charms to give us absolute protection from the effects of our bad karma, nevertheless defends their efficacy in certain circumstances.[11] The different traditions of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and South-East Asia, in East Asia, and in Tibet have all developed their own distinctive forms of devotional and protective ritual, yet these derive from a common ancient ancestry.

The Buddha of the early texts may be critical, then, of certain kinds of brahmanical ritual, especially those involving the sacrifice of animals; he may also deny that faith and rituals can of themselves bring about the final cessation of suffering. But there is no real evidence in the early texts to suggest a negative attitude to faith and its ritual and devotional expression; indeed we even find the Buddha apparently approving of worship at non-Buddhist shrines.[12] Faith and the activities which express that faith are, in fact, seen as performing a spiritually crucial function: they soothe and settle the mind thereby arousing the confidence to continue the practice of the path. Moreover, the mind that is quietly confident and trustful of the power of the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha is its own protection. Two ancient images for faith are worth noting. Faith is compared to a gem which, when thrown into a stream that has just been stirred up by the passing of an emperor's army, immediately causes the sand, silt, and mud to settle. Or if one were standing at the bank of a river in spate unable to judge whether it might be possible to leap over it and someone should come along and indeed jump across, then there might arise the confidence that it is indeed possible to cross the torrent. So faith has two characteristics: it causes the mind to become settled and composed and it inspires it with the confidence to leap forward.[13] In sum, devotional and ritual practice constitute a preliminary meditation practice, settling and composing the mind in preparation for the higher stages of Buddhist meditative practice.

Good conduct

I have already briefly discussed generosity and good conduct as bases of 'auspicious action' or 'merit' (*puṇya/puñña*) above (see pp. 101–2). In the present context I wish to comment further on the Buddhist understanding of 'good conduct' or 'virtue' (*śīla/sīla*). It is useful here to make a distinction between the good conduct as the refraining from various deeds that are considered unwholesome and harmful to both oneself and others, and the perfected conduct of one who is awakened, such as a buddha or arhat. The ordinary unawakened person sometimes acts in a wholesome, sometimes in an unwholesome manner. The goal of the Buddhist path is to eradicate the unwholesome motivations that cause harmful behaviour. To achieve this the mind needs to be 'trained'. Part of the training involves the undertaking of various precepts, literally principles or bases of training (*śikṣāpada/sikkhāpada*), in order to try to restrain the mind and draw it back from the grosser kinds of unwholesome behaviour. For one who is awakened such precepts are redundant, not because he or she is now permitted these kinds of behaviour, but because conduct is now perfected and the temptation or rather the motivation at the root of such kinds of behaviour has gone. That is, the ordinary unawakened person's actions are sometimes motivated by greed, aversion, and delusion and sometimes by non-attachment, friendliness, and wisdom. Since a buddha or arhat has completely eradicated the defilements and any latent tendency to attachment, aversion, or delusion, he or she acts exclusively from non-attachment, friendliness, and wisdom.

As part of the practice of the path, it is traditional for the lay follower to take on five precepts: to refrain from harming living creatures, taking what is not given, sexual misconduct, false speech, intoxicants that cause heedlessness. On occasion, for limited periods, the committed lay follower may take on eight precepts, while the monk's good conduct is founded on ten basic precepts elaborated in terms of the the 200 plus rules of the *prātimokṣa* (see Chapter 4); much of this elaboration in principle involves distinguishing between serious and less serious breaches of the ten precepts.

The five precepts are for the most part self-explanatory, although there is a certain subtlety in their definition. The first precept is usually taken as specifically referring to killing, although a wider definition is not excluded. The second refers in simple terms to stealing, although once more the wider definition begs the question of what precisely constitutes 'what is not given'. The third precept is traditionally taken as referring to sexual intercourse with partners who are prohibited—in other words, adultery; but again, the precept raises the question of what exactly constitutes sexual misconduct (and even, since a literal translation of the expression might be 'misconduct with regard to sensual desire', questions about more general sensual indulgence). The fourth precept refers specifically to lying but the question of right speech is elaborated upon in Buddhist texts (see below). The fifth precept also has wider implications. Heedlessness is interpreted by Theravādin commentators as the absence of 'mindfulness' (*smṛti/sati*), an important psychological quality. It is not the taking of alcohol or other drugs as such that is problematic, but the state of mind that it generally induces: a lack of mental clarity with an increased tendency to break the other precepts. The fifth precept also highlights once more that what we have to do with here are 'principles of training' and what is of paramount importance in the Buddhist conception of spiritual training is mental clarity: this helps to create the conditions that conduce to seeing the way things truly are. The additional precepts in the lists of eight and ten are similarly principles of training seen as helpful in the cultivation of the path, rather than prohibitions against intrinsically unwholesome ways of conduct.

The kinds of behaviour that the five precepts are intended to prevent one from committing are outlined by the list of ten courses of unwholesome action: harming living creatures, taking what is not given, sexual misconduct, false speech, divisive speech, harsh speech, frivolous speech, covetousness, anger, wrong view (see above, pp. 120–1). In these ten actions—three of body, four of speech, and three of thought—we find speech further elaborated, while the particular emphasis on actions of thought and the mind draws attention once again to the Buddhist focus on karma as essentially a matter of the mind and intention: what is important is one's state of mind, and a moment of intense anger and hatred, even if it does not lead to actual physical violence or verbal abuse, nevertheless constitutes a real 'deed' or karma.

The five precepts and the ten courses of action essentially define for us right speech and action of the eightfold path. What of 'right livelihood', the third item of the eightfold path that bears on good conduct? This is basically understood as making one's living by means that avoid activity infringing the five precepts. Such occupations as that of the soldier, butcher, or trader in alcohol are therefore called into question. Yet in approaching questions of good conduct and the precepts, Buddhist tradition has generally shown an attitude of practicality and flexibility. In order to illustrate this it is worth briefly considering the question of vegetarianism in the light of the first precept.

The ethical ideal that underlies the precepts is considered to be rather exalted, such that only someone very advanced on the path (a stream-attainer, or even a buddha or arhat) could really live up to it. Indeed, good conduct is ultimately understood in Buddhist thought not in terms of adherence to external rules, but as the expression of the perfected motivations of non-attachment, friendliness, and wisdom. Thus the arhat is described as simply being incapable of intentionally acting in a manner that is not in accordance with the precepts and ten courses of wholesome action.[14] In other words, ordinary beings cannot hope to keep the precepts perfectly; rather they abide by the precepts as rules of training in order to curb the grosser forms of bad conduct. At a deeper level there is also perhaps a sense in which no one, not even a buddha, can hope to live in the world and cause absolutely no harm to any living being. That is, it is almost impossible to isolate and disassociate oneself absolutely from activities that indirectly cause harm to living creatures. That this is so is an aspect of the deepest level of the first noble truth: the world, saṃsāra, is by its very nature an imperfect place, a place where suffering is always lurking in one form or another. The question of acting ethically then becomes one of where to draw the line.

In respect of harming living creatures Buddhist thought has generally and in the first place drawn the line at direct and intentional killing. Of course, this does not mean that harm that falls short of killing is ethical, or that by only giving the order to kill one is free of blame. Yet there is no direct prescription against the eating of meat in the earliest Buddhist texts. Buddhist monks and nuns, who are dependent on what is offered to them, are encouraged not to be too fussy and are permitted to accept meat provided it has not been specifically slaughtered to feed them (though certain kinds of flesh such as that of humans, snakes, and horses are never allowable).[15] On the other hand there is also an ancient and widespread Buddhist attitude that regards vegetarianism as the appropriate response to the first precept. Although many Buddhists in traditional Buddhist cultures are not strict vegetarians, eating no meat is respected as furthering the aspiration to live without harming living creatures that underlies the first precept. The Mahāyāna *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* explicitly argues at length against meat-eating, and its outlook has been influential especially in East Asian Buddhism, where vegetarianism has often been the norm for members of the Buddhist monastic community and committed lay followers.[16]

But there is also in the Buddhist attitude to good conduct the suggestion that adherence to 'moral' principles for their own sake may be an expression of rigid views and attachment—'clinging to precepts and vows' (*śīla-vrata-parāmarśa/sīla-bbata-parāmāsa*) —rather than of true compassion. Ultimately Buddhism teaches that the nature of good conduct is subtle and complex—so complex that it precisely cannot be solved by reference to precepts and rules of conduct. It can only be solved by following a path of training that ends in rooting out greed, aversion, and delusion. Ethical precepts are a necessary part of the training that constitutes that path, but attachment to those precepts, like all attachments, must itself be given up.

As with faith, the practice of good conduct is once more orientated towards meditation practice. An important aspect of meditation practice is the stilling and calming of the mind. Apart from the harm they cause to others, and the unpleasant results they will bring upon us through the operation of the law of karma and the process of rebirth, the ten courses of unwholesome action are also seen as damaging to one's own sense of well-being, resulting in feelings of guilt and remorse. At a subtler level they are seen as intrinsically disturbing. Keeping the precepts, on the other hand, frees the mind from guilt and also has a strong protective quality, warding off danger. Thus it is said that the one who abides by the precepts 'experiences a blameless happiness within'.[17] In fact, as expressions of deep faith and trust in the Buddha's teaching, Buddhist devotional and ritual acts (going for refuge, taking the precepts, chanting sūtras, etc.) are generally seen as having a protective quality, keeping the mind free of fear and warding off danger.[18] We have here an understanding that verges on the magical.

The practice of calm meditation

Basic principles of Buddhist meditation

We come now to the subject of meditation and its role in the Buddhist spiritual path. Curiously it is difficult to find a precise equivalent of the term 'meditation' in Buddhist technical terminology. The two principal candidates are *bhāvanā* and *yoga*. The first of these is the older, specifically Buddhist term and means literally 'bringing into being'; it refers to mental or spiritual exercises aimed at developing and cultivating wholesome mental states that conduce to the realization of the Buddhist path. Such exercises may centre on sitting quietly in a cross-legged posture, but should not be reduced to that. The second term means approximately 'effort' or 'work' and relatively early in the history of Indian religion came to refer to specifically spiritual work and techniques. In this sense the term is one of very varied application, there being many different approaches to yoga within Indian tradition from those such as *haṭha-yoga* which focus on the practice of different bodily postures (*āsana*) to those such as Buddhist yoga which focus on contemplative techniques while sitting in some form of the cross-legged posture.

Buddhist tradition comes to consider meditation by way of two different but complementary aspects, namely calm (*śamatha/samatha*) and insight (*vipaśyanā/vipassanā*), which are geared to the cultivation of deep states of concentration (*samādhi*) and