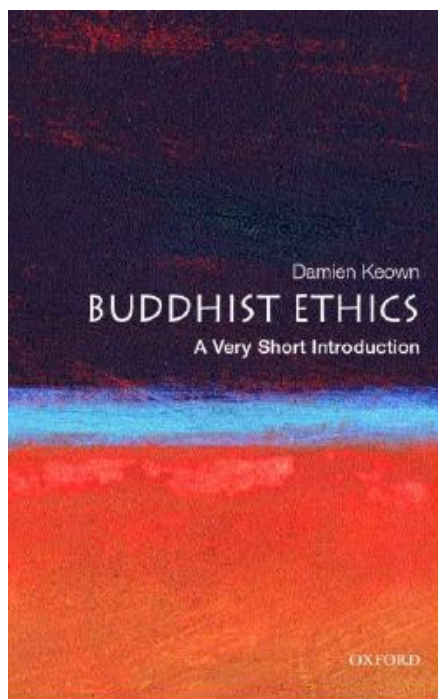




Buddhist Ethics: A Very Short Introduction

Damien Keown

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The latter half of the twentieth century witnessed a growing interest in Buddhism, and it continues to capture the imagination of many in the West who see it as either an alternative or a supplement to their own religious beliefs. Numerous introductory books have appeared in recent years to cater for this growing interest, but almost none devotes attention to the specifically ethical dimension of the tradition. For complex cultural and historical reasons, ethics has not received as much attention in traditional Buddhist thought as it has in the West, and publications on the subject are few and far between. Here, Damien Keown, author of *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*, illustrates how Buddhism might approach a range of fascinating moral issues ranging from abortion and suicide to cloning. Readership: Students and general readers with an interest in Buddhism, ethics, or comparative religion. Anyone seeking a clear and straightforward answer to the question 'What is the Buddhist view on X?', or who read and enjoyed Keown's VSI to Buddhism.

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Trung Rwo says

Cu?n sách nh? c?a ?H Oxford ?em t?i nh?ng d?n lu?n c? b?n nh?t v? các v?n ?? ??o ??c gây tranh cãi d??i quan ?i?m c?a Ph?t Giáo, cung c?p nh?ng cái nhìn khá toàn di?n. Do là bản v? ??o ??c, nên có l? khó có m?t câu tr? l?i rành m?ch ??n gi?n cho các v?n ?? nh? ?n chay, môi tr??ng, tình d?c, chi?n tranh, phá thai, t? t? và nhân b?n vô tính mà cu?n sách ?? c?p.

Tuy v?y, d??i cách vi?t không thiên v?, ?em t?i c? pro l?n con c?a t?ng v?n ??, cùng s? h? tr? c?a nhi?u ngu?n t? li?u uy tín, cu?n sách r?t thích h?p cho nh?ng ai mu?n tìm hi?u v? Ph?t Giáo, c?ng nh? ?? chính nh?ng Ph?t t? hi?u h?n v? b?n ch?t th?t s? c?a tôn giáo c?a mình.

Lauren says

What does Buddhism say about animal welfare? suicide? homosexuality?

As it turns out, it's pretty complicated - of course it is, it's ethics!- and not universal across Buddhist traditions. From some previous readings, I knew some basics of Buddhist views on sexuality, marriage, celibacy, and feminism, but this book gets a bit deeper (although one criticism - likely due to the "very short" nature in the title - is that so many examples seem cherry-picked to prove the thesis, where I am certain that there is much more to the story).

The chapter that stood out for me was the one on suicide and euthanasia. The indelible 1960s image of the Vietnamese monks on fire leads the chapter, framing this self-immolation as an ancient practice. While several modern Buddhist countries have ritual suicide or 'voluntary death' traditions, e.g. *seppuku* in Japan, the book argues that this practice came into regional Buddhism through indigenous culture. Euthanasia is also a complicated issue, as monks and nuns were traditionally caretakers for the dying, and there are several accounts of euthanasia using the central precept of compassion.

3/5 stars - some interesting things covered, even though it did seem "cherry-picked" to fit in as much as it could in less than 200 pages.

Ngh?a Nguy?n says

A short introduction to Buddhism.

Norbert Barth says

For academic courses it is the perfect short introduction to buddhist ethics.

Michael says

I enjoy the *A Very Short Introduction* series. I've read a bunch of them. I got this one for free somehow on line and read it today. I admit that I skimmed a little bit in parts that didn't interest me.

Buddhism is both simple and profound. You can learn the basics in 15 minutes, then spend the rest of your life trying to apply them to your life. I would not characterize Buddhism as being a religion per se, although there are certainly Buddhists who do worship Buddha as a god. Pretty much, Buddhism is about your mind. Learn to live with your mind, understand your mind, train your mind, and everything else will be better. It's hard to argue with. No gods, no supernatural. Just you and...you.

In the overwhelming majority of examples, Buddhism is a belief system, or a philosophy, that teaches compassion, self-discipline, non-violence, and generosity. There are four Noble truths, eight paths toward reaching a higher state of being, and three ways to do it. So that's like 15 things to know. Maybe 19. You can write it on an index card, then use the next 40 years of your life trying to make it all work.

So, Buddhist ethics? Care. Pay attention. Help. Control yourself. Go do that tomorrow for 24 hours then report back to me how you did.

Bojan Tunguz says

This is a very useful introductory book for anyone who is interested in Buddhist ethics, its principles and sources, and the answers it gives to some of the most pressing ethical questions of today. The first couple of chapters are dedicated to the historical origins and basic principles of Buddhist ethics. The bulk of the book, however, is aimed at someone who is already familiar with Western ethical traditions, and tries to show how the Buddhist teachings relate to those. In particular, the questions of animal and environmental rights, sexuality, war and terrorism, suicide and euthanasia, and cloning each get a separate chapter. In these chapters the naive impression of Buddhism as a very laid-back and permissive ethical tradition is challenged, and the author shows that the basic answers to those ethical dilemmas in Buddhism are not that far away from similar answers given in the Judeo-Christian ethics.

Overall, this is a very enlightening and informative reading. I highly recommend it.

John Eliade says

Read most of Damien Keown's second VSI Buddhist book while I was in Bhutan researching "Buddhist Social Theory" at the Royal Thimphu College. Keown's work is very interesting and enlightening. Like the VSI series as a whole, it presents great launching points to begin to seek out answers for other parts of an incredibly complicated subject. This book loses two stars primarily because Keown, though he does an awesome job presenting eastern textual sources, still tries to fit an eastern peg into a western hole, which is an incredibly hard thing to do (and it should at least be commended that he did so in a balanced, interesting, and fair way).

It's mostly his discussion on metaethics that can get confusing, hence the problem. Metaethics is a purely

western subject which can confuse eastern-based readers. In Buddhist Social Theory, this chapter was extremely difficult for my Bhutanese classmates to wrap their heads around, and even for me it was difficult to truly understand the point of a discussion on metaethics and how it applies to Buddhism which has little to no distinction or history of a difference between "morality" and "ethics." (Indeed, here in Korea they teach a class that students have interpreted as both "Morals" and "Ethics" when I consult the dictionary. I gather this is a similar thing across Asia, and Keown makes this known in his short book). My suggestion would have been for Keown to put that chapter at the end and discuss the difficulty of applying western conceptions of ethics onto a complex philosophical network of systems like Buddhism. That said, good read. Make sure you read his first VSI on Buddhism, or perhaps Walpola Rahula's "What the Buddha Taught" first.

Frank Spencer says

Worth reading, as all very short introductions are. Tells as much about general ethics as it does about Buddhist ethics. chapters about animals/environment, cloning, sexuality, war/terrorism, suicide/euthanasia, and abortion

Nick Imrie says

The biggest fact I've taken away from Damien Keown is that Buddhism is a lot more conservative than we realise in the West. Because Buddhism came to us via 60s hippies, it has a reputation as being an anything-goes, left-wing religion, which isn't really the case.

For example, Buddhist attitudes about sex are pretty much the same as Christian (which gets villified for being an prudish, sex-negative religion). In both religions, celibacy is the best state of being, and if you can't stay celibate then you should marry. Sex acts that aren't reproductive are pretty much verboten, so Buddhism has similar attitudes to homosexuality as Christianity.

With regards to abortion, Buddhism is, if anything, stricter than Christianity. Christianity, at least, doesn't say much specifically about when or how the soul enters the body. But Buddhist texts are quite explicit that the soul enters the body at the moment of conception, so there can't really be any doubt that abortion is murder. The enforcement and application of that kind of rule isn't so clear though. Most monks seem to be happy to leave it as a matter for secular authorities, and there's a fierce dispute in Japan, about the appropriateness of religious services for the souls of the aborted, which is a new practise adapted from services for miscarriage.

As in his previous VSI book about Buddhism, Keown is writing for the Western audience and trying to highlight how our instinctive patterns of thinking about rights, ethics, and religion don't really map onto Eastern ways of thinking. He makes some interesting speculations about whether the difference is caused by the difference in origin. Western philosophy arose in turbulent Greek democracies, while Buddhist ethics arose in strict monarchies.

The chapters focusing on individual ethical conundrums was a good way to do it in a very short introduction, I can only imagine that an attempt at a comprehensive comparison of how Buddhist ethics are reasoned out, and all the subjects they touch on, would be massive. I wasn't sure about the topic of cloning though. Most religions have very little to say about cloning, because it couldn't even be imagined by early man, and the things that people say about it are often daft. But the chapter on suicide, including the protest suicides in Vietnam, or the Japanese ritual seppuku, was very interesting and demonstrate neatly how different strands of Buddhism are influenced by local traditions and religions. Keown does a good job of making clear that

there is no one Buddhism. It's a vast collect of different philosophies all springly from the same source. While at the same time he shows how there are general trends that bring all these Buddhisms together. Skillfully, he does this with constantly interrupting himself to remind you #notallbuddhists.

Mckinley says

I found this book's premise odd. It starts with a brief survey short chapter on Buddhist moral teachings. Chapter two is a discussion of western ethical systems with a caveat that eastern perspectives don't fit in any of those models and that Buddhist teachings vary widely, the author then superimposes a western look at very specific topics: animals and environment, sexuality, war and terrorism, abortion, suicide and euthanasia, ending with cloning.

I'm not sure who the intended audience is. I didn't find the topical chapters helpful and felt that sects of Buddhism were cherry picked to fit the topic. I wonder if a 'compare and contract' wouldn't have worked better or even leaving out the western perspective. Forcing the Buddhist Dharma into a western lens in this book was like forcing a square peg into a round hole where both the peg and hole are deprecated.

Camie says

This is a very good introduction.

Ahmad Sharabiani says

Buddhist Ethics: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions #130), Damien Keown

The latter half of the twentieth century witnessed a growing interest in Buddhism, and it continues to capture the imagination of many in the West who see it as either an alternative or a supplement to their own religious beliefs.

Nancy Perez Segura says

This book introduces some interesting arguments regarding contemporary ethical issues, based on various Buddhist schools. However, it remains largely hypothetical since ethics are a feature of Western philosophy, and are rarely discussed in Buddhist texts.

Kathleen O'Neal says

While this book is interesting, it is also highly speculative. Instead of applying abstract Buddhist philosophy to various ethical issues, I would have preferred an examination of the way Buddhists today understand their beliefs as impacting their ethical decisions as well as treatment of these issues historically.

Nick says

Its a weirdly specific book to have a very short introduction. Ethics in the western conception didn't really exist in premodern Buddhism. A lot of this book is the product of Buddhists taking influence from Western ethics, or of Westerners interpreting Buddhism through the lens of enlightenment values, and Christian/humanist altruism. The whole notion that altruism, compassion, detachment, etc. are good because they lead to enlightenment is absent from much of this. Also tantra is mentioned, but not examined. Since classical Buddhism doesn't comment on very many specific moral issues, abstract and somewhat empty signifiers like "compassion" have to be interpreted, and then applied to moral problems.

Anyway, here is a funny quote from the chapter on cloning:

"...The belief in karma introduces many conundrums and complexities of this kind, since both karma and DNA may be thought to account for how people come to be born with specific physical and mental characteristics. Which is correct: Buddhism or science? Other puzzling questions also arise, such as 'Is it possible to clone a Buddha?', and 'Is there a Buddha gene?'. For the remainder of the chapter, I will explore some of these intriguing questions.

When considering the possibility of cloning a Buddha, the starting point of our speculations must be whether or not the Buddha had a normal physical human body or whether in some way he transcended the conventional laws of nature, including those of genetics..."
