

Warnings from the Past, Hope for the Future: The Ethical-Philosophical Unity of Buddhist Traditions

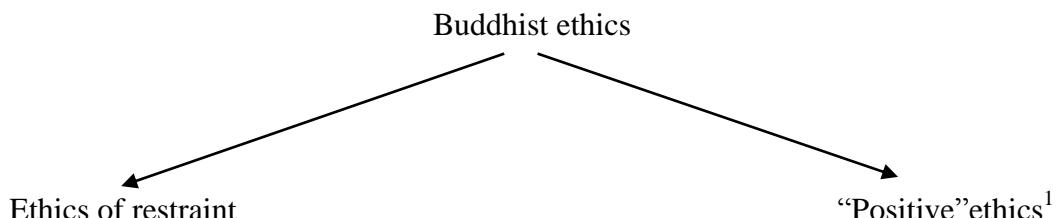
Justin S. Whitaker, M.A.

Ph.D. Candidate, Goldsmiths, University of London

There are many principles that one could say lie at the core of Buddhist thought throughout history: not-self, impermanence, and dependent-origination to name a few. Yet none is as far reaching or significant for the history of Buddhism or its contemporary and future practitioners as ethics. In this paper I will propose that ethics, in the form of both scrutiny of behavior and abstract thinking about behavior (descriptive and normative ethics), can stand as a common unifying factor for Buddhists around the world today.

For some people educated in Buddhism this may seem like an impossible task. After all, Buddhists from different schools all undertake different standards of behavior, from the long *Pātimokkha* vows of Theravādin monks to the pithy Bodhisattva vows of many Mahāyāna traditions that allow seemingly any behavior whatsoever in the pursuit of freeing sentient beings from suffering. Some Buddhists take up robe and bowl and live secluded lives in forests or monasteries, and others take wives or consorts and travel the villages and caves of the Himalayas, Wutai Shan, and other famed mountains. And that is just the monastics. The laity around the world have such varying degrees of observance of ethical rules that it may seem impossible to find common ground. And yet to many, especially those who know very little about Buddhism, it often does look “all the same.” Buddhism as a whole is often thought to be a peaceful and benevolent religion. We have many outstanding Buddhist leaders to thank for this: H.H. the Dalai Lama, Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh, and Sulak Sivaraksa to name just a few. These great leaders, along with monastics and laity of all traditions, do exhibit some fundamentally similar traits.

In this paper I will trace out what I think are the two streams of Buddhist ethics: one which focuses on ethics as rules such as the five precepts (*panca-sīla*) or Monastic Discipline (*Vinaya*), and another stream based in the four Divine Abidings, with emphasis on loving-kindness and compassion.



The flow of those streams will be traced in the widest possible trajectory, touching on their place in Early Buddhism by way of the Pāli Canon, Tibetan Buddhism with a discussion of the important Samye Debate, Japanese Zen in the life and teachings of Dōgen, and finally a mention of some issues facing Buddhism today

¹ A visual representation of splitting Buddhist ethics into two component parts.

around the world. And as I, a scholar of Buddhist ethics and Western Buddhism coming from the “Wild West” of the United States, am now writing for a conference in Thailand, sure to be read by scholars and venerable sangha members who are renowned for their preservation of early Buddhism, we may imagine these two great streams of Buddhist ethics having come full circle.

Buddhism as a religion is often lauded as being one of the most ethical in nature.² And so there is perhaps a certain irony in the fact that ethics itself is a rather elusive category within the writings passed down by Buddhist traditions. While all traditions have extensive writings on moral behavior, as well as a great deal of work in what we would today call moral psychology, nowhere is there developed a thorough and sustained analysis of moral behavior. This has left many wondering what kind of ethics or ethical system Buddhism might have. Contemporary thinkers such as Damien Keown (2001) and Charles Goodman (2009) are working to change this by suggesting that Buddhist ethics are Aristotelian or Consequentialist in nature. The work of these scholars and others has helped bring attention to a topic which is fundamental to Buddhism, yet often misunderstood in the contemporary world. As Keown correctly states, “Buddhism is a response to what is fundamentally an ethical problem – the perennial problem of the best kind of life for man to lead” (p.1, 2001).

The most obvious place to look for ethics in early Buddhism is *sīla*, which Rhys Davids and Steede defined as “1. nature, character, habit, behaviour; 2. moral practice, good character, Buddhist ethics, code of morality.” The *pañcasīla* they further describe as “a sort of preliminary condition to any higher development after conforming to the teaching of the Buddha (*saraṇayagamana*) and as such often mentioned when a new follower is ‘officially’ installed...”³ Perhaps a favorite discussion of *sīla* comes in the Vissudhimagga, where Buddhaghosa suggests that the etymology of the term derives from aspects of *sira* (head) and *sīta* (cool),⁴ drawing at least the modern reader to think of the moral person as one who keeps a cool head. Such a metaphor would not have been lost on the Buddha’s or Buddhaghosa’s contemporaries, either, as the image of fire as central to the problem of the human condition and *nibbāna* (extinguishing) as *the* solution, run throughout the Buddha’s teachings.⁵

The other stream of early Buddhist ethical thought is what Richard Gombrich labels “Buddha’s Positive Values.” Focusing on *mettā*, Gombrich holds that the *brahmavihāras* taught by the Buddha have the power to bring about liberation in the practitioner. As he puts it, “the Buddha saw love and compassion as means to salvation – in his terms, to the attainment of nirvana” (2009, p.76). This is an argument Gombrich has made in previous works as well,⁶ based on close analysis of early Buddhist texts as well as Upanishads (namely the Bṛhad-āraṇyaka and Chāndogya) that the Buddha was likely familiar with and responding to. I will not retrace his argument here, but instead direct you to the Tevijja Sutta (DN 13), where the notion that *mettā* and the other three Divine Abidings can lead one to union with *Brahman* is introduced. And I would suggest, as Gombrich does, that the Buddha is appropriating the notion of abiding with *Brahman* from his religious context and (perhaps not too) subtly changing the meaning to fit his unique ends, just as he did

² Keown, 2001, p. 1.

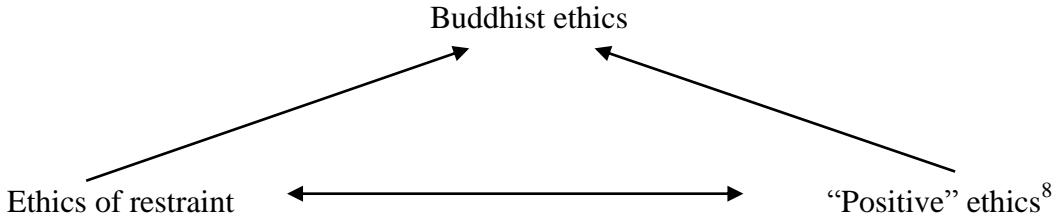
³ Rhys Davids & Steede, 1921, p. 713.

⁴ Chapter 1.17, p.11 in Āṇamoli.

⁵ Cf. Gombrich 2009, chapter 8, “Everything Is Burning: The Centrality of Fire in the Buddha’s Thought.”

⁶ Cf. *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings* (1996) pp. 58-64 and *Kindness and Compassion as Means to Nirvana* (1998).

when he slipped in the audacious comment, “it is intention, oh monks, that I call karma” (AN 6.63).⁷



These two streams of Buddhist ethics, though analyzed into separate parts, mutually reinforce one another to form the basis the practitioner’s life and indeed the whole of Buddhism. As Peter Harvey states:

In terms of the division of the Path into virtue, meditation and wisdom (always given in this order), the Path can be seen to develop as follows. Influenced and inspired by good examples, a person’s first commitment will be to develop virtue, a generous and self-controlled way of life for the benefit of self and others. To motivate this, he or she will have some degree of preliminary wisdom, in the form of some acquaintance with the Buddhist outlook and an aspiration to apply it, expressed as *saddhā*, trustful confidence or faith. With virtue as the indispensable basis for further progress, some meditation may be attempted. With appropriate application, this will lead to the mind becoming calmer, stronger and clearer. This will allow experiential understanding of the *Dhamma* to develop, so that deeper wisdom arises. From this, virtue is strengthened, becoming a basis for further progress in meditation and wisdom. Accordingly, it is said that wisdom and virtue support each other like two hands washing each other (D. I.124).⁹

Damien Keown, also emphasizing the central role of ethics in Buddhist soteriology, holds that, “The goal, then, is not simply the attainment of an intellectual vision of reality or the mastery of doctrine (although it includes these things) but primarily the *living* of a full and rounded human life” (2001, p.1). Just as the ethics of Buddhism has two branches, the constraints and the positive virtues, the fulfillment of the Buddhist ethical life takes place in two spheres, the social and the universal, or Dharmic. The enlightened master may be judged (either correctly or not) as insufficient or immoral by social standards, but cannot be spoken of *at all* in the universal sphere. As the Buddha stated, “The Buddha-sphere of the Buddhas is an unthinkable that is not to be thought [or perhaps “speculated”] about, that would bring madness and vexation to anyone who thought about it” (AN 4.77, cf SN 44.2).¹⁰

It is with growing emphasis on this unthinkable Buddha-sphere (in the form of concepts such as *śūnyatā*, *tathāgatagarbha*, sudden enlightenment, and others) as well as movement into new cultures that Mahāyāna Buddhists re-opened the traditional

⁷ *Cetanā aham, bhikkhave, kammam vicati.*

⁸ A visual representation of the two aspects of Buddhist ethics interrelating and forming the whole of Buddhist ethics.

⁹ 2000, p.41.

¹⁰ *Buddhānam bhikkhave buddhavisayo acinteyyo na cintetabbo, yam cintento ummādassa vighātassa bhāgī assa.*

thought on ethics. Yet despite certain changes in direction in early Mahāyāna away from mainstream Buddhism, Vasubandhu, the highly influential author of the Abhidharma-kośa (and its commentary, the Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya) still found a similar etymological understanding of *sīla* as would be later expressed by Buddhaghosa (cited above). The root *sī*, he explains, means “refreshing” and “morality is pleasant; because of that the body does not burn” (Keown, 2001, p.49).

To suggest further directions of discussion in the realm of Mahāyāna Buddhism, which is immense in both socio-cultural and textual terms, I wish to introduce just two important historical cases. The first is the Samye (Bsam yas) Debate, said to have taken place in Tibet around 797 C.E (Dalton, 2004). While the historical facts of the debate, and even whether such a debate even actually occurred, are disputed, it nonetheless later served as a pivotal moment in Tibetan Buddhist understanding and practice. The second case is the development of Dōgen’s complex relationship with the precepts. Both cases demonstrate that as Buddhism enters each new culture, it is taken up by a variety of interests and thus interpreted in multiple, often conflicting, ways. I will conclude by suggesting that many of the same things are happening today as Buddhism integrates into Western societies.

The Samye Debate stands out in Tibetan cultural memory as the decisive moment in which the nation, through its king Trisong Detsen (Khri srong lde btsan, r. 755 – 797), chose India Mahāyāna Buddhism, represented by Kamalaśīla, over Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism, represented by Huashang Moheyen. According to tradition:

The most important matters of doctrine in which Hva-shang differed from his Indian rival were (1) the attainment of Buddhahood does not take place slowly as the result of a protracted and onerous moral struggle for understanding, but suddenly and intuitively--an idea which is characteristic of the Chinese Ch'an and of the Japanese Zen sect which derives from it; (2) meritorious actions whether of word or deed, and, indeed, any spiritual striving, is evil; on the contrary one must relieve one's mind of all deliberate thought and abandon oneself to complete inactivity (Roccaslavo, p.508).

He thus denied the efficacy of both the constraints and the positive virtues of Buddhism. Kamalaśīla ridiculed Huashang's beliefs as destructive to Buddhism itself, instead advocating a gradual path based on the three-fold trainings in ethics, meditation, and wisdom. Winning the debate, Kamalaśīla revived the Buddha's ideal of the path to awakening and the necessity of ethics as its foundation. However, the tension between the gradual path and Mahāyāna concepts such as *śūnyatā*, *tathāgatagarbha* and others (mentioned above) continued to play itself out in Tibetan Buddhism, and the possible influence of Ch'an Buddhism on the Tibetan practices of rDzogs chen and Mahamudra is still a matter of scholarly discussion. The other ethically questionable side of Tibetan Buddhism in terms of potentially antinomian practices is tantra and the whole of the Vajrayāna, addressed by Gombrich as follows:

I think we can safely say that for about a thousand years Buddhism in India was antithetical to tantra...Firstly, Buddhism cultivated self-control in general, and in particular meditative states in which self-awareness is gradually enhanced to the point of total self-knowledge... Secondly, Buddhism *per se*, being unconcerned with

worldly matters, did not recognize brahminical concepts of impurity... Thirdly, Buddhism was never antinomian and under no circumstances could normal morality be transcended... Buddhist tantra is paradoxical Buddhism and has turned the tradition on its head in a way that deserves the label of syncretism. But it has been recolonized by Buddhist ethics: its purposes are never immoral, but the allegorical dramas enacted in Buddhist ritual and visualized by its practitioners always witness the triumph of good over evil, and are interpreted as leading to Enlightenment. In other words, what makes the Vajrayāna Buddhist is its ethics (1996, p.163-4).

These claims are supported by (and likely at least in part based on) anthropological field-work amongst Vajrayāna practitioners. Gellner cites Nepali scholar Asha Kaji Vajracharya stating that “In the Tantras, if one follows the literal meaning of the Sanskrit text and ignores the ‘intentional’ language not only will one’s rite be unsuccessful, afterwards one will go mad” (1992, p. 298). Gellner, based on years living with Vajrayāna Buddhists in Nepal, agrees that “This represents the normal view of the learned minority acquainted with the Tantric scriptures. (All others are simply unaware of their antinomian contents.)” (*ibid.*). If this understanding can work for tantric Buddhism, or Vajrayāna, it should also hold for Zen, often also thought of as an antinomian Buddhist tradition. The emphases on ‘just sitting’ and koans that cannot be solved by the conceptual mind lead many to believe that the entire tradition somehow goes beyond ethics or pays moral behavior no particular attention. However, this is very much mistaken, as a comparison of the life and works of the best known Zen master, Dōgen (1200 – 1253, founder of the Sōtō Zen school), and one of his contemporaries in Japan, Nōnin (founder of the short-lived Daruma Zen school), will show.

As I am not a Zen scholar, I rely primarily on a recent work by Steven Heine entitled “Dōgen and the Precepts Revisited.”¹¹ Heine begins the article with the quote “When doing zazen, what precepts are not upheld, and what merits are not produced?” (Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō zuimonki*). Part of the brilliance of the statement, of course, is that it can be taken two ways. One may interpret it as Dōgen upholding the importance of the precepts by claiming that they are inherent in his most important Zen practice, zazen. On the other hand one could read this line as a blithe dismissal of precepts as a category of Buddhist thought or practice because, after all, they’re already taken care of when one does the all-important zazen practice. So is Dōgen extolling the precepts or dismissing them?

It helps to place Dōgen’s statement in context with another early Japanese Buddhist teacher, Nōnin. Founding the Daruma school in the 1180s, Nōnin stepped dangerously into antinomian territory with such statements as, “There are no practices [to follow], no cultivation [to engage in]. From the outset there are no mental defilements; from the beginning we are enlightened.”¹² On the other hand, Dōgen’s concern seems not to have been with the precepts *per se*, but with the relation between the social and universal spheres of Buddhist ethical life, again influenced by Mahāyāna’s philosophical interest in concepts that could represent the deepest nature

¹¹ In *Buddhist Studies from India to America: Essays in Honor of Charles S. Prebish*, pp.9-27.

¹² In Heine, p.15, where he notes that it is from “an unpublished paper by Ishii, 1992, who points out that Nōnin’s attitude was influenced by early Ch’an but resembles Southern school utterances such as “Mind itself is Buddha” attributed to Ma-tsu.” The ties with Chinese Buddhism and its many varieties are too complex for the current essay but certainly deserve closer attention.

of conceivable reality. Heine states, “From the standpoint of absolute or ultimate truth, there is a full internalization of the precepts, which altogether vitiates the need for external guidelines expressed in the *Prātimokṣa* or allows them to be seen merely as a kind of metaphorical reflection of what is essentially an interior state of mind” (p.16). It was *through* and *in* zazen that Dōgen felt the precepts would be fully internalized, thus suggesting a more favorable explanation to his statement above.

Heine provides the following chart comparing the priorities of Dōgen and Eisai, the founder of Japan’s Rinzai (from the Chinese Linji) School of Buddhism (p.18).

<i>Eisai</i>	<i>Dōgen</i>
Precepts	Zazen
<i>Shingi</i>	<i>Shingi</i>
Zazen	Precepts
[Mikkyō	Kōan sermons]
based on Tendai	based on Ch'an

Figure 1.2 Comparison of Eisai’s and Dōgen’s religious priorities.

As we can see, the placement of Zazen and Precepts are reversed in the two, but both place great importance on the *Shingi*, or monastic conduct code, comparable to the traditional Vinaya rules. The fourth item on the list notes the central priority of each in terms of practice, Mikkyō referring to esoteric teachings first established in Japan by Saichō (767 – 822). Nōnin, in contrast, did not give consistent recommendations in any of these areas, in fact suggesting the ability to abandon precepts, zazen, and Vinaya (without supplementing with *Shingi* or a similar code). His sect was proscribed by the government not long after its formation, in 1194, and disappeared completely in 1241 when the last of its monks joined Dōgen’s Sōtō Zen sect (Heine, p.15). Eschewing all clear moral direction in favor of the nonduality of the ultimate sphere of Buddhist ethics no doubt helped bring about Daruma Zen’s downfall. In addition to his lack of clarity in rules of conduct, Nōnin also had problems that were structural or political in nature. As Heine reports, “Since Nōnin did not travel to China and therefore did not receive direct Dharma transmission from a Ch’an master, the Buddhist institutional hierarchy never considered his self-enlightenment-based credentials acceptable” (p.17). Furthermore, his choice of texts was unpopular, along with his allegiance to the Northern Bodhidharma-based School of Ch’an (while the Southern School was more accepted in Japan at the time), both also contributed to his inability to secure widespread support for his new school. Each of these represents a failure to recognize and adhere to the social sphere of Buddhist ethics. Dōgen, on the other hand, grappled consistently with the tensions between (in Mahāyāna terms) “[Theravada]” precepts and Mahāyāna Bodhisattva vows, as well as importance of strict monastic observances:

“Of the ninety or more chapters of the *Shōbō genzō*,” Martin Collcutt notes, “nearly a third are devoted wholly or in part to the detailed regulation of such everyday monastic activities as meditation, prayer, study, sleep, dress, the preparation and taking of meals, and bathing

and purification.”¹³ Therefore, the relatively lesser weight ascribed to the precepts by Dōgen does not indicate a lack of strictness or a tendency toward Nōnin-esque antinomianism (Heine, p.23).

This isn’t to suggest that Buddhism rises and falls on public opinion. Indeed, just as Buddhism has changed with each new culture it has entered, it has also changed each culture. Today we confront the arrival of Buddhism to the West and the important role it can play in the maturation of global ethical sensibilities. However, to do this successfully will require that Buddhists take up renewed diligence in not only following the moral rules of their respective tradition, but also developing the positive virtues. I turn once again to Richard Gombrich, who addressed the International Conference on Dissemination of Theravāda Buddhism in the 21st Century, held in Salaya, Bangkok, Sep/Oct 2010. In that address, he urged Theravādins to reexamine internal principles such as the inequality of women in the sangha, as well as inter-Buddhist issues such as disrespect for Mahāyāna Buddhists for behavior such as eating after midday, and finally inter-religious and inter-ethnic concerns such as the monastic support for the war in Sri Lanka.¹⁴ Of course these may appear to be bold demands coming from a person outside of the Buddhist tradition, but they rest upon the keen observations of a scholar with over 40 years of experience in the field, and they also reveal how Westerners more broadly are beginning to see Buddhism. In 1998, Brian (Daizen) Victoria published *Zen at War*, and three years later the (hitherto silent), “leaders of Myoshin-ji, the headquarters temple of one of Japan’s main Zen sects, issued a public apology for its complicity in Japanese militarism...” (Keown, 2005, p.75). In 2003 Victoria continued with *Zen War Stories*, in which he concluded that, “Japan’s wartime Zen leaders revealed themselves to be *thoroughly and completely morally corrupt*” (*ibid.*, emphasis in the original).

Buddhism in its historically native countries is no longer isolated from the scrutiny and criticism of Western scholars or the Western public. In 2010 the critique of Zen was expanded to the whole of Buddhism with Jerryson and Jurgensmeyer’s book *Buddhist Warfare*, a collection of essays discussing Buddhist connections with violence across traditions, and indeed Buddhism and War has become a topic worthy of entire college courses.¹⁵ At the same time, cases of corruption, sexual and other forms of abuse have reached Western shores.

The still very positive general perception of Buddhism is in danger of becoming increasingly tarnished. This is in large part why I urge a turn to fundamental ethical principles as a foundation for Buddhist traditions. That turn, while respecting social context, must in part be to simple universal Buddhist truths such as the centrality of intention and hence individual moral responsibility. It is in this return to the basics preserved in all traditions that one can hope for meaningful ecumenical discussions, both amongst Buddhist traditions and beyond, on specific elements of the three stages, 1) our current condition, as assessed by different traditions, 2) methods of training, both monastic and lay, and 3) the reality and nature of liberation in this world.¹⁶

It is that “current condition, as assessed by different traditions” that I take to constitute the discussion of ethics. Our textual traditions will play a role in that

¹³ Collcutt, Martin (1981) *Five Mountains: The Rinzai Monastic Institution in Medieval Japan*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p.148.

¹⁴ Gombrich, “Comfort or Challenge?”

¹⁵ I know of at least one, being taught in Spring 2012 at Penn State University (RLST 497D, “Buddhism and Warfare”).

¹⁶ These are based on the three-part scheme of sīla, samādhi, and paññā, but I wish to broaden the categories in order to avoid pulling in cultural or textual baggage which might limit the discussion.

discussion, but so will an opening up to the “global village” that constitutes our lives today. Age old prejudices and accepted inequalities are losing their grip on one society after another. And those whose morality fails to adequately bring the wisdom of tradition and reality of the current world together are likely to be kicked out, as Huashang Moheyen was from Tibet, or simply forgotten, as Nōnin was for much of Japan’s history. Let us hope that none of us, as either scholars or practitioners, suffer such a fate.

References:

- Dalton, J. (2004). BSAM YAS DEBATE. In R. E. Buswell (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Buddhism* (pp. 69-71). New York: Macmillan.
- Gellner, D. (1992). *Monk, Householder, & Tantric Priest*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Gombrich, R. (1996). *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings*. London: The Athlone Press.
- Gombrich, R. (2009). *What the Buddha Thought*. London: Equinox.
- Gombrich, R. (2010). “Comfort or Challenge?” address to the International Conference on Dissemination of Theravāda Buddhism in the 21st Century, Salaya, Bangkok, Sep/Oct 2010. Available online at www.ocbs.org.
- Goodman, C. (2009). *Consequences of Compassion: An Interpretation and Defense of Buddhist Ethics*. New York: Oxford.
- Harvey, P. (2000). *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Heine, S. (2006). Dōgen and the Precepts Revisited. In D. Keown, (ed.), *Buddhist Studies from India to America: Essays in Honor of Charles S. Prebish* (pp.9-27). Oxon: Routledge.
- Keown, D. (2001). *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*. New York: Palgrave.
- Keown, D. (2005). *Buddhist Ethics: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ñāṇamoli, B. (trans.) (2011). *The Path of Purification: Visuddhimagga*, Colombo: Buddhist Publication Society.
- Rhys Davids, T., & Stede, H. (1921). *The Pali-English dictionary*. Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Roccasalvo, J.F. (1980). “The Debate at bSam yas: Religious Contrast and Correspondence” in *Philosophy East and West* vol. 30:4, pp.505-520.
- Thanissaro B. (trans.) (2010). “Anuradha Sutta: To Anuradha” (SN 44.2). Access to Insight, 1 July 2010, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn44/sn44.002.than.html>. Retrieved on 20 October 2011.
- Thanissaro B. (trans.) (2010). “Kathavatthu Sutta: Topics of Conversation (1)” (AN 10.69). Access to Insight, 1 July 2010, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an10/an10.069.than.html>. Retrieved on 20 October 2011.