



Buddhist Ethics

CAPS 499

Bucknell University • Department of Religion • Spring 2009
SWMU Rm 117 • TR 1:00-2:22 pm

Professor: James Mark Shields • #71336 • jms089@bucknell.edu

Office: Coleman Hall Rm 11

Office hours: TR 2:30-4:00 p.m., or by appointment

“What would the Buddha do?” This is probably not a question that you have asked yourself, or have ever heard anyone else ask, but it is a simple query that to some extent gets to the heart of Buddhism as a religious tradition. For all of the wonderful variation that exists within Buddhism, which over the past two thousand years has spread out of its Indian homeland across Asia and recently made inroads in the West, there remains a set of core Buddhist teachings that cut across traditions—and these teachings are to a large degree *ethical*, i.e., concerned with the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ of particular thoughts, acts, and ways of existing in the world with nature and with other sentient beings. Despite sometimes being caricatured as a religion of passivity or one that teaches us to relinquish all dualism (such as that between ‘good and evil’), Buddhist ethics has a lot to say about contemporary issues, ranging from violence, warfare, terrorism, gender relations and sexuality to capitalism, consumerism, and the environment.

In this course we will first explore the basic foundations of Buddhist ethics, along with the virtues and values that arose from such foundations, including sectarian and cultural variations, and then apply these insights to both historical and contemporary ethical issues such as those listed above. Although this course is not meant to be comparative in nature, we will also discuss parallels and differences that arise between Buddhist ethics and those found in other traditions—Indian, Chinese, Japanese, and Western. In particular, we will relate features of Buddhist ethics to the primary ethical traditions of modern Western philosophy: deontology (or Kantian ethics), utilitarianism, and virtue ethics. In addition to contemporary scholarly reflections, we will explore primary Buddhist texts (in translation), such as the *Jataka Tales*, *Dhammapada*, *Heart Sutra*, and the writings of paradigm Buddhist thinkers like Nāgārjuna, Śāntideva, Dōgen, Thich Nhat Hanh the XIVth Dalai Lama and D. T. Suzuki. Throughout, however, we will always strive to bring our discoveries and insights back to the ‘here and now’.

Objectives:

The primary objectives of the course are to allow students to: a) develop a knowledge and understanding of basic Buddhist philosophy and ethics; b) use this knowledge to engage, critically, in issues and debates relevant to our times. Any self-discovery or personal enlightenment that may emerge along the way is, of course, also welcomed. Most importantly, this is meant to be an interactive course; the student will be asked to respond and engage with the course material, and with the ideas and opinions of the instructor and other students—though, it is hoped, always in a civil and polite fashion. Evaluation for the course will be based largely on the demonstration of critical engagement with course material.

Format:

The course will follow a seminar format, with two meetings each week, on Tuesday and Thursday. In a seminar, the focus is on discussion, debate, and conversation. This is not to suggest that there will be no lectures, but that much of what we do in class will be based on the student's critical reflections and written responses to the readings, powerpoints and other course material. In practical terms, this means that each and every student must be prepared for each and every class. To put this in more positive terms, each and every student will play a 'active role' in shaping the course. Each week of meetings will encompass a new theme, as dictated by the Schedule of Topics and Readings (see below). I have tried to keep the readings to a minimum, in part because I realize that you have a lot of other work to do, and in part because I want as much as possible for you to spend your time thinking about the ideas, and, wherever possible, trying to 'ground them' in your own life and in the context of the contemporary world.

Pedagogical Note:

I wish to create a comfortable, enjoyable, and at times provocative environment for learning. This is an *interactive* course; the student will be asked to respond and engage with the course material, and with the ideas and opinions of the instructor and other students—though, it is hoped, always in a civil and polite fashion. Evaluation for the course will be based largely on the demonstration of both oral and written critical engagement with course material.

Required Reading Material:

- 1) Harvey, Peter. *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- 2) *Blackboard Readings* [BB]



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COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. ATTENDANCE

I will not take attendance in this class. However, given the nature and format of this course, substantial participation is expected, and it is difficult to participate when you are not here.

2. PARTICIPATION

25%

Class participation, including discussion of readings, homework assignments and questions posed on weekly powerpoint slides, is a requirement. Participation is a matter of quality not quantity. You do not have to speak every class, but rather show that you have done the readings and assignments and are willing and able to engage, in a thoughtful way, with the topics under discussion. Good questions are also an important aspect of participation. We will also discuss the possibility of opening up a Discussion Board on Blackboard, where discussion can continue outside of our meeting times.

3. ENGAGEMENT PIECES (EPs)

6% x 4 = 24%

Throughout the duration of the course, students will be required to write a total of four short (1000 word) "engagement pieces," in response to an issue or question raised in the lectures or the readings. These pieces will take a variety of forms, and each will have its own specific requirements. Generally, the EPs will be graded in terms of the student's ability to critically engage with a specific text, issue or question (note: critically does not mean "negatively"). Any opinion or idea is valid, providing you can back it up evidentially (or, failing that, rhetorically). As the term progresses, evaluation of the EPs will become more demanding.

4. PRESENTATION

15%

Each student will give a 15-20 minute in-class presentation toward the end of the semester. The presentation is intended to raise critical questions about a specific issue in Buddhist ethics, and to lead a class discussion on the topic. Further details will be provided several weeks into the course. The topic of your presentation should be the same as that of your research paper.

5. FINAL PAPER

30%

Each student will write a 3000 word argumentative/research paper on a topic chosen from a list of diverse themes and issues relevant to Buddhist ethics. Details will be provided several weeks into the course. The research paper will be due at the end of the semester (T 04/28), but I will ask for a proposal and first draft in late March.

6. EXIT INTERVIEW

6%

At the end of the semester, each student will have an oral "exit interview" with me outside of class, in which you will be given a chance to reflect broadly upon what you have learned throughout the semester. Further details will be provided after Spring Recess.



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GRADING POLICIES

Grading for Participation is quite straightforward: the more engaged you are in the class, the higher your grade. I am particularly fond of the 3 e's: energy, effort, and enthusiasm. Please be aware of the subtle but significant psychological effect of me actually knowing who you are, and even a little bit about you. Though I do not evaluate you on your personality, the very fact that I am able to identify you implies that you have participated in the class in some fashion.

In grading the final paper I ask the following questions:

1. Does the paper have a thesis?
2. Is the thesis interesting / relevant to the course?
3. Is the paper free from long quotations / excessive borrowing of ideas?
4. Is the paper reasonably well written (i.e., sentence structure, grammar, spelling)?
5. Is it long enough / not too long?

If the answer to any of the above is 'no', the paper will receive a 'C' grade of some form. If the answer to more than two of the above is 'no', the paper will receive a 'D' grade. If all of the above are answered by 'yes', the following additional questions apply:

6. How thoughtful / original is the paper?
7. How well organized is the paper? Does it have a conclusion?
8. Is the style efficient, not wordy or unclear?
9. Does the writing betray any special elegance?
10. Does the paper go 'beyond' the course material to explore other possibilities?

Depending on the answers to these questions, the paper will receive some form of A or B grade.

When it comes down to it, there is absolutely no reason for anybody to get a grade lower than B- in this class. The only way you can get a C, D or F is if you fail to attend and/or do not do the work.

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|-----------------|---------|---|----|------|--------------------|
| GRADING RUBRIC: | 93-100% | = | A | 4.00 | Near Perfect! |
| | 88-92% | = | A- | 3.67 | Excellent |
| | 83-87% | = | B+ | 3.33 | Very Good |
| | 78-82% | = | B | 3.00 | Good |
| | 73-77% | = | B- | 2.67 | Average |
| | 68-72% | = | C+ | 2.33 | Below Average |
| | 63-67% | = | C | 2.00 | Acceptable, but... |
| | 58-62% | = | C- | 1.50 | Not so Good |
| | 50-57% | = | D | 1.00 | Poor |
| | 0-49% | = | F | 0.00 | Not Acceptable |



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Schedule of Topics and Readings

I. Introduction

| | | | | |
|---|---------|--|-----|-----------|
| R | 01/15 | 1. Course Introduction | HAR | 1-7 |
| T | 01/20* | 2. Indian Ethics in Context & Contrast | BB | Bilimoria |
| R | 01/22 | 3. Buddhist Ethical Theory | BB | De Silva |
| T | 01/27† | 4. Karma and Cosmology | HAR | 8-31 |
| R | 01/29 | 5. Rethinking Karma | BB | Wright |
| T | 02/03* | 6. Suffering & the Way Out | HAR | 31-46 |
| R | 02/05 | 7. A Philosophy of Action | HAR | 46-59 |
| T | 02/10†* | 8. DISCUSSION: <i>Dhammapada</i> | DHA | I-XII |
| R | 02/12 | 9. DISCUSSION: <i>Dhammapada</i> | DHA | XIII-XXVI |

II. Buddhist Virtues & Values

| | | | | |
|---|--------|---|-----|---------|
| T | 02/17† | 10. Charity – <i>The Parable of Prince Vessantara</i> | HAR | 59-66 |
| R | 02/19 | 11. Lay Precepts | HAR | 66-88 |
| T | 02/24* | 12. Monastic Values | HAR | 88-97 |
| R | 02/26 | 13. Marriage and the Family | HAR | 97-103 |
| T | 03/03† | 14. Kindness and Compassion | HAR | 103-109 |
| R | 03/05 | 15. The Mahayana Bodhisattva Ideal | HAR | 123-140 |

| | | |
|---|-------|----------------------|
| T | 03/10 | SPRING RECESS |
| R | 03/12 | SPRING RECESS |

III. Contemporary Issues / Presentations

| | | | | |
|---|-------|---|-----|----------|
| T | 03/17 | 16. Environment I: Sentient Beings | HAR | 150-174 |
| R | 03/19 | 17. Environment II: Non-sentient Beings | HAR | 174-186 |
| T | 03/24 | 18. Economic Ethics | HAR | 187-238 |
| R | 03/26 | 19. "Buddhist Economics" | BB | Payutto |
| T | 03/31 | 20. Engaged Buddhism | HAR | 109-122 |
| R | 04/02 | 21. Buddhism & Democracy | BB | Garfield |
| T | 04/07 | 22. War & Peace | HAR | 239-285 |
| R | 04/09 | 23. Terrorism | BB | Loy |
| T | 04/14 | 24. Suicide and Euthanasia | HAR | 286-310 |
| R | 04/16 | 25. Sexuality and Homosexuality | HAR | 411-434 |
| T | 04/21 | 26. Abortion and Contraception | HAR | 311-352 |
| R | 04/23 | 27. Sexual Equality | HAR | 353-410 |
| T | 04/28 | 28. Conclusions | | |

* EP is assigned / † EP is due



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ENGAGEMENT PIECE #1

Assigned: *Tuesday, January 27*
Due Date: *Tuesday, February 3*
Length: *1000 words, typed, double-spaced, reasonable font-size (11-12)*
Submission: *As Word document, sent to jms089@bucknell.edu*
Worth: *6% of final grade*

Throughout the early part of the course, students will be required to write a total of four short "engagement pieces," in response to an issue or question raised in the lectures or the readings. These pieces will take a variety of forms, and each will have its own specific requirements. Generally, the EPs will be graded in terms of the student's ability to critically engage with a specific text, issue or question (note: critically does not mean "negatively"). Any opinion or idea is valid, providing you can back it up evidentially (or, failing that, rhetorically). As the term progresses, evaluation of the EPs will become more demanding.

PREAMBLE

KARMA (or KAMMA) is a complex term with roots that go back to the very beginnings of ancient Indian religion. In the VEDAS, it appears to mean something like 'action', specifically ritual action that will have good 'effects' in the world. After the UPANISHADS introduce the idea of rebirth (*samsara*), karma comes to mean the 'motor of rebirth', in the sense that it is karma that makes the 'wheel of samsara' roll. While Mahavira and the JAINS taught that karma was actually physical 'stuff' that accrued to the non-physical 'soul', thus keeping it stuck in the mire of earthly existence and rebirth, the BUDDHA disagreed. His 'version' of karma would be more subtle, but important to an understanding of Buddhist notions of ethics, ontology (the way things are) and cosmology. Over time, however, the notion of karma has undergone further development—or, some would say, regression—such that it is not always employed by Buddhists in the ways in which the Buddha appears to have intended.

ASSIGNMENT

In this short assignment, I would like you to reflect personally and critically upon karma. First, briefly explain the *Buddhist idea of karma* (not the above, pre-Buddhist or Jain formulations). How was karma 'transformed' by the Buddha? Second, after reading the two short articles (on Blackboard) on "God, Buddha, and the Asian Tsunami," reflect on the way karma was used by Buddhists in response to the Asian Tsunami. How is the response related to the responses of other religions to the Tsunami? What are your thoughts on karma as an ethical concept? What are the benefits or problems/tensions of karma, as far as you understand it? Feel free to use Harvey (14-31) as well as the Blackboard reading by Wright, but I would like the 'argument' to be your own.



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ENGAGEMENT PIECE #2

Assigned: *Thursday, February 5*
Due Date: *Thursday, February 12*
Length: *1000 words, typed, double-spaced, reasonable font-size (11-12)*
Submission: *As Word document, sent to jms089@bucknell.edu*
Worth: *6% of final grade*

Throughout the early part of the course, students will be required to write a total of four short "engagement pieces," in response to an issue or question raised in the lectures or the readings. These pieces will take a variety of forms, and each will have its own specific requirements. Generally, the EPs will be graded in terms of the student's ability to critically engage with a specific text, issue or question (note: critically does not mean "negatively"). Any opinion or idea is valid, providing you can back it up evidentially (or, failing that, rhetorically). As the term progresses, evaluation of the EPs will become more demanding.

PREAMBLE

The *Dhammapada* (lit., "path of the Dharma"), written down in Pali in the 1st century CE, is one of the most important - and certainly the best loved - of all early Indian Buddhist texts. Its succinct poetry and clear expression of basic Buddhist ideals have made it the closest thing to a "sacred text" for many Buddhists, particularly but not exclusively those within the Southeast Asian (i.e., Theravada) streams. While it is certainly much more approachable than the bulk of the Pali Canon or other early Buddhist writings, the *Dhammapada* does contain subtleties that can be lost without close examination. Moreover, its teachings do not always cohere with later Buddhist ideas, especially those of the East Asian (i.e., Mahayana) traditions.

ASSIGNMENT

In this assignment, I would like you to reflect personally and critically upon the text of the *Dhammapada*. First, briefly explain, in a single paragraph, what you think is/are the central *ethical* theme(s) or idea(s) expressed in this classic work. Give specific examples to support your case. Second, consider the "ethics" of the *Dhammapada* in light of what we have already discussed in class (and readings). Where would you classify the ethics of the *Dhammapada* in terms of the Western theories of virtue ethics, utilitarianism, or deontology? What role does karma play in the *Dhammapada*? Rebirth? *Nirvana*? Do you see any contradictions or 'tensions' between the teachings of the *Dhammapada* and other traditional Buddhist teachings? Finally, choose at least one passage from the text that you consider the most powerful in terms of ethics; i.e., the passage or chapter that most strongly resonates with your own personal values or ideas about the best way to think and act. Explain why. Do the same thing for a passage or chapter that you find the least convincing or ethically weakest. You do not need to do any outside research for this piece, but you should think carefully and critically about the text (and your own ideas) before composing your response.



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ENGAGEMENT PIECE #3

Assigned: Tuesday, February 17
Due Date: Tuesday, February 24
Length: 1000 words, typed, double-spaced, reasonable font-size (11-12)
Submission: As Word document, sent to jms089@bucknell.edu
Worth: 6% of final grade

Throughout the duration of the course, students will be required to write a total of four short (specific length requirements may vary) "engagement pieces," in response to an issue or question raised in the lectures or the readings. These pieces will take a variety of forms, and each will have its own specific requirements. Generally, the EPs will be graded in terms of the student's ability to critically engage with a specific text, issue or question (note: critically does not mean "negatively"). Any opinion or idea is valid, providing you can back it up evidentially (or, failing that, rhetorically). As the term progresses, evaluation of the EPs will become more demanding.

PREAMBLE

Compassion (*karuna*) and charity (*dana*) are two of the most important Buddhist 'virtues'. However, to be fully compassionate and fully charitable at all times may lead to 'value conflict'. One finds this tension, and (perhaps) its resolution, in a number of Buddhist fables, including the Legend of Prince Vessantara, one of the classic *Jataka Tales* used to provide basic Dharma to lay Buddhists.

ASSIGNMENT

In this short assignment, I would like you to reflect personally and critically upon the fundamental Buddhist principles of compassion and charity. Read the story of Prince Vessantara, the so-called 'master of charity'. What is the point of the story? Why might the story have been 'successful' at spreading Buddhism? What is the relationship between charity, compassion and suffering (*dukkha*), as expressed in the story? Finally, what are some weaknesses or tensions in the story, from a Buddhist and from a non-Buddhist perspective. Please reflect critically and personally on these issues, using what you have learned in class and from Harvey and the *Dhammapada*. Finally, reflect and critically respond to the short piece on "The Solving of Dilemmas" from the *The Questions of Milinda*.



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ENGAGEMENT PIECE #4

Assigned: *Thursday, February 26*
Due Date: *Thursday, March 5*
Length: *1000 words, typed, double-spaced, reasonable font-size (11-12)*
Submission: *As Word document, sent to jms089@bucknell.edu*
Worth: *6% of final grade*

Throughout the duration of the course, students will be required to write a total of four short (specific length requirements may vary) "engagement pieces," in response to an issue or question raised in the lectures or the readings. These pieces will take a variety of forms, and each will have its own specific requirements. Generally, the EPs will be graded in terms of the student's ability to critically engage with a specific text, issue or question (note: critically does not mean "negatively"). Any opinion or idea is valid, providing you can back it up evidentially (or, failing that, rhetorically). As the term progresses, evaluation of the EPs will become more demanding.

PREAMBLE

As some of you are aware, the fall of 2007 witnessed a crisis in the South Asian Buddhist country of Myanmar (formerly known as Burma). Known as the Saffron Revolution, the standoff between hundred if not thousands of Buddhist monks and their lay supporters on the one hand, and the entrenched military regime ("junta") on the other, was the focus of world attention for several tense weeks, before a crackdown led to its fading from the news cycle.

ASSIGNMENT

In this short assignment, I would like you to reflect personally and critically upon the so-called Saffron Revolution. For background, read the *Economist* article entitled "The Saffron Revolution," along with any other news sources you can find (I also recommend this YouTube video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5vhNoXsYQc>) .In your introduction, briefly tell me what is happening, why it began, and what eventually happened. The rest of the EP should be a critical reflection on these events, using your acquired knowledge of Buddhist monastic and social ethics (Harvey pp. 109-122 might help here). Are the monks justified in their actions? Are they breaking vinaya rules or the ten precepts? Why or why not? Have they always been socially engaged—or is this new? Finally, how does this relate to the movement led by Aung San Suu Kyi?

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Prompts for “Thinking Ethics, the West and India”

01/20

- *What is ethics?* Try to formulate a short definition, based on pp. 1-3.
- *What, according to the reading, is the “task” of ethics?*
- *What is the difference between meta-ethics and applied ethics?*
- *What role(s) has religion played in Western ethics?*
- *What would you say is the difference between ethics and religion, broadly understood?*
- *How would you describe Aristotelian virtue ethics?*
- *How would you describe Deontological (Kantian) ethics?*
- *How would you describe Utilitarian ethics?*
- *Is there an ‘ethics’ in Indian tradition? Why or why not?*
- *What is the significance of the Indian term ‘dharma’?*

Prompts for “Buddhist Ethical Theory”

01/22

- *Why does the author say that Buddhist ethics is “practical ethics”?*
- *Can Buddhist ethics be classified as utilitarian? Why or why not?*
- *What is kamma/karma? Why is it significant to Buddhist ethics?*
- *What does the author mean by the “strange duality” in performing good actions with the intention of getting a good birth?*
- *What does the author mean by the “craftsmanship model” of Buddhist ethics?*
- *Do awakened beings such as arhats and buddhas accumulate karma?*
- *Are the five precepts of Buddhism ‘duties’ in the deontological sense? Why or why not?*
- *How, according to the author, does the Buddhist approach to morality help to “diffuse some of the tensions that emerge out of the special relationships in the family and a more generalized benevolence directed to larger humanity”?*
- *What, according to the author, is “impartiality,” as understood in a Buddhist context?*

Prompts for Harvey, “The Shared Foundations of Buddhist Ethics,” pp. 8-31
01/27 - 2/03

- *What are the three “key sources of inspiration” for Buddhist ethics? (8)*
- *How does the Dharma/Dhamma apply to lay people? (8-9)*
- *What are the Jataka Tales? Why are they important for Buddhist ethics? (9)*
- *What is relevance of the short passage quoted by Harvey from the Kalama Sutta (10)?*
- *What are HIRI and OTTAPPA? Why are they important? (11)*
- *What is the role of “heedfulness” — how is this understood? (11)*
- *Review the six features of “Right View” (12); are any of these surprising or unclear?*
- *How are the realms of rebirth understood, from a Buddhist perspective? (12-14)*
- *What distinguishes the Buddhist concept of rebirth from the Christian concept of an afterlife? What features do they share? (12-14)*
- *What is the root meaning of karma? How do the pre-Buddhist Upanishads understand karma? (14-15)*
- *It is said that negative karma leads to rebirth in poverty, disease, and ugliness in a future life. What, if anything, is the ‘danger’ in this concept? How do Buddhists (in theory) avoid this danger? (15)*
- *It is said that positive karma leads to rebirth with wealth, health, and physical attractiveness in a future life. What, if anything, is the ‘danger’ in this concept? How might Buddhists (in theory) avoid this danger? (15)*
- *What is the role of intention or will in the Buddhist understanding of karma? How does this differ from the Jain understanding? (16-17)*
- *What is the significance of the short passage quoted by Harvey from Buddhaghosa (19)? What are your thoughts on this?*
- *Review and critically reflect on the five ways in which “a good man gives” (21).*
- *Why was it considered “compassionate” for the Buddha to go with his monks collecting alms (i.e., donations, normally food) “in an area where there was famine”? (22)*
- *How does karma differ from fatalism, in the Buddhist understanding? (23)*
- *How does karma relate to personal responsibility? What are your thoughts on this connection? (23-24)*
- *What are the five “heinous deeds” that lead to immediate karmic effect? (24)*
- *What might be the value of the notion of karma’s “delayed results”? (24-25)*
- *Do the same acts bear the same fruit for all people? Why or why not? (25-26)*
- *What role, if any, does remorse and repentance play in karmic fruits? Are there limits to remorse in Buddhism? (26-28)*
- *Why, according to some studies, do Burmese lay Buddhists keep the precepts? (28)*
- *The first Noble Truth in Buddhism is “All is Suffering”—thus being born as a human should be a negative thing. Is this so? Why or why not? (29-30)*

Prompts for Harvey, “The Shared Foundations of Buddhist Ethics,” pp. 31-46
2/05

- *What are the Four Noble Truths? (31-32)*
- *What are the Five Skandhas? (32)*
- *What is Conditioned Arising? (33)*

- *What is dukkha/dukkha, and why is it important for Buddhist ethics? (33-34)*
- *What is the 'good side' of the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence? (34-35)*
- *What is the relation between the doctrine of No-Self and Buddhist ethics? (36-37)*
- *What, according to Harvey, is the place of ethics on the Eightfold Path? (40-42)*
- *Why is the Arahant "beyond fruitful and deadening actions" (43-46)*

Prompts for Harvey, "Key Buddhist Values: Charity," pp. 60-66

02/17

- *What are the three "central values" of Buddhism? (60)*
- *Look over the list of some of the "twenty-five wholesome qualities" according to Theravadin tradition. Does anything here surprise or confuse you? Are these qualities universalizable across the major religious traditions? (60)*
- *What is the relation between giving (dana) and karma? (62)*
- *What does the act of giving do to a person? (62-62)*
- *Why does the Milindapanha suggest that Vessantara's actions were of "great heroism"? (63)*
- *What sacrifices are expected of a bodhisattva in Mahayana tradition? (64)*
- *What is the specific understanding of how karma can be transferred to the dead? Is this surprising, given basic Buddhist teachings? Why or why not? (65)*
- *Why, in Theravada traditions, does one donate gifts to the gods? (65)*