



Beyond Gods and Reason: Towards a Buddhist Experiential Ethics

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During our relatively short sojourn on this planet, human beings seem to be evolving morally in ways that are undoubtedly beneficial to the future of our species, with more of us than ever living in democratic societies with open markets, the protection of civil liberties, and at least relative tolerance for diverse lifestyles. And yet, despite the advancements that we are making as a species, in many ways we haven't progressed that far beyond our primitive ancestors with respect to our moral interactions with one another. The 2013 Global Peace Index, for example, reports that every region of the world has seen a decline in peace since 2008 with the exception of North America, which has remained static, and that violence and homicide are on the rise almost everywhere (World, 2013). Income disparity between the very rich and the very poor continues to increase; religious, racial, and ethnic tensions persist unabated around the world; and our hyper materialistic lifestyle threatens the future of every species on the planet, including our own.

There are those who argue that what we need to combat some of the more pernicious tendencies that human beings possess is a reemphasis on the importance of ethics as central to both education and civic life. I would argue, however, that the problem is not that we don't have enough ethics in our everyday lives, but that we've traditionally focused on the wrong kinds of ethics. Specifically, I will argue that our fixation on religious approaches to ethics, which ground moral action either in the teachings of sacred texts or the proclamations of religious authority figures, and rationalist approaches to ethics, which provide a justification for moral action in clear and consistent principles that can be universally applied, are incapable of providing the solid ethical foundation that is required to move human beings beyond the kinds of moral, religious, and political conflicts that have characterized our past.

A viable alternative to religious and rationalistic approaches to ethics, I believe, is to be found in the kind of experiential approach to ethics that one encounters in the Buddhist tradition—most notably in such works as the *Kālāma Sutta*, the *Sandaka Sutta*, and the *Satipatthāna Sutta*. This sort of experiential approach to ethics, I further maintain, has the possibility to promote the kind of foundational virtues that are most needed in a multicultural world: openness to the richness and diversity of human experience, non-reactivity, equanimity, and compassion....

Teaching the Kālāmas: The Limitations of Religion-Based and Reason-Based Ethics

Before examining this alternative approach to ethics, it would be useful to understand the inherent limitations of religious-based and reason-based approaches to ethics. In the early Buddhist text, the *Kālāma Sutta*, the Buddha is asked for advice from the members of a clan called the Kālāmas, who tell him that many wandering holy men and teachers have passed through town promoting their own doctrines and criticizing those of others. They then ask the

Buddha whose teachings they ought to follow.

The Buddha's reply to this question is actually quite unique for any religious teacher insofar as he encourages the Kālāmas to embrace an attitude of skeptical doubt regarding the truth:

Indeed, it is proper to be in doubt, Kālāmas, and to be perplexed. When there is a doubtful situation, perplexity arises.

In such cases, do not accept a thing by recollection, by tradition, by mere report, because it is based upon the authority of scriptures, by mere logic or inference, by reflection on conditions, because of reflection on or fondness for a certain theory, because it merely seems suitable, nor thinking: 'The religious wanderer is respected by us.' But when you know for yourselves: 'These things are unwholesome, blameworthy, reproached by the wise, when undertaken and performed lead to harm and suffering'—these you should reject (Holder 21).

In general the Buddha appears to recognize two different types of truth claims: those derived from authority or revealed truths (recollection, tradition, report, authority of scriptures, and the respectability of a particular teacher) and those derived from logical deduction (logical inference, reflection on conditions, fondness for a certain theory, and the perceived suitability of a theory) (Nagapriya 3). While in no way trying to turn the Buddha into some kind of modern skeptic and while recognizing that this text can be open to various interpretations (see Nanayakkara, for example), it seems evident that, at the very least, the Buddha had certain legitimate concerns regarding the use of revelation, authority, and even reason and logic to arrive at the truth.

With respect to revealed truths, such as those derived from sacred texts, religious traditions, or venerated authority figures, the problem that even the Kālāmas grasped was that the ideas promulgated by different religious traditions will often contradict each other. In the *Sandaka Sutta*, it's also observed that even when a religious teaching is correctly transmitted—which is not always the case—it still may not be true in the first place (Nānamoli, 618-628). But an even greater concern for someone like the Buddha undoubtedly must have been that he saw such a reliance on external authority as a kind of abnegation of moral responsibility, a handing over of the essential act of moral discernment to others. This was, after all, the man who at his death exhorted his disciples to "be islands unto yourselves, . . . seeking no external refuge" (Vijara 29-30).

While it's clear that the Buddha certainly didn't reject the use of logical reasoning, per se, to arrive at the truth, it's also clear that he believed that such reasoning was limited in application. For example, in texts like the *Sandaka Sutta*, it's evident that he believed that logical inference could also lead one to false arguments and wrong conclusions (Nānamoli). When it comes to the question of the right way to live, it's also possible that the Buddha recognized that the basic difficulty that the Kālāmas had is inherent in any rationally deduced system of ethics: when conflicts arise among these systems, as they inevitably will, there is not necessarily any reasonable basis for choosing one such system over another. Finally, even when reason and logic are used properly, the truths derived from them may become mere metaphysical constructs that have no connection to the eradication of human suffering, and therefore are morally and spiritually empty. The Buddha's critique of reason in texts like the *Kālāma Sutta*, therefore, should be understood to be a critique of a certain type of speculative reason and not the kind of practical reason that the Buddha himself often employed (Nagapriya 8-9).

Towards a Buddhist Experiential Ethics

But if there are serious problems with the use of revelation, authority, reason, and logic to arrive at the truth about how we should live our lives, what else are we left with? The Buddha's novel approach is look to our own human experience to determine what is true or false, right or wrong. As he instructs the Kālāmas, "when you know for yourselves, 'These things are

wholesome, not blameworthy, commended by the wise, when undertaken and performed lead to one's benefit and happiness'—you should love undertaking these" (Holder, 23). This approach is experiential, insofar as it involves using one's own direct human experience to verify the truthfulness of any teaching, moral or otherwise. It is also eminently pragmatic, in that it aims first and foremost at the overcoming of suffering and the attainment of ultimate happiness.

As the *Kālāma Sutta* progresses, the Buddha proposes that the Kālāmas test for themselves whether behavior characterized by greed, hatred, and delusion is unskillful action that leads to suffering and misery. In the case of hatred, for example, he asks the Kālāmas whether hatred is detrimental and causes misery to the one who practices it, and they acknowledge that this is indeed the case (Holder 21). Thus, it is not enough for the Buddha simply to proclaim his moral teachings to the Kālāmas; he also thinks it necessary that they check these teachings against their own human experience to determine whether these teaching are true or not.

This experiential approach to ethics is also emphasized in the instructions that Buddha gave to his son, Rahula, at the Mango Stone (*Ambalatthikārāhulovāda Sutta*). The text begins with the Buddha admonishing his son never to tell an intentional lie, but he doesn't stop there. Instead he lays the principle that whenever his son is engaged in any physical, verbal, or mental activity, he ought to ask himself whether:

'Would this action that I wish to do... lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both? Is it an unwholesome...action with painful consequences, with painful results?' When you reflect, if you know: 'This action that I wish to do... would lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others; it is an unwholesome... action with painful consequences, with painful results,' then you definitely should not do such an action....But when you reflect, if you know: 'This action that I wish to do... would not lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both; it is a wholesome...action with pleasant consequences, with pleasant results,' then you may do such an action.... (Nānamoli 524-525).

Rather than simply giving his son religious doctrines or rationally deduced principles to follow, what the Buddha is doing here is putting the moral onus on his son to stop and reflect, based upon his own human experience, whether an act he is planning to perform is skillful or not—that is, whether it would lead to greater happiness for himself and others, or greater suffering.

Putting Experiential Ethics into Practice

The next question that I'd like to address is how an experiential ethics system like the one I've just been describing might work in everyday life. Fortunately, we have a marvelous illustration of experiential ethics in practice in the *Satipatthāna Sutta*, which contains the Buddha's teaching on the development of mindfulness.

The text describes what the Buddha calls the four foundations of mindfulness—mindfulness of the body (*kāyā*), mindfulness of sensation/feeling (*vedanā*), mindfulness of mind (*cittā*), and mindfulness of mental content (*dhammā*). For the sake of brevity, we'll focus on the third foundation—mindfulness of mind—and narrow our focus even further by exploring how mindful awareness might be applied to the experience of anger. There's a good reason for focusing on an emotion like anger, since in Buddhism it is recognized as one of the three defilements or poisons (*kilesas*) of the mind, and it's certainly true that much of the misfortunes of the world are caused by those who are swept away by emotions like anger and hatred.

Concerning mindfulness of anger, we read in the text that the practitioner of mindfulness

knows an angry mind to be 'angry,' and a mind without anger to be 'without anger'.... In this way, in regard to the mind he abides contemplating the mind internally... externally...internally and externally. He abides contemplating the nature of arising...

of passing away...of both arising and passing away in regard to the mind. Mindfulness that ‘there is a mind’ is established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world (Anālayo 8).

Although this passage from the sutta is extremely brief, it contains within it three characteristics of an authentically experiential approach to ethics: (1) non-reactivity, (2) equanimity, and (3) the relativization of and non-identification with the content of emotional experience.

Concerning the characteristic of non-reactivity, the Buddha was centuries ahead of his time in understanding that the repression of unwholesome thoughts or emotions does nothing to defuse the power of these emotions. In fact, as the discipline of psychology has demonstrated, repressing or trying to ignore an emotion like anger actually gives greater power to the emotion or, at the very least, causes the emotion to manifest itself in other aspects of our lives. For example, a man might be forced to repress the anger that he feels towards his employer for his condescending words towards him at work, but then when he gets home he takes his anger out on his family in extremely harmful ways. What the Buddha understood was that simply naming emotional states without reacting—knowing the angry mind to be “angry”—is the first step in defusing the power of that emotion over one’s life. By stepping back from the emotion and simply observing it, we no longer simply react reflexively or habitually, as is usually the case (This method is dealt with in greater detail in the *Vitakkasaṅṭhāna Sutta*. See Nānamoli 211-216).

This type of clinical observation of emotional states also involves an attitude of equanimity towards emotions like anger that might happen to arise within us. The first thing to note is that equanimity is not the same as indifference or apathy. Rather, it is an attitude of allowing things to unfold as they are, without our interference. It is “bare knowledge,”—a knowledge that treats emotional states as they are, without craving and without aversion, without, in other words, trying to make things different from what they actually are.

Finally, as we mindfully contemplate an emotional state like anger, we notice two other things about this state. First, it is evident through “contemplating of the mind...internally and externally” that much of the content of one’s mind is affected by external conditions. Second, the contemplation of “nature of...arising and passing away” reveals that emotional states like anger are hardly enduring states, but ebb and flow, morph and transform with time. To put it colloquially, there is no “there there”: these emotions have no enduring or abiding quality. As Larry Rosenberg notes:

Anger, when you look at it closely, is not a steady stream of emotion but a complex state that is constantly changing with intensity and finally disappears altogether. Anger is a movement of energy that comes and goes. It can’t possibly characterize a human being. It doesn’t have any enduring substance (Rosenberg 88).

As I observe these emotions carefully, I realize that they don’t belong to me, they’re not really part of me, and that I don’t have to identify at all with them.

Having briefly described the essential characteristics of experiential ethics as it is developed in a text like the *Satipatthāna Sutta*, the question that arises is what connection this ancient meditative practice has to moral behavior. In the “similie of the saw” (*Kakacupama Sutta*), the Buddha addresses the question of how one should respond to someone who uses harsh, harmful or untrue word towards us. Normally such language would generate anger within us and, before we know it, we might very well find ourselves retaliating in rage, either through equally harsh language or perhaps even through physical confrontation. Instead the Buddha offers us a very different path:

Herein, [monks] you should train thus: ‘Our minds will remain unaffected, and we

shall utter no evil words; we shall abide compassionate for their welfare, with a mind of loving kindness, without inner hate. We shall abide pervading that person with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, and starting with him we shall abide pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill will.’ This is how you should train, [monks] (Anālayo 221).

But how exactly does the method just described move one to a “mind imbued with loving-kindness, abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill will”? In the most basic sense, mindfulness practice can be described as “the ability to see without getting caught up in what we see.” Whereas in the past, a person might respond to some affront to his dignity by almost reflexively responding in anger or rage, the practice of mindfulness now “puts the brakes” on this process. By carefully and equanimously observing the arising and passing of emotional states like anger, by not reacting reflectively, and by learning not to identify with emotional states as one’s own, a person has now created a place of expansive openness within his mind where he then has the opportunity to respond in a more skillful way to other human beings—a process that can ultimately lead to less suffering for himself and others. This in turn leads to the possibility for a more authentic encounter with the other to occur—an encounter that, at its best recognizes that other human beings are not unlike oneself and not wholly separate from oneself.

All this requires hard work to bear fruit, but the practice begins with the simple act of becoming more mindful in our everyday dealings with others. As this practice develops and blossoms, the Buddha assures us our efforts will ultimately lead to the generation of a more compassionate mind—a mind filled with loving-kindness, sympathetic joy and deep concern for the welfare of others. The practice also reinforces itself, as we saw in our examination of the *Kālāma Sutta*. As a person begins to live more mindfully, he begins to see that hatred and greed causes misery in himself and others, while a life of compassion and kindness increases happiness for all. Conversely, the happier a person becomes as a result of living mindfully, the more he desires to live a morally skillful and virtuous life. The “proof” for the Buddha’s method, therefore, lies entirely in the method itself. . . .

The key to this method, I believe, lies in the act of clinically and objectively examining emotional states. This practice forces us to step away from our egoistic attachment to these states and thus neutralizes their power over us. In the space that is created between mindful awareness and action, the possibility of a new dynamic for human interaction is made possible. This is not to say that the practitioner of experiential ethics would always behave compassionately or justly towards others. But with practice, proper guidance, and constant consideration of how one’s actions add to or diminish the happiness of oneself and others, it certainly means that new moral paradigms can be created wherein such skillful behavior can become the norm rather than the exception.

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