

Suffering and the Six Perfections: Using Adversity to Attain Wisdom in Mahāyāna Buddhist Ethics

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In a collection of fourteenth century biographical narratives, a group of Japanese nuns discuss the events in their lives that motivated the decision take monastic vows. In one, “The Wife from the Western Part of the Capital,” a nun in her late thirties tells a particularly tragic tale of loss:

...I gave birth to a baby boy. He was an extraordinary child. He was not only very beautiful, but he was precocious and clever. He had a sweet voice and would hug his father and me and say things beyond his years. I was sure he would be a most wonderful person if he reached adulthood...His father adored him beyond all limits. Because he loved his son so much, in the winter of the boy’s fourth year, he had decided to kill a crane with his own hand, to serve to his son. At the time, our boy was at play on the other side of the carving board. The knife blade flew out of its handle and stuck in his breast, piercing him clean through. He screamed in fright, thinking his father had done it to chastise him. ‘I won’t ever again go near a bird,’ he cried. ‘I won’t do anything bad; I won’t be cross. I’ll do just as you say, Father.’ (Childs [6], 101)

Despite attempts to save him, the boy died. That night, the father stabbed himself with the same knife and died. The mother, who narrates the story, also considered suicide but, after an acquaintance begged her not to, had a strong insight into “the Buddha’s law” and decided instead to renounce her householder life, and devote her life to the ethical, intellectual, and religious practices of Buddhism.

Why does suffering and hardship lead to profound insight and wisdom for some, such as this nun, but only to despair, resignation, or bitterness for others? What skills, attitudes, and practices help us use our suffering to cultivate wisdom? Or, to use more Buddhist language, what allows us to take our adversity “as the path” to

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wisdom and liberation? In this paper, I aim to answer these questions through the lens of the Buddhist Mahāyāna ethical framework of the six perfections. These perfections – sets of skills and virtues designed to lead one from suffering to liberation from suffering – culminate in wisdom, the final perfection. They provide a conceptual blueprint for the ways we can successfully use our experiences of adversity to gain wisdom. Drawing on the fifteenth-century Tibetan Buddhist philosopher Tsongkhapa's discussion of the perfections in his classic *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment (Lam rim chen mo)*, I focus on two perfections – enthusiasm and meditative concentration – that, I argue, are necessary for understanding the role of adversity in wisdom but are generally under-theorized in Western philosophical and psychological approaches to wisdom [19].

1 The Value and Disvalue of Suffering in Buddhist Ethics

In Buddhist philosophy, the cessation of suffering is at the heart of the liberatory project. It is axiomatic in Buddhist moral psychology that no one wants to suffer and Buddhist thinkers present their path as a way to completely eliminate that suffering. This path involves recognizing the suffering in our lives in both its obvious and subtle manifestations (the Buddha's first noble truth) and understanding that this suffering has causes, that it is not randomly befalling us (the second noble truth). Once we clearly understand how suffering arises in our lives, then we can conceive of the possibility of its cessation (the third noble truth) and practice the moral, emotional and cognitive re-orientation that is required to actually end our suffering (the fourth noble truth). One of the lessons of the four noble truths is that to liberate ourselves from suffering, we must understand our suffering, how it arises in our lives, how it ceases, what makes it better, what makes it worse. Armed with this knowledge, we can learn to make use of our suffering for our own moral-spiritual development rather than allowing it to degrade our virtue and destroy our happiness. In other words, the four noble truths offer a way out of our suffering by inviting us to delve deeper in that suffering.

In order to understand how we can use our suffering for our own moral and cognitive development, Buddhist thinkers have to grant (at least, provisionally) that suffering and adversity can be good for us, even as we are ultimately trying to eliminate them. Indeed, the benefits of suffering is a central theme in Buddhist ethics. Although the claim that there are benefits to suffering may seem in tension with the general project of liberation from suffering, this claim follows from two core tenets of Buddhist moral psychology. The first is that the human (and sentient) condition is one of pervasive suffering (first noble truth). The second, and corollary claim, is that avoidance of suffering is not a successful strategy. This is because we simply cannot avoid the conditions of our own existence, such as illness, pain, and death. This insight is expressed in the historical Buddha's own life story: before he became awakened, Siddhartha Gautama's father tried to shelter him from suffering by creating an endlessly pleasant and cheerful environment for him, and forbidding encounters with anything miserable or arduous. This strategy, clearly, did not work: Siddhartha escaped his family's estate and immediately encountered the profound

suffering of human existence. It was this encounter with suffering – and not being sheltered from suffering – that ultimately lead to his awakening. Because suffering is pervasive and we cannot fully avoid it, we are left with two options: either we resign ourselves to our suffering or we understand and skillfully use our suffering in order to eventually transcend it. Thankfully, Buddhist thinkers choose the second.

The value of suffering, then, becomes a central theme in many Buddhist philosophical texts, meditation manuals, and ethical stories, such as the renunciation tales of the seven nuns quoted above. The fifteenth century Tibetan philosopher Tsongkhapa, commenting on Śāntideva's eighth century Buddhist ethical classic *How to Lead an Awakened Life (Bodhicaryāvatāra)*, presents what he calls the five "good qualities" (*yon den*) of suffering. First, suffering motivates us to try to liberate ourselves from that suffering, that is, it serves as a motivation for the entire Buddhist path. This is because any particular episode of suffering that is palpable enough to capture our attention can be used as an opportunity to renew our aspiration to do what it takes (i.e. develop moral virtue) to eventually be free of that, and all, suffering. The second good quality of suffering is that it dispels arrogance. This is because "when suffering strikes you, it reduces your sense of superiority," since the experience of our lives not going well uproots any false sense of superiority over others (2:174). Tsongkhapa argues that, as we become more aware of the causes of our suffering, we notice that our "very painful feelings... arise from non-virtue, so if we do not want these effects, we must avoid their causes." This is his third good quality of suffering: causing us to shun wrongdoing. Fourth, and related, suffering causes us to cultivate virtue. "This is because," Tsongkhapa tells us, "when you are tormented with suffering, you desire happiness, and once you want it, you must cultivate the virtue that causes it." Fifth, suffering has the value of producing compassion for "those who wander in cyclic existence." Tsongkhapa observes that when we suffer and assess the situation that caused that suffering, we think, "Other beings suffer like this." This empathic moment immediately produces compassion for others who, like us, experience suffering. Given that compassion is central to Buddhist conceptions of moral excellence, this good quality of suffering is not trivial. As we reflect on these five good qualities, Tsongkhapa encourages us to recognize other good qualities on our own and "then repeatedly train your mind to think, 'This suffering is a condition that I want'" (2:174). This last sentence – "this suffering is a condition that I want" – is striking, especially in a philosophical ethic that is devoted to the cessation of suffering. But, Tsongkhapa argues, it is by recognizing the good qualities of suffering that we create the conditions for ultimately transcending that suffering. This idea is well illustrated in the renunciation tale quoted at the beginning of this paper: One of the older nuns who listened to the younger nun's tale of her son's death and husband's suicide remarked, "You are to be envied" (102).

At this point we can see how, from a Buddhist ethical perspective, suffering can be a good thing: if used in the right way, we can benefit from our suffering, which will ultimately reduce our overall suffering because it will motivate personal and moral growth. But we still have not answered the question of *how* one would be able to use that suffering to achieve these good effects. What moral, emotional, or cognitive skills are necessary to make use of suffering in the way Tsongkhapa

describes? After all, we can easily imagine a dysfunctional alternative to what Tsongkhapa has described: Instead of the experience of suffering increasing moral motivation, virtue and compassion, and decreasing arrogance and the desire to harm others, it could instead cause us to resign ourselves to misery, increase our preoccupation with ourselves, decrease our compassion for others, and become apathetic about virtue and vice. How can we avoid that fate and learn to make our suffering good for us and others? How can our suffering make us wiser and better in the way Tsongkhapa describes? To answer these questions, we must first look at what it means to be “wiser and better” in the Mahāyāna Buddhist ethical context.

2 Wisdom in Buddhist Ethics

In the context of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, wisdom (*prajñā*, *she rab*) is the deep and fully integrated understanding of the nature of reality. This includes not only understanding ultimate metaphysical truths, but also social, political, and conventional realities. Tsongkhapa divides wisdom into three categories: the wisdom that knows the ultimate, the wisdom that knows the conventional, and the wisdom that knows how to act for the welfare of living beings. The first kind of wisdom, which knows the ultimate, is the wisdom that “cognizes the reality of selflessness, either by means of a concept or in a direct manner” (2:222). “Cognizing the reality of selflessness” means understanding the Buddhist metaphysics of the emptiness of all phenomena, including the self. When Buddhist thinkers argue that all phenomena are empty, they mean that they are empty of an intrinsic nature (Skt: *svabhāva*, Tib: *rang bzhin*). To say that something has an intrinsic nature (more literally, “own-being”) means that it has an independent essence that is not itself conditioned by other phenomena.¹ The claim that all phenomena are empty, then, is to claim that nothing exists in this way; nothing has an intrinsic, independent nature because all phenomena are conditioned by other phenomena. Because of the interdependence of all phenomena, “no identity can be given for any phenomenon independent of others” (Garfield, 62). This is not only true of “wholes” like tables and chairs, but is also true of parts, however defined (elements, atoms, particles, etc.). And it is not only a claim about physical existence; our mental states, thoughts, emotions, personalities, etc. are also empty of any intrinsic nature.²

Recognizing “selflessness,” then, means understanding the lack of “self” in terms of essential identity or intrinsic nature. But there is a second, and at least

¹ This understanding of *svabhāva* is based on a Madhyamaka analysis. See Garfield [9], pp. 61–63].

² It is important to understand that the metaphysics of emptiness is not a metaphysics that denies existence altogether; that would be nihilism, a position that all Buddhist philosophers agree is mistaken. Rather, the metaphysics of emptiness *specifies the way in which* phenomena exist: they exist only conventionally. That is, they exist in dependence on (changing, impermanent) conditions, which are themselves dependent on conditions, and so on. So, it is not the case on the Buddhist view that tables and chairs or thoughts and emotions don’t exist; they do exist. But they exist only because of our conventions – including cultural, social, linguistic, and psychological – and not as ultimate or fundamental constituents of reality. (See Garfield “Madhyamaka is Not Nihilism” (https://jaygarfield.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/garfield_nihilism1.pdf).

equally relevant, kind of selflessness: the lack of a “self” understood as an individual personal identity, or as the nineteenth century Tibetan master Mipham Rinpoche puts it, “the mind that thinks ‘I am.’”³ If I seek to understand on what ground “I” can be said to exist, Buddhist philosophers argue that my analysis will not reveal some kind of intrinsic essence or soul that defines or explains my identity. Rather, investigation will show my “self” to be a loose conventional label for a dynamic, changing set of causally connected psycho-physical moments, themselves empty of intrinsic nature. This does not mean that I don’t exist; it means that I don’t exist in the way I may have assumed: the self does not exist ultimately but only conventionally.⁴ This insight, called No-Self (*anātman*, *bdag med*), is central to Buddhist philosophy and practice. The wisdom that knows the ultimate, then, is the wisdom that understands all phenomena, including the Self, as empty of intrinsic nature.

The second type of wisdom is the wisdom that knows the conventional. Understanding the conventional is important in Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy since “conventionally” is the only sense in which anything could be said to exist at all. Tsongkhapa explains that this kind of wisdom understands the conventional sources of knowledge, which include Buddhist knowledge, grammar, logic, technical arts, and medicine. Part of being wise, then, is not just understanding the ways things are in the ultimate sense – that is, empty of intrinsic existence – but understanding the ways things are in the conventional sense – the way the world, as we conventionally understand it, works, especially with regard to the human realm. This includes understanding human language, psychology, and reasoning, and understanding the natural world, especially human biology, anatomy, and pathology.

Tsongkhapa defines the third type of wisdom – the wisdom that knows how to act for the welfare of living beings – as the wisdom that “knows the way to accomplish blamelessly the welfare of beings in their present and future lives” (2:222). This kind of wisdom puts into action the understandings associated with the other two in order to benefit others. There are two important elements of this kind of wisdom. The first is skillfulness: this kind of wisdom is what allows us to actually improve the wellbeing of others, rather than, say, have good intentions but botch things up. Second, this kind of wisdom is what allows us to help others in a way that is morally blameless. Because we understand the way things are on an ultimate and conventional levels, we understand how to help others without making moral mistakes.

On the Buddhist view, having wisdom depends on (but is not equivalent to) having a particular metaphysical view about the way things are: they are empty of intrinsic nature. (It is not equivalent to holding an intellectual view because that view needs to be integrated, applied, and remembered when it matters most). But as the second and third kinds of wisdom show, there is much more to wisdom in

³ *Ascertaining the Two Kinds of Selflessness* (<http://www.lotsawahouse.org/tibetan-masters/mipham/two-kinds-of-selflessness>).

⁴ This view, of course, requires argument, which Buddhist philosophers give and which I will not. For examples of such arguments see Siderits [16], Chs. 2 and 6], [9].

Buddhist philosophy than the metaphysics of emptiness. Since it is not my aim in the paper to defend this metaphysics, but to understand the nature of wisdom more generally and its relationship to suffering, I focus on some other aspects of Buddhist conceptions of wisdom that I think are more fruitful for developing global understandings of wisdom. These aspects are, of course, related to Buddhist accounts of emptiness, but, I think, can stand also stand alone.

First, as Tsongkhapa's discussion third kind of wisdom illustrates, there is commitment in Buddhist philosophy to making benevolence central to wisdom. Benefiting others requires not only a benevolent and altruistic motivation, but also associated skills of emotional regulation and cultivation, empathy, kindness, and moral sensitivity to the needs of others. This inclusion of benevolent motivations and emotional regulation skills in the concept of wisdom is shared with many, although not all, contemporary psychological accounts of wisdom [4, 11, 17, 18, 20]. In their review of the contemporary psychological accounts of wisdom, Staudinger and Glück note that empathy, benevolence, and concern for others is central: "In addition to being cognitively able to see others' perspectives, [wise people] transcend their self-interests and care deeply for the well-being of others (Staudinger and Glück, 218). Roger Walsh has even suggested that "the degree of wisdom is correlated with the scope and depth of benevolence" (287).⁵

Second, Buddhist approaches to wisdom emphasize the qualities of mental flexibility and open-mindedness as central to wisdom and see rigid thinking as antithetical to expressing or cultivating wisdom. This view is shared by most contemporary psychological models of wisdom. The five criteria that make up the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm, for example, include understanding how values are contextualized ("relativism of values") and a recognition of the limits of one's knowledge and the uncertainty of the future ("awareness and management of uncertainty") [2, 3]. Some kind of "openness to experience" and mental flexibility is present in other models of wisdom as well [1, 10]. The quality of mental flexibility will be discussed in more detail later ("Meditative Concentration").

Third, wisdom is what helps us deal with and make sense of (apparent) contradictions: the wise are able to more understand and make use of perspectives that to the unwise appear contradictory. Tsongkhapa writes, "Two good qualities which may appear to be mutually exclusive prove to be non-contradictory for those who have wisdom" (2:214). In particular he focuses on the following apparent contradictions that tend confuse the unwise: (1) love without attachment, (2) compassion without distress, (3) joy without the instability of excitement, (4) impartiality without indifference.⁶ The wise, according to Tsongkhapa, are able to see that love does not require attachment and that we love better when not fettered by attachments, which are ultimately self-serving. Similarly, to the unwise, cultivating compassion for others' suffering seems like a way to invite distress into our own lives, and that maintaining ease in one's life requires keeping a safe

⁵ To be clear, Walsh thinks that benevolence – but not emotional regulation – is central to wisdom [20], 289–290].

⁶ Tsongkhapa also includes a fifth apparent contradiction – conventional existence and emptiness – but I do not include it here since this dichotomy was already discussed in relation to the wisdom of the ultimate.

distance from the suffering of others. The wise understand that this is a false dichotomy and that compassionate living is compatible with a lack of distress (and, on the Buddhist view, is the only way of life that is ultimately compatible with a lack of distress). Similarly, usually joy is due to some feeling of excitement that makes our minds unstable, suggesting that the stability and calmness of mind are incompatible with feeling intense joy. But wise people understand that deep joy is possible without any instability of the mind. The wise also understand that being impartial between beings – that is, treating all beings as moral equals – does not, as it might seem to, imply neglecting others or decreasing our sense of care and concern. These are subtle, sophisticated, and difficult to codify distinctions that the wise are able to make because they are more comfortable with contradictions (or apparent contradictions) and less bound by rigid, dichotomous thinking.

Many contemporary psychological accounts of wisdom agree with Tsongkhapa that the ability to deal with contradictions and take on multiple perspectives is a characteristic of wisdom. Staudinger and Glück [17], for example, understand wisdom as fundamentally about “mastering the basic dialectics shaping human existence,” which include, “the dialectics of good and bad, positivity and negativity, dependency and independence, certainty and doubt, control and lack of control, finiteness and eternity, strength and weakness, and selfishness and altruism” (217). Like Tsongkhapa, they argue that “wisdom embraces the contradictions of life and draws insight from them.” One difference between Tsongkhapa’s account and Staudinger and Glück’s is whether the wise person eventually resolves such (“apparent”) contradictions, as Tsongkhapa’s analysis implies, or simply becomes more comfortable with them, as Staudinger and Glück suggest. Either way, what these accounts share is the assumption that wisdom fundamentally concerns coming to terms – in some way – with the core contradictions of human life.

Finally, in the Buddhist tradition, wisdom is seen as the opposite of, and correction for, confusion. Confusion is not merely a lack of knowledge or understanding, but is a kind of ignorance, sometimes stubborn and willful, that arises from ill-considered and unhelpful habits in everyday life. Tsongkhapa lists the causes of confusion as “relying on bad friends; laziness; indolence; oversleeping; taking no pleasure in analysis and discernment; lack of interest in the vast variety of phenomena; the pride of thinking “I know” when you do not; the major wrong views; and being discouraged and thinking, “Someone like me cannot do this,” and thus not taking pleasure in relying on the learned” (2:217). Being unwise (confused), then, is not a matter of just not-happening-to-know something but rather, through habit, putting oneself in the position in which one is unlikely to be receptive to learning and transformation. Thinking about wisdom as opposed to an entrenched, active confusion rather than a mere absence of knowledge is significant since it informs the practices and strategies to cultivate wisdom: becoming wise is not (primarily) about gaining knowledge but about changing habits.

To summarize, in Mahāyāna Buddhism, wisdom is the deep and integrated understanding of the way things are – ultimately, conventionally, and morally – and the application of that understanding in one’s life. The main characteristics of the wise person on this view include (1) benevolence (including the associated moral

skills of empathy, sensitivity, and responsiveness) (2) mentally flexibility and the ability to hold multiple perspectives, (3) mastery in understanding and dealing with contradictions and cognitive conflict, and (4) partaking in a lifestyle that does not maintain confusion and ignorance. In the remainder of this paper, I will explore what this wisdom-promoting way of living is and how it might explain how we can use our suffering for the cultivation of wisdom.

3 The Six Perfections as a Framework for Using Suffering to Gain Wisdom

In Mahāyāna Buddhist ethical traditions, the path to liberation and moral excellence is framed in terms of the six perfections (*pāramitā*, *pha rol tu phyin pa*): (1) generosity (*sbyin pa*), (2) ethical discipline (*tshul khrims*), (3) patience (*bzod pa*), (4) enthusiasm (*brtson 'grus*), (5) meditative concentration (*bsam gtam*), and (6) wisdom (*shes rab*). These perfections are a set of moral and epistemic virtues and skills that are designed to help us transition from our current state of suffering and confusion to happiness and wisdom. The Tibetan phrase that is translated as perfection – *pha rol tu phyin pa* – literally means “crossing over to the other side,” that is, from “this side” of suffering to “the far side” of awakening. The perfections, then, are foundationally concerned with the skills we need to make good use of our suffering in order to ultimately transcend it. Because they culminate in the perfection of wisdom, the six perfections framework is especially relevant for investigating the relationship between adversity and wisdom.

The relationship between the perfections is one of mutual dependence and support: they are not isolated, independent virtues. This is especially clear in the case of wisdom. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, wisdom is said to both undergird and encompass the other perfections. It undergirds the other five because they only become perfected when they are informed by wisdom. To be generous, for example, is generally a good thing, but it is not perfected unless we are wisely generous, that is, we know when to give, to whom to give, and with what motivation we ought to give [22], 226–227]. Wisdom encompasses the other perfections because wisdom requires the perfect integration of correct understanding into every aspect of one’s life. The proper integration of wisdom, then, requires one to be generous, ethical disciplined, patient, enthusiastic, and able to practice meditative concentration. It is not enough to just know true things about the world; one must also put them into practice in one’s emotional, ethical, and mental lives. Putting that knowledge into practice just is practicing the other five perfections.

Some of the Buddhist perfections are included in contemporary accounts of wisdom in the psychological literature. For example, Judith Glück’s MORE model of wisdom, which theorizes that wisdom requires four main facets (mastery, openness to experience, reflection, and emotional regulation and empathy), overlaps with some of the perfections [10]. The idea of mastery, like the concept of a perfection, marks out excellence rather than mere competency. Reflection, especially the exploratory processing that is associated with wisdom exemplars [11], is especially well-theorized in the perfection of meditative concentration, as

well as other perfections, such as patience, which require this kind of reasoning (for example, Śāntideva [15], Ch. 6). Emotional regulation and empathy play a crucial role in the cultivation of generosity, ethical discipline, and patience. Ardel's three-dimensional model of wisdom – which includes cognitive, reflective, and affective dimensions – also locates skills that are central to the six perfections. The affective component of Ardel's model, for instance, is described as a sympathetic, compassionate, and benevolent love for others, a core element in all perfections but especially central to the first three [1].

In Māhāyāna Buddhist ethics, all six perfections are necessary for transforming our experience of suffering and attaining wisdom, happiness, and liberation. In what follows, though, I will discuss only two perfections, enthusiasm and meditative concentration (especially meditative serenity). I focus on these two because they are not well accounted for in contemporary psychological (or philosophical) models, but are important not only for understanding wisdom but also for learning how adversity could give rise to wisdom.

4 Enthusiasm

Tsongkhapa defines enthusiasm as joyful effort applied to a virtuous object or cause (2:182). He calls it “a flawless state of mind that is enthusiastic about accumulating virtue and working for the welfare of living beings, together with the physical, verbal, and mental activity such a state of mind motivates” (2:182). Like all the perfections, enthusiasm is supported by, and in turn supports, the other five. This is because what one has enthusiasm *for* are just the other perfections – generosity, ethical discipline, patience, meditative concentration, and wisdom; the other perfections give us the proper (virtuous) objects to devote our energies. In turn, enthusiasm makes the other perfections possible, since without it we would lack the energy and perseverance to achieve high levels of generosity, patience, etc.

One helpful way to think about the six perfections are as antidotes to common human failings. Generosity counteracts stinginess; ethical discipline is the antidote for the lack of moral conviction and strength; patience corrects the tendencies toward frustration, anger, and hastiness; meditative concentration trains a distracted or dull mind; and wisdom dispels confusion. Enthusiasm, also translated as joyful perseverance, is the antidote to laziness. It is the ability to persevere, happily and cheerfully, in the face of obstacles. The “happily and cheerfully” is important; enthusiasm is not simply grind-your-teeth perseverance or endurance – it is not “pushing through” hardship – but rather taking on hardship with joy based on understanding the value of the hardship and shortcomings of avoiding it. In Buddhist ethics, there are three relevant types of laziness (*le lo gsum*) that enthusiasm can correct (Tsongkhapa, 2:187). The first is laziness understood as an orientation toward comfort (*snyom las 'dzin pa'i le lo*), such as not wanting to endure any physical hardship, over-indulging in sleep and leisure, procrastinating, and over-prioritizing pleasure and comfort. A person with the perfection of enthusiasm has uprooted these kinds of lazy habits and so can happily endure discomfort in order to achieve some greater good.

The second kind of laziness is the laziness associated with attachment to non-virtuous objects (*bya ba ngan pa zhen gyi le lo*). Here we fail to exert ourselves in a healthy or virtuous way because of our unhealthy or immoral habits. If we suffer from this kind of laziness we are not necessarily craving leisure or comfort; our attachment may be to unpleasant, non-virtuous objects, such as resentment, envy, or even business. For example, we may refuse to come to terms with our envy because of an attachment and habituation to envious ways to perceiving and understanding the world. This would be considered a kind of laziness (*le lo*) according to Tsongkhapa – even though such an attitude is not likely to be described “lazy” in English – because it is a way of not doing the moral work we need to do. This is why, somewhat paradoxically for the English speaker, busying ourselves with projects, work, or traveling can actually be a manifestation of laziness: we busy ourselves because it is actually easier than staying still, physically and mentally.

The third kind of laziness is the laziness associated with despondency and resignation (*sgyid lug bdag nyid brnyas pa'I le lo*). This includes losing heart, or giving up as soon as we meet with an obstacle or challenge. It also includes what Buddhist thinkers call the despondency of self-contempt [14], Ch. 4]. This happens when we do not even attempt great endeavors because we believe ourselves to be fundamentally incapable and inferior. Like having a strong orientation toward comfort, losing heart, despondency, and self-contempt are attitudes that make it difficult or impossible to take on the hardship required for moral and spiritual growth. They are ways to avoid doing what is difficult, and so are forms of laziness.

The three kinds of laziness, which enthusiasm is meant to correct, present major obstacles to using our hardship and suffering for moral and spiritual growth. The first kind of laziness, a deep-seated comfort orientation, prevents us from exposing ourselves to risks from fear of possible suffering and encourages us to perceive the suffering we currently experience as simply something to be “done with.” Both of these tendencies may prevent wisdom. Fear of taking risks (born from a fear of suffering) could create an extremely sheltered and narrow world-view. Given the centrality of openness to experience to accounts of wisdom, we would expect wisdom exemplars tend to show a great degree of facility in navigating radically different points of view. The craving to be done with our suffering – to have it be something that is in the past – is also not correlated with wisdom (Westrate and Glück [21] 808–811).

If we suffer from the laziness of attachment to the non-virtuous, we have grown attached to the non-virtue that, on the Buddhist view, is the source of our suffering. This attachment, then, only reinforces our suffering-producing habits. This kind of laziness precludes the possibility of using suffering as a motivation for our liberation (the first good quality of suffering on Tsongkhapa’s account) because it obscures the connection between non-virtue (bad habits) and suffering. The third kind of laziness, losing heart and despondency, prevents us from seeing the hardship through, and is likely to cause resignation rather than insight. To be able to learn from our suffering, we need to be able to see our suffering through, to not give up either physically or mentally. If we do lose heart, we may begin to internalize this failure and develop the despondency of self-contempt. This sort of self-hatred and

despondency may prevent us from believing that we can even survive the hardship, let alone come out “on top” or become wiser for it.

These reflections suggest that the perfection of enthusiasm may play an important role for using suffering for the development of wisdom. It is what allows us to deny ourselves certain comforts in order pursue greater achievements. It is what helps us overcome the fear of and aversion to suffering. When we have enthusiasm, we are able to see our suffering through, to not just wish it away or fantasize about a suffering-free life (see Plews-Ogan [13]). Enthusiasm also gives us confidence in ourselves; it creates the psychological possibility that we are strong enough and capable enough to not only survive our suffering but to become wiser for it.

One of the great things about Buddhist ethics – especially compared with many Western ones – is that abstract discussions of virtues or perfections are accompanied by practical guidance on how to achieve these good qualities in our own lives. In the case of enthusiasm, different practices are recommended for the different types of laziness. If you are suffering from a strong clinging to comfort, then the standard advice is to remember the fact of your own mortality. Although we all know that we will die, we do not know when or how. This reflection, it is claimed, helps motivate us to prioritize what is important in our live. Most of us would admit that the pleasures of comfort are not the most important things in life. Much more meaningful is our own moral and spiritual growth and happiness and that of others. When we find ourselves forgetting this (on the Buddhist view, obvious) fact, we should reflect on our own finitude and mortality.

If we are too attached to non-virtue to take on the hardship of cultivating virtue, then the recommendation is to reflect honestly on the connection between one’s unhealthy and non-virtuous habits and the suffering one experiences in one’s own life. This may be difficult since, by definition in this case, we are already attached to these non-virtuous habits. But the hope is that, through proper reflection and help from mentors, teachers, and honest friends, we will eventually be able to see how our own habits of thought, feeling, and action are causing suffering for ourselves. In the case of envy discussed above, we can come to see that feeling envy is painful for ourselves and bad for our relationships, which should motivate us to take measures to change our habit to become envious, even though envy may feel easy or natural for us.

If we find ourselves losing heart or suffering from the despondency of self-contempt, Buddhist thinkers suggest reflecting on our own capacities (Tsongkhapa, 188–194). In particular, we remember our basic capacities for insight, understanding, compassion, and love, capacities that we share with all humans. If we properly reflect on these capacities, we realize that there is no reason for despondency or resignation, since we are endowed with the same basic qualities as all the wisdom exemplars and sages, including the Buddha. These reflections should give us the strength to face our suffering and learn from it, and to do so with joy, knowing that we are exercising the very capacities that will, if we continue to cultivate them, ultimately result in our liberation from suffering.

According to Tsongkhapa, although these methods “eliminate unfavorable conditions,” we still need to “gather the forces of favorable conditions,” that is, we need to actively encourage and develop skills associated with enthusiasm (2:

195–201). This includes cultivating four “powers” or abilities that will strengthen our capacity for enthusiasm. First, we must develop the power of aspiration, which means cultivating the desire to take on a challenge. Second, we need to develop the power of steadfastness, which “means that you bring to conclusion, without turning back, anything at which you exert enthusiasm” (196). Steadfastness is the ability to carry on without becoming overwhelmed by obstacles. Third, we need to develop the power of joy: “The power of joy means that when you first engage in an activity, you do it joyfully, and once you have engaged, you have a sense of being insatiable in that you do not want to discontinue the activity” (2:199). Finally, we need to develop the power of relinquishing, which is the ability to know when to rest and to prioritize rest and relaxation when appropriate.

To summarize, the perfection of enthusiasm is the ability to joyfully persevere for a virtuous end. It is the antidote to the failure to persevere – laziness – that can take the forms of procrastination, overindulgence, attachment to non-virtue, resignation, despondency, and self-contempt. These failures to persevere prevent us from using our hardships to gain wisdom. Cultivating enthusiasm allows us to face hardship (rather than avoid it), overcome obstacles (rather than give up), and remain appropriately confident in times of adversity (rather than berate ourselves). Without these skills we would become either fearful and avoidant of our suffering or overwhelmed by it, thereby precluding us from using that suffering for our moral and spiritual growth.

5 Meditative Concentration

The English word “meditation” translates several Tibetan terms, including *goms* (Sanskrit: *bhāvanā*, meditative absorption), *ting nge ‘dzin* (*samādhi*, meditative stabilization), and *bsam gtan* (*dhyāna*, meditative concentration). It is this last, meditative concentration, that is the focus of the fifth perfection. It is the antidote to distraction, mindlessness, forgetting, mental dullness, and mental agitation or excitement. Given how many mistakes we make are due to these faults, meditative concentration is crucial to the development of oneself as a moral agent [5, 7, 8]. As we’ve seen, the perfections are mutually dependent, and meditative concentration is no exception. One needs the ethical grounding of the earlier perfections in order to effectively practice meditation – if one’s life and relationships are in chaos because of a lack of generosity, ethical discipline, or patience (the first three perfections), one cannot devote energy (the fourth perfection) to taming one’s mind and developing concentrative excellence (the fifth perfection). On the other hand, without the ability to concentrate and attend to an object without distraction one cannot cultivate the other perfections. Additionally, we can apply the other perfections to the perfection of meditative concentration; we can be disciplined with our meditation practice, patient with ourselves and others in the context of meditation, feel enthusiasm for our practice, and generously share that practice with others.

The perfection of meditative concentration (*bsam gdan*) includes two main kinds of meditative excellence: serenity (*zhi gnas*, or “calm abiding”) and insight (*lhag*

mtshong or “clear seeing”). Tsongkhapa defines serenity this way: “With undistracted mindfulness and vigilance, you focus your attention on [an appropriate] object and fix it to the object continuously, so that your mind stabilizes of its own accord on the object of meditation” (3:16). Serenity is a state of undistracted attention and is marked by feelings of calmness, mental and physical suppleness and pliancy (*shin sbyangs*), and even bliss. Insight is when we come to understand the true nature of the object of meditation through examination, investigation, and analysis. For example, if, when meditating on the five aggregates (the five types of mental-physical stuff that makes up a person), one maintains undistracted meditative stability on the object (the five aggregates), this is serenity. But serenity does not entail “understanding the reality of the thing” (16), since we can attend to something without understanding what it is. Through analysis of the five aggregates one comes to understand the deeper metaphysical truth of no-Self, and that understanding is what is called insight.

Insight – coming to understand the “reality of the thing” through reflection and analysis – is a central aspect of wisdom in both Western and Buddhist philosophies, and is well accounted for in both traditions.⁷ What is overlooked in many contemporary accounts, however, is the role of serenity in the cultivation of wisdom. But Buddhist thinkers give us good reason to take seriously the value of serenity for cultivating wisdom.

According to Tsongkhapa, the development of insight through analysis is necessary but not sufficient for wisdom and liberation; we also need serenity. Without serenity – the ability to focus one-pointedly on any given object – any insight we have is unstable, easily forgotten or mindlessly ignored. Insight without serenity is like a flickering candle flame: no matter how bright the flame it is useless if it constantly flickering (3:20). We need serenity to stabilize any insights that we have and effectively integrate them into our current understanding.

That serenity is necessary for making insight effective is an important point, since it can explain a common problem we face when trying to use our experiences of suffering to make us wiser: Through an experience of suffering we can learn some important truth (some insight), but that insight alone doesn’t make us wiser, since we can easily forget it once our situation becomes easier and more comfortable. After the death of a loved one, for example, we may come to deeply understand the finitude of human life and importance of prioritizing what really matters to us. But, once the grief decreases and we become more comfortable, we may fall back on our old habits, forgetting the insights that we had during our time of grief. This is a case of a bright but flickering flame, having deep insight that is quickly forgotten. Tsongkhapa’s diagnosis of this kind of problem is that we have the insight but lack the serenity, the ability to focus on the insight and to keep it in mind when it matters most.

Not only is serenity, along with insight, required developing liberatory wisdom, but, on Tsongkhapa’s view, it is also a condition for attaining insight in the first

⁷ In Western philosophical and psychological contexts, the “insight” aspect of wisdom is discussed in terms of reflection, contemplation, reasoning, and judgment, which are all, clearly, central to Western models of wisdom.

place. This is because serenity makes the mind (and body) pliant and flexible – a quality that he links to experiences of delight and bliss – thus making the mind ready for insight (3:24). Serenity, the ability to focus single-pointedly on a given object, requires that we overcome the distraction and mental reactivity that would normally cause us to lose focus. That transcendence of mental reactivity creates a sense of calm and spaciousness, which, in turn, makes the mind less rigid and dogmatic (pliancy). A pliant or “soft” mind is a great epistemic and moral asset in a Buddhist context – it is one of the eleven virtuous mental factors – because it is what allows us to consider views and perspectives contrary to our own without aversion or strong negative reactions. Having a pliant mind is pleasant, even blissful, since such a mind is free from the sluggishness and afflictive emotionality that comes from rigidity and dogmatism (see Kamalasila [12], Ch. 8]). Just as having a flexible body is enjoyable and having a rigid, stiff body is uncomfortable, having a pliant mind, it is claimed, is pleasant and having a dogmatic and tense mind is not. Cultivating the mental state of serenity, then, means that we have not only developed the ability to focus our attention without distraction, but, because of that, we also have enhanced that pliancy of our mind and increased our sense of pleasure, delight, and contentment. The combination of these features – undistracted attention, mental pliancy, and delight – put us in an ideal position to be open to insight and retain and integrate that insight.

Reflection and reasoning have been, rightly, central to Western (and Buddhist) philosophical and psychological accounts of wisdom. They are critical for explaining how experiences of adversity could make us wise: suffering causes us to reflect in different ways or on novel objects, which gives us new insight into the way things are. What Tsongkhapa’s analysis highlights is another, complimentary, skill of wise person – serenity – that allows insight to be integrated (rather than forgotten or ignored) and supports the arising of new insight by making the mind pliant and blissful. Without serenity we cannot become wise from our experiences of suffering, even if we do have insight, because we are unable to apply and remember that insight and reorient our lives in response to it.

6 Conclusion: Understanding Obstacles to Becoming Wise

To return to the motivating question of this paper: Why do some people become wise in the face of adversity while others do not? I argued that the Buddhist ethical framework of the six perfections provides a helpful way to understand some of the skills, practices, and virtues necessary to use our suffering to become wiser. In fact, this is what the six perfections are designed to do; they are supposed to guide the transition from suffering and confusion to happiness and wisdom. And part of that transition is reevaluating and learning from the very suffering we are trying to ultimately eliminate. Although all six perfections, and their associated skills and practices, are important for this process, I focused on enthusiasm and meditative concentration in order to raise their profiles in Western and comparative accounts of wisdom, which typically do not emphasize them.

Another way to approach the motivating question of this paper is to ask, what obstacles do we experience when trying to learn and grow from our suffering and hardship? This phrasing of the question may actually be more in line with typical Mahāyāna Buddhist approaches, which tend to focus on obstacles to self-cultivation and methods to overcome them. By focusing on enthusiasm and meditative concentration, I have responded to two main obstacles to wisdom that we face when experiencing adversity. The first is the problem of becoming overwhelmed by or avoidant of suffering. This includes feelings of resignation, despondency, self-pity, and wallowing, and includes actions and behaviors such as avoidance, procrastination, and denial. We cannot hope to learn from suffering that we cannot admit exists or cannot conceive of moving past. This is the obstacle to learning from suffering that the perfection of enthusiasm is intended to address.

The second obstacle that my paper addresses is the problem of short-lived, “flickering” insight: insight gained in times of adversity that is then forgotten, ignored, or loses its potency. Insight and understanding are not sufficient for wisdom; they must be remembered, applied, and remain vivid. This is what the skill of meditative serenity is supposed to do. It makes the flickering flame of insight stable and steady. And it is only when it is steady and stable that the insight, like the flame, is becomes useful.

The moral psychological framework that I have drawn on here is from the fifteenth century (and earlier) and is not based in methodologies of modern empirical science. I offer it as a conceptual blueprint that may be helpful for framing broad research questions and informing conceptual distinctions used in psychological research. For example, the perfection of enthusiasm and the distinctions between the three kinds of laziness may help us locate the specific skills that are required for facing our suffering without denial or despondency. The claims Buddhist thinkers make about the moral and psychological function of certain skills – that meditative serenity helps integrate insight, for example – could help structure a research program. The practices for overcoming obstacles to the perfections could also be empirically tested: Does contemplating one’s own death decrease tendencies toward procrastination and overindulgence? Does reflecting on one’s basic human capacities reduce self-contempt? Does one-pointed, non-distracted meditative concentration (serenity) increase one’s capacity for insight? The Buddhist philosophical texts provide some reasons for giving a (tentative) affirmative answer to these questions, but psychological research would be necessary to test these claims and assess the psychological feasibility of a Māhayāna Buddhist approach to cultivating wisdom through adversity.

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