

SOME ISSUES OF THE MORAL JUDGEMENT IN BUDDHISM AND VIRTUE ETHICS

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ABSTRACT

Buddhism is not only religion but also a philosophical tradition containing vast and rich knowledge about morality. Aside from describing moral concepts and human conduct, Buddhist ethics also focuses on understanding human nature, transformation, and development of the moral agency. Emily Mcrae defined the goal of the Buddhist teaching of life as “Buddhist moral psychology is centrally interested in the psychology of moral improvement: How do I become the kind of person who can respond in the best possible way to the moral needs of myself and others?” According to Buddhism, cultivating and “disciplining” one’s mental states (cognitive and affective states) and moral perception plays a central role in the moral improvement and moral judgment. In this article, the author has briefly compared the Buddhist interpretation of emotion and moral judgment with Western ethical theories. The author then looked into what Buddhist emphasis on emotion (anger) and its influence on decision-making can offer modern moral psychology.

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The main goal of practicing Buddhism is freeing oneself from suffering (*dukkha*)¹, and attaining enlightenment. Thus, Buddhists believe that long sustained training in emotional balance, mindfulness helps one to achieve awareness of the true nature of reality. To know about reality, one needs not only cognitive ability to perceive the external world, but also the affective capability to look further into own internal states. As Emily Mcrae (2018) defined the goal of the Buddhist teaching of life as “Buddhist moral psychology is centrally interested in the psychology of moral improvement: How do I become the kind of person who can respond in the best possible way to the moral needs of myself and others?”². Buddhism concerns understanding which types of mental activity are genuinely conducive to one’s own and others’ well-being, and which ones are harmful, especially in the long run. Thus, the concept of mental states closely intertwines with one’s moral behavior.

Furthermore, Buddhist sermons have highlighted the interdependence of cognitive and affective mental states from a long time ago. Simultaneously, it can be said that this is a relatively recent event in Western philosophy. Thus, comparing the Buddhist notion of morality with the Western concept would be a fruitful perspective which gives us new insights and new interpretations. For that purpose, the author will first compare eastern and western accounts on emotion, and moral judgments then look into what Buddhist emphasis on emotion (anger) and its influence on decision-making can offer modern moral psychology.

The reason why including emotion for the issue of moral judgement is: Even though nature and extent of emotion’s role in moral judgment are still debated, contemporary research in psychology and cognitive science has frequently demonstrated emotion’s significance in a moral judgment. Just mentioning one example, J.D Greene³ and others conducted the functional imaging research and has found evidence that brain areas associated with emotional responses are activated when participants judge moral acts. A significant number of similar studies and articles concerned the link between emotion and moral judgment.⁴ Besides, Buddhist tradition pays close attention to how an individual’s mental states influence ethical

conduct. Therefore, I believe that focusing not only moral judgement but also emotion could give us a wholesome picture of moral reasoning.

About the Western account for the emotion and moral judgment, virtue ethics may be appropriate for comparing to Buddhist ethics than other theories of normative ethics. For example, after comparing consequentialism, deontology and virtue ethics with Buddhist ethics, Silavādin Meynard Vasen concludes that:

The doctrines of dependent co-arising, the Four Noble Truths, no-self, the middle way, can all have their place in a non-artificial way, just as the ethical value of emotions and intentions, of ethical training, and the role of the wise...at least in Buddhist ethics, these notions are more appropriately placed in a virtue ethics context.⁵

Let’s begin with looking into Aristotelian interpretation on emotion. According to Aristotle, a feeling of pleasure or pain and belief are the main components of the emotion.

Emotions are the things on account of which the ones altered differ with respect to their judgments, and are accompanied by pleasure and pain: such are anger, pity, fear, and all similar emotions and their contraries.⁶

On the link between emotions and ethics, Aristotle treats emotion as responsive to reason and integral to the good life while accepting emotions can impair our reason. Like Buddhist ethics, Aristotle emphasizes the emotional balance, and one who has attained balance and appropriateness in emotion and action is a virtuous person. Furthermore, Aristotle claims that some passions are required for being a virtuous man: individuals need to learn how to master their emotions and experience them in the right way at the right times.

However, Buddhism rejects the Aristotelian understanding that all emotions are healthy as long as they are not excessive or inappropriate to the time and place. Ignorance (especially delusion of considering self as real and concrete), attachment, and aversion are considered fundamental poisons of the mind and root of all other kleshas. So, they are harmful emotions. Although there is no exact word for emotion in Pali Suttas and Tibetan resources, Buddhist

1 It can be said that happiness (*sukha*) is a counterpart of the *dukkha*. *Sukha* is not a fleeting emotion aroused by sensory stimuli, it is enduring trait arises from mind in a state of balance.

2 Emily McRae. “The Psychology of Moral Judgement and Perception in Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Ethics”, *The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Ethics*, ed. Daniel Cozort and James Mark Shields (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 335.

3 J. D. Greene, R. Sommerville, L. E. Nystrom, J. M. Darley, J. D. Cohen. “An fMRI Investigation of Emotional Engagement in Moral Judgment”, *Science* (2001), 293: 2105–2108.

4 For example, see the search result from philpapers.org; <https://philpapers.org/s/moral%20judgement%20and%20emotion>

5 Silavādin Meynard Vasen. “Buddhist Ethics Compared to Western Ethics”, *The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Ethics*, ed. Daniel Cozort and James Mark Shields (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 332.

6 Aristotle. “Rhetoric”, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. J. Barnes. Vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1378a20-2.

philosophy can offer in-depth analysis for the study of emotion. Kevin Trainor noted that according to Buddhist tradition "...emotion generically defined is simultaneously too general (it lumps together specific emotions that should be distinguished) and very specific (it sharply differentiates emotions from other sorts of closely related mental states).⁷ There is an explicit explanation of the **kleshas** (affliction), destructive emotions, negative emotions, mind poisons, etc.

Furthermore, there is a **vedana** which is a pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feeling or sensation we feel when we interact with the external world or internal mind. Briefly, vedana is the foundation of the affective dimension. If there are objects, sense organs, and consciousness, naturally feelings will arise. The vedana is constant, always present and kind of specific mental state.

Feelings and emotions should be differentiated. The feeling is a bare sensation, whereas emotion is something that arises from the raw feeling plus varying intensity of likes and dislikes, and other thought processes which can be coined as an intention. Padmasiri de Silva emphasizes,

Structurally emotion may be considered as an interactive complex or construct emerging with the causal network of the five aggregates...The concept of *sankh'ara*, translated as the volitional activity, provides the notion of intention and accountability, crucial in the task of moral criticism.⁸

From this quotation, it is clear that emotional experience is an interaction between sensations, feelings, desires, volitions, and dispositions. Emotion can be described as an effective response to a stimulus based on a person's assessment of a situation, such as anger, fear, sadness, or joy.

Concerning Western account on moral judgment, it can refer to an activity, mental a state, a capacity, or a virtue. In other words, moral judgment is a state of belief and states of desires and feelings since it is a judgment as well as a necessary component for moral knowledge. Also, moral judgment can be a criterion for whether an agent is virtuous or not. Aristotle claims that virtuous person "differs from others most by seeing the truth in each class of

things, being as it were the norm and measure of them."⁹ As an activity, moral judgment is an ability to put an abstract moral principle to a particular situation.

Contrary, the Buddhist account of moral judgment is quite different from the western tradition, so do the Buddhist perspective of moral agency. As mentioned before in the Buddhist tradition, thinking about one as a static self is a delusion which is a source of the suffering and a kind of destructive emotion. For Buddhism, an individual is nothing more than ever-changing mental and physical complex, connected by causal links and interrelated with the rest of the universe.¹⁰ Thus, when confronted with the situation required moral judgment, instead of asking what one ought to do as a moral agent who has an intrinsic, essential nature, Buddhism makes decisions based on the current situation and future well-being for oneself and others.

There is a concept of *Vinaya*, a collection of rules and procedures that govern the Buddhist monastic community about applying moral rules in real life. Because the *Vinaya* is not for all people, for only Buddhist monks and nuns, we could not say that Buddhism is fully rule-based ethics. In a Buddhist sense, moral judgment is the ability to discern, evaluate, make meaning in the moral context. For Buddhist people, if you make a moral judgment, it is neither based on a priori conceptions like goodness or truth nor subjective perspective. Moral judgment relies on economic, social, and emotional circumstances.¹¹ Unlike some utilitarian or deontological explanation, which considers moral judgment separately from emotional influences, Buddhist tradition claims that moral judgment involves a combination of wisdom and appropriate emotional response.

The next step is to see what extent Buddhist account on emotion can offer new interpretation to Western ethical theory. For this purpose, rather than an including all types of emotion, narrow our question to one specific kind of emotion: anger. An experiment conducted by Izard in 1977¹² shows that anger causes not only desire for revenge but also motivates to attack and humiliate the immoral person. Also, Lerner, Goldberg, and Tetlock

9 Aristotle. "Nicomachean Ethics", *The Complete Works of Aristotle*. ed. J. Barnes. Vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1113a32-33.

10 It does not mean Buddhism avoids the responsibility. The doctrine of *karma* takes account for your action with your responsibility. The purpose of no self-doctrine is to let go of your *kleshas* and being more altruist towards all sentient beings. If thinking yourself as a not a real thing, your and other's suffering would be basically the same. Also, your suffering has no greater importance than that of anyone else.

11 In this sense, Buddhism agrees with Jonathan Haidt who claims that moral judgement is determined by our intuition about whole issue.

12 Caroll E Izard. *Human Emotions* (Springer US 1977), chapter 13.

7 Kevin Trainor. "Seeing, Feeling, Doing: Ethics and Emotions in South Asian Buddhism", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71(3) (2003), 523.

8 Padmasiri de Silva. *An Introduction to Buddhist Psychology and Counseling: Pathways of Mindfulness-based Therapies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 61.

1998¹³ conclude that anger simplifies the cognitive reasoning process, and an angry person makes a fewer argument to make a judgment. The experiment conducted by Matúš Grežo and Ľubor Pilárik in 2013¹⁴, shows that anger may lead to more automatic information processing and hesitance to help people in a difficult situation. Thus, anger and its role in ethical decision making is an exciting issue of moral psychology.

For Buddhism, anger is a form of suffering, and like a two-edged sword, it causes pain on who is frustrated. Even though we get angry at an external situation, object, or other people, anger is always an internal state of mind. The three poisons of mind (ignorance, attachment, and aversion (sometimes translated as hatred)) and feeling (vedana) play a significant role in being angry. Pleasant feelings may cause an attachment, painful feelings can arouse latent anger and hatred, and delusion of the ego may rise the ignorance. Thus, the feelings should be adequately understood and managed. However, it should be noted that the distinction between hatred and anger is that anger is typically associated with the “heated” or “hot” mental state. In contrast, hatred may be described as being “cool”.

About the anger, Gil Fronsda describes it as “the desire to strike out at something. It is motivated by hostility. It manifests as wanting to hurt, attack, push away or turn away from something [in an unskillful way]”.¹⁵ So out of three poisons, anger is closely associated with the aversion. According to Abhidhamma, anger is a state that is always unpleasant. Although ranting may bring short term satisfaction, that rage leaves an imprint in our mainstream and may lead to long-term results. Furthermore, anger is an inherently immoral state of mind that tends to lead to immoral actions. In Kodhana Sutta, it is highlighted that:

Anger brings loss. Anger inflames the mind. I'll list the deeds that bring remorse, that are far from the teachings. Listen! An angry person kills his father, kills his mother, kills Brahmans & people run-of-the-mill...Doing these deeds that kill beings and do violence to himself, the angry person doesn't realize that he's ruined.¹⁶

On the issue of managing the anger, suppressing anger is not advised. Instead of suppressing forcefully, defusing anger prevents getting angry again. According to Tashi Tsering, the exploration of anger or any other affective mental state is the first step towards changing your attitude. Taking responsibility and not blaming anyone else is highly recommended. Even, there is saying in Mongolia: “It may be his or her fault for making you angry. However, why are you still mad at the experience?” Also, being mindfulness of anger is the most important step for one to embrace and defuse the anger. Mindfulness can be defined as the “awareness that arises through intentionally paying attention in an open, kind, and discerning way.”¹⁷ The Tibetan word referring to Buddhists is the “*nang-ba*”—an insider, or one who looks within. This concept is closely related to meditation. Meditation is a technique for becoming familiar with one's mind and the nature of mind and phenomena as a mind perceives them.

From here, we can observe that moral perception and attention are central to Buddhist moral psychology. Like sense perception “moral perception refers to the direct and immediate recognition of moral facts or features.”¹⁸ Furthermore, with consistent training, you can cultivate and sharpen your moral perception. This perception builds up awareness, and the awareness results in calm moments which slowly seep down your mentality. The things triggered your anger become the trigger for a cautious moment for preventing you gets angry.

Tashi Tsering suggested another way to manage your anger “is to replay scenes which you have been angry before, using the distance and clarity of a calm meditative mind.”¹⁹ It is interesting to note that UCLA Neuroimaging Study conducted in 2007²⁰ shows that verbalizing our feelings makes our sadness, anger, and pain less intense. Recollecting and verbalizing anger helps you to familiarize yourself and allows you to free yourself from an angry state.

As Aristotle claimed, specific emotions, even anger, can be virtuous as long as one can get angry at the right time and place. On the contrary, Buddhism considers ignorance, attachment and aversion as a fundamental poison which is harmful. The anger is closely associate with the

13 Jennifer S Lerner, Julie Goldberg, and Philip E Tetlock. “Sober Second Thought: The Effects of Accountability, Anger, and Authoritarianism on Attributions of Responsibility” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 24(6) (1998), 563-574.

14 Grežo, Matúš, and Ľubor Pilárik. “Anger and Moral Reasoning in Decision Making”, *Journal of European Psychology Students*, 4(1) (2013), 56-68.

15 Padmasiri de Silva. *An Introduction to Buddhist Psychology and Counseling: Pathways of Mindfulness-based Therapies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 178.

16 Bhikkhu, *AN 7.60 Kodhana Sutta*. https://tipitaka.fandom.com/wiki/AN_7.60_Kodhana_Sutta, Translator: Thanissaro.

17 S. L. Shapiro, H. Jazaieri, and P. R. Goldin. “Mindfulness-based stress reduction effects on moral reasoning and decision making” *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 7 (6) (2012), 505.

18 Emily McRae. “The psychology of moral judgement and perception in Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Ethics”, *The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Ethics*, ed. Daniel Cozort and James Mark Shields (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 349.

19 Tashi Tsering. *Buddhist Psychology: The Foundation of Buddhist Thought*, vol. 3 (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2006), 69.

20 Stuart Wolpert. *Psychology Study finds Resonance with Buddhist Teachings*. <https://www.international.ucla.edu/buddhist/article/72539>. 26.07.2007.

aversion and inherently immoral state. Even though unlike Aristotle, Buddhism does not allow us to be angry, it provides us to be the way to manage anger. Ethically harmful emotional states like anger can be prevented and trained through self-cultivating techniques like mindfulness and meditation. It is closely related to the Buddhist ethics aim, which dictated one's moral behaviour and taught to embrace one's flaws and negativities and used them as a stepping stone for moral development. The idea of preventing harmful emotions could lead the moral theorists to find another aspect of the anger.

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