# Kantian Autonomy and Buddhist Moral Cultivation in Philosophical Dialogue

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# Kantian Autonomy and Buddhist Moral Cultivation in Philosophical Dialogue

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**Abstract**

This paper develops a systematic philosophical dialogue between Kantian autonomy and Buddhist ethics in relation to freedom, moral agency, and moral cultivation. And in place of a hierarchic or reductionist juxtaposition, it is rather a question of how each tradition articulates the ethical normativity it adheres to in relation to specific philosophical problems. Kantian moral reasoning connects freedom with rational self-legislation and conceives moral obligation through universal law as articulated in the Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals and the Critique of Practical Reason. Buddhist ethics, by contrast, understands freedom as liberation from ignorance and craving, emphasizes causal continuity, compassion and moral cultivation, and it does so without postulating an enduring self. Drawing on recent contributions in Buddhist moral philosophy particularly that of Damien Keown, Charles Goodman and Jay L. Garfield, the article argues that the two perspectives offer kairotic rather than chronological perspectives on moral agency. Kantian universal respect and autonomy are at odds with Buddhist ethics which discloses the emerging and relational character of ethical existence. The conclusion is that the concept of moral freedom is better conceptualized when understood through the combined view of rational normativity and moral cultivation.

**Keywords:** Kantian autonomy; Buddhist ethics; moral cultivation; freedom; moral agency; comparative philosophy

## Introduction

The concepts of freedom and autonomy are central to the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant, in which the rational will that determines itself enacts a universal moral law. In contrast, Buddhist culture stresses moral cultivation, compassion and connectedness with all, based on doctrines like no-self (anattā) and dependent origination (pratītya-samutpāda).This paper is a contribution to a cross-cultural philosophical dialogue between Kantian and Buddhist ethics that takes itself to be open to the philosophical "space" of each tradition. Morally freedom, according to Kant, is to act on maxims which you could at the same time want to become universal laws – what he terms the autonomy of the will (Kant, 1785/1996; Kant 1788/1997). Buddhism, instead, teaches that one can overcome suffering (dukkha) by mental reformation and moral action. Garfield (2015) when he declares, "Buddhist ethics is a moral phenomenology that strives to alter how we experience the world, and by extension how we approach the world". In a nutshell Buddhism conceived ethics as an agent-centred, process of developing compassionate, wise qualities rather than a disciplining of individual acts of action, or developing acts alone.

Under a strong comparative frame, one should be able to avoid "descriptivist chauvinism" – transforming one tradition to look like the other. To that end, we will present Kant's theory on its own terms (its grounding of morality in rational autonomy) and Buddhism's ethics on its own (its grounding of ethics in interdependence and the cultivation of virtues). The analysis will then address points of contact and divergence. For instance, the strict individuation of Kant in moral agency (the will as a separate and self-legislating) shall be opposed to Buddhism's doctrine of no-self and interconnectedness (Garfield, 2015). We shall see whether these ideas are able to coexist or be transformed: for example some authors have posited a Buddhist-friendly notion of 'ego-less agency'

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as a substitute for Kantian autonomy. Throughout, we incorporate authoritative scholarship from Kant and contemporary philosophy (*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, *Critique of Practical Reason*) as well as modern analytic treatments of Buddhist ethics (Keown, 2014; Garfield, 2015). Avoiding oversimplifications and "pro-religious" tone, the aim is a scholarly comparison that respects each tradition's integrity and explores how they might inform one another.

*Kantian Autonomy and Moral Freedom*

Kantian ethics is rooted in the notion of *autonomy* (self-legislation) of the will. For Kant, being morally free does not mean acting on whim or avoiding all laws; rather, it means being bound only by laws that one gives oneself through reason (Kant, 1785/1996). Kant: 'Freedom... is not the freedom of being bound by no laws at all; but it is the freedom of being bound by laws, which in a certain sense one has made for oneself' (154). Thus, the notion of freedom as autonomy goes beyond the purely negative conception of freedom as absence of constraints imposed by external forces…It is rather "the idea of laws, prescribed by one's own will, and that implies the idea of laws which command us, at least in some sense." (Kant, 1785/1996).

Autonomy is positive freedom, which refers to the potential of rational beings to enact or legislate for themselves moral principles. This idea binds freedom and reason so closely that a free agent will choose to adopt as its own categorical imperative (CI), the moral law formulated by reason.The Categorical Imperative is formulated in a number of ways which are equivalent with respect to moral duty, however, not towards worth moral. One key version is the *Formula of Autonomy*: "Act so that through your maxims you could be a legislator of universal laws" (Kant, 1785/1996). Kant says we must treat our will as if it were *itself* enacting a system of universal law: we are required to conform our behavior to principles that express the autonomy of our rational will – its status as a source of the very universal laws that obligate it (Kant, 1785/1996). In other words, when an agent acts morally, she is both the author and subject of the laws governing her action. No external authority dictates the maxim; the agent's own rational will does.

This formula of autonomy is here closely connected to the formula of the Universal Law of the CI: "Act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law" (Kant, 1785/1996). Moral worth of an act done from duty – from respect for the moral law – not from inclination, or from any other motives is what Kant stresses. The agent is an agent which act as self-interest and other contingent desires are suspended in light of what reason in itself requires it should do (Kant, 1785/1996). Kant actually affirms that, "the only thing that is good without qualification is a good will" (Kant, 1785/1996). A good will is one that is ruled by rational moral considerations rather than fleeting desires. Hence moral behavior is a consequence of reasoned duty: autonomy is in large part rational self-determination within the domain of morals.

Another formulation, the Humanity Formula (also called the end-in-itself formula), states that one must "Act in such a way that you treat humanity… always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means" (Kant, 1785/1996). Though phrased in Kant's earlier works as respect for persons, it too arises from autonomy: we recognize others as rational agents who legislate moral law, so using them merely as tools would violate their autonomy and dignity. As one commentator summarizes, we may think of a person as free when bound only by their own will and not by the will of another; the source of the authority of the principles binding them will come from the fact that they willed them (Kant, 1785/1996). Under the Kingdom of Ends ideal, each rational being authorizes universal laws under which everyone (including herself) must live. Kant's autonomy concept thus secures human dignity: we impose the moral law on ourselves and each other through universal reason (Kant, 1785/1996).

*Moral Freedom and Self-Legislation*

Kant distinguishes "negative" freedom (being uncoerced) from the positive freedom of autonomy. Negative freedom is compatible with natural causation, but Kant insists that moral agency requires a higher freedom: a will determined solely through natural laws cannot be thought of as

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operating through its capacity for reasoning (Kant, 1788/1997). So although physics might render our actions causally determined, practical reason compels us to *act under the idea of freedom*, as if we were the first cause of our actions (Kant, 1788/1997). Kant's strategy in the *Critique of Practical Reason* is to assume that reason requires us to conceive ourselves as free, even if that freedom transcends empirical proof (Kant, 1788/1997). Thus moral obligation ends up postulating autonomy: by committing to the moral law, we effectively act "as if" our wills are autonomously self-legislating, and are justified in doing so because it is necessary for moral deliberation (Kant, 1788/1997**). In short,** freedom for Kant is practical freedom under self-imposed rational law**.**

Reinhold's interpretations of Kant's thought have been elaborated upon by contemporary Kantian scholars.Christine Korsgaard (1996), as a case in point, highlights the fact that agents are self-constituted as moral persons through their free and rational choices; the self is an identity that arises out of an act of commitment to moral law. Kant's own language in the *Groundwork* suggests that if one treats one's maxims as universal lawgivers, one perceives one's dignity as a free legislator of the moral realm (Kant, 1785/1996). Yet Kant never denies that we are empirically determined beings; rather, he holds that practical reason requires us to act as autonomous even if, as noumenal things-in-themselves, we cannot prove such freedom exists. As one Kant scholar explains, Kant's core aim is to show that we, as rational agents, are bound by moral requirements and that fully rational agents would necessarily comply with them. The autonomy of the will, in this sense, becomes the supreme principle of morality, and Kant thinks it underwrites the absolute authority of the categorical imperative (Kant, 1785/1996).

## Buddhist Ethics and Moral Cultivation

Buddhist ethics arises from the Buddha's diagnosis of suffering (dukkha) and its causes. Rather than grounding ethics in divine command or rational law-giving, Buddhism begins with *dependent origination* – the idea that all phenomena (including the self) arise due to causes and conditions. This implies *no enduring self* (anattā); what we call a "person" is a conventional label for a constantly changing stream of physical and mental processes. In this view, the sense of a fixed autonomous self is illusory. Ethics is therefore concerned with the investigation of the causes of these harmful states of mind (greed, hatred and delusion) and with methods for renouncing them. The Four Noble Truths delineate this path: (1) Suffering is part of life, (2) suffering is tied to attachment/craving, (3) ending suffering (nirvana) is possible by rooting out these attachments, and (4) the path to this end is the Noble Eightfold Path.

### *The Way of Virtue and Care for Others*

The Eightfold path offers a comprehensive code for ethical conduct (siila), meditation practice (samadhi), and wisdom (panna). The First Four Factors –Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood– lay the foundation for moral conduct and cause no harm. This is all about kindness, truth and no-harm. Factors 5–8 – Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration – cultivate mental discipline and wisdom. Finally, wisdom (seeing things as they really are) frees one from ignorance and craving. In one pedagogical sense, Buddhism can be seen as a path of *self-transformation*: it actively replaces unwholesome traits with positive qualities. As one scholar notes, it "seeks the elimination of negative psychological states (or vices) like greed, hatred, and delusion, and their replacement by positive or wholesome ones (virtues)" (Garfield, 2015).

Compassion (karuṇā) is especially significant in Buddhist ethics. In Theravāda as in Mahāyāna literature, acts of kindness and goodwill towards all sentient beings are enjoined again and again. The Mahāyāna tradition in particular crystallizes an ideal figure — the bodhisattva — who vows to achieve enlightenment for the sake of saving others. Central to this are the Six Perfections (pāramitās): generosity, morality, patience, energy, meditation and wisdom. It is significant that in Mahāyāna literature compassion is often called the highest virtue: "Mahayāna literature is permeated with reminders to foster compassion (karuṇā), at times even praising it as highest virtue, eclipsing also wisdom" (Keown, 2014). A Buddhist teacher describes the bodhisattva as driven by "boundless

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compassion (mahākaruṇā)" along with the quest for wisdom (Keown, 2014). In practical ethics, this translates into developing empathy, loving-kindness, and the desire to relieve others of suffering as central moral ends.

Buddhist ethicists often emphasize that cultivation of the moral life is not simply a matter of externals but also of internals states. The Indian logician Nāgārjuna regarded intentions (cetanā) as the cause of kamma (karmic result). Modern philosophers echo this: Garfield notes that what matters is not outcomes, but what we intend; intention grounds action, and even when it misfires, it matters to who we are and to what we become by what we intend to do (Garfield, 2015). He gives a vivid example: if one intends to steal medicine (a bad intention) but accidentally saves someone's life, negative karma accrues from the intention, but positive karma from the act and from the completion (Garfield, 2015). As he concludes, the fact that a terrible outcome ensues from a good intention does not make the outcome morally acceptable; nor does a good outcome somehow cancel malicious intent (Garfield, 2015). Each component of action has its consequences.

Garfield summarizes the distinctiveness of Buddhist ethics thus: it is primarily about *transformation of the agent's experience* rather than the external outcomes of actions (Garfield, 2015). In Western moral theory terms, he characterizes Buddhist ethics as *agent-centered* rather than *act-centered* (Garfield, 2015). In Buddhism, one trains attention, patience, and mindfulness, so that one naturally perceives reality and others with wisdom and compassion. The ultimate ideal is to see the world clearly and feel impartial caring for all beings. Thus Garfield writes that these dispositions *"emerge naturally"* from realizing our interdependence; we learn to act with *"impartiality, benevolence, care and sympathetic joy"*as proper responses to that realization (Garfield, 2015).

In sum, Buddhist ethics combines elements sometimes associated with Western approaches but is sui generis in its synthesis. It has virtue-like aspects, consequentialist aspects, and duty-like aspects (Keown, 2014; Goodman, 2009). As one scholar notes, early Buddhist ethics is notably *value-pluralistic* (Garfield, 2015). Key to all of it is the *underlying vision of reality*: no-self, impermanence, and interdependence. Ethics is thus inseparable from metaphysics in Buddhist thought. As Garfield emphatically states, Buddhists reject the image of an autonomous self; we are constituted as the persons we are in part by the continuum of processes on which we supervene, in part by the social complexes in which we figure (Garfield, 2015).

## Comparative Analysis: Autonomy and Cultivation

*Autonomy of Will vs. No-Self and Interdependence*

At an initial glance, Kantian and Buddhist conceptions of self appear incompatible. Kant's moral agent is a self-sufficient rational agent, whose value is grounded in his/herself in autonomy. Buddhism, in particular in subsequent schools, has refuted any substantial individual self. While Kantians focus on the separateness and uniqueness of persons, Buddhists focus on the interrelatedness and similarity of all persons (Garfield, 2015). In Kant's mind the self-legislating agent is what lies behind action; for Buddhists, the locus of agency is variously interpreted as a temporal cluster view is the influence of conditions and relations. This contrast raises the question: "Is it possible for Kant's concept of autonomy to survive the Buddhist teaching of anattā (no-self)?" A traditional Kantian autonomy is incompatible with the Buddhist teaching of no-self. In particular, Kant's assumption of a stable rational will that gives law to itself seems incompatible with the Buddhist idea that the person is a constantly arising process with no controlling core.

Many philosophers have grappled with this. Garfield observes that the Buddhist approach to ethics rejects the image of an autonomous self independently giving rise through mysterious free agent causation to actions (Garfield, 2015). Rather, in Buddhist ethics, persons are understood as the outcomes of mental and social conditioning. We are 'norm-governed creature[s]' that are transformed by engaging in language and society, as well as in moral practice (Garfield, 2015). We do act and choose, but those acts are to be understood only in terms of causes and conditions, and not as arising from an unconditioned self. According to this perspective, the very basis of autonomy is redefined:

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moral authority does not emanate from a monadic legislating will, but rather is grounded in wisdom and compassion that naturally arise upon realizing how things truly are.

A number of more contemporary authors have attempted to posi tive the middle way. A concept of ego-less agency to address moral agency absent Kantian selfhood. Proposes that even in the absence of a permanent self, people can still be moral agents – they just have a "self" as the collection of mental events and tendencies that they are cultivating. To that extent one acts and selects, but never except under conditions (karma, society, prior habits). The Buddhist denial of metaphysical ego does not negate intentional action and responsibility - it simply repositions them. This is in contrast with activity (a modern Kantian) that we make ourselves into moral selves by selecting our principles; Buddhists might respond that there is no original constitute point, but only ongoing evolution. Korsgaard's account is even said to be "at war with" the doctrine of no-self that it is here implied that the latter is untenable in light of the former. He does not disagree that a satisfying Buddhist ethics will have to explain how the ethical injunctions (such as not killing) make sense in the absence of a strong individual subject.

In conclusion, Kant and Buddhism provide fundamentally different metaphysical conceptions of the agent, with far-reaching ethical consequences. The Kantian concept of autonomy presupposes an inherent dignity and separateness of persons (Kant, 1785/1996). Buddhist relations emphasizes interdependence and is commonly suspicious of individualism as a barrier to compassion. But it does not flatten individuals into anonymous points on a map; instead it displaces agency. As Garfield notes, "Viewed through a Buddhist lens, ethics is our own engagement in a matrix of discursive and social practices, including those of moral cultivation (Garfield, 2015). in the end, responsibility, is shared and evolving: we tend to one another in the community of life.Even a the start of any conversation between Kant and Buddhism must take this contrast. We can say that Kant provides an ideal of individuals as co-legislators of universal law, whereas Buddhism offers an ideal of individuals as compassionate members of an interconnected whole. The two notions of agency – autonomous rational cause versus conditioned moral development – are not easily merged without reinterpretation.

*Freedom in Kant and Liberation in Buddhism*

Freedom is an issue both traditions have pursued, although what that means is different in each. For Kant, one is free (Freiheit) when one acts according to law, and is not just a passive subject of nature. It is a practical postulate: we are under the necessity of postulating freedom in order to make sense of morality. Kant considers freedom and autonomy to be inseparable: to be free is to be governed by one's own moral will (Kant, 1788/1997). In the Critique of Practical Reason, he famously asserts that although we cannot prove freedom theoretically, we must act as if we are free in practical (moral) deliberation (Kant, 1788/1997). This notion of freedom is negative in that it denies external determination of the will by non-rational forces, and positive in that it insists the will act for rational reasons.

Buddhism's notion of freedom is oriented toward liberation (mokṣa or nirvāṇa) from suffering, not toward free choice per se. The first Noble Truth identifies the lack of true freedom: we are all bound by desires, ignorance, and karmic conditioning, which cause recurring dissatisfaction. The goal of the path is to attain the freedom from these chains of craving. In other words, true freedom in Buddhism is emancipation (vimutti) – release from ignorance and the cycle of rebirth. One is liberated when the causes of suffering (greed, hatred, delusion) are eradicated through insight and discipline. Here freedom is framed in terms of overcoming inner constraints – not constraints imposed by external authority but by one's own mind-states.

The two conceptions intersect in intriguing ways. Kant and Buddhism both see freedom as tied to the condition of the agent rather than circumstances: Kant's freedom is negative (no external compulsion) yet must be assumed by a rational mind; Buddhist freedom is inner (no more compulsive cravings) and is achieved by insight. Perhaps more surprisingly, both can regard the will as constrained by higher principles. Kant would say that a will enslaved by appetite fails to be free;

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Buddhism would say that the will enslaved by desire also fails to be liberated. In this light, Buddhist moral training (overcoming desire) has an analogue in Kant's idea of rising above heteronomous impulses. However, Kant frames moral duty as freedom and sees self-legislation as the highest good, whereas Buddhism frames self-control and wisdom as means to a nirvanic freedom beyond even moral constructs.

One notable discussion arises from meditation and mental cultivation. O thers ask whether Buddhist mental practices could increase freedom in Kant's sense, such as reason-responsiveness. if that is to be true, one must either explain freedom without a fixed self or rethink what autonomy means. Kantian autonomy may be inapplicable if no self persists, thus one might speak of ego-less agency as acting freely in a way consistent with Buddhist lawfulness. This shows how each view might challenge and enrich the other's idea of freedom.

*Moral Motivation: Duty vs. Compassion*

Another contrast is in the source of moral motivation. Kantian ethics is typically formulated as duty-based ethics: One should do the right thing out of respect for the moral law, and without regard to any inclination or emotion. Having good intentions or acting from a moral duty in Kant's opinion is what matters. In practice, this means one's desires to duty one's to conform. Motives of sympathy or affection are not morally good when considered in themselves, unless they become consistent with duty. The motives of sympathy or affection have no moral value unless they align with duty. Kant does recognize duties of beneficence (helping others), but these are "imperfect duties" – good to follow but not strictly required in every case (Kant, 1797/1996). Kant famously argues that "act only from that maxim which you can at the same time will to be a universal law"; the moral agent tests motives by universality, not by emotions. Thus the ideal Kantian agent is impartial and rational, treating others as ends based on respect and reason (Kant, 1785/1997).

In Buddhist morality, compassion and the desire to alleviate suffering is the root of motivation. Bodhisattva Ideal Compassion is explicitly the motivating force in the bodhisattva ideal: out of compassion for all beings, one postpones one's own Nirvana. Even outside of Mahāyāna the Buddha taught that love and compassion (mettā and karuṇā) are qualities indispensable for development. Ethical conduct is not performed from the abstract sense of duty, but out of real empathy and understanding. Truthfulness and good intention are very important. This is not to say that Buddhism turns a blind eye to objective truth — the precepts come with specific directions — but that the moral life is colored with a positive emotion, not just dry duty (Keown, 2014).

This is what we witness when we practise. Buddhist traditions frequently recommend developing compassionate joy (muditā) and equanimity to the same degree as morality. Garfield notes that for us to "embrace impartiality, benevolence, care and sympathetic joy" is a natural consequence once we realize we are interconnected all (Garfield, 2015). One's love for others is not optional; it is the ground of ethical identity. In contrast, Kant would say love must be commanded by duty (or at least it accompanies it) but is not itself the ground of the law. Buddhism reverses the Kantian order: understanding of reality (dependent origination) generates compassion, which in turn motivates moral action.

On the other hand, Buddhism does impose strong normative constraints too (the five precepts, etc.), but these are often seen as skillful means informed by compassion. For example, one does not kill out of compassion for the victim's future lives and sorrow. Some modern Buddhists (e.g., Keown, Goodman) characterize Buddhist ethics as consequentialist in a limited sense: we keep the moral precepts because they tend to reduce suffering (on balance) (Goodman, 2009; Keown, 2014). As Garfield summarizes, the Eightfold Path can be seen as "broadly consequentialist" in that "what makes it a path worth following is that things work out better to the extent that we follow it" (Garfield, 2015). However, the spirit of this utilitarianism is more abstract—the ends (freedom from suffering) are not wholly separable from the means (virtuous practice), and the source of motivation continues to be a refinement of insight and compassion rather than simple calculation of happiness.

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To summarize: Kantian duty and Buddhist compassion both urge us to transcend our own self-interest, but they do so in slightly different registers. Kant argues 'obey duty because duty is rational and is universalizable', whereas Buddhism demands 'act out of love because everyone's liberation is significant'. There's a point of contact: Kant does recognize a moral feeling of respect that accompanies duty, and imperfect duties of beneficence indicate a place for good will towards others. Buddhism would also agree that reason and universalizability are helpful concepts in ethical inquiry and that one should not give way to passion in reasoning one should do his or her best in reasoning. Still, the emphasiss are changed. A Kantian might admire Buddhist compassion as a higher motive, but would want it guided by a universal principle. A Buddhist could argue that in the absence of genuine empathic feeling, strict duty tends to morph into mindless conformity. In Keown (2014) he proposes that buddhist virtue (kusala) and worldly happiness of cessation of suffering (nirvāṇa) are brought together; both the right motive and the right result are respected.

*Universal Law and Contextual Ethics*

The demand of Kant's categorical imperative is that moral rules be unconditional and must hold in all contexts: a maxim is immoral if it is not able to become a universal law of nature (one cannot will a world in which everyone lied or killed). Buddhism also maintains universal precepts (do not kill, do not steal, and so on), but it permits for "skillful means" (upāya) in certain circumstances. For instance, the morality, in Buddhist teachings, understands that even a skillful, kind lie told at a time when it can prevent harm is acceptable (Buddhist tales commonly serve to portray such moral quandaries). Fundamentally the core value (compassion) stays the same, but what you do can change. So, in other words, Buddhism recognizes the existence of universal moral truths but tempers this with the practicalities of individual situations and intentions.

The Western ethical traditions in general have a tendency to have problems with exceptions that are specific to context (have Kant allow lying to save a life? He said no). Buddhism itself confronts such questions: the motivation (compassion) can take precedence over the letter of the law. Today, some scholars are even ready to classify Buddhism as a kind of contextual—virtue or character—ethics, where the right course of action is discerned from case to case by the morally praiseworthy individual. For instance, Goodman (2009) offers an indirect reading of Buddhist prohibitions (such as killing): although killing is bad, one may at times choose to not kill by other means (e.g., by neutralizing a threat) as an act of compassion without infringing upon any precept.

Garfield observes Buddhism's stance on morality "is not based on a hard line between the moral and the pragmatic, the public and the private, the self-interested and the other-interested" (Garfield, 2015).Everything is in the domain of ethics because everything causes suffering or the relief of suffering. This holistic view aligns with Kant's demand for consistency (one's duties do not change by context), but Buddhism would insist that true consistency comes from consistently cultivating wisdom and compassion, not from rigid compliance. In the end, Buddhists might say that if one truly "sees" reality properly (including interdependence), one will not want to do anything that perpetuates suffering, because the universal context has already been internalized in one's mind.

*Agency, Karma, and Consequence*

Both systems recognize moral causation, but frame it differently. Kant speaks of "moral responsibility" in terms of autonomy: an action is right if done with the right motive (a will that could universalize its maxim). Bad actions stem from heteronomy (acting from non-rational motives). Responsibility is thus tied to the agent's will and its reasons. Buddhism uses the concept of karma, which literally means action or deed, but implies a natural moral law of cause and effect. Every intentional action plants a karmic seed that bears fruit of corresponding quality. Good intentions lead to wholesome results; bad intentions to unwholesome ones. There is no divine judge; karmic consequences simply follow inevitably from the nature of the act, intention, and results.

Notably, Kantian theory is intentionalist about morality (it cares only about the maxim), and Buddhism also gives pride of place to intention (cetana) (Garfield, 2015). However, Buddhism does

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not ignore outcomes: a destructive deed has negative karmic repercussions, even if the agent was mistaken about the facts. Conversely, an unintended good deed still promotes positive karma for the intention and effort. Kant would consider a good intention wasted if it fails to act (he says nothing is done), and condemns bad intentions even if they lead to good (since the maxim fails universality). Buddhists would mostly agree on these points, but might add that unwholesome deeds generate afflictions (future suffering), whereas constructive deeds generate merit (puñña) – a concept that Kant does not entertain.

Garfield succinctly observes that in Buddhism, "the desire to follow the Eightfold Path, by contrast, is a virtuous… form of desire" (Garfield, 2015) – the desire to end suffering. This might even be a meta-volition that Kant would laud: the inclination to do the right thing because deep down that is what one wants to do.However, the two traditions are not congruent when it comes to consequences.Kant would scoff at an ethic that justified bad means with good ends, but Buddhists are less dogmatic: if compassion insists on breaking a rule to stop harm, one must do so and trust that karma is tipping in the direction of compassionate relief rather than mindless legalism. In practice, Buddhist communities develop extensive doctrine on what actions lead to what kind of karmic retribution or merit, whereas Kantian ethics would treat those as morally neutral (Kant, 1797/1996).

*Moral Cultivation and Education*

Both traditions regard moral education as significant, but envisage it in different ways. Kant highlighted the value of duty and regard for the moral law. Education, in Kant, consists in developing the motive of duty and the ability to be one's own protected influence. Citizens in a Kantian republicThus, citizens in a Kantian republic need to be educated to obey the universal laws that they give to themselves and to treat others as ends. Inclinations and emotions shall be subjugated to rational understanding of duty. To be sure, Kant understood moral sentiment (e.g., respect for moral law) to have a role in moral life, and he viewed religion as serving morality by strengthening our duties and as a matter of practical reason (Kant, 1793/1998).

The Buddhist moral education (saṅgaṭhana) is more comprehensive in its nature. There is also rigorous moral training (for monastics and laity alike), but in addition meditation and scriptural study. The object is not to follow the rules but make them part of your understanding. Repeat actions cultivate virtues (e.g., almsgiving fosters generosity, training in mindfulness leads to clearness of mind). There are specific ones: confessing misdeeds, recollecting the virtues of the Buddha and Bodhisattv, plus receiving advice from more experienced practitioners.

Buddhist ethics "emphasizes mental transformation rather than physical act," according to Jay Garfield (Garfield, 2015). This "inward-turning" mentality is at odds with Western "output ethics" (deontological, utilitarian, etc.) now embodied by Kant, whose position asks "What should I do?" Buddhism rather asks, "What do I see and feel?" and "How do I remove ignorance from my mind?" The upshot is a different sort of moral pedagogy.

*Avoiding Ethnocentric Oversimplifications*

It is worth repeating that these comparisons are simplifications. We shouldn't boil down Kant to "promoting selfish individualism" or Buddhism to "fuzzy collectivism." Indeed, Kant's ethics, although it centers on the individual, is staunchly universal and demands that we treat all other human beings as ends. Buddhism, long with interdependence, does have a strong sense of individual ethical progress. Comparative scholars warn against caricature.Comparative philosophy's task is to do justice to each tradition on its own terms, rather than reinterpreting the other in one's own institutional terms.

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## Conclusion

In conclusion Kantian and Buddhist ethics are two rich moral tradition which manifest themselves in terms of freedom, law and cultivation in not so distant in manner. Freedom, as Kant conceives it, is realized by acting on laws that one, as a rational being, has given to oneself (Kant, 1788/1996); One attains freedom by training the mind to see things as they really are, which leads to compassion and right living (Garfield, 2015). But Kantian autonomy is individualistic and rational, and Buddhist autonomy is essentially relational and holistic. What they share is a difference of opinion over which non-reflective desires advance or set back freedom, and, more deeply, about whether moral worth does or does not consist in acting from the right source.

A philosophical dialogue between them need not end in one extolling the virtues of the other. Rather, Buddhist ethics is a different voice that enhances Western ideas (Garfield, 2015). Comparative ethics encourages us to approach Kant and Buddhism not as rivals but as collaborators in a wider project that investigates what it takes to live a genuinely free and ethical life.

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