# Are Freedom from Suffering and Boundless Compassion Contradictory Ideals? A Critical Examination of Buddhist Moral Psychology

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By most accounts, Buddhism is geared toward the ethical goal of *nirvāṇa*,[1] a state allegedly characterized by the full "cessation of suffering" (*dukkhanirodha*).[2] A common claim made in many Buddhist texts is that for as long as they remain alive and active in this world, those who have attained or are very close to attaining ethical perfection—*arhant*-s, *bodhisattva*-s, *buddha*-s, etc.[3]—manifest boundless compassion for all beings.[4] It would

1. "Ethical" and "ethics" in the present context are to be broadly construed as encompassing all types of discourse that deal with leading the "good life" and the attainment of the *summum bonum* ("highest good"). In this connection, I am inclined to agree with Richard Hayes that it is not, strictly speaking, appropriate to speak of Indian Buddhism as being "soteriological," seeing as there is no *σωτήρ* ("savior") in Indian Buddhism (other than oneself) and thus no "salvation" *per se* (*Diṅnāga on the Interpretation of Signs* [London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989], 34–35). I do not take the question as to whether or not Buddhist teachings constitute "religious doctrine" to be particularly relevant in the present context. This is why, all things considered, I prefer to describe *nirvāṇa* as an "ethical goal" and speak of the Buddhist path as one of "ethical training."
2. *Vinayapiṭaka,* Volume I, ed. Hermann Oldenberg (London: Williams and Norgate, 1879), 10.
3. It should be noted that for the sake of simplicity and clarity, all technical Buddhist terms will appear in their Sanskrit (or Sanskritized) forms unless I am *directly* quoting a Pāli text (as done above). Anthony K. Warder's systematic sanskritization of Pāli forms in *Indian Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980) represents an important precedent for this practice. It should be noted that all translations from Sanskrit, Pāli, German, and French in this paper are my own.
4. In the Pāli Canon, the Buddha is presented as a supremely compassionate agent (*Majjhimanikāya*, Volumes I–VI, ed. Vilhelm Treckner and Robert Chalmers [London: Pāli Text Society, 1888–1905], I.100; and *Saṃyuttanikāya*, volume I–V, ed. Léon Féer and Caroline A. F. R. Davids [London: Pāli Text Society, 1884–1904], II.110); nay, as the only agent in the world whose only goal is to act for the welfare of all "out of compassion" (*anukampāya*) (*Aṅgutarranikāya*, volume I–VI, ed. Richard Morris [London: Pāli Text Society, 1976–1981], I.22; and *Dīghanikāya*, volume I–III, ed. Thomas W. Rhys Davids and Joseph E. Carpenter [London: Pāli Text Society, 1890–1911], II.212). It is thus out of compassion, it is claimed, that he dispensed his teaching (*Majjhimanikāya,* I.23, II.238, and III.302; *Saṃyuttanikāya*,

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appear, then, that a perfected Buddhist is meant to be both entirely free from suffering and boundlessly compassionate. On the face of it, this is a patently contradictory ideal. To wit: compassion, on any definition of the term, involves psychological distress in the face of the other's suffering. As its etymology in the vast majority of Indo-European languages indicates, it involves *suffering "with" the other* and thus being "moved" by her suffering (compare: Sanskirt: *anu-kampā*; Latin *com-passiō*; Greek: *συμ-πάθεια*; German: *Mit-Leid*). Thus, in so far as perfected Buddhists have boundless compassion for all beings, they may be said to suffer boundlessly—keeping in mind, of course, that Buddhist texts insist that there exist at all times an infinite number of pain-ridden beings. Surely, then, it appears incoherent to describe such an agent as being "free from suffering." All but the staunchest irrationalist will recognize that such a contradiction at the heart of Buddhist moral psychology[5] poses a serious problem for whomever might wish to learn from Buddhism as regards the good life.

In this paper, I will make a textual-exegetical/philosophical case in favour of the view that it is possible to resolve this apparent paradox at the heart of Buddhist psychology. Drawing from a variety of South-Asian

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I.110 and IV.359; and *Aṅgutarranikāya* I.22, III.6, and IV.139). The tenth-century Mādhyamika Kamalaśīla, then, was apparently expressing a view common to Early and Mahāyāna Buddhism when he writes: "The root cause of the Buddha's entire teaching is compassion itself. [ . . .] The root of the Buddha's qualities is compassion itself" (*buddhasya aśeṣadharmahetumūlaṃ karuṇaiva* / [ . . .] *buddhadharmāṇāṃ karuṇaiva mūlaṃ*) (*Bhāvanākrama,* volume I, ed. Ācārya Gyaltsen Namdol [Sarnath: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 1985], 155). What is more, a quick survey of both Pāli Jātaka and Mahāyāna literature will confirm that such boundless compassion is also a distinctive characteristic of *bodhisattva*-s far advanced on the path towards enlightenment. Though the concept of the *bodhisattva* certainly evolved over the course of Indian Buddhism's long history—an excellent study of this topic being Arthur. L. Basham's "The Evolution of the Concept of Bodhisattva," in ed. L. S. Kawamura, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1981), 22–45—, the idea that a perfected Buddhist agent is boundlessly compassionate seems common to the Buddhist tradition, in India and beyond.

5. The phrase "moral psychology" in the context of this paper refers to claims concerning (1) the psychology of those beings that Buddhists regard as unenlightened, (2) the psychology of beings that Buddhists regard as enlightened, and (3) what is involved, *psychologically*, in passing from unenlightened to enlightened existence. At issue, then, is what distinguishes the sage who has attained the Buddhist *sommum bonum* from the common person, psychologically speaking.

texts associated with the Theravāda, Sarvāstivāda, Madhyamaka, and Vijñānavāda schools of Indian Buddhism,[6] I will argue that freedom from suffering and boundless compassion are not contradictory ideals, in so far as the suffering that comes to cessation in *nirvāṇa* and which arises as a result of genuine Buddhist compassion, or *karuṇā*, are to be regarded as qualitatively and phenomenologically different. This has the important revisionary implication that *nirvāṇa* does *not*, as is commonly assumed and taught, involve freedom from all suffering, but rather from a particular type of suffering—or, as I will suggest, from a *way* of suffering.

This paper is separated into three sections. Section one will examine what I call the psychology of *nirvāṇa*, i.e., the nature of the psychological, cognitive, and behavioural transformations that purportedly lead to freedom from suffering. Section two will seek to resolve the contradiction between "freedom from suffering" and "boundless compassion" through a careful examination of insights drawn from the writings of Nāgārjuna, Buddhaghosa, Vasubandhu, Asaṅga, and Śāntideva, most prominently. In section three, finally, I will discuss the more sophisticated and nuanced view of Buddhist psychology, which I take to emerge from the resolution of the apparent contradiction under examination.

## 1. The Psychology of *Nirvāṇa*

As I have argued in greater detail elsewhere,[7] it is philosophically enlightening, yet also respectful of the Buddhist tradition's self-understanding, to present the Buddhist path of ethical training as a *therapeutic programme*, the purpose of which is to bring suffering (*duḥkha*) to cessation. More specifically, it is made clear in the *sutta*-s of the Pāli Canon that what the unsurpassed therapist's (*anuttara bhiṣaj*) teaching targets is "mental suffering" (*caitasika duḥkha*) and not "physical suffering" (*kāyika duḥkha*), which in the final analysis is unavoidable for as long as

6. Accordingly, this study will emphasize the continuity and common ground among various South Asian Buddhist schools, rather than the differences between them. It should also be mentioned that the results of the present enquiry, though it relies on South Asian sources alone, will most likely prove applicable to most Buddhist schools across Asia.

7. *Nietzsche and Buddhist Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), Chapter 4.

one remains alive.[8] Buddhist therapy, it follows, presents itself as a form of *psycho*therapy. Accordingly, it is appropriate to describe *nirvāṇa* as a state of supreme mental health. It is, more precisely, a form of "mental liberation" (*cetovimukti*)[9] thanks to which even the most excruciating forms of physical pain are no longer experienced as mentally distressing.[10]

Now, two questions immediately present themselves at this juncture: (1) What is the Buddhist diagnosis concerning the ordinary person's (*pṛthagjana*) unhealthy take on the world? And (2) what is required, psychologically, to recover from such a debilitating mental condition? I will tackle each in turn.

Reading the Pāli *sutta*-s and Madhyamaka *śāstra* texts side by side, the answer to (1) can briefly be sketched as follows. The common person's mind is in the grip of a tenacious "self"-delusion (*ātmamoha*),[11] which is the work of twin psychological mechanisms, namely (a) the "I"-principle (*ahaṃkāra*) and (b) the "mine"-principle *(mamaṃkāra)*.[12] It is by virtue of these two principles that the pre-reflective delusion of diachronic numerical personal identity and synchronic personal unity are generated and maintained; this involves, correspondingly, (a) the internal appropriation (*adhyātmam upādāna*) of the physical and mental properties that "belong" to the (thereby) constructed self, or "I" (*aham*), and (b) external grasping (*bahirdham upādāna*) to whatever this self lays claim to as "mine" (*mama*) in the process of identity-construction (material possessions and wealth, status, gender, personal relations, power, etc.).[13] Note that this is a "performativist view" of the self, as opposed to a merely reductionist view, which only claims that a person can be analysed in terms, say, of the five *skandha*-s.[14] Indeed, though

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8. *Saṃyuttanikāya,* I.27 and 110; *Saṃyuttanikāya*, IV.207.

9. *Saṃyuttanikāya,* V.119.

10. This is why the historical Buddha, for example, is said to remain serene and composed, even when he suffers tremendously painful injury at the hands of his jealous cousin Devadatta (*Saṃyuttanikāya,* I.27).

11. This phrase is from the eigth-century Mādhyamika Śāntideva (*Bodhicaryāvatāra*, ed. Vidhushekhara Bhattacharya [Calcutta: Asiatic Text Society, 1960] IX.78).

12. *Majjhimanikāya*, I.486.

13. *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, ed. Jan Willem de Jong (Madras: Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1977) XVIII.2.

14. The sixth-century Candrakīrti makes it particularly clear that the Buddhist view of the self is performativist when, in commenting on the writings of Nāgārjuna (second to third century), he writes of the self as the "appropriator" (*upādātṛ*) of the external and internal

it is also all of these things, the "self" (*ātman*) is not just an illusion (*māyā*), a false view (*mrthyādṛṣṭi*), or an erroneous conception (*samanupaśyanā*); rather, the ordinary person performs "selving" in a specifically delusional way.[15] The *notion* of self as an error, false view, or erroneous conception is a derivative cognitive by-product of such unconscious self-performance. Thus, what makes this delusional is not just that our innate belief concerning the self's permanence and ontological status *qua* substance are *inaccurate*—so that one fails to see things, especially oneself, "as they really are" (*yathābhūtam*)—but that such a way of engaging the world co-arises[16] with a large family of debilitating affective and behavioural symptoms which fall under the banner of "thirsting" (*tṛṣṇā*).[17]

Now, thirsting, as anyone familiar with the Buddha's very first sermon in the Deer Park will remember, is said to be the (proximate) cause of *duḥkha*.[18] In view of what was reported above, the Buddhist claim seems to be the following: a person who "thirsts" as a result of suffering from the "self"-delusion is hopelessly self-centred and egoistical, endlessly dissatisfied, and continually tormented by a ceaseless and uncontrollable torrent of unhealthy desires, futile aspirations, vain hopes, and unrealistic expectations. More precisely, such persons long for pleasures (*kāmatṛṣṇā*), cling to what pleases them (*bhavatṛṣṇā*), and wish what displeases them

psycho-physical events that undergo appropriation (*upādāna*) (*Prasannapadā*, ed. Louis de la Vallée Poussin [St-Petersburg: Bibliotheca Buddhica, 1903], 212). See, on this point, Jonardon Ganeri, *The Concealed Art of the Soul: Theories of Self and Practices of Truth in Indian Ethics and Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 203; and "Subjectivity, Selfhood and the Use of the Word 'I,'" in ed. Mark Siderits, Evan Thompson, and Dan Zahavi, *Self, No Self? Perspectives from Analytical, Phenomenological and Indian Traditions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 176–192, 190.

15. On the key differences between illusions and *delusions*, especially as regards Indian Buddhist views on the self, see Panaïoti, *Nietzsche and Buddhist Philosophy*, 144–145.

16. On this point, see *Saṃyuttanikāya,* III.44 and my earlier commentary on this passage at "Anātmatā, Soteriology, and Moral Psychology in Indian Buddhism," in ed. Nina Mirning, *Puṣpikā: Tracing Ancient India through Text and Tradition* (Oxford: Oxbow Books Press, 2013), 365–379, 375–377.

17. Unlike most, I chose to translate *tṛṣṇā* with the straightforwardly verbal noun "thirst*ing*" to emphasize its dynamic, performative nature. *Tṛṣṇā* is not a "state," so to speak, let alone a "thing." Rather, it is something we do.

18. *Vinaya*, I.10.

to disappear or be destroyed (*vibhavatṛṣṇā*),[19] continually passing from attraction (*rāga*) to aversion (*dveṣā*), with only apathy (*moha*) in between.[20] The result is perpetual frustration, disappointment, anxiety, insecurity, dejection, and fretfulness, interspersed with only the rarest and briefest moments of contentment, serenity, or elation. The result of thirsting, in other words, is a life permeated with *duḥkha* ("suffering"). This, in its essence, is what it means for a human being to be "in *saṃsāra*."[21]

Such a diagnosis and attendant aetiology of *duḥkha* give us a good idea of what answering question (2), above, will involve. In a few words, the Buddhist therapeutic programme is geared toward the complete undermining of appropriation/grasping (*upādāna*) through the overcoming of the *ātmamoha*. The result is the "destruction of thirsting" (*tṛṣṇākṣaya*)[22] and the attendant cessation of (mental/*caitasika*) *duḥkha*.[23] Thus, it is by

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19. These are the three types of thirsting that the Buddha reportedly listed in the Noble Truths teaching (*Vinaya*, I.10–11). The third, *vibhavatṛṣṇā* (Pāli: *vibhavataṇhā*), is sometimes taken to denote some sort of suicidal desire for self-annihilation, but it is far from obvious that this was the initial meaning of the term. It seems, rather less dramatically, to stand for a desire for things to "pass away" (*vi*+√*bhū*)—of course, suicidal desires might consist in a subcategory of such desires, but their occurrence will be rather more infrequent than less obviously pathological forms of *vibhavatṛṣṇā*.

20. These three character flaws, or "three fires" (*Dīghanikāya*, III.217: *rāgaggi dosaggi mohaggi*), are often discussed in Buddhist literature. They are regarded as the three roots of all unwholesome affects and actions. Though in Middle and Late Indian Buddhism, *moha* came to be interpreted as the innate ignorance and/or delusion responsible for unhealthy attraction (*rāga*) and aversion (*dveṣā*), i.e., the *ātmamoha* itself, it is not obvious that this is what those who compiled the Pāli Canon had in mind. Instead, a number of passages in this body of literature suggest that *moha* in this context designates the subject's drowsy apathy or indifference to an object that elicits neither attraction nor aversion. This is the notion I have in mind in describing the ordinary person's psychology in the present context.

21. Note that my description of what it means to be "in *saṃsāra*" makes no reference to the idea of cyclical rebirth (*punarjanman*). Indeed, it is not obvious that Buddhist psychology bears any *necessary* conceptual relation with the common Ancient and Classical Indian idea that souls or subtle bodies reincarnate after death. On this point, see my comments at *Nietzsche and Buddhist Philosophy*, 161–162.

22. *Saṃyuttanikāya*, I.136 and III.190; and *Aṅgutarranikāya*, I.133.

23. There is something to be said, then, for Stephen Collins's interpretation of the doctrine of "no-self" as a "soteriological strategy" (*Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism* [Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982], 12–13); though "soteriological" might not be the best term (see note 1, above). Ernst Steinkellner, in a similar vein, presents it as "psycho-practical means" ("Zur Lehre von Nicht-Selbst (anātman) im frühen Buddhismus,"

overcoming the deep-set delusion that "I" am an enduring substance and by gaining a deep realization of the transient and insubstantial nature of all factors of existence—"internal" and "external," "physical" and "mental"—that one undermines the affective, conative, and behavioural dispositions that lead me to experience the world as hostile and endlessly painful. Freed from thirsting, one becomes free from suffering.

But this is far easier said than done. Indeed, attaining *nirvāṇa* involves the complete transformation of one's cognitive and affective take on the world. How, it may now be asked, is this achieved? Structurally speaking, Indian Buddhist therapy can roughly be modelled along the lines of contemporary cognitive-behavioural psychotherapy. This approach empowers patients by assisting them both in undermining the often tacit "conceptual scheme" that underlies their disabling affective symptoms (hence the "cognitive" component) and in altering their behaviour so as to stop responding to their environment in the ways that they habitually do as a result of their mental illness's affective symptoms (hence the "behavioural" component).[24] Likewise, on the one hand, Buddhist therapy involves what may be described as "cognitive interventions" geared toward the attainment of insight (*prajñā*). These include the practice of correct mindfulness (*samyaksmṛti*), sustained self-awareness and introspection, deep reflection on the teaching of no-self—and, amongst Mādhyamika, of emptiness (*śūnyatā*)—, the attainment of various transformative meditative states (*dhyāna; samādhi*), etc., all of which are designed to undermine a specific "conceptual scheme"—namely, that by virtue of which one's delusional "ego" stands at the centre of one's world. On the other hand, such cognitive interventions are complemented with what may be described as "behavioural interventions" designed to induce psychological change by encouraging the Buddhist to both *act* and *feel* like a person who has attained the supreme mental health of *nirvāṇa*.

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in ed. Johann Figl and Hans-Dieter Klein, *Der Begriff der Seele in der Religionwissenschaft* [Würzburg: Verlag Königshausen und Neumann GmbH, 2002], 171–186, 180).

24. For a helpful introduction to cognitive-behavioural theory and practice, see Brian Sheldon's *Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy: Research, Practice, Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1995). I should mention, in this connection, that Buddhist-inspired practices, especially mindfulness exercises, are increasingly being used in the context of contemporary behavioural-cognitive therapy. See, on this issue, Rebecca Crane's *Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy: Distinctive Features* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

The latter involve following the rules of right conduct (*śīla*)—negatively: not behaving in ways that are typical of those who are thirsting; and positively: behaving as "healthy types" do—, but also cultivating, through specific mental exercises, certain emotions that are said to be both characteristic of and conducive to mental wellbeing. Foremost amongst these, in the early texts at least, are the four "immeasurables" (*apramāṇa*), namely, boundless goodwill (*maitrī*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekṣā*).[25] In later Indian texts, special emphasis is placed on *karuṇā*, which is also claimed to be the motive behind the Buddha's (and various *bodhisattva*-s') teaching and interventions in the world.[26]

It is at this juncture that our problem arises. A mind free from *duḥkha*, if the texts are to be trusted, is also a mind permeated with boundless compassion. This is an important part of the reason for which no-harm (*ahiṃsā*) is such a strong regulative principle in proper conduct and the cultivation of compassionate concern is so vehemently promoted in Buddhist training. But, as stated above, there seems to be something contradictory about a purported state of ethical perfection characterized by freedom from suffering, yet which is also characterized by the continuous feeling of an emotion, which, on the face of it, invariably involves an important measure of mental distress—viz., compassion. If there is any prospect of resolving this contradiction, it will be found by more closely examining Buddhist compassion itself.

## 2. The Nature of Buddhist Compassion

A superficial survey of Theravāda literature may be interpreted in a way that would expediently resolve the apparent contradiction between "freedom from suffering" and "boundless compassion." Indeed, earlier Buddhist texts suggest that the compassion of enlightened beings is qualitatively different from that of ordinary beings, arguably in that it simply *does not involve any suffering*. If this were the case, then the contradiction under examination

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25. See, for instance, *Dīghanikāya*, I.251. The instructions relating to the cultivation of the immeasurables is repeated *verbatim* several times in the Pāli Canon.
26. See, on this point, note 3, above.

in the present paper would effectively be resolved. Consider the following evidence in favour of this view.

Let us begin with a terminological point on the language of *sutta* texts. There are three words that translate as "compassion" in Sanskrit, of which Pāli was an early *prakṛt*. The first is the feminine noun *kṛpā,* which can also mean "tenderness." *Kṛpā* is derived from the verbal root √*kṛp*, which means "to lament," "to implore," "to mourn," "to be weak," and, by extension, "to pity." From this root is derived the adjective *kṛpaṇa*, which means "inclined to grieve," "pitiable," "miserable," "feeble," etc. The second form, the feminine *anukampā*, is closest in structure to the English "com-passion" or "sym-pathy" and its equivalents in other European languages (e.g., the German *Mit-leid*). It is derived from the verbal root √*kamp* ("to move," "to tremble," etc.) preceded by the verbal affix *anu*- ("alongside," "after," or "with"—"with" in a figurative sense, unlike the more literal "*sam*-"). The verb *anu+*√*kamp* has the very specific meaning "to sympathise with," "to have compassion for," though it literally means something like "to move along/after/with."[27] Here, the idea of suffering or of feeling sorrow is not explicit; rather, the idea seems to be that one is somehow *moved* by another's suffering. The third Sanskrit word for compassion is the feminine *karuṇā*, which is most likely derived from the very common verbal root √*kṛ* ("to act," "to do," "to accomplish," "to make," etc.). The meaning of the word *karuṇa/karuṇā* seems to have evolved over the long history of Sanskrit literature. In Vedic Sanskrit, the neuter *karuṇa* stands for a holy action, often in the context of ritual. The feminine *karuṇā* then came to stand for the emotion commonly known as "compassion" in English and, by extension, later became associated in the Late Classical Brāhmaṇical aesthetic theory of Abhivanagupta with mourning, lamenting, and pathos, especially that felt by the audience of a dramatic performance.

The first thing to note is that *kṛpā*—the only Sanskrit form that explicitly connotes suffering—is entirely absent from early Pāli literature. From the root √*kṛp*, only the adjectival form "*kapaṇa*" (Sanskrit: *kṛpaṇa*) appears, in the pejorative sense of "poor," "wretched," "small," or "insignificant." *Anukampā*, in contrast, is very often met with in the Pāli Canon and seems to be the most general colloquial term designating the Buddha's compassion

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27. Monier Monier-Williams, ed., *Sanskrit–English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 305.

and that of awakened *arhant*-s. But as we saw, it may be understood simply as denoting "being moved," or motivated, to act by the other's suffering, not necessarily afflicted by it. *Karuṇā*, finally, is often met with in early Buddhist literature, with a slightly more specialised meaning in the Pāli Canon.[28] But the *karuṇā* discussed in this textual body does not explicitly connote pain, sorrow, and grief, as it does later in Classical Indian philosophy of art. Close to its roots in the verbal √*kṛ*, it seems to denote first and foremost a desire to act, namely, as one commentator put it, "the desire to remove woe and suffering" (*ahitadukkhāpanayakāmatā*). On the face of it, then, the wording of the Pāli *sutta*-s suggests that Buddhist compassion might involve no pain or enfeeblement whatsoever. Rather than a depressive affect, it seems instead to be a stimulating emotion.

Both the Buddha and later Theravādin authors, in this connection, were careful to distinguish compassion from some of the more vulgar sentiments it might be confused with. There is a verse passage in the canon, for instance, in which the Buddha is explicitly attacked for teaching others out of compassion—or for teaching others at all for that matter—, with the clear implication that this is somehow inconsistent with being "free from all ties" (*sabbaganthapahīna*). The *yakṣa* Sakka puts it this way: "It is not appropriate (*sādhu*) for you, a wanderer (*samaṇa*) who is free from all ties and is liberated, to instruct others." To which the Buddha answers: "Sakka, the insightful person is not capable of that [form of] compassion which arises in a mind that is attached. And if, with a clear mind, he instructs others, he is not bound in this way. Such compassion consists in genuine caring concern (*anuddayā*)."[29] The idea here is that the Buddha's compassion does not involve the common sentimental attachment that everyday compassion implies. It may be inferred from this that the liberated person's compassion is in no way a painful affect. This idea finds an echo in the writing of Buddhaghosa, the eminent fifth-century Theravādin commentator. Commenting on the cultivation of the four immeasurables, Buddhaghosa carefully points out the "false manifestation" (*vipatti*) of each of these core Buddhist virtues. Just as goodwill should not give rise to attachment (*sneha*), or sympathetic joy to derision (*pahāsa*), Buddhaghosa emphasises that genuine compassion should not be confused with sadness

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28. Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit–English Dictionary*, 31.
29. Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit–English Dictionary*, 255.

(*soka*). At first sight, then, it seems as though Buddhist compassion in the Theravāda is understood to be a painless affect.

Having said this, Buddhaghosa's instructions on cultivating boundless compassion leave it unclear whether such an easy solution is really at hand. Buddhaghosa instructs us to begin by developing compassion for family and loved ones, then gradually to extend the scope of our compassion to people toward whom we are indifferent, and finally even to those toward whom we feel enmity.[30] Such instructions suggest that the compassion of perfected Buddhists is *identical to what ordinary persons feel toward those to whom they are sentimentally attached*. This comes as something of a surprise given that Buddhaghosa then tries to qualify this form of compassion as firmly distinct from mere sorrow and self-regarding sadness. Buddhaghosa's statements are ambiguous. Is the Buddha's compassion different in kind, or only in scope, from ordinary compassion? Does it involve suffering, or does it not? It is not obvious that these questions can be answered by looking at Theravāda sources alone. There is, it would seem, a palpable tension surrounding this aspect of Buddhist doctrine, which remains unresolved in this body of literature.

In Sanskrit Buddhist *śāstra*-s, things are not ambiguous at all. Here, it is explicitly stated that compassion does involve an important measure of suffering.[31] Indeed, most great Indian Buddhist authors of the Middle and Late Buddhist periods who wrote on the subject, Mahāyānist and Non-Mahāyānist alike—including the likes of Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu, Asaṅga, Bhavya, Sthiramati, Candrakīrti, Śāntideva, and Prajñākaramati—, seem to agree that all forms of compassion involve suffering, even that of the

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30. See Thomas W. Rhys Davids's and William Stede's (eds.) *Pāli Text Society Pāli–English Dictionary* (Chipstead: Pāli Text Society, 1925), 245.

31. *Karuṇā* is the term used to designate the great virtue of compassion—alongside goodwill, sympathetic joy, and equanimity—that characterizes an enlightened being's mind and whose cultivation leads to *nirvāṇa*. Harvey B. Aronson suggests that *anukampā* and *karuṇā* actually stand for two very different things in the Pāli Canon, *anukampā* being the common emotion of sympathy and *karuṇā* being some sort of transcendental spiritual virtue (*Love and Sympathy in Theravāda Buddhism* [Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980], 14–15). I see no reason for drawing this distinction. The standard claim that the Buddha teaches out of *anukampā* seems completely interchangeable with the admittedly less frequent claim that he teaches out of *karuṇā*. Aronson is most probably thinking of the cultivation of *karuṇā* as a meditative exercise prescribed by the Buddha—there is no cultivation of *anukampā*—, but he nevertheless fails to convince. As I see it, *anukampā* and *karuṇā* are just about synonymous.

exalted *bodhisattva*-s or of the Buddha. How, then, can such a view be made compatible with the idea that a perfected Buddhist is entirely "free from suffering"?

Examining the claims of the fourth-century Sarvāstivādin Vasubandhu and Vijñānavādin Asaṅga (possibly brothers) side by side makes it possible to answer this thorny question. Vasubandhu draws a distinction between the compassion that Buddhists are preliminarily instructed to develop in the teaching on cultivation of the four immeasurables, for instance, and the "great compassion" (*mahākaruṇā*) characteristic of the Buddha's and advanced *bodhisattva*-s' supremely healthy mind. While the former is characterized only by the absence of aversion (*dveṣā*), Vasubandhu claims that the latter is also characterized by the absence of delusion (*moha*).[32] Asaṅga's discussion of compassion, in turn, can help us understand what exactly it is that Vasubandhu means when he says "great compassion" is free from delusion. Commenting on the love (*sneha*) involved in compassion, Asaṅga explains that unlike parental love, which "consists in thirsting" (*tṛṣṇāmaya*), the *bodhisattva*'s love "consists in compassion" (*karuṇāmaya*).[33] Though strikingly circular, this clarification nevertheless has the virtue of making it very clear as to what distinguishes genuine Buddhist compassion from mundane compassion. True *karuṇā*, Asaṅga implies, does not involve thirsting. Coming back to Vasubandhu, this makes it possible to infer that the "great compassion" described by Vasubandhu is free from *self*-delusion (*ātmamoha*). For, as we saw above, Buddhist psychology posits an intimate relation between thirsting and self-delusion. True Buddhist compassion, then, must be qualitatively different from ordinary compassion in so far as it is free of self-delusion (Vasubandhu), and it must also be phenomenologically different in that the love it involves carries no trace of thirsting (Asaṅga).

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32. *Suttanipātāṭṭhakathā* of Buddhaghosa, ed. Helmer Smith (London: Pāli Text Society, 1966), 138.

33. *Saṃyuttanikāya*, I.206:
*sabbaganthapahīnassa vippamuttassa te sato* |
*samaṇassa na taṃ sādhu yad aññam anusāsatī ti* ‖
*yena kenapi vaṇṇena saṃvāso sakka jāyati* |
*na tam arahati sappañño manasā anukampitum* ‖
*manasā ce pasannena yad aññam anusāsati* |
*na tena hoti saṃyutto sānukampā anuddayā ti* ‖

The full realization of selflessness and the arising of boundless compassion are thus intimately tied in Buddhist thought. Ludovic Viévard aptly summarizes the Mādhyamikas' moral psychology as follows:

> The compassion of the profane individual rests on the *ātman*. And we have concluded that the perfection of compassion is proportional to the disappearance of the idea of *ātman*. Such [perfection] is progressive, and operates simultaneously with the gradual understanding of emptiness.[34]

Though more explicit in the Madhyamaka, this model was arguably widespread in Buddhist India. To wit: it can be reconstructed on the basis of texts by the two non-Mādhyamika authors we have been examining so far and finds a close parallel in the writings of the sixth-century Theravādin Dhammapāla. Indeed, this author describes insight (*paññā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*) as the Buddha's mind's principal cognitive and affective characteristics, respectively. Dhammapāla makes it obvious that these are really two sides of the same coin, concluding with the following remark: "Just as the master's compassion was devoid of sentimental affection or sorrow, so his understanding was devoid of the thoughts 'I' and 'mine.'"[35]

Sanskrit Buddhist literature affords another central insight concerning the nature of Buddhist compassion. According to at least two prominent Classical Indian authors, enlightened compassion is not only "free from thirsting and delusion"—a rather vague negative property—, but also the suffering it involves ultimately turns out to be a prelude for exalted joy. To provide such a positive account of compassion-born suffering, it is important to focus on the relation between *karuṇā* and the fate of those toward whom it is directed. Consider, to begin, Asaṅga's baffling claim that though *bodhisattva*-s initially recoil before the suffering they undergo as a result of their boundless compassion, this same suffering fills them with joy when it is properly apprehended (*spṛṣṭa*).[36] Asaṅga goes on to explain that in

34. *Visuddhimagga*, ed. Caroline A. F. Rhys Davids (London: William and Norgate, 1879), 318. Buddhaghosa immediately follows this up with a discussion of compassion's "far" and "near" enemies, i.e., its opposite and the affect it may easily be confused with. While the former is cruelty, the latter he describes as sorrow related to the householder's life, i.e., ultimately self-regarding sadness (*Visuddhimagga*, 319).

35. *Visuddhimagga*, 314.

36. This perhaps explains why Buddhist Sanskrit authors do not hesitate to use the term *kṛpā*, discussed above, to refer to compassion. The sixth-century Vijñānavādin Sthiramati, in this

helping others progress on the Buddhist path, the *bodhisattva*'s "compassion-caused suffering turns into happiness" (*duḥkham eva karuṇājanitam* […] *sukhaṃ bhavati*).[37] Śāntideva makes a similar claim. On his account, the suffering born of compassion is far outweighed by the formidable pleasure *bodhisattva*-s' feel when the other is helped to get closer to *nirvāṇa*.[38] The suffering born of compassion, Śāntideva seems to be telling us, is really only a preamble for the happiness of sympathetic joy (*muditā).*

Suffering, then, acts as a stimulant for *bodhisattva*-s. It actively propels them to altruistic action. What is more, it stands as a necessary condition for the deep pleasures of sympathetic joy, and thus as a prelude to a noble and healthy form of other-oriented pleasure. Far from being problematic for Buddhist ethics, then, it seems as though the fact that Buddhist compassion does involve suffering brings into relief deeper and subtler aspects of Buddhist moral psychology. More specifically, it points to a stimulating form of suffering, or way of suffering. This, however, suggests that the standard Buddhist notion of "freedom from suffering" is in need of qualification.

## 3. Qualifying "Freedom from Suffering"

Our discussion so far has an important revisionary implication. Indeed, it would appear that ethical perfection in Indian Buddhism does not, strictly speaking, involve complete freedom from suffering. For as long as they are alive and engaged in the world at the very least, not all suffering has actually come to cessation for perfected Buddhists. On the contrary, in so far as

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connection, even went so far as to propose the following *nirukta* morphological analysis of the form "*karuṇā*," clearly suggesting that compassion is an unpleasant affect: "*Karuṇā* is composed of '*kam*' and '*ruṇaddhi*.' '*Kam*' means pleasure, so the meaning [of "*karuṇā*"] is "that which blocks (*ruṇaddhi*) pleasure" (*kaṃ ruṇaddhīti karuṇā / kam iti sukhasyākhyā sukhaṃ ruṇaddhīty ārthah*). As in the case of many *nirukti*-s, this analysis is inaccurate, historically speaking—it is far more likely that the form *karuṇā* simply derives from √*kṛ*—, but as Eivind Kahrs explains in his study of the *Nirvacana* tradition, linguistic historical accuracy was not the purpose of this type of analytical exercise (*Indian Semantic Analysis: The Nirvacana Tradition* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998]).

37. Ludovic Viévard presents a succinct and useful survey of citations from these authors concerning the personal distress involved in compassion at *Vacuité (śūnyatā) et compassion (karuṇā) dans le bouddhisme madhyamaka* (Paris: Collège de France, 2002), 180–183.

38. *Abhidharmakośa*, ed. Prahlad Pradhan (Patna: Jayaswal Research Institute, 1967), 415.

they are animated by boundless compassion for all beings, ideal Buddhist agents will suffer rather frequently. In order to draw out the significance of these results for Buddhist moral psychology, it will be necessary to take some distance from Buddhist texts themselves and engage in admittedly artificial yet thoroughly informed conjecture and reconstruction. A number of the more abstract claims that follow, accordingly, are to a certain degree speculative, and thus tentative. At issue throughout this section is the significance, or spirit, of Buddhist moral psychology, not the word of any particular text or tradition.

Our enquiry suggests that the two following claims are *à propos* when it comes to describing the perfected/ideal Buddhist type: (1) s/he knows nothing of the suffering which pervades an ordinary person's life—i.e., a life lead under the thrall of the self-delusion and thus a life of perpetual thirsting; (2) the kind of suffering s/he experiences as a result of his/her boundless compassion is of an altogether different nature to which ordinary, unenlightened beings consistently encounter.

Let us begin by fleshing out (1). Should *duḥkha* strictly be interpreted as a technical Buddhist term standing for "suffering that results from thirsting (*tṛṣṇā*)," then *nirvāṇa* can accurately be characterized as involving "*duḥkhanirodha*" (the cessation of suffering/*duḥkha*). On this line of interpretation, the Buddha holds good on his promise in the noble truths teaching; following his teaching will effectively lead to freedom from suffering, albeit a specific (though arguably very prevalent) type of suffering. Indeed, by overcoming the self-delusion (*ātmamoha*), dismantling the "I"- and "mine"-principles (*ahaṃkāra ca mamaṃkāra ca*), undermining both internal appropriation (*adhyātmam upādāna*) and external grasping (*bahirdham upādāna*), and thereby bringing about the destruction of thirsting (*tṛṣṇākṣaya*), the psychological ground for all forms of egotistic frustration, disappointment, insecurity, fear of loss, anxiety, etc. is thoroughly removed and freedom from all self-centred mental suffering (*caitasika duḥkha*) is achieved. In a sense, then, the results of the present enquiry are only mildly revisionary, for there remains an important, interesting, and inspiring sense in which Buddhism compellingly promises freedom from suffering, viz., unhealthy thirsting-based suffering. Having said this, everything in the Sanskrit Buddhist textual tradition at the very least indicates that perfected Buddhists will continue to suffer on account of their boundless compassion for all beings. And indeed, the fact of the matter is that "*duḥkha*" is *not*

used as a technical Buddhist term standing for "suffering that results from thirsting (*tṛṣṇā*)" in Buddhist texts; on the contrary, the very same form is used to describe the *bodhisattva*-s' and Buddha's experience of compassion. What the texts indicate, however, is that a *bodhisattva* or a Buddha suffers *differently*.

We may now enquire as to what distinguishes the perfected Buddhist's compassion-born suffering from the ordinary person's. I suggest there are three important respects in which *karuṇā*-born suffering is different from the suffering that comes to cessation in *nirvāṇa*. First, it appears to be different by virtue of its more limited "scope," so to speak. Indeed, it arises specifically as the result of an emotion, namely compassion, which has *the other* for its intentional object. The perfected Buddhist no longer experiences mental distress as a result of what happens, what happened, or what may happen to her. With the overcoming of the self-delusion, the patterns of egocentric concern so typical of ordinary people's experience of life no longer plague the perfected Buddhists' mind. The mental distress born of their genuine compassion has the *other* and more specifically the *other's suffering* as its sole intentional object. On the Buddhist view, thirsting invariably taints ordinary, unenlightened compassion—even the seemingly "purest," such as parental love (Asaṅga)—, which is why it essentially amounts to little more than sentimental sadness (Buddhaghosa).[39] Genuine Buddhist compassion, in contrast, is focused solely on the other; it is unique in being truly altruistic. This makes for a different type of suffering, the *immediate* and *unique* cause of which is the other's woe.

This connects directly to the second difference between the unenlightened *vs.* the enlightened person's suffering. This is a difference not in scope, but in kind, or "structure," more precisely. In so far as the perfected Buddhist's compassion-born suffering is not grounded in thirsting, it cannot be a result of the subject's vulnerability or irritability, but rather in her responsiveness and openness to the other. This idea requires a bit of fleshing out. Consider the structure of thirsting-based suffering. Such suffering is essentially the outcome of the unenlightened subject's over-sensitivity to the unpredictability of the world, to phenomenal change, to the impermanence of all things, etc. Subjects are closed up unto themselves, striving at all costs

39. *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkara*, ed. Surekha V. Limaye (New Delhi: Indian Books Centre, 1992) XVII.43, Commentary.

to preserve their identity—or the "integrity" of their "self"—in the midst of an incessant sea of change. As a result, they suffer tremendously because their rigidity makes them markedly vulnerable. Surely they would rather not suffer, but they do; they thus undergo suffering passively. Perfected Buddhists seem to stand beyond any such ego-related vulnerability; their emotional resilience as regards themselves and what happens to them is supreme. When they suffer as a result of true, i.e., thirsting-free, compassion, it is not as a result of being closed up unto their delusional and fragile little self, but precisely because they are sensitive, responsive, and open to the other. Accordingly, far from attempting to avoid suffering, they actively seek such opportunities to suffer because they are strong enough to take it.[40]

And this in turn points to the third fundamental difference between the ordinary person's suffering and that of the perfected Buddhist, namely the difference in the way experiencing suffering *feels* to them. Otherwise put, the difference here is *phenomenological*. Thirsting-born suffering is enfeebling. Subjects are afflicted and weakened by it. Asaṅga and Śāntideva help us see that quite the opposite holds for the compassion-born suffering of the ideal Buddhist type. Though it may initially be feared, such suffering quickly gives rise to pleasure (Asaṅga). And in so far as the actions it motivates effectively help the other in progressing toward *nirvāṇa*, it becomes a mere prelude for sympathetic joy in the face of the other's progress (Śāntideva). This suggests that the perfected Buddhist experiences compassion-born suffering as an invigorating, stimulating affect that signals the presence of a challenge to meet proudly, an obstacle to overcome heroically.[41] This is certainly very different from how suffering ordinarily feels, even that which results from everyday compassion, or pity.[42]

In sum, the ethical primacy of compassion in Buddhist moral psychology leaves us with no choice but to qualify seriously the standard idea that Buddhism promises "freedom from suffering." Having said this, the qualifications required should not be seen as posing a threat to the Buddhist tradition. On the contrary, it would seem that such a qualification enhances the appeal of the Buddhist psychology of suffering. If I am right,

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40. Viévard, *Vacuité (śūnyatā) et compassion (karuṇā) dans le bouddhisme madhyamaka*, 241.
41. *Paramatthamañjusā*, quoted in Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, *The Path of Purification* (Kandry: Buddhist Publication Society, 1975), 774.
42. *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkara*, XVII.46.

then Buddhism can coherently promise to bring a particularly disabling and harmful form of self-centred suffering to cessation, whilst also pointing to a different way of suffering, which on ethical grounds ought to be embraced. Buddhist ethical training, indeed, need not be concerned solely with creating serene subjects, but also *responsive agents*.

## Concluding Remarks

What are we to make of this critical examination of Buddhist moral psychology? Beyond its immediate and more obvious contributions to the philosophy of religion and Buddhist studies, this study might be of interest to contemporary psychologists and psychiatrists. Two prominent recent trends in the psychological sciences already point towards fruitful dialogue between Western and Buddhist forms of therapy. The first is the increasingly widespread use of Buddhist mindfulness practices in cutting-edge cognitive-behavioural therapy.[43] The second is the nascent field of positive psychology. Rather than focusing on relatively rare (though not rare enough) abnormal symptoms and pathological conditions, positive psychologists are interested in whatever might help otherwise well adapted or healthy people lead happier and more meaningful lives.[44] These two trends have lead to a broader interest in so-called "contemplative traditions," such as Buddhism.

Note, to begin, that on a rather cynical reading of the tradition, a Buddhist response to the positive psychology project in particular (which may also be relevant to Western psychiatry in general) is that even those people whom contemporary psychologists and psychiatrists would regard as "healthy" are in fact profoundly unwell, and in particular quite thoroughly deluded as regards selfhood, with everything that may follow from this. "Normal," on this line of interpretation, in no way implies "healthy" for Buddhists. There is certainly something to be said for this way of putting the Buddhist point, but there is a slightly more positive and, I believe, useful way of framing the problem. This would simply be to say that Buddhism teaches us that we could all be doing significantly better than we currently are. The gist of the first noble truth, under this formulation, is not that living is horrendous, but that it is possible for intelligent, sensitive,

43. *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkara*, 47, Commentary.
44. *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, VIII.104–108.

and determined people to lead far more meaningful lives. On this line of thought, Indian Buddhism may be seen as converging with the concerns of positive psychologists and to have something distinctive to offer mental health practicians more generally.

On the face of it, most Western psychologists will not find the seemingly quietist ideal of attaining a state in which a subject will be entirely free from suffering all that appealing. They will rightly ask whether all forms of suffering are really that bad, and whether some *ways* of suffering may not be healthier than others. More importantly, along with philosophers, they may ask whether moral agency—and responsiveness to other people's suffering in particular—requires that the agent suffer in the face of the other's woe. The more refined Buddhist moral psychology that has emerged from our present enquiry suggests the answers the Buddhist tradition may provide are more subtle and nuanced than might first appear when reading Buddhist texts or listening to Buddhist teachings. And in this regard, Buddhism may have valuable contributions to make to psychological theory and practice. Of course, a number of Buddhist psychological hypotheses—viz., on self-delusion and its relation to selfishness, on the propensity of less troubled agents to be more concerned with others, etc.—would have to be more thoroughly theorized and empirically tested. But it may be well worthwhile to go through the trouble of doing this. Empirically informed Buddhist-inspired psychology, after all, promises not only to produce happier, calmer "patients," but also more engaged, responsive, and responsible "agents." Virtue ethicists, in particular, would welcome this sort of win-win. In concrete terms, it would certainly make the world a better place; a world not free from suffering, but in which suffering may at least be turned to profit.