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Nibbana, Dhamma, and Sinhala Buddhism: A David Little Retrospective

Donald K. Swearer

In addition to David Little's significant contributions to the literature on peace and human rights, at several junctures in his distinguished academic and professional career he engaged topics central to Buddhist ethics. In this chapter I propose to superimpose a trajectory on this engagement that begins with his chapter on Theravada ethics in *Comparative Religious Ethics: A New Method*, which he co-authored with Sumner B. Twiss;¹ his debate with Frank E. Reynolds in *Ethics, Wealth, and Salvation: A Study in Buddhist Social Ethics*;² and his several publications on Buddhism, nationalism, and ethnicity in Sri Lanka.³ I shall argue that Little's account works best when contextualized in terms of Sri Lanka, and is least successful in *Comparative Religious Ethics: A New Method*. At each of the three junctures in this trajectory, Weberian-like perspectives loom large: in broad terms they are the interdependence between belief and behavior; and a typological construction of religious systems of thought and action.

I have chosen these three junctures in Little's work that engage Buddhist ethics, in part because they mark three moments in my personal and academic relationship with him beginning with my review of *Comparative Religious Ethics* in *Religious Studies Review*;⁴ the Harvard-Berkeley-Chicago conferences in comparative religious ethics in which we participated;⁵ and the conferences that we co-led at the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard Divinity School on Religion and Nationalism in 2005, and Visions of Peace and Reconciliation in 2007.⁶

Comparative Religious Ethics: A New Method

The three case studies that Little and Twiss take up in the Application section of *Comparative Religious Ethics: A New Method*—Religion and Morality of the Navajo, the book of Matthew, and Theravada Buddhism—first address the issue of the relationship between moral and religious action guides, and then examine the structure of the practical reasoning or the way in which the tradition justifies action. In the case of Theravada Buddhism they argue that “properly understood, all action-guides have as their object nirvanic attainment.”⁷ Given the preeminence of the basic religious claim, that is, Nibbana/Nirvana as sacred authority, the Theravada practical system must necessarily be a thoroughgoing religious system; and, that as a religious system it ultimately transcends morality follows from the fact that Nibbana obviates the concepts of self and other. All prescribed and proscribed acts are ultimately defined in reference to self-conquest.⁸ Even though Little and Twiss find that Theravada Buddhism encourages the cultivation of attitudes and acts that reflect a regard for the material welfare of others and that a central role is assigned to the virtues of sympathy and generosity, they contend that

there can be no doubt that the content of the action-guides, when systematically analyzed, is, in the last analysis, religious in character. . . . All moral attitudes and acts are consistently modified by a belief in a sacred authority (nirvana) that not only drastically subordinates the material welfare of others in favor of their spiritual enlightenment, but also, and even more importantly, disallows the ultimate reality of selves and others.⁹

The validational patterns—the character of an act, rules, principles of validation, and considerations to persuade—of Theravada practical teaching leads to a similar conclusion. The first, a qualified intrapersonal teleology, aims at the realization of one’s highest happiness, that is, Nibbana, without directly benefiting others; the second, a qualified extrapersonal teleology, aims at the realization of Nibbana for oneself and for all sentient beings; and the third, a pattern of unqualified intrapersonal teleology, aims at maximizing one’s happiness according to the calculus of karmic

consequences. The last pattern is seen as secondary or subsidiary, while the first two contain the premise of a fundamental belief in the ultimate unreality of human persons.

The key concept in the content and structure of Theravada practical teaching is the notion of *dhamma/dharma*, ontologically understood as reducing reality, including human existence, to basic elements or constituents and, hence, the concept of *dhamma* becomes another way of perceiving the “unreality of the concept ‘self,’ by reducing all putative selves to their more basic elementary constituents.”¹⁰ Thus, while there is a moral dimension to the Theravada action guide (value concepts, action-guiding concepts, dispositional concepts), it is provisional and subsidiary, qualified by a belief in a sacred authority, Nibbana, according to which the concept of the self and the other is dissolved.

In addition to the Nibbanic and the Dhammic deconstruction of reality into elements, much is made of the Theravada concept of not-self (*anatta*), especially in regard to Little and Twiss’s assessment of the tradition as a thoroughgoing religious system in which other-regarding concerns are subsidiary and provisional. Morality is by definition interrelational, that is, it involves relations among persons; and one of the special conditions of the legitimacy of a moral action guide is that it is other-regarding.¹¹ Logically, for a religious tradition which has as one of its cardinal teachings the concept of not-self and in which the character of all prescribed and proscribed acts is ultimately deemed in reference to “self-conquest,” a moral action guide, as defined in *Comparative Religious Ethics*, will have a secondary place at best. Furthermore, at the vindication level of the structure of the practical teachings of the Theravada, the “radical depersonalization of humanity” entailed by the analysis of the self into dhammic components re-enforces Little and Twiss’s claim: “In the ultimate sense...discussion of morality is inappropriate because the notion of morality presupposes persons, or at least intentions normally associated with persons, and these are not found in Nirvana.”¹²

In brief, Little and Twiss’s description of religion and morality in Theravada Buddhism utilizes a typological strategy (a transpersonal teleological action guide) in which the major justificatory terms—Nibbana, not-self, and reality/human existence as constituted by evanescent dhammic particulars—at the very least, problematize an ethic of other-regard.

It is perhaps an understatement to say that *Comparative Religious Ethics* raised a storm of controversy, especially among historians of religion who argued that the formal model of appellate reasoning which informed the interpretation of Theravada ethics sacrificed the complexity and historical realities of the Theravada tradition to a logical reductionism determined primarily by Nibbana as the overriding “sacred authority.” Little recalls a contentious incident that took place at the Harvard comparative religious ethics discussions when the late Wilfred Cantwell Smith, then director of the Center of the Study of World Religions, “delivered a furious denunciation of the approach [Twiss] and I took . . . [and argued] that the book represented an enormous setback in the comparative study of religious ethics, bringing to it unwelcome Western analytical techniques whose only effect is to distort severely the materials under consideration.”¹³ Little himself has reevaluated the Little/Twiss approach to *Comparative Religious Ethics* and, “had I [to] do it over again,” he observes, I “would approach the subject quite differently.”¹⁴

Ethics, Wealth, and Salvation: A Study in Buddhist Social Ethics

The lively debate sparked by *Comparative Religious Ethics* in the formative days of the development of the field of comparative religious ethics, was a measure of its significance, especially around issues of theory and history. At the time, Buddhologists *cum* historians of religion, especially Frank E. Reynolds, took aim at two major monographs in the field of comparative religious ethics published in 1978: *Comparative Religious Ethics: A New Method* and Ronald M. Green’s *Religious Reason: The Rational and Moral Basis of Religions*.¹⁵ Reynolds opined that when historians of religion take up the task of comparative religious ethics they place the study of ethics of a religious tradition within the context of a holistic understanding of that tradition including a diversity of texts and ritual practices, and that they “do not become so enmeshed in abstract theoretical discussions that they are distracted from their empirical research.”¹⁶

In his essay in the conference volume, *Ethics, Wealth, and Salvation: A Study of Buddhist Social Ethics*, Reynolds proposes a multivalent interpretation of *dhamma* that challenges Nibbana as the foundational “sacred authority”

for religion and morality in Theravada Buddhism. Furthermore, Reynolds critiques Little's singular interpretation of the concept of *dhamma* as the constitutive elements of reality and human existence that, in conjunction with the concept of not-self, undermine an ethic of other-regard. Reynolds contends that *dhamma*, broadly conceived, is a complex and dynamic reality and, as such, stands as the Theravadin religio-ethical center of gravity and normative truth that establishes *guidelines for all forms of action*. Dhammic norms do, indeed, have soteriological significance in that they express and cultivate non-attachment, however, at the same time adherence to dhammic norms is conducive to the production of goods such as wealth and the general well-being of individuals and communities. Although dhammic norms are the basis of the monastic code of discipline (*vinaya*), they are equally the foundation of lay ethics. Adherence to dhammic norms by rulers is of particular importance for the well-being of the entire community. Righteous kings (*dhammraja*) ensure peace, prosperity, and justice in their realms by embodying a set of ten virtues, the *dasarajadharma*—generosity, high moral character, self-sacrifice, integrity, gentleness, non-indulgence, non-anger, non-oppression, tolerance—and adherence to the *dhamma* is understood in this instance as a universal moral law. "In addition to the dhammic activities of kings," observes Reynolds, "the dhammic actions of other laymen and laywomen are recognized as contributing to social harmony, to a supportive natural environment, and to the economic prosperity that is associated with a properly ordered natural and social world."¹⁷

Little offers three responses to Reynolds. First, Little defends his typological construction of Theravada religion and morality as fundamentally teleological, dominated by the concept of Nibbana. Although Little admits that Reynold's shift from Nibbana to the category of *dhamma* as the over-arching concept informing Theravada religion and morality "suggests a need for some modification and further elaboration and clarification of the Little-Twiss interpretation,"¹⁸ he insists that it does not contradict that interpretation. Although strictly speaking I would agree, Little's characterization of Theravada as a system "according to which dhammic activity, if properly performed leads ultimately to the highest goal of Nibbana and its achievement signifies the condition of complete non-attachment" does not take sufficient account of Reynolds's expansive, multiplex interpretation of *dhamma*. Reynolds intends his shift

from Nibbana to *dhamma* as Theravada's sacred authority to be not merely an "extension" of the concept of "sacred authority," as Little opines, but as a substantive "revision."¹⁹

Second, Little challenges historians of religion like Reynolds to translate their tradition-embedded description into ethical categories amenable to cross-cultural comparison such as the structure of practical justification advocated in *Comparative Religious Ethics: A New Method*. He proposes that an "ethical translation" of historians' "data" into "conventional categories for the study of practical reasoning," makes Theravada reflections on issues such as wealth and poverty more adaptive to cross-cultural comparison and difference; for example, contrasting understandings of distributive justice, or contrasts between the Theravadin and Puritan economic ethic.²⁰ Little's point is perennially relevant, and both provocative and problematic when it comes to comparative work as Jeffrey Stout brilliantly pointed out in his critical review of *Comparative Religious Ethics*.²¹

Third, Little agrees with Reynolds's challenge to ethicists to broaden their scope of investigation to include non-normative texts and doctrines, but, in his consistently gentlemanly manner, he contends that Reynolds's "holism" really does not live up to its billing. He critiques holism for its high level of generality and lack of historical, contextual, and empirical detail that the informed historian of religion might bring to the enterprise of comparative religious ethics. Although Little's teleological-Nibbanic driven model overrides Reynolds's more complex and nuanced interpretation of *dhamma*, his critique of historians of religions' holism for being insufficiently historical is well taken and has served to advance the ongoing comparative religious ethics debates between ethicists and historians of religion. Furthermore, in his work on Sri Lanka, Little moves beyond his Nibbanic preoccupations to become more empirical, contextual, and historical.

Theravada Buddhism and Sri Lanka

In his more recent work on Sri Lanka, one of the countries included in the U.S. Institute of Peace Religion, Nationalism, and Intolerance project, Little moves from the meta-ethical project represented by *Comparative Religious Ethics: A New Method*, and his subsequent dhammic dialogue with history

of religion “holism,” to a specific historical context in which Buddhism has played a significant role in the discourse and practice of chauvinistic Sinhala nationalism. In his *Sri Lanka: The Invention of Enmity* and related essays, Weberian interests are also evident, but now woven into a more historically and contextually complex tapestry.²² Reflecting Weber’s view regarding the close entanglement of religion and ethnicity, Little challenges assessments of the Sinhala-Tamil conflict in Sri Lanka that focus primarily on nationalism, or privilege ethnicity to the near exclusion of religion. He points out that ethnic groups elevate their status above their neighbors by invoking a sacred warrant; hence, “religious shaded ethnic tensions appear to be latent in the very process of ethnic classification.”²³ In support of his view, Little quotes the Sri Lankan historian, K. M. deSilva: “In the Sinhala language, the words for nation, race and people are practically synonymous, and a multiethnic or multicommunal nation or state is incomprehensible to the popular mind. The emphasis on Sri Lanka as the land of the Sinhala Buddhists carried an emotional popular appeal, compared with which the concept of a multiethnic polity was a meaningless abstraction.”²⁴

In the construction of the Buddhist warrant for an ideology of Sinhala nationalism, Little points to the legitimating power of the authoritative Sinhala Buddhist chronicle, the *Mahavamsa*, and its valorization of King Duttagamaani’s defeat of the Tamils, the rise of Sinhala nationalistic sentiment in response to British colonialism, and ever increasing anti-Tamil attitudes and policies after the 1956 election of S. W. R. D. Bandaranike culminating in the internecine armed conflict that began in 1983. Little concludes, “[t]here can be little doubt that religious belief has, for several reasons, functioned in an important way as a warrant for intolerance so far as the Sinhala Buddhists are concerned. There is also evidence, though it is more controversial and perhaps less pronounced, that the same is true for Tamils.”²⁵

Little sees religion as being one of the factors, along with ethnicity, language, cultural habits, and historical dynamics contributing to one group declaring superiority and preeminence over another. He notes that social scientists tend to claim “that nationalist conflicts are either not about ethnicity and religion at all, but rather about economic and political matters, or that they are at bottom more about ethnic than religious issues.”²⁶ In the case of Sri Lanka, however, “it was the religious factor—the sacred legends synthesized by Buddhist monks into the *Mahavamsa* and the other

chronicles—that gave special authority to the Sinhala as a ‘chosen people’ and thereby entitled them . . . to preserve and protect the preeminence of the Sinhala Buddhist tradition in Sri Lankan life.”²⁷

In “Belief, Ethnicity, and Nationalism,” Little frames the Sri Lanka case typologically in terms of two types of modern nationalism: liberal and illiberal, civic versus ethnic, non-aggressive versus aggressive. Citing Weber’s characterization of nationalism as, at bottom, both a homogenizing and a differentiation mode of discourse that drives toward cultural standardization, Sri Lanka exemplifies illiberal, ethnic, aggressive nationalism sanctified by the Buddhist *sangha* (monastic order). Little is not claiming that Buddhist belief, as such, legitimates a virulent, chauvinistic Sinhala nationalism. Indeed, as he points out, the basic tenets and doctrines of Buddhism would not seem to support ethnic favoritism. Such attitudes, rather, resulted from a combination of historical pressures on the Theravada *sangha* in the fifth and sixth centuries CE, and colonial and post-colonial experiences in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including attitudes of racism and anti-Buddhist intolerance fostered by Christian missionaries and British colonial authorities.

In conclusion I choose to highlight one of several issues that Little’s engagement with Theravada Buddhist ethics raises within the on-going debates in the field of comparative religious ethics, namely, the relationship—might we say the dialectical relationship—between theory and history broadly construed. *Comparative Religious Ethics* was criticized for being overly theoretical and insufficiently historical. Stout, for example, observed, “What would a more genuinely historical approach to religion and morality look like? Probably rather like some of the work Little and Twiss find lacking in rigor. What seems like insufficient dedication to rigor on the part of historians may well be an altogether healthy willingness to make contact with all the messy details of historical change.”²⁸ Little acknowledges that he would now approach Theravada ethics quite differently than he did in *Comparative Religious Ethics*. Putting the shoe on the other foot, he criticizes historians of religion for their generalized holism which, he argues, is insufficiently historical. In contrast, Little’s work on Buddhism and nationalism in Sri Lanka is quite attentive to historical detail within the dual typology of liberal and illiberal nationalism: “We must be as attentive to the conditioning effects of politics, economics, historical

accidents and so on, on religion and culture, as we are to the contribution of religion and culture to the formation of nationalism.”²⁹

Finally, of the Weberian perspectives that inform the examples of Little’s work I have cited in this brief chapter, a Nibbanized Theravada that limits an ethic of other-regard, and a politicized Theravada that warrants ethnic nationalism—it is the latter that engages the “complexity and historical realities of the Theravada tradition” and in doing so might be seen as Little’s answer to his critique of holism for not taking sufficient account of changing social, political, and historical contexts.³⁰

NOTES

¹ David Little and Sumner B. Twiss, *Comparative Religious Ethics: A New Method* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

² Russell F. Sizemore and Donald K. Swearer, eds., *Ethics, Wealth, and Salvation: A Study in Buddhist Social Ethics* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1990).

³ David Little, *Sri Lanka: The Invention of Enmity* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1994); David Little, “Belief, Ethnicity, and Nationalism,” in *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 1.2 (Summer 1995): 284–301; David Little, “Religion and Ethnicity in the Sri Lankan Civil War,” in *Creating Peace in Sri Lanka: Civil War and Reconciliation*, ed. Robert I. Rotberg (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), 41–55.

⁴ Donald K. Swearer, “Nirvana, No-Self, and Comparative Religious Ethics,” in *Religious Studies Review* 6.4 (October 1980): 301–6.

⁵ The three conferences led to the publication of Sizemore and Swearer, *Ethics, Wealth, and Salvation: A Study in Buddhist Social Ethics*; John S. Hawley, ed., *Saints and Virtues* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987); Robin W. Lovin and Frank E. Reynolds, eds., *Cosmogony and Ethical Order: New Studies in Comparative Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

⁶ See the conference volume, David Little and Donald K. Swearer, eds., *Religion and Nationalism in Iraq: A Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁷ Little and Twiss, *Comparative Religious Ethics*, 215.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 235.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 246.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 27–29.

¹² *Ibid.*, 247.

¹³ E-mail communication to the author from David Little. November 6, 2009.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Ronald M. Green, *Religious Reason: The Rational and Moral Basis of Religious Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

¹⁶ Sizemore and Swearer, *Ethics, Wealth, and Salvation*, 60.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 82–85.

²¹ Jeffrey Stout, “Weber’s Progeny, Once Removed,” *Religious Studies Review* 6.4 (October 1980): 289–95.

²² Series on Religion, Nationalism, and Intolerance. Washington, D.C. United State Institute of Peace Press; David Little, “Religion and Ethnicity in the Sri Lankan Civil War,” in *Creating Peace in Sri Lanka: Civil War and Reconciliation*, ed., Robert I. Rothberg (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press), 41–55; David Little, “Belief, Ethnicity, and Nationalism,” in *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 1.2 (Summer 1995): 284–301.

²³ Little, “Religion and Ethnicity in Sri Lankan Civil War,” 42.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 42–43.

²⁵ Little, *Sri Lanka: The Invention of Enmity*, 104.

²⁶ Little and Swearer, *Religion and Nationalism in Iraq*, 5.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Stout, “Weber’s Progeny, Once Removed,” 294.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Sizemore and Swearer, *Ethics, Wealth, and Salvation*, 86.