

## Chapter 12

# “When You Know for Yourselves”

MINDFULNESS, WISDOM, AND  
THE QUALITIES OF HEART

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### 12.1. Introduction

The early Buddhist dialogues of the Pāli Nikāyas and the Chinese Āgamas take as the primary focus of ethical evaluation an agent’s emotional motivations, qualities such as hatred or friendliness, craving or equanimity—what I will call Qualities of Heart. These dialogues emphasize that one can develop wisdom through the establishment of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*), a practice of becoming more fully and accurately aware of both internal and external stimuli. I bring these two theses together to offer a naturalistic reconstruction of early Buddhist ethical theory. I draw on empirical and philosophical considerations to argue for the plausibility of a thesis that lies at the heart of Buddhist ethics: that certain Qualities of Heart are unskillful (*akusala*) and to be abandoned (*pahātabbaṃ*); that other Qualities of Heart are skillful (*kusala*) and to be cultivated (*bhavitabbaṃ*); and that we can come to discern the difference for ourselves.

A number of Buddhist theorists may be interpreted as grounding the goodness of acting selflessly in a metaphysical argument that there is no self (Goodman, 2009; Siderits, 2003). The idea is that the perception of ourselves as selves is a basic and universal perceptual error, due to unwholesome states such as ignorance and craving. By correcting this error one comes to see all suffering everywhere as equally to be prevented. Goodman argues that various Buddhist traditions are best understood along these consequentialist lines, as adopting approaches on which what makes an action or rule or mental

state skillful is that it minimizes *dukkha*: unease and suffering. The early discourses agree insofar as they emphasize that getting wrong how one ought to live is one result of a basic and universal perceptual error and in relating the correction of this error to a proper understanding of *dukkha*. However, in the *Sabbāsava Sutta*, both the view that there is a self and the view that there is no self are taken to result from inappropriate attention. In contrast, to attend appropriately is to notice “this is *dukkha* . . . this is the origination of *dukkha* . . . this is the cessation of *dukkha* . . . this is the path leading to the cessation of *dukkha*” (MN.i.9). As I will suggest, the form of perceptual distortion most directly relevant to the accuracy of ethical judgments has to do with not seeing accurately which ways of being, and in particular which ways of being motivated, bring ease and which bring unease. Moreover, the Pāli Nikāyas reject the assumption that there is a finite universe within which *dukkha* can be minimized (see, e.g., MN.i.483), an assumption that consequentialist ethical theories depend on (Davis, 2016). Even for a form of welfare consequentialism that takes motives as the primary unit of evaluative focus (e.g., Adams, 1976), what makes it the case that a certain motive is a good one are consequences for aggregate welfare that could be known only from a God’s-eye view. Thus, although both welfare-consequentialism and the reading of Buddhist ethics that I propose here are grounded fundamentally in pleasure and pain, my proposal differs in grounding ethical claims directly in features that can be known by human beings, each for themselves, from a first-person perspective.

## 12.2. Attention, Affect, and Buddhist Ethics

Although the early dialogues do not examine in detail the metaphysics or epistemology of ethical claims, they do raise the philosophical question of how we can know what is right and wrong, given the evident diversity of human ethical judgment. In one dialogue recorded in the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, the Kālāma townspeople find themselves visited by many spiritual teachers, each claiming their own system of values to be the right one and all others to be false. When in turn the Buddha comes to visit, the Kālāmas ask of him which of the many claims they have heard about the right way to live are true. “When you know for yourselves [*yada attanāva jāneyyātha*],” the Buddha replies, “these qualities are wholesome [*kusalā*] . . . blameless [*anavajjā*] . . . praised by the wise [*viññuppasatthā*],” leading to welfare and ease, then cultivate those (AN.i.189–190). However, as Bhikkhu Bodhi (1988) rightly points out, in precisely the same terms as the discourse famously counsels against going on faith in a cultural tradition or in a teacher, it also discounts the authority of appeals

to logic (*takkahetu*), appeals to inference (*nayahetu*), considering appearances (*ākāraparivittakka*), sympathies toward a considered view (*diṭṭhinijjhānakkharīyā*), and the appearance of probability (*bhābarūpatāya*). The discourse leaves us with the question of what avenue remains when both appeals to authority and also logical reason are dismissed as means of knowing how one ought to live. Indeed it does not explicitly address what makes it the case that certain ways of being are wholesome and others unwholesome, nor how precisely we can discern for ourselves the difference.

Drawing on other texts from the Nikāyas, I propose that the establishment of mindfulness can develop this kind of wisdom, functioning as a means for any human being to come to know for herself how any human being ought to live. In a certain surprising way, it is by developing full and accurate perceptual awareness of internal as well as external stimuli that we come to know the truth of the Buddha’s normative claims. If this account is cogent, it helps make sense of a stock refrain in the Nikāyas to the effect that the whole of Buddha’s teaching—the *Dhamma*—is “to be experienced by the wise for themselves” (*pacattam veditabbo viññūhi*).

If in the early Buddhist dialogues being criticized by the wise is one characteristic of unwholesome qualities, this suggests that what makes a certain Quality of Heart wholesome or unwholesome must be features that can be known from the perspective of human experience. The wise ones portrayed throughout the Nikāyas point out that when we feel pleasure, we normally react by grasping onto it, craving more of the same. When we meet with unpleasant experience, we normally react by pushing away the experience, craving for something—anything—other than the unpleasant way things actually are in that moment. Thus either pleasant or unpleasant experience can be the cause for an emotional response of craving to arise, craving for things to be some particular way rather than another. This connection between the affective valence of an experience (termed *vedanā*) and emotional responses based in craving (*taṇhā*) is the central link in the theory proposed in the Nikāyas for understanding how human suffering is perpetuated, the theory of dependent co-arising (*paṭicca-samuppāda*). For that reason, uncoupling the link between the affective valence of an experience and emotional responses of craving and aversion can be seen as the ultimate aim of every teaching in the Nikāyas—every prescription, admonition, and evaluative claim put in the mouth of the Buddha and his disciples in these early dialogues. The possibility of uncoupling *vedanā* from *taṇhā* is not merely a theoretical one, according to modern teachers such as Nyanaponika Thera. He suggests that by being continuously and carefully mindful of the affective valence of experience, a meditator “distinctly realizes that a pleasant feeling is not identical with lust and need not be

followed by it. . . . By doing so, he makes a definite start in cutting through the chain of dependent origination at that decisive point where feeling becomes the condition for craving. . . . It will thus become the meditator's indubitable experience that the causal sequence of feeling and craving is not a necessary one" (Nyanaponika, 2000, p. 174).

This suggestion by Nyanaponika sums up two central Buddhist claims that I draw on to suggest a way forward for Western philosophical debates over the ground of ethical claims. First, there is a distinction to be made between the pleasant or unpleasant affective valence of an experience and the emotional reaction to it, whether compassion or hatred, craving or equanimity. Second, one can come to see the difference between these two on an experiential level through the establishment of mindfulness. A third claim is implicit in this quote from Nyanaponika but is more explicit in the dialogues of the Nikāyas: it is not just that through mindfulness we see that we do not have to react to pleasure with craving; the further suggestion is that to the degree one establishes mindfulness, and thereby comes to know fully and accurately how unpleasant it is to react with craving or hatred, one simply cannot want oneself or others to perpetuate such states.

According to the *Vipallāsa Sutta* (AN.ii.52), perceptions, thoughts, and views can be distorted (*vipallāsa*). In the *Māgandiya Sutta* (MN.i.501ff.) and its parallel version in the *Madhyama-āgama*, the Buddha illustrates this with an analogy: one with distorted perceptions due to leprosy might want to burn his flesh over hot coals, but on being cured he could not be induced to touch the coals by any means (Anālayo, 2011, p. 410). In the same way, to those with perceptions distorted by craving, aversion, and delusion, the pursuit of sensual pleasure will appear enjoyable. But such distortions can be corrected.

Employing the broad Indian notion of morally valenced action, *karma*, but modifying it to suit his own distinctive approach, the Buddha says in a well-known passage from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, "It is *cetanā* (intention or motivation) that I call *kamma*" (AN.iii.415). The point of the leper simile may not be so much that sensual pleasures themselves are painful; after all, even the most enlightened beings cannot avoid feeling the pleasure of a beautiful vista, of a pleasant taste, or of good friends. Rather, as I take it, the point is, first, that the craving and like motivations that motivate the pursuit of sensual pleasures are in fact painful emotional motivations to have and, second, that we normally fail to see this.

Recent research has distinguished two separable psychological systems involved in human moral judgment, the first responsive to an action's outcomes, and the second responsive to the agent's intentions. One can get a handle on the distinction conceptually by considering cases of moral luck, such as the

difference between a drunk driver who accidentally runs over a small bush and an otherwise identical drunk driver who accidentally runs over a small child. Cushman (2008) demonstrates that in such cases of accidental harm adults tend to assign punishment based on outcomes but to make judgments of moral wrongness and of moral character based on perceived intentions. Recent work by Inbar, Pizarro, and Cushman (2012, p. 57) suggests more precisely that in morally evaluating intentions, subjects respond to “perceptions of desires for a harmful outcome” even in a case where no actual harm was precipitated.

The question remains to what degree these perceptions and ethical judgments of various motivational desires and intentions have some universal ground, some justification for judging desire for a harmful outcome as worse than the desire for a beneficial outcome. The suggestion I want to draw from the early Buddhist texts is that by establishing mindfulness one comes to be a reliable judge of the particular ethical valence of motivations such as friendliness or hatred, craving or equanimity, what I will call Qualities of Heart. The basic intuition behind the proposal is this: to the degree any human being were to fully feel what it is like to be motivated by care versus what it is like to be motivated by hatred, they will *know* which is a better way to be. I read the early Buddhist texts as committed in this way to the claim that to the degree that human beings become wise, they will converge in their ethical judgments about which sorts of Qualities of Heart human beings ought to act out of and which we ought not to.

### 12.3. Emotional Awareness and the Qualities of Heart

The early Buddhist account does not suggest that all human beings agree about whether we ought to cultivate hatred or instead cultivate friendliness. On the contrary, the central proposal is an account, first, of how it is that many of us, much of the time, get such evaluative judgments wrong. If we are subject to many various sorts of distortions, it is to be expected that our perceptions, thoughts, and views about which ways of living are good and right will be distorted in many varied and opposing ways. But to say that we can get such evaluative claims wrong is also to say that we could get them right. The early Buddhist texts hold out the possibility that by correcting the psychological forces that lead to distorted perceptions, by coming to see what is actually painful as painful, we can come to know for ourselves what is wholesome and unwholesome for all of us.

Drawing on recent empirical evidence, Evan Thompson and I have proposed that mindfulness training functions both to increase a generalized level of alertness to internal and external stimuli and to attenuate affective biases of attention and memory (Davis & Thompson, 2013, 2014). For instance, mindfulness training has been associated with increased reportability not only of subtle and fleeting external stimuli such as in rapid serial visual presentations (Slagter et al., 2007) but also of subtle somatosensory stimuli involved in emotional reactions (Silverstein, Brown, Roth, & Britton, 2011; Sze, Gyurak, Yuan, & Levenson, 2010). Moreover the development of general alertness may counteract biases of attention by broadening awareness to include incoming stimuli that attention would otherwise have been biased away from. Recent results suggest that mindfulness decreases such emotional proliferation and rumination by attenuating affective biases of attention and memory that cause our stream of thought to return again and again to mental images that spark negative affect (Roberts-Wolfe, Sacchet, Hastings, Roth, & Britton, 2012; van Vugt, Hitchcock, Shahar, & Britton, 2012). Mindfulness may decrease not only negative affective biases but also biases toward positively valenced stimuli, the kind of narrowing of attention that leads to wishful thinking, by preventing us from seeing negative aspects. In accord with this suggestion, Ortner, Kilner, and Zelazo (2007) found that decreases in arousal to negative images were common to both mindfulness training and a relaxation training control group, but that decreases in arousal to positive images were unique to mindfulness training. Thus, establishing mindfulness can be seen as a practice of increasing alertness and attenuating the affective biases of attention and memory that narrow one's awareness. This process of becoming more Wide Awake, in the sense of being more alert and less biased, thereby allows individuals to perceive more accurately both negative and positively valenced objects of awareness.

In these terms, then, the early Buddhist proposal I want to defend is that to the degree individuals are Wide Awake, they will converge in their ethical judgments about which sorts of Qualities of Heart human beings ought to act out of and which we ought not to. The function of mindfulness practice in making individuals more fully and accurately aware of internal and external stimuli is a first step toward justifying this claim. The second step starts from an assumption that at least some human Qualities of Heart, hatred and care, for instance, have physiological and affective profiles that are both distinct enough from each other and also similar enough across human beings that to the degree any of us are feeling fully what it is like to experience these, we will converge in our preferences regarding which Qualities of Heart we would rather our actions be motivated by. It might be, for instance, that to the

degree individuals are Wide Awake enough to feel what is actually painful as painful, they will converge in preferring to be motivated by hatred rather than by care. I think the converse hypothesis vastly more likely, however: that to the degree people are Wide Awake enough to feel what is actually painful as painful, they will converge in preferring to be motivated by *care* rather than by *hatred*. I mean this as an empirical claim, subject to disconfirmation by future scientific research.

A judgment that hatred is a bad Quality of Heart will also count against types of actions that could be motivated only by hatred, such as perhaps hate crimes. Conversely, if those who are Wide Awake will converge on judging the motivational state of friendliness to be praiseworthy, then they will also converge on judging as morally praiseworthy the sorts of compassionate actions that would be done by anyone who was in this state. On the other hand, the theory does not imply any convergence on the moral value or disvalue of types of action, except by implication from the moral value or disvalue of the particular Qualities of Heart behind particular actions. Nonetheless, this gives us a sketch of how establishing mindfulness might lead to convergence in moral judgments of various human Qualities of Heart, despite radically diverging cultural mores. What remains is to show how this psychological claim could bear on the normative claim that we ought to agree with the consensus of those who are Wide Awake about how human beings ought to live, if there were to be such a consensus.

## 12.4. Acting Wide Awake

In describing the state of being fully and accurately aware as correcting distortions of perception, thought, and view, my reconstructed approach follows Buddhist tradition in implicitly appealing to a general epistemic norm that privileges knowledge over ignorance. The claim I draw from the early Buddhist texts is that to the degree individuals attenuate affective biases of attention and memory, and are thereby more fully conscious of various aspects of external and internal stimuli, they will be better judges than they were before of the relative ease and unease characteristic of various Qualities of Heart. The basic project of avoiding unease is a concern built into the affective systems of human psychology, and perhaps more broadly animal psychology as well. It is a concern that we can plan to override in certain specified cases, of course. However, if it is affective valence that serves as the basic currency of human and animal motivation, then we can only override the motivational pull of the affective valence of a particular emotional state, for instance, by employing an opposing affective force, of a certain thought, for example. The ascetic who

plans to deny himself every sensual pleasure must use a thought of some end to do so, a thought that must itself have enough affective force to beat out the opposing affective pulls on his motivational system. The thought of some eternal reward might be pleasant, but at the very least the thought of giving in to the pursuit of sensual pleasures must have for him a stronger negative affective valence than the thought of not giving in in this way, however he conceives of those two. If so, it is practically inconsistent to plan to override the motivational force of affective valence in every case.

The sorts of beings that take sides in the ethical debates we get into, human beings, are each subject to the motivational force of ease and unease. The value of this project of avoiding unease therefore is a shared premise on both sides of any such debate. Moreover, to the degree I recognize that I sometimes do badly at knowing how to live, to be internally consistent with our shared human project of avoiding unease requires deciding to rely on those who are better at such judgments. We ought to agree with the consensus of those who are Wide Awake about how human beings ought to live, if there were to be such a consensus, because these are the judgments we ourselves would come to, to the degree we were Wide Awake. Even if I am not on my own motivated to act as the wise do, I can use their example as a motivation. And even if I am not intuitively inclined to make the same judgments about how to live that they are, I can decide to defer to the judgments they make, since these are the judgments I myself would make in a moment of wisdom. In short, we can *act* Wide Awake, even when we are not. The ethical claims entailed by the theory I have outlined has force for all human beings because, given our shared project of avoiding unease, any internally consistent plan for a human life will be one that requires us to act as if we were Wide Awake.

I have suggested that all human beings, or at least all human beings with whom we can conduct our practices of moral judgment and debate in the normal way, value living in ways that are characterized by ease rather than by unease. And I have suggested that to the degree one establishes mindfulness one can come to be a better judge of which states are which. Suppose that two human beings have equal epistemic access to the external world; in particular, suppose they know all the same facts about the impacts of their own actions on others' welfare and suffering. Still, on my account, they may make different judgments about which sorts of actions ought to be done if they are not equally alert and unbiased, because they may not have the same preferences regarding various Qualities of Heart. One who favors compassion may express this attitude in positive moral evaluation of actions intended to bring about welfare and not harm, whereas one who prioritizes other Qualities of Heart may not agree. The point of the arguments sketched above is that we



all ought to privilege the judgments of those who are more fully and accurately aware of which Qualities of Heart are characterized by ease over the judgments of those who are less Wide Awake in this way, all else being equal, because the project of avoiding unease is one we all share.

One might object to this proposal on the grounds that it represents a sort of enlightened egoism, that it falsely takes the aim of ethics to be the (at best) morally neutral project of decreasing one’s own suffering rather than the morally praiseworthy project of decreasing the suffering of all. My own interpretation is that the position of the early Buddhist texts is to bite this bullet. That is, the path to the end of *dukkha* is a path to the end of *dukkha* in one’s own world of experience. It is not a path to the end of *dukkha* in the external world, the world conceived from a third-person perspective as populated by other beings, a finite universe within which it would be meaningful to think of decreasing or eliminating suffering overall. In general the states that are characterized by ease internally, such as care rather than hatred, are those that lead to benefiting others rather than harming them. Nonetheless external effects are not what make morally praiseworthy states morally praiseworthy, as I read the early Buddhist account. Although ethical reflection does involve concern for others, the foundational reasons an ethical theory gives for why this concern for others matters ethically need not themselves appeal to considerations about others. Moreover perhaps it is not—not directly, at any rate—the fact that the states described as wholesome in the early Buddhist texts are characterized by relative freedom from *dukkha* that makes them wholesome. Rather I have suggested that states such as care are morally praiseworthy states because they are the states we ourselves would praise to the degree we were [wise](#).

## 12.5. Further Objections

Although it is suggested in general terms that the establishment of mindfulness leads to wise understanding of what is wholesome and unwholesome, nonetheless the discourses of the Nikāyas do not offer any precise psychological account of how the one leads to the other. I have drawn on empirical studies to suggest one way the increased alertness and decreased affective biases characteristic of those with established mindfulness could lead to systematic shifts in ethical judgments about which Qualities of Heart ought to motivate our actions. As I have reconstructed the claim, the judgments converged on by those who are Wide Awake have force for the rest of us just because we share a common human experience of various emotional motivations. Both in the course of the cultural evolution of moral judgment and also in the contemporary context, it is with other human beings and only with

other human beings that we make and debate ethical claims. For this reason, it is plausible to think that our practices of moral judgment might include an implicit if defeasible assumption of a distinctly human practical point of view, one that all human beings share in virtue of our shared neurobiological makeup.

Nonetheless this appeal to human nature also raises a question about the aptness of Acting Wide Awake as an interpretation of Buddhist ethics. It is inaccurate and irresponsible to construe the early Buddhist dialogues as neatly compatible with a modern naturalistic worldview. These dialogues relate the Buddha's interactions with many sorts of spirit beings, such as devas and more elevated beings, including the god Brahma, who is said to have originally convinced the Buddha to begin teaching what he had discovered for the sake of those beings who would be able to understand, those "with little dust in their eyes." We have no reason to suppose that such spirit beings would share the particular neurobiology that makes the state of hatred an unpleasant one for us human beings, if it is one. And yet these dialogues clearly take it to be the case that states of craving, hatred, and delusion are present among spirit beings and unwholesome for them just as for human beings. So to the degree one takes this cosmology seriously as truth-apt metaphysical claims rather than as stories that are apt instead as powerful motivation for human beings to live wisely, then this worry could be a serious one for my interpretation of Buddhist ethics. It is worth noting, however, that whatever sorts of beings the stories in the dialogues are told about, these stories are nonetheless told for a human audience. If so, a practical perspective that is distinctly human can nonetheless be assumed as an invariant aspect of any performative context in which the Buddhist dialogues are told, including whatever evaluative claims are made about craving and hatred.

A further worry has been raised by Westerhoff.<sup>1</sup> It will be noted that my reconstruction of Buddhist ethics has made no mention of the doctrine of rebirth that figures so prominently in traditional Buddhist culture and also in the stories of the Nikāyas. Westerhoff suggests that attempts to naturalize Buddhist ethics fail in principle because without this cosmological picture, one cannot make sense of the notion of karmic consequences that is so central to Buddhist ethical teaching. Given a naturalistic picture on which there is no rebirth, there could be no karmic consequences for an action done just before death, for instance. And if one assumes a consequentialist reading of Buddhist ethics, Westerhoff's objections to naturalization may hold. But on one natural reading of the early Buddhist view, an action is not unwholesome because it has bad karmic consequences in the future; rather an action has

bad karmic consequences in the future because it was unwholesome at the time it occurred. In particular, I have suggested that early Buddhist ethics is best understood as taking the states that give rise to actions, not the consequences of actions, as the primary unit of evaluative focus (Davis, 2016). Once this line of thought, the ethical quality of actions done just before death is determined in the same way as actions at any other time, by the quality of the motivating intention. Moreover, taking intentions as determinative of ethical valence helps make plausible, in the way I have shown, a second thesis evident throughout the Nikāyas: that by increasing awareness and decreasing bias on the perceptual level, one can become wise, a reliable judge of how one ought to live. This way of grounding ethics is meant to have force independently of whether one accepts or rejects the doctrine of rebirth, or remains uncommitted.

The proposal offered in this chapter thus not only serves as an example of how a naturalistic reconstruction of early Buddhist ethics could be executed; the particular naturalized account on offer may also serve to help make Buddhist ethics safe for naturalization. In return, the distinctive approach of early Buddhist ethics offers a novel and powerful contender among contemporary naturalist approaches. In particular, it offers a means for establishing a certain circumscribed set of truths about whether we ought to be motivated by hatred or instead by care. These are truths that hold even for human beings socialized in radically opposed systems of value, because they are entailed by the set of values we are all born into in virtue of shared features of human experience. It is this that allows the theory to adjudicate the sorts of debates over questions of how to live that human beings get into with one another, and the debates we each get into within ourselves.

## Abbreviations

- AN *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, volume and page in the Pali Text Society edition.  
Translations are my own.
- MN *Majjhima Nikāya*, volume and page in the Pali Text Society edition.  
Translations are my own.

## Note

1. See this volume, chapter 8.

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