Buddhist Morality and Trans-morality

James D. Sellmann
University of Guam

Abstract:
This paper presents a study of Buddhist ethics and the trans-moral perspective developed by Masao Abe a member of the Kyoto School of Japanese philosophy. The paper presents some of the major Buddhist moral concepts, and clarifies the Buddhist trans-moral perspective in order to show that it is not a form of nihilism or pessimism. The first part of the paper explicates the Buddhist world view and its moral teachings. The second part of the paper argues for the value of the trans-moral perspective. The trans-moral perspective is a religio-philosophical dissolution of the vicious cycle of judgment and counter-judgment perpetuated by most two-value, that is, right/wrong, true/false, moral systems. The trans-moral perspective offers an engaging way to cope with moral atrocities and the subsequent cycle of counter-judgment.

It is a common belief that non-Western traditions have little or nothing to offer to modern moral dilemmas because it is held that modern problems are unique and peculiar to contemporary technology, business, national and international contexts and laws. Contemporary scholars and students of morality have paid little attention to Hindu, Buddhist, Chinese and Japanese conceptions of morality and ethics. In this paper I bring forward some of the major Buddhist moral concerns, and I clarify the Buddhist trans-moral perspective in order to show that it is not a form of nihilism or a type of pessimism, but rather it is a religio-philosophical dissolution of the vicious cycle of judgment and counter-judgment perpetuated by most two-value, i.e. right/wrong, true/false, moral systems.

There is a need for more studies in the comparative philosophy of ethics. Buddhism is especially pertinent to comparative philosophy when we consider the growth and development of Buddhism within its historical context. Historically and contextually Buddhism has experienced its periods of greatest development both socio-politically by means of influential power and religio-philosophically by means of compelling arguments. These "golden ages" of Buddhism appear to follow a general pattern in that they arise every five to seven hundred years and are connected with periods of social, economic, and political changes, especially when the teachings of Buddhism are being transmitted from one culture to another. Buddhism arose with the enlightenment experience of Siddhartha Gautama (ca. sixth century before the common era, hereafter B.C.E.) during a period of religious and social change in Northern India. When King Asoka unified the subcontinent of India (ca. 273 B.C.E.), Buddhism, or at least some of its teachings and moral values, spread through the kingdom, and its missionary role became international. Around the time of the beginning of the common era (C.E.), Buddhism was undergoing its major split with Mahayana (Great Vehicle) Buddhism moving north into central Asia; while Theravada (the Way of the Elders) Buddhism stayed rooted in Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia. By the seventh century C.E., Buddhism was entering Tibet, and had taken root in central Asian, and also in China. It reached its Chinese "golden age" during the T'ang Dynasty (618-906 C.E.). It had spread quickly to Korea and Japan, (from China) and experienced its first Japanese "golden age" during the Thirteenth Century, and its revival, especially of Zen Buddhism, in the Seventeenth Century. Buddhism has taken root in the Pacific basin and America. If the historical pattern continues, then America would appear to be the

home of Buddhism's next "golden age." It has also spread to Europe and Africa. Thus we should consider what Buddhism has to say about morality.

I. The Buddhist world view and morality.

Buddhism is complex in that it spans twenty-six centuries, and has been elaborated on by numerous thinkers and schools of Buddhist thought, in at least seven major languages. I will focus on some of the basic principles common to all schools of Buddhism, e.g. The Three Marks of Existence, the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path with the Middle Way, focusing on those ideas and teachings which pertain to morality. I will, however, draw the trans-moral perspective from Mahayana Buddhism, the Buddhism of Tibet, China, Japan, and the Pacific basin.

A. The Three Marks, and the Middle Way.

Early Buddhism was basically a method of meditation for gaining insight, which if practiced appropriately generates the enlightenment experience of *nirvana* (literally meaning "to blowout or to extinguish")--the cessation of self-centered attachments to our clinging-desires (*tanha*) that perpetuate bad feelings, dis-ease, suffering, or pain (*dukkha*). Dukkha is also known as the first mark of existence. The historical Buddha (literally meaning "the awakened one") refrained from discussing metaphysical matters; he would not discuss such topics as the eternality or destruction of the soul, the world, and god(s). Thus, early Buddhism is a non-theistic religion; it is not a simple atheism or denial of the existence of god(s). It is non-theistic in that the early Buddhists were not concerned to deal with the questions of the nature and existence of divine beings or powers. An analogy offered to justified the sidestepping of these metaphysical questions is that if we were to requested to answer a wounded soldier's questions about his assailant before relieving his suffering, then he would suffer and die with neither an answer nor freedom from the suffering. Likewise to attempt an answer to metaphysical questions will not relieve people from the human condition of dis-ease or suffering (*dukkha*). For early Buddhism metaphysical questions are a distraction from the method of analysis and meditation required to relieve discomfort. Without making an appeal to the existence or non-existence of a divine reality or god, early Buddhism completely avoided the problem of attempting to justify morality by appealing to a divine source. Not only did the Buddhists avoid the philosophical problems, e.g. unwarranted assumptions, and circular reasoning, connected with attempting to justify the divine source of morality, but they also avoid having to refute arguments appealing to a divine source, that is, belief or disbelief in a divine ultimate reality or god do not affect a person's practice of Buddhism. Unlike atheistic moralities, the Buddhists have not bothered to argue against or refute theological and theoretical metaphysical arguments. What is interesting to note is that the Buddhists have sidestepped a number of ethical arguments concerning the source of morality. They have sidestepped the issue by appealing to an "alternative." This "alternative" is characteristic of the Buddhist method of following the Middle Way, that is, the path avoiding extremes. However, this Middle Way is not like the Greek "Golden Mean." It is not merely the middle ground between extremes; rather it is a penetration into the root of the form of life, or the dimension "between" dualistic extremes, between right/wrong, theist/atheist, and so on. It is an alternative perspective in that it recognizes this form of life as empty (*sunyata*)--empty not of moral value, but empty of a substantialistic, unchanging core or essence. In this case it is a Middle Way through theism and atheism or through right and wrong which is found by neither affirming nor denying the existence of a divine reality or absolute truth. Schools of Mahayana Buddhism, especially the Pure Land sects,

became “theistic,” but the Mahayana justification for the use of theism is “*upaya*,” that is skillful means in teaching. In other words the Buddhist will interpret the teaching into a "theistic" or polytheistic model if it will help lead others to enlightenment--the Buddhist liberation of awakening.

Since Buddhism is basically non-theistic (neither affirming nor denying the existence of god), it also avoids the notorious problem of evil. Buddhism is without a theology and a theodicy. For Buddhism, there is no independent ontological evil being (demon or devil) that leads people astray. There is, however, a “badness” to people, a lacking, a wanting, and that is their ignorance (*avidya*), which causes them to perform bad, immoral actions. People lack insight into the nature of reality and themselves. They are ignorant of the “three marks of existence,” namely, that all of this is impermanent (*anicca*); that all things, including oneself, are lacking an essential self-nature (*anatta* or *anatman*--no soul); and that all of this (the ignorant desire-centered life) is *dukkha* (dis-ease, or suffering). In Buddhism, there is no moral scapegoat (i.e. an independent tempter to lead people astray) aside from oneself. The actor as a manifestation of his or her desire-centered cravings is the moral wrongdoer, and the actor as the manifestation of the perfection of wisdom (*prajña*) and compassion (*karuna*) is the performer of morally worthy acts. Because of the *anatta* position, it cannot be said that the actor is motivated by desire-cravings or compassion; there is no essential self or actor beyond the cravings or the compassion--actor and action are one and the same. Thus, Buddhism is primarily a religio-philosophy concerned with affecting a change in people. Buddhism is meant to transform people. As a *way of life*, the Middle Way, or the Way of the Buddha-Dharma (the Truth of Awakening), is concerned with applied philosophy in a most serious manner. Buddhism *is* applied religio-philosophy, and Buddhist morality is naturally and only applied morality--moral theory is not a concern in itself without praxis.

B. The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold path.

The main focus of Buddhist applied ethics is the suffering person who can be freed from the dis-ease of life by following the Four Nobel Truths, namely, 1. All this unenlightened life is *dukkha* (dis-ease, discomfort); 2. the *dukkha* is generated from *tanha* (desire-cravings, “thirst”); 3. the cravings can be stopped; and 4. the way to stop them is to follow the Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path is an expression of the Middle Way, and it is the core teachings of all Buddhist methods for meditation and insight. The Eightfold Path can be divided into three progressive phases: The first two paths fix a person's devotion to practice; the next three paths form the whole of Buddhist morality; and the last three phases yield *samadhi* (enlightenment) and an insight into the trans-moral dimension of life. The first two paths are: Appropriate Views of the Buddhist teachings; and Appropriate Aspiration to achieve enlightenment. The moral development phase consists of Appropriate Speech, Action, and Livelihood. The last phase consists of: Appropriate Effort-in-Practice, Appropriate Mindfulness or Meditation, and Appropriate *samadhi* or trance. Speaking developmentally, the eight paths must be practiced consecutively. Speaking practically, however, they all must be practiced simultaneously. The moral development phase is primarily concerned with bringing a person's thoughts, words, and deeds–a person's actions or *karma*--under control in order to develop the physical and psychological discipline needed to achieve Appropriate Meditation. The final phase is not separate from the other phases; it consummates the others.

The moral development phase forms the core of the lay Buddhist's religious practice. It directs control over one's actions. Appropriate Speech teaches a person to refrain from gossip, from harming others with words, from lying, and from speaking too quickly. Appropriate Livelihood draws a person's attention to the means of earning a living: Does your work harm others; does it involve stealing, dishonesty, or exploitation? Appropriate Action directs attention toward behavior, and here we are given a list of ten precepts, the ten *ciksas*: 1) *ahimsa*, or not killing living beings and by extension not interfering with them; 2) taking nothing that is not given; 3) keep matrimonial sanctity; 4) do not lie; 5) do not slander; 6) do not insult; 7) do not chatter; 8) do not be greedy; 9) bear no malice; and 10) harbor no skepticism. Followers of the Mahayana in their more argumentative days criticized the Theravada traditions for falling prey to externalism and formalism in that they did not practice these precepts on a deeper spiritual level, being aware of their own subjective motives for morality.[1] For the Mahayana philosophers, practitioners of Buddhism do not merely follow these precepts for their own attainment of enlightenment; rather they exercise them according to the cultural and environmental context in order to assist in the enlightenment of others. This is the Bodhisattva's project. Bodhisattvas are people who postpone their own enlightenment, or full entry into *nirvana* in order to assist all sentient beings in attaining *nirvana*. The Bodhisattva uses *upaya* (skillful means in teaching to assist others). This *upaya* requires a command of the situation. In a sense Mahayana Buddhist morality is contextualistic. D.T. Suzuki notes this deeper spiritual basis in the following description of Buddhist *ahimsa*:[2]

> The Bodhisattva . . . does not wish to be bound within the narrow circle of moral restriction [i.e. formalism]. Aiming at an universal emancipation of mankind, he even ventures to violate the ten *ciksas* if necessary. The first *ciksas*, for instance, forbids the killing of any living being; but the Bodhisattva does not hesitate to go to war, in case the cause he espouses is right and beneficent to humanity at large.

This is to say that formal rules cannot be blindly followed. The context and results must be considered. Will the actions help other attain enlightenment? The Mahayana schools also reinterpreted the Noble Eightfold Path, and presented a system of six perfections. The first moral perfection is donation, charity or gift giving. The second is *sila*, following the moral precepts. The third is patience. The fourth is vigor in practice. The fifth is concentration or meditation, and the sixth is wisdom (*prajña*). Like the Eightfold Path, the six perfections develop a person's self-control and self-reliance.

The first three perfections are basically moral concerns. Again the approach is to develop control of psychological and physical processes, especially those which influence others. The six phases are called “perfections” (*prajña paramita*, i.e. “the wisdom that has gone beyond”--beyond dichotomous thinking) because they must be performed with a consummate Buddhist

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1. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), pp. 70-71, n 3.

2. *Ibid*., p. 71.

attitude of non-attachment, especially non-attachment to dualistic thinking. For example, in practicing charity the practitioner must hold an attitude of non-attachment to any notion that there is an essential or substantial gift giver; that there is any essential receiver of the gift, and that there is any substantial gift given. There is no giver, nothing given, and no receiver, and yet there is an act of charity being performed. All six phases must be practiced with this threefold purification or emptying process. Likewise, actions of moral worth must be performed without attachments to the actor, the action performed, and those people who are benefited.

The second phase, the perfection of moral precepts, is at the heart of the Five Precepts or vows of a Buddhist, namely, 1) *ahimsa*, no killing; 2) no stealing; 3) no lying; 4) no adultery; and 5) not imbibing in intoxicating drinks. The first precept is an ancient Indian injunction not only against taking life, but also against harming or even interfering with another's *karma*. It is not based on a transcendent, higher value, on an abstract principle of "sanctity" or the "oneness of life."[3] It is based on a person's living experience of the love of one's own life and freedom. Edward Conze provides a description of the Buddhist formulation of *ahimsa* by citing the following discussion of the Buddha:[4]

> 'My thought has wandered through the world in all directions; yet I have not met with anything that was dearer (to anyone) than himself. Since to others, to each one for himself, their self is dear; therefore let him, who desires his own advantage not harm another.'

This attitude assumes that a person can and does experience a commonality with all other living creatures. The Buddha was not proposing egoism. "Nor is *ahimsa* a universal principle in the sense that anyone would be expected to be able to live without doing some harm to others."[5] It is not a formal, abstract intellectual construct; rather *ahimsa* is an embodied, practiced and lived life-affirmative attitude or form of life. Examples in Mahayana literature abound, attempting to capture the *ahimsa* attitude of reverence for life, e.g., fishing a fly out of a tea cup before it drowns; or not draining the swamps in order to save fish and dragons; or stealing the temple savings to buy food for the hungry.

The philosophical application of *ahimsa* is worth noting, for it has moral implications. Because *ahimsa* not only prohibits killing, but also entails reducing one's negative influence on others as well, that is Buddhists are reluctant to interfere with the course of another's *karma*, the Buddhist is not concerned with debate in the sense of attempting to "convert" an opponent. In other words, philosophically speaking, the application of *ahimsa* to philosophy itself yields intellectual peacefulness.[6] Conze cites the Buddha's own description of this state of

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3. Edward Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1967), p. 212.

4. *Ibid*., p. 212.

5. *Ibid*., p. 212.

6. *Ibid*., p. 213.

consciousness: "I do not fight with the world, but the world fights with me; for one who knows about Dharma never fights with the world."[7] That is, a person does not strive to force others into Buddhism, nor to struggle about anything. The objective is to relieve suffering whatever the philosophical theory may look like. Furthermore, the Buddhists are first to accept that even the Buddhist approach is limited. The teachings are likened to a raft–when you reach the "other shore," you do not shoulder the raft, but leave it at the riverbank–Buddhism too is limited, and must be left behind at some point. Although Buddhists developed this attitude of non-attachment and applied it to their own religio-philosophical system, nevertheless, the cultural practice in India for hundreds of years was open, public philosophical debate. When the Buddhists failed to adequately respond to the Vedanta philosophers, it blended with various Hindu schools.

Psychologically, the *ahimsa* attitude would reduce, if not eliminate, the "aggressive belligerence," and "argumentative cantankerousness" that many discussions end up in.[8] In recognizing a limitation to all positions, even their own, the Buddhists are pointing out a basic weakness with any two-value, or binary value system, e.g. a belief system which sees the world dualisticly in terms of true/false, right/wrong, good/bad, moral/immoral, like Zoroastrianism, Manicheanism, fundamentalist Christianity, and so on. Again the Buddhist seeks the "alternative," the Middle Way to avoid dualistic extremes. Applying the *ahimsa* attitude to morality develops a trans-moral perspective. The two-value moral attitude is limited to a judgment of condoning morally worthy acts and admonishing unworthy acts. In a sense, all morality involves some moralizing, passing judgment on others, appraising their actions' moral worth. The *ahimsa* attitude would want to avoid such imposing of value judgments on others because this would be interfering with another's karmic course. Thus, we have seen that morality is not the highest good for the Buddhists, but that it serves as a discontinuous phase in the practice of meditation and insight, leading to enlightenment or *nirvana*. The moral posture or attitude is a phase in the process of attaining enlightenment. However, enlightenment, especially for the Mahayana tradition, is not a stagnant state or stage separate from worldly social existence. In other words, the wisdom (*prajña*) gained in enlightenment simultaneously arises with compassion (*karuna*) which directs us to assist others in attaining enlightenment–wisdom and compassion are co-terminus. In a sense, morality is "gone beyond" or transcended in that it is a phase toward enlightenment. But such a view itself is dualistic, i.e. morality vs. the amorality of enlightenment. After attaining enlightenment, it is realized that the process is the goal, the means is the ends, enlightenment is the practice of compassion–morality. However, the very practice of Buddhist morality itself demands a trans-moral attitude in that *ahimsa* is embodied in not interfering in the course of another's *karma* by passing moral judgment on them.

II. Buddhist trans-morality.

The Buddhist trans-moral perspective has been explicated by Abe Masao.[9] Before

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7. *Ibid*., p. 213.

8. *Ibid*., p. 214. Conze caricaturizes Western philosophy in this manner; his position is extreme.

9. Masao Abe, "Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata," in John B. Cobb, Jr., and Christopher Ives, eds. 1990. *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, pp 3-65. The essay also appears in Christopher Ives, ed. 1995. *Divine*

elaborating on his discussion, I should clarify the meaning of the prefix "trans" as I intend to use it in this context. For Buddhism the transcendent is *not* beyond or outside of this world, that is, it is not transcendent in the sense that the Judaic-Christian God is transcendent, nor is it a Kantian-like transcendentalism. The trans-moral perspective of Buddhism is not *outside* of or beyond the moral dimension of human life--it is not a higher realm or reality. "Trans" here is similar to the German "*über*" which is not only a "going beyond" but also carries the connotation of "going through," "going under," and "penetrating into and through." The trans-moral dimension is a full penetration into the depths of the moral dimension. Morality collapses, for the Buddhist because of the vicious cycle perpetuated by its two-value structure--the judgment of right versus wrong. When the moral dimension has been carried to its conclusion, and social justice has been met, the Buddhist, then, seeks to move into and through the moral dimension to a deeper religio-philosophical perspective. The trans-moral perspective requires a "leap," an existential leap which acknowledges the limits of social justice and attempts to reconcile and reintegrate the "accused" or "wrong doer" with the community (*sanga*). This reconciliation is brought about by recognizing the collapse of the moral judgment. For the Buddhist looking at human action from the ultimate dimension of emptiness (*sunyata*), all action is empty, i.e. without an eternal self-nature. There are no eternal moral or eternal immoral acts. Ultimately, human action is neither moral nor immoral. There is no continuous development from the moral to the trans-moral perspective; rather it requires a radical break with the moral dimension--a leap into and through the depths of human action such a leap is realized in a person's enlightenment experience of clinging-desire (*tanha*) as the motivator of human action (*karma*). The trans-moral perspective is for the most part implicit in Theravada Buddhism. The exception to this generalization is the Buddha's teaching story of the good prince who repays the evil tyrant's hatred with non-hatred makes the trans-moral perspective explicit in the early teachings.[10] The Mahayana traditions place greater emphasis on the trans-moral perspective. The trans-moral perspective is generated out of a fundamental problematic of Buddhism. Buddhism does not face the problems of justifying a divine reality, or how evil came to be, or the divine source of morality. Buddhism has to resolve the problem of *avidya* (ignorance), or the problem of generating bad-karma (that is, actions that condition people to further suffering) in the face of the universal existence of Dharma (Buddhist Truth). This problem or paradox is displayed in the dying words of the Buddha. Tradition has it that on his death bed, the Buddha preached:

> I am now grown old, my journey is drawing to a close, I am turning eighty years of age. Therefore . . . be ye lamps unto yourselves. Rely on yourselves. Hold fast to the truth as a lamp. Seek liberation alone in the truth (*Dharma*). (*Nirvana Sutra*)

Here we see a paradox developing between "being a lamp unto yourself" and seeking "salvation alone in the truth." Or to put it more bluntly: How can the Dharma be universal in the face of all

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Emptiness and Historical Fullness: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation with Masao Abe, Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press International. A shorter version of this paper appeared with the same title but with different content in Roger Corless and Paul Knitter, ed. 1990. *Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity Essays and Explorations*, Paulist Press.

10. See E.A. Burtt, 1982. *The Teaching of The Compassionate Buddha*, New York: A Mentor Book, section 4) "How the Buddha met a Schism among His Disciples," pp. 39-42.

the human ignorance (*avidya*) and suffering (*dukkha*)? And the abstract distinction between universal *Dharma* and particular *dharmas* does not dissolve the paradox. In Mahayana Buddhism the paradox is clearly stated when the Mahayanists contend that "All have the Buddha-nature," and yet it is clear that all are not enlightened, but they are suffering. Following Abe's coinage the Buddhists are in need of a Dharmadicy, i.e. a justification or at the very least an explanation of the universal Dharma or Buddha-nature in the face of rampant *avidya*. Instead of a "problem of evil," the Buddhists have a "problem of suffering." The problem of suffering is intimately connected to the problem of karma. The term "karma" denotes the conditioning consequences of actions in which a person's thoughts, words and deeds influence future actions both collectively and personally. This "conditioning of karma" is not, however, a deterministic fatalism; it is organic. The "law of karma" operates on a stimulus-response model rather than a cause-effect paradigm, and it always functions with an element of free choice--the actor chooses certain behaviors, e.g. eating certain foods, etc., and those actions in turn condition the actor, e.g. the foods alter psycho-physical states, moods, and so on. Thus, the problem of suffering, which arises out of karma, comes from within ourselves; it originates from within us. In a sense we are our own problem. Ignorance (*avidya*) is the very root of our karma. This cycle is perpetuated by clinging-desire for life, the will-to-be-and-have (*tanha*). The Buddhists' moral acts are based on free choice, and they condition (karma) the actor. The problem is that these moral acts take place due to *tanha* (clinging-desire). This problem is similar to the Kantian problem of moral acts having to be completely free of any inclinations or self-interests. However, there are important differences between the two positions, namely that, Kant held that moral acts, at least in theory, could be preformed without inclinations or self-interests; whereas the Buddhists see morality and moral actions as part of the problem of ignorance and suffering. What the Buddhists are saying is that on the social-moral level, we are acting out of ignorance (*avidya*). Our moral judgments, and moral actions, the whole moral dimension and evaluation of right/wrong, good/bad are rooted in the depths of human life, which is *avidya*. Both good and bad actions arise out of *avidya*. Moreover the very moral worth of Buddhism itself is seen as being lodged in the realm of suffering and ignorance if it is practiced with the attitude that Buddhism is "good" at the cost of something else being "bad." Passing judgment of good or bad is part of the moral problem; it is part of the problem of antagonism, of accusing and blaming others of bearing grudges, and harboring malice. These ideas generate a mind set which is willing to violate the equal love of life, the *ahimsa* attitude, and thereby violate another being. The Buddhist resolution of this problem, as it has been proposed by Masao Abe, requires people to put themselves at the heart of the moral dilemma.[11] This attitude also requires people to realize that their conditioning actions (karma) are not only personal but also collective.[12] That is, we all equally share in the responsibility of each and everyone else's karma. In other words we are *not* afforded the right to take the stance of an objective judge--we are at once the assailant, victim, and judge. We recognize a basic homogeneity of being human, our collective *karma*, our fundamental ignorance, and our universal enlightenment, i.e. freedom from these bonds.

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11. Masao Abe, "Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata," pp. 47 & 51.

12. *Ibid*., p. 51-52. See John Hick, 1983. *Philosophy of Religion*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., p. 142.

The Buddhist trans-moral perspective is grounded in the realization that social moral judgments have their limitations. Moral and legal judgments may assist in giving people a sense of social justice of setting a standard of what is wrong, or what is right, but they do not contribute to a deeper solidarity of humanity. Thus, the Buddhists seek a trans-moral perspective. Abe outlines the development of this unique trans-moral view by discussing three ontological perspectives. Abe contends that there are basically three different dimensions or view points from which people can discuss the world and human issues, but ". . . all issues are properly and legitimately understood *ultimately from the vantage point of the third dimension*:

1) a nonhuman, natural dimension represented by pure natural science.

2) a transnatural human dimension represented by individual morality and, collective social and historical ethics.

3) a transhuman fundamental dimension represented by religious faith or awakening."[13]

It is from this third vantage point that we grasp the need for the trans-moral perspective. Abe applies his analysis to the Nazi Holocaust, but we might also consider the atomic bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, or a partite racism in South Africa, and America, or child abuse anywhere. The first response to such moral atrocities is to "get outside" of them, to objectify and conceptualize them to either look for "scientific" explanations for why people behave that way or give a social historical scenario, like "I wasn't born yet" or "that's occurring on the other side of the world" or "what can I really do about it?" that separates us from the deemed immoral event and makes it easy for us to criticize and condemn it as diabolical. However, such an "outside," "external" approach is unrealistic and as Abe says ". . . entirely wrong."[14] From the third dimension, to which collective karma belongs, I am not free from responsibility for these inhumanities, e.g. the Holocaust, bombings, racism, abuse, and so on. I must come to accept that the inhumanity is a problem of my own karma. As Abe put it:[15]

> It is indeed the problem of my own karma, not in terms of my individual karma in the narrow sense, but in terms of collective karma in that the Holocaust is *ultimately* rooted in the fundamental ignorance (*avidya*) and the endless blind thirst to live inherent in human existence in which I am also deeply involved through my own individual karma. I am sharing the blame of the Holocaust because at the depth of my existence I am participating in the fundamental ignorance with the overt assailants in the Holocaust.

No one is in a choice position to say that she or he would not have directly participated in such inhumane practices. If we can acknowledge the interrelatedness of social life, we cannot avoid our indirect participation in inhumane acts. The need for a trans-moral perspective arises out of this deep understanding of responsibility.

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13. Masao Abe, "Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata," p. 46.

14. *Ibid*., p. 50.

15. *Ibid*., p. 50-51.

Social justice and retribution are met on the second level where psychological, social, and moral judgments are exercised. The deeper religio-philosophical position of the third dimension leads us to a trans-moral practice that strengthens the solidarity of humanity. Moreover, this third dimension of religious awakening is not the same as the Judaic-Christian-Muslim concept of the trans-human dimension of the loving and just God. Abe distinguishes them in the following:[16]

> Instead, what I am saying in terms of the religious dimension signifies the boundless openness or emptiness that is neither God, human, or nature, and, in which all things, including the divine, the human and the natural, are all interrelated with and interpenetrated by each other. Accordingly, even such an atrocious event such as the Holocaust in Auschwitz, which is relatively unrelated to me, must be grasped as a matter of my own responsibility in terms of sympathetic and collective karma that reverberates endlessly and is unfathomably deep.

The more fundamental vantage point of religious awakening allows people to come to terms with or to cope with inhuman events like the holocaust, i.e. by realizing our responsibility for the inhumane acts, we are in a position to properly cope with it.[17]

The trans-moral perspective is not a nihilism nor a pessimism because it is not practiced before a person performs the moral act, that is a person does not start off with the trans-moral view and say: "Well it does not matter what I do, we are all one!" No! A person starts off practicing morality; as we saw above, the Buddhists have many moral practices. But after the immoral act has been performed the problem remains "how are we to cope with it." Then, the trans-moral perspective is helpful. It brings to an end the cycle of retribution, judgment-passing and counter-judgment. Abe brings out this problem in the following:[18]

> . . . justice is a double-edge sword. On the one hand, it sharply judges which is right and which is wrong. On the other hand, the judgment based on justice will naturally cause the counter-judgment as a reaction from the side thus judged. Accordingly, we may fall into endless conflict and struggle between judge and judged. All judgment, "just" or otherwise, may perpetuate another karma. Instead, the standpoint of wisdom and compassion, which is realized through the realization of collective karma and the realization of the nonsubstantiality of everything in the universe, in my view, can provide a more proper basis to cope with the Holocaust without getting involved in an endless conflict. In this regard, a key point lies in recognizing that although the Holocaust was indeed a brutal, atrocious historical evil, we should not substantialize and cling to it as a fixed separate entity unrelated to the rest of the vast and endless network of human

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16. *Ibid*., pp. 51.

17. *Ibid*., p. 51.

18. *Ibid*., p. 51-52.

> history. That is to say, we should realize the relationality and nonsubstantiality or the lack of self-being of that event.

Abe goes on to say:[19]

> While in a human, moral dimension The Holocaust should be condemned as an unpardonable, absolute evil from the ultimate religious point of view, even it should not be taken as an absolute but a relative evil.

The Buddhist trans-moral perspective does have something to offer to applied morality. The trans-moral perspective should be practiced after social justice has been met. After the requirements of social justice, then people must realize their own responsibility for that moral problem. After the moral judgment has been passed and the requirements for social justice served, the trans-moral perspective is used not only to cope with the results, but also to reconcile the differences between the judge and the judged. If we do not allow for the reconciliation of the judgment and the ill feelings of the judged, then the karmic cycle of perpetuating the judgment will never stop. Under these conditions, the problem of morality is a psychological one in that we cling to the vanity of our own self-righteousness, and so we perpetuate a vicious cycle of judgment and counter-judgment. The Buddhist trans-moral perspective is used as a reminder not to cling to the immoral event, or the judgment. It provides a means for breaking the cycle of judgments in order to reintegrate the accused, the accuser, the culprit, the victim, and the judge.

The whole of the trans-moral perspective was nicely and succinctly stated by the Ch'an/Zen master Seng-ts'an in the opening lines of his *Record of the Truthful Heart-mind* (*Hsin-hsin-ming*):

> The great way (*tao*) is not difficult, only avoid choosing. If you want to get the plain truth, be not concerned with right and wrong. The conflict between right and wrong is the sickness of the mind.

The major difference, then, between Buddhist ethics and Euro-American ethics, in general, is that some Euro-American philosophies base ethics on “social justice” or on deterring immorality; whereas the Buddhist recognizes a limitation and collapse of the quest for social justice and deterrence in that they perpetuate a cycle of judgment and counter-judgment. Thus, the Buddhists establish their ethics on wisdom (*prajña*) and compassion (*karuna*). Wisdom gives people insight into the collapse of the moral dimension, and compassion allows people to seek full reconciliation and integration with the other.

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19. *Ibid*., p. 53.