born as a man" as a result of compassion for suffering humanity (Xing 2005: 59, 61). His birth, subsequent embodied life and death were entirely an appearance, motivated by compassion for the suffering of sentient beings. Thus, the Mahāsāṃghikas view of the Buddha is sometimes referred to as a type of Buddhist Docetism; it is similar to the early Christian Docetic theory, eventually rejected as a heresy, that the worldly incarnation of Christ was only an illusion (Eckel 1992: 127).

However, Williams disputes this interpretation; he contends that the *Mahāvastu* does not teach that the Buddha's body *per se* is illusory; rather, what is illusory about the Buddha is "his being subject to the normal human needs of food, sleep, washing and so forth" and "there is no suggestion . . . that the Buddha did not die when he appeared to die" (Williams, Tribe and Wynne 2012: 95–6). The Buddha is supramundane in that his body transcends normal human needs, which is different from saying that his body is entirely fictitious. The Buddha was born into the world but his purity was not tainted by it.

Nevertheless, even if the Mahāsāṃghikas did not consider the Buddha's physical body *per se* to be illusory, it is evident that they thought that his pure body was truly extraordinary; many of the problems, requirements and characteristics that are ordinarily inseparable from having a body do not really apply to the Buddha. It is also worth noting that claims that the Buddha's body is pure are not unique to the Mahāsāṃghikas, even if they appear to be more pronounced and developed in this school; for example, the Theravāda account in the *Mahāpadana sutta* of the Buddha's birth stresses his purity, claiming that he descends into his mother's womb mindful and self-possessed and comes forth stainless from the womb (*Dīgha Nikāya* ii, 14).

Buddha in Mahāyāna

The gradual emergence of various forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism in ancient India saw the development of teachings that further emphasise the truly extraordinary nature of Buddha. It seems likely that the Mahāsāṃghika teachings about supramundane Buddhas were an important impetus for the evolution of these Mahāyāna beliefs (Xing 2005: 62–8). On the most fundamental level, in Mahāyāna traditions Buddha becomes identified with the ultimate truth about the universe. In addition, Mahāyāna Buddhism claims that there are multiple, simultaneous, supramundane Buddhas and that they continue to exist in celestial Pure Lands – untainted by the defilements of our impure world – out of compassion for the sake of suffering beings. The Buddha as an historical individual who lived in ancient India comes to be regarded as simply one of many earthly and impermanent manifestations of these supramundane Buddhas.

Nirvāṇa as a final goal of escape from samsāra is indefinitely delayed so that Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, who are pursuing the path to Buddhahood, can remain active in the world until all sentient beings are liberated. Eventually, Mahāyāna Buddhism largely re-imagines the highest ideal of Buddhism as the non-abiding nirvāṇa (*apratiṣṭhit Nirvāṇa*); a Buddha's nirvāṇa does not entail leaving samsāra; rather, it involves remaining within samsāra to assist the infinite number of suffering beings while at the same time not being afflicted by the defilements of ignorance and craving which keep other beings in samsāra (Makransky 1997: 337–8; Williams 2009: 185–6). This continuing presence of Buddhas coupled with their compassionate and powerful natures means that they are still accessible for reciprocal relationships; they can be called upon for assistance and for continuing revelation. Meditation, prayer, visions and dreams become common means of entering into communication with them. The powerful, compassionate Buddhas are thought to be able to intervene to bring about one's liberation or salvation. In its most extreme form, this attitude manifests in Shinran's true Pure Land Buddhism where salvation is by faith alone and even that faith is bestowed upon one by Amida Buddha's grace rather than by self-effort (Bloom 1965: 37–59). More typical perhaps are Mahāyāna traditions that recognise that liberation is achieved through a mixture of self and other power.

Mahāyāna Buddhism also often presents the ideal of Buddhahood as an aspiration for all Mahāyāna Buddhists. The influential *Lotus sūtra* declares that there is only one true goal, that of Buddhahood, which supersedes the inferior ideals of śrāvaka and *pratyekabuddha* (Williams 2009: 152–4). Buddhahood is often considered to be the final result of an extremely long training over numerous lifetimes as a Bodhisattva. The possibility of Buddhahood for all was a corollary of the Mahāyāna belief in a plurality of simultaneous Buddhas and also common Mahāyāna ideas about Buddha nature inherent in everyone. While Buddhahood is truly extraordinary, it is also immanent in all sentient beings.

Buddha's three bodies

Mahāyāna traditions develop further the pre-Mahāyāna ideas about the bodies of Buddha. This eventually gave rise to the classical Mahāyāna doctrine of Buddha's three bodies (*trikāya*): the transformation body (*nirmāṇakāya*), the body of communal enjoyment (*sambhogakāya*), and the body of truth (*dharmakāya*). The first two bodies are effectively elaborations of Buddha's body of form (*rūpakāya*), because they are Buddhas' earthly forms and Buddhas as they exist with extraordinary, rarefied forms in their respective Pure Lands. By contrast, the *dharmakāya* is formless; it is identified with the true nature of things rather than being a physical body. The *trikāya* doctrine was developed particularly by the Yogācāra tradition in texts such as the *Mahāyānasūtrālambakāra*, its commentary, and the *Mahāyānasamgraha* (Williams 2009: 179). Also, this model and variations of it (sometimes including more than three bodies) were adopted by other Mahāyāna Buddhists (Makransky 1997).

The transformation body (*nirmāṇakāya*) is the earthly forms of Buddha, the various physical manifestations of Buddha in this defiled world, as exemplified by the historical Buddha, Siddhārtha Gautama. All supreme *nirmāṇakāya* Buddhas are said to manifest the same acts in the course of their lives, such as descending from the Tuṣita heaven into the womb, being born, being a playful boy who learns various skills, leaving home, practising asceticism, defeating Māra, attaining awakening, teaching the *dharma* and entering the *parinirvāṇa* (Xing 2005: 144–5). However, *nirmāṇakāyas* are said to be able to take numerous other forms, depending on the needs of those to whom they manifest: they can appear as an animal, a tree or even as a bridge to assist people who need to cross a ravine (Williams 2009: 183). The transformation bodies are described as magical manifestations and the relationship between the true Buddha, the *dharmakāya*, and these unreal manifestations is said to be like that between the moon and its multiple reflections in various bodies of water (Xing 2005: 141). The *Avataṃsaka sūtra* makes it clear that there is no limit to the number of *nirmāṇakāyas* that a Buddha can manifest at any time (Xing 2005: 140). *Nirmāṇakāyas* are principally for the sake of those who are not yet spiritually advanced enough to encounter Buddhas in a Pure Land; they are regarded as manifestations orchestrated by the Pure Land Buddhas as a compassionate skilful means (Williams 2009: 181, 185).

The body of communal enjoyment (*sambhogakāya*) is so named because it refers to the enjoyment of the *dharma* taught by Buddhas in their Pure Lands to the assembled advanced Bodhisattvas who have been reborn in these celestial realms and are close to Buddhahood as a result of their long practice of the Buddhist path. The term is sometimes also translated as ‘reward body’ because the *sambhogakāya* is the outcome of the enormous merit accrued by Buddhas through their arduous and long training as Bodhisattvas (Xing 2005: 133). Bodhisattvas attain Buddhahood as enjoyment bodies (Williams 2009: 181). It is also the enjoyment bodies who attain the non-abiding *nirvāṇa*; they remain engaged with *samsāra* for as long as they are needed, which may be forever, given the infinite number of sentient beings to be assisted (Williams 2009: 186). They do so by teaching the *dharma* in their Pure Lands and manifesting transformation bodies in impure lands such as ours.

It is the Buddhas and the advanced Bodhisattvas in the Pure Lands with which Buddhists can continue to enter into relationship – through prayer, meditation, rituals and visionary experiences – in the absence of an earthly Buddha. There are numerous well-known *sambhogakāya* Buddhas including Vairocana, Akṣobhya, Bhaisajyaguru and Amitābhā while the many *sambhogakāya* Bodhisattvas include Avalokiteśvara, Kṣitigarbha, Mañjuśrī and Tāra, although the distinction between these two categories of very sacred beings can sometimes be rather blurred. In Tantric Buddhism there is a further proliferation of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as well as the ritual and meditative methods employed to encounter them.

The pre-Mahāyāna notion of the *dharmakāya* persists into Indian Mahāyāna literature. In many early and mid-period Indian Mahāyāna sources, the *dharmakāya* continues to refer to the teaching of Buddhas and their remarkable awakened qualities (*dharma*s) that distinguish them from the unawakened (Harrison 2005b).

This is the true body of Buddha that continues after the demise of his physical, earthly form. Indeed, the exponents of the *trikāya* doctrine continue to refer to the *dharmakāya* as Buddha's extraordinary good qualities; this is how the *dharmakāya* appears from the conventional, phenomenal point of view (Makransky 1997: 299).

However, the meaning of *dharmakāya* also shifts so that, in the classical *trikāya* doctrine, the term has a metaphysical and cosmic significance; it refers to the nature of reality and Buddha's awakened knowledge of this reality. The *dharmakāya* is identified with the ultimate truth about the universe, and becomes synonymous with other terms such as suchness (*tathatā*), reality element (*dharmadhātu*) and the nature of reality (*dharmaṭā*). It is also sometimes referred to as the body which is Buddha's inherent nature (*svabhāvikakāya*), that is, Buddha as one with reality (Williams 2009: 179). The *dharmakāya* is imperishable, given that the ultimate truth remains without end (Harrison 2005b: 126).

The ultimate truth with which Buddha is identified varies depending on the particular ontology adopted by a Mahāyāna Buddhist as discussed in chapter 5. The *dharmakāya* can be emptiness in the sense of the universal and constant absence of intrinsic existence or the intrinsically existing and never-ending, non-dual flow of consciousness or Buddha nature; the latter is sometimes construed as an unchanging, intrinsically existing absolute reality. But Mahāyāna Buddhism also sometimes makes the claim that reality is ineffable, which may mean that no descriptions of the inconceivable *dharmakāya* can do it justice (see chapter 6).

Mahāyāna sources also make it clear that the *dharmakāya* includes Buddha's extraordinary and unending undefiled *awareness* of the nature of reality (Eckel 1992: 106–7, 155); moreover, this pure awareness is the ultimate source of the compassion which gives rise to the other two bodies for the sake of suffering sentient beings (Williams 2009: 179). The *dharmakāya* is thus the ultimate reality aware of its own nature. It is also how Buddha is for itself (gendered pronouns not being applicable here) rather than how Buddha is for others. It is both Buddha's awareness as perpetually absorbed in emptiness as well as the emptiness in which Buddha's awareness is absorbed, whether that emptiness is considered to be the absence of intrinsic existence of all things, the non-dual intrinsically existing stream of consciousness devoid of conceptual fabrications, an intrinsically existing and unchanging absolute, or as transcending all such attempts at description.

Unlike the *dharmakāya*, the transformation and communal enjoyment bodies are not Buddha as Buddha is for itself; rather, they are Buddha as Buddha manifests to and for the sake of others. Buddha as Buddha is for itself and as identical with reality is arguably best thought of as singular in the sense that there is only one ultimate truth; however, Buddha as Buddha is for others is plural because Buddha manifests in numerous Pure Land and earthly forms, in dependence on the needs of the unawakened inhabitants of *samsāra* (Williams 2009: 180).

While the *nirmānakāya* is described as simply an unreal earthly show, it should not be thought that the *sambhogakāya* Buddhas by contrast are themselves ultimately real. They are also appearances rather than real, although this claim needs to be seen in the context of the Mahāyāna ontology of emptiness, where all

forms are mere appearances in that they lack intrinsic existence; these bodies of Buddha (and advanced Bodhisattvas) are no more and no less real than our own. They are conventionally but not ultimately real (Eckel 1992: 218; Williams 2009: 179, 225).

Buddha and God

The concept of Buddha, especially as it occurs in Mahāyāna Buddhism, may seem to resemble that of God, if ‘God’ is construed broadly and as having a variety of possible meanings, as discussed in the introduction to this chapter.

And yet, there is a long tradition of Buddhist critiques of God, usually aimed at concepts of the divine that occur in the varieties of Hinduism. These criticisms begin early in the history of Buddhism, with the *Kevaddha sutta* parodying the god Brahmā’s claim to omniscience; he is eventually forced to acknowledge the limits of his knowledge and to concede the superiority of the Buddha’s understanding (*Dīgha Nikāya* 11). In the *Brahmajāla sutta* (*Dīgha Nikāya* 1) Brahmā is mocked for wrongly thinking that he created the world because he was the first to be born when the universe starts to evolve and then, after he feels lonely and wishes for the company of others, other beings start to be born. He commits the fallacy of false cause by thinking that his wish created these beings when, in fact, it is simply part of the natural development of the universe that other beings would be born immediately after him. Contrary to his own mistaken belief, his temporal priority and desire for company, subsequently fulfilled, did not make him cause of the beings that evolved after him.

Later Buddhists developed more sustained and sophisticated refutations of God’s existence. In the seventh century, Dharmakīrti expounded arguments that are complex and technical (Jackson 1986: 322–35). One of his critiques of God’s existence relies on the assumption that it is impossible for a single permanent, unchanging being to be the cause of a multitude of impermanent phenomena. Causes have to resemble their effects; it is not coherent to claim that a single unchanging cause (God) could be active in bringing about effects, for activity entails change (Steinkellner 2013: 46–7; Jackson 1986: 320–1). Buddhists defend the claim that impermanent phenomena come into being as a result of the natural law of dependent origination; manifold impermanent causes bring about a plethora of impermanent effects (Steinkellner 2013: 44, 47; Jackson 1986: 327). Moreover, Buddhists sometimes employ theodicy to reject the existence of God: if God was creator and in control of the universe then he could not be benevolent because he would be creator also of evil and suffering; in addition, human individuals’ moral responsibility for their actions would be undermined (Steinkellner 2013: 46; Jackson 1986: 320).

A primary intention of many of these Buddhist critiques is to refute the existence of a creator and designer God. A belief in such a divinity was common and took various forms in ancient and medieval Hinduism; for example, there were concepts of God as only efficient cause of the universe and also concepts of God as both material and efficient cause (Steinkellner 2013: 38–43; Jackson 1986: 317–19).

The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika tradition, in particular, proposed arguments in favour of the existence of a creator and designer God (*Īśvara*) and sought to defend the existence of this deity against the attacks of Buddhists (Steinkellner 2013: 45–6, 51).

However, Buddhists also often reject the notion of God on the grounds that no permanent entities exist. Roger Jackson (1986: 320) comments: “It really is Buddhism’s emphasis on universal impermanence that is at the root of its aversion to the concept of God.” For example, Dharmakīrti argues that only momentary entities can exist because to exist means to be causally efficacious; a permanent, unchanging being cannot be causally efficacious because its immutability entails that it cannot interact with other entities; therefore it does not exist (Steinkellner 2013: 47; Jackson, 1986: 324). Whether Dharmakīrti is right to claim that only things that are causally efficacious exist is a moot point. However, his argument also implies that, even if God were to exist, there is a contradiction in the notion of a God who is permanent and unchanging and yet also causally efficacious as a creator of the universe.

There is a puzzle here. The rejection of the existence of any permanent, unchanging entities is arguably in conflict with interpretations of *nirvāṇa* that construe it as an everlasting unconditioned reality that is contrasted with the world of impermanent, conditioned things. In addition, the refutation of a deity that is permanent – as well as entirely benevolent, extremely powerful, omniscient, and responsive to the needs of worshippers – does not seem to be consistent with many Mahāyāna Buddhists’ own views, because these are precisely the attributes that they ascribe to Buddha (Steinkellner 2013: 43). In that they contend that Buddha has these attributes, it would seem that Buddha might be described as God, broadly conceived, but not as creator and designer of the universe. We have already seen that Buddhists sometimes reject the attribution of extraordinary qualities, such as omniscience and awakened wisdom, to gods of the Hindu pantheon who, in Buddhists’ opinion, do not have these qualities. Buddhists would seem to oppose not the existence of the qualities themselves but the attribution of them to a Hindu creator divinity rather than to Buddha (Jackson 1986: 335).

Furthermore, it may even be possible to argue that Buddha is, in a sense, creator of the universe. If one accepts the Mādhyamika ontological claim that the entire world is a conceptual construction and couples this with the Mahāyāna contention that all sentient beings, who conceptually construct the world, have Buddha nature, then perhaps the entire universe is a creation of Buddha after all. In response, it could be argued that the conceptual construction of the world is the result of sentient beings’ ignorance and craving rather than their Buddha nature, which is obscured by these defilements.

It might also be objected that, for Mahāyāna Buddhists who accept the Mādhyamika philosophy and the teachings about emptiness in the Perfection Wisdom literature, Buddha itself, that is, the *dharma-kāya*, is simply the absence of intrinsic existence of all things, including itself (Xing 2005: 78). To attribute the status of God to Buddha is to give Buddha an unwarranted ontological standing. The difference between God and Buddha can be explained by resorting

to the doctrine of the two realities; God is normally thought to be ultimately real whereas Buddha is considered to be only conventionally real. And yet, even Mādhyamikas typically accept that the *dharma-kāya* includes Buddha's eternal, omniscient, compassionate consciousness. This consciousness is aware of the emptiness of everything, including itself, but it is also the ultimate cause of the salvific appearances of Buddha in *sambhogakāya* and *nirmanakāya* forms. Even if the Mādhyamikas think that Buddha's non-dual consciousness of emptiness itself lacks intrinsic existence, it still seems to have other characteristics which are rather God-like. Moreover, not all Mahāyāna Buddhists are Mādhyamikas who would assert that the *dharma-kāya* is empty of intrinsic existence and would instead attribute to Buddha a more exalted ontological status.

Hiddenness and evil

There are further philosophical challenges relating particularly to the Mahāyāna concept of Buddha. A common question about the monotheistic God is why does he remain so hidden if he is so powerful and compassionate? Why does he not make himself more obvious for the sake of human beings, who need him (Schellenberg 1993)? This hiddenness would seem to be peculiar behaviour on the part of such a deity and may be a rational basis for asserting his nonexistence. A similar question might be asked of Buddha. Why are his manifestations not more obvious to us? Why does Buddha seem to be hidden from us despite Buddha's compassion and extraordinary power? It is claimed that a Buddha can manifest an infinite number of *nirmanakāyas* at any one time and yet they are apparently only rarely witnessed or recognised. Furthermore, it isn't clear why Buddha – who is considered to be powerful, compassionate and always present – would allow so much evil and suffering to occur in the world. This brings us back to the issue of theodicy. Even if it is granted that Buddha is not creator of the evil and suffering in the world, why is Buddha not more able to ameliorate these problems?

A predictable answer to these questions relies on the teaching of karma. Evil and suffering are the result of individuals' past intentional deeds and decisions and are the inevitable repercussion of these deeds and decisions. However, surely the very powerful Buddhas should be able to mitigate the effects of karma, as many Mahāyāna sources contend (see chapter 2); why, then, don't they do so more often to alleviate terrible suffering? Alternatively, if they cannot mitigate the effects of karma more often, this seems to be a serious limitation of their supposedly great power.

Mahāyāna sources also claim that Buddha remains hidden from us because of the craving and ignorance which cloud our minds and prevent us from seeing Buddha (Eckel 1992: 107–8; Makransky 1997: 118). The *Mahāyānasūtrālambhāra* (ix, 33–4) declares: "The sins of sentient beings obscure the cognition of Buddhas just as clouds and the like are said to obscure the rays of the sun" (Cited and translated by Eckel 1992: 108). However, it seems to be a severe constraint on Buddhas' power that they are not able to manifest to us more obviously just because we are afflicted by craving and ignorance; it may be wondered why our

rather pathetic, unawakened defilements have such a strong negative influence over the powerful, awakened Buddhas' abilities to show themselves to us.

Asaṅga, in the *Mahāyānasamgraha*, explains why the *nirmāṇakāya* forms of Buddha, at least, do not manifest permanently and thus the physical form of Buddha does not remain obvious. Among the reasons he gives for the Buddha's disappearance is the need "to arouse longing for the Buddha, lest those who see him continually take him for granted", "to induce sentient beings to develop personal effort as they no longer have the teacher among them" and "to induce those under training to reach maturity quickly by not abandoning their own efforts" (Xing 2005: 144). The thrust of these explanations is clearly that the continuing existence of the earthly Buddha would be deleterious, making people less likely to practice diligently as they might rely too heavily on their teacher rather than taking responsibility for their own spiritual progression. This is in line with the aforementioned Buddhist warning that the physical form of the Buddha is not a true refuge; one should seek refuge in his teachings and spiritual qualities that should be emulated. Even so, this explanation is perhaps in tension with Mahāyāna Buddhist encouragements to enter into relationship with *saṃbhogakāya* forms of Buddha and rely on them for assistance. It might also be wondered whether Buddhas being less hidden from us would really be as harmful as Asaṅga suggests; their presence might be inspiring and dispel a considerable number of doubts about the efficacy of the Buddhist path.

Buddha's consciousness

Other puzzles relate to the nature of Buddha's consciousness in Mahāyāna Buddhism. For example, Buddha as *dharmaśākya* is declared to have awareness of all modes of appearance (*sarvākarajñatā*); Buddha is omniscient. Indian Mahāyāna scholastic texts usually reject the view, sometimes found in early Buddhist scriptures and explained earlier in this chapter, that Buddha does not literally know everything; he knows only matters, such as the four noble truths, that are pertinent to the attainment of awakening. This view of Buddha's cognitive capacities is often deemed too limited given the prevalent Mahāyāna belief in Buddha's "maximal greatness" (Griffiths 1994: 170).

An interpretation of omniscience sometimes found in Indian Mahāyāna scholastic texts is similar to that commonly expressed in the Theravāda tradition; Buddha has the capacity to be aware of all possible objects of awareness but Buddha has to intentionally turn its mind towards objects in order to be aware of them. Buddha is not literally aware of all possible objects of awareness in one moment. However, Griffiths (1994: 169–70) argues that in Indian Mahāyāna scholastic texts this understanding of omniscience is only occasionally advanced because intentionality contradicts the claim that Buddha exhibits effortless spontaneity. Buddha is said to act entirely spontaneously for the sake of sentient beings, and this spontaneity is said to be akin to that of the mythical wish-fulfilling tree or wish-granting jewel; Buddha acts automatically and no effort or deliberation occurs (Makransky 1997: 361). Consequently, in most Indian Mahāyāna sources,

Buddha's omniscience is construed in a very strong way; it entails immediate, constant and effortless knowledge of all possible objects of awareness, past, present and future. The only limitation to this omniscience is that Buddha cannot experience unawakened, defiled mental states such as greed, hatred and ignorance (Griffiths 1994: 170–1).

This raises the spectre of strict determinism, as discussed in chapter 3, for it would seem that there is no room for individuals' freedom and genuine decision making in a world in which the future can already be seen by Buddha in all of its details. Moreover, Buddha's spontaneity would seem to deprive Buddha of free will because Buddha does not make decisions. Spontaneity without any pause for reflection or consideration of alternative courses of action does not appear to leave room for choice. This would seem to mean that freedom in this sense is not ultimately valued; it is not constitutive of Buddha's awakening (Griffiths 1991: 644).

Indeed, we have seen in chapter 3 that it is debatable whether ultimately there is room in Buddhism for agents with freedom of choice in general, not just in the case of Buddha, given the universal law of dependent origination. However, an important difference is that non-Buddhas experience themselves as having free will, in the sense of deliberating and making decisions, even if these deliberations and decisions are in fact caused. By contrast, Buddha would not experience itself as deliberating and making choices; Buddha's actions would be entirely spontaneous and non-deliberative. Of course, in a different sense, Buddha does have freedom and this freedom is of ultimate concern for Buddhists; that is, Buddha is free from the defilements of ignorance and craving.

Also perplexing is an apparent implication of the frequent claim that Buddha's awakened consciousness is devoid of conceptual construction (*vikalpa*) and dualisms. The world of individuated, conventional things is dualistic and said to be a result of conceptual construction. It is therefore not clear how Buddha could be omniscient, given that Buddha's omniscience would surely entail that Buddha sees all of the dualistic, conceptually constructed objects that populate the world (Griffiths 1994: 154–5). Nor is it clear how Buddha could experience genuine compassion for those in the conventional, conceptually constructed world without perceiving the conventional world which sentient beings inhabit and in which they suffer. And yet Buddha's perception of the dualistic, conventional world would seem to imply that Buddha is not free from ignorance. It would appear to follow that, if Buddha is omniscient, then Buddha must not be fully awakened.

Tsong kha pa (fourteenth century) offers the explanation that the omniscient Buddha constantly perceives the ultimate truth which is the emptiness of all phenomena while simultaneously perceiving all of the dualistic, conventional things which are empty (Makransky 1997: 316; Williams 2009: 183); Buddha perceives all conceptually constructed things but with fully awakened awareness that they are merely conceptual constructions. Therefore, Buddha perceives these things but without ignorance. However, it seems difficult to imagine what such an omniscient consciousness would be like, given its difference from the far more limited states of consciousness with which we are generally familiar. Other Tibetan Buddhist thinkers of the time, such as Go rams pa,

criticised Tsong kha pa's claim that Buddha would perceive the dualistic, conceptually constructed world. Tsong kha pa is wrong because Buddha has transcended ignorance and therefore conceptual construction; instead, Buddha's omniscient gnosis "knows all conventional phenomena but knows them in a nondualistic manner...and without any appearance of temporality". Go rams pa himself acknowledges that this is difficult to understand (Makransky 1997: 317), which is perhaps an understatement.

From an outsider's perspective, the incomprehensibility of such claims made about Buddha's omniscience may signal incoherence. From the point of view of those with faith in Buddha, the philosophical puzzles here are more likely to indicate the exalted, incomparable nature of Buddha's consciousness which the unawakened mind cannot fathom. Indeed, the inconceivability of Buddha is a common theme in Mahāyāna literature (Eckel 1992: 207; Makransky 1997: 294; Williams 2009: 178). It is debatable whether Buddhists are able to provide persuasive answers to these and other conundrums about Buddha; however, a pertinent point here is that they have an uncanny resemblance to the conceptual challenges often confronted by those who believe in a compassionate and powerful God.

Visions of Buddha

An important aspect of Mahāyāna Buddhism is the prevalence of visions of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. This is of significance to the philosopher of religion because visions are a notable dimension of Buddhist epistemology; they are a means of gaining knowledge of these sacred beings.

Even in pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism, there is evidence from the *Ekottarāgama* (iii, 1) that the common practice of recollecting the Buddha and his good qualities (*buddhānusmṛti*) was sometimes developed into practices that "entailed not merely a reminiscence of the Buddha, but an imaginative evocation of his presence by means of structured meditation procedures" (Harrison 2005a: 86). The text contains instructions from the Buddha about how to direct one's attention in meditation towards both the Buddha's physical appearance and his spiritual qualities. It is not difficult to imagine how such practices developed among Buddhists after the Buddha's death who yearned for continuing communion with him (Harrison 2005a: 86–7).

With the emergence of Mahāyāna beliefs in multiple simultaneously existing Buddhas who continue to take an interest in and assist suffering beings, visions in the context of structured meditation and elsewhere became opportunities for communication with these Buddhas. The importance of Buddha visualisation is already evident in the *Pratyutpanna sūtra*, one of the first Mahāyāna sūtras to be translated into Chinese (Harrison 2005a: 90). The text describes a meditation procedure, the *pratyutpanna samādhi*, for being in the presence of the Buddha Amitāyus or Amitābha in his Pure Land; the meditator is then encouraged to worship and receive teachings from him (Harrison 2005a: 102).

Carl Becker (1983: 139) describes the *Amitāyurdhyāna sūtra*, one of the foundational scriptures for Pure Land Buddhism, as "a veritable handbook of the

procedures to be followed in order to gain a vision of Buddha Amida [Amitābha].” Unsurprisingly, meditation techniques were employed by numerous devotees of Amitābha over the centuries to induce visions of the Buddha in his Pure Land, Sukhāvati (Becker 1983: 140–2). For example, the great Pure Land teacher Fazhao (died c.820 CE) is said to have had many religious visions, including an encounter with Amitābha in his Pure Land as a result of sustained practice of the *pratyutpanna samādhi*. The extant vivid and detailed account of the meeting describes how Amitābha taught Fazhao a method of chanting Amitābha’s name in five different rhythmic and tonal patterns, which subsequently became a very popular religious practice both in China and Japan. According to the account, Amitābha described to Fazhao the great benefits that people would receive by reciting the Buddha’s name; most importantly, they would be welcomed to Amitābha’s Pure Land after death (Stevenson 1996: 220–2).

Fazhao’s visions were not limited to encounters with Amitābha. For instance, his biographies recount his extraordinary encounters with the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī while Fazhao was on pilgrimage to the sacred mountain Wutai. Mañjuśrī predicts Fazhao’s future Buddhahood and teaches him that visualization of the Buddha and the invocation of Amitābha’s name are the supreme Buddhist practices. Mañjuśrī assures him that devout practitioners will be reborn in Amitābha’s Pure Land after death (Stevenson 1996: 212–20). Indeed, in Pure Land Buddhism death proximate religious visions of Amitābha are considered to be particularly important. The *Larger* and *Shorter Pure Land Sūtras* make explicit that visualization of the Pure Land during the process of death can bring about rebirth there. Moreover, there are many records in Pure Land Buddhism of near death experiences which include visions of Amitābha, Bodhisattvas, and the Pure Land (Becker 1983: 143–7).

Another example of the importance of religious visions comes from the Tantric Buddhist literary genre of *sādhanas*, which provide instructions for visualisation of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. These guides can be more or less elaborate and performance of the visualisations is said to require initiation of the pupil by a tantric teacher. The visualized deity is believed to manifest in the meditation, and the *sādhana* often culminates in the identification of the tantric practitioner with the Buddha or Bodhisattva who is encountered (Williams, Tribe and Wynne 2012: 173–5). The purported benefits of such visualisations include protection from mundane dangers, the attainment of magical powers, and ultimately Buddhahood itself (Gomez 1995: 320, 327).

The dream diaries kept by some medieval Japanese monks provide a final example of the importance granted to religious visions. Bernard Faure (1996: 114–43) discusses the dream reports of Keizan Jōkin (1268–1325) who was the second of the great founders or patriarchs of the Sōtō Zen sect in Japan. Keizan’s written record of his extensive and elaborate dream experiences, which Faure (1996: 114) refers to as an “oneirical autobiography”, includes encounters with Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Another example is Myōe (1173–1232), a master of the Japanese Shingon tantric school who kept a dream diary for 35 years and gave his dreams enormous religious significance (Tanabe 1992; Faure 1996: 124–6).

Some of these dreams involve visions of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Both Keizan and Myōe receive teachings and have knowledge imparted to them in the course of their dreams. They appear to think that their dreams are genuine encounters with Buddhas and Bodhisattvas: “[D]reams for Myōe and Keizan are an ‘arena of enlightenment’ in which a truly real presence manifests itself. The dream opens onto the divine Other or Others” (Faure 1996: 143). The dream experiences of these medieval monks have shamanistic elements because they include altered and higher states of consciousness in which the dreamer journeys to a world of extraordinary beings, often considered to be higher and purer than the world of ordinary waking life (Faure 1996: 127–8). Furthermore, dreams are often seen as the response or reward from a Buddha or Bodhisattva after a ritual or prayer has been performed. Faure (1996: 135–8) cites various examples in which the Bodhisattva Kannon was believed to have sent dreams to devotees.

Buddhists’ attribution of great significance to religious visions is of philosophical interest partly because it is an appeal to religious experience as a source of authoritative knowledge. The medieval Japanese Buddhists thought that some dreams are revelatory in nature and “constitute an outburst of reality into one’s consciousness” (Faure 1996: 119).

Of course, Mahāyāna Buddhists have often asserted that the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas encountered in dreams and other religious visions are empty of intrinsic existence like everything else; they have conventional rather than ultimate reality (Harrison 2005: 95–101; Becker 1983: 138–9). Indeed, the analogy of the dream is often employed in Mahāyāna Buddhist literature in a negative way, when it is claimed that the objects of waking experience are ultimately unreal, like those experienced in a dream (Faure 1996: 118). However, it seems clear that, even when visions of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are regarded as empty, they are often considered to be no less real than ordinary, waking life; moreover, these visions are thought to be revelatory insofar as they impart teachings about the nature of reality as well as efficacious spiritual practices which were not available in non-visionary experience.

The obvious epistemological problem here is that such supposed revelations may be more akin to subjective hallucinations, rather than being truth-bearing, and the verification of such private, internalised meditative and dream encounters with supramundane beings seems impossible. However, sometimes there are Buddhist accounts of collective visions; for example, Fazhao’s followers are said to have had a shared vision of Mañjuśrī under Fazhao’s tutelage (Stevenson 1996: 219–20). Becker comments that Buddhists who had visions of the Pure Land sometimes had doubts about their ontological status. However, he explains that the widespread accounts of these experiences convinced many of these Buddhists that they were not simply imaginary. They were empirically verifiable in the sense that they had been observed to be experienced by many different people (Becker 1983: 147).

But even if many Buddhists did have such visions, this does little to dispel the doubt that they were simply collective hallucinations. Sceptics will object that it is not surprising that intensive and prolonged religious training – in which the

Buddhist is encouraged to visualise Buddhas and Bodhisattvas – would eventually lead to Buddhists having visions of these Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The experiences one has are conditioned by one's cultural and religious background; the fact that Buddhists, even many Buddhists, have visions of Buddhas does not prove the veracity of what is seen. An obvious rejoinder is that neither does this prove that the Buddhas which Buddhists see are less real than things experienced in ordinary waking life. Becker (1983: 148) contends that modern materialists would say that Buddhists' visions of Buddhas are hallucinations but they make this claim arguably because of their materialist bias. The Buddhist can counter that the materialists' assertion that the material world is more real than the visionary world is itself an unproven assumption.

A different sort of scepticism questions the truthfulness of these Buddhists; did they actually have the visionary experiences that they recorded? Faure observes that dreams could be manipulated "for all sorts of down to earth reasons" such as to validate one's claim to authority and power. For example, Keizan uses his dreams to legitimize himself as leader of the Sōtō Zen community and to give authority to his teachings. This, of course, leaves one wondering "to what extent Keizan was sincere, and to what extent he was manipulating his dreams – if he really had them" (Faure 1996: 141). The same question might be raised about the records of religious visions supposedly experienced by other Buddhists in meditations and dreams. They may well have had ulterior political and economic motives for declaring that they had such experiences or they may have had reasons to embellish the experiences that they did have. However, Faure (1996: 142) concludes that "it is in the last analysis as impossible to retrieve the original experience, or even to affirm the existence of such experience, as to deny it." Perhaps the outcome of this discussion about the veracity of Buddhists' religious visions of Buddhas – both in the sense of whether their experiences are more than hallucinations and whether they really had the experiences at all – is an epistemological stalemate.

Images and relics

Even a cursory familiarity with Buddhist material culture reveals that in the lived experience of many Buddhists the most immediate way in which Buddha remains present and accessible is through Buddha images and relics (Sharf, 1999: 77–8). This is of importance to Buddhist philosophy of religion because the continuing presence of Buddha in material remains and images indicates an enchanted view of the world; apparently inanimate objects can actually be alive, powerful and communicative. In other words, this belief has profound implications for Buddhist ontology.

The Buddha may have encouraged his disciples to take refuge in his teachings after his death, but he also gave instructions for his cremated bodily remains to be placed within a *stūpa*, a memorial burial mound, and revered. He claims that making offerings with a devout heart at this *stūpa* will bring happiness and benefit to the worshipper (*Dīgha Nikāya* ii, 141–3). A belief in the sacred power of relics

of Buddha and other awakened people and the worship of *stūpas* has been a feature of Buddhism across cultures and throughout its history. The worship of these relics was considered to be highly beneficial to the devotee – providing cures for disease, merit for a better rebirth and so on. The possession of relics gave prestige and power to the possessor and economic benefits flowed from having a relic as a focus for pilgrimage.

There is textual evidence from early Indian Buddhism which indicates that monks thought that “the Buddha was, after his *parinirvāṇa*, in some sense still present at the places where he is known to have formerly been” (Schopen 1997: 117). This belief was extended to *stūpas* containing relics of the Buddha; “the presence of the relic was thought to be the same thing as the presence of the actual Buddha” (Schopen 1997: 134) Hence devout Buddhists wished to have their remains enshrined near the relics of the Buddha leading to the proliferation of minor *stūpas* crowded around *stūpas* that supposedly contain the relics of the Buddha. Schopen shows that there is textual and archaeological evidence that the relic in early Buddhist India was thought of as an actual living presence. These sources claim that the physical relics of the historical Buddha were endowed with his “life” or “breath” but also they were imbued with the characteristics of a living Buddha, that is, his wisdom, compassion and various powers (Schopen 1997: 126–8).

Thus the relic effectively becomes both *rūpakāya* and *dharmaṅkāya* because the physical remains are a locus for Buddha’s spiritual qualities. *Stūpas* also became the *dharmaṅkāya* because sacred texts containing Buddha’s teachings were often placed within them, instead of relics (Boucher 1995: 60–1), and these *stūpas* were also regarded as having the spiritual qualities of a Buddha. There is also epigraphic evidence that the *stūpa* was regarded as a legal person with property rights and that “an object given to a *stūpa* becomes itself a sacred object” (Schopen 1997: 128–31). Harming a *stūpa* was equivalent to wounding a Buddha, one of the five most serious crimes. Honouring or worshipping a *stūpa* was “explicitly equated with honor of worship done to living persons” (Schopen 1997: 131).

The Buddha image has been regarded in a similar fashion. Scholars dispute whether the earliest forms of Buddhism were all aniconic (Dehejia 1990; Huntington 1992), but it is clear that within several centuries Buddha images were being created and subsequently became central to Buddhist belief and practice. Image worship was so important in Buddhism that early Chinese accounts of the religion referred to it as the “teaching of the icons” (Kieschnick 2003: 53). Even if there were no anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha in earliest Buddhism, later Buddhists often saw their worship of Buddha images “as part of a long and continuous tradition stretching back to the time of the Buddha” (Kieschnick 2003: 53); this is evident in several legends in Southeast and East Asian Buddhism of the sandalwood image Buddha, which is said to have been created during the Buddha’s own lifetime and with his permission. The image was said to function as a substitute for the Buddha in his absence. The stories portray the image as rising to greet the Buddha when he returns; the Blessed One speaks to the sandalwood Buddha and invests the image with his remarkable powers for the benefit of the world (Swearer 2003: 15–18; Crosby 2014: 52–3).

These legends alert us to the extraordinary nature of Buddha images for many Buddhists. Buddhist modernists have sometimes regarded Buddha images as merely representations of Buddha and reminders of the ideal of awakening which Buddha achieved and to which Buddhists aspire; however, for many Buddhists, Buddha images are sacred presences that contain the power of Buddha. Images are believed to be enlivened and infused with Buddha's qualities through consecration rituals (Swearer 2003, 2004; Kieschnick 1997: 52–63); worship of these images is thought to provide protection from evil forces, bring worldly benefits, generate good karma and rebirth, and even lead to awakening. Kieschnick (1997: 55) observes "for most devotees, images were and are the chief point of contact with Buddhism, the point at which the faithful enter the presence of a Buddha or bodhisattva, offer gifts, and ask for assistance." For example, the *Mahāyāna Sūtra on the Merit of Bathing the Buddha* describes elaborate procedures for venerating the Buddha image by ritualized ablution. The *sūtra* explains that the merit produced by bathing the Buddha image is unlimited, leading to diverse benefits such as prosperity, protection, a comfortable old age, good rebirths and encounters with Buddhas in future lives, and even to awakening itself (Boucher 1995: 62–3). Daniel Boucher (1995: 60) notes that "the text does not espouse the cultivation of particular virtues or contemplative practices for the attainment of awakening. Ritual attendance upon the Buddha [in the form of his image]...is sufficient." The soteriological efficacy of devotion and ritual here challenges simplistic views that Buddhism is a path to awakening by means of meditation, ethics and wisdom.

In addition, Buddha images, like Buddhas themselves, are widely believed to perform miracles. For instance, the travel diary of the seventh century Chinese monk Xuanzang, who visited India, records his encounters with a variety of Buddha images in India. Xuanzang explains that the Buddha images are expected to perform miracles such as emitting light, moving and producing cures when touched (Brown 1998: 26–7). He regards such miracles as unsurprising, as he views the world as an enchanted place in which magical and supernatural happenings are commonplace (Brown 1998: 27–8).

Contrary to a popular misconception, relic and image worship are features not just of Mahāyāna; they are also important in Theravāda Buddhism (Swearer 2003, 2004; Crosby, 2014: 43–65). Nor is it correct to view these beliefs and practices as a pragmatic concession to the laity who are not able to practice the more demanding and elite monastic path of self-discipline; monks and nuns have commonly been devotees of images and relics (Boucher 1995: 63; Sharf 1999: 78), as proven by the example of Xuanzang himself, who was a highly educated monk. They are also attitudes that widely persist in contemporary Buddhism as evident, for example, in the popularity of the protective and magical powers of Buddhist amulets and images in contemporary Thailand (Tambiah 1984; Swearer 2003).

Even so, there is undoubtedly a tension within Buddhism about the status of images and relics. In Theravāda Buddhism, the continuing presence of the Buddha or his power seems to conflict with claims that the Buddha is no longer accessible after his *parinibbāna*. And some Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptural sources such as

the *Vajracchedikā (Diamond) sūtra* contain warnings that physical forms are empty and thus should not be objects of attachment, sometimes leading to a reluctance to employ Buddha images as part of Buddhist practice (Kieschnick 2003: 75–6). We have already seen that Buddhist sources sometimes point out that the physical form of the Buddha is not a true refuge. In Zen Buddhism, this attitude sometimes resulted in iconoclastic stories such as that of a monk burning a Buddha image as firewood (Faure 1996: 265; Kieschnick 2003: 76). However, such narratives function as a rhetorical warning against overvaluing Buddha images rather than as a call to actually destroy Buddha images; Zen Buddhists continued to employ images and there are very few examples of literal iconoclasm in Buddhism (Faure 1996: 264–7). And Buddhists often have continued to imbue Buddha images and relics with an importance and reality which seems to be at odds with these warnings. As it is so often, Buddhism does not speak with one voice.

The contemporary Buddha

It is clear that many Buddhists regard Buddha images and relics in a manner which does not accord with some prevalent Western preconceptions about what Buddhism is and how Buddhists behave; scholars of Buddhism (and some modern Buddhists themselves) have tended to overlook the importance of images and relics in Buddhist belief and practice. Instead, they have exhibited a bias towards texts produced by the intellectual elites of Buddhism. Image and relic worship are often incorrectly relegated to the level of impure accretions which dilute and distort the true, pure Buddhism as represented in texts. This has led to a skewed view of Buddhism which does not accord with the reality on the ground. A philosophical account of the concept of Buddha is incomplete without consideration of the place of Buddha images and relics in Buddhist belief and practice.

For the philosopher of religion, the prevalent Buddhist attitudes to relics and images raise interesting questions about the belief that apparently inanimate objects can become enlivened by sacred powers, influence peoples' lives and fortunes and perform miracles (Sharf 1999: 79). Buddhists have had, and often still do have, a worldview that entails the expectation that Buddha images and relics have extraordinary powers, can perform miracles and so forth (Brown 1998). In many respects this is similar to the medieval Christian worldview which embraced the miraculous power and enlivened status of sacred images and relics (Freedberg 1989; Belting 1994), a belief which continues in some Christian communities (Brown 1998: 23).

The scientific revolution and eighteenth century Enlightenment have cast considerable doubt on such beliefs, although they clearly persist even in Westernised cultures. How, then, are such beliefs about Buddha images and relics to be regarded from a contemporary philosophical perspective?

One possibility is that these beliefs are simply pre-modern, irrational superstitions, rooted in the uncritical psychological need for security from misfortune in a dangerous world and a desire for a continuing connection with the

sacred founder of the tradition. This negative attitude to the prevalent worship of Buddha images can be found among some contemporary Buddhists themselves (Swearer 2003: 18–25). By contrast, an epistemological relativist might contend that these beliefs are simply a different way of interpreting the world and should not be judged to be inferior to a rationalist worldview which has no space for such phenomena. Finally, such an enchanted world of benevolently inclined images and relics could conceivably be regarded as a superior worldview to the largely disenchanted and disinterested world as envisaged by the modern rationalist. Perhaps a re-enchantment of the world is desirable in response to current dominant attitudes that see the world as mechanistic and devoid of magical or mysterious happenings.

In addition, some caution may be required to avoid overstating the difference between traditional Buddhist and modern Westernized views; there is arguably a strong visceral response and attraction to sacred relics and images that many people still feel. Nor is it the case that we are clear about the dividing line between animate and inanimate, and the relationship between consciousness and matter. Our complex psychological responses to human remains may indicate that our attitudes do not differ so radically from that of our ancestors, despite the influence of modern rationalism (Sharf 1999: 89).

The extraordinary nature of Buddha as explained in this chapter also raises similar questions of belief and scepticism for contemporary Buddhists. To what extent can contemporary Buddhists accept these traditional accounts of Buddha?

Some contemporary Buddhists doubtlessly will accept attributions to the Buddha of miracles, omniscience, psychic powers, infinite life in Pure Lands, etc. Some may also accept the claim that human nature is perfectible and that we can achieve these extraordinary abilities, which is the implication of the Mahāyāna position that we can become Buddhas ourselves. Even so, it is hard to imagine that a philosophically aware contemporary Buddhist could assent to such accounts without a significant degree of uncertainty. It may also be that the Buddhist ideal of our perfectibility is a fantasy that takes insufficient account of the irrevocably messy and fractured nature of the human condition. This doubt may also extend to the desirability of the ideal of human perfection which Buddha and awakening represent; perhaps there is something inherently valuable that the Buddhist ideal fails to recognize in the psychologically complex, vulnerable, and flawed nature of human existence (see chapter 1).

Some Buddhists nowadays may envisage a human Buddha and a more modest version of human awakening, shorn of the more extraordinary qualities by selective reading and interpretation. Contemporary scholars are sometimes scathing of this rationalist tendency which they see as a misreading of the nature of Buddha as a result of Western preconceptions. Yet, it seems that historically aware, rationalist Buddhists might choose to identify more humanistic elements of Buddha's character while rejecting, or remaining agnostic about, the more extraordinary claims; they might do so in full acknowledgement that they are construing Buddha in a way that is largely novel and at odds with many aspects of tradition. Whether the stripped-down Buddha with which they are left would be

sufficiently like the Buddha of tradition to remain a Buddhist Buddha is a debatable point; it is perhaps never finally answerable given the many adaptations of Buddhism and the endless disagreements about what is and is not Buddhist. What is clear is that such a humanized Buddha loses the magical aura and superhuman characteristics that many Buddhists throughout history have regarded as central to Buddha's nature.

A similar contemporary approach would be to psychologize the extraordinary accounts of the greatness of Buddha as myths which contain deep truths about human aspirations for perfection, wisdom, compassion and benignly employed power. Many of the aspects of traditional accounts of Buddha that seem difficult to accept literally might appeal to one's imaginative faculty and move one towards ideals of understanding, kindness and compassion. These regulative ideals may remain distant and unrealized; nevertheless, they are inspiring for fallible, morally and cognitively imperfectible human beings. Teachings about the empty, conceptually constructed nature of Buddhas might be exploited in a self-conscious contemporary adaptation to support the view that Buddhas are actually just powerful metaphors for our own most exalted desires and values, while also acknowledging that Buddhas were not usually psychologized in this way by traditional forms of Buddhism.

5 The varieties of emptiness

Emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is a central teaching in Mahāyāna Buddhism. The Indian Mahāyāna scriptures known as the *Prajñāpāramitā* (Perfection of Wisdom) *sūtras* have the teaching of emptiness as their primary focus. The recurrent theme of these texts is that all phenomena are empty like a magical illusion and perfect wisdom or understanding (*prajñā*) fully comprehends emptiness. We will see that this claim was in part a reaction to mainstream, non-Mahāyāna Indian Buddhist philosophy which had asserted that some phenomena are not empty, namely, the momentary and atomic events (*dharmas*) that are the fundamental constituents of everything. The concept of emptiness gets reiterated and reinterpreted in other Mahāyāna scriptures and the vast commentarial tradition which produced the Mahāyāna philosophical schools of Mādhyamika and Yogācāra, as well as teachings about Buddha nature.

Emptiness is of such importance that Buddhist philosophy of religion must give it considerable attention. However, this is not a simple task because the Mahāyāna Buddhist concept of emptiness has numerous meanings. Many Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophers use the term ‘emptiness’ but often in divergent ways. Moreover, contemporary scholars of Buddhism often disagree about the interpretation of emptiness, in both fundamental and quite nuanced ways. This is fuelled in part by the hermeneutical challenges that Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophical works pose; different texts or portions of texts can suggest different readings and often the same passage can support more than one interpretation. There is also an understandable wish to relate teachings about emptiness to current philosophical trends and debates. When done without sensitivity to the original intellectual, linguistic and social context of Mahāyāna Buddhism, this comparative thinking can lead to dubious readings. For instance, Andrew Tuck (1990) has shown how the interpretation of Nāgārjuna’s Mahāyāna philosophy of emptiness has often depended on the philosophical fashions of the time; when Kantianism was in favour, emptiness was construed in Kantian terms, when deconstruction is dominant, then Nāgārjuna’s philosophy gets interpreted as a forerunner of those of Wittgenstein and Derrida.

However, given the ambiguities and divergent views often present in the source material, even careful commentators reach different conclusions about the philosophical implications of emptiness. This rich diversity of possible meanings

provides an opportunity for vigorous debate about the relative philosophical merits of the variety of interpretations. This chapter will identify some prominent meanings of emptiness in Mahāyāna Buddhism and highlight some important interpretive disputes and philosophical problems. It will not be a comprehensive treatment of this complex topic, but will investigate some aspects of the emptiness concept (or concepts) that are crucial for the development of a Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy of religion. While this chapter will refer to important texts and thinkers from India and beyond, the emphasis will be on an exploration of the various philosophical possibilities associated with the emptiness concept without neglecting textual, philological analysis and the cultural and historical context in which the emptiness teachings arose.

Mādhyamika: Emptiness as absence of intrinsic existence

Perhaps the best-known teachings about emptiness come from the Mādhyamika school of Mahāyāna Buddhism, with Nāgārjuna (second century) regarded as the foundational figure and many subsequent Mādhyamika philosophers in India and beyond.

When Mādhyamika philosophers assert that all things are empty they mean that all things are the result of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*); they lack, or are empty of, autonomous existence because they are reliant on causes to bring them into and sustain their existence. The manifold entities that make up the world are related to one another in complex patterns of interdependence. Nāgārjuna famously declares that emptiness (*śūnyatā*), dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and the middle way (*madhyamā pratipad*) are synonyms (*Vigrahavyāvartanīvrtti*, 70). In other words, emptiness means that all things lack, or are empty of, autonomous existence because they depend on other entities as their causes and sustainers. No thing is an island unto itself. This is an ontological middle way between complete non-existence, the extreme of nihilism, and independent and permanent existence, the extreme of eternalism.

However, the Mādhyamika concept of emptiness entails more than an assertion of interconnectedness; in addition, it means that all phenomena are empty in the sense that they lack existence independent of the conceptualizing activity of the mind. Here Mādhyamika philosophy is closely related to the teaching in the Perfection of Wisdom scriptures that all entities are empty like a dream or a magical illusion. Dependent origination in the Mādhyamika context entails that all entities are mental constructions. Nāgārjuna equates emptiness, dependent origination and the middle way with what he calls dependent designation (*prajñaptirupādāya*) (*Madhyamakakārikā* xxiv, 18). One plausible reading of this statement is that, according to Nāgārjuna, entities are one and all designations or concepts that exist in dependence on our cognitive processes of discrimination and individuation. The ontological middle way for Nāgārjuna is that things exist, but nothing exists more than conventionally.

This Mādhyamika claim should be understood in the context of Abhidharma Buddhism which distinguishes between fundamental or primary existence

(*dravyasat*) and conceptual existence (*prajñaptisat*). This distinction corresponds to that between ultimate truths (*paramārthasatya*) and conventional truths (*samvṛtisatya*). Entities such as mountains and tables have conceptual existence and are conventional truths because they can be analysed into their component parts. Their existence is the result of conceptual synthesis on the basis of their constituents. Entities have fundamental existence and are ultimate truths if they cannot be further analysed into parts. Abhidharma philosophy refers to these partless components of all mental and material things as the conditioned *dharmas*, each of which is said to have its own defining characteristic (*svalakṣaṇa*) and intrinsic existence (*svabhāva*).

There are some complex areas of disagreement between early Buddhist philosophers about the nature of these *dharmas*. For example, the Sarvāstivādins maintained that the *dharmas* have a persisting existence which explains phenomena such as memory of past mental events, karmic effectiveness of past actions, and the ability to be objects of cognition when anticipating the future (Cox 1995: 134–46). Other mainstream Buddhist schools, such as the Sautrāntikas and Theravāda, considered these *dharmas* to be radically impermanent and causally produced by preceding *dharmas* in a chain of dependent origination. Even so, the strictly momentary *dharmas* are ultimate truths and have intrinsic existence because they are the basic components into which all other things can be analysed. Their existence is not the result of conceptual reification (Cox 1995: 145–6; Williams, Tribe and Wynne 2012: 83–92).

Mādhyamikas contend that this two-tier Abhidharma ontology does not go far enough. All things are empty of intrinsic existence. Even the *dharmas* have conceptual existence and are conventional truths. This again is in accord with the Perfection of Wisdom scriptures, which repeatedly assert that all *dharmas* are empty of intrinsic existence. Mādhyamikas present a host of detailed arguments intended to refute the intrinsic existence of all things. But the key Mādhyamika contention is that *dharmas* would have to be independent and permanent in order to have their own, autonomous defining characteristics; however, nothing has that type of existence. All things dependently originate and dependently originating existence entails conceptual existence; entities are reifications on the basis of their manifold causes. These causes are themselves always reifications on the basis of their own multiple causes. There is just conceptual construction without exception. There are no ultimately true entities that function as an ontological bedrock on which conceptual construction takes place.

This means that, for Mādhyamikas, the ultimate truth is that there are no ultimate truths. This apparent paradox arguably can be resolved by identifying two senses in which Mādhyamika philosophy uses the term ‘ultimate truth’. Ultimate truth₁ refers to the way things really are. Ultimate truths₂ is used in the plural to refer to entities that have intrinsic existence. The Mādhyamika claim is that the ultimate truth₁ is that there are no ultimate truths₂. There is an important ambiguity in the Sanskrit term ‘satya’, it can be understood epistemologically as ‘truth’ but it can equally be construed ontologically as ‘reality’. So, emptiness means that the ultimate truth is that there are no ultimate realities.

Mādhyamikas are insistent that emptiness has genuinely universal scope; emptiness is itself empty. This is often interpreted to mean that emptiness is not an independently existing absolute reality like *Brahman* in Advaita Vedānta, for example. On the contrary, emptiness is itself a characteristic of the entities of which it is the emptiness – it is the emptiness of the tree, the emptiness of the chair and so forth. Emptiness is itself dependently originated. Without entities there would be no emptiness. The emptiness of emptiness arguably does not mean that emptiness is not ultimately true,₁ but it does entail that emptiness is not an ultimate truth.₂ The ultimate truth₁ is that all things, including emptiness itself, are empty of intrinsic existence. Put another way, emptiness is the ultimate truth that nothing, including emptiness itself is ultimately real. This is the true nature of things.

So, Mādhyamika texts declare that all entities are simply conventions (*samvṛti*, *sāṃvṛta*) and that the whole world is name-only (*nāmamātra*). They also claim that all things are the result of conceptualisation (*vikalpa*) and imagination (*kalpanā*, *parikalpa*) (*Yuktisāṭikākārikā*, 37; *Lokātītastava*, 19; *Acintyastava*, 6, 35, 36). Furthermore, these sources often compare all entities to illusions, dreams and mirages. All things are, in a manner akin to fantasy objects, dependent on cognitive processes for their existence (*Ratnāvalī* 110–13. Trans. Hopkins 1975: 33–4). This is presumably why Nāgārjuna says that dependently originating entities do not really originate (*Yuktisāṭikākārikā*, 48). In other words, the whole world of dependently originating entities is simply like a phantasm or a mental creation. Thus the *Madhyamakākārikā* and later Mādhyamika texts seek to demonstrate the merely conventional existence of phenomena such as causality, motion, the senses the agent and actions, and the five aggregates. In Tibetan Mādhyamika, things are said to have no “existence from their own side” (*rang ngos nas grub pa*) and no “existence from the side of the basis of designation” (*gdags gzhi'i ngos nas grub pa*). Entities are declared to be mere imputations of thought (*rtog pas btags tsam*) and to have a conceptual existence (*btags yod pa*) (Hopkins 1996: 35–41).

In an apparent denial of the earlier Buddhist belief in an unconditioned reality beyond time and space, Nāgārjuna declares *nirvāṇa* to be identical with *saṃsāra*, that is, the conditioned world of conventionally existing things (*Madhyamakākārikā* xxv, 19–20), and that *nirvāṇa* is simply the correct understanding of existence (*bhava*), that is, as lacking intrinsic existence (*Yuktisāṭikākārikā*, 6). The early Buddhist ontology of the conditioned and the unconditioned is here replaced apparently with an ontology that denies this duality.

Mādhyamika philosophy also rejects the two-tiered ontology of conditioned things that lies at the heart of the Abhidharma project by denying that any dependently originating entities have substantial existence (*dravyasat*). All conditioned things, and that is everything, are merely conventional, and there are no entities that are ontologically foundational in the sense that they have more than conceptual existence. Each and every thing is simply a convenient designation for a concatenation of causes. For Mādhyamikas, there is simply conceptual construction all the way down and no entity escapes this analysis.

Is there a substratum?

The precise ontological significance of this claim, however, is not entirely clear. It might mean that there is a flow of events that is not dependent on our perceptual and cognitive functions, but that this is pure process, not yet divided into identifiable, discrete things with nameable qualities. There is an unconstructed indeterminate, changing substratum but no unconstructed, identifiable things. Independently of the mind, there are no distinct, discrete objects with describable qualities; named entities are a result of conceptual and linguistic superimposition that carves up a spatio-temporal stream of relentless change which is otherwise unspecifiable. One might doubt the intelligibility of the notion of change without things that are changing; despite this problem, the Mādhyamikas are arguably claiming that the partition of the world – into things, their properties and relationships – is a function of conceptual and linguistic reification, rather than existing independently of the human mind. All talk of discrete things is merely a practical convenience that is misleading if they are taken to be ultimately real.

The phenomenon of vagueness can be used to support the view that there are no discrete entities. The boundaries between things are ill defined, especially when one examines them at the atomic level, with constant shifting of particles and no clarity about whether particular particles belong to one thing or another. This vagueness is a powerful argument against common sense realism, which naively assumes the existence of well defined entities; it can also be used to support the Mādhyamika claim that the division of the world into distinct things is a result of conceptual construction rather than a feature of the way the world exists independently of our interpretations (Goodman 2009: 93–5). We determine the boundaries between things on the basis of our own biases and interests.

According to Jay L. Garfield (2002: 61), Nāgārjuna's assertion that all things are conventional means that "Nature presents no joints at which to be carved", and thus there are no natural things that exist as distinct portions of nature prior to the carving done by our conceptualizing minds. Even so, 'nature' exists prior to conceptual construction. Mādhyamikas would presumably accept – as Buddhists committed to process ontology – that 'nature' prior to our conceptualising activity is a process of changing but unspecifiable events rather than static. Thus, some Mādhyamikas might accept pure change as a substratum, which is not yet divided into discrete things prior to conceptual construction and naming. Of course, ontological realists will object that nature does have joints which are mind-independent – be they *dharma*s, atoms, quanta and so on – and are features of the world as it actually is, prior to conceptualization, despite this Mādhyamika claim to the contrary.

But the Mādhyamika ontology may be even more radical and controversial; it might mean that all entities are simply conventions, and that is all there is. There is no substratum whatsoever for conceptual construction; there is not even an undifferentiated process as the basis for the fabrication of entities. Not only are there no joints in the undifferentiated process of nature, in addition, the undifferentiated process is itself just the product of conceptual construction.

Prāsaṅgika and Svātantrika

A relevant distinction in Tibetan Mādhyamika exegesis is that between Prāsaṅgika and Svātantrika are two different strands of Indian Mādhyamika. This was a differentiation that was introduced by Tibetan commentators in the eleventh or twelfth centuries and then applied retrospectively to Indian Mādhyamika thinkers. The nature of the supposed philosophical differences between these two sub-schools has been widely contested in Tibetan Buddhism, with many different interpretations having been advanced (Dreyfus and McClintock 2003).

José Cabezón notes that, according to the analysis of the fifteenth century Tibetan dGelugs pa mKhas grub rje, an important difference between Prāsaṅgika and Svātantrika Mādhyamika is that the Prāsaṅgikas reject any intrinsically existing substratum for the conceptual construction and labelling of things. By contrast, the Svātantrikas, while accepting that all entities occur in dependence upon concepts and labelling, also accept that there is an unconstructed substratum for the conceptually constructed entities which constitute conventional reality (Cabezón 1994: 166–7). mKhas grub rje is following the teaching of his master, Tsong kha pa, who claimed that the Svātantrikas, unlike the Prāsaṅgikas, accept that the existence, at the level of conventional truth, of unique particulars (*svalakṣaṇas*) that have existence independent of conceptual construction. This reading owes a great deal to the thought of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti (see chapter 6) who asserted the existence of unique particulars as momentary causally connected events that are inexpressible by language and accessible to perception prior to the imposition of concepts and labels on them.

This appears to mean that, for the Svātantrikas, there is something in the conventionally true world – a substratum of real, ineffable particulars – that exists independently of conceptualisation and is the basis on which conceptual construction takes place (Tillemans 2003: 97–114). However, Tsong kha pa and mKhas grub rje regarded the Prāsaṅgika position as the highest Buddhist philosophy and the most rigorous assertion of emptiness; there is no unconstructed substratum for conceptual construction, even at the level of conventional truth, contrary to the Svātantrika position. The Svātantrikas supposedly still exhibit residual tendencies towards ontological foundationalism and realism that need to be expunged (Dreyfus and McClintock 2003: 11).

This interpretation of the difference between Svātantrika and Prāsaṅgika schools was rejected by various other Tibetan Buddhist exegetes who assert that the two schools are united in claiming that all entities have simply conceptual existence with no intrinsically existing substratum. For instance, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Rong ston pa, Go rams pa, Dol po pa and Mi bskyod rdo rje and, in the nineteenth century, Mi pham disputed that there was any substantial difference between the ontologies of Svātantrikas and Prāsaṅgikas (Cabezón 2003a: 298–306; Dreyfus 2003: 321–8). Such thinkers tend to downplay the distinctions between the two supposed sub-schools and accuse Tsong kha pa and his followers of exaggeration and distortion. These interpretive disagreements demonstrate the highly contested and problematic nature of the Svātantrika and Prāsaṅgika distinction. But they also

show that, in Tibetan Mādhyamika at any rate, the issue of whether some Mādhyamikas may have accepted an unconstructed substratum for conceptual construction was a matter of some controversy and concern.

Mādhyamika anti-realism

The Mādhyamika concept of emptiness invites comparison with contemporary currents in philosophy that attack ontological realism – that is, the philosophical view that there is a real world which is not conceptually constructed. The similarity is most pronounced in forms of ontological constructivism that claim that even physical and biological phenomena – such as race, sex, trees, chairs, and atoms – are human constructions rather than having existence independent of our interests, concerns and biases. Thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Terry Winograd, J.R. Wheeler and Humberto Maturana have sometimes made such constructivist claims (Searle 1995: 157–60). There is clearly an affinity between this recent trend in Western thought and the Mādhyamika philosophy of emptiness. Nevertheless, there are notable differences. For instance, Mādhyamikas would highlight the influence of karma on the way the world is constructed whereas contemporary constructivists often emphasise the impact of social conditioning.

If the contemporary constructivist thesis is taken to mean that the world is *entirely* a human construction, it has attracted stern opposition. For example, John Searle (1995: 1–30) acknowledges that many aspects of our social reality are constructed and that the socially conditioned mind is very active in creating the world that we inhabit. However, he finds unintelligible the notion that *everything* is a human construct; there must be some unconstructed “brute facts” on the basis of which such construction takes place. It may be very difficult to determine what these brute facts are, and they may be heavily infiltrated by human conceptualisation, making it problematic to disentangle them from the imposed interpretations. Even so, there must be some reality that is independent of, and logically prior to, the activity of conceptual construction.

Similar doubts occur about the intellectual coherence of the Mādhyamika claim that all entities are entirely conceptually created. If Mādhyamikas reject any unconstructed substratum whatsoever, this arguably brings them perilously close to ontological nihilism, despite their protestations to the contrary; a world of mere conventions with no basis at all in an unconstructed reality may be hard to distinguish from a non-existent world. Does there not need to be some sort of unfabricated basis on which the conventional world of named entities is founded?

Thus, critics of Mādhyamika sometimes dismiss the philosophy of universal emptiness as a form of ontological nihilism; the claim that everything is empty means that nothing exists at all. The standard Mādhyamika reply is that this objection rests on a misunderstanding of emptiness. Emptiness means that entities exist without intrinsic existence but not that they do not exist at all. Emptiness is the ontological middle way between non-existence and intrinsic existence. Mādhyamikas claim that it is emptiness properly understood which explains and makes possible the existence of all things. Far from entailing ontological nihilism,

it is because things are empty that they can exist in a dependently originating way (*Madhyamakārikā* xxiv).

However, it is not clear that the Mādhyamika explanation is entirely convincing because they do not say only that all things are dependently originated; they also contend that all entities are caused by conceptual construction. If Mādhyamikas reject an unconstructed substratum of any sort, then all entities are *entirely* caused by conceptual construction. It is this latter claim that many opponents find particularly problematic.

Still, the Mādhyamikas' constructivism can also be seen as a call to think differently and move beyond foundationalism which always assumes that there must be some basic, irreducible building blocks of reality. They challenge the 'myth of the given', that asserts that there is some mind-independent ontological support given to us as the basis for our interpretations of the world. Perhaps the infinite regress which results from the rejection of foundationalism is not incoherent; rather it can be viewed as a challenge fully to recognise the dream-like insubstantial nature of all things by moving beyond the conventional philosophical attitude that there must be some sort of ontological bedrock.

The emptiness of views

Further interpretive and philosophical issues result from the famous Mādhyamika claim that they assert no views (*dṛṣṭi*) of their own and that emptiness is not itself a view (*Madhyamakārikā* xiii, 8). This statement is perplexing; isn't the emptiness of intrinsic existence a view about the way things really are that the Mādhyamikas wish to assert?

One possible solution to this difficulty is to offer a non-literal reading of the Mādhyamika claim to have no views. The Mādhyamikas have no views in the sense that they have no views that assert the intrinsic existence of anything; however, they do assert the view that nothing has intrinsic existence, including emptiness itself. Their chastisement of those who take emptiness to be a view is directed at those who misconstrue emptiness as intrinsically existent. The Mādhyamikas do think that it is ultimately true that all things lack intrinsic existence; they do assert that emptiness is the way things really are and in this sense they do have a view. Tsong kha pa and the dGe lugs pa tradition, for instance, claim that Nāgārjuna means that he does not have a thesis or standpoint that asserts the intrinsic existence of anything (Hopkins 1996; Napper 1987). The implication is, of course, that he does hold the view that all things lack intrinsic existence. Only wrong views (*mithyādṛṣṭi*), and not the right view (*samyagdṛṣṭi*) are to be given up.

If it is objected that Buddhism teaches that attachment to all views should be given up, it can be replied that it is possible to uphold the truth of a view without attachment. One would calmly accept the truth of universal emptiness of intrinsic existence but would maintain this view without pride, arrogance or egotism.

In addition, the Mādhyamika aversion to views might be interpreted as a warning against a merely theoretical understanding of emptiness; the intellectual

grasp of the ultimate truth that things lack intrinsic existence needs, through meditative techniques, to be matured into a direct perception of emptiness. Bhāvaviveka (sixth century) makes a distinction between the conceptual ultimate (*paryāyaparamārtha*) and the nonconceptual ultimate (*aparyāyaparamārtha*) (Ruegg 2010: 157). In modern philosophical parlance this is possibly akin to the distinction between propositional knowledge and knowledge by acquaintance. The latter has a potency which the former often lacks. For example, knowledge about a tiger does not have the same impact as seeing a tiger in the flesh. A view is not the same as a vision; those who rest content with the theoretical or conceptual understanding of emptiness will not achieve the direct insight that has powerful transformative effects on one's character. The unmediated perception of oneself and the objects one craves as empty of intrinsic existence is liable to undermine the psychological proclivity to be attached. Only the awakened have fully gone beyond a mere theoretical view of emptiness (which is still ultimately true) so as to apprehend emptiness in an immediate way.

Reflection on things as they really are is central to Mādhyamika meditation and is intended to transform knowledge by description into knowledge by acquaintance, that is, a direct seeing of things in their true nature, the latter having an immediacy and affective impact that the former cannot match. Thus Candrakīrti (seventh century) makes a distinction between the *drṣti* that things are empty, which would be the merely propositional knowledge, and the *darśana*, or direct perception of emptiness (*Yuktisaṃkāvṛtti*, 23). Buddhist meditation theory identifies special states of meditative absorption (*dhyāna*) in which discursive thought and conceptual diffusion fall away, as consciousness becomes focused on the ultimate truth (Williams 2009: 79–81). This is one way of making sense of various Mādhyamika claims to an insight into reality that surpasses concepts or words, as will be discussed in more detail in chapter 6. Even so, the view that all things lack intrinsic existence continues to be a correct statement of the ultimate truth that is directly perceived in meditation.

However, it is also possible to take the Mādhyamika no views claim at face value; Mādhyamikas literally hold no linguistically expressible position about the true nature of things and simply refute those who have such positions. For instance, this claim was taken literally in Tibet by Ngog blo ldan shes rab and this attitude continues to be influential in the rNying ma school of Tibetan Buddhism (Garfield 2002: 48). David. S. Ruegg (1981) identifies a number of proponents of this ‘no views’ approach in Indian and Tibetan Mādhyamika. This attitude arguably has precedents even in the Pāli literature, most notably in the *Atṭhakavagga* of the *Sutta Nipāta*, which seems to advocate that holding any views at all is an obstacle to awakening (*Sutta Nipāta*, 766–975; Gomez 1976). Overcoming attachment to all views would, in this case, entail relinquishing the claim that any view expresses the ultimate truth.

It follows that emptiness is not the ultimate truth, in the sense identified earlier; it is not how things really are and is only a conventional truth. Mādhyamikas are not doing ontology when they teach emptiness; on the contrary, emptiness is a warning against all attempts to formulate views about the nature of reality.

However, the philosophical implications of this interpretation of emptiness are not clear and can be construed in a number of ways.

Emptiness and the rejection of ontology

Some Mādhyamikas might think that all views should be abandoned because there simply is no way things really are. The emptiness teaching is intended to dispel all ontological speculation because the true nature of reality simply does not exist. Truth and reality are always contextual and relative. This is apparently the interpretation of Mādhyamika favoured by C.W. Huntington, who sees deep parallels with recent deconstructionist philosophy. Emptiness means that our notions of truth are without any objective basis and exist only within specific and varying sociolinguistic contexts for pragmatic purposes: “Recognition of the strictly contextual or pragmatic significance of the thoughts and objects that populate our mental and material world renders meaningless any search for a transcendental ground behind these phenomena” (Huntington 1989: 39–40). The Mādhyamika teaching of the emptiness of all views is an encouragement to let go of all conceptions about the true nature of reality because there is no true nature of reality. Thus, Mādhyamika arguments are employed to deconstruct all ontological opinions without asserting any of their own. While this interpretation of Mādhyamika may be accused of anachronistically distorting the teaching of emptiness by imposing contemporary relativist ideas, it is perhaps not so farfetched to construe some Mādhyamika assertions about the emptiness of emptiness and the emptiness of all views as implying that there simply is no ultimate truth on which we can rely.

It can be objected that this is paradoxical because the claim that there is no way things really are is itself a claim about how things really are. The claim that truth and reality is always contextual and relative is not itself contextual and relative. However, the Mādhyamika might respond that this paradox does not demonstrate a fault in their teaching; on the contrary, it indicates that the misguided need for there to be ultimate truth is deeply rooted in the structures of our language and thought. There is no way things really are even if our minds struggle to make sense of this claim. This is arguably a risky move for the Mādhyamika to make because it seemingly neglects the constraints of rationality; however, this may be a price that they are willing to pay.

Emptiness and scepticism

Another possibility is that the Mādhyamika abandonment of views is intended to be a critique of all knowledge claims about the true nature of things. Emptiness in this case is an epistemological rather than an ontological (or anti-ontological) teaching. It is not a claim about how things really are or even that there is no way things really are. On the contrary, the emptiness of all views means that we do not know the nature of the world as it exists independently of human interests and concerns. The world that we experience is without intrinsic existence in the sense

that it is suffused with the conceptual constructs that originate from our minds. How the world exists in itself is beyond our comprehension because we experience the world from behind the veil of conceptuality.

The world as experienced is conventionally true in that it is the world as it appears to human beings; the Mādhyamika can accept this world as conventional but rejects any assertions that our perceptions correspond to the mind-independent world. The Mādhyamika focus on the emptiness of all views can be seen as an encouragement to let go of all pretensions to knowledge about the true nature of reality; hankering after knowledge of the true nature of things – as well as the misguided conviction that one has achieved such knowledge – fuel so much of the attachment, conflict and suffering which Buddhism is dedicated to eradicating. The awakened Mādhyamika is one who recognises the futility of the search for knowledge of things as they really are.

Doubts about the reliability of truth claims concerning the world as it is independent of our perceptions have also been an important feature of Western philosophy. This has sometimes led to a thoroughgoing knowledge scepticism which does not accept any knowledge about things as they really are, although in modern philosophy the arguments for such scepticism are often raised only in order to be refuted.

A common objection to universal knowledge scepticism is that such sceptics must at least claim to know that they have no knowledge of the true nature of things. In the Mādhyamika context, this would mean that they must claim to know that all views are empty in which case they still have one view about things as they actually are. One response is for knowledge sceptics to accept that this is the one exception to the general claim that we have no knowledge of things in their true nature. However, critics might object that this is a case of special pleading. Alternatively, the knowledge sceptics might choose to bite the bullet and contend that they do not even know that they have no knowledge. This is not necessarily paradoxical. For example, the knowledge sceptics might believe that they have no knowledge without attributing the status of knowledge to this belief. For Mādhyamikas, this would mean that they believe but do not know that all knowledge claims are empty.

However, the paradox re-emerges if the assertion that all views are empty is interpreted as universal belief scepticism. That is, the Mādhyamika refutation of views is a refutation of all beliefs about things in their true nature and not just all knowledge claims. In this case, it would seem that the paradox can be resolved only if the Mādhyamika can passively accept the claim that all views are empty without this acquiescence requiring the level of assent associated with a belief. The view that all views are empty is simply how matters appear to them without it having the status of a belief about how things really are.

The attempt to undermine beliefs and knowledge claims about things in their true nature is a feature of Pyrrhonian Scepticism in ancient Greece and Rome (Hankinson 1995: 21). Moreover, some of the arguments employed in Pyrrhonian Scepticism to undermine ontological assertions have quite close parallels in Mādhyamika texts. For instance, the Pyrrhonian Sceptics contend that attempts to

make truth claims credible lead to circularity or an infinite regress (*Outlines of Scepticism* 1994: 40–3). The Mādhyamikas also argue that circularity and an infinite regress occur when efforts are made to establish the instruments of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) as reliable (*Vigrahavyāvartanīvrtti*, 32–51). Furthermore, Mādhyamikas liken emptiness to a drug which is itself expelled from the body once its curative work has been done (*Prasannapadā* xiii, 8). A similar metaphor is employed by the Pyrrhonian Sceptics; their sceptical arguments are said to be like purgative medicines which are not to be retained once their task has been accomplished (*Outlines of Scepticism* 1994: 118).

There are scholarly disagreements about the nature and precise extent of the various forms of Classical Scepticism. However, it is clear that Pyrrhonian Scepticism aims to produce suspension of judgement (*epochē*) about competing beliefs concerning the true nature of things. The result is said to be a mental state of tranquillity (*ataraxia*) in which the mind gives up its restless search for what is really the case. The turmoil associated with the sometimes obsessive search for truth is removed (Hankinson 1995: 30–1). Nonetheless, the Pyrrhonians claim that they are still able to function in the world; they follow the appearances without making the mistake of believing that the ways things appear corresponds to what is really the case (Hankinson 1995: 28). This is arguably similar to the Mādhyamika who might accept conventional truths while recognising that they are merely conventional. Such a Mādhyamika might see awakening as a state of contentment, akin to *ataraxia*, that results from giving up the futile search for knowledge of ultimate truth. George Dreyfus (2011) discusses the twelfth century Tibetan *Pa tshab nyi ma grags pa* as an example of such a sceptical Mādhyamika who considers the Mādhyamika rejection of all views as the repudiation of all claims to knowledge of, or reliable beliefs about, the ultimate truth.

No views and non-conceptual knowledge

While some Mādhyamikas contend that all knowledge claims are empty, others might claim that their scepticism extends only as far as *conceptual* knowledge claims; this does not appear to have any parallels in Pyrrhonian Scepticism. Such Mādhyamikas would maintain that there is a special non-conceptual form of knowledge which apprehends reality without any distorting mental impositions. The veil of conceptuality can be pierced but only by the awakened consciousness which sees all attempts to express reality in words as ultimately false. These Mādhyamikas would contend that knowledge is possible but hold no ontological views because the true nature of things entirely transcends concepts.

This appeal to radical ineffability is one way of making sense of various Mādhyamika claims to an insight into reality that surpasses concepts or words, as will be discussed in more detail in chapter 6. There are examples of Mādhyamikas, such as advocates of the *gzhan stong* interpretation of emptiness in Tibet (see below), who would advocate that emptiness can be known but only by a non-conceptual gnosis that entirely transcends views about reality. Critics will object that this assertion of the total inexpressibility of reality itself appears to be a

linguistically expressible view about the nature of reality. Chapter 6 will further discuss the debate about ineffability.

The status of conventional truths

Much of this discussion has concerned various interpretations of ultimate truth. However, the Mādhyamika emptiness teaching prompts interesting questions about the status of conventional truths. The Mādhyamikas need not all give the same responses to these questions concerning conventional truth and in many cases it is debatable what their answers would be (Tillemans 2003: 107–14; The Cowherds 2011: 2016).

Given that conventional truths are conceptual constructs, in what sense are they true? Mādhyamikas claim that unawakened people fail to see that the conventional truths are merely conventional; the spiritually ignorant give such truths an ontological status which they do not in fact have. Conventional truths are deceptive in the sense that they appear in a manner that conceals their true nature as empty of intrinsic existence.

Even so, can the Mādhyamika provide an account of conventional truth that acknowledges that it is in some sense true that my book is sitting on the desk and false that I am a world-class pianist? Evidently some things are not even conventionally true – for example, square circles, winged horses and, according to Buddhists, permanent, autonomous selves and a creator God. There are some serious constraints on the conventional truths that occur and are even possible.

Are the Mādhyamikas required simply to accept whatever the majority of people take to be true with the caveat that this conventional truth is merely conventional, unbeknown to most people? Or can Mādhyamikas accommodate a more demanding understanding of conventional truth as something that can be reformed and improved by, for example, scientific enquiry irrespective of the opinions of the (often scientifically uninformed) majority? If the majority of people (including Buddhists) have in the past believed the world to be flat, presumably this belief was conventionally false, even though it was a widely accepted opinion? Moreover, even if the majority of people believe that they have a permanent, independent self or that there is a creator God, this would not make that view even conventionally true, according to the Mādhyamikas. And Mādhyamikas seem to consider some conventional beliefs – for example, the ethical and conventional religious teachings espoused by Buddhism – to be superior to others even when most people do not accept these Buddhist teachings. Mādhyamikas presumably think that people should behave compassionately, become Bodhisattvas, and so forth even if most people do not act in this way or have such an aspiration.

There is also uncertainty about whether Mādhyamika accounts of conventional truths are compatible with a correspondence, coherence or pragmatic theory of truth, the dominant theories of truth in contemporary philosophy. Is conventional truth simply measured by the criterion of what is useful for navigating and functioning within the everyday conceptually constructed world? Is conventional

truth determined by the extent to which one's truth claims are consistent with the other truth claims one makes, or the web of truth claims upheld by one's socio-linguistic community? Or can Mādhyamika argue that some conventional truths are more robust so that statements are conventionally true or false dependent on whether they correspond to features of the world that do not vary depending on usefulness or the standards of one's particular community? Yet how can there be such robust conventional truths in a world in which everything is a conceptual construction? But without the acceptance of any such robust conventional truths, the Mādhyamika would seem to be condemned to an arguably unappealing and unconvincing relativism, in which there is no distinction between truth and opinion.

One possibility is that all human beings, and perhaps all sentient beings, are 'hardwired' to construct a similar world in certain respects, so that the conventional truth of some claims can depend on whether they correspond to the ways in which the conceptually constructed world must exist. For example, in the conceptually constructed world karma must lead to consequences for the moral agent and Bodhisattvas can be repeatedly reborn in fulfilment of their vows. In the modern scientific context, we might add that scientific facts such as the roundness of the earth and the laws of gravity are conventional truths which are not dependent on people's opinions. There may be such deep structures of the conceptually constructed world that exist whether or not we are aware of them.

Another possibility is that some Mādhyamikas might accept, as discussed previously, some kind of unconstructed substratum for conventional, conceptually constructed truths, so that conventional truth claims that take into account the nature of this substratum are more objectively accurate than those that do not. This unconstructed substratum provides some constraints on which conceptual constructions can be deemed to be conventionally true. But the acceptance of such a substratum would make Mādhyamikas less radical than often appears to be the case.

Yogācāra: Emptiness of the subject-object duality

Another concept of emptiness occurs in the Yogācāra tradition of Mahāyāna Buddhism whose earliest known proponents were Asaṅga and Vasubandhu (fourth century CE), but with many further Yogācāra thinkers in later Buddhist history. Mahāyāna scriptures that serve as important sources for the Yogācāra ideas of these philosophers include the *Samdhinirmocana sūtra* the *Pratyutpanna sūtra*, the *Daśabhūmikā sūtra*, the *Avatamsaka sūtra* and the *Laṅkāvatāra sūtra* among others. Interpretations of Yogācāra vary, and it should not be assumed that all Yogācāra thinkers think of emptiness in the same way.

According to a common interpretation, the Yogācāra concept of emptiness is a reaction against the Mādhyamika contention that all things lack intrinsic existence. It also represents a return to the Abhidharma position that there must be an unconstructed ontological foundation for conceptual construction. For both Yogācāra and Abhidharma philosophy, the common Mādhyamika claim that everything is conceptually constructed amounts to ontological nihilism.

For the Abhidharma, the unconstructed substratum is the *dharma*s, which include the fundamental material constituents of the world. By contrast, the Yogācāra substratum is the dependently originating stream of consciousness. Yogācāra adopts the Abhidharma two-tiered ontology of conventional reality (*saṃvṛti satya*) and ultimate reality (*paramārtha satya*); however, unlike Abhidharma, Yogācāra attributes merely conventional existence to all external objects, even the physical *dharma*s, whereas only the flow of consciousness has ultimate reality. Hence, the Yogācāra ontology is described as “mind-only” (*cittamātra*).

Emptiness for Yogācāra does not mean universal absence of intrinsic existence. On the contrary, there is something that has intrinsic existence, namely, the flow of cognitive events (*vijñapti*). It is this substratum which is erroneously bifurcated into the duality of subject and object. Unawakened people fabricate a world of external objects and selves. However, in reality the objects and selves are nothing more than a flow of experiences. Emptiness in Yogācāra Buddhism means the emptiness of the duality of grasping subject and grasped object.

Various Mādhyamika texts accused the Yogācāra tradition of advocating the intrinsic existence of consciousness (*Bodhicittavivaraṇa*, 26–56; *Bodhicaryāvatāra* ix, 11–37). Mādhyamika thinkers such as Bhāvaviveka in the sixth century, Candrakīrti in the seventh century, and Śāntideva, Jñānagarbha, Śāntarakṣita, Kamalaśīla and Haribhadra in the eighth century criticised the Yogācāra ontology as not thorough enough, because it does not assert the merely conventional nature of absolutely everything, including consciousness (Makransky 1997: 211–12). The logical Yogācāra response is that consciousness cannot lack intrinsic existence, because consciousness is the agency that fabricates the conventional world of external things. There has to be something non-imaginary that imagines the world of conventions and it is precisely that non-imaginary foundation and agent of imaginings that Yogācāra calls ‘consciousness’ (*Bodhicaryāvatāra* ix, 15–16).

There is also a Cartesian-style argument that can be employed to support the Yogācāra tradition here; that is, one cannot successfully doubt the intrinsic existence of consciousness because the act of doubting is itself a state of consciousness. To dream the world of things there must be a dreamer, even if that dreamer is, contrary to Descartes, a flow of consciousness rather than a static, unchanging substance. Consciousness must exist, though the external world is only appearance.

In other words, the Yogācāra position is that objects exist only as objects of consciousness and have no genuine existence external to consciousness. Vasubandhu makes this clear when he declares that the external world is only perception or cognition (*vijñaptimātra*) because consciousness manifests as non-existent objects; he compares this perception of the external world to that of a person who is afflicted by an optical disorder, and thus sees hair and bees when they are not really there (*Vimśatikākārikāvrtti*, 1). He rejects the existence of divisible material entities and of indivisible material atoms, explaining the perception of external objects as analogous to dream experiences in which an unreal world is created by the mind and falsely believed to be real.

The three aspects

Central to the Yogācāra philosophy is the teaching of the three aspects or natures (*trisvabhāva*) which Vasubandhu identifies as the imagined aspect (*parikalpitavabhāva*), the dependent aspect (*paratantrasvabhāva*) and the perfected aspect (*parinisp洋洋nitasvabhāva*) (*Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*, 1).

The first of the three is the constructed aspect (*parikalpitavabhāva*). This is the world of subject-object duality which unawakened people wrongly think intrinsically exists; in fact, it is a fabrication. The subject-object dualism is merely constructed or imagined, because external objects are actually just cognitive experiences. Objects falsely appear to exist externally.

The second is the dependent aspect (*paratantrasvabhāva*). This is the intrinsically existing, dependently originating stream of cognitive events. It is the dependent aspect that is the way things really are and which functions as the substratum for the erroneous conceptual construction of reified subjects and objects. If the constructed aspect were removed, then only the non-dual dependent aspect would remain. The dependent aspect is what really exists; however, when it is contaminated by the imagined aspect, it appears in a false way, that is, as a subject set over against a world of external entities.

The third is the perfected aspect (*parinisp洋洋nitasvabhāva*). It is what needs to be known for awakening to occur, namely, emptiness, understood here as the fact that the dependent aspect is empty of the constructed aspect. One who sees the perfected aspect understands the dependent aspect as it really is, devoid of the conceptual fabrications which are ordinarily superimposed on the non-dual stream of cognitive events. Awakened people achieve human perfection by seeing this emptiness with perfect clarity. They overcome craving by fully understanding that the subjects and objects that most people grasp are merely conceptual constructions. The perfected aspect is the fact and reality of non-duality realised in the perfect insight of the awakened person who sees the dependent aspect as it really is, that is, as a non-dual flow of consciousness not reified into subject and external objects (*Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*, 2–4, 11–14). In other words, the awakened person sees the absence of the imagined aspect in the dependent aspect.

So, in Yogācāra philosophy, emptiness refers not to the universal absence of intrinsic existence, because consciousness is not empty in this sense. Emptiness is the absence of the consciousness-external world duality, given that the supposedly external world is a product of consciousness.

Vasubandhu asks us to consider an illusory elephant that is created through the power of a magician's spell. Vasubandhu says that the elephant is akin to the imagined aspect, because, just as the elephant does not really exist, so too objects which are imagined to be external to consciousness are not external in reality. The consciousness-external object duality does not really exist. However, just as the perception of the illusory elephant undeniably exists, so too do the perceptions of objects, even though these perceptions do not really have external correlates. This is the dependent aspect, that is, the really existing mental events (such as the perception of an elephant) which make up the flow of consciousness. Finally, the

perfected aspect is seeing that the flow of dependent originating consciousness is devoid of external objects just as, when the magician's spell is broken, one sees that the perception of an elephant does not correspond to any really existing elephant (*Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*, 27–30).

Emptiness and ontological idealism

This Yogācāra concept of emptiness does not go as far as the Mādhyamika assertion that everything lacks intrinsic existence, if the Mādhyamika statement is understood to entail that everything is conceptually constructed and there is no unconstructed substratum; nevertheless, it is a radical and controversial position. The Yogācāra denial of the mind-independent existence of objects certainly contradicts the contemporary view of scientific realism that consciousness is dependent on, and evolves from, the material world. It has more in common with forms of Western ontological idealism which make the claim that nothing exists independent of the mind. The most famous Western proponent of this position is George Berkeley. The Yogācāra philosophers would agree with Berkeley's contention that the mind-independent existence of the world is unobservable; all that we perceive is cognitive experiences that we falsely believe to be caused by objects that exist independent of the mind. The existence of these cognitive experiences can be explained without recourse to an unobservable world of external objects (Berkeley 2002).

However, there are also significant differences. For example, Berkeley considers the mind to be a thinking substance with ideas (including sensory images) as its qualities (Berkeley 2002: 20, 51). By contrast, for Yogācāra philosophers the notion of an unchanging substance is anathema; their view is that the mind is a causally conditioned series of mental events. This is in accordance with the prevalent Buddhist rejection of an enduring, unchanging self. The difference might be summed up as that between substance and process ontological idealism.

Furthermore, one of the principal objections to ontological idealism is that it is difficult to explain the shared nature of sensory experiences. The ontological realists can claim that people have similar sensory experiences because there are mind-independent objects which cause these similar sensory experiences in different people. We have a shared experience of a river in the park because there really is a river in the park. If the ontological idealists are right, then this explanation of shared sensory experience is not acceptable. Berkeley resorts to the explanation that God coordinates the experiences in different individual minds and ensures the order and regularities in our perceptions of nature (Berkeley 2002: 20, 30–2).

Yogācāra philosophers would have no truck with this theistic form of ontological idealism; instead they often claim that shared sensory experiences of an apparently physical, external world are the result of the maturation of metaphorical seeds (*bīja*) in the subterranean storehouse consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*), a sort of subconscious level of the mind which is always present and influences conscious experiences. The fact that many people experience the same external world is the

result of the maturation of similar seeds in their individual consciousnesses, resulting in what is ultimately a shared hallucination (*Vinśatikākārikāvṛtti*, 2–16). These seeds are often said to be the result of karma, although not all Yogācārins claim that all of the seeds are karmic in nature. For instance, some Chinese Yogācārins claim that some or all of the seeds that give rise to the world have been present in the storehouse consciousness eternally or *a priori* rather than arising there because of intentional actions (see chapter 3). We are all able to perceive the river in the park because of the maturation of similar seeds and presumably as humans we all have broadly similar seeds maturing so many of our experiences of the apparently physical, external world are similar. But differences in how we construct the apparently physical, external world are the result of the maturation of different seeds. And to the extent that these seeds are karmic in origin, similarities and differences in the apparently physical, external world that our consciousnesses construct are the result of similarities and differences respectively in the karma that comes to maturation. The stock example is that the bad karma of hungry ghosts (*preta*) causes them to experience rivers of pus rather than rivers of water (Siderits 2007: 152–8).

However, it might be objected that the Yogācāra philosophers have simply replaced the ontological realists' common sense assumption that there is an external world with the unverifiable belief in metaphorical seeds in the storehouse consciousness that cause our experience of an apparently physical, external world. Whether ontological idealism provides a better account of reality than ontological realism is a topic of perennial debate.

The problem of other minds

There is also the danger of solipsism – that is, the philosophical position that only the cognitive events that make up one's own mind exist or can be proven to exist. Many Yogācāra philosophers reject solipsism and assert the existence of a plurality of streams of consciousness; however, it is not evident how one would know that there must be streams of consciousness other than one's own. They might, after all, be nothing more than the product of one's own conceptual construction.

Some Yogācāra thinkers demonstrate that they are aware of this difficulty and seek to prove the existence of other minds. The most notable attempt to overcome solipsism is Dharmakīrti's *Santānāntarasiddhi*; in this text, he writes from a Yogācāra perspective and seeks to prove the existence of the streams of consciousness while also denying the existence of external physical objects. Dharmakīrti recognises the problem that only our own stream of consciousness is available to us through perception; we cannot have a first-hand experience of other minds. This means that, if we are to have knowledge of other minds, we must do so through inference. Dharmakīrti's claim is that we can successfully infer the existence of other streams of consciousness from the evidence of their actions and speech. This is an argument from analogy; we know in our own case that our own stream of consciousness precedes and causes the appearance of our

deliberate bodily and verbal actions. Similarly, when we observe the appearance of bodily and verbal actions associated with other bodies, we can infer that they are preceded and caused by minds other than our own (Inami 2001: 465–7). We do experience our own consciousness as often producing the deliberate actions and speech associated with our own body; we do not usually experience our own consciousness as producing the apparently deliberate bodily actions and speech associated with other bodies. Therefore, we can infer that there are other consciousnesses producing these examples of deliberate action and speech associated with other bodies.

Unfortunately, there are some problems with this reasoning. Inference can only prove in general that there are other minds; it cannot give us detailed and particular knowledge of what it is like to have someone else's consciousness; this specificity and intimacy could only be provided by perception, and, as we have already seen, Dharmakīrti concedes that, short of Buddhahood, we cannot have perceptions of other people's minds. There are thus limits to the understanding that we can have of other people.

Even more seriously, it is not clear that the inference is sound; just because our own deliberate actions and speech are generally experienced as preceded and caused by our own consciousness, it does not follow necessarily that it is the case that there must be comparable consciousnesses causing actions and speech observed to be associated with other bodies. We have seen that the Yogācārins are fond of the dream analogy to refute the existence of external objects which may appear to be external. This same analogy can surely be used to cast doubt on Dharmakīrti's inference to the existence of other minds; bodily and verbal actions associated with other bodies may occur without any preceding associated consciousness other than our own. We do not generally experience our own consciousness as fabricating apparently external objects and yet the Yogācārins claim that they are fabricated by our consciousness; the same could be true of the bodily and verbal actions apparently associated with other consciousnesses. Unbeknown to us, they may be fabrications of our own minds, like in a dream, without any need for other consciousnesses to precede and cause them.

It is hard to see how, given their own philosophical presuppositions, the Yogācārins can convincingly overcome this difficulty. Dharmakīrti does claim that the Buddha, as omniscient, has direct perceptual knowledge of other minds but he also acknowledges that this omniscience surpasses our understanding (Inami 2001: 468). This is a solution of a sort to solipsism but one that will only convince those who have faith in Buddha's omniscience. It is also puzzling that a Buddha could have knowledge of other minds because this would seem to introduce a duality between Buddha's mind and the minds of others, and Buddha is said to have overcome dualities (Inami 2001: 472). Indeed, the Yogācāra teaching of non-duality leads Ratnakīrti (eleventh century) to deny that a plurality of separate minds ultimately exist. Multiple consciousnesses are themselves a feature of the conventional, dualistic imagined world and not how things really are (Inami 2001: 472–3). Any rational proof, such as Dharmakīrti's, of other minds must function at the level of conventional reality rather than being ultimately

true. Ratnakīrti proposes what may be considered to be a solution to solipsism in the sense that he ultimately rejects the distinction between one's own mind and the minds of others; however, this state of non-duality is incomprehensible to the unawakened. If it is a solution, it is one that we cannot really understand.

An alternative reading of Yogācāra emptiness

This chapter has so far presented Yogācāra as a form of ontological idealism, which claims that the external world of objects is actually a creation of the mind. However, there has also been a trend to reject the dominant view that Yogācāra is a form of ontological idealism (Kalupahana 1987; Kochumuttom 1982; Lusthaus 2002). Of course, texts regarded as Yogācāra in orientation are not univocal and, furthermore, contain ambiguities that make them susceptible to diverse readings.

The alternative reading considers Yogācāra to be a form of epistemological idealism which contends that unawakened minds are unable to distinguish the world as it actually is from the conceptual constructions which they place upon it. The unawakened mind is thus unable to gain knowledge of things as they really are because it is trapped within a web of conceptual fabrications. In this sense, the world as conceptualised by the unawakened mind is always perception or cognition only (*vijnaptimātra*) for such a mind does not see past the cognitive representations to things as they really are (Ueda 1967: 162; Willis 1969: 34–5). The world as we experience it is a projection of our own minds to the extent that it is always a product of our own interpretive categories. These impositions are fuelled by ignorance and craving. For example, objects of desire are imbued with a substantiality, attractiveness, and permanence which they do not have independent of the desiring mind. The unawakened mind thus erroneously interprets the world in an appropriative way; objects are there to be grasped by a grasping self.

The Yogācāra philosophy is a mind-only teaching in the sense that the world as we experience it is a construct of consciousness; however, this does not mean that no mind-independent world exists. The world as it really exists independent of the conceptualising mind is the dependent aspect understood as the complex causal flux; this is presumably what the awakened mind sees, shorn of the false imaginings that are a feature of unawakened experience. Contrary to ontological idealism, Yogācāra Buddhism is not making the claim that this causal flux is reducible to a flow of exclusively mental events.

For example, Dan Lusthaus (2002: 534) asserts that “no Indian Yogācāra text ever claims that the world is created by the mind. What they do claim is that we mistake our projected interpretations of the world for the world itself, that is, we take our own mental constructions to be the world.” Lusthaus insists that Yogācārins are not doing ontology. That is, they are not saying that external objects do not exist and they are not saying that consciousness, by contrast, is ultimately real. Rather, they are making an epistemological point, namely, that the way we *see* or *interpret* the world is a product of our own unawakened minds. Lusthaus (2002: 538) writes that, according to Yogācārins: “The mind does not

create the physical world, but it produces the interpretative categories through which we know and classify the physical world. It does this so seamlessly that we mistake our interpretations for the world itself.” Moreover, short of awakening, “we are usually incapable of distinguishing our mental constructions and interpretations of the world from the world itself.”

Whether this reading of Yogācāra is sufficiently supported by the textual sources is queried by some scholars (Williams 2009: 302–4); Even so, it is philosophically interesting and also shares common ground with the interpretation of Mādhyamika as a form of scepticism, where emptiness is a teaching about our cognitive limitations and biases rather than an ontological claim.

Buddha nature: Emptiness as absence of defilements

Another Mahāyāna concept of emptiness occurs in the *tathāgatagarbha* teaching, which means the *tathāgata*’s womb or embryo. ‘*Tathāgata*’ is an epithet of Buddha which can be translated as ‘thus gone’, that is, to nirvāṇa or ‘thus come’, that is, to samsāra, out of compassion for unawakened sentient beings. For convenience, *tathāgatagarbha* is commonly translated as ‘Buddha nature’. This concept appears in Indian Mahāyāna scriptures such as the *Tathāgatagarbha sūtra*, the *Śrīmālādevīśimhanāda sūtra*, the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, and the Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* and has had a very great impact on Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions beyond India.

There is an ambiguity regarding Buddha nature which is suggested by the two translations of the term *tathāgatagarbha*; as ‘embryonic *tathāgata*’ Buddha nature is incipient and a potential for awakening whereas ‘*tathāgata*’s womb’ could indicate an already existing Buddha deep within one’s being (King 1991: 4). Indeed, Buddha nature is sometimes interpreted in Mahāyāna Buddhism to mean that sentient beings have the potential to become Buddhas. However, there is also a Mahāyāna view that Buddha nature is an actual, already fully formed, primeval reality present within sentient beings who are therefore already awakened. Buddha nature is obscured by various adventitious moral and cognitive defilements (*kleśa*) – primarily greed, hatred and delusion – which afflict the unawakened. Even so, it is intrinsically pure and undefiled. The purpose of Buddhist practice is thus to remove the defilements and recognize that one has always been awakened. The *Tathāgatagarbha sūtra* employs various metaphors; for example, the discovery of Buddha nature within oneself is likened to enjoying sweet, delicious honey after a swarm of protective bees has been removed, or a poor man who is first unaware of, but then uncovers, a store of treasure hidden under the floorboards of his house (Grosnick 2007).

In some Indian Mahāyāna *sūtras*, East Asian Buddhism and also in some forms of Tibetan Buddhism, the Buddha nature is presented as an unchanging, permanent reality, which is sometimes described as immanent within sentient beings as their real essence, a luminous state of undefiled consciousness, and even the true self (*ātman*) (Williams 2009: 108–12). Buddha nature is said to possess the four perfections of permanence, bliss, purity and self (King 1991:12).

Such claims, if taken literally, are in tension with the frequent Buddhist teaching that there is no self, the Mādhyamika teaching of universal absence of intrinsic existence and the Yogācāra notion of consciousness as an ever-changing stream. They suggest that Buddha nature is a substantive absolute reality – perhaps akin to the monistic *brahman-ātman* in Advaita Vedānta or the *of Daoism – which is not conceptually constructed and not subject to change. Buddha nature cannot be reduced to emptiness, if emptiness is understood simply as absence of intrinsic existence or as the non-dual flow of consciousness.*

Some interpreters dispute that there is a conflict here, and seek to construe these claims about Buddha nature in non-literal ways that do not entail that Buddha nature is an unchanging, substantive entity. Buddha nature is to be read in a practical and soteriological way as a metaphor for the universal potential for change into a Buddha; it is entirely in line with Buddhist teachings about dependent origination rather than the assertion of an unchanging metaphysical absolute (King 1991; 1997).

Even so, it appears that Buddhists have sometimes understood Buddha nature as an unchanging, pure, absolute reality that intrinsically exists. See, for example, Fazang, a seventh century Chinese commentator on the *Awakening of Faith* (*Dasheng Qixin Lun*), a text which has been very influential in East Asia and in which the Buddha nature features prominently. Fazang considers Buddha nature to be identical with the essential nature of the mind, and non-empty because it is beyond change, eternal and self-sufficient. Nevertheless, he contends that the Buddha nature is empty in the different sense that it is essentially ‘One Mind’, an absolute reality empty of defilements, without the deluded thoughts of the unawakened consciousness, and devoid of the distinguishing characteristics of individual things. Moreover, *The Awakening of Faith* gives the Buddha nature teaching a cosmological twist, regarding it as the permanent substratum from which all phenomena originate (Williams 2009: 116).

However, East Asian Buddhists are not united in accepting such absolutist interpretations. For instance, the Sōtō Zen monk Dōgen (1200–1253) says that all things simply *are* Buddha nature, rather than that they *have* Buddha nature. The point appears to be that, for him, the impermanence and insubstantiality of all things is their Buddha nature. It is how they really are, rather than that there is some permanent, unchanging absolute reality that they possess as their true essence (Williams 2009: 120–1).

The recent Critical Buddhism movement in Japan, associated with scholars such as Hakamaya Noriaki and Matsumotō Shiro, acknowledges that the Buddha nature doctrine has been widespread in East Asian Buddhism. Matsumotō (1986) contends that Buddha nature. It is commonly considered to be a substantive, static absolute, “fundamentally real eternal underlying basis of everything” (Williams 2009: 122). However, he rejects this Buddha nature teaching as a departure from the authentic Buddhist teachings of universal dependent origination and not-self.

The views of the Critical Buddhist movement have been the subject of considerable interest and scrutiny (Hubbard and Swanson 1997). Their judgements concerning authenticity seem simplistic given the shear variety of forms that

Buddhist thought has taken, each with their own claim to be genuine, and the complexities associated with interpreting the varied expressions of Buddha nature teaching.

Moreover, interpretations of Buddha nature as an absolute reality beyond change are arguably continuous with a venerable tradition in various forms of Buddhism. After all, *nirvāna* is sometimes described in rather similar terms in early Buddhist sources. Perhaps one should not be too quick to dismiss belief in an absolute reality as un-Buddhist. Malcolm David Eckel (1992: 71) is surely right to remark that the “problem of the Absolute … has generated much controversy among modern interpreters of Buddhism as it did centuries ago among Mahāyāna philosophers themselves.”

Another example of what may be an absolutist understanding of Buddha nature is the ‘other empty’ (*gzhan stong*) tradition of Tibetan Buddhism which asserts that all things *other than* Buddha nature lack intrinsic existence. Unlike everything else, Buddha nature – which is often identified by *gzhan stong* proponents as luminous, unchanging, non-dual consciousness – has intrinsic existence and is empty of adventitious defilements which obscure its nature and are other than it. It is not empty of the pure qualities of a Buddha such as wisdom and compassion. Its proponents sometimes describe this as the ‘Great Mādhyamika’ tradition, which they claim represents the highest form of Mādhyamika philosophy. This is contrasted with the ‘self empty’ (*rang stong*) position, which claims that emptiness simply means that all things, including Buddha nature, lack intrinsic existence. Proponents of *rang stong* often accuse *gzhan stong* of departing from genuine Mādhyamika philosophy because they compromise the teaching of universal emptiness of intrinsic existence (Williams 2009: 112–15). It also seems to depart from the Yogācāra claim that the ultimate truth is an ever-changing flow of consciousness, because it seems to assert an absolute reality beyond change. It appears to affirm what Mādhyamika and Yogācāra ontologies reject.

Still, this belief in Buddha nature as an unchanging intrinsically pure absolute reality can be conjoined with the Mādhyamika and Yogācāra philosophies. There are arguably suggestions of such an absolutist reading in some Indian Mādhyamika texts themselves. Indeed, Bhāvaviveka makes the surprising claim at one point that the Buddha is identical with the supreme *Brahman* of the Upaniṣads, which is usually understood as an unchanging absolute reality (Eckel 1992: 121) and hymns attributed to Nāgārjuna himself are arguably open to an absolutist interpretation (Williams 2009: 114); moreover, the Yogācārin Paramārtha (499–569 CE) declares that there is an immaculate consciousness (*amalavijñāna*), which is the “permanent, ultimate true reality” (Williams 2009: 99). These ideas do not seem very different from Buddha nature as the intrinsically existing absolute reality which is the pure and most fundamental level of the mind, unaffected by change and accessible only through a gnosis beyond all conceptualisation and language (Williams 2009: 103–19).

Then again, if Buddha nature is truly beyond concepts and words, perhaps it cannot even be described as an unchanging, intrinsically existing absolute reality. Texts that teach Buddha nature sometimes assert that even the categories of

existence and non-existence do not apply to it, for it does not have a describable ontological status akin to existing things such as stones, trees and mountains (King 1991: 34). This appeal to the inconceivable character of Buddha nature indicates one way in which *gzhanshong* and other advocates of a ‘higher emptiness’ beyond the mere absence of intrinsic existence might respond to their critics’ accusations of absolutism. This claim, made by some Buddhists, that reality strictly transcends language will be considered in more detail in the next chapter. It is an approach that seems to imply that we really do not know what we are talking about when we use concepts to comprehend Buddha nature and that it is strictly a matter for experiential encounter rather than philosophical discussion.

Emptiness and liberation

This chapter has explained that the concept of emptiness in Mahāyāna Buddhism is contested and open to a variety of readings. Emptiness can be construed in a range of ways which are of interest to the philosopher of religion; indeed, the interpretive uncertainties and diversity of ideas make emptiness extremely intellectually engaging.

Despite the diversity of Mahāyāna notions of emptiness, most readings are united in recognizing that emptiness has, as a central part of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, a soteriological purpose. Understanding emptiness is thought to remove the psychological impediments to awakening. Emptiness is likened to a medicine because it cures the mind of the causes of suffering, namely, the mental ailments of craving and ignorance. While emptiness might seem abstract, it is a concept which is intended to have an existential impact.

Emptiness needs to be understood in the context of Buddhist praxis; insight into emptiness is typically part of a broader Buddhist discipline of ethical training, meditation and so forth. Philosophical reflection on emptiness is not intended to be simply an intellectual and theoretical exercise; it is also meant to induce a profound change in one’s psychological dispositions and motivations. However, the various interpretations of emptiness that are possible indicate that Mahāyāna Buddhists are not united in their understanding of emptiness, the knowledge of which is meant to produce such profound transformative effects.

6 Language and reality

The nature of religious language is one of the main issues addressed by philosophy of religion. Philosophers of religion with a theistic orientation explore the extent to which God's nature can be expressed by words. This is evident, for instance, in Christian discussions about the scope and limitations of 'God talk', and whether positive descriptions of the divine nature are possible (cataphatic theology) or whether only the *via negativa* is appropriate in attempting to describe the deity (apophatic theology) (Louth 2012). This debate is not confined to Western traditions; we find a broadly similar discussion in Vedānta philosophy, for example, with Śaṅkara propounding that brahman, the absolute reality, is ultimately without qualities and thus indescribable except by means of statements of what it is not, whereas Rāmānuja declares that *Brahman*, whom he identifies with the god Viṣṇu, most definitely has superlative divine qualities which can be described positively (King 1999: 224–5).

It may seem that Buddhism would have little to contribute to this discussion. We have already seen (chapter 4) that Buddhists commonly reject the existence of a creator God and so would not have anything to say about the capacity of language to express God's qualities. Even so, there is some room for comparison here. We have also seen in chapter 4 that, although Buddha is usually not thought of as God, he is considered to be an extraordinary being with many superlative qualities such as wisdom and compassion which he is believed to possess to the maximum degree. Buddhist sources often delight in describing these qualities, indicating that words have some power to express the Buddha's nature. However, there are also indications of the indescribable nature of Buddhahood; indeed, Buddhist texts sometimes refer to the Buddha as so extraordinary that he is inconceivable and others state that the categories of 'existence' and 'non-existence' are not applicable to a Buddha in his post-mortem state, possibly indicating the radically ineffable nature of such an awakened being (*Majjhima Nikāya* i, 483).

Moreover, we have seen that a common claim in Buddhism, especially in Mahāyāna traditions, is that Buddha is ultimately identified with reality itself and that the way things really are is the Buddha's *dharma-kāya* (reality body). And there is a persistent thread in Buddhist thought that reality is in some sense beyond the capacity of words to apprehend. Yet this claim sits alongside numerous Buddhist descriptions of the true nature of things. Can reality be expressed by

words or does language fail as a means for apprehending the way things really are? It is this question, and some of the diverse Buddhist responses to it, that this chapter will explore.

In general, there is a spectrum of possible philosophical views about the relationship between language and reality. At one extreme is a naive linguistic optimism that would posit a snug fit between words and reality. A moderate and probably more credible linguistic optimism would claim that some words do depict reality with some degree of accuracy; however, words can also miss their mark, failing to pick out things as they really are. Moderate linguistic optimism can itself have different strengths, with a strong variety claiming that most words successfully identify real features of the world (the errors or mis-hits are exceptions) whereas a weaker variety would say that only some, perhaps very few, words have this accuracy. At the other extreme from naive linguistic optimism, total linguistic pessimism would completely sever any relation between language and things as they really are. Reality is literally inexpressible. Words do not and cannot correspond to the true nature of things. Linguistic pessimism should be distinguished from linguistic scepticism, which says that we cannot *know* to what extent our words correspond to the world as it really is. Linguistic scepticism is rooted in the epistemological conviction that we can never establish how things are independently of our experience, individual and collective, for we can never get outside our experience to see the world from a God's eye perspective or view from nowhere.

How do Buddhists understand the relationship between language and reality? There is not a single Buddhist philosophy of language because Buddhism is not monolithic; moreover, many ancient Buddhist texts and traditions are open to a variety of interpretations regarding this issue. However, there is a common Buddhist claim that many or, for some of these Buddhists, all entities identified by language do not exist independently of one's perceptual and cognitive processes. This chapter will argue that mistrust of language is a common attitude in Buddhism, which typically expresses caution about the tendency for words to lead one astray. In some cases, this results in linguistic pessimism and a commitment to the total, or near total, ineffability of reality. Nevertheless, there is also a strand of moderate linguistic optimism in Buddhism, even if, in many cases, it is of a relatively weak variety. In other words, there is a confidence that, when used carefully and appropriately, language has some capacity to describe the ultimate truth with accuracy, even if words can often be inaccurate and misleading.

Language in early Buddhism and Abhidharma

Early Buddhist texts undertake a reduction of apparently stable subjects and objects into their constituents, all of which are envisaged as processes made up of impermanent events. In the early Pāli texts, people and other sentient beings are analysed into the five impersonal aggregates (*khandha*) of physical form (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception or discrimination of objects (*saññā*), volitional forces or dispositions (*samkhāra*), and consciousness (*viññāna*). The five

aggregates are described as being impermanent (*anicca*), without an enduring self (*anattā*), and thus the cause of suffering (*dukkha*) (*Majjhima Nikāya* i, 138–9). This is thought to be an exhaustive analysis of the individual person intended to prove that they are simply a complex bundle of mental and physical interconnected events, with no unchanging agent or subject of experience. An alternative analysis sees the individual person and objects as comprised of twelve spheres (*āyatana*), namely, the six senses (the five physical senses and the mind) and the six types of objects of those senses (*Samyutta Nikāya* iii, 62). Another variation refers to eighteen elements (*dhātu*), that is, the six senses, six types of sense objects, and six types of consciousness (*Majjhima Nikāya* i, 138–9). This means that the external world is made up of physical data of five types, that is, visible, audible, tactile or tangible, olfactory and tastable, apprehended by corresponding sense faculties and states of awareness. In addition, there is consciousness of, and the capacity to apprehend, mental entities such as ideas and affective states. These typologies, and others like them, are meant to describe accurately the genuine constitution of the individual person and the world of objects, leaving no room for belief in anything unchanging and uncaused. These descriptions are thought to pick out the character of the world as it really is, independently of our interpretations. By contrast, the enduring self and stable external objects identified by language as mountains, houses, and trees, etc., do not exist independently of our perceptual and cognitive processes that reify the flux of causally connected mental and physical events.

The *Milindapañha* (25–8) famously gives an account of a meeting between the local Bactrian Greek king, Milinda, and a Buddhist monk. The monk introduces himself to the king as Nāgāsena, but declares that Nāgāsena exists just “as a denotation, appellation, designation, as a current usage . . . only a name” (Trans. Harvey 2009: 272), for in reality there is no Nāgāsena entity corresponding to the label. He likens terms such as ‘Nāgāsena’ to the term ‘chariot’, used to describe the vehicle by which the king came to visit the monk. Nāgāsena asks the king whether the chariot is the pole, the axle, the wheels, the framework, the flagstaff, the yoke, the reins or the goad. King Milinda admits that the chariot cannot be identified with any of these constituents. Indeed, when the chariot is analysed, we find that it exists just as a name in dependence upon the pole, the axle, the wheels, the framework, the flagstaff, the yoke, the reins and the goad. There is no distinct, separate chariot entity that is found in the analysis. ‘Chariot’ is a convenient label for what is in fact a number of entities in a particular spatial relationship to one another. So too, Nāgāsena says, terms such as ‘Nāgāsena’ are used as convenient labels when the five aggregates are present, despite the fact that, when analysed, there is found to be no independent thing corresponding to ‘Nāgāsena’. Of course, this analogy has its limitations. Most importantly, the five aggregates are, according to early Buddhism, real physical and mental processes and not simply labels; by contrast, the pole, the axle, the wheels, the framework, etc., can presumably themselves be analysed into physical processes (*rūpa*), and are thus themselves, like the chariot, just convenient names used to refer to what is actually a complex, interdependent web of physical events.

There are two further points that need to be made about this text. First, Nāgāsena does not deny that terms such as ‘chariot’ and ‘Nāgāsena’ have utility. Though there are no ultimately real entities to which the terms refer, they can have a pragmatic function, facilitating everyday activities and discourse. We could hardly do without them, for communication would be difficult if not impossible if we insisted on meticulously describing the manifold physical and mental processes that make up the world whenever we talk to one another. These terms function positively as useful abbreviations preventing the “hopeless prolixity” involved in an accurate and complete description of things as they really are (Siderits 1987: 150). Indeed, the Buddha himself uses such terms in his sermons, but presumably always with the awareness that they are pragmatic shorthand and refer not to substantial entities, but to complex and evanescent causal processes. Steven Collins (1982: 71) has shown that terms such as ‘self’ and ‘person’ are used in early Buddhist texts “quite naturally and freely” except for “matters of systematic philosophical and psychological analysis” where they are strictly prohibited. Second, Buddhism contends that, although useful, words like ‘chariot’ and ‘Nāgāsena’ are potentially, and often actually, extremely misleading. We are easily beguiled by language into thinking that these terms have stable and unchanging referents. Because we use the term ‘I’, for instance, we tend to think that there is an ‘I’ that exists apart from the changing flow of mental and physical events. The careless and unreflective use of language is both a symptom of and contributes to the endemic unawakened ignorance about the way things really are. We tend naively to accept statements about complex, whole entities as referring to actually existing things: “While such statements *could* be used as mere abbreviatory devices, their use more commonly leads us to accept the existence of such fictions as trees, forests, cities, and, more significantly, persons” (Siderits 1987: 150).

Early Buddhism thus claims that much of the world described by words does not exist independently of our minds and language use. However, early Buddhism also displays moderate linguistic optimism; some language hits the mark. For example, the statement that “things are impermanent and dependently originating” is an accurate proposition about the nature of reality. Furthermore, the descriptions of the *khandhas*, the *dhātus* and the *āyatanas* are apparently thought to be precise and correct uses of language. In addition, the statement that “linguistic referents such as ‘chariot’ and ‘Nāgāsena’ exist only in dependence upon our perceptual and cognitive faculties” also expresses the way things really are.

According to the Pāli scriptures, *saññā* is the capacity to discriminate, identify and name. It is our ability to form concepts that pick out objects from their environment (Hamilton 1996: 53–65). *Saññā* “does not in itself mean *false* conceptions” (Hamilton 1996: 60). Some concepts (for example, *khandhas*, *dhātus*, *āyatanas*) are compatible with things as they really are. However, some *saññā* is incompatible with reality. For example, the concept ‘permanent, substantial thing’ has no real referent in the conditioned world. Such concepts misrepresent the way things really are. Moreover, many cases of *saññā* (for example, ‘chariot’, ‘self’, ‘mountain’) do not describe the way things really are – that is, they do not have ultimately real referents – but still have conventional utility.

Vaibhāṣika Abhidharma texts, such as Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa* and Saṅghabhadra's *Nyāyānusāra*, provide a systematisation and elaboration of the moderate linguistic optimism that is first articulated in the early Buddhist texts. The analysis of the self and objects into constituent processes is more sophisticated, with the elucidation of many types of momentary physical and non-physical events (*dharma*) and also the various types of causal relationships that pertain between them. The non-physical *dharma*s are the range of psychological occurrences that together get labelled as the mind. The physical *dharma*s are akin to atomic sense data out of which sensed objects and the human body are fashioned and named by consciousness. There are general characteristics (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*), notably impermanence and dependent origination, which are shared by all of these conditioned (*samskṛta*) *dharma*s. In addition, each *dharma* has a defining characteristic (*svalakṣaṇa*), which allows for it to be described as belonging to a particular type and thus placed within the taxonomy of *dharma*s.

The Vaibhāṣikas say that these *dharma*s have substantial existence (*dravyasat*) or intrinsic existence (*svabhāva*) and are ultimate truths (*paramārtha satya*). In other words, the conditioned *dharma*s are the real features of the world that exist independently of language but can be described accurately by it. By contrast, things that are formed out of these *dharma*s are said to have conceptual or nominal existence (*prajñaptisat*), to be conventional truths (*samvṛti satya*), and to have no intrinsic existence (Williams 1981: 227–57). This means that the language that refers to things such as mountains and tables describes reified objects that do not exist independently of the mind. Evidently the Vaibhāṣikas think that the world as it actually is, as the sensed raw material, gets interpreted and labelled as the discrete everyday objects of our conventional world; we impose on the world a cognitive and linguistic framework that does not correspond to the complex dependently originating flow of events that is ultimately real.

Anthony Warder has argued that Theravāda Abhidhamma texts express a similar attitude to language and reality. For example, the *Abhidhammāvatara*, distinguishes between concepts or names (*paññatti*) that are occurring (*vijjamāna*) and non-occurring (*avijjamāna*), terminology also used by Buddhaghosa in the *Visuddhimagga*. Warder says that ‘occurring’ means “there is a reality corresponding to the name”, whereas ‘non-occurring’ means “that there is no such reality.” In other words, occurring concepts are those that refer to something ultimately real (*paramattha*); they identify the defining characteristics of the *dhammas*; a non-occurring concept has a referent, such as the self, which is a mere name (*nāmamatta*). Warder also explains that the *Paramatthavinicchaya* of Anuruddha II similarly distinguishes between occurring and non-occurring names. The former identify the “ultimately real elements”, that is, the *dhammas*. They are not contradicted (*avisamvādaka*) by reality. By contrast, the concepts or names that are non-occurring have conceptual or nominal objects such as ‘being’, ‘person’, ‘I’, ‘man’, ‘horse’ and ‘pot’. They are not ultimately true but are “in conformity to the linguistic usages of the world when using everyday language” (Warder 1971: 181–96).

Both the Vaibhāṣika and Theravāda forms of Abhidharma arguably display a weak form of moderate linguistic optimism. Many entities exist only as referents

of language and for the sake of conventional utility; some named entities, that is, the *dharma*s, exist independent of our perceptual and cognitive interpretations. Language goes wrong if, for instance, it is used to attribute a mind-independent existence to those things that are simply conventionally real. It also misses the mark if it is used to misidentify the *dharma*s and their general and individual characteristics. However, these *dharma*s and their causal relationships can be accurately described. And language can accurately state that many (though not all) things identified by words do not have a mind and language independent existence.

Do mountains, houses, trees, etc., exist *only* because language categorises the world into these objects? This seems philosophically problematic, given that there is evidence of pre-linguistic discrimination of objects. Things sometimes seem to be identified, or picked out from their surrounding environment, without the use of labels or names. For instance, witness the ability of young babies and non-human animals to recognise features of the world without having any linguistic skills. Furthermore, even those who have language can often recognise objects without having known their names or when their names have been forgotten. Language users often navigate their environment and discriminate between objects without having to label them. For example, if I am cleaning my kitchen, I am able to turn on the water tap, mop the floor and so forth without recourse to language. I function in this familiar environment without naming. Much of our everyday activity seems to take place at a pre-linguistic level where we identify objects and yet do not label them. It would seem that perceptual and cognitive processes, some of which are pre-linguistic, identify the world of objects. Our sense organs and minds act as interpreters of the ever-flowing world of *dharma*c processes, shaping these processes into the relatively stable objects of perception that we experience. This interpreting activity happens even prior to explicit naming, although the use of language surely adds a new level of complexity to the individuation of objects.

Dignāga and Dharmakīrti: The inexpressible particular

Sautrāntika Buddhism is more parsimonious about the number of types of *dharma*s and attributes conventional existence to some of the ultimately real *dharma*s that Vaibhāṣika tradition identifies (Cox 1995). Thus, the number of concepts and words that refer to really existing phenomena diminishes and in this sense the Sautrāntika linguistic optimism can be interpreted as somewhat weaker than that found in Vaibhāṣika.

This tendency becomes most pronounced in the Sautrāntika-influenced works of the Buddhist logicians Dignāga and Dharmakīrti for whom there are momentary *dharma*s but they can no longer be accurately categorised or labelled into types at all. According to them, there is a sharp divide between things as they really are and the concepts and words that we employ to refer to them. The ultimately real world is constituted by numerous causally connected momentary events, each of which is a unique particular (*svalaksana*). These

unique particulars are apprehended by momentary veridical perceptions (*pratyakṣa*), which are unmediated by concepts and language. We then subsequently employ concepts and labels to impose universals (*sāmānaylakṣaṇa*) on this immediate flow of instants so that they are placed within categories ('table', 'chair' and so on). Although we may say that we perceive the 'table' or 'chair', in fact, we perceive only the flow of momentary particulars which, through a process of conceptual and linguistic reification, get interpreted as an entity such as a 'table' or 'chair' that persists through time. These universals are conceptual fabrications (*kalpanā*) and distort reality as apprehended by perceptions. Although concepts and labels have pragmatic value, allowing us to communicate and navigate the world of shared conventions, they do not correspond to things as they really are (King 1999: 152–3; Williams, Tribe and Wynne 2012: 89). This is a version of nominalism because it attributes reality only to particulars and denies the existence of universals as anything more than human conventions.

Of course, the plausibility of this ontology may be questioned; it may be that the claim that indeterminate particulars are the ultimately real entities is misguided. Perhaps there are natural, repeatable kinds or types in the unconstructed world; these kinds are perhaps determinate and can be named. What seems clear is that Dignāga and Dharmakīrti's philosophy of language veers towards linguistic pessimism. *Dharmas* are now unique particulars and can no longer be accurately classified into and labelled as identifiable types. Any attempt at naming leads to misrepresentation of things as they really are, which are now envisaged as a flow of indeterminate events. The extreme fluidity of the world makes categorisation necessarily a form of reification. This is process ontology of a sort, which makes the really existing events ineffable and accessible only to perception, unmediated by concepts. This pure perceptual experience is presumably recoverable by the awakened person who strips away the distorting names and concepts to see things as they really are.

This view is undeniably pessimistic with regard to the power of language; words and concepts are a veil between us and reality, rather than revealing the true nature of things. Yet even this pessimism is perhaps slightly less extreme than it might first seem. After all, Dignāga and Dharmakīrti still attribute to language an important pragmatic function; they do not deny its utility in allowing humans to navigate the world of conventions. It is just that this world of conventions does not mirror the world as it actually is. Moreover, they seem content to describe the real, ultimately true world as constituted by unique particulars. This is surely an example of language being employed to point out how things really are. Admittedly, this description does fail in the sense that it cannot communicate the specificity of the things as they really are; this specificity is only revealed to direct perception unmediated by concepts and words. Regardless, language does reveal that reality is not some sort of static absolute and is made up of momentary events rather than being undifferentiated, unchanging oneness. There is still arguably a degree of linguistic optimism here, even if the power of words has been severely constrained.

Nirvāṇa and the limitations of language

The Buddhist philosophies discussed so far may allow for some amount of moderate linguistic optimism with regard to the conditioned world of impermanent, caused things; however, surely nirvāṇa (*Pāli nibbāna*) is inexpressible? There have been longstanding debates about the nature of nirvāṇa, and it seems that various Buddhist traditions can admit a variety of readings. For example, there has been a long debate about whether nirvāṇa is 1) simply the absolute cessation of craving and ignorance, or 2) also an ineffable transcendent reality (Welbon 1968).

The first reading of nirvāṇa is most obviously suggested by the Sautrāntika descriptions of nirvāṇa, which depict it in purely negative terms as an absence or cessation rather than as a positively existing entity or ultimate reality (King 1995: 106). Nirvāṇa realised by an awakened person during life is the blowing out of craving and ignorance by deeply seeing things as they really are, that is, as impermanent, without self and unsatisfactory. Nirvāṇa is the permanent cessation of those causes (craving and ignorance) that create samsāra; the awakened person after death will be eternally liberated from samsāra presumably because such a person will no longer exist. Nirvāṇa in life is describable as the cessation of craving and ignorance and nirvāṇa after death is describable as the mere absence of all the conditioned phenomena that together constitute the personality.

However, in this case perhaps there is a subjective quality of the experience of nirvāṇa during life that is, strictly speaking, incommunicable (Gombrich 1997: 6). Indeed, the affective dimension of experiences in general is notoriously difficult to describe, largely because of the essentially private nature of emotions. For instance, how it feels for me to be in love is difficult for me to communicate to another person, for whom the experience of love might be rather different. And words are like empty husks when compared with the full-blooded experience. This problem is exacerbated in the case of experiences that are not shared, so that, if for example, you have never been in love and I attempt to describe my feeling of being in love to you, my efforts are unlikely to succeed. The referent of my words is inaccessible to you by personal acquaintance.

Similarly, the subjective dimension of the experience of nirvāṇa, that is, how it feels to be awakened, cannot be entirely communicated to someone who has never had the experience, or anything like it. If the affective content of the total and final elimination of craving and ignorance is quite unlike unawakened experience, then words will totally fail to convey the feeling to those who are not awakened. However, presumably the descriptions can succeed, to an extent at any rate, if there are broadly similar non-awakened experiences that roughly approximate what the awakened person feels. For instance, a person who has experienced a temporary elimination or diminution of craving and ignorance might have some inkling of the subjective dimension of the awakened person's experience. However, the experience of nirvāṇa, understood as the permanent and total elimination of craving and ignorance, may be of a completely different order; perhaps then there are no shared experiential referents in the two cases, and the unawakened person cannot understand how it feels to achieve nirvāṇa.

Either way, there is an important distinction between psychological and epistemic ineffability. The subjective dimension of the experience of nirvāṇa, that is, the psychological content, might be inexpressible or not fully expressible. But this is compatible with the claim that what is known, that is, the epistemic content of the experience, is describable. What one knows when ignorance has entirely ceased is that all things are impermanent, without self and unsatisfactory. Moreover, the experience of nirvāṇa is often said to take place in the context of very deep meditation; it is quite plausible that someone in such a meditative state would be psychologically unable to speak about or conceptualise what they are experiencing. However, this temporary inability would be compatible with accurate post-meditative descriptions of what was known in the meditative experience, namely, that all phenomena are impermanent, without self and unsatisfactory.

However, the second reading of the meaning of nirvāṇa construes it differently. Pāli texts, for instance, sometimes say that *nibbāna* – the *summum bonum* which the awakened person (*arahat*) experiences in life, and passes into in an undefined and inexpressible way at death (*Sutta Nipāta*, 1076) – is not born or made and is outside of time and space (*Udāna*, 80). This seems to imply a transcendent, supramundane reality. Steven Collins (1998: 163) shows that frequent epithets for *nibbāna* in early Pāli Buddhism include unthinkable (*acintya*), free from conceptual differentiation (*nippapañca*), indescribable (*na vattabba*) and beyond reason (*atakkavacāra*). Rupert Gethin (1998: 77) writes that the early Pāli tradition tends to “shy away” from definition of the unconditioned and its ontological status is undetermined (*avyākata*), as the categories of existence and non-existence, like all other words, apply only to the world of conditioned things. Christopher Gowans (2003: 153–4) says that *nibbāna* is clearly thought to be an ultimate reality, rather than mere nothingness, but our concepts and words are suitable to describe only objects of the spatio-temporal world.

Thus, Pāli Buddhism might be characterised as a form of linguistic pessimism with respect to *nibbāna* as the ultimate, unconditioned reality that is accessible only to a special gnosis that transcends words. Understood in this way, the realisation of *nibbāna* seems similar to William James’s notion of the mystical experience, which he identifies as both noetic – that is, a state of knowledge – and ineffable (James 1982: 380–1). The experience has epistemic content but what is known cannot be described. It is not just the subjective quality of the experience which is ineffable; what is known in the experience is also not expressible. *Nibbāna* is both psychologically and epistemically ineffable.

The notion of an ineffable reality, apprehended by an inexpressible knowledge is admittedly rather puzzling, prompting Collins (1998: 176) to remark ironically “ineffability is easier said than understood.” Critics may doubt that there can be knowledge that has an inexpressible content, for it seems hard to distinguish from mere blankness; furthermore, all other examples of knowledge have describable referents. Surely knowledge entails that the thing known has some qualities, attributes or characteristics, and can thus be expressed linguistically? The Buddhist response to doubts about this indescribable unconditioned reality is essentially an

argument from religious experience; that is, in order to resolve the doubts one must undertake the arduous ethical and meditative training that eventually results in the realisation of *nibbāna* as an unconditioned reality beyond the purview of language (Gowans 2003: 151). The awakened develop a new cognitive capacity, and trying to explain the ineffable unconditioned reality to the unawakened is like attempting to explain colour to the blind. Of course, critics will raise questions about the reliability and trustworthiness of inherently private religious experiences; this is a much-discussed topic in the philosophy of religion.

Even so, claims that *nibbāna*, understood as an unconditioned, transcendent reality, is strictly ineffable may be a slight exaggeration. Pāli textual references to *nibbāna* as not born, not conditioned, not made, etc., indicate its otherness from the world of conditioned things. The similes that the awakened person after death is unfathomable like the great ocean and *nibbāna* is like the further shore of a dangerous stream have a similar function (*Majjhima Nikāya* i, 487; *Samyutta Nikāya* iv, 172–5). These words, even if often expressed negatively and metaphorically, tell us something about *nibbāna*, namely that it is quite other than the conditioned world. Furthermore, Pāli Buddhist texts seem often to accept the description of *nibbāna* as an unconditioned, permanent reality; moreover, they would presumably assent to the description of *nibbāna* as an ultimate reality which is nonetheless not the cause of the universe and not a personal, omnipotent and creator God. It seems, then, that *nibbāna* is not entirely ineffable and there is room for words to express something about it, even if language is limited to negative and poetic descriptions.

Language and the Mahāyāna nirvāṇa

Nirvāṇa as understood in Mahāyāna Buddhism adds some further complications. A common theme in some strands of Mahāyāna Buddhism is that nirvāṇa and saṃsāra are non-dual. This claim is compatible with the Mahāyāna idea of the non-abiding (*apratīṣṭhita*) nirvāṇa. That is, Buddha's nirvāṇa entails that he does not abide in saṃsāra because he is free from craving and ignorance; however, he does not abide in nirvāṇa, at least as understood in some earlier Buddhist traditions as an escape from this world. He continues to be thoroughly engaged in saṃsāra for the sake of suffering sentient beings (Makransky 1997: 322). In this case, nirvāṇa is not to be understood as set apart from the world of impermanent, insubstantial things, contrary to what some Pāli texts seem to indicate.

According to one interpretation, this means that nirvāṇa is the permanent, unchanging ultimate truth about impermanent, insubstantial things, that is, that they are empty of intrinsic existence (Mādhyamika) or that they are empty of the subject-object distinction (Yogācāra) and can be described as such. Words can be employed to express what is known when the awakened person realises nirvāṇa, as the previous sentence demonstrates.

According to another interpretation, nirvāṇa in these Mahāyāna traditions is to be construed as epistemically ineffable. The ultimate truth known by the awakened consciousness is inconceivable. It is strictly beyond concepts and labels, which

are used to describe conventional things. In this case, the non-duality of nirvāṇa and samsāra indicates that the nirvāṇa known by the awakened person is an indescribable reality which is the ultimate truth behind the conventional, conceptually constructed world. The veil of concepts and words needs to be removed in order to reveal the inexpressible reality which is nirvāṇa. We will turn now to a more detailed exploration of the power and limitations of language according to Mahāyāna philosophies.

Language in Mādhyamika

The previous chapter dealt with various interpretations of emptiness in Mādhyamika; the present section of this chapter will consider the implications of these interpretations for Mādhyamika philosophy of language. How pessimistic or optimistic are Mādhyamikas about the capacity of language to describe the nature of reality?

We have seen that Nāgārjuna famously declares emptiness means that all things lack, or are empty of, autonomous existence because they are dependently originating. Moreover, Nāgārjuna says that entities are not just dependently originating but have a merely conventional or conceptual existence; they do not dependently originate independently of cognitive processes that construct them. In other words, Nāgārjuna has universalized the tendency in early Buddhism and Abhidharma to deny mind-independent existence to many things. Buddhists had always recognised that named entities such as chariots, selves and mountains do not exist independently of our minds. However, they had claimed that the purview of conceptual construction is limited; some names and labels refer to entities or events that really do exist, that is, the *skandhas*, *āyatanas*, *dhātus* and the *dharmas*. By contrast, Nāgārjuna claims that even the *skandhas*, the *āyatanas*, the *dhātus* and the *dharmas* are empty of inherent existence, that is, they too are, like all other things, simply the referents of our conceptual and linguistic activity (*Madhyamakākārikā* iv and v; *Śūnyatāsaptatikārikā*, 53–4; *Acintyastava*, 2). Contrary to the Abhidharma analysis, there are no entities that are ultimate truths and have substantial existence. All entities are conceptual constructs.

We have also seen in the previous chapter that, according to one reading, Mādhyamikas consider the world of conventional truths to be undergirded by a substratum of pure process (perhaps similar to Dignāga and Dharmakīrti's unconceptualised particulars), not yet differentiated into linguistically identifiable objects. Another more radical interpretation denies even the existence of such an undifferentiated substratum of ever-changing indeterminate events as the basis for conceptual construction and conventional truth.

Either way, the Mādhyamika philosophy is arguably still a form of moderate linguistic optimism. It is true that Mādhyamikas think that some words simply misrepresent reality. For instance, the statement that “things exist independently of cognitive and linguistic processes” is simply false. Even so, if the Mādhyamikas claim that the conventional world is underpinned by a pure unconceptualised substratum then it is the case that the words “there is a pure substratum not yet

differentiated into named entities” accurately describes the mind-independent conventional world before it is interpreted and labelled as discrete things by the perceiving mind. By contrast, if they claim that there is not a pure unnamed substratum then the words “there is not a pure unnamed substratum not yet differentiated into entities” accurately describe the fact that the world is purely conventional with no ultimately real foundation at all. Furthermore, Mādhyamikas say that “all entities are merely the referents of concepts and words”, and this claim is thought to be an accurate description of reality. That is, it is a correct statement of the ultimate truth that there are no things beyond the web of conventions.

This is why Nāgārjuna contends that the absence of intrinsic existence of all things is the ultimate truth (*Śūnyatāsaptaṭikārikā*, 69). Of course, this statement is itself empty, in the sense that it is part of the web of conventions, but it is the part of the web of conventions that speaks the truth that the web of conventions is simply a web of conventions, rather like a person in a dream who proclaims that he or she is in a dream. Indeed, Nāgārjuna likens his statement that “all things are devoid of intrinsic existence” to a fictitious or magically created person (*nirmitaka*) who tells a man, obsessed with a fictitious or magically created woman whom he takes to be real, that the woman is indeed unreal, thus dispelling the false notion that fuels his passion. The proposition that things lack intrinsic existence itself lacks intrinsic existence, but, like the fictitious or magically created person who points out the true nature of the unreal woman, it is truth-bearing, in the sense that it accurately points out that all things lack intrinsic existence (*Vigrahavyāvartanīvr̥tti*, 27).

The distinction between conventional existence and conventional truth may be useful here. The statement that “each and every thing has a merely conventional existence” itself *exists* only conventionally; however, it is ultimately *true*, because it accurately states that everything, including itself, exists in this conventional way. Hence Nāgārjuna claims that emptiness is the incontrovertible (*avisaṃvādi*) truth (*Acintystava*, 41). Other statements, like “this is a chair” or “I am going to catch the train”, are both conventionally existent and conventionally true, which means that they point out features of the conceptually and linguistically dependent world, like chairs and trains, but without pointing out that these things have merely conventional existence. Such statements have pragmatic, transactional (*vyavahāra*) value, facilitating interaction and survival in the dream-like world of experience but overlooking the empty ontological status of their referents.

No views and the limits of language

However, it might be objected that Nāgārjuna recommends the relinquishing of all views (*dṛṣṭi*), that emptiness should not to be misconstrued as a view (*Madhyamakākārikā* xiii, 8), and claims that he does not have a thesis or standpoint (*pratijñā*) (*Vigrahavyāvartanīvr̥tti*, 29). Surely this means that Mādhyamikas are pessimistic about the capacity of language to apprehend reality?

We saw in the previous chapter that this ‘no views’ claim can be interpreted as a form of scepticism or as a rejection of ontology all together. Interpreted as a

sceptic, the Mādhyamika thinks that it is not possible to have knowledge of reality; thus views about things as they really are should be given up. In this case, reality is indescribable because reality cannot be known. Alternatively, if Mādhyamika philosophy is interpreted as a rejection of ontology all together, it deconstructs all attempts to describe the ultimate truth because there is no ultimate truth to be described; all truth is merely conventional. Both of these interpretations of the no views claim are quite linguistically pessimistic but for different reasons. Moreover, in both cases, linguistic pessimism arguably has its limits; at least the Mādhyamika sceptic can employ language to state the truth that knowledge of reality is not possible and at least the Mādhyamika ontological deconstructionist can use words to say (paradoxically) that it is true that there is no ultimate truth.

Another interpretation of the no views claim sees it as meaning that there is ultimate truth and it can be known, but it can only be known in a non-linguistic way, through, for example, meditative experience. Mādhyamika, understood in this way, advocates the epistemic ineffability of the ultimate truth. Emptiness means that the true nature of things can be known but is empty of, or inaccessible to, conceptualisation. There are simply no words that can describe the ultimate truth that is apprehended by non-conceptual consciousness.

This reading might be supported by Nāgārjuna's depiction of the Buddha as "having the eye of knowledge" which he employs to see the world as "free from the characterised (*lakṣya*) and characteristics (*lakṣaṇa*) and as free from expression by words (*vāgudāhāravarjita*)."¹ Nāgārjuna also refers to a signless (*animitta*) consciousness (*vijñāna*), which results from meditation (*bhāvanā*) and is required for liberation (*Lokatīlastava*, 12, 26–7). Moreover, he claims that reality (*tattva*) is beyond conceptual diffusion (*prapañca*) and is devoid of conceptualisation (*vikalpa*) (*Madhyamakakārikā* xviii, 9). Śāntideva declares that, unlike the conventional, the ultimate is beyond the scope of thought or the intellect (*buddhi*) (*Bodhicaryāvatāra* ix, 2). Candrakīrti claims that the view that things are empty is like a purgative medicine that, once it has flushed out all other views, must be expunged itself lest it make one ill (*Prasannapadā* xiii, 8). So, it would seem to follow that, paradoxically, even the view that things lack intrinsic existence is simply a conventional truth and not expressive of how things really are. It too must ultimately be abandoned. The appropriate response to the ultimate truth, beyond the conventions of our concepts and words, is silence.

This linguistic pessimism is perhaps most poignantly expressed in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, by Vimalakīrti's 'great silence' when the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī asks him to explain the doctrine of the entry into non-duality (*advayadharma-mukha*), presumably a metaphor for the direct experience of reality (*tattva*). Mañjuśrī praises Vimalakīrti's response and declares that syllables (*akṣara*), sounds (*svara*) and concepts (*vijñapti*) are worthless (*asamudācāra*) in this matter (*Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* viii, 33).

So, it is possible the reading that Mādhyamika is a form of moderate linguistic optimism does not take sufficient account of Mādhyamika claims that indicate the radical ineffability of things as they really are. Perhaps the ultimate truth is beyond language, and all words that attempt to describe it simply fail.

However, the Mādhyamika relinquishing of all views has not always been taken at face value. In the previous chapter, we saw that Tsong kha pa and the dGe lugs pa tradition, for instance, claim that Nāgājuna means that he does not have a thesis or standpoint that asserts the intrinsic existence of anything (Hopkins 1996; Napper 1987). The implication is, of course, that he does hold the view that all things lack intrinsic existence. Reality is not inexpressible, because the view that all things lack intrinsic existence expresses the true nature of things and does so with precision.

In this case, the Mādhyamika texts which refer to reality as being beyond conceptual diffusion and as free from characterised objects, characteristics and without expression by words can be interpreted as statements of psychological rather than epistemic ineffability. Perhaps the subjective quality of the experience of emptiness is unique and therefore not communicable in words. We saw in the previous chapter that reflection on things as they really are is central to Mādhyamika meditation and is intended to transform knowledge by description into knowledge by acquaintance, that is, a direct *seeing* of things in their true nature, the latter having an immediacy and affective impact that the former cannot match. Buddhist meditation theory identifies special states of meditative absorption (*dhyāna*) in which discursive thought and conceptual diffusion fall away, as consciousness becomes focused on the ultimate truth. The conceptual construction of the manifold world of everyday entities would temporarily be suspended. How this feels might be indescribable, or not fully describable, especially to those who have not had the experience. And, at the time, even the object known in the experience, that is, the absence of intrinsic existence of all phenomena, might be inexpressible, because one is so utterly absorbed in the experience. The meditator might have a non-dual experience, in the sense of feeling no sense of being a knower at a distance from the object of knowledge.

Even so, this psychological ineffability is presumably compatible with descriptions of what is known in the meditation experience – namely, that all entities are simply conventions and empty of intrinsic existence – and does not contradict the thesis that things as they really are can be expressed in words.

Svātantrika and Prāsaṅgika on language

The previous chapter discussed how Tibetan commentators on Indian Mādhyamika often make a distinction between the Svātantrika and Prāsaṅgika sub-schools, a distinction which has been widely, and sometimes rather simplistically, adopted in modern scholarship. This nomenclature is problematic because it is of relatively late Tibetan provenance (eleventh to twelfth centuries) and it gets applied retrospectively to earlier Indian Mādhyamika thinkers who did not think of themselves in these terms (Williams 2009: 65–6). The precise, supposed difference between these two branches of Mādhyamika has often been disputed and is open to a considerable amount of interpretation, with rival views among Tibetan scholastics who interpret Indian source material which is often philosophically ambiguous (Dreyfus and McClintock 2003). The Tibetan discussions of this issue are sophisticated and nuanced. However, I want to make a few fairly general

observations about the possible significance of the Svātantrika and Prāsaṅgika distinction for the Mādhyamika understanding of the relationship between language and ultimate truth.

A disagreement that Tibetan interpreters often claim divides these two sub-schools is their supposedly differing attitudes to pedagogy and the use of argumentation. It is claimed that Svātantrikas are willing to use independent (*svatantra*) inferences in support of the emptiness philosophy, which enabled them to engage with rival philosophies in ancient India that required one to assert and defend one's own philosophical position in formal debates. They did not simply refute the arguments of their opponents; they also advanced their own arguments in support of the emptiness of intrinsic existence of all phenomena. It is often claimed that, unlike the Svātantrikas, the Prāsaṅgikas did not seek to establish a position of their own but only refuted the views of other philosophers by pointing out the absurd consequences (*prasaṅga*) of these views in a manner akin to the *reductio ad absurdum* (King 1999: 94–5).

It is possible to see this disagreement as simply or primarily a difference in methodology; that is, the two types of Mādhyamikas have different attitudes to the correct forms of argument. They do not agree about whether Mādhyamikas should conform to the complex rules of philosophical debate that had evolved in ancient India, which involved asserting and defending one's own thesis against an opponent (Ames 2003; Dreyfus and McClintock 2003: 28–9).

Alternatively, there may be a more substantive philosophical division here about the capacity of language; the Svātantrikas had a more positive attitude to language and its ability to express the ultimate truth than did the Prāsaṅgikas; for the Svātantrikas, the emptiness view can be asserted and defended in arguments against opponents.

Bhāvaviveka and Jñānagarbha, who are both commonly identified in Tibet as Svātantrikas, make a distinction between the conceptual, linguistically expressible ultimate truth (*paryāyaparamārtha*) and the non-conceptual, linguistically inexpressible ultimate truth (*aparyāyaparamārtha*) (Ruegg 2010: 157; Eckel 1992: 118). This would seem to indicate that for them the ultimate truth is not so radically ineffable that concepts and words entirely fail to describe it.

By contrast, the Prāsaṅgikas' attitude is arguably negative about the capacity of language to express the ultimate truth. They refute all attempts to express, conceptualise and argue for the ultimate truth. Why? Perhaps the Prāsaṅgika presents a challenge to all philosophical dogmatism by undermining all linguistic expressions about ultimate truth because there is no ultimate truth. Alternatively, the Prāsaṅgikas' point may be that we can never be certain about the nature of whatever ultimate truth there may be (Huntington 2003). Thus all of our linguistic expressions of the ultimate truth are unreliable.

A third possibility is that the Prāsaṅgikas think that the ultimate truth can be known but in an experiential way (through direct perception in meditation, for example) that cannot be expressed in words and concepts; hence, views about the nature of the ultimate truth need to be refuted. The ultimate truth can be known non-conceptually but is epistemically and not just psychologically entirely

ineffable. This is an interpretation that was favoured by a number of Tibetan interpreters, such as Go rams pa and Mi bskyod rdo rje, who stress that the true Prāsaṅgika insight is that the ultimate truth is utterly beyond words and concepts. Arguing in favour of emptiness is futile and misleading; the only point of logic is to deconstruct itself (Dreyfus and McClintock 2003: 26–7). Hence Candrakīrti (commonly identified as a Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamika) apparently thought that Bhāvaviveka (considered to be the founding figure of Svātantrika Mādhyamika) was “simply addicted to logic” because of the latter’s preoccupation with arguments to prove emptiness (Williams 2009: 67).

However, although the Prāsaṅgika perspective may seem to be very negative about the ability of language to express reality, more positive readings also occur. An example is the aforementioned interpretation by Tsong khapa and the dGelugs school of Tibetan Buddhism, which considers Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamika as the highest form of Buddhist philosophy (Dreyfus and McClintock 2003: 27). For them, the Prāsaṅgikas’ apparent refusal to state and defend their own view is not to be taken literally. The Prāsaṅgikas do not think that ultimate truth is epistemically ineffable; it is expressible as the absence of intrinsic existence of all things. Moreover, they do think that rational argument must be employed to understand this ultimate truth, even if this conceptual understanding of emptiness needs to be developed into a direct, non-conceptual perceptual experience through meditative techniques (Williams 2009: 79–81). In this case, what one directly perceives is precisely the absence of intrinsic existence of all entities that was previously known in a linguistically expressible way. This direct perceptual experience may be psychologically ineffable but it does not seem to be epistemically ineffable. The Prāsaṅgika focus on refuting the views of rival philosophies does not preclude the Prāsaṅgika from asserting and defending with argument a linguistically expressible view of their own, namely, that the ultimate truth is the absence of intrinsic existence of all things (Hopkins 1996; Napper 1987).

Unsurprisingly, those aforementioned Tibetan interpreters who assert that the true Prāsaṅgika insight is that the ultimate truth strictly transcends words, concepts and logic consider Tsong kha pa’s reading to be a distortion and dilution; it fails to recognise the radical nature of the Prāsaṅgika assertion of the inability of language to apprehend reality (Dreyfus and McClintock 2003: 26–7). Even emptiness, as the absence of intrinsic existence of all things, cannot be a correct statement of the epistemically ineffable ultimate truth.

Language in Yogācāra

The previous chapter showed that (some) Yogācāra philosophy is commonly understood to be a form of ontological idealism. What implications does this have for the Yogācāra view of language? With the exception of the ultimately real flow of consciousness itself, the referents of language do not really exist.

This ontology is clearly quite negative about language; nevertheless, it is possible to argue that Yogācāra Buddhism is a form of moderate linguistic optimism. Some statements misrepresent reality, for example, the claim that

“there is an external world that exists independently of consciousness.” But other words are up to the task of describing things as they really are, though the Yogācāra description of how things really are differs from that of the other Buddhist traditions. Thus, statements that “external objects are merely imagined” and that “consciousness really exists as a flow of mental events and is empty of the subject–external object duality” are accurate portrayals of reality.

However, there is a puzzle here. Yogācāra texts also say that reality is indescribable, which appears to support a more pessimistic view of language. For instance, Asanga refers to the inexpressible inherent nature of all phenomena that he equates with suchness (*tathatā*), reality (*tattva*) and emptiness (*śūnyatā*) (*Bodhisattvabhūmi*, 26, 32). Elsewhere he declares that the signless (*animitta*), as well as suchness (*tathatā*), reality-limit (*bhūtakoti*), the ultimate (*paramārthatā*), and the sphere of reality (*dharmadhātu*) are all synonyms for emptiness (*śūnyatā*) (*Madhyāntavibhāga* i, 14). That is, emptiness is the signless or inexpressible ultimate reality. Furthermore, Vasubandhu says that, phenomena are essenceless (*nairātmya*) in their imagined aspect, where they are fabricated as dualisms such as subject and object (*grāhaka* and *grāhya*); however, they have an inexpressible (*anabhilāpya*) essence (*ātman*) that is not a product of fabrication. He claims that there is an inconceivable (*acintya*) supramundane (*lokottara*) knowledge (*jñāna*) free from grasping subject and grasped object (*Trimśikākārikā*, 29–30). The *Samdhinirmocana sūtra* (trans. Powers 1995: 20, 98) says that, unlike the dependent aspect, the imagined aspect “is established as names and signs”. The *sūtra* in this way proclaims the inexpressible (*brjod med*) nature of the dependent aspect as the true nature of things.

What does this mean? It might be argued that for Yogācāra all language is implicated in the subject-object duality and thus the non-dual flow of consciousness transcends language. But surely this statement is self-refuting, given that language is being used to express that the flow of non-dual consciousness is the true nature of things and that it transcends language. The inexpressible reality is the non-dual flow of consciousness, no longer infected by the illusion of a grasping subject who craves and appropriates external objects to which it attaches names and signs. In this case, this non-dual consciousness cannot be literally inexpressible, because it is describable as a non-dual flow of consciousness.

One solution to this problem would be to say that, although it is correct that reality is the non-dual flow of consciousness, the mental events that make up that non-dual flow are pure unconceptualised particulars that cannot be named and categorised without falsification and distortion. Language has some power to describe reality as the non-dual flow of consciousness made up of momentary mental events, but it is severely limited because it cannot say anything more specific about these particular, indeterminate mental events without distorting them. Indeed, Dignāga and Dharmakīrti’s final philosophical position is sometimes interpreted to have been Yogācāra; this would mean that the inexpressible momentary particulars are all mental events rather than external entities. They are genuinely real, unconstructed images that make up the flow of non-dual consciousness but have no external, physical reality (Tillemans 2003: 98).

Another solution to this problem is to rely again on the distinction between psychological and epistemic ineffability. Unawakened consciousness is always intentional because it is always consciousness of an object. It seems likely that the awakened experience of a non-intentional (or non-dual) consciousness would be so extraordinary and unlike unawakened experience that words might fail to communicate its affective character. Thus, words might express the truth about reality (reality is non-dual consciousness), but an unawakened person can get very little purchase on what the experience of this reality would be like. It is possible, then, that Yogācāra references to the inexpressibility of reality are best construed as statements of psychological ineffability; we cannot really express or understand what it would feel like to have the experience of an awakened non-dual consciousness. However, insofar as we can say something about it – for example, that it is not a state of unconsciousness and is fully aware of reality – this experience is not entirely inexpressible.

Moreover, this psychological ineffability is consistent with the epistemic claim that language correctly expresses the truth that reality is non-dual consciousness. It is true that the awakened person knows that reality is non-dual consciousness, even if the unawakened cannot appreciate, or cannot fully appreciate, what the experience of this non-dual consciousness is like. Furthermore, given the emphasis in the Yogācāra tradition on states of meditation, it may be that references to that reality as inexpressible may be about psychological states of contemplative absorption in which explicit conceptualisation and all verbalisation is absent. But this would be compatible with descriptions (perhaps post-meditation, assuming the meditative state is not permanent) of what is known in the meditation. This interpretation of Yogācāra preserves a degree of optimism about the capacity of words to express things as they really are. Even so, the awakened non-dual consciousness seems to be very different from, and mysterious to, the dualistic consciousness experienced by the unawakened; it is therefore arguable that there are severe limits to the understanding of reality that the words ‘non-dual consciousness’ can communicate. It may be that the meaning of these words remains (largely) incomprehensible to the unawakened even if they do accurately describe the nature of reality.

There is also a more radical interpretation. Perhaps (some) Yogācāra thinkers do mean to assert the complete epistemic ineffability of reality; the ultimate truth that is known by the awakened person is literally beyond words. Although on a conventional level Yogācāra texts favour ontologically idealist language which asserts the reality of consciousness but not the external world, ultimately even mentalist language is inadequate to the reality which is apprehended through awakening. Reality is not finally accessible to words and even descriptions of it as non-dual consciousness must be transcended. The Yogācāra *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* (6.8) states: “Realizing with discerning intelligence that there is nothing other than mind, he then understands the nonexistence of mind” (trans. Makransky 1997: 73). This might be taken as a refutation only of the existence of the dualistic mind, but could equally be construed as an assertion of the radical ineffability of reality, which transcends all descriptions, and cannot even be described as

non-dual consciousness or mind. What the awakened person knows (and not just the experience of having this knowledge) cannot be expressed in words. According to Jonathon Gold (2012),

Vasubandhu believes that whatever can be stated in language is only conventional, and therefore, from an ultimate perspective, it is mistaken. Ultimate reality is an inconceivable “thusness” (*tathatā*) that is perceived and known only by awakened beings. Ultimately, therefore, the idea of “mind” is just as mistaken as are ordinary “external objects.” For this reason, we can say that Vasubandhu is an idealist, but only in the realm of conventions. Ultimately, he affirms ineffability.

The previous chapter discussed how some interpreters see Yogācāra Buddhism as epistemological rather than ontological idealism. The world as we experience it is so permeated by the interpretive framework imposed by our minds that we are unable to see things as they really are. Presumably, only awakened people can cut through the conceptual constructions to see uninterpreted reality. Perhaps what they see is necessarily beyond the scope of language, given how thoroughly implicated language is in the conceptually constructed world. As Gold indicates, descriptions of reality as mind-only fall short like all other attempts to describe the ineffable.

John Makransky (1997: 89) explains that Indian Yogācāra sources claim that the Buddhas’ non-dual knowledge of reality is “impossible for ordinary persons to understand or explain with precision” and that it is “quite literally inconceivable (*acintya*).” Of course, this leaves us puzzled as to the epistemic and psychological content of their ineffable awakened experience. We may conclude that the Yogācāra philosophy is incoherent because we cannot make sense of literally ineffable knowledge, or we may simply think our puzzlement is indicative of the limitations of the unawakened mind.

Language and Buddha nature

The previous chapter discussed the teaching found in some Mahāyāna sources that Buddha nature is obscured by various adventitious moral and cognitive defilements (*kleśa*) – primarily greed, hatred and delusion – which afflict the unawakened. However, it is intrinsically pure and undefiled. We saw that Buddha nature can be interpreted in various manners but that it is sometimes said to be a fully formed primeval reality, which is permanent, unchanging and intrinsically pure.

In relation to the topic of this chapter, the question arises about the relationship between language and Buddha nature. It would seem that at least some minimal description of Buddha nature is possible, as demonstrated by the very words that have just been used to indicate what it is, that is, “a primeval reality, permanent, beyond change, intrinsically pure.” Moreover, Buddha nature is itself sometimes referred to as luminous, non-dual consciousness, permanent and even the true non-egoistic self. These appear to be descriptions.

Some interpreters argue that Yogācāra and Mādhyamika are ultimately united in asserting the ineffability of reality; the disagreements between these two traditions occur largely on the conventional level of words and concepts (Harris 1991). It is also not difficult to see how Buddha nature teaching could be conjoined with some of the more linguistically pessimistic strands of both Mādhyamika and Yogācāra. If all language is conceptual construction and mere imagination, then perhaps Buddha nature is truly signless. Indeed, Buddhist treatises on Buddha nature sometimes refer to it as inconceivable and a mystery. *The Awakening of Faith* says that Buddha nature is the essence of the mind “beyond language” and “has nothing to do with thoughts conceived by a deluded mind” (Williams 2009: 116). As already explained, in Yogācāra sources, language is itself often associated with the defilement of delusion and strongly implicated in the fabrication of dualities. In this context, all views about Buddha nature could be misleading attempts by the unawakened to describe a reality that is both psychologically and epistemically ineffable and accessible only through awakened gnosis. Buddha nature as intrinsically pure and non-dual is empty of all words and concepts, although there is an obvious tension between the first part of this sentence (which describes Buddha nature as intrinsically pure, luminous and non-dual) and the second part (which says that Buddha nature is empty of all words and concepts). Perhaps the conflict is resolved through the suggestive capacity of language when it functions poetically; words used metaphorically may have some ability to reveal reality as long as they are not taken literally; they are indicators (no matter how feeble) of reality, and an experience of reality, which they can only point towards but not describe with any precision and in any detail.

The relative weakness of Buddhist linguistic optimism

I have argued that various Buddhist philosophies can be interpreted as having a negative view of the relationship between language and reality. But I have made the case for examples in Buddhism of a more positive understanding; language can sometimes express and sometimes distort the way things really are. However, even for Buddhists who have some faith in the capacity of words to represent the way things really are, words are acknowledged often to mislead.

Linguistic optimism in Buddhism is generally significantly weaker than forms of linguistic optimism found in non-Buddhist Indian philosophies such as Mīmāṃsā and Nyāya-Vašeśika. These philosophies exhibit a confidence in the ability of language to identify real features of the world that is foreign to Buddhism. We have seen that Buddhist philosophers attribute only nominal existence to complex entities such as mountains, chariots and selves; those Buddhists who attribute ultimate existence to anything do so to the partless events which constitute complex entities. All things that can be analysed into parts are simply convenient labels and have no reality beyond the conceptually constructed world of human conventions. By contrast, Indian philosophers from the Nyāya-Vašeśika tradition commonly accept the mind-independent existence of many complex entities; thus, there really are mountains, chariots and selves. The whole entity is something

ultimately real that cannot be reduced to its parts, contrary to the Buddhist contention. Consequently, the words that refer to these whole entities refer to ultimately real features of the world that are more than simply human conventions (King 1999: 114–15; 119).

For Indian philosophers of these traditions, then, far greater numbers of words are successful at picking out things as they really are because their ontologies are much less parsimonious than those of Buddhists. Contrary to the Buddhist mistrust of things that can be analysed into parts, the ultimately real world contains complex things such as mountains, chariots and selves with their various qualities; consequently, far fewer words go astray in describing things as they really are than Buddhists maintain.

It is common to argue that all language is conventional in the sense that words are human constructs that vary depending on the particular language that one's culture employs. An English speaker uses the word 'cow', a French speaker 'vache', and a Hindi speaker 'gāy' to refer to the familiar fully grown female bovine animal; that these particular sounds are used is obviously linguistically relative and thus a matter of convention. There is no special connection between the English word 'cow', for example, and a real feature of the world. A different sound could be, and is (in different languages), used to refer to the same entity; all that is required for a word to be functional is widespread acceptance amongst users of a language that a particular sound will refer to a particular entity.

However, some Indian philosophers, notably from the Mīmāṃsā tradition, disagreed, exhibiting a sort of linguistic fundamentalism by claiming that Sanskrit, as the sacred language of the Vedas, was in accord with the nature of reality in a way that other languages cannot be (King 1999: 52). Buddhists, by contrast, often accepted the conventional nature of all languages, as evident in their willingness to communicate Buddhist sacred texts in many local languages and dialects (*Vinaya ii*, 139). No particular language is favoured as better able to depict things as they really are.

Regardless, it is possible to reject the Buddhist ontology that claims that complex entities such as mountains, chariots and selves are merely conventional while accepting with Buddhists that different languages employ different words to refer to these complex entities. What is primarily at issue here is the ontological status of the complex entities to which these different words refer rather than whether a particular language has a privileged access to reality and special capacity to describe things as they really are. Words can be conventional and linguistically relative without it following necessarily that the complex entities to which many words refer are merely conventional. An English speaker uses the word 'cow', a French speaker 'vache', and a Hindi speaker 'gāy' to refer to the complex entity which is the familiar fully grown female bovine animal.

For Buddhists, these various words all refer to an entity which can be analysed into parts and thus the entity to which the words refer is only conventionally real, a mere convenient designation to facilitate human activity and interaction. But the non-Buddhist philosopher with a realist ontology, that admits the ultimately real existence of some complex entities, will see the matter differently. They will

contend that there really is a fully grown female bovine animal which exists as more than simply a convenient designation for its parts and is a feature of the mind-independent world to which words can refer. Thus, contrary to the Buddhist analysis, such a philosophical perspective would claim that the words that describe these complex entities hit the mark insofar as they identify entities that ultimately exist, even if it is granted that the words themselves are conventional.

Descriptive and non-descriptive uses of language

Philosophers of religion often point out that ontological description (of God or the way things really are) is only one function of religious language. Indeed, description is only one function of language in general. I may use words to describe the nature and characteristics of a chair but I may also use words to express my desire to sit on the chair, or to invite or command others to sit on the chair.

Similarly, much religious language is employed with aims other than ontological description. While religious language can be ontological in orientation, it is often intensely practical. For example, religious language is used to exhort believers or practitioners to behave, and to refrain from behaving, in certain ways. And religious language can have an instructional function, providing information about how to follow the various ethical and ritual practices which constitute the lived reality of the religion. Language is also used to encourage non-adherents to join a religion, embrace its beliefs and practice its teachings. Religious language also often has a narrative function, relating significant stories that communicate information about the beliefs, values, history and self-understanding of a religious tradition. And religious language can be used to express emotions and feelings of devotion, commitment, doubt and to express one's aspirations and perceived shortcomings.

These multiple uses of religious language are important to Buddhism as they are to other religious traditions. They should not be overlooked, even though this chapter has focused on the ontological dimension of language, that is, the relationship between language and reality.

Language and liberation

Moreover, Buddhism makes statements about how things really are because it is believed that the understanding of the nature of reality is necessary to bring about awakening. Language has a transformative, soteriological function. The linguistic expression of the nature of reality is intended to transform experience from a state of ignorance and suffering. Buddhism employs language to identify and discourage mental attitudes, patterns of speech, and action rooted in craving and ignorance and to identify and encourage those that lead to the alleviation and eradication of these mental poisons.

For a Buddhist who is a strict linguistic pessimist, Buddhist statements about reality must have at best a merely instrumental value, as means to achieving the

end which is awakening. Even the most profound and effective uses of language which communicate Buddhist views are simply skilful means. In this case, it would seem that Buddhist right views are only true to the extent that they are useful. It would appear to follow that the awakened person will no longer assent to them as true, except perhaps as a means to help others achieve the same ineffable awakening. All Buddhist teachings ultimately fail to describe the way things really are. If one asserts that the Buddhist teachings about the nature of reality are ultimately true, then one has fallen prey to a dogmatism that is inimical to the spirit of the Buddhism. The Buddhist simile of the raft is often used to support this interpretation; just as a raft should be abandoned once it has done its job of transporting one to the further shore of a river, so too the Buddhist teachings about the nature of reality should be relinquished once they have done their work of transporting one to the ineffable awakened state (*Majjhima Nikāya* i, 134–5).

By contrast, a Buddhist who is more positive about the capacity of language to express things as they really are may claim that the awakened state does not entail giving up Buddhist right views about the nature of reality; such views are constitutive of the awakened state, rather than simply instruments for its attainment. And when they are useful, this is because they are true, rather than vice versa. As Jonardon Ganeri points out, similes such as the raft seem problematic, given that they imply that the truths expressed by Buddhist doctrines can be dispensed with once their pragmatic work has been done. He suggests the helpful alternative analogy of a man who flees from danger by climbing a large rock:

From the top, he is safe and has an excellent view. Should he then say to himself “This rock has served me well, and now I can dispense with it?” Obviously not. The point is that we might prefer a solid grasp of the truth as helping to sustain and maintain a person in a form of life, for example, the life of a sincere Buddhist (Ganeri 2007: 49).

The Buddhist who is a moderate linguistic optimist will agree. The awakened person would not give up those Buddhist doctrines that are deemed to be definitive, correct statements of the true nature of things. These doctrines are linguistic formulations of the ultimate truth to which awakened people are said to have become fully receptive, allowing them to reshape their cognitive and affective experiences. Right views about the ultimate truth are not to be renounced; on the contrary, they are to be embraced and made to permeate one’s thoughts and actions. Buddhist descriptions of reality continue to provide a “solid grasp of the truth” even, or perhaps especially, for awakened people; such individuals embody cognitive and affective attitudes, devoid of ignorance and craving, that accord with these statements of the truth.

7 Religious diversity

Another major issue in contemporary philosophy of religion is religious diversity. How do, and should, people with particular religious identities view those who have different religious commitments? Those with different religious identities can belong to other denominations within one's own religion (intra-religious diversity) or to religions other than one's own (inter-religious diversity).

The academic literature about attitudes to religious diversity has become extremely sophisticated and varied with terminology often disputed and employed in disparate ways. However, this chapter will identify three distinct attitudes to religious others: exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. Let me explain the meaning of these terms as employed in this study, without intending to deny that they have been used in other ways as well.

Exclusivism rejects the claim that other religious traditions express the truth about ultimate reality or the divine and that their teachings and practices can lead to salvation. Only one's own religious tradition expresses the ultimate truth and is soteriologically efficacious.

Inclusivism affirms that one's own religious tradition is the highest and most complete expression of the truth about ultimate reality or the divine and also that one's own religious tradition is most effective in bringing about salvation. However, other religious traditions express this truth but in a less complete manner, and thus are not entirely false; they can also be effective, though not as effective as one's own religious tradition, in bringing about salvation.

Pluralism affirms that other religious traditions employ diverse concepts to express the truth about ultimate reality or the divine and that these diverse concepts express this truth as effectively as the concepts used by one's own tradition; moreover, the diverse practices and beliefs of other religious traditions are as legitimate as one's own as means to achieving salvation. This pluralist position is often coupled with the view that ultimate reality or the divine transcends words and concepts and diverse religious teachings are limited but equally valid conceptual attempts to point towards the ineffable truth (Hick 1973).

The discussion of attitudes to religious diversity has a descriptive and a normative dimension. Philosophy of religion investigates what the attitudes of religious people to religious others *are* and also what they *should* be. For example, pluralism is sometimes lauded for its apparent open mindedness and acceptance

of different religious traditions but it is also criticised for taking insufficient notice of vital, irresolvable religious disagreements and incompatible points of view. Exclusivism is commonly criticised for narrow mindedness and intolerance but can also be admired for its principled loyalty to a particular religious tradition and for taking religious difference seriously; exclusivists are unwilling to accept alternative perspectives that they regard as contradicting or diluting the truth. Inclusivism is often seen as a compromise position which allows religious adherents to assert the superiority of their own tradition while not entirely dismissing the views of religious others. However, pluralist critics will often highlight the hierarchical and judgemental nature of this inclusivism, which gives other religious traditions too little worth by demoting them to a position below one's own. Exclusivist critics would view inclusivism as attributing too much value to false teachings which lead people astray.

Historically, the complex issues relating to religious diversity have been explored largely from Christian perspectives. However, there has also been a burgeoning literature and debate from the points of view of other religions, including Buddhism. This chapter will examine Buddhist views about intra-religious and inter-religious diversity. What are Buddhist attitudes to Buddhist teachings and practices from outside their respective traditions and to the religious views of those who are not Buddhist? There is a common view of Buddhism as tolerant, non-dogmatic and willing to embrace religious diversity. This interpretation is simplistic although not entirely wrong; Buddhist traditions have supported a range of attitudes towards religious others. Buddhists display a spectrum of attitudes – exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist – to Buddhist beliefs and practices which are different from their own. And Buddhist views regarding the truth claims and efficacy of religions other than Buddhism are similarly varied. We will begin with an analysis of Buddhist attitudes to intra-religious diversity, and then consider Buddhist views about inter-religious diversity.

Intra-religious exclusivism

For many Buddhists an important issue has been whether, or to what extent, the teachings of other Buddhist traditions are true and can lead to liberation. Indeed, there is a rich and venerable history of vigorous Buddhist intra-religious polemics in which competing interpretations of the Buddhist teachings vie for the position of ultimate truth and maximum efficacy in bringing about liberation.

In some cases, Buddhists have exhibited an exclusivist attitude to the beliefs of other Buddhist traditions, who are accused of advocating views that are simply false and of no soteriological benefit. For example, many ancient Indian Buddhists dismissed the rival Pudgalavāda school, which advocated the existence of an enduring person, as a harmful deviation from the genuine Buddhist teaching of not-self (Williams, Tribe and Wynne 2012: 92–4). Moreover, Theravāda Buddhists have often regarded Mahāyāna scriptures and teachings as inauthentic and fraudulently attributed to the Buddha; early Buddhists sometimes condemned the Mahāyāna scriptures as mere poetry or the teachings

of Māra, the devil-like figure who leads people into greater delusion (Xing 2005: 129–30; Kim 2013: 189). And the dGe lugs pa school of Tibetan Buddhism frequently accused the rival Jo nanga pa school of reifying emptiness into a substantial, independently existing reality. The dGe lugs pas considered this to be a misguided and dangerous departure from the authentic Buddhist teaching of emptiness – that is, the non-substantial and dependently originating nature of all things (Ruegg 1963).

In medieval Japan, an aggressive example of an exclusivist attitude towards other Buddhists is displayed by Nichiren (1222–1282) who maintained an uncompromising approach to the truth, condemning other Buddhist teachings prevalent in his day. He accused the Pure Land, Zen, Vinaya, and Shingon sects of disseminating erroneous and slanderous teachings that contradict the true Buddhist teaching of Śākyamuni Buddha as stated in the *Lotus sūtra*. Nichiren contended that these false Buddhist teachings, far from bringing about liberation, would lead their practitioners to rebirth in hell (Habito 2003: 372–5). This intra-religious exclusivism is directed at rival Japanese Buddhist denominations, which were his competitors, rather than at non-Nichiren Buddhists in general. While some later followers of Nichiren continued this exclusivist attitude, others have been more accommodating of other Japanese Buddhist traditions (Stone 2013).

A recent example of Japanese Buddhist intra-religious exclusivism is the rationalist, modernist ‘Critical Buddhist’ movement associated with Buddhist scholars such as Hakamaya Noriaki and Matsumotō Shiro. Chapter 5 explained that they are critical of the Buddha nature teaching because it posits a permanent absolute reality; this contradicts what the Critical Buddhists consider to be the authentic Buddhist teachings of universal dependent origination and not-self. They also reject as a non-Buddhist accretion the notion that, because we all have Buddha nature fully formed within us, we are intrinsically awakened. Given that these teachings of Buddha nature and intrinsic awakening have been highly influential in Japanese Buddhism and East Asian Buddhism more broadly, the Critical Buddhists consider a significant amount of Japanese and East Asian Buddhism to be not genuinely Buddhist. They often regard the inauthentic elements as accretions because of syncretism with Daoist and East Asian folk religious traditions (Williams 2009: 122–3). Matsumotō also argues that the notions of a non-conceptual gnosis that goes beyond all words and the teaching of non-duality are not authentically Buddhist, even though these ideas that have been central to Yogācāra, Buddha nature thinking and Zen in particular (Hubbard and Swanson 1997; Williams 2009: 122–3). The Critical Buddhists – who believe that for genuine Buddhism the ultimate truth of dependent origination and not-self can be expressed in words – oppose the view that reality is ineffable. The Critical Buddhists’ attempt to exclude as inauthentic many beliefs that have been regarded as Buddhist is obviously highly contentious.

The fourteenth Dalai Lama expresses a more surprising contemporary example of what might arguably be described as partial intra-religious exclusivism. As we will see in more detail later, he is normally not associated with exclusivism; he

usually seeks dialogue and common ground with other Buddhist traditions, and, indeed, non-Buddhist religions. However, he has been outspoken in his disapproval of the worship in his own dGe lugs pa school of rDo rje shugs ldan (Dorje Shugden). This protector deity has historically sometimes been associated with the assertion of the dGe lugs school's political interests and its persecution of other Tibetan traditions. In 1996, the Dalai Lama banned members of government official and monasteries under the control of Tibetan exile administration from worshipping rDo rje shugs ldan, whom he had come to regard as a malign spirit promoting intra-religious intolerance and undermining the unity of the Tibetan community. Devotees of rDo rje shugs ldan unsurprisingly accuse the Dalai Lama of religious intolerance. The history and nuances of this controversy are very complex (Dreyfus 1998; Lopez 1998: 188–96; Ardley 2002: 175–6). However, what seems clear and philosophically interesting is that Buddhists such as the Dalai Lama, who claim to seek intra-religious harmony and dialogue, will inevitably find it difficult to accommodate aspects of Buddhism which they consider to have promoted sectarian-based intolerance and persecution. Such tolerant Buddhists will be inclined to exhibit an exclusivist attitude towards those elements of Buddhist traditions that have been intolerant and aggressively sectarian.

Intra-religious inclusivism

A different and popular Buddhist attitude has been intra-religious inclusivism, which acknowledges the validity of the teachings and practices of other Buddhist groups while ranking them hierarchically below those of one's own tradition. Buddhists have often combined tolerance of sectarian diversity with an assertion of the superiority of their own school.

The *Catupratisarana sūtra* makes a distinction between teachings of the Buddha that are of interpretable meaning (*neyārtha*) and those that have a definitive meaning (*nītārtha*). These are hermeneutic categories that are employed in many traditions of Buddhism. Teachings with a definitive meaning represent the Buddha's final view and thus can be taken literally. By contrast, the Buddha taught teachings with an interpretable meaning as pragmatic concessions to those who have not progressed far enough spiritually to receive the final teaching. A widespread Buddhist hermeneutical technique is to categorize the scriptural teachings of one's own Buddhist tradition as having definitive and precise meaning whereas those of other groups are relegated to provisional or interpretable status (Lamotte 1992: 16–23). The teachings of other forms of Buddhism are the lower steps on a path to liberation which are preparatory to the final and complete teaching of one's own tradition.

Consequently, there is considerable disagreement between the various types of Buddhism about which teachings have the highest status. For instance, writing from a Theravāda perspective, Buddhaghosa (fifth century CE) identifies the truths of impermanence, suffering, and not-self as the definitive truths (Lopez 1992: 62). However, the Yogācāra tradition favours the teaching of mind-only

(*cittamātra*) as the highest teaching. Some Mādhyamikas criticise this Yogācāra claim, arguing that the mind-only teaching is provisional. It is a therapeutic device taught to enable practitioners to relinquish their craving for external objects (Lopez 1992: 52–6; 69). For Mādhyamikas, the definitive teaching is universal emptiness of intrinsic existence. The Yogācārins claim that there have been three turnings of the wheel of the Dharma: the non-Mahāyāna teachings are the first and lowest Buddhist teachings, supplanted by the Mādhyamika doctrine of universal emptiness, which itself is superseded by the Yogācāra mind-only teaching. Unsurprisingly, the Mādhyamikas reverse the second and third turnings, so that the teaching of universal emptiness becomes the supreme teaching and the mind only view is provisional (Lopez 1992). Furthermore, Buddhists strongly influenced by the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine will often treat teachings about Buddha nature as definitive.

There are numerous other Buddhist scholastic classification systems that involve such hierarchical ordering. For example, in Chinese Buddhism, Zhiyi (Chih-i) (538–597) of the Tian Tai (T’ien T’ai) school ranks the Buddhist scriptures based on the content of the teachings, the disposition of the student, and the period of the Buddha’s teaching career; he places the *Lotus sūtra* at the pinnacle. By contrast, the Huayan school identifies ten levels of Buddhist teachings with the *Huayan sūtra* expressing the highest standpoint. Another classification system was developed by Zongmi (Tsung-mi) (780–841) according to whom the supreme teaching was contained in the Mahāyāna text, the *Awakening of Faith* (Habito 2003: 364). Furthermore, the Tibetan dGe lugs pa school identifies its own Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamika teaching as the highest form of Buddhist philosophy and above Svātantrika Mādhyamika, which is itself higher than Yogācāra. Non-Mahāyāna forms of Buddhism are relegated to a lower position (Hopkins 1996). And the Japanese Buddhist Kukai (774–835) arranges Buddhist schools hierarchically, with the Shingon esoteric teaching at the apex, and other forms of Buddhism as lower, preparatory stages (Kiblinger 2005: 58–9).

This inclusivist strategy is frequently employed by Mahāyāna Buddhists to subordinate non-Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions in particular. The Mahāyāna Buddhists refer to the latter pejoratively as the Hinayāna, literally translated as ‘the lesser vehicle’. Mahāyāna sources, such as the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa sūtra*, sometimes display an exclusivist hostility to the Hinayāna, stressing the foolishness of the Hīnayāna saints and their incorrect understanding of the Buddha’s teaching (Robinson and Johnson 1997: 85). However, Mahāyāna texts such as the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* and the *Lotus sūtra* are more inclusivist and conciliatory; they regard the Hīnayāna dispensation as a pragmatic concession. The Buddha’s Hīnayāna teachings – about the selflessness of persons, the four noble truths and the attainment of a personal nirvāṇa for oneself alone – are for those who are not spiritually developed enough for the more exalted Mahāyāna teaching of emptiness and its goal of becoming an omniscient Buddha who is compassionately devoted to helping all sentient beings achieve awakening (Kiblinger 2005: 44–8).

Jōkei: A Japanese inclusivist

An interesting case study is Jōkei (1155–1213), a medieval Japanese monk from the Hossō (Yogācāra) school. He worshipped Śākyamuni, Maitreya, Kannon, the local Kasuga deity and Jizō among others. He did not confine himself to the Hossō consciousness-only meditation practice, also valuing the recitation of the Buddha's name (*nenbutso*) and esoteric mantras, typically associated with Pure Land and Tantric Buddhism respectively. He also recognized the importance of other Buddhist practices such as relic worship, "participation in liturgical assemblies" and the observance of monastic precepts (Ford 2006: 7).

There is certainly intra-religious eclecticism in Jōkei's wide-ranging attitude to devotion and practice. James Ford (2006: 71) describes this as a pluralistic attitude that was common in Buddhism in the Heian period and is also prevalent in contemporary Japanese Buddhism. However, Jōkei's borrowing from diverse Buddhist traditions seems more akin to inclusivism than pluralism, at least in the way that the terms are being employed in this chapter. Indeed, Ford (2006: 7, 203) sometimes describes Jōkei's approach as inclusive or inclusivist and does not appear to differentiate these terms from pluralism. This is a good example of the fluid nature of the terminology employed in the academic discussion about religious diversity.

Jōkei is an inclusivist because he does not appear to value all forms of Buddhism as equally soteriologically efficacious and as equally valid expressions of the ultimate truth. For instance, Ford (2006: 65) notes that Jōkei viewed the rival Tendai school's teachings as provisional and "true from a certain perspective", ultimately to be superseded by the Hossō teachings. Furthermore, although Jōkei clearly values a wide range of Buddhist practices, there is still a hierarchy; for example, the realms of Kannon and Maitreya are presented as inferior to Amida's Pure Land but have the advantage of being easier to attain. Jōkei also states that the *nenbutsu* and esoteric Tantric practices are preliminary to the Hossō consciousness-only meditation (Ford 2006: 110–11; 117). Jōkei made use of the skilful means teaching (see below) to explain the value of provisional teachings and practices for those not yet spiritually ready for the higher teachings of the Hossō school (Ford 2006: 143–6).

In addition, Jōkei was a staunch critic of Hōnen and the Pure Land Buddhist tradition. Jōkei petitioned the Japanese court in support of the suppression of Hōnen's Pure Land movement. Jōkei's motivations were complex but included his opposition to Hōnen's neglect of monasticism and Hōnen's claim that the *nenbutso* practice was the sole means to salvation (Ford 2006: 157–84). Jōkei's inclusivism is thus tinged with an element of exclusivism in relation to Pure Land Buddhism.

Skilful means

A key concept in the Mahāyāna discourse about intra-religious inclusivism is skilful means or skill in means (*upāyakauśalya*). Just as a kindly and experienced

doctor prescribes medicines in accordance with the malady, so the Buddha has the skill and compassion to adapt his teachings to the capacity of those he teaches. The methods employed to advance people on the path to awakening will vary depending on their needs and ability to understand. So, the views of other Buddhist traditions can be accommodated as appropriate for those who are not yet ready for, or do not have access to, the highest teaching as expressed by one's own denomination.

The *Lotus sūtra* claims that the Buddha uses various devices to guide people towards awakening; they will vary depending on the individual circumstances and aptitude. In a famous parable in chapter 3, the *sūtra* compares the Buddha to a father who seeks to rescue his sons from a burning house. To persuade them out of the house, the father entices them with desirable toy carts pulled by goats, deer and oxen. Similarly, the Buddha uses a range of teachings to persuade unawakened people to embark on the path from *samsāra* – a metaphorical burning house of craving and delusion. However, when they leave the house, the father gives the children a sumptuous carriage made of precious stones and pulled by bullocks. The inferior carts can be understood as the lower but useful teachings of Buddhism which function as skilful means whereas the superior carriage is the highest Buddhist teaching, contained of course in the *Lotus sūtra*.

This means that Buddha does not teach the whole truth to all people. He teaches only what will be beneficial, remaining silent as an act of merciful discretion when he judges that the revelation of the truth will have a deleterious effect. Some people are not, or not yet, sufficiently receptive and robust for the disclosure of naked reality to be helpful to them. As Nāgārjuna says in the *Ratnāvalī*:

Just as a grammarian [first] makes
His students read the alphabet,
So Buddha taught his trainees
The doctrines which they could bear

(*Ratnāvalī*, 394. Trans. Hopkins 1975: 76)

This notion that many Buddhist doctrines are skilful means is used not only as a way of accommodating the variety of teachings as each having validity but also as a “hermeneutics of control”, whereby the views of rival Buddhist traditions can be conveniently subordinated to those of one's own (Lopez 1992: 6). Attitudes to religious diversity, including intra-religious inclusivism, are not purely philosophical stances and cannot be divorced from the political considerations that motivate them. Buddhist sects and textual sources, including the *Lotus sūtra*, have used the notion of skilful means to justify the elevation of their own doctrines to a superior position. It is the teachings of other Buddhists which tend to be labeled as skilful means, while those of one's preferred Buddhist group are given a higher status and more authority (Hubbard 1995).

Intra-religious pluralism

It is arguable that the skilful means notion suggests the more radical message – sometimes forgotten by Buddhists themselves – that *all* Buddhist teachings and practices are skilful means because the experience of the ultimate truth transcends concepts and words. The goal of Buddhism is awakening, an immediate, non-conceptual experience of ‘things as they really are’. In this case, the teachings of no Buddhist school can have absolute status, as they are all simply proverbial fingers pointing towards the moon (Pye 1978; 1990).

Indeed, some Buddhist texts seem to suggest that all doctrinal formulations are simply skilful means; they declare that they must all be relinquished eventually as inadequate to the inexpressible ultimate truth. For example, the *Atthakavagga* from the *Sutta Nipāta* (780–87) seems to advocate that the awakened person will hold no views whatsoever. Furthermore, the famous simile of the raft indicates that, like a raft used to cross a river, the Dhamma should be used for crossing to the far shore beyond the stream of birth and death (*samsāra*). Once one has reached the other side the Dhamma, like the raft, should be abandoned as it has fulfilled its purpose (*Majjhima Nikāya* i, 134–35). And the *Ratnakūṭa sūtra* likens the Buddha’s teachings to a medicine that expels itself from the body as well as the poison that it removes (*Prasannapadā*, 83b–84a).

The pluralist may therefore argue that the teachings of various Buddhist traditions are equally effective methods to achieve the same ineffable end. They are equally valid conceptual expressions which mediate in different ways an experience which is beyond concepts. So, it is possible to interpret the skilful means doctrine as compatible with a non-hierarchical intra-religious pluralism, which acknowledges that the teachings of a range of (perhaps all) Buddhist groups may be equally efficacious in bringing about the ultimate goal of awakening and may be equally valid conceptual mediations of the non-conceptual ultimate truth.

This pluralist position is appealing to some contemporary Buddhists because it transcends sectarian dogmatism by acknowledging that the Buddhist path to awakening can take a variety of equally legitimate forms. For example, this view, that all Buddhist teachings and scriptures are just skilful means, is expressed by Yong-pyo Kim (2013: 198–200) who sees it as a way of promoting harmony between Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhists. Another example of a pluralist tendency is found among proponents of the Tibetan Ris med (Rimé) or non-partisan movement, which was founded in the nineteenth century and is still significant in contemporary Tibetan Buddhism. This ecumenical tendency developed in response to pronounced sectarian rivalries, disagreements and suspicions between Tibetan Buddhist schools. The Ris med movement claims to respect the differences in teachings and methods of Buddhist practice in the diverse Tibetan schools and lineages without asserting the superiority of any particular tradition. According to Ri mgul sprul sku (Ringu Tulku), “the Rimé position is that although the various Tibetan lineages have evolved different emphases and practices, they have a single ultimate understanding and their teachings all arrive at the same essential point” (Tulku 2006: Chapter 1).

There is an obvious attraction in the pluralist approach as it counteracts the strong tendency in Buddhism historically to assert the superiority of one's own variety of Buddhism, which can appear narrow-minded, dogmatic, and presumptuous. However, the common objection is that such pluralism arguably pays insufficient attention to challenging, and sometimes irreconcilable, doctrinal differences that occur between Buddhist traditions. It may be that pluralism does not take the genuine disagreements and diversity seriously enough. For instance, some Buddhists think that the ultimate truth is strictly ineffable whereas others disagree. Some Buddhists claim that there is an absolute reality; others make the denial of an absolute reality central to their teaching. Some Buddhists affirm, while others deny, the existence of the material world. Many Buddhists deny, whereas others assert, the existence of the unchanging self. It is not clear that there is a single awakened experience which is common to all Buddhist traditions. Critics of the pluralist approach will wonder how such apparently contradictory beliefs can be equally valid expressions of how things really are. If all Buddhist teachings are just rafts, some may be more watertight than others. Even if all Buddhist teachings are fingers pointing at the same moon, some may point more directly. The Buddhist teachings may all be medicines, but some drugs may be more potent and effective.

Inter-religious diversity

Buddhist attitudes to non-Buddhist religions have been similarly varied. There are examples of inter-religious exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, although the latter appears to be largely a modern development.

Buddhism arose in the late Vedic period in northern India, an environment in which there were many competing and conflicting religious beliefs about the nature of the universe and the place of human beings within it (Jayatilleke 1975: 3–9). Thus, the encounter with other religions has been a significant issue in Buddhism from its inception. Furthermore, once Buddhism was transplanted into other cultures, it came into contact with traditions such as Daoism, Confucianism and Shintō. So, it is unsurprising that, throughout Buddhist history, there are many examples of Buddhists who have addressed explicitly the relationship between Buddhism and other religions.

Inter-religious tolerance and intolerance

Buddhism sometimes has been less brutal and dismissive in its reaction to other religions than has Christianity. This is partly because Buddhism has been accustomed to operating in religiously diverse cultures in which it has often not been dominant. Consequently, Buddhism has in many cases sought for peaceful co-existence rather than resorting to persecution of other religions. Moreover, there is a non-dogmatic current evident in some Buddhist texts, which warn against the spiritual dangers of partisan and disputatious clinging to any religious and philosophical views, including those of Buddhism itself (Jayatilleke 1975: 9–10; Fuller 2005). This accommodating attitude is exemplified by the Buddhist

convert emperor Aśoka who expresses, in his rock edicts, the desire that members of all religious traditions should live together harmoniously in his kingdom. He praises religion generally and not simply Buddhism (Kiblinger 2005: 38–40).

However, it would be a misrepresentation to claim that Buddhists have always sought peaceful coexistence with other religions. For instance, the Sri Lankan *Mahāvamsa* (fifth or sixth century CE) is a chronicle of the early Sri Lankan Buddhist kings, including King Dutṭhagāmaṇī (101–77 BCE), whom it regards as a hero. He is said to have defeated the Tamil Hindu king Elara who was regarded as a threat to Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Buddhist monks and relics accompanied Dutṭhagāmaṇī's army. Monks were also encouraged to disrobe and become soldiers. When he felt sorrow for the harm he had caused, awakened monks (*arahats*) are said to have reassured him that it was right to kill men who have wrong views who were wicked, not fully human, and who were a threat to Buddhism. In modern times, Sinhalese Buddhism has become strongly nationalistic in post-independence Sri Lanka which has contributed to a devastating civil war. Sinhalese nationalists sometimes draw on idealized perceptions of ancient Sri Lanka as a Buddhist kingdom established by Dutṭhagāmaṇī; non-Buddhist Tamils and other minorities are sometimes regarded as outsiders who endanger the Buddhist nation (Bartholomeusz 1999).

Another example of Buddhist inter-religious intolerance occurs in the first chapter of the *Kālacakra tantra* which demonises Muslims and prophecises a utopian future in which a Buddhist messianic hero, Kalkin Cakrin, eradicates the adherents of Islam (Newman 2013: 34–5). The negativity towards Islam evident in this text needs to be seen in the historical context of the tenth century Muslim invasions of India which threatened the existence of Buddhism (Berzin 2013: 11–12). Moreover, the second chapter of the *Kālacakra tantra* seeks to interpret the battle against the Muslims as an allegory of the Tantric practitioner's inner spiritual battle against the forces of ignorance (Newman 2013: 35–6). But the non-allegorical interpretation seems to persist in, for example, the writings of the Tibetan scholar Thu'u bkwan blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma (1737–1802) who claims that the text is a prediction of the final victory of Buddhists over the Muslims (Nyima 2013: 37–41). The battle is also sometimes explained “to be mere illusion, a mere magic show that the Kalkin emanates to convert, not destroy, the Muslims” (Newman 2013: 32). While this non-literal interpretation reconciles the *Kālacakra* teaching to the Buddhist principle of non-violence, it nonetheless exhibits an exclusivist attitude towards Islam. A further example of intolerant Buddhist attitudes towards Muslims occurs in contemporary Thailand, where Buddhists have discriminated against Muslim minorities, although there are also examples of Thai Buddhists who seek Buddhist-Muslim peaceful coexistence and dialogue (Keyes 2013; Visalo 2013).

Buddhist critiques of other religions

The Buddha is often represented in the scriptures as adopting a critical outlook towards other religions rather than regarding them as equals. For example, he

attacks the epistemological foundation of the Vedic religion, with its dependence on inherited and unexamined traditions passed down over many generations. He likens the Brahmins to a file of blind men, each holding on to the one in front of him and led by a man who is also blind (Hayes 1991: 84).

There are many examples in Buddhist scriptures of explicit critiques of the beliefs and practices of other religions. For instance, they reject Vedic animal sacrifice as contrary to the ethical principle of non-violence (Bailey and Mabbett 2003: 22–3). The Hindu caste system is also criticised on the basis that ethical and spiritual attainment is not dependent on the caste into which one is born, contrary to the Brahminical beliefs (Chakravarti 2013: 84–5).

Moreover, common non-Buddhist religious views such as the belief in an eternal soul and creator God are frequently subjected to muscular and sustained refutations. Buddhists often contend that these religious doctrines arise out of ignorance, an unwillingness to face unpalatable truths, and wishful thinking. The soul or permanent self is rejected as contrary to the Buddhist teaching that the individual is simply a complex process of impermanent mental and physical events (Siderits 2003). Indian Buddhist philosophical traditions argued for many centuries against the Hindu belief in an eternal divine creator (see chapter 4). Moreover, some Buddhists repudiate the common theistic religious view that there is a savior deity; a Buddhist attitude is that human beings are responsible for their own liberation and no divine being is capable of bestowing liberation upon anyone (Cabezón 2003c: 24–8). However, this is not the only attitude expressed by Buddhists; indeed, reliance on Buddha or Buddhas (and Bodhisattvas) for both mundane and salvific assistance is a feature common to many forms of Buddhism, so the contrast with theistic religions should not be too sharply drawn here (see chapter 4).

The inferiority of other religions

The Buddhist scriptures represent the Buddha as advocating that one should rely on one's personal experience in order to test religious beliefs and practices, accepting them only if they are found to be justified and lead to the cessation of suffering (Jayatilleke 1975: 17–19). This can be construed as exhibiting openness to the possible value of other religions; however, the Buddha is represented as confident that Buddhism in the end will pass this experiential test more successfully than any other religion. Indeed, there are various stories in the Buddhist scriptures of followers of other religious traditions converting to Buddhism when convinced of its superiority (Schumann 1989: 226–9).

Buddhists have frequently related to other religious traditions as inferior. If there is truth in other religions, it is at a lower, more fragmentary level than Buddhism. In some cases, the Buddhist texts seem to be saying that whatever truth is communicated by these religions is so distorted that it does not help one at all on the path to liberation.

This is the message of the often-misconstrued Buddhist parable of the elephant and the blind men. The king instructs each of the blind men to use their hands to

grasp a different part of an elephant in order to get some understanding of its nature. Religious pluralists of a non-Buddhist persuasion have employed this parable to explain their view that all (or many) religions are equally valid and complementary because they each understand some aspect of the sacred reality just as each blind man grasps one part of the elephant. And, sometimes, recent Buddhists themselves, such as Robert Thurman (1997), have employed the story to support a pluralist view of Buddhism.

However, it is striking that the Buddhist rendition of this parable, seen in its original context, does not seem to support a pluralist reading. On the contrary, the Buddha is compared to the sighted king who is far superior in that he can see the elephant in its entirety, whereas other religious teachers are compared to the blind men who are inferior in that they have only a limited understanding of the truth. Furthermore, the text comments that, unlike the Buddha, these non-Buddhist religious teachers engage in dogmatic bickering based on their attachment to their partial perspectives and they do not have enough insight to attain liberation (*Udāna* 66, trans. Ireland 1997: 81–6; Schmidt-Leukel 2005: 19). In a similar vein, the *Cūlaśīhanāda sutta* declares that true saints are not found in religious systems other than Buddhism (*Majjhima Nikāya* 11; Dhammadvisuddhi 2013: 112).

Even so, Buddhist texts give occasional examples of Buddhist practitioners, such as Sudhana in the *Gandavyūha sūtra*, who are said to have learned from non-Buddhist teachers (Chappell 1999: 5). The Buddhist scriptures also accept the notion of the lone Buddha (*pacceka-buddha/pratyeka-buddha*), a category of saints that achieved awakening independently of the Buddha's teaching. This concept is sometimes interpreted as a Buddhist acknowledgement that, although Buddhism is superior to other traditions, spiritual insight has been possible on rare occasions outside the Buddhist community (Kloppenborg 1974; Jayatilleke 2013: 99). However, this is not necessarily an endorsement of non-Buddhist religious teachings and practices as leading to awakening. It would seem that the *pacceka-buddhas* do not gain awakening by following a religious system other than Buddhism; rather they discover and follow the Buddhist path as the only correct way to liberation but as “free thinkers” without the support of the Buddhist community and a Buddhist teacher (Dhammadvisuddhi 2013: 112–14).

Inter-religious inclusivism

We have seen that hierarchical inclusivism is a frequent Buddhist strategy when dealing with intra-religious diversity. It is also a common Buddhist way of relating to non-Buddhist traditions. Buddhists have not always regarded their tradition as having a monopoly on the truth and soteriological efficacy. This is an attitude which is both accommodating and subordinating because it leaves open the possibility that other religions have discovered aspects of the truth while it also asserts the superiority of Buddhism. A partial grasp of the truth is arguably better than no understanding at all. Thus, it is not surprising that Buddhists have sometimes been open to the value of at least some other religious traditions.

For example, the Pāli scriptures exhibit a degree of inclusivism when they divide non-Buddhist religions into two categories. While one group is constituted by false or pseudo-religions which advocate teachings such as immorality, fatalism and non-survival after death, the other group is made up of religions that are unsatisfactory although not completely false. The former are of no value whereas the latter have a limited value, because they encourage moral behaviour, some kind of survival after death and the need for one to take responsibility for one's progress towards salvation (Jayatilleke 1975: 23). Some religions are considered to be simply wrong and entirely deleterious whereas others contain some truth and are of some efficacy, although inferior to Buddhism itself.

In the Pāli scriptures, the Buddha indicates that any religion is spiritually efficacious only to the extent that it incorporates renunciation of possessions and the domestic life, strict rules of ethical conduct as set out by the Buddha, and the practice of forms of meditation which overcome attachment to sense objects and the tendency to regard the body and mind as one's self (Hayes 1991: 83). The extent to which the teachings and practices of other religions overlap with the Noble Eightfold Path is the criterion by which they are measured, and no other religion has taught the Noble Eightfold Path as completely as Buddhism (Chappell 1991: 358).

In addition, the Mahāyāna skilful means teaching has sometimes been applied in a way that supports inter-religious inclusivism. Non-Buddhist religions have been included as useful teachings but at a lower level than those of Buddhism (Makransky 2013: 187). Thus, Chinese Buddhists often recognized Confucianism and Daoism as having relative value as preliminary stages to Buddhism and there were attempts to harmonise the three teachings. This is evident in some of the aforementioned scholastic classification systems. For instance, Zongmi (Tsung-mi) regards Confucianism and Daoism as "outer teachings" whereas Buddhism has the "inner teachings". The two indigenous Chinese religions are ranked below all forms of Buddhism, because they do not teach key doctrines such as karma, rebirth and causality, but Zongmi accepts that Confucian and Daoist beliefs and practices overlap with those of Buddhism and are of some worth as teaching some correct ways of living (Gregory 2013). By contrast, the fourth Chinese Huayan patriarch Chengguan (Ch'eng-kuan) (738–839), who was Zongmi's teacher, takes a predominately exclusivist stance towards Daoism and Confucianism, making numerous criticisms of Daoist and Confucian teachings as largely incompatible with Buddhism (Hamar 2000).

Buddhist inter-religious inclusivism can sometimes involve attributing different functions to Buddhism and its competitors; Buddhism has the supreme, supramundane role of bringing about final liberation but this is seen to be compatible with the more mundane, worldly purposes of other religions. For instance, Confucianism is often valued as giving ethical instructions and governing human interactions whereas Daoism provides good health and guidance about living in harmony with nature (Chappell 1991: 359). And the deities of other religions may be consulted and propitiated in order to ensure a good harvest, cure an illness, or achieve success in business. For example, rather than denying the existence and usefulness of the Japanese Shintō deities, Buddhism frequently

construed them as “worldly assistants” of the Buddha, who are “still of legitimate use in *this* world, while the Buddha held the key to the *eternal* world of full salvation” (King 1999: 37). Only Buddhism is capable of guiding people to awakening. In Japan, this view that different religions have different functions means that many people have multiple religious identities simultaneously; one need not be exclusively Buddhist (Reader 1994: 169).

Another inclusivist approach is evident in the early Indian Buddhist attitude to some Vedic beliefs and practices. The Buddha is said to have reinterpreted rather than simply dismissed them. For example, Vedic religion sought concord and harmony with the god Brahmā through the performance of Vedic sacrifices. The Buddha proposed that the genuine way to gain the fellowship of Brahmā is by developing the same admirable ethical qualities that the god possesses (Jayatilleke 1975: 28–30). Moreover, the notion of a brahmin is not refuted but ethicized: the Buddha claims that a true brahmin is not a person born into a superior social class; on the contrary, he is someone who has developed moral virtues and has achieved awakening (Kiblanger 2005: 43). In such cases, the Buddha redefined, rather than rejected, the inherited Indian beliefs and practices, although the re-definitions are sometimes so radical that they are arguably tantamount to refutations.

A further Buddhist inclusivist strategy is to claim that the gods of other religions are actually Buddhist deities in disguise. For instance, in Japanese Buddhism, the indigenous Shintō god Amaterasu was sometimes understood to be Buddha while Hachiman, a Shintō war-god, was promoted to the role of a Bodhisattva (King 1999: 37; Kiblanger 2005: 54). They manifest in a non-Buddhist way motivated by compassion and as an example of skilful means. Similarly, in Sri Lanka, Buddhists often regard the Hindu deity Viṣṇu as a Buddhist high god who is committed to practising the Buddhist path to awakening (Holt 2013: 136–7).

Inter-religious pluralism

Richard Hayes (1991: 93–4) argues that inter-religious pluralism is “a distinctly modern ideology” that has developed in reaction to older triumphalist and supremacist attitudes by which most religions, including Buddhism, have been influenced. Consequently, he contends that to seek genuinely pluralist messages in traditional Buddhism would be “anachronistic” and “intellectually dishonest”. Hayes expresses this view quite forcefully; nevertheless, his criticism is a reminder that we should be cautious about overtly pluralist readings of traditional Buddhist attitudes to other religions. The popularity of inter-religious pluralism seems to be largely a response to modern values such as egalitarianism, multiculturalism, globalization and relativism.

If there are some examples of pluralist tendencies in pre-modern Buddhism, they appear to be exceptions and often inchoate. David Chappell (1999: 4–5) observes that traditional Buddhism did not usually assent to the pluralist view that other religions are equal to it. Still, he notes that some Buddhists claimed that Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism have the same essence or substance. For instance, the Korean Ch'ongho Hyujong (1520–1604) believed that “the ways to

enlightenment of the three religions resonated with each other". Their use of many different words and names should not be a distraction from "the universal One" beyond concepts towards which their teachings are directed (Chappell 1999: 9). A precedent for this attitude is found in the writings of Dahui Zonggao (Ta-hui Tsung-ka) (1089–1163) who declared that, although Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism are different in their conceptual expressions, they "see with one eye, they hear with one ear, they smell with one nose, they taste with one tongue, they touch with one body, they think with one mind." (Chappell 1999: 8–9). However, Chappell observes that Dahui Zonggao interpreted the common core of the three religions in Buddhist terms, which would seem to be an implicit favouring of Buddhism over Daoism and Confucianism (Chappell 1991: 363).

This notion that Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism have important commonalities was developed into the 'Unity of the Three Teachings' (*sanjiao heyi*), which became well established in the Ming dynasty (Brook 2013: 296–7). While this teaching of the three religions' complementary nature might seem like an example of inter-religious pluralism, it was often combined with the implicit or explicit belief that the three religions were hierarchically arranged; Buddhists such as Hanshan Deqing (1546–1623) accepted the unity of the three teachings but claimed that Confucianism and Daoism were lower stages of religion and Buddhism is the highest stage (Brook 2013: 298–9).

However, in some cases, and particularly at the level of popular worship, there is evidence of a more egalitarian view in which all three religions coexist without the assertion of one religion's supremacy. In the religious attitudes of ordinary people, there sometimes appears to have been much less concern about the doctrinal and sectarian disagreements and incompatibilities that tended to preoccupy intellectual elites. Joint worship of Buddha, Confucius and Laozi became common, with images of representatives of the non-Buddhist traditions situated in Buddhist monasteries (Brook 2013: 301–11). Perhaps here there is sometimes a genuine tendency towards pluralism at the level of everyday practice among those who look to a diverse range of deities for assistance in confronting life's challenges; for such people, the particular religious affiliation of those deities, their status relative to one another, and abstract doctrinal disagreements are often not the most important concerns.

Recent inter-religious dialogue

A significant number of Buddhist thinkers have been active in the inter-religious dialogue that has become common in the contemporary world. Increased awareness of, and interactions with, a wider variety of religious traditions have led many Buddhists to re-examine the issue of inter-religious diversity, sometimes reaffirming old attitudes to non-Buddhist religions and in other cases developing new views.

Exclusivist attitudes towards Christianity

There has been a particularly strong inter-religious dialogue between Buddhists and Christians. One Buddhist strand of this interaction has been predominately

exclusivist in tone, stressing that core Christian beliefs are irreconcilable with Buddhism and harmful to Buddhist goals.

For example, the English Buddhist Sangharakshita (1978) maintains that the acceptance of Buddhism entails a rejection of the conventional Christian God, whom he construes as an oppressive, coercive and authoritarian deity. Sangharakshita claims that belief in the Christian God results in irrational and harmful feelings of guilt and fear, which can be expunged by means of therapeutic blasphemy. However, the Theravādin scholar Maurice O'C Walshe disagrees; he sees the notion that cursing God could be therapeutic as contrary to the teachings of Buddhism; it is a childish act of aggression rooted in anger and hatred, unhealthy mental attitudes which should be dealt with through traditional Buddhist practices that develop loving kindness and compassion (Walshe 2013: 130).

Another example is the Sri Lankan Gunapala Dharmasiri who displays exclusivist attitudes in his rigorous and detailed critique of the Christian concept of God. For instance, he finds Christian theodicies unconvincing, contending that the undeniable suffering of innocents is incompatible with the existence of a benevolent, omniscient and omnipotent God (Dharmasiri 1988: 41–51). Although Dharmasiri occasionally makes the inclusivist move of conceding that Christianity can have pragmatic value by encouraging moral development, his usual emphasis is on the “extremely dangerous” and “morally disastrous” implications of the belief in God (Dharmasiri 1988: 260). He sees dependence on God viewed as the ultimate moral arbiter as compromising one’s moral autonomy. Despite the efforts of Christian theologians, belief in an omniscient God cannot be successfully reconciled with free will, leading to a morally stultifying determinism (Dharmasiri 1988: 51–7). He blames the Christian belief in a patriarchal, intolerant God for manifold ills such as religious persecution, holy wars, and the subjugation of women (Dharmasiri 1988: 259–71). Moreover, he claims that the Christian belief in the soul is rooted in the misguided attachment to one’s individual life and the futile desire for immortality (Dharmasiri 1988: 7–8). Buddhists view the soul as “an essentially evil idea that leads to spiritually harmful results” such as conceit and the illusion of separateness from others that undermines community (Dharmasiri 1988: 22–3).

For Dhamarasiri, the differences between Buddhism and Christianity are much more important than any superficial similarities. His views are continuous with earlier attitudes often expressed by Anagārika Dharmapāla and other modern Sri Lankan Theravādins in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who present a highly rational interpretation of Theravāda Buddhism; they downplay or discredit as superstitious accretions the widespread and venerable Theravāda tradition of worshipping the Buddha, his images and relics (Crosby 2014: 47) and are often staunch critics of the perceived irrationality of Christianity.

These critiques arose in part as a result of the encounter with often-hostile Christian missionaries in the colonial period (Malalgoda 2013; Young 2013; Dharmapala 2013). Indeed, Buddhist attitudes to Christianity have often been affected by the experience of Western imperialism and Christian missionary zeal. This is one reason why Buddhists have sometimes regarded Christianity in a

critical manner. Buddhists have also expressed some caution about the enthusiasm among some Christians for inter-religious dialogue: “The suspicion is still rife that the new Christian enthusiasm for open dialogue and exchange might simply be yet another strategy in the unaltered goal of religious conquest” (Schmidt-Leukel 2005: 13).

The Dalai Lama

A less suspicious attitude is exhibited by the fourteenth Dalai Lama, who is very active in inter-religious dialogue. He likens the world’s religions to different types of medicine required for diverse ailments; the various religious traditions are necessary in order to meet the various needs of people with many different mental dispositions (Dalai Lama 1998: 15–18). He also claims that excessive attachment to one’s own religion or philosophy leads to intolerance and conflict, as one seeks to impose one’s ideas on others (Chappell 1999: 22–3). He warns converts to Buddhism against criticism of their former religion because “we can be certain that it has been an inspiration to millions of people in the past, that it inspires millions today, and that it will inspire millions in the path of love and compassion in the future” (cited in Kibligner 2005: 35). Moreover, the Dalai Lama emphasizes that Buddhism can learn from other religions in certain respects. For example, he has expressed the view that the Jewish diaspora experience might provide some practical lessons for modern Tibetan exiles who have experienced a similar loss of their homeland (Dalai Lama 2013: 177; Kibligner 2005: 66–7). And he sees Jesus as an inspiring exemplar of love and compassion akin to a fully awakened being or a very spiritually advanced Bodhisattva (Dalai Lama 1996: 83).

He contends that, despite their philosophical and doctrinal differences, the world’s religions serve a broadly similar purpose of cultivating a “good heart” – that is, ethical virtues such as love, compassion and tolerance (Dalai Lama 1996: 6, 81). However, it is possible that, in stressing the common moral outlook of the world’s religions, the Dalai Lama has not given sufficient weight to the serious disagreements in ethical perspective that occur between and within religious traditions – for example, different moral views about sexual behavior, animal welfare, capital punishment, war and violence, abortion, euthanasia, and so forth. To claim that (many) religions agree in advocating a selfless and tolerant orientation remains a rather abstract ethical commonality; what it means to act selflessly and tolerantly gets construed in diverse and often contradictory ways. Nor is it obvious, given the many cases of hatred and intolerance that are given religious justifications, that the Dalai Lama is right to assert that religions are united by the common aim to develop compassion and tolerance. Presumably it would be open to the Dalai Lama to adopt an exclusivist attitude towards elements of non-Buddhist religions that promote violence, hatred, intolerance; he could still maintain that there are shared ethical principles that underpin religious traditions that eschew such destructive values. We have already seen the Dalai Lama’s willingness to take such an exclusivist attitude to what he considers to be an ethically harmful element of his own tradition in the rDo rje shugs ldan controversy.

Kristen Kiblänger reflects that some of the Dalai Lama's pronouncements can be difficult to interpret and perhaps suggest that he may be privatizing religions and relativizing their truth claims to such an extent that Buddhist philosophy and goals are simply different but not superior. This would mean "different religions are best for different people, period" (Kiblänger 2005: 61–2). However, it would seem that the Dalai Lama often speaks as an inclusivist who acknowledges the shared values and usefulness of non-Buddhist religions, while apparently still assuming the ultimate superiority of Buddhist philosophy and its soteriological goals which, after all, he espouses. While affirming the legitimacy and worth of non-Buddhist religions – particularly at the level of ethical teachings – the Dalai Lama also contends that religions such as Buddhism and Christianity have genuinely different philosophical and metaphysical perspectives, salvific goals, and means of attaining them (Dalai Lama 1996: 81–2; Makransky 2003: 355).

Buddhadasa

Another recent Buddhist who has been active in recent inter-religious dialogue is the Theravāda Bhikkhu Buddhadasa (1906–1993). He claims that the differences between religions occur at the level of conventional language, causing conflicts and egoistic assertion of one's beliefs. By contrast, at the level of what he calls "dhamma language" or ultimate truth these differences are transcended because the religions are alike in promoting non-attachment and the overcoming of selfishness (Buddhadasa 1989: 147–55; Kiblänger 2005: 50–1). He contends that, at the outer and most superficial level, religions appear dissimilar. At a deeper level, all religions share a common nature. At the very deepest level, religion itself disappears because one "cannot particularize that dhamma or truth as Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam, for whatever it is, you cannot define it by giving it labels" (Buddhadasa 1989: 147). Buddhadasa uses the analogy of water to clarify his point. The conventional level of religious discourse corresponds to the many different types of water that exist such as sewer water, rain water and ditch water. At a deeper level, religions share a common, unpolluted essence, like the varieties of water all have pure water as their underlying nature. At the deepest level, the various religions are understood to be empty and void. There is no such thing as religion, just like water is seen not to exist when analyzed into hydrogen and oxygen (Buddhadasa 1989: 146–7; Chappell 1991: 363–4).

Buddhadasa employs the Buddhist notion that reality ultimately transcends all dualities in order to assert that one should relinquish attachment to any and all religions. The common reality to which religions refer is beyond conceptualization and all labels. Here Buddhadasa appears to be in sympathy with those religious pluralists who maintain that there is one ultimate truth which transcends languages and conceptualisation; however, there is a plurality of diverse conceptions of ultimate truth that are imprecise but equally legitimate culturally determined attempts to express the inexpressible.

The irony is that such apparent Buddhist pluralists often display a bias towards Buddhism nonetheless. Kiblänger argues that Buddhadasa's apparently egalitarian

analysis remains hierarchical and contains a Buddhist orientation. He implies that Buddhism is superior to other religions because it recognizes the ultimate truth of emptiness and thus speaks the dhamma language most fluently. By contrast, religions such as Christianity are inferior and do not penetrate as successfully into the ultimate truth. Their preoccupation with beliefs such as the personal nature of God means that theistic theology often remains at the level of dualisms and conventional discourse (Kiblinger 2005: 50–1).

Masao Abe

In agreement with Buddhadasa and the Dalai Lama, the Japanese thinker Masao Abe (1915–2006) claims that religions such as Buddhism and Christianity have their own distinctive and unique beliefs and practices but “typically share a common message of peace, harmony and salvation to be gained by overcoming self-centredness in its various forms” (Abe 1995: 71). Moreover, he thinks that they have a common interest in repelling the common enemy of contemporary anti-religious ideologies such as Marxism, scientism and nihilism (Abe 1995: 19–20). And he contends that Buddhism can be transformed by its encounter with Christianity. For example, he is impressed by the Christian emphasis on social justice from which, he thinks, Buddhism can learn (Abe 1995: 56–9). This is a point echoed by many recent Buddhists; however, Cabezón (2003c: 23) also comments that, from a Buddhist perspective, Jesus’s apparent lack of concern for the welfare of non-human sentient beings is an ethical shortcoming.

Although Abe admires Christianity, he judges Christian monotheism to be dualistic and therefore superseded by the Mahāyāna Buddhist non-dualistic ontology of emptiness (Kiblinger 2005: 106–7). He describes the latter as a “positionless position” (Abe 1995: 23, 47) which recognizes the relativity of all religious traditions and is the remedy for all one-sided, dogmatic, and prejudiced views. However, this claim appears naive given his evident commitment to the superiority of the non-dualistic emptiness philosophy; irrespective of his protestations of neutrality, his own view contains a Buddhist bias and, indeed, a bias towards a particular version of Buddhism (Kiblinger 2005: 104–6).

Despite Abe’s critique of monotheism, he sees a parallel between the Mahāyāna notion of emptiness and the biblical reference to the self-emptying (*kenosis*) nature of Christ (Abe 1990). However, a number of Christian theologians have been unconvinced by this comparison (Kiblinger 2005: 108–9). For example, Hans Kung objects that the biblical meaning of kenosis refers to Jesus’s act of self-denial, that is, the self-emptying of Jesus’s will in his “ethical, exemplary humiliation” during his short and self-sacrificial life. Abe distorts the biblical meaning by interpreting it, in accordance with his Buddhist preconceptions, as “an ontological emptying, and emptying of God himself” akin to emptiness understood as the impersonal, ineffable and dynamic ultimate ground of all phenomena. Kung comments that “as a Buddhist, he [Abe] discovers his own world – even on foreign Christian soil” but does so by interpreting selective passages in a way that changes the meaning they have in their biblical context (Kung 1990: 32–5).

Thich Nhat Hanh

Like Abe, the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh focuses on the relationship between Buddhism and Christianity. He is impressed by the example of Jesus, whom he declares to be one of his “spiritual ancestors” (Nhat Hanh 1995: 4). In common with many recent socially engaged Buddhists, Nhat Hanh praises Jesus for his compassionate involvement with the oppressed and disadvantaged. Jesus was an exemplary activist against social injustices (Muck 2003: 146–7). Nhat Hanh also stresses that, despite their different “roots, traditions and ways of seeing” Christianity and Buddhism “share the common qualities of love, understanding, and acceptance” (Nhat Hanh 1995: 11).

He contends that religious concepts such as God and *nirvāna* are inexact attempts to express a reality that is the common core of religions and can only be fully “touched” in an experiential, non-conceptual manner (Nhat Hanh 1995: 139–50). Thus, Nhat Hanh warns against dogmatic attachment to one’s own religion, which he sees as a cause of violence and suffering, and encourages receptivity to non-Buddhist religions: “To me, religious life is life. I do not see any reason to spend one’s whole life tasting just one kind of fruit. We human beings can be nourished by the best values of many traditions” (Nhat Hanh 1995: 2). He maintains that differences between religions are largely a matter of emphasis rather than points of fundamental disagreement (Nhat Hanh 1995: 154; 193–5). And he claims that a genuine inter-religious dialogue must involve being aware of the strengths and weaknesses of one’s own tradition and a willingness on both sides to be changed by the encounter and to accept that people from outside one’s own religion may have valuable insights into the truth (Nhat Hanh 1995: 8–9). He sees receptivity to other religions as a practical implication of the Buddhist teachings of not-self and interconnectedness (Nhat Hanh 1995: 10–12). Rather than establishing barriers between themselves and others, Buddhists should recognize the reality of interdependence by engaging in a mutually transformative dialogue with non-Buddhist religions. Nhat Hanh sometimes goes so far as to assert that there is no real distinction between Buddhism and Christianity and asserts, like a number of other recent Buddhist-Christians or Christian-Buddhists, a dual religious allegiance: “Buddhism has no separate self. When you are a truly happy Christian, you are also a Buddhist. And vice versa” (Nhat Hanh 1995: 197).

A notable feature of Nhat Hanh’s position is that, while he emphasizes the need to be open to, and learn from, other religions, he tends to interpret those religions in explicitly Buddhist terms. Critics maintain that his understanding of Christian beliefs and rituals is selective and appears contrived to cohere with his view of Buddhism. The stress on similarities between religions leads Nhat Hanh to impose Buddhist readings on Christianity which do not necessarily accord with the understanding that Christians themselves would have of their own faith. It is sometimes claimed that Nhat Hanh appropriates Jesus for his own purposes and “doesn’t hesitate to tell Christians what the true core of Jesus’ teachings is. He explains Christianity to Christians” (Muck 2003: 147). The essence of Jesus’s teaching turns out to be remarkably similar to Nhat Hanh’s interpretation of Buddhism.

A difficulty the critics perceive here is that he effectively turns Christians into anonymous Buddhists. For instance, he construes the Christian Communion ritual as simply a practice of mindfulness thereby stripping it of much of its theological significance in a way that would be unacceptable to many Christians (Nhat Hanh 1995: 30–2; Kiblinger 2005: 98). Furthermore, he sees the exemplary life of Jesus as the most important Christian teaching rather than faith in the resurrection and an eternal afterlife (Nhat Hanh 1995: 36). A fundamental belief of many Christians is that Jesus Christ is the unique son of God whose self-sacrifice on the cross should be the focus of redemptive faith. By contrast, Nhat Hanh presents Jesus as an awakened teacher like the Buddha who teaches the Dharma and whom we can emulate. Nhat Hanh claims that the belief in Jesus as the unique incarnation of a monotheistic deity “excludes dialogue and fosters religious discrimination and intolerance” (Nhat Hanh 1995: 192–3).

The rhetoric of pluralism

Nhat Hanh is arguably a prominent example of a tendency among some recent Buddhists to assert the rhetoric of religious pluralism, in which religions are regarded as equal, while interpreting non-Buddhist religions in a manner which imposes Buddhist concepts on them. Significant and possibly fundamental differences between these religions and Buddhism are thus de-emphasized or overlooked.

Another example is the willingness of many contemporary Mahāyāna Buddhists to accept Jesus as an earthly manifestation, a transformation body, (*nirmāṇakāya*) of Buddha (Williams 2009: 181–2). However, a problem with this apparent openness is that it denies the uniqueness of Christ in a manner that would be unacceptable to many Christians. Although this approach accommodates Jesus, it does so on Buddhist terms and in a way that compromises a central feature of orthodox Christology (Cabezón 2003c: 26–7). Moreover, Mahāyāna Buddhists commonly claim that the *nirmāṇakāya* manifestations of the Buddha are mind-made appearances that do not really experience pain. By contrast, Christians commonly see Christ’s real and redemptive suffering as central to their faith. It would seem that this recent Mahāyāna Buddhist willingness to accommodate Christ in their Buddhology unfortunately leaves out essential elements of what Christ means to Christians.

Kiblinger, who argues for “alternative-ends-recognizing inclusivism”, offers a possible way forward, which is more sensitive to genuine inter-religious differences. This position recognizes that there can be common ground between Buddhist traditions and other religions, while also acknowledging significant differences, particularly with regard to ultimate goals. The aims of other religions will sometimes be incompatible with those of Buddhist traditions. In other cases, these aims may overlap with those of Buddhist traditions (Kiblinger 2005: 69–89). She accepts that there can be significant areas of agreement between Buddhist traditions and other religions. However, she does not seek to superficially and inaccurately assimilate other religions into Buddhism. Inter-religious dialogue is

not simply about finding similarities; it also has the important function of clarifying genuine diversity and disagreements.

Buddhist-Christians

Another recent development has been that some people, often from Western cultures, identify themselves as Buddhist-Christians. This is an example of dual or multiple religious belonging, which takes various forms. It can be a casual and curious experimentation with another religion or it can entail the incorporation into one's religious outlook of some selective aspects of another religion. Finally, it can involve the full-blown acceptance of the beliefs and practices of another religion while continuing to belong to one's original religion (Cornille 2003: 48–9).

The clearest and strongest cases of dual Buddhist-Christian identity occur when people regard themselves as fully Buddhist and fully Christian at the same time, consider both religions as equally important and valid, participate in both communities, and have made a formal commitment to both faiths. Rose Drew (2011) has provided some in-depth case studies of people who can be described as Buddhist-Christians in this way. This often elicits accusations of superficial engagement with both religions, given the incompatible truth claims and practices of Christianity and Buddhism. Christians believe in a creator God whereas Buddhists do not. Most Christians regard Jesus as uniquely salvific whereas Buddhists do not share this conviction. The Buddhist soteriological aim is *nirvāṇa*, which seems very different from the Christian conception of heaven. Buddhists usually believe in karma and rebirth whereas Christians normally do not, and so on (Drew 2011: 1)

However, the accusation that all Buddhist-Christians are only superficially engaged with the two traditions to which they feel that they belong is arguably not very charitable. While some Buddhist-Christians may be guilty of unreflective and piecemeal syncretism, this is not necessarily always the case; a more thoughtful attitude is also possible which maintains a dual religious identity while also taking seriously the areas of tension and possible contradiction between the two religions with which one identifies.

For example, it is possible to be a Buddhist-Christian who is fully aware of the contradictions and who also does not think that there is any way to harmonise the two religions. A person with such a dual religious identity would feel strongly drawn to both faiths, even to the extent of formal membership in, and commitment to, both. He or she would also honestly acknowledge the irreconcilable differences in the religions' truth claims and practices. This divided allegiance would seem to be a psychologically (and socially) uncomfortable identity to maintain, but it may do justice to some people's deep attraction to admittedly incompatible religious traditions. The split religious personality that this entails may be an authentic representation of some people's existential struggles.

Critics would contend that such divided loyalties between two religious traditions makes genuine commitment impossible and thus impedes spiritual

development (Cornille 2003: 48–9). A more positive evaluation would be that such people perhaps exhibit a mature recognition of the uncertainties and inner turmoil that occur when one finds conflicting religious truth claims appealing. This could plausibly be a sign of ‘spiritual development’ rather than an impediment to it.

Some Buddhist-Christians may exhibit an honest agnosticism about the incompatible truth claims of the two religions; for example, it may be accepted that one does not know whether the eschatological beliefs of Christianity or Buddhism (heaven or rebirth) are true, but one is receptive to both possibilities (Drew 2011: 152–5). Combining faith with uncertainty would seem to be a possible way of holding together these two religious identities. However, critics would argue that such agnosticism, especially when it includes suspension of judgment about teachings that are central to the religions, arguably demonstrates that Christian-Buddhists do not fully belong to either tradition. However, this criticism seems to rely on the dubious assumption that one only fully belongs to a religion when one accepts all of its tenets. Perhaps one can ‘belong’ to a religion while still having significant doubts about the beliefs that it entails.

Other Buddhist-Christians believe that the apparent contradictions can be overcome or are not as serious or fundamental as they may first appear. The strategies for accomplishing this harmonization are varied. One common approach is to find a level at which the apparently incompatible truth claims of both religions are not contradictory. For example, Buddhist-Christians often adhere to the ineffability thesis. Like many inter-religious pluralists, they highlight Buddhist claims that *nirvāṇa* is linguistically and conceptually transcendent and the Christian belief that the nature of God is inexpressible. This is the deeper ineffable common ground which underlies the doctrinal disagreements between the two religions. There is one ultimate reality but it gets expressed and conceptualized differently by Buddhists and Christians (Drew 2011: 53–85). In effect, both Buddhist and Christian doctrines about the ineffable reality are both simply skilful means.

It is debatable whether such an appeal to a common ineffable ultimate truth is convincing as a way of reconciling one’s Buddhist and Christian identities; there are both Buddhists and Christians who would defend what they consider to be describable, profound and irreconcilable differences between Buddhist and Christian conceptions of ultimate truth (for example, see Williams 2002: 71). And even if it is granted that the ultimate truth is ultimately inexpressible, Buddhists and Christians will often want to defend their sometimes mutually incompatible doctrines as more helpful pointers towards that truth, thus relegating the other religion to a lower level in a way that is not acceptable to those Buddhist-Christians who regard both religions as on the same level.

Such Buddhist-Christians may be described as pluralists in that they accept both religious traditions as equally valid. However, they do not go as far as those inter-religious pluralists who accept the equal validity of numerous religious traditions. In a different sense, they may go a step further than some other Buddhist inter-religious pluralists by actually committing or formally belonging to a

religious tradition other than Buddhism while also seeking fully to retain their Buddhist identity. Buddhist-Christians are situated towards one end of a broad spectrum of Buddhist attitudes to inter-religious diversity which range from exclusivism through inclusivism to pluralism, where pluralism may or may not include multiple religious belonging.

Conclusion

This book has focused on a number of issues that are central to Buddhist philosophy of religion. The detailed analysis in the preceding chapters demonstrates the complexity of Buddhist attitudes to a wide range of these philosophical issues. Hopefully, it has also shown that Buddhist philosophical ideas are both of historical and contemporary philosophical importance; the Buddhist perspectives discussed in this volume reveal a long and rich intellectual tradition but one that is also of current relevance. However, this book has also sought critically to scrutinise various aspects of the Buddhist worldview, or Buddhist worldviews, which are open to a variety of challenges. It is not that Buddhist traditions can have no answers to such objections; on the contrary, the creative dialogue between Buddhist and alternative standpoints contributes to a deeper reflection on the difficult questions that are central to the philosophy of religion.

For most religious traditions, the encounter with modernity presents philosophical problems as well as opportunities for interesting innovations and adaptations. As this book has shown in various ways, this is certainly true for Buddhist traditions. Pre-modern Buddhist beliefs have undergone, and continue to undergo, serious revisions. This book, as a contemporary investigation of Buddhist philosophy, has given attention both to the historical manifestations of Buddhist ideas, their present significance, and also ways in which they can sit uneasily with current understandings of the world. The extent to which Buddhism can and should adapt to these current understandings of the world is a topic which has been addressed in various contexts throughout this volume and does not permit a single, simple answer.

Buddhism and science

The complex relationship between Buddhism and modernity is nowhere more evident than in the encounter between Buddhism and science, which began in the nineteenth century and continues to the present day, with a voluminous and burgeoning literature on the subject (McMahan 2004; Lopez 2008: 2–33). The sometimes fraught relationship between religion and science is a common topic in the philosophy of religion and is of obvious contemporary interest; reflection on this issue in relation to Buddhism is thus a fitting way to conclude this study. However, this is a challenging topic for analysis, given the shifting, variegated

nature of both participants (Buddhism and science) in the debate (Lopez 2008: xii). Broadly, there are three distinct ways in which the nature of the relationship between Buddhism and science has been conceived: 1) conflict/ambivalence, 2) compatibility/identity, and 3) complementarity (Cabezón 2003b).

Conflict/ambivalence

Those who consider Buddhism and science to be in conflict see them as having separate and incompatible worldviews with little or no scope for fruitful dialogue or agreement. This is an attitude that can be attributed to some Buddhists as well as some critics of Buddhism.

As a stance adopted by some Buddhists, this amounts to a rejection of science and thus a retreat from modernity, which includes scientific method and theory as one of its hallmark characteristics. Such Buddhists would highlight points of disagreement, and Buddhist perspectives would be favoured over those offered by science. Aspects of traditional Buddhist worldviews that have been problematized or even falsified by the empirical scientific method – such as the existence of miracles, the magical efficacy of rituals, Buddha images and relics, rebirth, the detailed ‘flat earth’ cosmology centred on Mount Meru and populated by deities, ghosts and hell beings – would be affirmed regardless of contrary scientific evidence and/or judgements of implausibility. The epistemic authority of the scientific method would be denied in favour of that of the omniscient Buddha, whose existence is recorded in the Buddhist scriptures.

There have been examples of Buddhists who have adopted this reactionary attitude to modern science, particularly in the early stages of the encounter when scientific discoveries that contradict Buddhist claims about the cosmos were sometimes met with incredulity and suspicion (Lopez 2008: 47–50; 54–7). However, such a wholesale rejection of the scientific worldview seems unsustainable given the dominance and success of modern science, bolstered by undeniable and remarkable technological innovations. Any Buddhist who has benefitted from Western medicine, used a mobile phone or computer, or travelled by car or airplane would seemingly need to reach some kind of accommodation with science. Less reactionary Buddhists who are ambivalent about science may cautiously accept its legitimacy but still be worried about the corrosive effect that some of its assumptions – such as its common advocacy of materialism and the scientific method as the final arbiter of truth – may have on Buddhist faith.

Colonial critics of Buddhism also employed the supposed conflict between Buddhism and science in the nineteenth century with the intention of demonstrating the inferiority of Buddhism. The contradiction between traditional Buddhist beliefs and modern, Western scientific discoveries were used as part of a strategy to undermine Buddhism and colonised Buddhist cultures on the basis that modern science demonstrates Buddhism to be primitive, misinformed, superstitious nonsense. Buddhism and modern science are incompatible and this incompatibility is to be resolved in favour of modern science and the Western culture from which it originates (McMahan 2004: 904; Lopez 2008: 53–4).

Compatibility/identity

In response to this colonial critique, some nineteenth and early twentieth century Buddhist apologists – such as Anagārika Dharmapāla, Sōen Shaku, Henry Steel Olcott and Paul Carus and others – were keen to argue that, in fact, Buddhism is compatible with modern science or even that Buddhism has been scientific since its inception. This ‘scientific Buddhism’ was an effective tool which empowered colonised Buddhists against the colonial imposition of the dominant western scientific worldview by claiming that Buddhism had anticipated this worldview all along (McMahan 2004; Lopez 2008: 14–24). It also appealed to “spiritually unmoored Victorians” who had become disillusioned with Christianity because of its perceived incompatibility with science and who were searching for a rational religion that did not conflict with the modern scientific worldview (McMahan 2004: 925). Although scientific Buddhism originated in response to nineteenth century colonial pressures, it has demonstrated remarkable persistence and resilience; there are numerous more recent examples of proponents of the basic compatibility or even identity of Buddhism and science (Solomon 1980; Macy 1991; Duckworth 2015).

Typically, scientific Buddhism focuses on perceived commonalities between Buddhism and science such as the Buddhist teachings of dependent origination and the ever-fluctuating nature of things as powerfully confirmed by modern scientific views about causation. The notion that all things exist in an interconnected web of relationships is taken to be a basic insight shared by Buddhism and science. The scientific credentials of Buddhism are further demonstrated by the teachings of not-self and insubstantiality, which are thought to be similar to the modern scientific method of analysing everyday, perceived phenomena into their vanishingly small constituents and the causal laws that govern their interactions. Buddhism may not have identified the constituents and laws with the precision and detail of modern science, but the basic orientation is the same. Moreover, scientific Buddhists sometimes make comparisons between Nāgārjuna’s emptiness teaching – which asserts the contingent, non-absolute nature of everything including time and space – and the modern scientific theory of relativity. Resonances between emptiness and quantum physics are also noted, with both theories recognising the indeterminable, fluid nature of matter. Proponents of scientific Buddhism also often contend that both Buddhism and science recognise that the world as it exists independently of human perception is very different from the world as filtered through our sensory and cognitive facilities. Science and Buddhism share a rejection of naive realism that considers our ordinary perceptions to mirror reality without distortion (Lopez 2008: 136; Jinpa 2010: 873).

In addition, defenders of scientific Buddhism often employ the *Kālāma sutta* (*Ānguttara Nikāya* i, 88) to support their interpretation; here the Buddha is recorded as encouraging his disciples to accept his teaching only “when you know for yourselves” that it is true. This is often taken to mean that truth in Buddhism is always subject to empirical, experiential verification rather than appeals to authority or tradition. Another often cited passage that may support a scientific

reading of Buddhism comes from the eighth century Indian Buddhist Śāntarakṣita, who cites the Buddha as having said that the Buddha's teachings should be accepted "after due investigation" rather than out of respect for him "just as gold is accepted as true only after heating, cutting and rubbing" (*Tattvasaṃgraha*, 3588. Trans. Jha 1986: 1558).

However, it may be too hasty to read such statements as demonstrating that Buddhism has an epistemology that is compatible with the empirical methods favoured by modern science. There is no suggestion in the traditional sources that such testing of the Buddha's teaching will do anything other than confirm that the Buddha is right; the eminently scientific attitude that the Buddha's teaching might be falsified by further investigation seems to be entirely absent. Furthermore, the nature of epistemic authority in Buddhism is more complex than these isolated passages seem to suggest. In particular, the word of the Buddha is commonly regarded as a supremely trustworthy source of knowledge. David McMahan (2004: 927) writes that "... one would be hard pressed to find a non-modern Asian Buddhist, living or in the ancient texts, who did not consider the words of the sutras all but supremely authoritative." Disciples may sometimes be encouraged to accept the Buddha's teaching only after due investigation; nevertheless, a dominant attitude in Buddhism has been that the word of the Buddha as recorded in scripture is reliable testimony. This testimony is believed to be based on his awakened experience, which is deemed the ultimate form of empirical verification; however, this is unlikely to be accepted by modern science. And it seems very doubtful that many pre-modern Buddhists would countenance that the omniscient Buddha's epistemic authority could be overturned by empirical scrutiny, and especially that of unawakened people, including scientists.

Proponents of scientific Buddhism sometimes seem to overlook, or ignore, that a straightforward assertion of the compatibility of Buddhism and science neglects very significant aspects of Buddhism that do not seem to be easily assimilated to science and which would be deemed essential by many Buddhists historically and presently. If scientific Buddhists do acknowledge such troublesome features of Buddhism, they are generally marginalised as cultural accretions or the Buddha's pragmatic accommodations to the prevailing non-scientific worldview of his time. Whatever in traditional Buddhism does not fit with modern science tends to be jettisoned or is interpreted in a non-literal way; for instance, the intricacies of Buddhist cosmology with its gods, hungry ghosts and hells become metaphors for particular psychological states. Moreover, the teaching of karma and rebirth is, as Aparna Sharma (2004: 78) reports, construed merely as an adumbration of modern evolutionary biology where "humans' conscious and unconscious goals are rooted in the activities and goals of their ancestors". The obvious danger of this approach is that Buddhism becomes effectively subservient to science; only those Buddhist truth claims that conform to the modern scientific perspective pass muster and are granted the status of genuine Buddhist teachings. The result is arguably a sanitised, safe and vapid Buddhism, shorn of the supernatural, magical and mysterious elements which have often been deemed central to Buddhist worldviews. If Buddhism is "filtered through a scientific grid" it becomes "demythological,

deflated and evacuated of any inconvenient whiff of theism" (Harrison 2010: 866). Scientific Buddhism is "a Buddhism extracted from the Buddhist universe, a universe dense with deities" with "the vast imaginaire of Buddhism largely absent" (Lopez 2008: 216). It is arguable that this amounts to a capitulation by Buddhism to the dominant and domineering scientific outlook.

Complementarity

The third manner in which the relationship between Buddhism and science has been conceived lies somewhere between the first two attitudes. Buddhism can learn from science and must significantly revise its beliefs in accordance with scientific discoveries about the physical universe; for example, the world is not flat, does not have Mount Meru at its centre, and so forth. Even so, some Buddhist ideas – emptiness, dependent origination, not-self and so on – may resonate with recent scientific views. However, this attitude also recognises that, although fruitful dialogue between Buddhism and science can take place, important Buddhist teachings remain beyond the purview of the scientific method. Buddhism does not reject science but asserts that some of Buddhism's most central truth claims are not ultimately amenable to scientific verification or falsification.

The epistemic authority of the scientific method is acknowledged, but only in relation to the material universe. Science can provide Buddhism with "a robust understanding of the physical world" (Jinpa 2010: 881). Traditional Buddhist views about the physical cosmos can be overridden by science; however, this does pose an awkward question about why the supposedly omniscient Buddha apparently failed correctly to understand these matters (Lopez 2008: 64–8).

With regard to issues that are arguably more central to the Buddhism – such as the nature and possibility of awakening – the word of Buddha, as recorded in scriptures, remains the supreme authority and cannot be overturned by the empirical scientific method. Buddhism thus preserves a significant measure of autonomy from science while also acknowledging limited, but important, areas in which traditional Buddhist perspectives need to be seriously modified in accordance with modern scientific discoveries.

Buddhism and neuroscience

Constructive interaction can take place between Buddhism and science, as demonstrated by the various discussions between the Dalai Lama and scientists on issues of mutual interest, such as psychology, epistemology and physics (Jinpa 2010: 876). Moreover, this dialogue has given rise to experiments by neuroscientists who have subjected the brains of experienced meditators to rigorous empirical testing. These experiments have reportedly provided some confirmation that such meditators exhibit increased activity in the areas of the brain associated with the experience of happiness and compassion (Barinaga 2003).

Even so, such experiments fall far short of proving Buddhist claims that meditation, usually in conjunction with other Buddhist practices, leads to

awakening; indeed, it is difficult to imagine a scientific experiment that could substantiate this belief. One difficulty is that neuroscience measures physical evidence, changes in the brain, whereas Buddhism assumes that consciousness is not reducible to brain and other physical functions. Another difficulty is that science seeks knowledge that is detached, objective and impersonal whereas the knowledge most esteemed by Buddhism is personal, experiential and transformative; the latter may not be (entirely) measurable by scientific means (Duckworth 2015: 8).

Furthermore, although neuroscience has seemingly provided some evidence in support of the effectiveness of Buddhist meditation, some Buddhist claims about the power of meditation – such as that it allows the meditator to remain focused on one object for very long periods of time – seem to be contradicted by the neuroscientific understanding of the brain's capacities (Barinaga 2003: 45). It is conceivable that future experiments may yield further evidence which does not support Buddhist views. For instance, they might indicate that there are other limits to the plasticity and powers of the brain. In this case, Buddhist awakening as a radical transformation of cognitive functions might be deemed implausible. Hypothetically, neuroscience might eventually falsify this central Buddhist truth claim. For the scientific Buddhist who accepts the ultimate epistemic authority of science in all matters, this would be troubling indeed. However, for a Buddhist who sees the epistemic authority of science as limited, this scientific falsification of the Buddhist awakened experience would presumably be interpreted as a sign of the limitations of the scientific method rather than as a convincing refutation of Buddhist understandings of the mind and its capacity for radical transformation.

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy

Another area where constructive, if limited, collaboration between Buddhism and science has occurred is in clinically based psychological therapies. Notably, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy has borrowed heavily from the Buddhist practice of mindfulness in order to identify and transform persistent negative cognitive responses (such as aversion and anxiety) to painful or difficult experiences (Fennell and Segal 2011). This Buddhist-inspired therapy has been widely used to treat a variety of psychological difficulties, enabling patients to change how they relate to their cognitions, breaking habitual responses that cause suffering. Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy reportedly “leads to greater self-esteem, self-confidence, self-assertiveness and willingness to face up to the challenges of life” (Gilpin 2008: 241). It has been employed to treat “chronic pain, stress, anxiety, depression, borderline personality disorder, panic attacks, and eating disorders” (Gilpin 2008: 233).

The effectiveness of mindfulness as a method for psychological transformation has thus received some scientific confirmation and has been shown to be of practical benefit; this is an example of a Buddhist contribution to applied science. Of course, evidence that mindfulness has these psychological benefits is always vulnerable to later empirical falsification; moreover, it is a long way from scientific

proof of the far more exalted Buddhist claim that mindfulness – usually in cooperation with other Buddhist practices – leads to awakening. Again, a Buddhist who does not accept the ultimate authority of science in such matters would not be too concerned if such proof is not forthcoming; it is likely to be beyond the scope of science.

Buddhism, science and ethics

A further way in which Buddhism may benefit science is through Buddhism's contribution to the debate about the place of ethics in scientific enquiry. Thupten Jinpa (2010: 881) argues that, given Buddhism's emphasis on compassion as a fundamental value, Buddhism can have a "humanising influence" on science which "constantly challenges science to be mindful of its motivations", ensuring that its discoveries are applied in ways that contribute to, rather than detract from, human flourishing.

As valid as this point seems to be, it is also the case that Buddhism is not alone in being able to provide science with an ethical perspective. Other religious and secular views can, and do, inform science about the ethical implications of scientific technologies. Buddhism can surely contribute meaningfully to this debate but it has no monopoly on ethical insights. Moreover, while Buddhism can surely remind scientists of the importance of ethical considerations, this does not mean that Buddhism, or any other ethical perspective, can provide clear, definitive answers when scientists and the wider public grapple with the knotty moral problems relating to recent scientific and technological innovations such as genetic engineering, the internet, advances in medicine, and so on.

The limits of science

The dialogue between Buddhism and science as envisioned here concedes some important ground to science while bracketing many central Buddhist truth claims as beyond the purview of science and resistant to scientific falsification. There is open acknowledgement that scientific and Buddhist worldviews rest on different assumptions, most notably about whether all phenomena are ultimately physical in nature. Still, Buddhists who adopt this attitude contend that there can be fruitful interaction with science; Buddhism can learn from science and vice versa.

In a frequently cited statement, the Dalai Lama (2005: 3) declares that Buddhism must abandon any Buddhist views that science conclusively proves to be wrong. He thus accepts that the traditional Buddhist cosmology needs to be rejected in favour of modern scientific accounts of the physical universe. However, his statement is perhaps not as radical as it may seem. He relies on a traditional Buddhist epistemological distinction between 'that which is not proven' and 'that which is proven not to be the case' (Dalai Lama 2005: 35). While science has proven the traditional Buddhist account of the physical universe to be false, many other Buddhist truth claims are beyond the scope of the scientific method to assess, and thus fall into the category of that which is not proven, by science at least. Of

course, from a traditional Buddhist epistemological perspective, the proof of these Buddhist views is provided by the testimony of the omniscient Buddha.

How much of the Buddhist worldview can be bracketed from scientific scrutiny in this way is an interesting question, which probably will yield diverse Buddhist answers. Presumably the belief in awakening would not be open to falsification by science. However, other aspects of the traditional Buddhism may or may not be similarly protected. For instance, can the Buddhist beliefs in, and visions of, various deities, Buddhas in Pure Lands be preserved? Can there still be room for miracles as well as the magical efficacy of Buddha images and relics, or must they fall under the category of outdated Buddhist views which are falsified or rendered improbable by science? Can those Buddhist accounts of the universe that are ontologically idealist, and see the physical world as entirely a conceptual construction, be bracketed or must they be jettisoned, given the scientific account that the material world precedes consciousness and consciousness evolves out of the material world?

Perhaps most contentiously of all, is the teaching of karma and rebirth to be preserved as beyond assessment by the scientific method? Some contemporary Buddhists, including the Dalai Lama, contend that the traditional teaching of karma and rebirth must be maintained. This creates an interesting problem because, to his credit, the Dalai Lama recognises that this teaching is in tension with the scientific theory of natural selection. Some Buddhists perhaps too easily view Buddhism and evolutionary theory as compatible. By contrast, the Dalai Lama observes that the idea that life forms evolve purely through inherited genetic characteristics and mutation obviates the law of karma as traditionally conceived. Buddhism usually explains many current experiences – including many aspects of our physical nature – to be the result of deeds in past lives (Lopez 2008: 148). In this case at least, it would seem that a Buddhist truth claim is to be maintained even though it conflicts with a scientific theory for which there is considerable empirical evidence. This is no doubt because the Dalai Lama sees karma and rebirth as fundamental to Buddhism. Moreover, he is sceptical about the theory of evolution on the grounds that consciousness cannot, he claims, be caused by matter. And he is also concerned that the theory of natural selection may preclude the possibility of genuine altruism, if we are simply biological machines driven by the need to reproduce (Lopez 2008: 149–51).

As discussed in chapter 2, some other contemporary Buddhists disagree and re-envision karma in a ‘naturalised’ way, divorced from the teaching of rebirth and thus more compatible with modern evolutionary theory. For them, defending the rebirth theory in the face of modern science is too high a price to pay. However, this approach also has its price, because a Buddhist worldview without rebirth arguably deprives Buddhism of much of its rationale, which is, after all, about liberation from the cycle of birth and death. It also changes the nature of the awakened experience itself, which has detailed insight into the workings of karma and rebirth as one of its components. It seems that the more ground is conceded to science, the more the Buddhist imaginaire becomes depleted.

The complex issues arising from the encounter between Buddhism and science clearly have no easy resolution. Of course, this problem is not unique to Buddhism; most traditional religions are confronted by similar conundrums and face the difficult, but interesting, challenge of accommodating modernity, including science, in a variety of ways. Hopefully, this book has shed some light on Buddhist responses to science and various other topics of interest to contemporary philosophers of religion.

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