

## Imaginative Moral Development

Nicolas Bommarito<sup>1,2</sup> 

© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2016

All of us, aside from the most devout cynics and amoralists, have to figure out how to become better people. Even though I know a good person will be kind to others, actually being kind – kind to *this person, right now* – can be incredibly difficult. Sometimes even avoiding cruelty can be a tall order. If there is any progress to be made, how are we to understand the process of changing ourselves for the better? This is the central question of moral development.

Though much of our moral development occurs in childhood and many classic works in the area have focused on moral development in this period, it is a lifelong challenge.<sup>1</sup> The task of becoming a better person does not end with puberty; it is one we grapple with day after day for our entire lives. Though moral development in childhood raises particular philosophical issues, my discussion here will apply to moral development at any age.

First, I will challenge what is, at least in some circles, the conventional wisdom about how moral development works. Influenced by Aristotle, many philosophers have understood the task of moral development to be similar developing a skill. On this model, learning to be a good person is like learning to be a good harpist: Just as people get to be a better harpists by sitting down and playing the harp, you get to be a better person by actually doing the things a good person does.

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, see Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Philosophy of Moral Development* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981) and Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982/1993). More recently Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) and Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) have focused on moral development in children.

---

✉ Nicolas Bommarito  
nic.bommarito@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup> New York University, New York, USA

<sup>2</sup> University at Buffalo, Buffalo, USA

Though there is much to be gained by thinking about moral development in this way, it has its limits. When we think of moral development *exclusively* in this way, we ignore many other effective ways of cultivating virtue. If we look outside the Aristotelian tradition to Buddhist thought, we can find a picture of cultivation that is quite different. Though Buddhist thought allows for moral development through active practice, as one might learn to play the harp, it also highlights ways we can develop virtues *without* performing the associated actions. These techniques, involving imagination, pretense, and visualization, suggest a way of approaching moral development that emphasizes how developing moral virtue is *unlike* developing a skill.

I will begin with a description of a common Aristotelian model of moral development, which requires that one perform actions associated with a virtue in order to cultivate it. Next I will describe some of the techniques of moral development found in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist sources that do not fit this model: Methods for cultivating virtue that do not involve performing any of the associated overt actions. Finally, I will argue that such techniques are particularly important because many virtues can be, and sometimes *must* be, cultivated in this way.

## 1 Playing Harps: The Aristotelian Model

Aristotle rightly pointed out that we can't become virtuous simply by listening to lectures and sermons. The information we get from books, essays, and lectures is insufficient because moral development isn't merely an intellectual matter – experience and instruction are also critical.<sup>2</sup> This leads him to liken moral development to development in arts and crafts. In a famous passage, he writes:

The virtues on the other hand we acquire *by first having actually practiced them*, just as we do the arts. We learn an art or craft by doing the things that we shall have to do when we have learnt it: for instance, men become builders by building houses, harpers by playing on the harp. Similarly we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.<sup>3</sup>

On this model, the way to become a morally good person is the same as the way to become a good builder or a good harpist. You become a good builder by actually building things; you get good at playing the harp by actually sitting down with the instrument and practicing. The same is true, according to Aristotle, of becoming virtuous:

It is by taking part in transactions with our fellow-men that some of us become just and others unjust; by acting in dangerous situations and forming a habit of fear or of confidence we become courageous or cowardly.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion of these factors in an Aristotelian context see *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI and Rosalind Hursthouse, "Practical Wisdom: A Mundane Account" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 106 (2006), 285–309.

<sup>3</sup> *NE* 1103a36–1103b2. Emphasis is mine. Quotations from Aristotle are from the Rackham translation.

<sup>4</sup> *NE* 1103b16–20.

Just as you only get to be good at playing the harp *by actually playing the instrument*, you only get to be just by actually doing just actions, courageous by actually standing one's ground in dangerous situations, and so on.

This analogy does not mean that performing the acts associated with a certain virtue is *sufficient* for becoming virtuous. As Aristotle himself notes, actually playing the harp is what makes both good and *bad* harpists (NE 1103b8-9). It's also important to keep in mind that this model does not make being virtuous *simply* a matter of having certain habits of behavior. Aristotle is clear that the continent person is different from the virtuous person (NE 1102b26-8 and 1151b43ff) and that performing a virtuous action is not the same as merely acting in accordance with virtue (NE 1105a33).

Even though being a virtuous person is not simply a matter of acting like one, on this model of moral development, performing the actions associated with virtue is a necessary condition for becoming virtuous. Regularly sitting down and playing the harp might not be enough to make you a good harpist, but you can't become a good harpist without it. So too with moral virtue. Simply giving gifts might not be enough to make someone a generous person; after all, a bitter, selfish, or uncaring person can also go through the motions of gift giving. But the model is clear that we cannot develop generosity without such motions.

Aristotle himself may not have been strongly committed to this model; he did, after all, acknowledge the role of drama in moral development in the *Poetics* and the importance of reading and music in the *Politics* (especially book VIII).<sup>5</sup> Strands in the moral development literature drawing on Aristotle's account in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, however, are more strongly committed to this model. Myles Burnyeat, for example, claims that it is by performing such actions that we develop the emotions, motives, and pleasures that characterize the virtuous person:

The thesis is that we first learn (come to see) what is noble and just *not* by experience of or introduction from a series of instances, nor by intuition (intellectual or perceptual), but by learning to do noble and just things, *by being habituated to noble and just conduct*.<sup>6</sup>

On Burnyeat's understanding, not only is playing the harp necessary for developing as a harpist, we learn what harp playing is all about by actually sitting down and playing the harp. In addition, playing the harp is necessary for developing *enjoyment* of it. Burnyeat again:

There is such a thing as learning to enjoy something (painting, music, skiing, philosophy), and it is not sharply distinct from learning that the thing in question is enjoyable. Once again we need to eliminate the weak sense of *learn*, the sense in which to have learned that skiing is enjoyable is simply to have acquired the information, regardless of personal experience. In the strong

<sup>5</sup> I thank John Hacker-Wright for pointing out these passages to me.

<sup>6</sup> M.F. Burnyeat, "Aristotle on Learning to Be Good" in ed. Amelie Rorty, *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 73. Emphasis is mine.

sense I learn that skiing is enjoyable *only by trying it myself and coming to enjoy it.*<sup>7</sup>

The idea seems to be this: There is a weak sense of learning that skiing is enjoyable that anybody could learn from a lecture. If I've never been skiing and a friend comes back from Colorado and tells me how much fun he had on the slopes, I've learned that skiing is fun. But, according to Burnyeat, I can only learn to appreciate skiing in a stronger, more personal sense by actually doing it. It is by getting out there on the slopes that I come to properly enjoy skiing.

If the analogy holds, the same is true of becoming kind or courageous. It's not merely that I attend a lecture or sermon that reports to me that kindness and courage are good things. I must actually *do* them to fully appreciate their goodness. It is *only* by performing kind or courageous acts that I can become a more kind or courageous person. This is the fundamental claim of the Aristotelian model of moral development: the only way to develop virtue is via actually doing the associated actions for yourself.

Other philosophers have also endorsed this model. Julia Annas, for example, writes: "Aristotle famously notes an important similarity between virtue and skill: both are practical, and so *can be learned only by practice, by actually doing what needs to be done.*"<sup>8</sup> After quoting the earlier passage from Aristotle likening moral development to learning to play the harp, Sarah Broadie writes, "Let us take it that experience bears this out, and also *shows no other more effective method of moral development.*"<sup>9</sup>

And yet, not *everyone's* experience bears out the Aristotelian picture. Stoic and Buddhist philosophers, for example, have long discussed techniques for moral development that do not fit this model. Here I will draw on moral development texts from the Buddhist tradition in India and Tibet to argue that there *are* other very effective methods of developing virtue that do not involve performing virtue's associated actions. In particular, I will focus on the role of mental simulation: methods for developing virtue via particular imaginative and visualization techniques.

## 2 Imaginative Moral Development

To be clear, Buddhist thinkers often advocate the same method of learning through doing as the Aristotelian model. Consider the Tibetan thinker Tsongkhapa's advice, written in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, for helping others to become more generous:

If you have some belongings, go to the homes of stingy people who have no experience of giving gifts even a few times. Joyfully and in a relaxed manner

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 70. Again, the emphasis is mine.

<sup>8</sup> Annas, op. cit., p. 16. Emphasis added.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 104. Emphasis added. For a more recent statement, see Marta Jimenez, "Aristotle on Becoming Virtuous by Doing Virtuous Actions" *Phronesis* 61 (2016), 3–32.

direct them as follows: “I really do own a vast amount of things. I want some people to ask me for things so that I can complete the perfection of generosity, so if you meet some people who ask you for something, rather than turning them away without giving them anything, take from my wealth and give it to them. Or else lead them to me, and then rejoice in my generosity.” This does not destroy their wealth, and they do this with pleasure. In this way they plant the seed for the removal of their stinginess. By gradually getting used to doing this they will give away a little of their own wealth and they will reduce their attachment a little.<sup>10</sup>

Here you can help others to become more generous by creating a situation where they can act generously with no cost to themselves and thereby come to appreciate its goodness. Generosity is developed, as on the Aristotelian model, by actually performing generous actions. Just as taking a friend along on a ski trip can help them to enjoy skiing by actually doing it, giving a friend a low stakes chance to give to those in need can help them develop a taste for giving.

Though this is accepted as *a* way of developing virtue, it is by no means the only or even the primary model of moral development. Buddhist thought includes a wide array of imaginative techniques that, when practiced over time, change one’s basic outlook. I will give a brief overview of three such methods for developing virtue in a Buddhist framework. This is not meant to be an exclusive list nor is it meant to be a full description of any of the methods; it will merely sketch the basic contours of these techniques.

Though my examples are largely drawn from the Tibetan *Lojong* (*blo-sbyong*) or Mind Training literature, imaginative techniques like this are by no means exclusive to Buddhism. Stoic thought in particular includes a wide array of imaginative techniques for moral development, which continue to be developed in contemporary thought.<sup>11</sup> Despite some overlap, the Buddhist techniques I’ll describe are quite different from those advocated by Stoics and warrant independent discussion.

**Exchanging Self and Others:** This technique involves imagining yourself from different points of view. First, you adopt the point of view of someone lesser or beneath you in some respect – in skill level, wealth, social status, or even in moral development. Seeing yourself from this lower view, let feelings of jealous and envy towards yourself arise. Contemplating yourself from this vantage point, you think, “*They* are doing so well and I just struggle and get nowhere!” Next, you adopt the point of view of someone equal to yourself and from this perspective, let competitive feelings emerge. Seeing yourself in this way, you experience the impulse to hide your own shortcomings and to come out ahead. Finally, take up the

<sup>10</sup> Tsongkhapa, *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment Volume One*, trans. Lamrim Chenmo Translation Committee (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1402/2000), p. 129.

<sup>11</sup> For example see Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*, trans. and eds. Luther Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982/1988) – especially section IV. For more recent Stoic developments Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001) and William Irvine, *A Guide to the Good Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

point of view of someone above you and feel superiority and even contempt. Seen from this angle, your current accomplishments, skills, and power seem so meager and just can't measure up.

Over time, exchanging self and other is said to be an antidote to a variety of obstacles to moral development. Experiencing the relational nature of various kinds of assessments can combat the tendency to see your own position and qualities as absolute and fixed, to think of being successful, influential, or skilled in some area as an independent and intrinsic quality of people. Seeing the fluid and perspectival nature of these feelings can help rob pride, jealousy, and resentment of their power, making you less susceptible to them. Perhaps most importantly, adopting these various views better allows you to empathize when actually confronted with others in those positions.<sup>12</sup>

**Mettā Visualization:** Sometimes translated as 'loving-kindness', this technique begins with reflection on your own desire to be happy and avoid pain. After the feelings associated with these wishes arise, they are gradually redirected towards others. First to a friend via the thought, "They want to be happy and avoid pain just like me – I hope they will!" This is then again extended from your friend to a neutral person, like an acquaintance who you know little to nothing about – for example, the checkout worker at the grocery store or someone you saw on the bus. This person is the same as your friend, they want to be happy and avoid pain. Just as you and your friend go through life trying to be happy, so does this stranger. Finally, this kindness is directed to someone you are hostile towards, an annoying co-worker or a person you are fighting with. This person, though a rival or enemy, is just like you, your friend, and the stranger – a person going through life and trying to be happy and avoid suffering.

This is a classic method for developing good will towards others. It is said to combat feelings of resentment and to develop patience and kindness towards others, even those we dislike.<sup>13</sup> As a mental practice it helps to extend the goodwill we often have for ourselves to others.

Though not a traditional Buddhist technique, one can also use a similar technique in reverse when one has more goodwill for others than for oneself. So if Sarah feels like she is worthless when her scholarly work is rejected by publishers, she might reflect on how she doesn't think her colleagues worthless when they received rejection and, focusing on their similar situations, extend the kindness she naturally feels for others towards herself.

<sup>12</sup> The canonical source for this technique is the 8<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist philosopher Śāntideva's *The Way of the Bodhisattva* (Sanskrit: *Bodhicaryāvatāra*); see Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1997) – particularly verses 141–154. My description of the practice and its benefits draws heavily from Kunzang Pelden, *The Nectar of Manjushri's Speech*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (New Delhi: Shechen Publications, 2008), which in turn draws heavily from that of Patrul Rinpoche.

<sup>13</sup> This description is drawn from the 5<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist philosopher Buddhaghosa's classic, *The Path of Purification* (Pali: *Visuddhimagga*); see Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, trans. Bhikkhu Nanamoli (Onalaska: Buddhist Publication Society, 1991) – particularly chapter nine.

**Giving and Taking:** The name of this practice refers to giving happiness and taking in suffering; it typically involves visualization along with focusing on the breath. The pain, negative traits, and bad actions of others are pictured as thick, black smoke. When inhaling, you imagine taking in all of this smoke, then transforming it into compassion and good will. When exhaling, you imagine breathing out this happiness, virtue, and good actions, visualized as bright light or even nectar.<sup>14</sup>

This practice is aimed at developing a habit of responding with kindness and compassion when confronted with harsh words and actions. It is a way of cultivating patience and goodwill towards others under difficult circumstances.

A few disclaimers: I have not meant this to be an exhaustive list of such practices; there are many others in addition to numerous variations on those above. Also, it is important to keep in mind that these techniques are not a one-size-fits-all affair; these texts make a number of assumptions about the background and context of the practitioner. Many traditions, particularly in Tibet, emphasize personal contact with a qualified teacher who can offer techniques based on the particular obstacles and tendencies of their student.

The important thing to note here is that these are ways of becoming a morally better person, ways to become more kind-hearted, patient, and compassionate. And yet, they do not fit the Aristotelian model – they are *not* very much like learning to playing the harp at all. None of these techniques involve performing overtly virtuous actions. In fact, they do not involve interacting with others at all – they are all imaginative exercises, practiced inwardly. They are examples of ways of cultivating virtue that do not involve “doing what actually needs to be done” but that instead take place entirely within the skull. They are more like *imagining* that you’re playing a harp than actually playing it.

This doesn’t mean that there is nothing valuable about the skill analogy. There is some empirical work suggesting that mental practice, the imaginative performance of a skill without any overt actions, can actually help to develop a variety of motor skills.<sup>15</sup> Of course, these imaginative techniques *alone* are not sufficient; nor are imaginative techniques *alone* enough to become fully virtuous. Moral development is complex. There are many different aspects of being a good person and many different obstacles and setbacks. Most likely we will need a variety of tools, each useful for a different task.

<sup>14</sup> Classic texts on the practice of Giving and Taking (Tibetan: *gtong-len*) are Chekawa’s *Seven Point Mind-Training* (Tibetan: *blo-sbyong don-bdun-ma*) and Langri Thangpa’s *Eight Verses on Mind-Training* (Tibetan: *blo-sbyong tshigs-rkang brgyad-ma*). Both can be found in English in *Mind Training: The Great Collection*, trans. and ed. Thupten Jinpa (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006). My description of the practice here draws heavily on the description in that volume.

<sup>15</sup> The most common application is in athletics and physical therapy. For example, see Lesley Jones and Gretchen Stuth, “The Uses of Mental Imagery in Athletics: An Overview” *Applied & Preventative Psychology* 6 (1997), 101–115 and Graham Powell, “Negative and Positive Mental Practice in Motor Skill Acquisition” *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 37 (1973), 312. See also Albert Bandura, *Social Foundations of Thought and Action* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1986), p. 61ff. on observational learning, particularly cognitive rehearsal and Peter Gollwitzer, “Implementation Intentions” *American Psychologist* 54 (1999), 493–503. For a meta-analysis of the empirical evidence see James Driskell, Carolyn Copper, and Aidan Moran. “Does Mental Practice Enhance Performance?” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 79 (1994), 481–492.

We should see the Aristotelian model as *one* aspect of a broader moral development strategy: Some tools help to develop our mental habits and general orientation towards ourselves and others. Other tools help us to integrate these attitudes into day-to-day behavior. The practices emphasized by those who focus on the Aristotelian model will be effective for the latter while the kind of imaginative techniques I've discussed are particularly effective for the former. Most importantly, there are genuine forms of moral development that do not take the form of practicing the activities associated with virtue.

And, as I'll argue in the following section, these imaginative methods of moral development are critical in cases where one is unable to engage in the activity and best explain cases of moral development where previous practice is not possible for various reasons.

### 3 The Importance of Imaginative Moral Development

These imaginative moral development techniques are critical for explaining moral development in cases when previous practice is not possible, cases where we can and do develop moral virtues without engaging in the associated activities. This can happen for many reasons, but I will focus on three cases: single-event virtues, first-time virtuous acts, and morally dangerous situations.

**Single-Event Virtues:** Imaginative techniques can be essential for virtues connected with unique situations. For example, many have thought that there is a virtue in facing death with resolve and acceptance: Recall that Socrates in the *Phaedo* characterizes philosophy as training for dying and Epictetus' lament, "I must die. But must I die bawling?"<sup>16</sup>

If there is a virtue concerned with how we face our own death, it is not one that fits the Aristotelian model very well. After all, we can only die once and so cannot develop the virtue by actually doing it. One can, however, develop the virtue through various mental techniques. Both Stoics, like Musonius and Seneca, and Buddhists, like Buddhaghosa and Tsongkhapa, describe imaginative practices for this purpose. These practices involve sustained reflection on the reality and certainty of death. These partly serve to motivate cultivation and develop a sense of urgency, but also partly help make us accustomed to the reality of death so it will not be as surprising when we face it.<sup>17</sup> By engaging in these reflections, we prepare to face death not by actually *doing* anything, but by making a habit of reflecting on various features of life: on the impermanence and inessential nature of all things, the inescapability of death of all living things, or on one's small part in the larger world.

<sup>16</sup> Epictetus, *Discourses and Selected Writings*, trans. Robert Dobbin (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 7. The characterization from the *Phaedo* can be found at 67e.

<sup>17</sup> See Irvine, op. cit., p. 197ff. for an overview of Stoic practices. On Buddhist practices see chapter eight of *The Path of Purification* – see Buddhaghosa, op. cit., 225ff., along with the discussion in Tsongkhapa, *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment Volume Two*, trans. Lamrim Chenmo Translation Committee (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1402/2004), p. 143ff. on the importance of mindfulness of death.



It's not only facing our own deaths that can be done only once, the deaths of others can also pose similarly unique challenges. Dealing with the death of one's father or mother cannot be done over and over – it only happens once.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, if there are virtues of aging gracefully, dealing with a mid-life crisis, or making a dignified transition into old age, it is not the sort of thing that a younger person can practice the way she would sit down and play a harp. One can, however, develop these virtues by conjuring up the situation imaginatively and in a context that allows one to shape one's reactions. Insofar as the imaginative exercise of Exchanging Self and Other helps us to become less attached to our own life stories and less invested in external measures of success, they can prepare us to face difficulties that we only encounter later in life.

Again, there are resources in Aristotle to meet these challenges; for example, in engaging with drama we can prepare for facing the loss of loved-ones. But this is already taxing the skill analogy since this kind of cultivation is unlike skill development – We don't get better at playing the harp by attending harp recitals.

A proponent of the Aristotelian model can also reply here that we develop these virtues by doing other things that closely resemble them. In facing mortal danger, the possibility of death, someone might develop courage for facing death when the time comes.<sup>19</sup> This is, to be sure, one way we can develop such virtues. This method, however, might not work as well for all single-event virtues: After all, what challenges do we face that closely resemble a mid-life crisis? What losses do we suffer that are like the loss of a parent?

Even if we *can* develop these virtues via practice in similar situations, for those of us lucky enough to not encounter mortal danger very often, imaginative techniques allow for the development of such virtues in the absence of mortal danger. Relying on developing virtue through similar situations already gives up much of the skill analogy. After all, the claim was never that I get to be skilled at playing the harp by doing things that *resemble* harp playing, it was that good harpists are made *by actually playing the harp*.

**First-Time Virtuous Acts:** Aside from single-event virtues, accepting imaginative moral development techniques can explain cases where one exercises virtue for the very first time. When one is courageous *in their very first battle* or maintain their integrity *the very first time* they experience peer-pressure. Howard Curzer offers the examples of war and seduction:

We intrinsically value and desire many actions that we have not even performed, let alone performed habitually. For example, we may not only judge that in certain situations standing fast in battle and resisting adulterous advances are the right acts, we may also desire to perform these acts for their own sake even if we have never before been in battle or been the object of seduction.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> I thank Tenzin Norbu Nangsal for this example. On some Buddhist views that accept rebirth facing death will fit much better with the Aristotelian model.

<sup>19</sup> I again thank John Hacker-Wright for raising these issues.

<sup>20</sup> Howard Curzer, 2002. "Aristotle's Painful Path to Virtue" *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 40

Curzer highlights the difficulties for those, like Burnyeat, who defend the Aristotelian view. If virtues must be acquired through habitually doing the associated actions, how can we explain courage of someone in their very first battle or the integrity of someone who has never before been tempted to cheat on their spouse?

One way to respond to this challenge is to draw on what Aristotle calls natural virtues, virtues we have from birth.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps first-time virtuous actions are the result of natural virtue, not virtue we have cultivated. Leaving aside questions about the existence of natural virtue or its place in moral life, this response doesn't allow for the possibility of cultivating first-time virtues.<sup>22</sup> It would be very surprising if we could *never* cultivate virtues before the first time we were in the relevant situation. We often do just that: Before meeting an ex or an abrasive in-law for the first time, we may prepare for this new test by imagining the situation and how we'd like to react. We mentally prepare for the situation so that once we're actually facing the person, we're better prepared to respond well. Eddie might know that his new school has a ruthless bully and so mentally prepare for standing up to him by vividly conjuring up the situation and picturing how he will respond. He can do this even though he has never stood up to a bully before; he prepares for a first-time virtuous action not by performing the associated actions, but through imagination.

The imaginative techniques that prepare us for first-time virtuous actions need not involve picturing the particular situation. They can develop more general mental habits that apply to a variety of situation. For example, the visualizations associated with Exchanging Self and Other develop a more general tendency to see ourselves from the point of view of others. This general orientation can help in novel situations, making us more able to more vividly see the harm adultery would do to our partner when unexpectedly meeting an ex for the very first time.

Imaginative techniques can help in facing novel situations in a variety of ways. Insofar as techniques like Exchanging Self and Other and *Mettā* Visualization can develop a greater degree of concern for others and lessen our attachment to comparative judgments, they can make us more able to deal with professional jealousy *at our very first job* or respond compassionately *the very first time* someone rudely criticizes our work.

**Morally Dangerous Situations:** In addition to single-event virtues and the initial instances virtue, these techniques of imaginative moral development are also critical for virtues that involve morally dangerous situations. This advantage is described by analogy in Tibetan sources:

---

Footnote 20 continued

(2002), 141–162, p. 147. My analysis of first-time virtuous acts here follows Curzer. See Jimenez, op.cit. for a different take on first-time virtuous actions. I don't need to claim here that Aristotelians cannot find a way out of this puzzle, simply that many such cases are more easily accounted for by giving up the idea that moral cultivation must always be the result of performing the associated actions.

<sup>21</sup> See *NE* VI.13 (especially 1144b5-6).

<sup>22</sup> Aristotle draws a distinction between “natural virtue” and virtue “in the full sense” (1144b3). Hursthouse 1999, op. cit., p. 105ff. claims that adults who act on inclination are more like the weak-willed than the virtuous. I again thank John Hacker-Wright for raising this issue.

The first method is like a Mongol taming a tiger: First he rehearses by learning the skills of taming a tiger so that when he actually meets a tiger, he can subdue it. If he has not trained previously, he will be unable to tame it and may instead become its prey. Similarly, you should vividly conjure within yourself the powerful afflictions, such as attachment, and then imagine driving them away.<sup>23</sup>

If someone attempts to practice tiger taming the way she would practice the harp, by actually sitting down and doing the activity, she will be eaten. Someone who wants to become skilled at taming tigers will instead develop first by practicing without a tiger present. She will engage not in actual tiger training, but rather a simulated imitation of it because the real thing is simply too dangerous.

In the same way, one can develop virtues associated with dangerous situations via a kind of mental imitation. Temptation can be one case of this. If one wants to avoid an adulterous encounter with an ex, by the time one is in the situation, when in the dimly lit expensive restaurant, it will be too late. Anger is another case: If I want to avoid getting angry with a friend who is very annoying or who has very different political views, once I'm face to face with them it will be too late. Such danger can be social: Perhaps when I'm with certain friends, I'm tempted to say very hurtful things about others. Once I'm with them at the bar and the drinks are flowing, I'll find the temptation to say mean things about others impossible to resist.

In these cases, it can help to imagine the situation and mentally prepare for the situation and simulate ways to react differently. The tiger trainer will practice when the tiger is not present, with a stool, whip, and an *imagined* tiger so he can safely develop good habits in a low-stakes situation. He develops by engaging in a simulated imitation of real tiger training. In the same way, by engaging in a simulated pretense of resisting seduction or remaining calm, we can develop good emotional responses safely, in a low-stakes situation.

Mind Training practices can help us to cultivate virtues in cases where attempts to cultivate them in the relevant situation can be too dangerous. Jeff might know that once he is in a meeting with others present, he will find it too hard to avoid saying insulting things to those who propose ideas he disagrees with. Jessica might know that once she starts playing a casual game she will be swept away and her ugly competitive side will come out. Because of their personalities and habits, once Jessica and Jeff actually find themselves in these situations, it is too late. Trying to be kind once they're in the meeting or on the court is risky, the combined forces of habit and situation make it too difficult.

Techniques like *Mettā* Visualization and Exchanging Self and Other can help Jessica and Jeff to become less attached to their own small victories over others and more sensitive to the suffering that their current reactions cause, both for themselves and for others. Most importantly, they offer a way to train their reactions *before* they're in a heated game or meeting discussion. This gives them more opportunities to develop and allows them to do so in a low-stakes environment.

<sup>23</sup> From "Mahayana Mind Training Eliminating Future Adversities" in *Mind Training: The Great Collection*, trans. and ed. Thupten Jinpa (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006), 241–6, p. 242.

This is particularly evident in the case of remaining calm in the face of insults or aggression.<sup>24</sup> Part of what makes staying calm in these situations difficult for many is that once the insults have been hurled, the anger follows almost immediately. This makes practicing patience around abrasive people morally dangerous, as the likelihood of an angry response is high. Imaginative techniques provide a method of cultivating patience in a controlled environment: Giving and Taking can slowly develop a habit of responding to negative input in a positive way and *Mettā* Visualization can help us to see that other people, even abrasive ones, want to be happy, face insecurities, and fear losing just the way we do.

Just as an airline pilot can develop the ability to keep calm in a crisis through calmly imagining how to respond to difficult situations over and over while safe on the ground, a person can develop their ability to respond to difficult situations by imaginatively preparing for them before they arise. In this way they cultivate virtue not by performing the actions that virtue demands, but by developing their responses through imaginative pretense. This is particularly important in the initial stages of developing virtue where our bad dispositions are well entrenched and our virtuous responses are fragile. But through imaginative techniques not only *can* we develop virtues without previously performing the associated activities, because of the moral danger involved, sometimes we *must*.

## 4 Conclusion

Aristotle was right to point out that moral improvement is very often an active process. It is not enough simply to read books and listen to wise people speak about the right way to live. There is something powerful about the idea that we can develop moral virtue in the way we can develop non-moral skills. And yet, there is also something limited about it too. By looking to other traditions, we can see how inner mental practices like imagination and visualization can also play a critical role in developing virtue.

**Acknowledgments** Thanks to Tenzin Norbu Nangsal for helpful discussion of these topics and to John Hacker-Wright and an anonymous referee for very helpful comments.

---

<sup>24</sup> For an account of this kind of virtuous patience, see Nicolas Bommarito, "Patience and Perspective" *Philosophy East & West* 64 (2014), 269–286.