

Meditation is an ethical activity

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6.4 MEDITATION IS AN ETHICAL ACTIVITY

6.4.1 Wise attention

6.4.1.1 Meditation, that is, mind-training, is also an ethical activity; it is a wholesome process because it will only work when the meditator is motivated by generosity, lovingkindness and wisdom. The key factor in mind-training (that is, the practice of meditation and mindfulness) is *attention*. In a sense, mind-training is *how well* you direct your attention towards the mental state. When we are mindful, we are present in the situation: we *are* the situation.

6.4.1.2 Wholesome mindfulness is sometimes called “**wise attention**” (*yoniso manasikāra*), where *yoniso* literally means “as regards the womb” and *manasikāra* means “mental working” or mentation. In practice, the term refers to not merely looking on the surface of things, but directing one’s attention to the root of the phenomenon. Behind all phenomena (whatever that can happen) there are the three universal characteristics impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self. It is sufficient initially to focus one’s attention on *the impermanent nature of the phenomenon* by way of preparing the foundation of seeing it as unsatisfactory and not self.

6.4.1.3 Take for example, when anger arises in you, you are *conscious* of it (which means, it is karmically potent), but you are always not aware or mindful that it is *unwholesome*,² as it will somehow hurt both yourself and others as a result. Your anger is fuelled by two conditions, internal and external. *The internal condition* is your own latent tendencies of lust, aversion and ignorance. *The external condition* is the memory or impression of the other person that you have directed your attention to. (Strictly speaking, this is also an internal condition, but the other person is the stimulus, as it were.) The attention here is, of course, wrong attention, that is, unwise attention (*ayoniso manasikāra*), since the whole process is fuelled by the unwholesome roots of greed, hate and delusion.³

6.4.2 Being mindful and being mindless

6.4.2.1 One of the benefits of mindfulness is that it empowers us with positive emotion and motivation. Very often, our problem in behaving ethically is not that we are not well informed of the situation—“behaving ethically does not come from cognitive difficulties”⁴—but *from an emotional inability to see the ethically relevant features of the situation*.⁵ Dreyfus, in his paper on “Meditation as ethical activity,” gives this example:

For example, I see a homeless person. I know that this person is in trouble. I also know that I could help this person, but that would involve some trouble. I decide to remain uninvolved. This

¹ SD 18.11: <https://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/18.11-Virtue-ethics-piya.pdf>

² That is, you might be aware that your anger *is* unhealthy, but you are incapable of stopping it anyway, and are driven on by it.

³ For an Abhidhamma model for overcoming anger (wise attention), see SD 19.14(5.1).

⁴ Dreyfus 1995:47.

⁵ See Ronald de Souza, “The rationality of emotions,” in Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (ed), *Explaining Emotions*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980:127-151.

decision is not due to a cognitive deficit, but an emotional inability to overcome my fear, as well as an inability to feel strongly enough for the person. This fear and indifference lock me into a certain vision in which I focus on the aspects of the situation that threaten me. This prevents me from considering other perspectives, particularly the ethically salient aspects of the situation, the fact that a fellow human being requires help that I can provide.

In particular, this precludes me from engaging in what Strawson describes as “the range of reactive feelings and attitudes that belong to involvement or participation with others in interpersonal human relationships.”⁶ (Dreyfus 1995:47; reparagraphed)

6.4.2.2 This is where, says Dreyfus (as would any Buddhist familiar with meditation), mindfulness is especially relevant. Our present-moment awareness and wise consideration make us alive to the external situation as it arises outside us, and to our mental reactions as they unfold inside us. The mindfulness training here is to allow ourselves to be aware of our present attitudes and emotions. It is clear that *attention is not introspection*. While introspection is an active searching or examination of one’s thoughts and feelings, attention (in mind-training) is simply a *non-judgemental reflective awareness of events both inside and outside us*.

As both a state of heightened receptivity as well as a starting point for further action, mindfulness is both active and passive. Mindfulness also brings together emotion and cognition, acting as the basis of both, and thereby enabling and keeping together these aspects of the human psyche.

Mindfulness is also directly relevant to the development of basic moral sensitivity. If we go back to our example, we can see that the development of mindfulness would have helped me to deal with the situation more appropriately. It would have given me the awareness of the emotional obstacles, here fear and indifference, that prevented me from helping a fellow human being. It would have allowed me to notice the limitations of my perception, and shift to another more compassionate perspective. Being mindless, however, I was carried away by my emotions. I was led to act unethically, not because I did not know what needed to be done, but because I was unable to resist my impulses. I walked away from the homeless person displeased with my inability to help and yet unable to do anything else. (Dreyfus 1995:48; emphases added)

6.4.2.3 It is therefore clear that mindfulness (or meditation in general) does not work by itself. It cannot be truly effective in a lasting and wholesome way when it is divorced from its ethical framework. Mindfulness, in other words, is an enabling virtue only in relation to other virtues. Not any form of attention is wholesome; *only those forms of attention that enables us to see closer to the true reality of things and empowers us with positive emotions are virtuous*. It is only in this context is meditation an ethical activity.

R924 Inspirations 565
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⁶ P Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment*, London: Methuen, 1974:9. (Dreyfus’ fn)