



# Mindfulness and Ethics: Attention, virtue and perfection\*

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## Introduction

Mindfulness is regarded by all scholars and practitioners of all Buddhist traditions as essential not only for the development of insight, but also for the cultivation and maintenance of ethical discipline. The English term denotes the joint operation of what are regarded in Buddhist philosophy of mind as two cognitive functions: *sati/smṛti/dran pa*, which we might translate as *attention* in this context (although the semantic range of these terms also encompasses *memory* or *recollection*)<sup>1</sup> and *sampajañña/samprajanya/shes bzhin*, which I will render here as *introspective vigilance*. The first function involves the fixation of attention on an object, and the second, particularly in the context of Mahāyāna literature, such as the *Bodhicāryāvatāra* and its commentaries, which is focus of my discussion here, comes to include.<sup>2</sup> The careful maintenance of that attention and of the attendant attitudes

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<sup>1</sup> See Shulman (2010) and Gethin (1992, pp. 36ff) for excellent discussions of the interpretation of this term and its roots in Pāli literature.

<sup>2</sup> But see Analayo (2004) for a detailed discussion of the somewhat different sense this term has in the Pāli literature.

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and motivations.<sup>3</sup> When we bring attention and introspective vigilance to bear on an object, we can be said to be mindful of it.

Indeed—and this is no news to Buddhist scholars or practitioners, though it is sometimes surprising to non-Buddhist ethicists—the cultivation of ethical discipline is generally regarded in the Buddhist philosophical tradition as a necessary condition of the cultivation both of mundane insight into conventional reality and of the wisdom that allows us to understand ultimate reality. For that reason, not only is there an important reciprocal relation in this tradition between the cognitive and the moral, but mindfulness, *per se*, lies at the foundation of *everything*. In the Pāli canon, particularly in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, but also in such places as the *Vitakkasaṅṭhāna-sutta*, the *Sekha-sutta*, the *Ānāpānasatisutta* and the *Kāyagatāsati-sutta* and even the *Mahāsuññata-sutta* we encounter admonitions to train in mindfulness as the foundation of all Buddhist practice and direct connections between the practice of mindfulness and the cultivation of morality.

In the best-known and most sophisticated text on ethics of the Mahāyāna tradition—Śāntideva's *Bodhicāryāvātāra*—mindfulness is taken up as the very foundation of all of moral practice and development. This foundational role was emphasized beautifully in a Dharma talk by the most ven Khamtrul Rinpoche in which he explained how easy it is to practice the Buddhist path perfectly for one second—just for one second, right action, right speech, right livelihood, etc... and how easy it is to continue for one more second—but that only with mindfulness can that practice be preserved continuously, moment after moment. (Bodh Gaya 1992)

I use the English term “mindfulness” to translate the joint operation of *smṛti/samprajanya*, *dran pa/shes bzhin* not only because it is the

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<sup>3</sup> Hallisey (2010) translates the Pāli cognate *satisampajañña* as *moral discernment* or *prudence*, [141] while recognizing its sense as “*mindfulness and awareness of the way things are*” [144] in non-moral contexts. The examples he offers as reasons for this translation, however, are not entirely compelling. In each case, the second translation would be felicitous. It appears that Hallisey is motivated in part by a discomfort with the moral import of *mindfulness*. I hope that my case for its moral import in this context should set this worry to rest.





terminology preferred in contemporary discussions on the interface of Buddhism and cognitive science, but also because it nicely captures the broad semantic range that the pairs of Sanskrit and Tibetan terms enjoy, bringing together what we would characterize in English as memory, as well as attention. “Mindfulness” in this unusually felicitous Buddhist Hybrid English sense captures the unification these cognitive functions under the rubric of *calling to mind* and vigilantly *retaining in mind*. This is not, I emphasize, to say that these functions are identical. They are not. It is one thing to attend, and another to guard that attention with vigilance, but it is important to note that these functions are co-operative, each enabling and reinforcing the other.

Sāntideva emphasizes that mindfulness is constituted by the union of these functions in the following verses, in which he first introduces the need to care for the mind, and then cashes that care out in terms of these two functions:

17. Those who do not understand the secret of the mind,  
Which is the innermost essence of phenomena,  
Although they wish to achieve happiness and avoid suffering:  
They just wander aimlessly.
18. Therefore, I should maintain and care for  
This mind well.  
If the vow to care for the mind is not maintained,  
What is the point of maintaining any of the other vows?
- ...
23. I therefore beg those who wish to care for their minds:  
Always, assiduously,  
Care for your  
Attention and introspective vigilance!<sup>4</sup>

Here Śāntideva emphasizes first the primacy of mindfulness as a whole—that care for the mind is the foundation of all other virtuous

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<sup>4</sup> All translations of the *Bodhicāryāvataāra* are my own from the sDe dge Tibetan edition of the text.





activity, as well as the foundation of the possibility of happiness, the release from suffering, and a meaningful life. But he concludes this passage by emphasizing that this care amounts to the union of attention and introspective vigilance. That is the essence of mindfulness.

Thinking about the role of mindfulness in ethics as it is articulated both by Śāntideva and Khamtrul Rinpoche—as the necessary mechanism for focusing the mind on the morally relevant dimensions of situations and on one’s own moral responsibility—calls to *my* mind two *prima facie* contrary streams of thought about the relationship between mindfulness and moral experience, setting up interesting tensions that arise both outside of the Buddhist tradition and within it: Aristotle’s account of virtuous action, Theravāda and Mahāyāna accounts of a Buddha’s enlightened action, and the Chan/Zen account of action without thought. These tensions are also relevant to contemporary life, as we try to imagine the goals and methods of values education in our schools, and our individual practice both as ethical agents and as mentors to young people in their ethical development.

Each of these traditions—albeit in ways different from one another—emphasizes *both* the importance of *conscious attention* in moral conduct, *and* the importance of non-deliberate *spontaneity*. This emphasis on spontaneity and on non-cognitive engagement at least appears to be in tension with an emphasis on the deliberate, conscious focus suggested both by the Pāli suttas and indeed in the Chan meditation tradition, and by the *Bodhicāryāvātāra*, as well as by Aristotle in the Western tradition. How can one be at the same time fully mindful in one’s conduct and appropriately spontaneous? In the end, I think that these two strains of thought are not only consistent but mutually illuminating. Reflection on just why this is the case and on how to reconcile the demand for spontaneity and the demand for mindfulness leads to deeper insight into each.

I will first talk briefly about why mindfulness is so important in Buddhist ethics. I will then shift gears and discuss the importance of spontaneity, first in the Aristotelian and then in the Zen tradition. I will close by showing why that spontaneity can only be understood as





desirable if infused by the kind of mindfulness philosophers such as Śāntideva recommend, and why that mindfulness can only be morally efficacious if it suffuses our perception and action so as to render them spontaneous.

### 1. The Importance of Mindfulness

Why is mindfulness so important? Śāntideva puts the point in the following memorable way at the beginning of chapter V of *Bodhicāryāvātāra*:

V:1     One who wishes to protect his practice  
           Should be careful to protect his mind.  
           If one does not protect one's mind  
           It is impossible to protect one's practice.

V: 2     The elephant of the mind  
           Causes much harm and degradation.  
           Wild, mad elephants  
           Do not cause so much harm.

V: 3     Nonetheless, if the elephant of the mind  
           Is restrained by the rope of mindfulness,  
           Then all fear is banished,  
           And every virtue falls into our hands.

Śāntideva here argues that the cultivation of a moment-to-moment awareness of one's own cognitive and emotional states is central to leading an awakened life.<sup>5</sup> The "practice" with which he is concerned here (*śikṣa /bslab pa*) is of course the bodhisattva's training in moral perfection. Without mindfulness, he insists, morality is impossible to

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<sup>5</sup> There are two aspects to this mindfulness, as Śāntideva mentions, marked by the difference between *smṛti/dran pa* on the one hand, and *samprajanya/shes bzhin* on the other. The first pair, which can often denote *memory* as well as *retention*, connote a *keeping in mind* of moral motivation, morally relevant information, etc. The second connote *attention*, or *moment-to-moment awareness*. The *smṛti/dran pa* aspect of mindfulness is cultivated as the basis of the *shes bzhin/samprajanya* aspect. But they form a coherent whole, a psychological state in which one is guided by moral attention, and in which that guiding consciousness is not permitted to lapse. (See Shulman, *op. cit*)





achieve or to maintain. That is because it is possible to remain utterly inattentive to one's own moral life, failing to notice situations that call for moral response, failing even to recognize one's own moral attitudes, dispositions and motivations, even if one is obsessed with the *idea* of morality. Indeed the obsession with the idea of morality in the context of inattention to the moral landscape is a common phenomenon in the modern world, evident in persistent public discourse about moral principles alongside regular blindness to the pervasiveness of poverty, oppression, and preventable hunger and disease, not to mention the destruction of the ecosystem that sustains life.

The three fundamental *kleśas* of confusion, attraction and aversion function in the first instance as distractors, leading us away from the attention that is necessary if we are to live effectively, insightfully and compassionately; awakening consists in part in replacing that inattention with mindfulness. Awakening, and the moral development that facilitates it, Śāntideva emphasizes in the first two chapters of *Bodhicāryāvātāra*, also requires the conquering of fear, as fear—in particular the fear of death—conditions attachment, aversion and confusion so deeply. Hence the remark that mindfulness banishes fear.<sup>6</sup>

There are several other important issues to note here. These opening verses emphasize the fact that mindfulness is necessary in order to combat the natural tendency to *mindless* action driven not by compassionate motivation and insight that Śāntideva extols in this text, but rather by blind passion and confusion. That mindfulness, as the connotations both of *smṛti* and *samprajanya* suggest, need not involve explicit reflection. Indeed, as we shall see below, in the end they had better *not*, although this kind of reflection may be needed at the outset of moral development in order to stabilize them. But there is much of which we are aware, and to which we attend, on which we do not explicitly *reflect*. Consider, for instance, our awareness of the position of our bodies as we sit or move through space, or of the goings-on on the road that guide our driving even when we are absorbed in conversation or listening to a news broadcast or music on the radio, or more to the point, of the activities of others on the sports field that guide

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<sup>6</sup> I explore this issue at length in Garfield (2010/2011).





an expert athlete's actions. There is neither the time nor the resource for reflection in this kind of expert performance, but there is the need for supremely refined attention and awareness, and constant guiding by well-practiced knowledge.

Without attention to our motivation as well as to the situations in the context of which we act, moral conduct is impossible. Later in the same chapter, Śāntideva emphasizes, using the metaphors of Buddhist hell imagery emphasizes a second *moral* dimension of mindfulness, *viz.*, that mindfulness is necessary not only in order for us directly to alleviate the suffering of *others*, but also in order to extirpate the deep existential suffering in ourselves that leads us to moral failing in virtue of our inability to see beyond our own misery. He emphasizes here that this suffering is entirely endogenous, and that moral development is entirely mental cultivation:

V: 7      Who so purposefully forged  
The implements of sentient beings' hell?  
Who constructed the floor of burning iron?  
And whence have those women come?

V: 8      The Sage has explained that  
The vicious mind gives rise to all of these.  
So, there is nothing whatever in the triple world  
More terrifying than the mind.

Because our own *maladaptive* mental activity is the root of primal confusion, it is the root of the other root vices of attraction and aversion, and so of all vice, and so of all suffering. Because our own *effective* mental activity is the only possible root of insight and understanding, it is the only possible root of compassion, of virtue and so of liberation. Left to its own devices, the mind is the mad elephant and the architect of hell. But mindfulness of what we can, on reflection, endorse as cogent and beneficial can tame it, and it can become the disciplined instrument of our own and others' happiness. Without mindfulness, even carefully considered and endorsed reflective knowledge is not efficacious in





action, just as a carefully memorized score cannot guide a musician's skillful performance without the cultivation of its action-guiding force, or a playbook guide a basketball player without assiduous practice not only on the play itself, but in the perceptual and motor skills that enable its effective execution in the moment of play. Mindfulness, from this perspective, is therefore important because without it no other virtue can be manifest; and because with it, all other virtue emerges.

Attention to these issues is novel in the Mahāyāna, but begins in the earliest stratum of Buddhist texts. Consider these important remarks from the Pāli canon, which are taken only as representative. There are many such admonitions spread throughout that corpus. In the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* we read:

And how does a bhikkhu abide contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects in terms of the five hindrances? Here, there being sensual desire in him, a bhikkhu understands: 'There is sensual desire in me'; or there being no sensual desire in him he also understands how there comes to be the arising of unarisen sensual desire, and how there comes to be the abandoning of arisen sensual desire, and how there comes to be the future non-arising of abandoned sensual desire.' [151]

The point is clear. The cultivation of mindfulness is what makes it possible in the first place to abandon the attachment and aversion (sensual desire) that the Buddha is represented as arguing in the *Dhammacakkappavattāna-sutta* are the root of suffering and of action conditioned by the *kleśas*. In the *Vitakkasaṅḥāna-sutta* this mindfulness that allows the abandonment of attachment and aversion is given a more directly ethical direction:

Here, bhikkhus, when a bhikkhu is giving attention to some sign, and owing to that sign there arise in him evil unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate, and with delusion, then he should give attention to some other sign connected with what is wholesome. When he gives attention to some other sign connected to what is wholesome, then any evil unwholesome thoughts







connected with desire, with hate, and with delusion are abandoned in him and subside. With the abandoning of them his mind becomes steadied internally, quieted, brought to signlessness, and concentrated. Just as a skilled carpenter or his apprentice might knock out, remove, and extract a coarse peg by means of a fine one, so too... when a bhikkhu gives attention to some other sign connected with what is wholesome.... His mind becomes steadied internally, quieted, brought to signlessness, and concentrated. [211] (ellipses in original)

Here we see a representation of the reciprocal relation between mindfulness and morality. Mindfulness enables the abandonment of the causes of immorality, and a return to ethical engagement facilitates increased mindfulness. The *Sekha-sutta*, after an eloquent discussion of the aspects of cultivation draws this direct connection between mindfulness and the cultivation of ethical sensibility:

Having arrived at that supreme mindfulness whose purity is due to equanimity, this noble disciple recollects his manifold past lives... Thus with their aspects and particulars he recollects his manifold past lives. This is the first breaking out like that of the hen's chicks from their shells.

Having arrived at that same supreme mindfulness whose purity is due to equanimity, with the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, this noble disciple sees beings passing away and reappearing... he understands how beings pass on according to their actions. This is his second breaking out like that of the hen's chicks from their shells.

Having arrived at that same supreme mindfulness whose purity is due to equanimity, by realizing for himself with direct knowledge, this noble disciple here and now enters upon and abides in the deliverance of mind and deliverance by wisdom that are taintless with the destruction of the taints. This is his third breaking out like that of the hen's chicks from their shells. [464]





This sutta continues to emphasize that the roots of all other virtues are grounded in mindfulness and the capacities of moral perception it enables. The *Ānāpānasati-sutta* and the *Kāyagatāsati-sutta* ground the cultivation of this awareness firmly in the focus on the breath, and on the nature of the body, respectively, with the *Kāyagatāsati-sutta* in particular arguing that relinquishing the attachment to sensual pleasures that ground immorality is grounded in the mindfulness of the similarity of the body to a corpse [952], concluding that:

...when mindfulness of the body has been repeatedly practiced, developed, cultivated, used as a vehicle, used as a basis, established, consolidated, and well undertaken, these ten benefits may be expected. What ten?

One becomes a conqueror of discontent and delight, and discontent does not conquer oneself; one abides overcoming discontent whenever it arises.

One becomes a conqueror of fear and dread, and fear and dread do not conquer oneself; one abides overcoming fear and dread whenever they arise... [957]

Given the role of attraction and aversion in the genesis of saṃsāra, and the role of fear in propelling vice in Buddhist moral phenomenology, this is a very direct connection indeed between the cultivation of mindfulness and the cultivation of moral perfection. Finally, in this sampler of passages from the Pāli suttas, consider the *Mahāsuññata-sutta*, one of the earliest explicit discussions of emptiness in the Buddhist canon:

Then that bhikkhu should steady his mind internally, quiet it, bring it to singleness, and concentrate on that same sign of concentration as before. Then he gives attention to voidness internally. When he is giving attention to voidness internally, his mind enters into voidness internally and acquires confidence, steadiness, and decision. In this way he has full awareness of that.

... He gives attention to voidness internally and externally... He gives attention to imperturbability. While





he is giving attention to imperturbability, his mind enters into imperturbability, and acquires confidence, steadiness, and decision. When that is so, he understands thus: While I am giving attention to imperturbability, my mind enters into imperturbability and acquires confidence, steadiness and decision....

When a bhikkhu abides this, if his mind inclines to walking, he walks, thinking: ‘while I am walking thus, no evil or unwholesome states of covetousness and grief will beset me. In this way he has full awareness of that. And when a bhikkhu abides thus, if his mind inclines to standing, ... sitting... lying down, ...thinking: ‘while I am lying down thus, no evil, unwholesome states will beset me. In this way, he has full awareness of that.

When a bhikkhu abides thus, if his mind inclines to talking, he resolves: ‘Such talk as is low, vulgar, coarse, ignoble, unbeneficial, and which does not lead to disenchantment, cessation, peace, direct knowledge, enlightenment and Nibbāna, ... such talk I shall not utter...

But he resolves: ‘Such talk as deals with effacement, as favours the mind’s release, and which leads to complete disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, peace, direct knowledge, enlightenment, and Nibbāna... such talk I shall utter. In this way, he has full awareness of that. [973-974]

So here, in one of the very earliest discussions of emptiness in the entire Buddhist canon, we already have an emphasis on the need to cultivate mindfulness of emptiness, and an articulation of the intimate connection between that mindfulness and moral cultivation, a connection only made possible by the union of *smṛti* and *samprajanya*—by not only attending to the emptiness of self and others, but also ensuring that that attention is constant and action guiding. Āryadeva, Candrakīrti and Śāntideva were to explore this connection in rich detail much later.





## 2. Spontaneity

So far, so good. But as I anticipated above, there is another narrative about mindfulness in ethical discourse, one we find in both Western and Buddhist sources. Let us begin by examining how that narrative arises in the Western tradition, with its origins in the *Nicomachean Ethics* of Aristotle. [1105a17-1105b8] Aristotle, in distinguishing between *virtuous* action and action *merely in accordance with virtue*, addresses himself, as would any Buddhist moral theorist, to the relation between the action and the state of mind that gives rise to it. Actions that are merely in accordance with virtue are those a virtuous person would perform, but which are performed not with virtuous motivation, but by accident, under compulsion, under the instruction of another, out of desire for praise or gain, etc. Virtuous actions, by contrast, are performed voluntarily, with pleasure, as a consequence of one's character, *spontaneously*.<sup>7</sup>

Aristotle draws a number of important distinctions between virtuous action and action merely in accordance with virtue, prominently including the role of a stable character as well as the relation between pleasure and pain and the role of practical wisdom. But an important aspect of this complex distinction—and the one most relevant to the present issue—concerns the spontaneity of action in the Aristotelian sense. The “one thought too many problem” (Williams 1981) brings out this aspect very nicely. You are ill. I visit you in the hospital. You thank me for coming. I reply that there is no need to thank me. I only came because I knew that it was the virtuous thing to do, and I wanted to be good. Suddenly what looked like an act of kindness turns out to be hollow, ironically because it was not? done from an impulse to be kind. If I were truly kind, I would have visited you out of concern for *you*, not out of concern for my moral state. The Aristotelian insight that a kind

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<sup>7</sup> As we will see below, this spontaneity may well nonetheless require deliberation and choice in order to be effective. But the act of deliberation may itself be undertaken spontaneously, of course.





action is an action performed spontaneously *because one is kind*, as opposed to one done *in order to be kind* captures this feature of virtue.

We can connect this more directly to the character of mindfulness and the distinction between mindfulness and reflectiveness. Virtuous action in this case requires that one have *internalized and be guided* by the relevant habits of moral perception and action, and that these are steady features of one's ethical engagement. Being so guided—having these *embedded in one's mind*—determines that one's actions are motivated by friendship and compassion. On the other hand, the very need for reflection—for the extra vitiating thought—indicates a *failure* of the kind of mindfulness we expect in the morally mature agent, akin to the failure that would be represented by the basketball player having to remind himself to get into position, or the pianist asking herself what notes come next in mid-performance. In this case one attends not to one's friend, but to the demands of morality themselves, and that indicates a *failure* of the kind of attention represented in true mindfulness, not a refinement of it. Reflection is necessary in the context of training, of justification or of explanation; it gets in the way in the context of expert action.<sup>8</sup>

The Aristotelian account of moral development reinforces this picture. *Paideia*, or moral cultivation,<sup>9</sup> on Aristotle's account involves teaching a child to perform virtuous actions, as well as to take pleasure in those actions. The goal is a mature moral agent with a stable character constituted by the virtues as well as a set of desires, perceptual ability practical skills and strength sufficient to enable activity inspired by those

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<sup>8</sup> On Aristotle's account of *paideia* (education/upbringing/cultivation) early moral *paideia* involves a great deal of explicit attention guided by a moral expert, but no deliberation or choice, and no infusion of moral conduct by genuine virtue (*aretē*) or practical wisdom (*phronēsis*). These traits of character emerge only with maturity, at which point one becomes *attentive* to the demands of morality, but not necessarily, in the context of action, *reflective*. On the other hand, on the Aristotelian view, as we will see below, there certainly are cases in which moral decision requires explicit reflection, and the deployment of explicit deliberation. In this respect we cannot map the Aristotelian framework directly on to the Buddhist framework. These are, in this respect, and in others, very different approaches to morality. See Garfield (2011) for more on this.

<sup>9</sup> The parallel Sanskrit term would be *śikṣa*, again connoting teaching, but teaching *how*, or *cultivating*.





virtues, who performs virtuous actions not because *those actions* are virtuous, but because *she* is virtuous, spontaneously, joyfully, without having to think first about whether this is the right action.<sup>10</sup>

A different model of spontaneity—but a model of spontaneity in the moral domain nonetheless—emerges in Chan Buddhism, partly through an inheritance of ideals of *wu wei*, or effortless action, from the Daoist tradition that partially informs it in China. (Hansen 1992, 2011, Kasulis 1981, Garfield 2006, 2011, Cowherds 2010, Finnigan 2011, Finnigan and Tanaka 2011, forthcoming) Here the driving idea is the suspicion of conceptual thought common to later Buddhists traditions and Daoists. From the perspective of these traditions, such discursive mental activity always involves the superimposition of unreal universals upon reality. In the case of action this leads to an ideal of moral agency in which perception guides action mediated by compassion and skill, but not by conceptual representation, not by thought.

Spontaneous action on this model is also nondual in an important sense connecting directly to the role of mindfulness in morality. Spontaneous action is characterized by an absence of subject-object duality in phenomenology. In awakened action, there is no awareness of self as subject or actor, no awareness of action as action, of instrument as instrument or of object as object. The absence of the objectification (*ālambana/dmigs pa*) of agent, instrument, action and object is a hallmark of action emanating not from egoistic involvement but from awakened awareness.

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<sup>10</sup> Once again, the picture will become more complex once we attend to the role of *deliberation* in Aristotle's moral psychology.





We can now see more clearly the tension to which I alluded earlier in the characterization of morally mature action. On the one hand, we demand of ourselves, and others, as moral agents, a certain degree of mindfulness, of consciousness and attention. Moral agency is not robotic. On the other hand, we demand a certain degree of spontaneity. Moral agency is not calculating. The task is to find the middle ground between the viciously mindless and the psychopathically deliberate. This is the task, I might add, not only of moral theory, but also of moral education. It is to the resolution of this tension and the search for the *madhyama pratipad* in morality that we now turn.

### 3. Digression on the Way to a Solution: Deliberation and Intention

Before seeking a complete resolution of the tension between the demand for greater attention to the moral domain and the need for less explicit reflection about it implicit in the accounts we have been scouring, let us first deepen that tension through attention to two technical terms, one Aristotelian, one Buddhist: *bouleusis* or *deliberation*, and *cetanā/semś*, or *intention*. Consideration of the role that the concepts denoted by these terms in their respective domains complicates matters in interesting ways, but also shows us the way to resolution.<sup>11</sup> Let us begin with the Greek context.

As we have seen, the Aristotelian ideal of spontaneous virtuous action involves an agent acting voluntarily and from character. Nonetheless, the manifestation of virtue in action requires not only the possession of *moral* virtue, but also two essential auxiliary character traits, *enkrates* or *moral strength*—the role of which we can set aside for present purposes—and the *intellectual* virtue of *phronēsis* or *practical*

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<sup>11</sup> I emphasize that in considering these terms together I am *not* suggesting that *cetanā* is synonymous with *bouleusis* or indeed any other Aristotelian ethical term, and I am certainly not suggesting in this essay that Buddhist and Aristotelian ethics are structurally analogous. (See Garfield 2010/2011 and 2011 for more on this). I am only suggesting that there are good heuristic reasons for thinking about these terms at the same time because, despite the differences in their semantic range, and despite the structural differences between the theories in which they are at home, similar problems arise.





*wisdom*, to which we now turn. Aristotle emphasizes that for virtue to manifest as virtuous action, we need to know *how* to act. The impulse to generosity, for instance, must be mediated by the practical knowledge of how to give, to whom to give, in what amount to give, and this is a kind of *knowledge*, albeit practical knowledge.

This knowledge is realized in the process of *deliberation*, culminating in the *choice* (*prohairesis*) of a particular action appropriate in a particular situation. Deliberation begins when an end is given, and terminates when the means to that end are selected, with the choice of action. *Phronēsis* is excellence in deliberation. The importance of *phronēsis*, and hence the need for *deliberation*, complicates the account of moral spontaneity. If truly virtuous action is mediated by deliberation, we should pause before we take spontaneity to entail a retreat from mindfulness. Even mature virtue does not entail that virtuous action is completely *thoughtless*, at least not for Aristotle.

We encounter a parallel complexity when we consider the role of *cetanā*, or intention, in Buddhist moral psychology.<sup>12</sup> *Cetanā* is central to karmic formation, because it is our intentions that have the greatest effect on who we subsequently become. Aristotle would have agreed. It is for this reason that it is important to develop positive intentions, intentions that are morally beneficial. And of course *cetanā* is *cognitive*, *conceptual*.<sup>13</sup> So, just as in the Aristotelian framework, Buddhist accounts of spontaneous action must be modulated. Morally positive action, however free from duality we might hope it can become, is, at least initially, *intentional*, hence *conceptualized*, hence implicated with subject-object duality, objectification, always conditioned by ignorance, and therefore, in the end, with *samsāra*.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> This term is notoriously difficult to translate, partly because of its broad semantic range in Pāli and Sanskrit, and partly because of the incommensurability of Buddhist and Western moral psychology. (Heim 2003). Gombrich (2005) uses *intention*; Keown (1991) prefers *choice*; Rhys Davis (1898) likes *volition*; other translations include *choice* (Karunaratna 1979), *decision*, and, felicitously, *intending* (Myers 2010).

<sup>13</sup> For an exceptionally clear treatment of the role of *cetanā* in Buddhist theory of action see Myers *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> This is why the relevant distinction, as is so often the case in Buddhist epistemology is that between *perception* and *reflection* or *conceptual thought*. When we perceive, we







The point here is that even appropriate conception is *conceptual*; even positive karma is *karma*, and it is important for Buddhist soteriological theory that a Buddha does not generate karma, does not objectify, does not engage conceptually. A Buddha, therefore, acts without *cetanā*, *non-intentionally*. This is difficult stuff—the idea is not simply that a Buddha acts without *reflection* of the one-thought-too-many kind, but that a Buddha acts without any conceptuality, or intention, at all. Now a great deal of debate about how to understand the subjectivity and agency of a Buddha without the category of intentionality has been generated by this conundrum.<sup>15</sup> (See Griffiths 1994, Siderits 2011, Finnigan 2011, Finnigan and Tanaka forthcoming, Garfield 2011, Myers 2010 for some recent moments in these debates.) We need not venture into that fraught terrain for present purposes, for what concerns us here is the role of mindfulness in *human* action; path, not fruition, and we are concerned in our lives and in the present context with the cultivation of our own moral development and that of our fellow citizens. It is, therefore, important for us to note that Buddhist theory of the path to awakening must make room for action that is *intentional* in the full sense, on the way to action that *is not*, or at least to action that is intentional in a *different sense*, a distinction encoded for instance, in Śāntideva's important distinction between *aspirational* and *engaged* bodhicitta<sup>16</sup>—between an altruistic commitment that is

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engage directly with particulars, and hence with *reality*. When we reflect, we *conceive*, and apprehend unreal universals. For unawakened human beings, the morally salutary finger pointing to the moon of perfection remains, for all that, a finger.

<sup>15</sup> Buddhaghosa attempts to resolve the conundrum of a Buddha's motivation being at the same time intentional but not karmic by introducing a new "neutral kind of intention and karma that characterizes the Buddha's and arhat's actions: *kirīyakarma* or *kirīyacetanā*, which are neither the fruits of other karma nor generative of future fruits. This karma is also called "path karma" (*maggakarma* or *maggacetanā*). This device is picked up by Vasubandhu in *Abhidharmakośa* as well. This move to something that is supposed to be just like an intention, directing action to its object, only without objectification or conceptualization does appear rather desperately *ad hoc* only emphasizing the difficulty and the importance of the problem.

<sup>16</sup> I draw this distinction differently from the way it is typically drawn in the Tibetan tradition. Most in that tradition take aspirational bodhicitta to be the aspiration to take the bodhisattva vows, and to be only that bodhicitta that inspires one to engage in the bodhisattva path, with engaged bodhicitta arising the moment one takes the vow, well before non-conceptual engagement with phenomena arises at the higher bodhisattva grounds. But I prefer to take the metaphor Śāntideva employs—that of the distinction





conceptually mediated and that which is direct and spontaneous, whose necessary condition is the cultivation and development is its conceptual precursor.<sup>17</sup>

All of this is to say that whether we see the landscape from Pagan Greece, from Buddhist Asia or from the standpoint of our own modern reflection on the nature of human action, we must acknowledge that *even if our ideal of action is one of spontaneity* there is room for attention, thought, deliberation, in short, for mindfulness, at least if we are talking about action undertaken by *persons*, as opposed to Buddhas or divinities, whatever they may be like. After all, even in the most spontaneous expert action, such as that in sport, virtuoso musical performance or intimate human association, while explicit calculation may well be absent, attentive responsiveness is essential.

The football player does not deliberate, but she is aware of what is going on around her when she crosses the ball to the spot where the striker will arrive; the saxophone soloist is attentive to the piano and the bass, but is not thinking about music theory; the mother is focused attentively on her child, but is not deliberating about whether to embrace him. Each, however, acts in a way that reflects an internalization of principles which, while not present in consciousness, direct consciousness, allowing us to be more mindful not of those *principles*, but of the *immediate objects* that determine action, and to be mindful of

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between those who have merely read guidebooks and want to travel and those who have traveled—more seriously, and to see this distinction as encoding the distinction between an inferential or conceptual motivation and a perceptual, or direct motivation, arising from the direct perception of the nature of suffering made possible by transcendental wisdom. So, I see aspirational bodhicitta as operative until the achievement of the perfection of wisdom, and engaged bodhicitta as operative only after the direct apprehension of emptiness. I think that this makes better sense of the role of the ninth chapter in *Bodhicāryāvātāra*, as well as of the initial metaphor. I do realize that this is heterodox.

<sup>17</sup> Once again, we might note a difference between the Aristotelian and the Buddhist accounts of *paideia/sikṣa*, and hence of moral majority: For Aristotle the development of a moral student into a full moral agent involves, *inter alia*, the development of conceptual, reflective capacities, such as skill in deliberation; for Śāntideva on the other hand, the development of a bodhisattva from aspirational and to bodhicitta involves the abandonment of conceptual mediation in favor of direct perception.





those ways in a sense that neither objectifies self, nor object, nor action, but which allows action to flow spontaneously.<sup>18</sup>

#### 4. Mindful Spontaneity/Spontaneous Mindfulness

There are lessons to be gained from this cross-cultural excursion for the relationship between mindfulness and spontaneity in traditions that valorize both. First, it is worth noting that spontaneity, whether it is conceived in the Buddhist or the Aristotelian tradition, is not *randomness*. Any spontaneity in action worth cultivating in the first place emerges from training, and much of that training requires the cultivation and maintenance of mindfulness, mindfulness of moral principles and of the moral situation.<sup>19</sup> At the training situation, that mindfulness will even involve a great deal of explicit meta-awareness, as is necessary in the development of any expertise.

Mindfulness is also implicated with spontaneity in morally salutary action. For the cultivation of mindfulness is the cultivation of a particular spontaneous response—that of being mindful. This cultivation is the very point of mindfulness meditation. Here we must remember that mindfulness is not simply an *accompaniment* to or a *quality* of actions or of perceptual sets; being mindful is *itself* an action, and training in mindfulness makes being mindful, being *attentive*, a spontaneous way of taking up with the world.<sup>20</sup>

Mindfulness—a spontaneous disposition to be aware that has become *embedded in the mind*—is therefore that which makes spontaneous

<sup>18</sup> This idea of spontaneous, but mindful flow is articulated elegantly by Csikszentmihalyi (1990).

<sup>19</sup> One might at this point ask whether training is *essential* or *accidental* to the cultivation of mindful spontaneity. Suppose, as Nic Bommarito has suggested, that a surgeon could simply inculcate mindful spontaneity in me without training. Wouldn't this be a good thing? It would, but unfortunately, that is not the way that *human* moral development works, and we are addressing the human condition here. (Of course tantra might involve just such a shortcut, but that is beyond the scope of this paper.)

<sup>20</sup> And of course if it could not become spontaneous, as Nic Bommarito points out (personal communication), a vicious regress of mindfulness would emerge.





action skillful as opposed to random. Mindfulness also confers a kind of *freedom* to our actions—not freedom in the Augustinian sense, that is, the freedom of a causeless will—but the ability to be genuinely *responsive*, as opposed to being merely *reactive*;<sup>21</sup> the ability to mobilize our own moral sensibilities and understanding in action as opposed to being driven by unmodulated reflexes. This freedom is the freedom of *authorship* of our lives, as opposed to handing our actions and our lives over to be buffeted about by external events and the actions of others. Śāntideva puts it this way:

70. Since it is the only the basis of coming and going,  
Think of your body as a vessel;  
Let it be your wish that your body  
Achieves the purposes of sentient beings.
71. In this way one becomes free.  
And with a perpetual smile.  
Forgoing scowls and dark countenance,  
And becomes a sincere friend to all beings.

Śāntideva emphasizes here that when mindfulness becomes spontaneous we gain control of our emotional and interpersonal lives. That control issues not in a freedom from the interests of *others*, but a freedom from our *own* destructive reactive habits that lead not to spontaneity but to heteronomy; a freedom *to* advance the welfare of all, and a freedom manifested both in skillful responsiveness and in genuine joy.

There is a nice analogy to be noted between this account of the generation of mindfulness as a spontaneous response in the moral domain and Tsong kha pa's account of the development of mindfulness and spontaneity in meditation. Tsong kha pa, in discussing the role of mindfulness at the ninth state of meditative absorption—an extremely advanced attainment—points out that mindfulness is consistent with the absence of an effort to maintain it—that it becomes spontaneous and

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<sup>21</sup> I thank Geshe Damdul Namgyal for this happy distinction.





infuses one's meditative practice with a spontaneity that manifests in effortlessness, despite being the culmination of a great deal of effort.

The achievement of the ninth mental state can be understood in terms of an analogy: in the case of those who are extremely familiar with reciting the scriptures and so on, if the initial motivation to recite arises and they begin, even though their mind is occasionally distracted elsewhere, the recitation continues effortlessly, without interruption. In a similar fashion, once your mind is settled with mindfulness (*dran pa/smṛti*) ..., even if you do not continually *cultivate* mindfulness and vigilance (*shes bzhin/ samprajanya*), your concentration is able to focus continually, for long periods of time... Since *effort* is not needed to maintain a continuous stream of mindfulness and vigilance, this is said to be without application or effort.

For that to arise, in an *earlier* phase of practice you continually and energetically cultivate mindfulness and vigilance. During *that* phase, it is necessary to produce a concentration that can be sustained throughout long meditation sessions.... This is the eighth mental state. ... [I]n this eighth state, you must uninterruptedly cultivate mindfulness and vigilance, so it is said to associated with application, or effort. (Tsong kha pa 2002, V. III, pp 76-77, emphasis mine)

This account of the advanced stages of meditation provides a nice account of the effort necessary to develop spontaneity in this domain, as well as of the consistency of mindfulness with that spontaneity at advanced stages. Not surprisingly, given the mutual reinforcement of meditation and ethics, this account is remarkably similar to that we have been developing of the relationship between mindfulness and spontaneity in that domain.

I am reminded here of a wonderful interview of the great jazz pianist Hank Jones by the journalist Terry Gross (2005 archived in 2010). She asked him whether, when he plays, he knows what he will play next, expecting, in a suitably romantic mood, the answer that the music just comes out of its own accord, without any thought or intention. Jones





responded, “Terry. What do you think all of those years of practice are *for*? I may not be consciously aware of what my fingers are doing now, but I am certainly thinking hard about the next two measures.” Great jazz, Jones emphasizes, may be *spontaneous*, but it is not *random*. And it certainly requires responsiveness to those with whom and for whom one is playing, a responsiveness that itself must be spontaneous, not labored, albeit the product of countless hours of deliberate labor.

So, what do *you* think all of those years of practice are for? To become a mindless robot, or to become a virtuoso human agent? Mindfulness—deliberate, metacognitive attention—makes training possible, but the goal of that training is to abandon that attention in the context of mature perception and action. But we train not to become mindless, but to become more spontaneously mindful in a deeper sense, mindful of ourselves, of others, of the moral landscape and of our actions so that we can act with the effortless virtuosity of a jazzman bodhisattva.<sup>22</sup>

To paraphrase Candrakīrti on compassion: Mindfulness is important at the beginning, the middle and the end; it is the seed that gives rise to morality; the rain that nurtures its cultivation; and the harvest in skillful spontaneous interaction that is the hallmark of moral sensibility.

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<sup>22</sup> See *Bodhicāryāvātāra* I:19, where Śāntideva remarks that the effects of the cultivation of mindfulness are evident even in sleep, or when one is distracted.

From that moment on,  
Even when one is asleep or inattentive  
An uninterrupted continuum of merit  
Limitless, like the sky, constantly proceeds.

Of course, Śāntideva is really emphasizing here the role that the vow plays in the psychological continuum, as an ever-present substantial cause of merit. But it cannot fulfill this function if the vowed mindfulness itself is not maintained in some form as an aspect of consciousness even when attention is not explicit.





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