

## REVIEW OF *THE BUDDHIST AND THE ETHICIST*

This was an interesting window into a school of thought I don't know much about, though it didn't really change my views on anything.

### 1. Self-sacrifice

The thing I like best about the Christian tradition I was raised in is its emphasis—at least in the abstract, and often in practice at an interpersonal level, though sadly this tends to go out the window when politics gets involved—on forgiveness and self-sacrifice, such as in Jesus' command to “turn the other cheek” and of course in the story of his death. I love to see similar themes appear in other traditions, and I think Chao-hwei gives a particularly clear statement of the kind of expansive concern for everyone that ought to be the ideal:

There is a[n] ... ideal that one should sacrifice individual welfare for the greater good, but this is not the Buddhist altruistic attitude. [The former] altruistic ideal will eventually hit a boundary. No matter how large the space enclosed by the boundary is, there is still a boundary. It is therefore always possible that the person who claims to sacrifice their individual welfare for the greater good also has to sacrifice anyone who is outside the boundary of the greater good they define, such as people of other ethnicities, or animals. ...

However, the practice of immeasurable samadhi (the boundless state) is different. ... [it] is about dissolving one's self (ego) through the process of exchanging self for other. That is the difference between compassion and love for the greater good. A bodhisattva does not love the drowning child due to a certain connection; instead, they turn the limited love (that we typically only have toward ourselves or those close to us) into a strong concern for this child's well-being.<sup>1</sup>

Some of my favorite parts of the book are when Chao-hwei relates Buddhist stories where the hero engages in some sort of self-sacrifice, such as these two:

An eagle was attacking a dove, and the dove came to the Buddha for help. Of course, out of compassion the bodhisattva protected the dove from the eagle. Then the eagle flew down from the sky and argued with the bodhisattva, saying, “Well, I know that out of compassion you want to help the dove, but you are doing a cruel thing to me, because without food I will starve to death.” The bodhisattva thought the eagle had a point, so he decided to cut off a piece of his thigh and give it to the hungry eagle.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Shih Chao-hwei, *The Buddhist and the Ethicist: Conversations on Effective Altruism, Engaged Buddhism, and How to Build a Better World* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2023), 48–49. She refers to the limited form of altruism as “a Chinese ideal,” but I've omitted that adjective since I see this as a common flaw in human moral thinking.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 3–4.

In one of his incarnations as a bodhisattva, Lord Buddha was a king, called King Long-lifespan. When another country invaded, he gave up all his lands and power to avoid people suffering in both countries. He gave his throne to the invader and retreated to the forest with his queen and heirs. Nevertheless, the invader still hunted Lord Buddha down and executed him. While he was being executed, he looked around and saw his son, Prince Longevity, watching among the surrounding crowd. He could see the rage and anguish in his son and calmly said to him, “Confronting anger with anger can never stop this vicious circle. However, confronting anger with compassion will stop the negative loop.” After the execution, Prince Longevity did everything he could to avenge his father’s death, but in the critical moment, right before he succeeded, he remembered his father’s words and tucked his sword back in its sheath. The invading king learned from this and regretted his own behavior. He then gave the country back to Prince Longevity.<sup>3</sup>

Although that story has a relatively happy ending, I like that there is also one—about Buddha and Vidudabha<sup>4</sup>—which extols nonviolence even when it fails to stop the aggressor.

Notably, though, Chao-hwei is not advocating strict pacifism. In her analysis, whether the Buddha recommends fighting or surrendering depends on what would minimize casualties in a given situation. And “[h]e understood that to raise military power in moderation may sometimes decrease the chance of warfare...”<sup>5</sup> She says that “defense or nondefense are simply strategies” for “reducing casualties”<sup>6</sup>.

## 2. Nirvana

As a child, I once read a Christian book attacking Buddhism. One of its complaints was that Buddhists are trying to achieve annihilation, which was portrayed as a pathetic, dismal, absurd goal. Singer raises this topic:

...I have read that for Buddhists, the ultimate goal is nirvana, which is release from the cycle of life. That is, of course, a release from suffering, but it would also seem to be a release from happiness. I am puzzled by this idea, which seems to me to be one-sided. I take the ultimate goal to be, not release from the cycle of life, but a better life for everyone.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 204.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 210–11.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 212.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Peter Singer, *The Buddhist and the Ethicist: Conversations on Effective Altruism, Engaged Buddhism, and How to Build a Better World* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2023), 32.

The “one-sided” view has gained some adherents in Western philosophy (and in my own friend group)—I’ve reviewed a couple books by negative utilitarians—but like Singer, I find it strange. There were three interesting aspects to Chao-hwei’s response.

First, she notes “[t]he Buddha adjusted his teachings based on those with whom he was interacting” and “didn’t talk about nirvana right away.”<sup>8</sup> People are perhaps not expected to be able to see the desirability of nirvana immediately. Later she talks about three distinct stages a Buddhist may go through—pursuing happiness, liberation, and altruism—and indicates the Buddha has teachings addressed to each of these goals.

Second, she gives some insight into why one might want to let go of the pursuit of happiness, or at least happiness that comes from “the external world”:

One often pursues happiness through sensual satisfaction, yet this happiness will result in two possibilities. One is that, with repetition, we become numb to the stimuli; the other is that we will seek to enhance the intensity of the stimuli. When we deepen awareness of our experiences, we realize that the happiness we believe we enjoy actually turns to suffering because we are more and more dependent on sensual pleasures.<sup>9</sup>

Notice this is a bit different from the negative utilitarian view: the value of pleasure isn’t denied outright, but it’s viewed as inextricably linked to suffering. This resonates with me a little bit, but I also see it as a very contingent aspect of human psychology. The ultimate long-term goal for humanity, in my view, should be to break the link—to find a way to change our world or our brains such that we can have the pleasure without an excessive amount of pain. But within our present circumstances, Chao-hwei’s argument helps me understand better why there could be wisdom in trying to lessen one’s attachment to happiness.

Thirdly, I’m not entirely clear on this, but it sounds like the idea that nirvana (or “enlightenment”, or “the fourth dhyana”—are these all synonymous?) involves annihilation may just be a misunderstanding.

...we wished that all beings would attain another level of happiness beyond sensual pleasure. This is a kind of joy that comes from having a tranquil and focused mind, which is what we refer to as *dhyana*, or “meditative absorption,” a happiness that comes from the mind.

There are four levels of dhyana, and the enjoyment of the body and mind deepens at each level.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Chao-hwei, *The Buddhist and the Ethicist*, 32.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

Chao-hwei's descriptions of dhyana almost (but not exactly) sound like increasingly pure states of flow. And her emphasis is on release from attachment, not release from existence:

If we realize that our bodies are like the gathering foam and our hearts are like water bubbles, when we face our own death, it is like seeing a leaf falling from a tree. There is neither an unwillingness to let go nor a strong desire to move on to the next journey; this is so-called nirvana.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. Scripture

Although Chao-hwei clearly has a lot of respect for Buddhist scriptures and her worldview seems to be heavily influenced by them, she is also open about the fact that she is “making a constant effort to deconstruct the authority of the so-called sacred scriptures.”<sup>12</sup> When the scriptures are sexist, she rejects them (though often by pointing out how other parts of the scriptures point in different directions).

I don't know how common this willingness to overrule the scriptures is within Buddhism—I infer that it's far from universal—but it's certainly anathema within the forms of Christianity I'm most familiar with. I wish it were the norm. I sometimes wonder whether my relationship to Christianity would be different if I had not felt pressured to accept it all-or-nothing; if I could have engaged with the parts of the tradition that seemed false or immoral from within the tradition, rather than feeling the need to exit the tradition entirely.

### 4. Embryos

The biggest point of disagreement between Singer and Chao-hwei in the book is about when/whether it is wrong to kill embryos that cannot yet feel pain. Singer thinks there is nothing bad about it at all; Chao-hwei is much more concerned, because:

From the Buddhist perspective, when we give equal consideration to all sentient beings with signs of life, we especially value two instincts of life. The first is to pursue happiness and to avoid pain and suffering, and the second is to survive and avoid death.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 39.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 60.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 113.

A utilitarian, by contrast, would care only about the former. Although I can sort of imagine that, if one of our priorities is to avoid causing harm, that justifies having some respect for the latter just for the sake of being cautious, ultimately I agree with Singer: I just don't see why a survival instinct *in and of itself* merits respect if it is not associated with any conscious experience at all.

### **5. A story about cat sex, which I will quote without context**

Once there was a male cat on the college campus, and he looked so gorgeous that when a movie star saw a picture of him, she immediately liked him because of how “spiritual” he looked. She wanted her female cat to mate with that male cat, so she brought her cat to the college personally. The whole day, the other venerables at the college and I saw how the male cat tried to chase the female cat without success. Neither cat could rest properly during that whole night and the next day. We felt pity for the male and also for the female, who was trying to avoid the male and run away. In this case, we only saw the suffering of the male cat's unsatisfied desire and the female's constant need to escape from the male, but there was no sin. After two days of chasing, they both ran out of energy, and they just sat down and looked at each other in exhaustion.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 85.