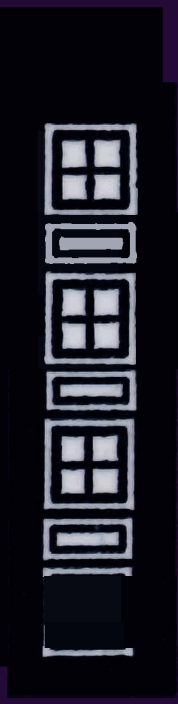

Ethics, Wealth, and Salvation

A Study in Buddhist Social Ethics

edited by Russell F. Sizemore
and Donald K. Swearer

not simply work toward his own salvation (nibbana), but functions as teacher and moral exemplar within the broader community.

Accordingly, Riijavaramuni argues that the roles of monk and laity are distinct but interrelated. Both live and act in terms of a single, **unified** "system of Buddhist ethics," which Riijavaramuni describes in terms of principles or ideals (*dhamma*) and rules (vinaya). Both draw on aspects of the moral life (pre-magga) coupled with specific categories or stages in a developmental path (magga). **Rājavaramuni's** discussion of pre-magga and *magga* aspects of the moral life reflects his concern for the polarity of individual perfection and the social good. Thus, in general terms Riijavaramuni analyzes the moral life around social interaction ("association with good people") on the one hand and the development of mental awareness ("systematic attention and reflection") on the other. Likewise, the path of moral and spiritual development includes training rules (*sikkhā*), which build character and stipulate appropriate reactions, but which also promote mental awareness and insight. The distinction between lay and monastic ethics is as much a matter of context as it is of specific content. Thus, lay ethics emphasizes generosity (*dāna*)—the laity have material goods to give—whereas the monk has a responsibility to gain the wisdom (*adhipaññā*) associated with mental training (*adhi*-citta) in order to fulfill his responsibilities as teacher and moral exemplar.

Consistent with this view of Buddhist ethics, **Rājavaramuni** argues that Buddhism takes a middle-way stance toward wealth. That one accumulates wealth is less of a moral problem than how one acquires and uses it. Furthermore, given the principle of mutual reciprocity at the heart of Buddhism's Middle Way, the person of wealth has the natural responsibility to be generous or to redistribute it. On the practical level generosity means lay support of the monastery; spiritually it expresses an attitude of **non-grasping** or **unselfishness** which leads to compassionate, generous, other-regarding attitudes and actions.

The system of Buddhist ethics, in short, integrates the highest good of the individual with the welfare of society, connects the mental **development** and exemplary character of the individual devotee with virtuous and harmonious social existence. Put in Buddhist terms, Riijavaramuni integrates the Four Sublime States of Mind (loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity) and the Four Bases of Social **Harmony** (charity, beneficial speech, acts of service, and impartiality).

1 Foundations of Buddhist Social Ethics

Phra Rājavaramuni

Although the ethics of Buddhism is widely discussed today, its treatment is frequently misconceived or lopsided, even when offered by Buddhist scholars. In order to gain a more accurate picture of Buddhist ethics, it would be helpful to avoid certain mistakes from the start.

First, Buddhism has been characterized by some people as an ascetic religion. In reality, asceticism was experimented with by the Buddha and later rejected by him before he attained enlightenment. As far as Buddhism is concerned, the meaning of the term is ambiguous and should not be used without qualification. Also, since the western term monasticism has been applied to the way of life and practice of the Buddhist *bhikkhus* (Pāli), or monks, they have been misunderstood by many as living apart from society in isolation from the world. In principle, at least, a Buddhist monk cannot live even a single day without contact with lay people.

The way of life and practice of Buddhist monks, furthermore, have been mistaken by some interpreters as the whole content or the standard of Buddhist ethics, whereas in fact monks are only one part of the Buddhist community and their ethics are only one component of Buddhist ethical reflection. Buddhism is the religion or way of life not only of the monks, but of the laity as well.

A different sort of problem results from the history of Buddhist studies in the West. It seems that most of the books on the doctrinal aspect of Buddhism written by western scholars deal mainly, if not exclusively, with metaphysical and spiritual teachings, with the mind and meditation. Very few treat the daily-life ethics of the common people. It might be that Buddhist metaphysical and spiritual teachings are what make Buddhism unique or different from other religions and philosophical systems, or it might simply be that these writers are especially interested in such subjects. Whatever the case, this slant has lured many into thinking that Buddhism is merely an ethics of the mind and that it lacks concern for social and material welfare. Although Buddhism does emphasize the cultivation of certain mental states, it teaches that human existence consists

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Ethics, Wealth, and Salvation is a study of the relations of attitudes toward wealth and the quest for salvation in Theravada Buddhism. Drawing on authors from a variety of disciplines, this anthology offers a foundational interpretation from a prominent Thai scholar-monk, and wide-ranging analyses of Buddhist texts, ritual, folklore, monastic history, and contemporary Buddhist practices. The primary underlying theme is the question of how individual spiritual perfection is related to social well-being in the Theravada tradition. Additional essays consider how Buddhist conceptions of charity and social good compare to those of contemporary western theories of justice. The volume offers a significant addition to our understanding of the social and political implications of what has too often been thought of as an entirely otherworldly religious tradition and places this inquiry within the broader context of the developing field of comparative religious ethics.

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