**Other-Power**

Why self-mastery is self-defeating

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[SUMMER 2014](https://tricycle.org/magazine-issue/summer-2014/)

The logic of morality is often based on a wish, an assumption, or an aspiration toward self-mastery in service of a spiritual or worldly goal. Buddhists in the West, for instance, often present morality as the necessary basis for meditation, as a means of gaining a personal stability that allows one to practice beneficially. Another kind of moral logic is based on calculation. This might manifest as fear of retribution, whether in terms of karma or as sin against divine law, or, conversely, as hope for a reward. Even secular morality often has this attitude: if I am good to others when they need help, then I’m creating social capital for when I need help. Modern Western Buddhists often include in this kind of logic of morality a calculation about gaining happiness: if I am good to others, I create the conditions for my own mental well-being.

[Pureland Buddhism](https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/foundations-of-pure-land/) has a different starting point. Pureland moral logic starts with the recognition that self-mastery sets the self against the self and thereby undermines the very thing it is attempting to do. Pureland instead aims to undermine the calculation involved in trying to master oneself. It does this by directing us to be grateful for the support of others for whatever good we are able to do. Our meritorious actions are only possible because of countless others who conspire unknowingly to guide us, help us, and create the conditions in which our typically confused and ambiguous efforts to do good don’t backfire on us. Pureland’s faith in other-power and [*nembutsu*](https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/foundations-of-pure-land-1/) (keeping Buddha in mind) lays a basis for a radically different approach to spiritual practice than what many meditators bring to it. Let us, therefore, consider the possibility, whether or not one is a Pureland Buddhist, that Pureland ideas can reorient and enrich how we understand morality, resting it on a foundation that does not set the self against itself and that starts not from how we imagine we’d like to be but from how we actually are.

At the core of morality is morale; a person in good morale is less likely to act in an unprincipled manner. Morale is essentially a matter of faith, which is the mainspring of motivation. People do things that contribute to what they have faith in, be it a goal, an ideal, certain values, an institution, or some other base. Obviously, faith is not always positive. No doubt the Gestapo had faith in the supremacy of the Aryan race, for instance. Or as Dale Carnegie points out in the original self-help book *How to Make Friends and Influence People*, even Al Capone regarded himself as a good man who was simply implementing the values he believed in. This is all in line with basic Buddhist thinking that wickedness is mainly a matter of error. Acts that are *akushala* (mentally unskillful or unwholesome) rather than *kushala*(wholesome or skillful), to use the Indian terminology, are basically mistakes flowing from wrong belief rather than sins or disobedience to an overruling deity.

The Pali Buddhist texts contain repeated descriptions of sila, samadhi, and [prajna.](https://tricycle.org/magazine/prajna/) The moral guidelines (*shila*) precede descriptions of meditation (*samadhi*) that in turn precede descriptions of wisdom (*prajna*). It is common, therefore, to understand that morality is a foundation for meditation and that meditation is a foundation for wisdom. It is, however, also possible to read the causal relationship in the reverse direction, seeing morality as the surface level, dependent upon a rightly ordered mind, which in turn depends upon wisdom.

Morality, then, is an outcome or consequence of a well-ordered mind, and such a mind is well-ordered because there is correct understanding of the true situation. It is not so much that morality leads to meditation and meditation to wisdom as that wisdom naturally leads to right-mindedness and that this, in turn, leads to the kind of behavior that even the uninitiated recognize as moral.

If wisdom is at the core of the Buddhist understanding of morality, what can we say about wisdom itself? In Buddhism, wisdom is closely related, on the one hand, to foresight and, on the other, to faith. (Foresight is, in fact, one implication of the word *prajna*.) Buddhas see the long term, which obviously has a good deal to do with morality. Immoral acts arise from unskillful intentions based on the *kleshas* (mental hindrances) of greed, hatred, and ignorance. Often, the harm brought by immoral acts comes only in the long run; many immoral acts have a short-term payoff. If they didn’t, no one would bother with them. Understanding the long-term consequences of our acts is a case of right orientation of mind leading naturally to rightly ordered behavior. As it says in the [*Dhammapada*](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/dhp/index.html) regarding our actions, “Mind is first. Mind made are they. If a person acts with a right mind, happiness clings to them like a shadow.” Faith and foresight go together, because to act on foresight is to act in faith. The Buddha prescribes a life of good faith.

Conceit says, “I can do this; I am a special case; I will not reap the consequences that others reap.” Wisdom says, “I cannot do this by my own power.”

The Buddhist notion of foresight is closely tied to the teaching of dependent origination, that everything arises in dependence on multiple causes and conditions. Things become possible only when the necessary conditions are in place, and right-mindedness and wisdom are necessary conditions for right behavior. The question is, therefore, how to understand this wisdom and right-mindedness. In East Asia, dependent origination underwent two distinctive and contrasting developments. One, deriving from the idealism of Yogacara philosophy, was the downplaying of the element of temporality. This ultimately led to the ideas about nonduality, interbeing, and non-arising that modern Western students of Mahayana are generally familiar with.

For East Asian Buddhist practitioners, however, it was the second development that had more impact. This was the transformation of dependent origination into other-power, a natural development from the Buddha’s first two teachings.

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The Buddha’s first teaching was on the eightfold path and the four noble truths, which can be described as essentially a distillation of dependent origination. His second teaching was on non-self, within which we find the repeating refrain “this is not me, this is not mine, this is not myself.” If forces are at work in our lives that are not oneself, then they are other.

Over time, this led to a Buddhist approach that was based on a principle quite different from the idea of deliberately pursuing spiritual achievement. In this approach, the major forces at work were taken to be non-self, or what we moderns might call unconscious. This is completely in accord with the actual experience of anyone who tries to keep a New Year’s resolution. One makes a conscious resolve . . . and then something else happens. Positive psychology adherents would say that one did not try hard enough. Followers of Pureland Buddhism would say, however, that one is not capable of achieving one’s salvation by one’s own conscious effort. In fact, it is the very realization that one is so incapable that leads to the transformation that constitutes real Buddhist wisdom: namely, the awakening to non-self.

Let us consider another example. It is notoriously difficult to give up smoking. Doing so requires persistence and, from a self-power perspective, one can say that what is needed is strong willpower. What actually motivates a person, however, is foresight. It is generally only when a person becomes strongly aware of the future consequences that he does something about the habit. Often this happens too late. If a person does not stop smoking until he has had one lung surgically removed, then we can readily say that he should have stopped earlier. Why didn’t he, and why can he do so now? One might say that it is because his fear is now strengthening his willpower. But what usually happens is actually the reverse: the evidence of surgery has brought home to the person the fact that he is mortal and that he cannot, by the power of self alone, defy natural processes. It is the realization that natural processes are stronger that paradoxically permits the person to do what he could not do before when his self felt more powerful. This is not a case of self-assertion but of self-diminishment; not one of achievement, but of submission.

Moral resolve is like this. A noble person does not do good because of willpower. She does it through a combination of, on the one hand, modesty about self, and, on the other hand, faith in a higher purpose, a higher meaning, in powers more potent than self-will. Such a person is not moral through gritted teeth. She is at ease in goodness.

Buddhism revolves around the idea of refuge. One takes refuge not from a position of strength but from a position that acknowledges weakness. Right-mindedness is self-diminishment plus gratitude for higher guidance and assistance. For a Buddhist, the source of guidance and assistance is the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha. Since the dharma is the teaching of Buddha and the sangha is the community of Buddha, the core of refuge is the Buddha himself.

Other-power thus came to mean allowing Buddha to work in, on, and for us by reducing our self-estimation, willfulness, ambition, and conceit. The core attitudes here are gratitude and assurance: gratitude for the awakened one who “has-come-to-us” (Japanese, *Nyorai*; Sanskrit, *Tathagata*), and assurance that comes from confidence in the power and process that result from our taking refuge therein. From such gratitude the traditional virtues such as generosity, energy, patience, balance, foresight, and morality flow naturally without special effort. From such assurance flows a confidence that takes away the need to grasp at short-term personal gain or be ever vigilant in self-defense. In this way, right-mindedness naturally gives rise to right behavior. It is not a case of achieving morality by will-power as a necessary basis for mental cultivation—such a method is self-defeating and ignores the inherent weakness of the individual. In sutra after sutra, the Buddha tries to combat the folly of conceit. Conceit says, “I can do this; I am a special case; I will not reap the consequences that others reap.” Wisdom says, “I cannot do this by my own power; I am not a special case; I, like all others, am subject to suffering and impermanence; all dharma is non-self.” For one who has such faith, morality is not rule-keeping, it is naturalness.

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