

Book Review

Moonpaths: Ethics and Emptiness

By The Cowherds
Oxford University Press, 2016
Review by Jess Row

In the translation of the Heart Sutra used by the Kwan Um School of Zen, Avalokiteśvara teaches us that in emptiness (that is, using the original term, *śūnyatā*) there is “no suffering, no origination, no stopping, no path, no cognition, no attainment, and nothing to attain.” This is a line we repeat constantly in our practice, embodying the central view of the Mahāyāna, rooted in the Prajñāpāramitā sutras and the Madhyamaka śāstras (that is, philosophical texts), that emptiness, compassion and ethical conduct are all interrelated. The Zen tradition is full of (in some sense, is entirely made up of) stories where emptiness, compassion and correct action manifest all at once. But how exactly does this relationship work? In other words, how does emptiness manifest as compassion (as it does, sometimes) and why does it not *always* manifest this way?

These are questions Buddhist practitioners and scholars have wrestled with for centuries—essentially since the Mahāyāna began—and they continue as a lively subject of debate. *Moonpaths* is an anthology of essays by an international collective of scholars, primarily in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism. (If they were coming from the Zen tradition, I imagine they would have named themselves “The Oxherds.”) They approach this question philosophically, using the language and terms Nāgārjuna uses in *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*), the foundation of the Madhyamaka tradition. If you’re not familiar at all with Nāgārjuna, this book may be a little difficult to navigate; I recommend picking up the highly accessible translation of *Fundamental Wisdom* by Jay Garfield, who is also a member of the Cowherds. But fundamentally—and somewhat surprisingly—*Moonpaths* is an accessible book that I think can help clarify some very tricky and easily misunderstood areas of Buddhist thought and practice.

In *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* Nāgārjuna teaches us that the reason the world we live in seems permanent, solid and full of independently existing entities—even though it’s not—is because there are two interdependent truths, the absolute and the relative, or “ultimate reality” and “conventional reality.” Conventional reality is where most human beings live their lives, convinced of the permanence and stability of objects, relationships and selves; of course, this is where suffering occurs, too, and where ethical action is necessary. A persistent problem in Mahāyāna Buddhist communities, and even societies (for example, among the Zen teachers in Japan who supported the imperial regime during World War II) is the attitude that because suffering is “merely conventional,” it doesn’t actually matter. Probably we have all struggled at some

point with this question ourselves. If we’re supposed to “put it all down,” then why and when should we take up the path of concrete ethical action, especially when that action is risky, difficult or not directly related to us?

One of the key texts that takes up this issue in the Mahāyāna tradition—and one of the focal points of *Moonpaths*—is the eighth chapter of Shāntideva’s classic *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, or the *Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life*. (There are excellent translations of this book available from the Dalai Lama and Pema Chödrön, among others). Shāntideva’s argument begins with a fundamental question: What does it mean to experience, in meditation, the realization that “I am the same as you, and my suffering is the same as yours?” One useful technique, he says, is to think of yourself and others as part of one body, where every part—the hands, the toenails, the eardrums—has to remain healthy for the whole to be healthy. Another is to consider that just as you are attached to your own suffering (as a conventional being) others are also attached to theirs. But in the final analysis, Shāntideva says, we have to give up our attachment to any idea of “I” and “you,” and accept that suffering simply appears, even without the existence of independent agents who suffer:

As the suffering self does not exist,
There are no distinctions among anyone.
Just because there is suffering, it is to be eliminated.
What is the point of discriminating here?
(*Bodhicaryāvatāra*, 8.102)

Interpreting this passage, Jay Garfield says “Compassion is grounded in the awareness of our individually ephemeral joint participation in global life” and is “the direct result of a genuine appreciation of the essencelessness and interdependence of all sentient beings.”

Other chapters in *Moonpaths* that I found particularly meaningful deal with the vexed question of how karma works within the Madhyamaka view of impermanence. If our experience of the self is an illusion that arises moment-to-moment, and is always changing, how can we feel any certainty at all that actions actually have consequences, let alone a sense of karma’s influence on what passes from one life to another? Sonam Thakchöe, a Tibetan philosopher with both traditional Buddhist and Western training, does an excellent job of explaining two



answers to this question, one from Vasubandhu (who originated Yogācāra, or the “Mind-only” school), and the other from the Prasāngika-Mādhyamaka tradition (the basis of the Dalai Lama’s Gelugpa school). Vasubandhu argues, in effect, that because of the momentary arising and disappearing of mental states, there would be no such thing as karma if not for the *ālaya-vijñāna* or “storehouse-consciousness,” which exists permanently, across lifetimes, and contains karmic seeds that may bear fruit much later. The contrasting view, which originates with Candrakīrti, argues that karma does not disappear when momentary consciousness disappears; it “disintegrates,” and that disintegration is a separate moment unto itself, so that one state of consciousness is constantly influencing the next. Guy Newland, a philosopher and translator (responsible for translating Tsongkhapa’s mammoth *Great Treatise on the Path to Enlightenment*) provides a clear explanation of this second analysis in a chapter with the tongue-in-cheek title, “How Does Merely Conventional Karma Work?”

In the end I felt what was most lacking from this otherwise excellent anthology was any reference to actual

ethical situations or problems. This is not in any way a book about what philosophers call “applied” ethics, and as a Zen practitioner and nonphilosopher, I have a hard time understanding how anyone can bear talking about ethics in the abstract when the world is overflowing with concrete ethical dilemmas, large and small. Fortunately, there are plenty of other texts Zen students can turn to; I would start with Robert Aitken’s *The Path of Clover* and *The Morning Star*, and with Zen Master Seung Sahn’s wonderful “Letter to a Dictator” from *Wanting Enlightenment Is a Big Mistake*. *Moonpaths* is important because it provides a rigorous introduction to the wide and even beautiful Madhyamaka concept of ethics within an interdependent universe, but it remains to us to absorb these teachings into our moment-to-moment lives as students, teachers, parents, children, and ordinary nonspecial human beings. ♦

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Life is like a dream within a dream.
In our worldly encounters, who is who?
Before I was born, who am I?
After the last breath, what am I?



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