# Buddhist Ethics: a Perspective[[1]](#endnote-1)

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## Introduction

Religions, and the metaphysics and ethics that go with them, often move from one culture to another. When they do, they may gain features, features inherent in the older tradition but which are brought out by the new culture, or just features plain added by the new culture. Conversely, they may lose features, features to which the new culture is unsympathetic, or with which it is incompatible. Indeed, to be successful in a new culture, the religion must have this chameleon-like character.

Buddhism is no exception. It has moved from India to Tibet, Thailand, China, Japan, amongst other places. And each culture has shaped Buddhism in different ways – sometime more than one way. Thus, the largely Theravada Buddhism of Thailand is different from Tibetan Buddhism, with its array of tantric practices. Both are different from the fideistic Pure Land Buddhism of China and Japan, not to mention Zen.

In the last 50 years we have witnessed Buddhism moving into “Western” countries in North America, Australasia, and Europe. It can be expected to evolve accordingly. How, it is too early to predict. But that this will happen is all but certain.

This essay is about Buddhist ethics; and it is an attempt by one “Westerner” to formulate a Buddhist ethics that makes sense to him. If, in the end, traditionalists say ‘This isn’t really Buddhism’, I don’t really mind. I am more interested in what seems to me to be true, than in signing up to any ‘ism’.[[2]](#endnote-2)

In the first half of this essay I will formulate what seems to me to be a plausible Buddhist, or Buddhist-inspired, ethics. In the second, I will examine a number of objections, and see what can be said by way of answer.[[3]](#endnote-3)

## A Buddhist Ethics

*2.1 Buddhism*

As I have already observed, there is not just one Buddhism; there are many Buddhisms. So what makes a view a Buddhist view? One might go about answering this question (and the similar question for Christianity or Islam) in a couple of different ways. One might hold that there are certain core Buddhist views, essential to it; after this, there is a variety of “optional extras”. Alternatively, one might reject this essentialist position, and hold the various Buddhisms to be connected by a web of similarities which form, in Wittgenstein’s phrase, a family resemblance:[[4]](#endnote-4) any two Buddhisms have some things in common, though there may be nothing common to all Buddhisms.

I shall not try to adjudicate the matter here. Whichever of the views one adopts, it is seems clear that there are cultural accretions in Buddhism: things which were simply taken over from the ambient culture without argument. Abortion, for example, is deeply frowned upon in most Indo-Tibetan Buddhisms, but not generally in Japanese Buddhisms.[[5]](#endnote-5) The reason, I presume, is that the Indo-Tibetan Buddhisms were influenced by Ayurvedic medical theory, according to which, as in the medieval Christian teaching, life begins at conception. Sino-Japanese medicine was quite different. Similarly, Buddhism, like all major world religions is patriarchal. It has its share of misogynistic texts; there has never been a female Dalhi Lama; virtually all temple-heads in Japan have been men; and so on. But there is nothing essentially patriarchal about Buddhism – quite the contrary: gender is of no theoretical importance whatever. So why the patriarchy? Simply because Buddhism evolved in times and places (India and China between about 500 BCE and 1000 CE) which were deeply patriarchal societies. The religion simply reflected this fact.

These two examples, it seems to me, are very clear cases of cultural accretion. With other things, matters are not so clear. One of these is the doctrine of rebirth. We will come to this in due course.

*2.2 The Four Noble Truths*

If there is a core to Buddhism, this must surely contain the Four Noble Truths[[6]](#endnote-6) – and if there isn’t, there is yet, as far as I know, no form of Buddhism that has jettisoned these original teachings of the historical Buddha. These, it seems to me, form the framework of any Buddhist ethics.

The First Noble Truth is that life is… and then there is one of these Sanskrit words that it is difficult to translate into English: *duḥkha*. The most frequent translation as ‘suffering’, though it captures something of what is at issue, is quite inadequate. The word’s connotations standardly include: suffering, pain, discontent, unsatisfactoriness, unhappiness, sorrow, affliction, anxiety, dissatisfaction, discomfort, anguish, stress, misery, and frustration. The thought, whatever word one uses, is that all people get ill, suffer pain, age (if they are lucky to live long enough to do so), lose limbs, loved ones, jobs, treasured possessions – all of which gives rise to unhappiness, insecurity, mental dis-ease, and so on. This is not to say that there are not also times of happiness and joy. But like everything else in life, they are transient, and so prone to occasion the unhappiness of loss.

I must confess that the First Noble Truth strikes me as pretty ungainsayable: “suffering” is a fact of anyone’s life. There’s not much to argue about here.

The Second Noble Truth says that there is a cause of *duḥkha*. This is expressed by another of those words difficult to translate: *tṛṣṇā* (pronounced ‘trishna’). The common translation as ‘craving’, suggesting as it does the feeling one has for water when one has had no fluid for four days, gives the wrong impression. Better, is something like ‘attachment and aversion’: a certain mental attitude connected with wanting something good to go on, or wanting something bad to go away. The thought is that when we experience duḥkha it is caused by this attitude which bring to affairs, the result of which is unpleasant, sometimes very unpleasant.

The truth of the Second Noble Truth is, I think, less obvious than that of the First. But if one reflects on the times when one has been unhappy, I, at least, find it hard to think of one when this kind of attachment did not play a role. This is not, of course, to say that the mental attitude is the only cause of the unhappiness. Many causes have to conspire to bring about an effect. No doubt events of unhappiness can be brought about by cars crashing, stock markets collapsing, etc. But of all the causes that conspire, our mental attitude is the only one that is significantly under our control. It makes sense, therefore, to single that out.

The Third Noble Truth is but a corollary of the Second. If you can get rid of the attitude of tṛṣṇā, you can get rid of the duḥkha*.*

The Fourth Noble Truth is a series of suggestions as to how to get rid of the attitude – the Eightfold Noble Path: right view, right intention [wisdom], right speech, right action, right livelihood [ethical actions], right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration [mental states]. When these suggestions are implemented in the appropriate way, they constitute what Foucault calls a technology of the self[[7]](#endnote-7) – though given the Buddhist view of the self (to which we will come in a moment), this is not a happy way of putting it. We might better say ‘personal technology’: these are practices which bring about dispositional changes in a person. For the most part, when suitably spelled out, these strike me as good advice; though I’m sure that there is much other good advice out there as well. Further details are not germane to the present inquiry, however.

The important point to take away from the preceding discussion is that the Noble Truths – especially the First and the Second – serve to ground Buddhist ethics. When in doubt, it is by reference back to these that we can seek guidance.

*2.3 Rebirth*

At this point, an obvious thought arises. If the point of it all is to get rid of duḥkha, there is a very easy way to do so: kill yourself. That will certainly end it. Or if one is concerned with the duḥkha of other sentient creatures as well, nuke the planet. (Unlike committing suicide, this option is not practically available to most of us; but the thought experiment is still good.) Surely, that cannot be right.

A standard reply will come immediately to most Buddhists (at least most Buddhists in the Indo-Tibetan tradition). Death won’t work, because one is going to have to come back and do it all again: rebirth. One is locked into as many rebirths as it takes to get it right.

It might well have seemed that the doctrine of rebirth is simply a cultural accretion to Buddhism, just taken over from the general culture of India circa 500 BCE. The Buddhist canon certainly does not argue for it; it just takes it for granted. The preceding paragraphs might suggest that this is wrong, however. Rebirth is, in fact, integral to making the whole perspective coherent. But then again, rebirth plays little role in, say, Japanese Zen Buddhism. (Not that Zen Buddhists ever explicitly repudiated rebirth, to my knowledge; it just becomes strangely irrelevant to where the action is.) The matter, then, is at least moot.

Whatever one makes of this matter, however, let me put my cards on the table. I, like many “Westerners” cannot endorse rebirth. There are, of course, problems about how even to conceptualise rebirth when there is no self to be reborn. (Here, Hindus, who believe in a self (*Ātman*), have a much easier time.) Still, I think that one can, in fact, make sense of the notion in an appropriate way. The problem is simply one of lack of evidence. An old woman dies in downtown Melbourne in 2010. In the next year or two, hundreds of thousands of children are born all over the world. If rebirth is to mean anything, there must be something that makes one of them *her*. And there could be evidence for this. For example, if a child born in Osaka seems to remember Melbourne, and especially some of the things that no one but the old woman knew, but which can be independently verified (say that before her death she hid a box in a certain location) then we would have such evidence – especially if this sort of occurrence were common.

But we do not have such evidence. I see no more evidence for rebirth than for the existence of miracles in the Christian traditions. This does not, of course, show that rebirth is false. But the wise person, as Hume put it, proportions their beliefs according to the evidence.[[8]](#endnote-8) Accordingly, one should not believe it. In particular, one most certainly should not base a system of ethics on such unsupported views.

Let me add that a rejection of rebirth does not mean a rejection of karma. Karma is the view that one’s actions have effects, both good and bad, both for oneself and for others. In Indo-Tibetan Buddhism especially, the karma of one’s actions play an important role in how fortunate a human rebirth one has – indeed whether one has a *human* rebirth at all.[[9]](#endnote-9) Clearly, if one does not endorse rebirth, one will not endorse this. But the doctrine of karma makes perfectly good sense within one life. For example: If you go around being friendly to others, they are more likely to be friendly to you; if you go around being mean to others, they are more likely to be mean to you. And if you are constantly friendly, it will make you into a person with friendly disposition; whereas if you go around being mean, it will make you into a person with a mean disposition. As Aristotle noted, we train ourselves into virtues and vices.[[10]](#endnote-10) All this seems to me little more than plain naturalistic (common sense) psychology.

Anyway, and to return to the question of the aim of a Buddhist ethics, if one cannot invoke rebirth, the suicide objection strikes me as a knock-down argument – as much as anything can be in philosophy. What it knocks down is the thought that a Buddhist ethics is simply about the elimination of the negative. It has to be about accentuating a positive. There must something positive to promote. But what?

*2.4 Ataraxia*

The obvious candidate to someone who knows the Buddhist literature is peace of mind: equanimity. Most of us experience this sometimes, and we know when it happens that it is good. Of course, most of us lose peace of mind when things go wrong. That’s when the unhappiness kicks in, and we know it’s bad.

The idea that ethics is about the promotion of peace of mind is not unique to Buddhism. It is a common thought in Hellenistic philosophy. The Greeks tended to call it *ataraxia*; the Romans *tranquillitas*. Buddhism itself has a name for it: *upekṣhā*. Maybe these are not all exactly the same thing, but they are certainly in the same ball-park: a tranquil state of mind, not disturbed by unpleasant thoughts or emotions. I will use the word ‘ataraxia’ in what follows.

It would be a mistake to think of ataraxia as emotional flat-lining. It is quite compatible with peaceful joy, for example. Clearly, though, there are certain emotions that are incompatible with it. The obvious example is hatred. Hatred destroys peace of mind. Between these two extremes, however, there is a whole range of emotions where matters are not so clear. I once thought, for example, that sadness was not compatible with ataraxia. But there would seem to be a certain kind of sadness that is compatible with ataraxia. There is much beautiful Japanese Zen poetry, especially on the theme of the impermanence of things, that undeniably has an air of sadness about it. The Japanese term is ‘*aware*’, which is a sort of bittersweet sadness (or wistfulness) at the transience of things. This appears to be quite compatible with ataraxia.

There is surely more to be said about the nature of ataraxia; but that will do for the moment. What I suggest is that the goal of a Buddhist ethics is the promotion of this state. The Eightfold Noble Path can be though of as steps in this direction.

Of course, it needs to be said that one should not be *attached* to the goal of ataraxia. That would be self-defeating. Developing equanimity does not, moreover, mean withdrawing from the world. For a start, it is hard, probably impossible, to follow the Eightfold Path if one is starving, has no time to meditate, or whatever. Even if the aim is to transcend our material circumstances, material circumstances of the right kind are necessary to learn how to do this.

In what follows, it will be convenient to have a word for the failure of ataraxia. Nothing particularly obvious seems to recommend itself. In what follows, I will generally refer to this as *being troubled*. A corollary of these ethics, then, is that one should try to eliminate, or at least minimise, being troubled.

*2.5 Compassion*

So much for oneself. But what about others? Perhaps the central virtue of Buddhist ethics is compassion (*karuṇā*). The ethical steps of the Eightfold path are, generally speaking, compassionate. In pre-Mahāyāna forms of Buddhism, compassionate behaviour is good, but mainly because of its effect on the person who shows it. Later Buddhism, however, stresses compassion as a good in itself. So one should be just as much concerned with the ataraxia of others as one is with one’s own. But why should this be?[[11]](#endnote-11)

An answer is implicit in the early Buddhist view of the self, namely that there is none. Consider your car. It is just a bunch of parts that were put together at a certain time. They interact; some wear out and are replaced; and in the end they fall apart. It might be useful to give the car a name (like ABC 123), but this is no more than a matter of convenience. The parts of the car are interacting with all sorts of things (like the air and the road); it is just convenient to have a name for that particular *relatively* stable bunch of interacting bits.

Now, you are exactly like the car, except that your parts are psycho-biological. And just as the car has no self, something which persists through all the changes, and makes the car the very car it is, neither do you.

This is a paper on Buddhist ethics, and so not the place to enter into a discussion of the metaphysics of the self.[[12]](#endnote-12) Let us just grant this view here, for the sake of argument. If it is right, then a compassionate attitude would seem to follow. There are lots of psycho-biological states of being troubled abroad. There is no sense in which some of these belong to *my* self, and some belong to *other* selves: there are no selves in the relevant sense. Their badness, then, does not depend on *whose* they are. They are all equally bad. We should therefore be concerned to eliminate *all* troubled mental states. [[13]](#endnote-13)

*2.6 Why be Moral?*

I have now sketched a Buddhist ethics. Before we look at some objections to this, I will make a few further comments to round out the picture.

There is a standard conundrum about morality: why should one be moral? If, for example, one were given the Ring of Gyges, which makes its wearer invisible, why should one not behave entirely out of self-interest? There are various standard answers to the question. I just point out here that the above account of ethics provides a very simple answer to the question. Ethical behaviour *is* self-interest – though in the present context, this has to be understood in a somewhat Pickwikian sense! Let me clarify.

For a start, why should a person behave in such a way as to develop their own ataraxia? This hardly needs an answer. A troubled state of mind is not a state we feel happy being in. Of course one would like to get rid of it. (You enjoy the headache? – Okay don’t take the asprin!) Why should one be concerned with the ataraxia of others? Because, in the last instance, the distinction between myself and another has no substance. One cannot even attribute a state of unease to *my* self, and opposed to your *self*. There are no selves.

Morality is therefore self-interest, universalised by a denial of the self. Indeed, one might say that self-interest in the narrow sense is irrational once one sees that there is no self. Perhaps, then, we should just say that ethical behaviour is interest.

*2.7 Application*

Next, application. The above gives the framework within which ethical decisions are to be made. It does not, on its own, determine any particular ethical decision. Such decisions will depend on contingent facts concerning the outcomes of any particular action in its context, and on natural laws of human (or better sentient) psychology.

Neither may making particular judgments be expected to be easy much of the time. Situations are always complex, and any action is likely to have both good consequences and bad consequences. The determination of the best course of action will therefore require an act of judgment, or *phronesis* (practical wisdom) as Aristotle put it.[[14]](#endnote-14) This does not, of course, mean that all situations are unclear. In many situations the most important effects of a possible action will obviously be on a certain individual and those close to them. We should act in such a way as to promote their ataraxia. Thus, it is quite clear that if, next time I am in class, I pull out a gun, and shoot one of the students, this is not going to do this.

But life often presents hard moral choices. If I am a doctor, should I respect the wish of a parent not to give a blood transfusion to their child, even though I know that without it the child is very likely to die? Buddhist ethics provides no magic bullet in hard cases. Phronesis is required.

*2.8 The Precepts*

But what of the Precepts? In Buddhism there is a standard set of moral guidelines: don’t kill, don’t lie, and so on.[[15]](#endnote-15) These look like pretty universal edicts. Violating them can certainly get one kicked out of the Sangha. In the Mahāyāna traditions, especially, it is recognised that it might be right to violate them sometimes. There are stories, for example, of the Buddha in an earlier rebirth killing someone because it was the best thing to do in the context. But none the less, the edicts are enforced pretty rigidly. Don’t expect to get away with breaking one if you are a much lesser mortal!

As is clear from what I have said, however, the Precepts can be at best rules of thumb, and they should never be promoted to thoughtless demands. This does not mean that they are not generally good guidelines. Most of them probably are. But the effects of an action will always be context-dependent, and this must be taken into account. In particular, it must be remembered that the Precepts were formulated at particular times and places, and might well be heavily dependent on the socio-historical contexts in question. And rules of thumb that were pretty good at one time, may be disastrous at another. This should be borne in mind when reading Buddhist ethical texts.

For example, generally speaking, Buddhism has been down on gays and lesbians (and being patriarchal, particularly down on male homosexuality).[[16]](#endnote-16) Now it may well have been the case that being gay in the India of 4th century BCE was not a great strategy for leading a happy life. But in enlightened contemporary societies – or at least those parts of them that are enlightened – where sexual preference is not an issue, gay sexuality is no more (or less) problematic than straight sexuality.

*2.9 Concluding the Outline*

This concludes the outline of a Buddhist ethics that strikes me as plausible in a contemporary Western context. I have argued that the aim of ethics should be to promote one’s own ataraxia, and, with compassion, that of others. Before we pass on to possible objections, and so that we have it fresh in out minds, let me finish with a nice statement of what ataraxia – or to use its Sanskrit name *upekṣhā* (Pali: *upekkha*) – is. This is from a contemporary Theravada Buddhist monk, Bikkhu Bodhi:[[17]](#endnote-17)

The real meaning of upekkha is equanimity, not indifference in the sense of unconcern for others. As a spiritual virtue, upekkha means equanimity in the face of the fluctuations of worldly fortune. It is evenness of mind unshakeable freedom of mind, a state of inner equipoise that cannot be upset by gain and loss, honor and dishonor, praise and blame, pleasure and pain. Upekkha is freedom from all points of self-reference; it is indifference only to the demands of the ego-self with its craving for pleasure and position, not to the well-being of one's fellow human beings. True equanimity is the pinnacle of the four social attitudes that the Buddhist texts call the ‘divine abodes’: boundless loving-kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, and equanimity. The last does not override and negate the preceding three, but perfects and consummates them.

## Objections

So much for the outline. No ethical theory is without its problems. Nor is this one. In the second part of the paper I will formulate what (currently) strike me as the most interesting objections to the account, and do what I can by way of giving answers. Some of the objections are reasonably easily answered; others are not. I will do my best.

*3.1 The Bastards in Life*

*Objection 1: You claim that one should work for the ataraxia of all things. But surely one should not work for the ataraxia of those things that cause others harm, such as colonies of malaria-bearing mosquitos in Africa?*

For a start, the only sorts of creatures that can have or fail to have ataraxia are sentient creatures. How far sentience goes down the evolutionary scale is debatable. But mosquitos are too far down. Of course one should eradicate mosquitos that cause much suffering.

I should note that some have suggested that Buddhist ethics are naturally an environmental ethics, concerned with the flourishing of all environments/species.[[18]](#endnote-18) This is certainly not the case with the present view. It is sentience-centric. This is not to say, or course, that we should not care about the environment. What we are doing to it at the moment is very likely to cause a great deal of suffering for sentient creatures. But the environment is important because it has an instrumental value.

That is not an end to the matter, though. For there are certainly sentient beings – people, in particular – who cause others to suffer, and destroy their ataraxia. How should one treat them? The exact answer in any particular case will depend on the context, but should be determined by considerations of compassion. Violence is never good, and should be avoided if possible. But sometimes it may be necessary to avoid greater suffering. Perhaps, if it had been possible to kill Hitler in 1933, this would have been the best thing to do.

It should be remembered that those who make others suffer are almost certainly suffering themselves. Plausibly, this is the source of their desire to hurt others. At the very least, I find it very hard to see how someone in a state of ataraxia could want to perpetrate suffering on others. Ideally, one should stop the suffering, whilst helping the person causing it to develop ataraxia.

*3.2 Goods Other than Ataraxia*

*Objection 2: You say that the aim of ethics should be to promote ataraxia. Ataraxia is certainly a good, but there are many goods. Should these not be promoted too? Why single out just this one?*

There are, indeed, goods other than ataraxia which are worth having. A Verdi opera, a bottle of wine with friends, an interesting philosophical discussion. These are quite compatible with ataraxia. But these goods are quite subjective. I love all the things just mentioned, but some people do not enjoy opera, wine, or philosophical discussion. And things that some others enjoy I most certainly do not: rap music, contemporary visual art, sodas. It seems to me that each individual can be safely left to choose their own goods of this kind. Such things are *ethically* neither ethical goods nor bads, simply an area of “free choice”.[[19]](#endnote-19) It needs to be remembered, though, that *attachment* to any of these things will destroy peace of mind.

However, ataraxia is quite different. By its very nature, it is something that all people would give to themselves if they could: no one likes being troubled. Moreover, there is some sense in which all the other goods presuppose ataraxia. Suppose that one is listening to an opera or chatting with friends, but at the back of one’s mind there is a niggling worry about what the pain you have been experiencing means, what your kids are up to, or losing your job. The experiences of the moment will be marred. To enjoy them properly, and experience these goods to the full, one needs to have ataraxia.

*3.3 Goods Incompatible with Ataraxia*

*Objection 3: There are goods such as love and the success of an ambition achieved. These are incompatible with ataraxia. Yet it is necessary to have them for a full life. Life without such things would be bland and boring. Ataraxia would ruin a full life.*

I think that this is the hardest objection. One might pin something like it on Nietzsche. Interpreting Nietzsche is always a fraught task, but one may see him as painting a picture of life as a struggle. What gives it meaning is constantly facing challenges and overcoming them – and sometimes failing.[[20]](#endnote-20) Whether or not this was Nietzsche’s view, it is not a foolish view.

In replying, let me start by reemphasizing that ataraxia is not emotional flat-lining. It is not life after a lobotomy, or on constant valium. It is quite compatible with joy, for example, just not with attachment to the joy. This is hardly even the start of a reply, though. Let us look more closely at love and aiming at goal, in particular, to see if they really are incompatible with ataraxia.

Love is, at least for most people, a good in life. The joy of loving and being loved, whether it be of a child or of a partner, certainly enriches most people’s lives (which is not to say that one cannot live a perfectly rich life without them). But as anyone who has loved knows, love normally comes with suffering: jealously, being rejected, the death of a child, and so on. Of course, we all hope that our particular loves will not result in such things. But I have never yet known a love relation – mine or others’ – which did not occasion some sufferings.

Must it do so? Arguably, the suffering is not caused by the love, but by the state of attachment that normally goes with it. We suffer because we cling when our lover leaves, or our child dies. We want the other person to be something, do something – often, perhaps very often, in a self-centred way. But one can have the joy of the relationship without the clinging attachment. Indeed, arguably, a non-clinging love is better not only for oneself, but also for the beloved, and the thriving of the relationship itself.

I have heard it argued that this is impossible, that the experience of attachment is *phenomenologically constitutive* of love, at least the love of a partner. It’s not really love if one does not want to posses and be possessed. I doubt this claim, though I certainly don’t want to deny that love is often accompanied by this kind of possessiveness. But if it *is* constitutive in this way, what I am inclined to say is that there is something very much like love: the caring, the sharing, the giving, the receiving, which is not accompanied by possessiveness. Call this love\*, if you like. And we are better off without love, but with love\* instead.

What about achieving goals? Let’s take sport as an example. Most people who play sport do so with the aim of winning, sometimes at very high levels of performance. When they succeed, this brings them great joy. But in the process they fail often (in fact, the joy is often greater if winning has meant overcoming many failures). And in most sports, training involves painful activities of physical endurance to build up strength, stamina, and so on.

But again, the question is whether these things must entail suffering. For a start, physical pain is not suffering. Most athletes take on the pain of training gladly. It is certainly compatible with peace of mind. Suffering is something to do with the mental attitude which we bring to bear on our pain (though one which, when it accompanies illness, is very hard to shake). And failure brings suffering only if one does not accept it with equanimity. If one fails, one should just accept it, pick oneself up, and carry on. On the other side, if one does succeed, one should accept this also with equanimity, enjoying the moment without clinging to something which is sure to pass.

Before we leave the subject of goods incompatible with atarxia, there is another kind of example that might occur to you in this context. It is frequently claimed that there would be no great art – which is certainly a good for many of us – if there were no suffering, both in the process of creation and (sometimes) in that which is the subject of the art. As far as the latter goes, the First Noble Truth tells us that we are unlikely to run out of that very soon. If the thought is that one has to struggle to produce great art, which is no doubt true, the matter has already been addressed. There remains the claim that the artist must live in a garret, starve, go deaf, cut an ear off, to produce great art. I see no real evidence of this. Bach, Picasso, Shakespeare, did not lead tragic lives. They were very successful people. This is not to deny that suffering can result in great works of art sometimes. But it does not seem to be necessary.

*3.4 Making Others Suffer*

*Objection 4: Suffering and making others suffer are goods in themselves.*

I have already said that it may right to stop people doing what they want to do, thereby making them unhappy, in the cause of compassion. For the same reason, one may even stop someone doing something for their own good: we do not let children do anything they want.

But when one reads Nietzsche, one sometimes finds him suggesting that suffering is not just good because it promotes good, but is a good in itself. Not only that, but that making others suffer can be a good in itself.[[21]](#endnote-21)

I must confess that I find it very hard to have even a little sympathy with this view. The reason that Nietzsche makes these extraordinary claims is, as best I can understand it, that the surviving of suffering, and its infliction on others, is an exercise of the “will to power”', which characterises the “superior person” (*übermensch*).

Now, it is true that one who survives a tragic experience, such as a Nazi concentration camp, may well have had to develop an admirable strength of character; but it would have been better had it not had to be done in this way. The self-discipline required to develop a robust ataraxia is much to be preferred. And, it must be said: for all that some people develop the strength to survive a tragic experience, such circumstances will just as often, if not more often, damage and crush people in the process – as the example of the Nazi concentration camps reminds us too clearly.

As for the need to valorise oneself by making others suffer, I can only regard this as a sign of a deeply troubled person. (Nietzsche, indeed, is not known for his untroubled psyche.) Why would one feel any need to do this unless one felt some deep sense of inadequacy and the duḥkha that goes along with it? There are better ways of dealing with this.

Neitzsche was contemptuous for those who had the mentality of sheep, who followed the herd, and submitted passively. Whether he was right to be so or not (he wasn’t), it should be obvious that ataraxia does not entail this. Compassionate action is often not easy – it often means *not* going along with the herd – and neither is non-violent resistance of the kind sometimes undertaken by Buddhists.[[22]](#endnote-22) Indeed, compassion often requires as much strength of character as surviving suffering; and others do not come off worse as a result of it.

*3.5 The Ethics is Psychologically Unrealistic*

*Objection 5: this is psychologically unrealistic. How can one, e.g., love a child, without mourning their death (or struggle to win without an attachment to the project).*

No one said that Buddhism is easy. It is a practice that may take much discipline. Perfection may even be unobtainable (unless one believes in nirvāṇa). But that does not mean that it one should not work towards it. Moral ideals are often not fully realisable in practice.

Suppose that one loves a child, who is killed suddenly and tragically in a motor accident. If one did not grieve, would this not be the sign of some mental pathology? Indeed, yes, it normally would be. But if the person has learned non-attachment, why should it be? No mental state can bring the child back, or reverse the tragic events. The child themself does not benefit from the grief – and neither does the person who grieves. None of this means that the person could not have loved the child, cared for it, sought the best for it, enjoyed times together. But all things must pass, one way or another, sooner or later. Don’t cling.[[23]](#endnote-23)

*3.6 The Ethics is Theoretically Impossible*

*Objection 6: this is theoretically impossible. Standard belief/desire psychology tells us that one needs beliefs and desires to act at all. Relinquishing all desires would result in no compassionate activity – indeed, no activity at all.*

Belief/desire psychology[[24]](#endnote-24) gives us the following picture. I am thirsty and desire to alleviate the thirst. I believe that drinking a glass of water will do so. So I drink a glass of water. Without both the belief and the desire I would have done nothing. Without the desire, I would have had no reason to drink the water; and without the belief that this would be efficacious, I would not have known what to do. According to this account of action, desire is necessary for action because it provides the motor for action (and belief is necessary since it provides the method).

A couple of things need to be said about this. First, though desire may provide one kind of motive to act, it is not clear that it is the only thing that can do this. Arguably, a belief that I *ought* to do something can itself motivate an act.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Next, Buddhism is not about the elimination of desire as such. There is nothing wrong with aiming to develop ataraxia or act compassionately. What is wrong is being attached to this aiming. This is the state of being mentally troubled until the aim has been fulfilled, or after one has failed to fulfil it. Though these may normally go together with a desire, a Buddhist ethics teaches divorcing them.

## Conclusion

Doubtless, there is a lot more to be said on all the above matters. There always is. But if one waited for all things to be resolved, one would wait till the end of time. One cannot wait till then to act.[[26]](#endnote-26)

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1. *Dedicated with affection to Jay Garfield, on the occasion of his 2015th* *birthday* [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. As the Buddha himself says in the *Kālāma Sutra*: ‘Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another’s seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, “The monk is our teacher.” … [W]hen you yourselves know: “These things are good; these things are not blameable; these things are praised by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness,” enter on and abide in them.’ (Thera (2010).)

And as the first of the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings, Thich Nhat Hanh says: ‘we are determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory or ideology, even Buddhist ones. Buddhist teachings are guiding means to help us learn to look deeply and develop our understanding and compassion.’ (Edelglass and Garfield (2009), pp. 421-2.) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Despite the fact that the paper is appearing for the first time here, it was, in fact, written in 2010, and I gave talks based on it in a number of places: a meeting of the Australasian Association of Philosophy, Sydney, July 2010; the Columbia Society for Comparative Philosophy, New York, October 2010; departmental seminars at the Universities of Melbourne, Tasmania, and Western Ontario; and the Student Philosophy Society at the University of St Andrews. The original paper had another section, exploring the specifically Māhāyana justification for compassion. I have cut this here, since it the matter is now covered in much greater details in Priest (201+). I drew upon this essay and that one to write chapters 14 and 15 of Priest (2014), which has now appeared before both of them. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *Philosophical Investigations*, Sections 66 ff. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Keown (2005), ch. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See, e.g., Harvey (2000), ch. 1, and Siderits (2007), ch. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Foucault (1988). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section 10, Part 1. Selby-Bigge (1902), p. 110. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See, e.g., Keown (1996), ch. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. *Nichomachean Ethics*, Book 2, Ch. 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. The following is essentially an Abhidharma justification. For a quite different, Māhāyana, justification, see Priest (201+). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See, e.g., Siderits (2007), ch. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. These considerations are to be found, arguably, in perhaps the greatest Madhyamaka ethicist, the 8th Century Śāntideva, in Chapter 8 of his *Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life*. See Wallace and Wallace (1997). For further discussion, see the essays in Cowherds (201+), esp. chs. 4-7, 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. *Nichomachean Ethics*, Book 6, Chs. 5, 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See Harvey (2000), ch. 2, and Keown (2005), ch. 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See Harvey (2010), ch. 10, and Keown (2005), ch. 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Bodhi (1998). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See, e.g., Keown (2005), ch. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. But should an ethics not recommend the encouragement of a multitude of these to enhance the richness of life? No. If one wishes to become a monk and a live quiet, withdrawn, life, this is a perfectly legitimate ethical choice. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. See, e.g., Tanner (1994), ch. 4, Spinks (2003), ch. 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. E.g., *Geneology of Morals*, Essay 2, Section 5, and Essay 3, Section 28. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. See, e.g., Keown (2005), ch. 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. This does not mean, though, that one’s immediate reaction should be to shrug one’s shoulders when it happens. Why should one not cry? One can do this whilst accepting what has happened, and not cling to the past – or to one’s tears. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. As found, for example, in Davidson (1963). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. See, further, Humberstone (1987). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Many thanks go to all those who have heard me talk about the matters in the paper, and given helpful comments and criticisms. Especial thanks go to Jay Garfield for many enlightening discussions. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)