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# The Aesthetics of Excess

Maria Heim

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This article explores South Asian Buddhist analyses of feelings and their roles as intermediaries between the external world and moral choices and motivations. Specifically, I consider emotions that, in their extremity, may not at first appear to play a significant role in motivating moral action and yet are evoked frequently in Buddhist narrative: fear, horror, grief, and awe. I argue that the texts suggest a “moral naturalism” whereby the external world is structured morally. Feelings of fear and horror, insofar as they take their cues from such a moral structure, can provide trustworthy moral guides for those sensitive to them.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INTENTION has long been recognized as a central component of Buddhist ethics. The Buddha’s assertion that “it is intention [*cetanā*] that I call karma” has led modern scholars to characterize Buddhist ethics as “an ethic of intention” (Gombrich: 289).<sup>1</sup> An ethic of intention is meant to indicate that the moral value of an act (as determined by its karmic effect) rests on the intention or volition underlying it; moral acts are not simply external events but have an internal component of choice and will. Less clear, however, is the question of what causes or generates intentions and the moral significance of what lies behind them. This is a long-standing problem in moral thinking in general that may be put another way: If moral action depends on the intention or will to act morally, then how does one come to have the right sorts of intentions? How does one become motivated to begin with?

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<sup>1</sup> The full quotation is: “Cetanāhaṃ bhikkhave kammaṃ vadāmi; cetayitvā kammaṃ karoti kāyena vācāya manasā” [Monks, it is intention that I call karma; intending, one does karma with body, speech, and mind] (Hardy: 3: 415).

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Sanskrit and Pali Buddhist texts provide different sorts of answers to this question, but in general they identify feeling and perception as generating intentions, a choice that makes the role of emotion in moral behavior immediately evident. Buddhist discussions of mental processes are fascinated by causality and how mental states give rise to further mental states. A quite standard listing of mental factors that generate intention is given in the well-known Pali text *The Questions of King Milinda* (*Milinda-pañho*): The teacher Nāgasena says that first there is contact between the senses and the external world, which gives rise to feeling, which gives rise to perception or awareness, which produces an intention, which gives rise to initial thoughts and then sustained reflection.<sup>2</sup> This is a sequence seen elsewhere in Buddhist texts as well, and while there is some disagreement among Buddhists about the exact mental factors (*cetasikas*) involved here, they do agree that feeling and perception lead to intention and that various processes of reflection follow.<sup>3</sup>

These mental factors do not have ready English equivalents, so some additional explication of some of the key terms here is in order. The Pali word for feeling (*vedanā*) is broader than the English word *emotion*, in that it includes physical sensations that originate from the body and from forces outside one's control in the external world, such as feelings produced by the humors, by the changes of seasons, and by the maturing of karma (Trenckner: 134–135). *Vedanās* are also mental in nature, corresponding more closely with our word *emotion*.<sup>4</sup> Varying lists of feelings are given in Buddhist texts. Often there are simply three: pleasurable, painful, and neutral (Hardy: 3: 400). However, feeling is described also as fivefold: pleasure, pain, joy, grief, and equanimity (Warren and Kosambi: 390); and in other places the Buddha acknowledges multiple lists of feelings: three, five, six, eighteen, thirty-six, or 108, enumerated according to distinctions between religious feelings and worldly feelings and occurring in the past, present, and future (Trenckner: 45–46; Trenckner and Chalmers, vol. 1: 399). Another word sometimes related to emotion is *bhāva*, but it too is broad, incorporating a variety of experiences and states. Sometimes it can mean mental states or conditions, which might bear some resemblance to the English word *emotion*.

<sup>2</sup> He says: "Phasso pi tattha uppajjati, vedanā pi tattha uppajjati, saññā pi tattha uppajjati, cetanā pi tattha uppajjati, vitakko pi tattha uppajjati, vicāro pi tattha uppajjati, sabbe pi phassapamukhā dhammā tattha uppajjantīti" (Trenckner: 60).

<sup>3</sup> The *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, for example, lists these mental factors thus: *phasso, vedanā, saññā, cetanā, ekaggatā* (the unification of mind with its object), *jīvitindriya* (vitalizes associated mental states), and *manasikāra* (attention) (Bodhi: 77–81 [II.2]).

<sup>4</sup> The distinction between bodily (*kāyikā*) and mental (*cetasikā*) feelings is made clear in a discussion in the *Milindapañho*, which argues that arhats may have bodily pains but are free of mental feelings (Trenckner: 253).

The meaning of *cetanā* does not have a single English equivalent either, in that it incorporates various elements of intention, will, volition, and motivation. In the Pali material, the importance of *cetanā* is elaborated in the Vinaya and elsewhere primarily in terms of moral culpability, describing an ethic in which one is not held accountable for blameworthy actions done without intent. This interpretation of *cetanā* emphasizes, in philosophical terms, intentionality, that is, the notion that moral culpability from an act rests on whether or not one freely chose to engage in it. This gives *cetanā* a flavor of a rational and free choice.<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere, however, *cetanā* is defined in terms of exertion (*padhāna*), as a purposiveness or striving to do something, suggesting the English word *motivation*.<sup>6</sup> In this context, *cetanā* is described less in terms of making cognitive choices about what to do and more in terms of the mental effort in carrying out an action. In other texts *cetanā* has a quite affective quality, described as the pleasure associated with the decision and resolve to perform meritorious actions, in anticipation of, during, and even after performing them.<sup>7</sup>

Returning to the analysis in the *Milindapañho* we see that the will and motivation of action are conditioned in part by feeling, and then different moments of reflection occur—initial thoughts (*vitakko*) and sustained reflection (*vicāra*). These two terms indicate the whole cognitive process of thinking: applying one's thoughts to and then reflecting on a matter. Thus, intention emerges not as a result of rational reflection but as a result of feeling and perception—our reactions and responses to the external world. Feeling, not reason, generates the intentions on which morally significant actions rest, and cognitive activity follows feeling and intention. This ordering suggests a quite striking departure from many western ethical systems, in that here, rationality and reflection, far from being the basis of moral action and choice in motivations, follow along behind. Feelings are regarded as prior to motivation and are thus central to analyzing how moral activity comes about. Thus it would appear that feelings are not distractions or impediments to forming intentions but, rather, are necessary and inevitable causal agents in making moral choices that result in

<sup>5</sup> Richard Gombrich emphasizes this aspect of *cetanā*, arguing that what is meant by the importance accorded to *cetanā* is free will: "Karma is a doctrine of free will. Indeed, will is paramount: the doctrine is that what counts is the intention, not the effect" (170).

<sup>6</sup> For example, "Cetanāti ca padhānavasena vuttam" (Maṅgalatthadīpanī: 3).

<sup>7</sup> The story of Mahāpajāpati Gotamī, who gives a gift to the Buddha and is enjoined to have six *cetanās* from this one act, is a good example. According to the commentaries she has a good intention directed toward the Buddha in three moments: before giving, while giving, and after having given. In addition, the Buddha says that she should have three more *cetanās* directed to the *saṅgha* before, during, and after, for a total of six *cetanās* (*Suttasaṅghaṭṭhakathā*: 18; see Horner 1937: 1001). The three thought moments (*cetanās*) of taking pleasure in giving a gift are also elaborated at length in Maṅgalatthadīpanī: 8.

karma. Management of the will, then, would seem to require attentiveness to feelings on causal grounds, and the possibilities for performing morally significant action will rest in part on mastery and control of those feelings.

In the ensuing discussion in the *Milindapañho* King Milinda asks the monk Nāgasena if it is possible to point to the difference between these various states or moments because it seems to be our experience that they arise together (Trenckner: 63–64). That is, it seems that though we can *analyze* them in their causal relations, we *experience* them all at once rather than in a sequence of discrete events. Nāgasena agrees and argues that it is not possible to tell them apart, for it is like soup or a sauce in which discrete things are mixed together. Our actual experience is that feeling, intention, and thought consort together in something of a jumble. That actual experience does not testify to the analysis of the causal sequence is important and indicates a certain degree of psychological realism. The difficulty of having direct access to how thoughts, judgments, feelings, and intentions influence morally relevant action might find modern expression in psychoanalytic theory, which has forced our attention on the difficulty of sorting out the emotions that lie just beneath the surface yet motivate much of what we do. We often regard our motivations as based in reason rather than emotion and have difficulty sorting out the various elements of our moral motivations and decisions.

In another Buddhist analysis feeling's role as mediating between contact with the world and meritorious action is specified in a different way. In the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* a discussion of various mental processes identifies the source of *vedanā*, the varieties of it, its result, its cessation, and the steps leading to its cessation. The source of feelings is contact with the world, and the result is meritorious or demeritorious action.<sup>8</sup> Here feelings are direct responses to input from the external world as well the innermost springs of moral action.

Martha Nussbaum has invited us to see how emotions are important in moral philosophy, arguing for a conception of emotions that does not dismiss them simply as “blind surges of affect” (1990: 291). Like the Buddhist analyses here, she sees emotions as integral to moral decision making and “part and parcel of the system of ethical reasoning” (2001: 1). For Nussbaum (2001: 135–136), emotions have an “intimate connection” with motivation and are closely connected to action. She sees them as “judgements of value” about the people and things in the world that provide reliable guides to action because they are intimately acquainted with what

<sup>8</sup> For example, “Phasso bhikkhave vedanānaṃ nidānasambhavo. . . . Yaṃ kho bhikkhave vediyamāno tajaṃ tajaṃ attabhāvaṃ abhinibbatteti puññabhāgiyaṃ vā apuññabhāgiyaṃ vā” (Hardy: 3: 412).

matters most to us and how we fit into a world that influences us in ways we do not control. In her view emotions have some cognitive content and are empirical beliefs about what is important and valuable for our well-being (2001: 2–3).

As Nussbaum shows, many traditions in western philosophical ethics have tended to regard emotion with distrust and have generated various arguments against attaching moral value or significance to emotion. Her project is to argue that this distrust is misguided and that the objections to emotions playing a role in the moral life can be met. As the Buddhist evidence here shows, these discourses share with Nussbaum a sense that what drive human motivation and decision making are affective responses. This does not make morality problematic for Buddhists, however, for emotions, as well shall see, can be reliable guides to what is important to human beings. They do so because they are most intimately acquainted with a world that is itself structured in moral terms and that guides our responses to it in ways that are appropriate for making merit and avoiding demerit. How this might be so is the subject of this article.

## MORAL NATURALISM IN BUDDHIST LITERATURE

The view that the intention to perform a moral deed comes from feeling and perception rather than from rational reflection has important implications in religious ethics. If moral choice and exertion are the result of our responses to the world in the immediate particularity of its context, rather than of the rational formulation of abstractions, then our approach to Buddhist moral reasoning may need to find new points of entry. If moral response is prior to rational reflection, then rational and discursive styles of ethical analysis may have limitations on just how much they can explain of what prompts meritorious or demeritorious action.

Once again, Martha Nussbaum has paved the way for enriching moral philosophy's ability to grasp the nuances of context and particularity. As Nussbaum illustrates, abstract moral philosophy may not be as well equipped as literature to help us enrich our grasp of the particular ways in which human emotion intersects with moral interests. Turning to literature and narrative can help us to appreciate the complexity of emotion and its impact on our decisions and motivations. In narrative, emotions themselves are engaged in a way that they are not in abstract and theoretical discussions of moral philosophy. The work of Charles Hallisey and Anne Hansen has taught us how to read Buddhist narrative in a way that goes beyond crude moral didacticism. Much as narratives can teach lessons, convey morals, and provide stimuli to moral reflection, they can also deliver us to a world of thought and feeling more profound than our own

and thus prefigure a moral sensibility. In certain forms of Buddhist literature emotions are cultivated and crafted into experiences that make meritorious action possible.

Although the various formal analyses of feeling and its relationships to motivation and action suggest a causality that identifies feeling's potential in moral processes, it is difficult to specify in any generic way the exact nature of how feelings or emotions as a single class influence moral action. Some emotions may have moral value while others do not, and the precise type of moral value an emotion may have will differ from that of other emotions. Neither Nussbaum nor the Buddhists treat emotions in detail as a single phenomenon; rather, because emotions differ so much from one another, they are perhaps best investigated on a case-by-case basis. Literature is particularly effective at evoking each emotion's complex particularity.

Equanimity (*upekkhā* or *majjhatabhāva*) is often set forth as the ideal Buddhist emotion and might appear to be a good candidate for having moral value. It is the feeling of neutrality—neither pleasure nor pain, neither attraction to nor repulsion from the external world. As a feeling of even-mindedness, balance, and impartiality it is sometimes conceived as the source of many other Buddhist moral values and actions, described by Buddhaghosa as present in every skillful state of mind (Aronson: 82). For Buddhaghosa, the value of equanimity is skillful in part because it “hinders deficiency and excess, and blocks partiality [*ūnādhikatānivāraṇarasā pakkhapātupaccheda-narasā*]” (Warren and Kosumbi: 395). The importance attached here to balance from extremes would seem to suggest that the more passionate and turbulent emotions have little role in the Buddhist view and are principally to be quelled and calmed. It seems unlikely that we would find in Buddhist moral thinking much room for strong and excessive emotion.

And yet some of the best known, often told, and widely circulated stories in the Buddhist world provoke not equanimity but excessive reactions of fear, grief, horror, and astonishment. Much of the narrative literature invites us to experience not only extreme emotions but also quite painful ones. Because the Buddhist soteriological project is aimed at eliminating sorrow and bringing about peace, it is intriguing that painful feelings are so frequently invoked in Buddhist literature. Perhaps most challenging to understand in terms of our question about the relationship of emotions to ethics in a tradition that so prominently values equanimity is the affective turbulence aroused by feelings of fear, anguish, grief, and horror. Why do Buddhist stories attempt to frighten and horrify us? Do such experiences serve a moral or religious purpose?

We find a rich literature of anguish in the *jātaka* and *avadāna* literature and stories of self-sacrifice and extraordinary gifts, in which the Bod-

hisattva is depicted as giving up his own limbs, his loved ones, and even his life for others. These stories are particularly poignant examples from a genre of tales that celebrate Gotama Buddha's former lives as a bodhisattva, in which he cultivated the perfection of his character by extraordinary moral deeds. An important moral perfection is generosity, and some of the best known tales celebrate the renunciation and magnanimity of great gifts. Perhaps the most famous story (besides that of Gotama Buddha's life) in many places in the Buddhist world is that of Prince Vessantara, in which the Bodhisattva's crowning completion of his perfection of generosity required him to give away his beloved wife and children. Other stories in both Sanskrit and Pali traditions describe the astounding "gifts of the body" (*dehadāna*), such as when the Bodhisattva (as a king named Śibi) gives away his eyes and when the Bodhisattva (in his previous birth as a hare) roasts his entire body to give as a gift of food. All of these stories are riveting and dramatic in their praise of such giving. They may also owe some of their widespread popularity to the fact that they give voice to considerable moral ambivalence.

Narratives of the Bodhisattva's gifts provide good cases to explore the role of fear, anxiety, and awe in Buddhist literature for several reasons. The first is because the acts described attract these feelings among the characters in the narratives themselves. Plucking out eyes and chopping off limbs as gifts are not morally unambiguous acts, even in tales intended to celebrate and exalt the Bodhisattva's meritorious deeds. The observers in the tales themselves react with fright and dismay. Second, the narratives employ graphic description and horrified response to generate feelings of horror and fear in the audience. In places the tales cue the audience to react in certain ways. Finally, these stories have left an enduring legacy on the tradition itself, inspiring lengthy discussions in other Buddhist texts and commentaries about these acts. Thus both the narratives themselves and the textual traditions reflecting on them furnish us with a significant body of literary and commentarial reflection on the intersections of emotion, ethics, and aesthetics.

The telling of the Vessantara story is a good example of a text instructing its readers on how to respond to its narrative.<sup>9</sup> In the oldest Pali version (see Cone and Gombrich) the events are immersed in pathos, culminating with the Bodhisattva giving away his two innocent children to be slaves to a wicked brahmin. Who can forget the chilling refrain that occurs at

<sup>9</sup> The story is known to most Buddhists in oral and visual form, in performances, recitations, and Buddhist temple sculpture and paintings. In Sri Lanka recitations of the Vessantara story are used ritually at Buddhist funerals during all-night mourning vigils (Cone and Gombrich: xlii). The shared oral experience of the story, a quite different experience from reading it silently by oneself, is likely to be relevant for conceiving of the text's emotional impact on the audience.



the moment of Vessantara's exorbitant generosity when he offers up the children? "Then there was a frightening thing, then there was something to make your hair stand on end, for when he gave away the children, the earth shook. Then there was a frightening thing, then there was something to make your hair stand on end, when the prince, who brought prosperity to the Sivi's kingdom, raising his folded hands, gave those luckless children as a gift to the brahmin" (Cone and Gombrich: 59–60). Being told of the appropriate circumstances to have one's hair stand on end is not uncommon in Buddhist texts: "horripolation," like other emotional reactions, can be enjoined. Here and elsewhere in the narrative, the text gives direct cues—and permission—to its hearers to feel apprehension and ambivalence about this extraordinary act.

The various literary devices employed in both Pali texts and the Sanskrit poetic language in the *Garland of Birth Stories* (*Jātakamālā*) seem crafted in such a way as to invite the audience to share in the anguish of the characters in the stories. There is often a cast of characters who are appalled by the bloodiness of the Bodhisattva's gifts of his own body. In the tale of King Śibi, for example, we are told how the Bodhisattva's decision to give his eyes to a suppliant fills his ministers with misgivings; "distressed, agitated, and worried," they remonstrate with him to no avail (Khoroché: 13). When he tears out his eyes, his subjects do not share in his happiness of the gift; rather, "everywhere in the palace and royal capital, tears of grief sprinkled the ground" (Khoroché: 36). It takes some time before the people's grief begins to abate.

In another story the Bodhisattva is once again a king and is asked by some hungry ogres (*rākṣasas*) for food. He decides to give them what they want, that is, "thick, solid lumps of flesh, dripping with blood," which he procures by first letting them lap up his blood and then by slicing up his own body (Khoroché: 51). His ministers, not surprisingly, are indignant and alarmed and beseech him to reconsider. The ogres, for their part, though at first impervious to his goodness, are radically transformed at the offering of his flesh after consuming it, and they "thrill with intense emotion," and their "hearts are melted with devotion" (Khoroché: 56). They go on to become civilized and refrain from taking life.

While in many of these stories the ministers and subjects react in horror, in other stories the one to watch is Śakra, king of the gods, who experiences a range of emotions, from astonishment and indignation to fear and uneasiness, at the deeds of the Bodhisattva. As Reiko Ohnuma (116–120) has suggested in her dissertation on *dehadānas*, Śakra often seems to play the role of the curious and attentive reader: he asks the questions about the moral ambiguities of these gifts that the reader may wonder about, and he serves as a reliable, and often skeptical, witness. Śakra some-

times devises tests to challenge the Bodhisattva's resolve out of fear that the Bodhisattva is seeking to replace him as king of gods by performing such meritorious deeds (Khoroché: 42). But once he can be assured that the Bodhisattva has no designs on his own position, he acts as a register of incredulous astonishment.

In addition to a divine witness, the stories often describe a natural witness. It is customary for the earth to quake and the seas to boil at the extraordinary deeds of the Bodhisattva. One of the most famous earthquakes known to Buddhist literature is the earthquake that occurred when Vessantara gave away his children. In a Sanskrit telling this earthquake is described as a reaction of giddy excitement: "The earth heaves her breasts, the great mountains, as though shivering in ecstasy" (Khoroché: 71). The shaking of the earth alerts Śakra and the other gods to what has happened and fills them with wonder.

A much more terrifying seismic response to Vessantara's gift can be found in some of the Pali accounts of this earthquake. We already have seen in the narrative itself that "there was a frightening thing . . . something to make your hair stand on end, for when he gave away the children, the earth shook," suggesting that we might be frightened not only by the deed but by the earth's response. The frightening aspects of the earthquake trouble King Milinda in the *Milindapañho*, and he queries Nāgasena at length about it. In the *Milindapañho*'s description of the natural events after the gift, the earthquake is a scene of violent natural calamity, eliciting not wonder but outright fear. The scene describes violent winds, tidal waves, contortions of the highest mountains, and many creatures in grave danger:

The great winds raged below in a state of great strength and vigour because of the [king's] giving. And slowly, slowly, one by one, they blew up in confusion, subsided, rose up and whirled about; leafless *pādapa* [trees] crashed down; thunder clouds, densely massed, raced across the sky; dust-laden were the cruel winds, the sky obscured; the winds blew violently and incessantly; a huge terrifying sound arose; because of those agitated winds, slowly, slowly the water [began to] tremble; when the water was trembling, fish and turtles were jostled about; waves formed in pair upon pair; creatures living in the water were terrified; the waves of water rolled on without a break between them, the roar of the waves went on, terrible bubbles reared up, there were wreaths of foam, the great sea boiled up, the water rushed to all points of the compass, crests of water flowed from the mouth [of rivers] upstream and downstream; terrified were the *asuras*, *garuḷas*, *nāgas*, and *yakkhas*, and in their agitation thought: "what now, how now, is the ocean turning upside-down?" and alarmed, they sought a way of escape. While the sea was jostling and turgid, the great earth quaked with its mountains and oceans. The rocky peak of a summit of

Mount Sineru, twisting round was turned about; snakes, mongooses, cats, jackals, swine, deer and birds were in consternation; the *yakkhas* of little power cried out, the *yakkhas* of great power laughed—[all while] the great earth was quaking. (Horner 1969, vol. 1: 164–165)

This passage, worth quoting at length in Horner's vivid translation, poses the question of why the earth responds so violently to what is regarded as one of the most meritorious gifts ever. It is not surprising that Milinda was perplexed by this gift and its reaction in the world. Why does the earth react at all to moral events, and why does it respond so violently to this one?

Given the considerable ambivalence of the act itself evinced in the Pali accounts, could not the earth's reaction be a reflection of the general state of mental upheaval this act generated? One possibility is to see natural phenomena as metaphors and symbols of emotions. There is considerable precedent for the symbolic apprehension of nature in Indian aesthetic theory that may furnish a useful comparative analogue here. Tamil *caṅkam* poetry indicates a close affinity between internal and external turbulence, between physical and affective response. A. K. Ramanujan's (1967, 1974) work on *caṅkam* poetics demonstrates how every landscape is a mood and how landscapes are formulized into a symbolic language depicting the inner world of feeling. Tamil literary aesthetics employ natural landscapes to chart emotional peaks and valleys. To employ Tamil poetic conceptions to this example, we might see here the exterior landscape matching the interior landscape of the tumult and ambivalence of this act. It may be that, like Tamil *caṅkam* poetics, this scene of environmental destruction is a metaphor or symbol for internal states.

There is little in the Buddhist sources that would suggest that this earthquake is a symbol, however. Indeed, the context of the discussion in the *Milindapañho* treats the quake in a very naturalist and literal sense. Milinda is puzzled that this earthquake is not the result of one of the eight "known" causes of quakes. Traditionally, there are eight causes of earthquakes, ranging from winds blowing, which disturb the earth because it rests on water, to the activities of great beings or the Buddha.<sup>10</sup> This particular earthquake was not caused by one of the eight causes; it was exceptional and happened only once (Trenckner: 115). It occurred because the earth was so weighed down with Vessantara's virtues that it buckled

<sup>10</sup> The eight causes are (1) great winds, (2) tremors caused by a holy person or god thinking of the limited earth on limitless waters, (3) when a bodhisattva leaves heaven and enters a human womb for his last birth, (4) when a bodhisattva is born from that womb, (5) when a bodhisattva becomes a buddha, (6) when a buddha sets the wheel of dharma in motion, (7) when a buddha leaves aside the body, and (8) when a buddha obtains final *nirvāṇa* (Hare: 209–210; Trenckner: 113–115).

under the pressure and trembled seven times (Trenckner: 116). Similarly, the storm clouds that occurred are not among the three categories of storm clouds found in the world (those holding rain, those found during cold weather, and those shedding rain). These clouds were exceptional to known natural causes (Trenckner: 114).

This attempt to fit an extraordinary event into a known pattern of natural phenomena suggests that the earthquake was not understood by the *Milindapañho* as a symbolic event. A more likely interpretation is to see this scene and others like it as linked to a kind of “moral naturalism,” in the sense that the physical world is so ordered that it responds to moral acts. The earthquake is not a metaphor but, rather, demonstrates an actual feature of the world and its connections to human moral deeds. The world can actually buckle under the pressure of the Bodhisattva’s merit.

Moral naturalism means that the external world is inscribed with a moral order. This is expected in a world structured according to karma because making merit is a natural process, in the sense that it bears fruit independently of human or divine arrangements. Yet the Vessantara earthquake suggests an additional angle on moral naturalism that depicts a physical world that is intimately connected and responsive to moral action. In this account the world responds in a manner quite exceeding the ordinary causal mechanisms of karma in which actions produce automatic and proportionate effects. Here the natural phenomena react *violently* to extraordinary goodness, almost in surprise and in quite exceptional circumstances. It is as though the earth is capable of experiencing and indicating awe.

Moral naturalism has important implications for the role of feelings in moral action. It is *natural* to care, to be alarmed at, and even to fear extraordinary feats of the Bodhisattva, for the earth itself responds in this way. Moreover, moral naturalism indicates that we are closely linked with an external moral structure that is natural and prior to human arrangements. Emotions are close and immediate empirical judgments about the moral world and how we fit into it. This fact would suggest that *vedanā*, as our first contact with goodness or badness in the world, might in fact be a trustworthy guide to moral action.

## UNIVERSALITY AND OBJECTIVITY IN THE EMOTIONAL LIFE

One difficulty in seeing feeling and emotion as key to moral action is a prevailing sense that emotions are too subjective, transient, and partial to ground morality. Much of western ethics is staunchly of this view, preferring to leave moral action safely in the hands of reason, rather than

subject to the vicissitudes of emotion. However, the force of the objection is mitigated when a different sense of emotion emerges, one in which emotion is not regarded as so unreliable and subjective. In fact, many Buddhist texts support the opposite conclusion: feelings are to a large degree predictable and natural, even universal in the sense that they are widely available across space and time. Moreover, emotions and mental states can be cultivated and trained in ways that can make them reliable and useful as moral guides.

Buddhist texts often display a marked degree of confidence in predicting the emotional responses that people will have to certain events. Anyone familiar with Buddhist discourses that analyze mental processes will recognize a feature they share with South Asian *sāstric* discourse more generally, that is, a proclivity toward making lists that provide at once definitive moral prescription as well as a sense of exhaustive and totalizing analysis. This capacity of the *sāstra*-style scholastic and technical language of Buddhist texts to get at very internal, subjective states is taken for granted in the tradition. To cite just one example, in a passage in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* we are told that there are recluses and holy men who possess certain undesirable qualities; gifts given to them are “not very fruitful, nor very beneficial, nor very brilliant, nor very thrilling [*evam eva kho bhikkhave aṭṭaṅgasamannāgatesu samaṇabrahmaṇesu dānaṃ dinnaraṃ na mahapphalaṃ hoti na mahānisaṃsaṃ na mahājutikaṃ na mahāvippahāraṃ*]” (Hare: 162).<sup>11</sup> The sense here is that we can name definitively certain morally relevant deeds that will be either thrilling or not; it is not only that the texts can predict whether an act is fruitful but that they can predict and instruct an affective response.

That emotions are predictable and prescribable is significant. Such confidence in predicting emotions and reactions from a given act assumes and promotes a naturalness and universality in emotional life. By stating that a certain sort of gift is thrilling, the text presumes that any and all rightly ordered persons will be stimulated from such a gift. Such discourses do not seem to share the sense of many modern theorists that feelings and aesthetic responses are private, subjective, or culturally circumscribed. The modern trend toward assuming that emotion is a “sociocultural construct” (Lutz; Lutz and Abu-Lughod: 7) is posited as a reaction to what has been called an “ethnocentric” and “western” idea that emotions are natural and universal (Lutz and Abu-Lughod: 25). In contrast, Buddhist authors were

<sup>11</sup> The term for thrilling here is *mahāvippahāraṃ*, from *vipphurati*, “to agitate, move, vibrate, quiver.” Buddhaghosa says that a thought that is *vipphāra* has the condition of trembling at first arising, like a bird spreading its wings to fly into the air and like a bee diving into a lotus at first scent of it (Warren and Kosambi: 115; see also Hare: 162n). As often seems to be the case with Buddhist conceptions of emotions, there is a physical component here: one is *moved*.

quite comfortable assuming that emotional and aesthetic experiences are universal in the sense of being part of an objective and natural order.

*Rasa* theory in Indian aesthetics shares the same basic presumption, of course, extending it to considerations of how literature can bring about formulaically the experience of certain basic and shared human emotions. *Rasa* is less a feeling than a mood, savor, taste, or relish, and we should not willy-nilly assume direct connections of Buddhist ideas about *vedanā* with Indian aesthetics. Nevertheless, there are features of *rasa* theory that might be suggestive here for comparison. Some Sanskrit aesthetic traditions identify eight relatively stable feelings or emotions (*bhāva*) that when manipulated by poetic excellence or dramatic gesture can produce the corresponding *rasa* in a sensitive connoisseur.<sup>12</sup> The eight emotions, all assumed to be universally possible in human experience, are love, mirth, grief, anger, exertion, terror, disgust, and wonder. These emotions correspond to eight moods or *rasas*, which are the “tastings” or “relishings” of the eight feelings: erotic, comic, compassionate, cruel, valorous, terrible, abhorrent, and miraculous. These moods occur only under the correct conditions: literary and dramatic success must meet with the presence of a *rasika*, someone with taste.

In the development of Indian aesthetic theory *rasas* came to be regarded as universal in the sense that any well-cultivated aesthete can experience them, and feelings can be crafted into experiences shared collectively. Emotional experience can be reproduced by dramatic gestures and language to be savored publicly and in this way become “unyoked from the emotional authenticity of any particular person’s feelings” (Appadurai: 107). As Edwin Gerow, describing the theories of the medieval literary theorist Abhinavagupta, puts it, “The reality of emotional life not only can be separated from the determinate contexts in which emotion is normally realized, but is, when thus perceived *in se*, the very same thing as esthetic pleasure” (221). This is a conception of a type of human experience of emotion that is not subjective and particular. The emotion is already there, understood as permanently impressed on a person’s soul (this is why the emotion is called stable or permanent, *sthāyi-bhāva*), and is tapped by poetic skill to allow one to savor it (De: 53). Because all humans have these emotional experiences, their capacity for appreciating *rasa* is inherent; because many people never learn to hear poetry, however, they may not, in practice, learn to savor the emotions (Gerow: 221). Aesthetic experiences of emotion are also generalized; the ability to experience literary and

<sup>12</sup> Some list nine, including *sānta*, peace or tranquility, but often it is left out because it does not lend itself to dramatic performance. There are other *bhāvas*, but they are considered to be too flighty and transient to be able to relish them through poetic and dramatic skill (Raghavan: 437).

dramatic art is to “apprehend the universal” (Gerow: 221). Feelings and aesthetic experiences are *not* regarded as subjective or relative, and in fact they bring one out of one’s own self and into a shared and universal space—what Abhinavagupta calls “a consensus of minds” (Gerow: 221).

It is curious that experience of a generalized emotion invoked through artifice should produce such pleasurable aesthetic experience. As Daniel Ingalls explains, *rasa* is “not simply the apprehension of another person’s mental state. It is rather a supernormal relishing based on an involved sympathy” (in Selby: 30). Here, apprehension of others’ experience from a distance, cultivated through artistic sensibility, is regarded as something to be relished and enjoyed, even in the case of the more violent or negative *bhāvas* and *rasas*. Indeed, private experiences of the emotions of terror and disgust are not thought to be pleasing when they are particular to oneself and privately one’s own; yet the connoisseur seeks out fine poetry and goes to dramatic performances to relish the terrible and abhorrent “tastes” alongside the more pleasurable ones. Private emotion may be painful, but public sharing of cultivated sympathy is a pleasure (De: 52).

Although the Sanskrit poetics traditions do not draw specific moral implications from aesthetics, they do articulate how art can put us into direct contact with what is most sublime and fulfilling in human experience. These observations about aesthetic experiences may be broadened to a larger sphere of experiences when we consider Brāhmaṇical and Advaita Vedānta perspectives on emotions.<sup>13</sup> As Padmanabh Jaini discusses, bliss or *ānanda* for Upaniṣadic thinkers is grounded in the self and thus ultimately in Brahman. Experiences of happiness, and indeed any other emotion or *rasa*, are experiences that transcend the subjective or the particular: “All experiences are manifestations of the same ‘savour’ (*rasa*) that constitutes the essence of the cosmic self” (Jaini: 5). If *ānanda* is the true reality of the Self (*ātman*), and the Self is identified with Brahman, the ultimate reality, then bliss is a sort of happiness continuum that we are already in but simply need to wake up to. The particular experience is simply an instance of a cosmic experience that is already there, prior to the individual partaking in it. Here we find a religious rather than literary postulate about emotion whereby it is pulled out of the private, subjective sphere into a shared and generalized human space.

Although Buddhists are unlikely to share in many of these metaphysical assumptions, these comparative examples from other Indic traditions

<sup>13</sup> Advaita Vedānta was, as Gerow puts it, “the backbone of the Kāśmīri Śaiva tradition” (see 225–226), in which Abhinavagupta developed his thinking, and may provide some of the ontological possibilities for the transcendent generalization of experiences that we see here attributed to the Upaniṣads by Jaini.

may broaden our imagination about how emotions might be thought to be more stable, public, generalizable, and predictable than is sometimes thought.<sup>14</sup> Buddhist texts prefer to conceive of aesthetic and emotional experience in naturalistic terms rather than in terms of transcendence, but either way there is a sense of their existing in the world prior to our own particular experience. We have already seen how the world “experiences” emotions whereby they can occur outside of human minds.

### IS IT MORAL TO MAKE US QUAKE WITH FEAR?

We have begun to see how emotions, even painful ones, might be seen to have the features of reliable guides: they are predictable and prescribable, they are natural and generalizable, and they take their cues directly from empirical experience of a morally ordered physical world whose impositions on us are critical for our well-being. It remains to be seen, however, how the painful emotions of fear and grief specifically contribute to meritorious action.

A notable feature of the moral heroism of the Buddha or Bodhisattva is that it is not usually depicted as something to be imitated. The tales of the bodily gifts and the gift of wife and children do not enjoin their readers to go and do likewise. The stories seek to inspire awe and admiration rather than provide tangible exemplars for moral behavior. They do not suggest that one imitate the Bodhisattva or the Tathāgata but, rather, that one note through awe and astonishment the chasm between one’s own capacity and the perfections of the great being.

A key issue in the narratives related so far regarding the Bodhisattva’s extraordinary deeds concerns not simply that such terrible events invoke emotional experience but also that such events are morally ambiguous in themselves; the texts lead us—through emotion—to a place of moral bewilderment. Milinda gets at this in questioning Nāgasena on the nature of excess. Vessantara’s gift is an *atidāna*, an excessive gift (the prefix *ati-* is itself significantly ambiguous in the Pali, in that it can mean either excessive or just “great”—but here Milinda means excessive, when something is just *too much*). It is objectionable not only because it caused anguish to Vessantara’s children and wife but also simply on the grounds of being excessive, like excessive rains destroying crops, excessive weight sinking a ship, and excessive passion leading to madness (Trenckner: 277). Nāgasena counters that excess is not in itself a vice; consider the excessive hardness of the diamond, the excessive purity of the lotus that keeps it

<sup>14</sup> Though, of course, Buddhists were practitioners of Sanskrit poetics.



from being sullied by mud, and the exceeding brilliance of the sun that dispels darkness. The Bodhisattva's excess makes him unrivaled, and he becomes "praised, extolled, commended, magnified, and famous in the ten thousand world-system" (Trenckner: 101). Hair-raising tales have the feature of creating renown for the Buddha's deeds and teachings and make themselves memorable for us to be able to discuss them in our own time (suggesting the universality of emotions across space and time). As Nāgasena puts it: "Gradually and by successive tradition his renown has reached our meeting here today so that, defaming and disparaging that gift, we question whether it were well given or ill given" (Trenckner: 276; see Horner 1969, vol. 2: 97). Excess inscribes itself on human memory on the strength of the feelings it can invoke and thus bridges time. The moral power of fame is also in evidence here. Emotional impact is not conceived as fleeting or transitory but, rather, endures a long time and thus stimulates memory, ideas, and moral deliberation.

In addition to excess, the Tathāgata also likes to inspire urgency. The experience of *samvega*, translated variously as agitation, urgency, thrill, fear, and anxiety, is often used in Pali sources to indicate fear that is capable of instigating a sense of moral and religious urgency. It is a feeling that the Tathāgata delivering his teaching inspires among deities in the heavens in exactly the same way that a lion's roar causes brutes of the forest to quake in fear (Morris, vol. 2: 33). The gods realize their impermanence and vulnerability, which is a moment of fear and agitation. In a *jātaka* tale a king who notices his first gray hair, which beckons him to retirement and renunciation, experiences *samvega* (Fausboll: 138). Sometimes great teachers deliberately generate *samvega*, urgency, in the negligent, as when Mahā Moggallāna performed a miracle by quaking the heavens to cause wonder and amazement in the gods, making their hair stand up on end (Trenckner and Chalmers, vol. 1: 254).

The use of *samvega* in these examples suggests that some fear is valuable, in that it can replace complacency with urgency. *Samvega* is like a goad to beasts of burden, as when a steed sees the shadow of the goad stick and feels agitation to wonder what work he must do for his master (Morris, vol. 2: 114). In this extended analogy there are four types of horses: those that merely glimpse the goad and feel urgency, those that need to be pricked with it, those that need to be pierced through the skin, and those that must be pierced to the very bone before they will feel *samvega*. Similarly, there are different types of humans: those who need merely to hear of a person in a certain town who has died to feel urgency about death, those who must see the dead person, those who must have their own relative die, and those who themselves must be stricken with a life-threatening illness before feeling *samvega* (Morris, vol. 2: 114–115). Like animals, humans have varying

degrees of sensitivity and will respond to different measures of prodding before they are stirred to action.

*Samvega* is a tool for the Tathāgata to stir up religious motivation in those mired in complacency and comfort.<sup>15</sup> Yet sometimes the Tathāgata is downright harsh. Several intriguing discussions of fear and terror occur in the *Milindapañho* in reflections on the question of whether or not any of the Buddha's words, and by implication the Teaching, can or should be said to be harsh. In places the Tathāgata seems to provoke anguish. King Milinda questions Nāgasena about how it is that the Tathāgata is represented as bringing only welfare and benefit to beings and yet in the story of the *Aggikkhandūpama Sutta* (Hardy: 4: 128–135; Hare: 84–90) we learn that, at the end of the Tathāgata's sermon, hot blood gushed from the mouths of as many as sixty monks (Trenckner: 164–167). The *Aggikkhandūpama Sutta*, that is, the *Simile of the Mass of Fire Discourse*, is one of the Buddha's fire-and-brimstone sermons. In the *sutta* the Tathāgata queries his disciples on a number of points along the following lines:

Monks, what do you think would be better: that a strong man with a glowing hot iron spike, ablaze and fiery, should pry open one's mouth and thrust in a glowing hot iron ball, ablaze and fiery, so that it burn the lips, burn the mouth, burn the tongue, burn the throat, burn the belly, and take along with it the intestines and the bowels and pass through the other end . . . or that one should enjoy alms which should be given out of esteem (*saddhādeyya*)?

Surely, lord, it would be better to enjoy the alms which should be given out of esteem. . . . Unfortunate indeed would it be to have strong man . . . thrust a glowing hot iron ball, ablaze and fiery into one's mouth. (Hardy: 4: 131–133)

But the Buddha disagrees: In fact, it is better in the case of a wicked man to have a blazing metal ball thrust into his mouth than to receive alms, which he would be accepting out of a misplaced faith or esteem in him. In accepting such gifts he assures his rebirth in hell, and no matter how disagreeable the glowing hot iron ball might be, it cannot even begin to compare with the fires of hell. Similarly, the Tathāgata instructs that it is far better for a wicked man to prefer blazing fires, the crushing of his bones down to the marrow, and being stabbed by a sharpened sword than to enjoy the embrace of a tender maiden or to enjoy the flattery of the wealthy. And indeed, at the end of the sermon, not only does hot blood issue from the mouths of

<sup>15</sup> Accounts of the various hell realms in such texts as the *Petavatthu* (see Gehman), as well as in illustrations on temple walls throughout the Buddhist world, may have a similar aim. As with vivid accounts of hells in other religions, fear and horror have perhaps no equal as a device to scare people into religious activity.

sixty fevered monks but sixty more give up their monastic vocation altogether and return to lay life, saying, "What the Bhagavan teaches is hard, what the Bhagavan teaches is very hard [*Dukkaram Bhagavā sudukkaram Bhagavā'ti*]" (Hardy: 4: 135).

Nāgasena resolves (at least to Milinda's satisfaction) the issue of how it is that the Tathāgata, who is said to bring only welfare to the world, is apparently causing distress by this sermon. In fact, the Tathāgata does not cause distress to these monks; they bring it on themselves (Trenckner: 167). He is no more to blame than a man shaking a mango tree, where the strong fruits remain attached, but the rotten fruits fall. A curious analogy is offered: Do we blame a man who offers the ambrosia of immortality just because some who take it die from stomach problems encountered in ingesting it? "Even so, sire, the Tathāgata gave immortality, the gift of the Dharma, to gods and humans in the ten thousand world-system; those beings who are able awaken through the deathless Dharma; but those beings who are not able are struck down and fall because of the deathless Dharma" (Trenckner: 167). The preservation and communication of the Dharma seem to require that some be turned away from it, but they turn away from it as the result of their own nature, not the Tathāgata's teaching.

In another passage Milinda is concerned for a certain monk who is stricken by fear and bad conscience when he is addressed by the Tathāgata as a "deluded man" (*moghapurisa*). Is the Tathāgata rightly using correct speech when he says such harsh words (*pharusā-vācā*)? Yes, replies Nāgasena, not unlike a physician who sometimes has to resort to harsh medicines for the health of the patient, the Tathāgata uses harsh words to "soften beings and make them pliable [*satte sinehayati, muduke karoti*]" (Trenckner: 172). Harsh words can make one soft and tender, but they do not—in themselves—cause fear and trembling. The text specifies that the Tathāgata's words may well be harsh, but they cause anguish to no one (Trenckner: 172). This example provides one clue about what the presence of harshness in a text or teaching is meant to do: to provoke not anguish but, instead, softness or sensitivity in beings.

These aspirations of generating sensitivity stand in marked contrast to some western conceptions of the role of fear in ethics and aesthetics. Immanuel Kant thought that agitation and fear inspired by the sublime have a place in the moral life. For Kant, contact with the sublime makes us aware by contrast of our vulnerability. When we are confronted (through the might of nature or the infinity of mathematics) with the sublime, the "absolutely large," we fail to comprehend it through the imagination and become aware of our smallness (Kant: 104). This leads, interestingly, to purposiveness and a "respect for our own vocation," that is, our ability to engage reason (Kant: 116). When we see violent thunderstorms, hurricanes,

and volcanoes in all their destruction, we call these “sublime because they raise the soul’s fortitude above its middle range and allow us to discover in ourselves an ability to resist which is of a quite different kind, and which gives us the courage [to believe] that we could be a match for nature’s seeming omnipotence” (Kant: 120). Because our power of reason “has infinity itself under it,” we find “in our mind a superiority over nature itself in its immensity” (Kant: 120). Nature’s ability to make us feel small and vulnerable does not ultimately triumph because we have recourse to reason’s own infinity and supremacy, which calls forth moral aptitude and even greatness (Kant: 121).

Although the Buddhist texts do not draw the same conclusion that vulnerability in the face of the sublime can lead to appreciation of the internal power of reason as moral capacity, they do share with Kant a sense that vulnerability makes us reach out for something great. For the Buddhists, though, fear and awe communicate when we are in the presence of something of immediate importance *in the world itself*. Awe of the Bodhisattva’s extraordinary deeds leads to a sense of extremity that highlights our own finitude and incapacity; however, in the Buddhist sources it does not lead to reason but to dependency on and devotion to, what Paul Griffiths calls, the “maximal greatness” (58–60) of the Buddha. Fear and apprehension of the sublime make us aware of our dependency on things external to us, which is what it means to be sensitive.

The theme of fear and terror often appears when one is confronted with someone who is highly advanced spiritually. When King Milinda first approaches Venerable Nāgasena, Milinda is described as “a frog chased by a snake . . . fearful, flurried, terrified, agitated (*samviggo*), his hair standing on end, perplexed and dismayed, his thoughts in turmoil” (Trenckner: 23). Nāgasena in contrast is “like a maned lion, fearless and free of dread, horripilation, and trepidation” (Trenckner: 24). Milinda’s response of trepidation puts him on high alert, which is appropriate for one about to be influenced and convinced of the Dharma, while Nāgasena, the teacher, is cool and calm. The Tathāgata and other great teachers, despite their compassion and wisdom, should properly be feared and exalted by those who perceive how they stand apart.

Fear puts us on guard to our own and others’ suffering, indicating urgency as a response to threats and seeking to protect our interests and well-being. Horror and distress at the world may be most valuable to Buddhist ethics in their ability to generate compassion.<sup>16</sup> Buddhaghosa

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<sup>16</sup> The objections to pity and compassion in Stoic and other western thought are well documented in Nussbaum 2001. Kant’s view in “Doctrine of Virtue” is this: “Such benevolence is called soft-heartedness and should not occur at all among human beings” (34, in Nussbaum 2001: 358).

describes compassion (*karuṇā*) as that which “causes the trembling in the hearts of good people in the presence of the distress of another [*paraduk-khe sati sādihūnaṃ hadayakampanaṃ karoti*]” (Warren and Kosambi: 263). Compassion is of course regarded as a supreme moral and religious achievement in Buddhism, exalted in the most positive terms. Yet compassion is actually quite a painful upheaval because one feels, in a genuine way, the distress of others. In compassion, one is sensitive to the way the world is and how beings fit into it. Properly channeled, compassion can lead to urgency in recognizing and mitigating suffering in the world.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, many Buddhist meditative practices aim at controlling and directing compassion so that it is not applied subjectively, narrowly, or partially.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, we might consider those who are impervious to the moral ordering of the world and our complex emotional ties to it. In some of the same literature as the stories of emotional excess we meet with a strong disapproval of fools. Śakra himself is taken aback by what has got to be one of the harshest indictments of fools ever registered. Upon an act of extreme generosity by the Bodhisattva, Śakra presents him with a boon. The Bodhisattva asks for the following wish:

“May I never have to hear, see or speak to a fool or endure the misery and oppression of having to stay with one. This is the favor I beg of you.”

“Surely someone in distress is especially deserving of a good man’s sympathy,” said Śakra. “Now because it is the root of all evil, stupidity is regarded as the worst affliction, and it is the fool who has a particular claim on your sympathy. How is it that someone as compassionate as you does not even want to set eyes on such a one?”

“Because there is no help for him. . . . Since not even the compassionate have power to help a worthless fool, O best among the gods, I have no wish even to set eyes on one.” (Khoroché: 43–44)

What makes fools so objectionable in this tradition? To make sense of the Bodhisattva’s incapacity with regard to helping fools—a startling limita-

<sup>17</sup> Compassion is a positive response to horror at the world and one that engages our involvement. Other uses of our horror at the world, such as disgust at the body and its decay, are deployed to provoke a turning away from the world in renunciation and often have important implications for gender analysis in South Asian texts (see Wilson). Some kinds of horror might be more useful for soteriological purposes but would not seem to have any moral component because they turn us away from engagement in the world. In fact, Nussbaum (2001: 220–221) argues that disgust is not helpful in moral processes.

<sup>18</sup> As Nussbaum (2001: 360) indicates, one of the chief Stoic objections to compassion as a grounding of moral action is that it is unlikely to be evenly and fairly distributed. Buddhist meditative techniques of applying compassion in which one gradually enlarges one’s spheres of concern to expand compassion beyond one’s partial and narrow circle (Warren and Kosambi: xi.9–13), and the meditations in which one comes to regard all beings as one’s mother (Warren and Kosambi: ix.36), may deflate these objections.

tion on his own boundless compassion—we need to see fools as more than merely stupid in a childlike or untutored way. Fools (*bāla*) are defined according to one Pali etymology as “those who live (*balanti*) without being bent or inclined (*a-nanti*)” (*balanti ananti ti bālā*) (Smith: 124). This suggests that part of the trouble with fools is that they are not bendable, pliable, or soft and thus cannot be helped. This implies a lack of emotional sensitivity, not just cognitive error.

As we have seen, great moral actions celebrated in literature manipulate human feelings; it is deemed natural that both the physical world and the realm of human emotion respond to moral greatness. In their intransigence fools are a clear affront to this naturalism. Nussbaum’s crediting of the emotions with providing intelligent appraisals of our “fit” with the world is suggestive here in making sense of the Bodhisattva’s frustration with fools. In Nussbaum’s view, although emotions are sometimes accused of trying “to make the world fit our mental attitude,” instead the opposite is the case: “Emotions do attempt to fit the world—both to take in the events that really do take place, and to get an appropriate view of what matters or has value” (2001: 48). Fools remain impervious to important external stimuli coming in from outside, making them rigid and not easily helped.

## CONCLUSIONS

Buddhist texts are not merely descriptive accounts of the world and our place in it; as this article has attempted to demonstrate, many texts seek to have an enduring effect on their audiences. Didactic sources convey a confident assessment of how mental processes conduce to certain well-specified emotions and feelings and how these in turn are causally related to meritorious action: emotions are universal, predictable, and prescribable. Yet it is in narrative, through literary effect, that the emotions themselves are engaged. When the texts cause us to feel something, they insert us into the world outside of ourselves and may evoke the first glimmerings of a moral consciousness. The moral consciousness engendered—in those attuned to the external world prodding them—is sensitive to a moral ordering of the world and its various cues about what is relevant for our well-being.

Emotions of fear and horror direct us to sense our own vulnerability in the world as a way to generate urgency and admiration of moral heroism. The morality of emotional excess is not the ethics of a buddha or a bodhisattva, however, or for those further advanced on the path. Vesantara is held in awe for the fact that he did a thing most difficult to do, in that “though he was in great distress and terror as the children were

being led away and had gone out of sight, his heart did not split into a hundred or a thousand pieces” (Trenckner: 275; see Horner 1969, vol. 2: 97). The imperturbable and balanced nature of great beings stands in marked contrast to the fear and trembling invoked in those who stand in awe of them (and is in part the reason for standing in awe of them). Unlike the Bodhisattva, whose mastery of himself has put him beyond many of the depredations entailed in being subject to worldly events, we are intimately connected to the empirical world and its impositions on us. Feelings and perceptions are our most immediate connections to that world. They respond to it and take their cues from it in ways that produce religious and moral urgency, tenderness, and compassion.

At least since Clifford Geertz defined so clearly the subject matter for religious studies as dealing in part with “powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations” (90), our field has identified questions of religious feeling and motivation as a critical area for investigation. The subfield of religious ethics is slowly catching up. As all of the articles in this discussion attempt to demonstrate, the study of Buddhist ethics holds out considerable potential for genuine advances in the exploration of moods and motivations as they impact moral as well as religious lives.

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