The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Ethics. Edited by Daniel Cozort and James Mark Shields. 2018. Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0-19-874614-0

Reviewed by Katie Javanaud

The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Ethics explores some of the most important moral questions of our time and demonstrates the value of thinking through these problems from Buddhist perspectives. Comprising 31 chapters, this book covers everything from the doctrinal and historical foundations of Buddhist moral discourse to contemporary Buddhist views on issues such as animal rights, the ethics of climate change, euthanasia, abortion and much else besides.

The chapters are logically arranged into five sections. The first of these, 'Foundations,' examines the basic principles of Buddhist ethics, introducing key doctrines such as karma, rebirth, the transference of merit, etc., and analyses the roles of precepts, vows, meditation and wisdom in the moral lives of Buddhism's spiritual aspirants. Part two, 'Ethics and Buddhist Traditions,' showcases Buddhism's diversity and examines the ways in which the foundational concepts have been interpreted in different historical, geographical and cultural contexts. This part of the book explores the broad scope of ethics in Southeast Asian, Madhyamaka, Pure Land, Zen, Tantric and Tibetan traditions (amongst others), and does so through an equally extensive range of perspectives – philosophical, historical, anthropological, emic and etic, as well as through text-critical methods. Part three, 'Comparative Perspectives,' addresses the important question of whether, and to what extent, Buddhist and Western ethics are comparable, while part four, 'Buddhism and Society,' considers how Buddhists might respond to problems such as social injustice, climate change and war or violence. Finally, in part five, contributors turn our attention to 'Contemporary Issues' in ethics and present Buddhist perspectives on human and animal rights, gender and sexuality, abortion, euthanasia, suicide, and so on.

In their 'Introduction' to the book, editors Daniel Cozort and James Mark Shields identify its main objectives and intended audience. One of their aims in assembling such a large number of essays has been to provide a comprehensive account of Buddhist ethics as it has been conceived down the ages and in different settings. Although it is doubtful that a truly comprehensive account of Buddhist ethics is possible, given that some important ancient texts may be irrevocably lost and given that some Buddhists would resist the idea that experiences of *bodhicitta* or *mahākaruṇā* can be adequately explained in language, Cozort and Shields have certainly met their first objective as fully as anyone could expect.

The scope and scale of this book means that few reviewers would be competent to judge every chapter fairly. The field of Buddhist studies is so multifarious that it requires specialization, and a specialist in, say, contemporary Thai Buddhism will not necessarily be equipped to evaluate contributions on the historical development of Pure Land conceptions of what it means to live the right life. Accordingly, this is only a partial review of *The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Ethics*. It will touch on quite a number of the chapters but will focus only on those I have found particularly stimulating, informative or intriguing. That even those who have dedicated several years, or even a whole lifetime, to the study of Buddhism will have plenty to learn from reading this volume, and may even be guided towards new research projects,is probably the book's greatest achievement.

The editors have sought to generate fresh insights into the field of Buddhist ethics by bringing scholars together on a collaborative project, thereby achieving what would have been impossible for any one individual. However, the extent to which this ambition is realised is less certain: even on issues of importance, contributors disagree, but do not always engage with each other. Consequently, and despite the considerable length of the book, some key issues in Buddhist ethics are left largely unresolved. This could be a serious problem for a book which is sure to attract not just other scholars (the target audience) but also students, for whom this might be their first introduction to Buddhist ethics. It is one thing for different contributors to hold conflicting views, and indeed this is only to be anticipated, but it is quite another for them to present their views as definitively settling controversial questions. There is a risk here of confusing those who are just beginning their Buddhist studies.

For example, the question of whether Engaged Buddhism represents a genuinely new development or whether its roots are embedded in ancient Buddhist texts and traditions recurs throughout the book. In her chapter 'The

Changing Way of the Bodhisattva: Superheroes, Saints, and Social Workers', Barbara Clayton asks whether and how we might conceive of bodhisattvas represented in Indian Mahāyāna literature as Engaged Buddhists. To answer this question Clayton examines how the bodhisattva is presented in a small number of admittedly highly influential texts: the *Ugraparipṛccha Sūtra*, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, and commentaries on them by Pema Chödrön, a nun in the Shambhala tradition. Clayton argues that answering this question requires a distinction between the canonical and the contemporary, secularized, perspectives of the bodhisattva path. To do this Clayton employs "an analogy of the bodhisattva as an astronaut" (p. 156) tasked with obtaining a rare mineral from Mars which has the power to alleviate great sufferings caused by disease. She contends that, from the traditional Buddhist perspective, the bodhisattva would prioritise acquiring the skills needed to become an astronaut so that, in the future, (s)he could administer the life-saving mineral to everybody. In contrast, from the contemporary Buddhist perspective, the bodhisattva need not wait until (s)he has collected a sufficient quantity of the mineral to save everybody before (s)he starts distributing it to save at least some. Effectively Clayton is arguing that Engaged Buddhists today have substantially revised the role of a bodhisattva. She concludes that "while the canonical, premodern bodhisattva is in a long-term, multi-lifetime, elite training programme, the contemporary bodhisattva must be a social worker in the here and now" (p. 157). Contrastingly, in his chapter 'A Perspective on Ethics in the Lotus Sūtra' Gene Reeves first challenges the generally accepted definition of a bodhisattva as somebody who voluntarily postpones her/ his attainment of *nirvāṇa* to help others and then contends that "from the perspective of the Lotus Sūtra, full Buddhist practice is necessarily action-oriented and social" (p. 217). The issue receives further attention in Christopher Queen's chapter 'The Ethics of Engaged Buddhism in the West': he argues that public welfare projects initiated by revered Buddhists of the past (such as Emperor Aśoka) "do not fit the pattern of today's counter-cultural movements" associated with Engaged Buddhism (p. 501).

What becomes clear from reading these chapters is that a compelling case can be made on both sides of the argument. The issue cannot, therefore, be settled on the basis of such a small number of texts as those alluded to above. Clayton's initial posing of the question in terms of whether Indian Mahāyāna literature supports or undermines the idea of bodhisattvas as socially engaged activists now seems dubious. For what this book demonstrates so successfully is

that Buddhist traditions are so diverse as to leave any such sweeping statement open to objection. Unfortunately, however, because Clayton, Reeves, and Queen all present their own particular stances on this issue as definitive, it is possible that students new to the subject will be perplexed by the conflicting opinions.

Another important, and related, question to receive a lot of attention throughout the book is whether, for Buddhists, ethics is primarily about action or intention. As previously, the variety of different answers proffered in the book attests more to a problem with the way the question is posed than to anything else. It would be nonsensical to imagine that a single answer, applicable to all the different strands of Buddhism, could be available. Indeed, despite the fact that early chapters of the book (in the 'Foundations' part) do occasionally portray karma as a doctrine of ethical intentionality on which all Buddhists are agreed, most contributors are careful to point out that even Buddhists belonging to the same school/ sect have disagreed, sometimes profoundly, on how the karmic mechanism works and on the overall importance of action versus intention.

That this complex issue requires a more thorough investigation than it has so far received comes out especially clearly in Michael Conway's excellent chapter 'Ethics in Pure Land Schools.' Conway maintains that although some of Pure Land Buddhism's foundational sūtras "deny the necessity for moral action and ethical behaviour as a prerequisite to enlightenment," there has been more "plurality of thought in the broader Pure Land tradition throughout history" than is usually acknowledged (p. 184-186). The emphasis on ritual chanting in Pure Land Buddhism as a path to attaining liberation has meant that scholars have tended to overlook this tradition as a source of valuable insight into ethical questions with which all Buddhists should be concerned. For instance, what does the claim "we will do anything that karmic conditions prompt us to do" (attributed to Shinran) tell us about the human capacity for freedom and the prospects for moral responsibility? As Conway is surely right to assert, the counterintuitive, and often radical nature, of some of Shinran's sayings (another being "if even the good person is born in the Pure Land, how much more so the evil one") might give the impression that he is not worth taking too seriously as a source of moral insight. Yet, as Conway convincingly argues, Shinran and others belonging to the Pure Land schools of Buddhism are subtler thinkers than one might first recognise. Just as the debate between Protestants and Catholics is sometimes crudely cast in terms of faith or works, when in fact it is more a question of which comes first, so too would it be a mistake to imagine that Pure Land Buddhists are committed to ritual activity while wholly disinterested in

ethical action. Rather, for Shinran, while faith in Amitābha may be the cause of liberation, this faith inspires more compassionate behaviour. So, as Conway concludes: "a person with faith is said to live in such a way as to express a sort of non-volitional compassion in their every act… [and] Shinran is very much concerned with issues of good and evil, right and wrong" (p. 199-201).

Another chapter to deserve a special mention is that by Juliana Essen 'Buddhist Ethics in South and Southeast Asia.' With relatively few words, Essen manages to cover a vast amount of ground in surprising detail. Her chapter is divided into five sections which explore (1) political ethics, (2) monastic ethics, (3) social and environmental ethics, (4) karmic ethics (for lay Buddhist practitioners), and (5) a new development she calls "ethics of worldly benefit." Essen's chapter is a rich source of information on everything from 18th and 19th century Thai politics to contemporary Thai social movements such as the Santi Asoke Buddhist Reform Movement. Essen has clearly been personally moved and inspired by her time spent living in the Santi Asoke community (which she documents elsewhere, on the Global Wellbeing Institute website, of which she is the founder) and these experiences have given her an insider's perspective on the respective place of karma and *nirvāṇa* as sources of moral motivation in the lives of most Thai Buddhists. She concludes that although "during months of conversations with Asoke residents, *karuṇā* was referenced infrequently, whereas *bun* (merit)… came up several times a day" Santi Asoke members "are indeed motivated by the ethic of compassion even if they don't label their actions so" (p. 270). This chapter draws on anthropological literature and enthographic evidence to paint a picture of how ethics is conceived and, most importantly, practised in a range of social settings in Thailand both now and in the past. Of course, Thailand is not the whole of South/ Southeast Asia and it could fairly be noted that the title of Essen's chapter is a bit misleading.

Parts four and five of *The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Ethics* are likely to have much wider appeal than the first three parts of the book because the issues dealt with are so topical and are of almost universal interest. In part four, the chapter by Stephanie Kaza, 'Buddhist Environmental Ethics: A Contextual Approach,' and that by Michael Jerryson, 'Buddhism, War, and Violence,' are especially worth reading. Kaza proudly acknowledges that, for her, the question of how best to respond to the climate emergency "is not theoretical." She says: "I come to this position from a sense of urgency and candour about the state of the earth's ecological systems" (p. 449). Over the years Kaza has written and edited numerous books and articles on the themes of over-consumption,

greediness, and how humanity can fulfil its role in repairing some of the environmental damage we have already caused. In this chapter Kaza makes several distinct but related points: First, she favours a constructivist, or what she calls "an emergent and contextualist", approach to environmental ethics over and above the kinds of virtue-theoretic approaches which have been advanced in recent years and which she thinks "reflect a privileged position that may be seen as elitist in some of the contexts of environmental choice-making" (p. 434). Secondly, she argues that although Buddhist practices – such as mindfulness – may equip the individual to make better environmental choices, it would be woefully inaccurate to suppose that personal behaviour change will be enough to achieve the kind of systematic and structural-level changes that are required. Instead, Kaza calls for a Buddhist social ethic based on the recognition of the deep interconnectedness of all life. Thirdly, Kaza observes the close affinities between key Buddhist doctrines routinely invoked to promote a harmonious relationship with nature (e.g. dependent origination, the idea of greed as the root of suffering, and the notion that humans are not intrinsically superior to other forms of life) with ideas present in other environmental philosophies, such as deep-ecology and general systems theory. This last point is important because a solution to the environmental crisis that relied on everybody's first becoming Buddhist would be no solution at all. Yet, as Kaza points out, core Buddhist values such as non-harming, compassion, etc., have begun to permeate Western culture and thus to challenge some of the dualistic ways of thinking (such as the self/other or the man/nature dichotomies) often credited with distorting our sense of self-importance on the global scale.

The next chapter, by Jerryson, continues with the theme of destruction, probing the Buddhist stance on issues of war and violence. Unlike those with a tendency to view Buddhism through rose-tinted spectacles as a tradition which has always lived up to its commitment to non-violence, Jerryson presents a lengthy catalogue of conflicts in which Buddhists have participated. Generally speaking, Jerryson presents a balanced view of Buddhism's stance on war and violence by documenting some of the atrocities carried out by nationalistic, perhaps even bloodthirsty, monks persuaded of the lesser humanity of their non-Buddhist opponents. He also examines texts, such as excerpts from the *Upāyakuaśalya Sūtra*, which seek to justify acts of violence only when they are a means of safeguarding the spiritual wellbeing of others in the long term.

However, whilst Jerryson's discussion on the ways in which Buddhists have dehumanized their opponents is generally sound, there is one particular point

at which his treatment of the subject misses the mark. Referring to the teaching of emptiness, he contends that "perhaps the most extreme religious rhetoric of dehumanization occurs within Mahāyāna doctrine: If a person is empty of substance, what is being murdered? One text that offers an answer is the Chinese text called the *Susthitamati-Paripricchā*… [wherein] the Buddha explains that there is neither killing nor killer" (p. 465). The idea that the teaching of emptiness effectively offers Buddhists a licence to kill would, however, be sharply contested by the vast majority of Buddhists. Jerryson's omission of the word *ultimately* from the claim "there is neither killing nor killer" is an extremely serious oversight based on misunderstanding of several key doctrines, including the two truths, no-self, and karma. That is, Buddhism's denial of an ultimately existent, metaphysically substantial, self does not amount to a denial of a conventionally real person and, in fact, Buddhists are very keen to point out the importance of acknowledging the conventional existence of the person so that ordinary, everyday, inter-personal transactions can be successfully performed. Indeed, as even the earliest Buddhist texts establish, were it not for the conventional existence of the person, the attribution of karmic merit or demerit for intentions formed and actions executed would be impossible.

Jerryson compounds the problem when, some pages later, he argues that from a Buddhist perspective abortion is impermissible because "Buddhist notions often pinpoint life at conception [and so] the abortion of a foetus is the ending of a self" (p. 469). Yet, by invoking the two truths teaching, we see that this also is not the case: at most, for Buddhists, abortion prevents the birth of what would be a conventionally real person. The round of *saṃsāric* rebirth nevertheless continues unabated. The permissibility or otherwise of abortion, euthanasia, and suicide are examined in much more detail in the chapters dedicated to these topics by Michael G. Barnhart, Damien Keown, and Martin Kovan respectively.

Contributors to *The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Ethics* are to be credited for their willingness to challenge and expose certain Buddhist principles as inconsistent and unethical, at least by contemporary standards. For example, the question of the role and status afforded to women in Buddhist traditions is explored in several chapters from historical and philosophical perspectives. In his chapter 'Bhikṣuṇī Ordination,' Bhikkhu Anālayo (who has written on this subject elsewhere, including in the *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies*) provides a helpful survey of positions adopted on the question of the legitimacy of female ordination. He discusses the transmission of the bhikṣuṇī lineage in Sri Lanka and China and examines the possibilities, in terms of

whether the Vinaya requirements can be satisfied, for restoring the lineage in Southeast Asian countries today where the practice has died out. Bhikkhu Anālayo's thorough investigation of this topic is well supplemented by Alice Collett's brilliant chapter 'Buddhism and Women', which focuses less on the 'legal' question of whether a female lineage can be revived and more on the fact that women have been, and continue to be, subjugated in most Buddhist traditions. Though she remains respectful of the tradition, Collett is unafraid to demonstrate the hypocrisy and inconsistency of Buddhists who maintain the intrinsic inferiority of women, yet simultaneously endorse the doctrines of dependent origination, karma and rebirth, according to which the ascription of any *intrinsic* property is nonsensical. Or, as Collett puts it: "This notion that the transformation of human nature is possible underwrites all fundamental Buddhist doctrine, in all schools… To say that a woman is inferior to a man because of her (static and unchangeable) 'female nature' is therefore to deny the quintessence of Buddhism" (p. 559).

To conclude, there are many chapters in this book worthy of greater consideration than can be afforded them here. As is only to be expected in a book of this length, some chapters are more readable than others, some have wider appeal, and some engage with their topics in more dynamic and exciting ways. The inclusion of a list of recommended reading at the end of each chapter is a very helpful feature for those wishing to pursue further research in the specified field and, although one of the stated aims of the book is to provide "much deeper treatment [of the topics] than… possible in an introductory text" (p. 3), it is nevertheless the case that this book will serve as an introduction to the entire field of Buddhist ethics for many students. If the present and forthcoming generation of religious studies, philosophy and anthropology students read this book and seek to emulate the work of many of its contributors, we can surely look forward to the time when they build on this already excellent body of work and seek to settle the still unanswered ethical questions in years to come.

The *Life of Jamgon Kongtrul the Great*, by Alexander Gardner. 2019, Snow Lion, Boulder, Colorado. 506pp. Preface ix-xiii.

Reviewed by Rob Mayer

Alexander Gardner is much to be congratulated for this excellent biography of Jamgon Kongtrul (*'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas* 1813-1899), one of the most important figures in 19th century Tibetan Buddhism, whose wideranging influences continue to pervade Tibetan Buddhism in the present day.

Gardner's historical sources are listed on pages x to xi of his Preface. While he makes no claim to have identified previously unheard-of sources that revolutionise our understanding of Kongtrul, he has seamlessly woven together already known sources to construct a minutely chronologised and densely detailed narrative of Kongtrul's life that greatly exceeds anything hitherto published. Gardner's work will very likely remain the go-to resource on Kongtrul's life for many years to come. It is painstakingly researched, but also highly readable. As a disclaimer, I should add that for the purposes of this short review, I have not found the time to compare Gardner's readings with his original Tibetan sources, but my hope and expectation is that he has done them justice.

Gardner has organised the volume into three sections, entitled Training, Collaborations, and Deaths. Part One (pages 3-115) describes Kongtrul's training under different teachers and at different institutions; Part Two (pages 119-320) describes his famous collaborations with other lamas, including Khyentse Wangpo (*mKhyen brtse dbang po*) and Chogyur Lingpa (*mChog gyur gling pa*); while Part Three (pages 323-351) documents the deaths of the important people in Kongtrul's life, followed by his own demise.

The volume also includes a timeline (pages 354-355), some maps (358-363), a full list of Tibetan orthographic equivalents (65-416), notes (417-451), a list of works cited (453-462), and a bibliography (463-474) and index (475-506).