

Book

Discussion

Section

# BUDDHIST ETHICS

## A Review Essay

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### ABSTRACT

I argue that three recent studies (*Imagining the Life Course*, by Nancy Eberhardt; *Sensory Biographies*, by Robert Desjarlais; and *How to Behave*, by Anne Hansen) advance the field of Buddhist Ethics in the direction of the empirical study of morality. I situate their work within a larger context of moral anthropology, that is, the study of human nature in its limits and capacities for moral agency. Each of these books offers a finely grained account of particular and local Buddhist ways of interpreting human life and morality, and each explores complex conceptions of moral agency. I suggest that these three studies share similar interests in moral psychology, the human being across time, the intersubjective dimensions of moral experience, and what life within a karmic framework looks like. I propose that their contributions offer some of the most refreshing and interesting work generated in Buddhist ethics in the last decade.

KEY WORDS: *Buddhism, anthropology, human nature, agency, psychology, time, karma*

THE GROWING FIELD of Buddhist ethics includes diverse subjects and methodological approaches including moral philosophy, cross-cultural and interfaith dialogue, anthropological studies of ethics, and constructive or “engaged” Buddhist ethics (itself a large and heterogeneous set of concerns including social and political philosophy, Buddhist stances on human rights, gender equality, medical ethics, the environment, economic justice, and so on). While many of these areas have produced exciting studies in the last fifteen years or so, I take up here a slender slice of recent work to focus on several important contributions (two by anthropologists and one by a historian) and argue for a broader recognition of their particular achievements. The works considered here, interestingly enough, do not all describe themselves as engaging in ethics, and yet, I suggest, they offer more provocative and substantive ideas about Buddhist conceptions of morality than many of the more explicitly ethical and philosophical

studies emerging today. I offer the following reflections in an effort to give support to a direction that, though occurring in a rather diffuse fashion, pushes us to see some of the distinctive ways Buddhist thinkers can advance our understanding of ethics.

My approach is to look closely at studies of Buddhist thinkers and communities that are less intent on systematizing Buddhist thought into theories of ethical action, and more interested in examining particular Buddhist views on what it means to be a moral subject. These studies take up intricate matters of moral psychology and challenging problems concerning agency. Unlike many philosophical studies which assume a more or less universal moral agent and then examine what sort of moral choices this relatively unencumbered free agent should make (for example, utilitarian), these studies begin a few steps back from these assumptions and examine what exactly are the capacities for and limitations of moral agency as particular Buddhists interpret them. They are concerned with the subjective aspects of moral experience.

### 1. The Life Course

Nancy Eberhardt's 2006 book, *Imagining the Course of Life: Self-Transformation in a Shan Buddhist Community*, examines local constructions of personhood among Shan villagers in northern Thailand. Eberhardt explores how her Shan informants view the moral development of a human being from infancy to old age; she is interested in how the Shan understand the mind, what emotions are, and how human experience changes over the life course. Her work is perched at the intersections of anthropology and psychology and attends to the "locally relevant categories" that people use to describe human nature (Eberhardt 2006, 5). Her approach, like others in this new generation of psychological anthropologists, eschews rigid dichotomies between the psychological and the cultural, the individual and society, thought and feeling, mind and body.

Eberhardt learns from her informants by paying close attention to how people gravitate toward certain topics of conversation and steer clear of others, and how they give advice. Such talk "helps constitute people's sense of who they are and what they are like" (85). Human nature is something that emerges in a dialectical way through conversation and social interaction. We come to see that human nature and moral agency are not statically conceived but change and develop according to the different stages of life. She pays close attention to how people talk to and about children and how they construe maturity and old age. In the Shan view, a person is a work-in-progress, gradually domesticated from the "wildness" of childhood into a mature adult with

self-command, and, ideally, eventually into a “temple sleeper,” an old person who spends his or her time at the temple, meditates, studies, and engages in committed religious practice. Perhaps most interesting is that old age is a time of dramatic development, in which people are “involved in the most fundamental and radical sort of self-transformation, all the more remarkable in that it is expected to be performed by everyone, as a normal stage of life” (164). Old people are to be engaged in difficult work on the self and they move into a public role and social status in which they are highly regarded for it.

Early childhood, by contrast, is a time of wildness, in which children are not masters of their emotions and desires and are thus vulnerable; children (together with the various spirit beings prevalent in the animist Shan worldview) “constitute a class of beings that functions as a kind of unacknowledged Other for the construction of the ideal Self” (72). Children are indulged to a large degree in their desires and are perceived as having quite well-defined wills. A baby is not a *tabula rasa* at birth, but comes with a previous life story and karmic inheritance (often with persisting affective bonds from that previous life) that shape who they are and their distinctive nature. Over time, though, children are socialized to embark on a lifelong project of learning to control their emotions and desires.

One of the important arguments in Eberhardt’s book concerns the role of novice ordinations among the Shan villagers. She argues that the ordination of boys into the monkhood constitutes less a dramatic rite of passage for the boys, than an important moment of leadership and social recognition for the middle-aged sponsors of the event (many of whom are women). This shift of focus from the young boys to the adult sponsors confounds some of the expected gender dynamics that would seem to emphasize male development (since there is no equivalent ordination for girls). But if this ordination ritual is equally or even largely a rite of passage for adult women, then we see an involvement of women in Buddhist practice and an elevation of their social status that we might not have anticipated.

Eberhardt attends closely to how life stories are told. She notes the insistence on Shan conceptions of persons as unique; individuals are unique in terms of their personal experiences, their particular vulnerabilities and strengths, the influences on them from astrological forces, spirits, and the particular people in their lives, and their particular karmic heritage. At the same time, her informants view the general trajectory of human life in ways distinctively different from many modern western interpretations of a person’s life story.

The Shan I spoke with do not conceptualize the archetypical life as a unique odyssey of development, a dramatic narrative, a story with a plot,

a “journey,” or any of the other metaphors common to Western biographical discourse. Experience in the world can provide lessons for life, but the lesson is always the same. The role of experience in the developmental process is to provide us with insights into the nature of life and human existence in general, not to serve as a vehicle for self-discovery, the cultivation of individual talents, unique perspectives, and so on [167–68].

The lesson that “is always the same” is a Buddhist one: life is frustrating and sorrowful and the result of complex causal factors, but its frustrations can be transcended by awareness and insight. In a related idea, the Shan are not interested in the deep psychological interiors of a person: “the contrast for Shan is not between the psychologically ‘deep’ individuals and those who are ‘shallow’ but, rather, between the aware and the unaware, between the knowing and the ignorant, between those who have mastered and transcended the contradictions of life and those who are still struggling” (169). Ideal persons are not admired for interior complexity or depth, but for their calm and smooth demeanor, their awareness, insight, and transcendence.

Although she does not frame her work in this fashion, we can begin to name the kind of ethics she is doing by suggesting that her style of ethnopsychology contributes to a larger family of ethical study called “moral anthropology,” that is, the study of human capacities and limitations for moral subjectivity and agency. This is a broader and more inclusive domain of inquiry than the discipline of anthropology as it stands today, though the discipline grew out of it and offers some of the best resources for investigating it. The language of moral anthropology was used by Immanuel Kant, whose empirical study of morality has often gone unrecognized. The idea of a division between pure, conceptual ethics that can be arrived at entirely a priori and an ethics based on the empirical study of human nature did not originate with Kant, but his work and teaching affirmed and explored it. Moral anthropology is the empirical side of ethics, which takes as its subject, as he put it, “the particular constitution of the human being, and the laws which are grounded on it.” Kant argued that “ethics cannot exist without anthropology, for one must first know of the subject whether he is also capable of doing what is demanded of him” (quoted in Loudon 2000, 6, 8, 10). Moreover, he insists that this “second part of morals” is “the most difficult, because one must study the human being” (quoted in Loudon 2000, 14).

Kant was interested in education, art, religion, and history as aids to the study of human nature; empirical ethics would also include biographies, plays, and novels. His treatment of the empirical side of ethics is much less systematic than his “pure” ethics, and it may well be that by its very nature “the contingency and particularity of the empirical prevent theorists from ever capturing it completely in their

theories” (Louden 2000, 7). Even if difficult to systematize and classify, the empirical side of ethics should take up the following types of questions, which Robert Louden shows occupied Kant in many of his lectures and writings on moral anthropology:

How should moral principles be taught to human beings? Given what we know about human development, at what stages in human life should people learn about morality, and how should they learn about it? What specific passions and inclinations are human beings subject to that will make their adherence to moral principles difficult (or easy)? Are there specific cultural aspects of the modern era that make the establishment of the “rule of right” more or less likely than in previous eras? What stage of moral development is the human race itself in at present? [2000, 13].

Many of these questions are explored by Eberhardt and the other scholars I discuss here. All of these scholars are interested in human moral capacities across time, either within the course of a human life, or in history. All of them are interested in how their Buddhist informants understand human “passions and inclinations” as they bear on moral agency. They are interested in education and techniques for moral development and the ways that morality is a matter of process and progress. Such questions are not important solely for applied ethics, but for grappling with fundamental questions of what sort of moral subjects we humans are.

The precise relationship in the Kantian scheme of the empirical study of human moral capacity and the pure science of ethics which locates moral character (the product of free rational choice) as entirely transcendent and independent of empirical conditions is not entirely clear, and we can leave it to Kantian scholars to sort that out. For our purposes, what this detour through Kant allows us to see is that even Kant (who is often regarded as interested solely in a pure, rational, and transcendent ethics) recognized an essential domain of ethics that would include the empirical study of what human beings are actually like. That such an ethics is messy and resistant to being systematized may be one reason why anthropologists in our time have not, as James Laidlaw suggests, provided an “anthropology of ethics” that offers a “body of theoretical reflection on the nature of ethics” (Laidlaw 2002, 311). Moreover, despite the fact that anthropologists, of course, often do write about morality, the field lacks sustained inquiry and debate about ethical questions: it has no “connected history of morality in anthropology” and has developed “no serious dialogue with moral philosophy” (Laidlaw 2002, 312). Again, it may be that a theoretical systematization of anthropological insights into human moral capacities is unfeasible given the contingency and particularity of its subject. Thus it is perhaps not surprising that the moral anthropological

studies considered here offer insights that are not easy to assemble into a theoretical system, though we may begin to recognize patterns.

In addition, the detour through Kant can expose certain peculiarities about the study of Buddhist ethics. The dominant energies in the field of late rely very heavily on a pure conception of ethics centered on what can be determined through reason about moral choice. Moral philosophy has been a leading approach to Buddhist ethics despite the fact that few Buddhist authors and textual sources approach ethics as a purely speculative and nonempirical enterprise. Much of the recent energy in the field has been directed to debating whether “Buddhist ethics” (holistically conceived) should be regarded as a distinctive form of either consequentialism or virtue ethics, and a veritable cottage industry has grown up around debating this question.<sup>1</sup> But when we consider that Buddhist sources themselves are more typically interested in exploring human nature empirically rather than focusing on rational decision making, we can begin to align them with this other tradition in the West that has also valued empirical knowledge about morality. In Kant’s terms we are then in a position to see “the second part of morals” as not only a legitimate but an essential field of study. Moreover, this vision of moral anthropology might begin to assemble a rather diverse range of scholars working toward a shared project of discerning what Buddhists can teach us about the human condition.

## 2. Sense and Sensibility

In this light we turn to the work of Robert Desjarlais, an anthropologist working for decades with the *Yolmo wa*, a Sherpa people in Nepal. His recent book, *Sensory Biographies* (2003), offers a useful contribution to the study of Buddhist ethics on several fronts: like Eberhardt, he focuses on “the relation of culture and human subjectivities—how, that is, diverse cultural forces contribute to the makings of subjective experience” (Desjarlais 2003, 4). He wants to learn from his *Yolmo wa* informants “what it means to be a person, to live a life, to relate to others, to have a body, to be conscious in time” (5). Like Eberhardt he is not interested so much in structural or systemic cultural forms, but rather in the particular lives of individuals especially as they are lived across time.

<sup>1</sup> This trend began with Keown 1992 who argues for seeing Buddhist ethics as most similar to a certain interpretation of Aristotelian virtue ethics. See also Velez de Cea 2004; Adam 2005; Clayton 2006; and Goodman 2009, all of whom argue for or against the merits of Keown’s view. These studies share the idea that our chief method for understanding Buddhist ethics (treated more or less as a single entity) lies in determining which family of Western ethical theory (deontology, consequentialism, or virtue ethics) it can be likened to.

*Sensory Biographies* can be said to be even more finely textured and closer to the bone than *Imagining the Course of Life*. By this I mean that Desjarlais is interested not only in how the Yolmo wa interpret and construct human nature but also how they perceive and experience the world. He focuses on just two people, both elderly and drawing near to death, and then on the particular ways that they see and hear. He is interested both in the way that cultural forms influence and pattern the senses, and how these two old people, Ghang Lama (whom he calls Mheme) and Kisang Omu, describe what they have seen and heard and spoken in their long lives. About vision, he learns from Mheme that seeing “does not entail simply a subject’s detached, observing, receptive gaze,” but is rather “constitutive, constructive,” involving both a subject’s active construction of a perception, as well as a transformative impact on the viewer (98). Because our perceptions are shaped by *how* we see, not just *what* we see, moral experience is subjective by nature. Desjarlais tries to get at this idea not simply by naming it as a proposition or view held by the Yolmo wa, but helping us to see and understand the very particular and subtle ways that Mheme, in particular, sees his world.

In what ways is vision an ethical matter? How can ways of looking be moral? Desjarlais shows how profoundly *social* vision can be among the Yolmo wa:

[Vision] can be a harmful force. But it can also be a vehicle of intimacy and friendship. It can be reciprocal, participatory, transactive, responsive, respectful, tender. It can be at once projective and receptive, active and reflective. It can be either compassionate or playful, caring or persuasive, prohibitive or protective. Some ways of looking are more moral than epistemic in nature, more a means of relating to another than a technique for knowing that other. . . . If anyone is to make sense of Emmanuel Levinas’s inspired but cryptic comment that “ethics is an optics,” my guess is that Mheme or other Yolmo wa could do so [61].

How people gaze at one another, how we see others, what we notice and attend to, and how we communicate with our eyes can be, in this conception, ethical. And much of everyday morality is a matter of how we look and how we see.

Desjarlais’s explorations of Kisang’s experience draw us to notice how she hears speech and to her sensitivity to skillful speech. One important aspect of this attentiveness to speech, for our purposes, is that it reveals links between ethics and aesthetics. Ethical action is skillful action, virtue is virtuosity. The Yolmo wa are highly sensitive to the aesthetic aspects of crafting interpersonal relationships, and the criterion of skillfulness is often mentioned when people appraise everyday social interactions (260–62). Desjarlais shows how these lives are concerned with aesthetically and ethically proper forms; right speech



and action are, in part, matters of style and are highly attuned to others' critical regard. This suggests that there is a domain of moral awareness and behavior that is forged in everyday, highly intersubjective, relational existence that is chiefly a matter of sensitivity and sensibility. That he came to have an ear for such a sensibility is testament to the care in which his ethnography is undertaken.<sup>2</sup>

Desjarlais is not concerned with linking all of these ideas to doctrinal or textual Buddhism—like Eberhardt, he wisely makes space for his informants to be much more than Buddhists (or worse, representatives of Buddhism)—but many of these ideas about both the constructive nature of human perception and the skillfulness of moral action and speech can be found in Buddhist textual and normative sources. In his discussion of Mheme and vision, for example, he points out that “a fundamental tenet in Tibetan Buddhism is that vision can be highly fabricative” with reality shaped by “a person’s habitual thought patterns, worldly attachments, and karmic heritage” (98–99). Like Eberhardt, Desjarlais focuses on the local and particular, but never entirely loses sight of the cosmopolitan and normative presence of Buddhist ideals that can interface in a complex way with the local. Both steer clear of “culturalist” explanations “which appeal to the logic of a cultural system or religious worldview to explain any given view of the self” (Eberhardt 2006, 13). At the same time, their books do not retreat entirely into the local and particular, but also attend to what Eberhardt describes as the “culturally salient and pervasive systems of thought and practice that continually intrude on people’s subjective experience of themselves.” They listen for both “recurrent and improvisational” moments (2006, 173).

Both ethnographies raise important questions about what a particular person’s life can teach us about human experience more broadly. We may move this issue into sharper focus by turning again to Kant. As much as Kant may have been interested in an empirical study of human moral capacity, even in his empirical moments he still gravitated toward a generic and universal conception of the human being—the human being as such—rather than one situated in a specific social class, gender, culture, or moment in history. Although he acknowledged that human differences in “rank, age, sex, health, prosperity, or poverty” could be relevant in the application of moral rules, he treated such deliberations in a secondary manner and, in fact, had little to say about their moral relevance (and what he does have to say about women and nonwhite people is more than a little distasteful). How his

<sup>2</sup> I should note also, though I cannot go into it here, that Desjarlais is highly self-aware and reflective about the ethics of ethnography and about the moral implications of his own choices in representing Mheme’s and Kisang’s experience.

universalist ethics might be resolved with his ideas about the moral experience of particular subgroups of humanity remains another unresolved tension (Louden 2000, 15).

In contrast, modern anthropology is centered on the particular and is indisposed to hazard characterizations about “the human being as such.” And yet, might we learn something about being human from Mheme or Kisang? Can we glean a more cosmopolitan or shared understanding of old age and the proximity to death from the Shan and the Yolmo wa? How do the ways the Shan characterize and construct childhood tell us about children and their experience more broadly? In describing his dialogical engagements with Mheme and Kisang, Desjarlais offers some helpful guidance about how to bridge the divides of culture, language, age, and gender. In their interactions he experienced at times a “consubstantiality of thought and feeling,” indicating connections and similarities in their shared experience that may not lead to something universal but certainly leads out of the particular. He sees this “betweenness” as an ethical encounter forged with difficulty across the “borderlands between cultures, lives, languages, consciousnesses” (Desjarlais 2003, 338). These ideas of encounter and consubstantiality can offer a useful model for thinking about the spaces between, on the one hand, a radical particularism of unique individuals and, on the other hand, a universal moral subject. A human potential for glimpsing or inhabiting shared experience is a matter of incremental progress forged through conversation, exchange, and attentive study of others.

### 3. Moral Discernment

Though a historian rather than an anthropologist, Anne Hansen may be included here as contributing to the project of moral anthropology. Her 2007 book, *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia: 1860–1930*, offers a historical study of a time of very rapid social, religious, and political change in the making of modern Cambodia. She focuses on the new print writings of the early twentieth century, almost all of which were focused on morality, as they construct a distinctive modernist Buddhism. Hansen charts how a number of ideas—authenticity, rationalism, and above all, purification—became the hallmarks of this modern Buddhism.

A central theme in the writings she looks at concerns the ways in which human moral capacity and experience differ across time. There is, first of all, the idea within traditional Buddhism that the Buddha predicted that the Dhamma—“what is right”—would diminish and decay over time and that peoples’ capacity for morality would degenerate (Hansen 2007, 6). At the same time, and in juxtaposition to this

view, Hansen describes changing conceptions of temporality brought on by modernity, most notably historicist views of progress. The rapid changes and disjunctures associated with this period in Cambodian history, initiated in part by colonialism, posed the problem of how “to give meaning to the experience of flux and change when the older Buddhist ways of understanding and representing the world were becoming unglued” (10). How is it that people understand themselves in a context in which the times and peoples’ conceptions of time are changing dramatically? What should the Dhamma be in our time? How does it differ from those who lived in ancient times?

The prevalent nineteenth-century moral framework of time was an idealized ordering of reality articulated in the *Trai Bhūm*, in which the cosmos moves through vast cycles of moral and natural degeneration and renewal. The moral order in our current cosmic era is anchored on the presence of our Buddha and his teaching, though human moral capacity becomes increasingly limited by our temporal distance from him. However, beings may look forward to the arrival of the next Buddha, who will restore the teachings. Beings are also situated geographically in this traditional framework: humans inhabit the southern continent of the four continents surrounding the *axis mundi* Mount Meru. This continent is an imperfect world, to be sure, but one in which some degree of moral awareness and agency is possible. Politically the moral order is founded in an important way on linking Buddhism with kingship: the degree to which a moral life is possible within these vicissitudes of time and geography depends on the presence of a Dhammic ruler, on whose righteousness both the moral and natural orders rest. Finally, individuals within this cosmos are constituted by their own moral actions as they move through various hierarchically-ordered levels of rebirth in *saṃsāra* depending on their previous merit.

How do these traditional notions of time and place fare when faced with modern ideas about history and geography? Nineteenth-century Cambodian intellectuals reproduced these traditional representations in tension with their lived historical context of political and social upheaval and tumult of warfare, slavery, social reform, economic crisis, onerous taxation, and colonial occupation. But by the latter half of the century a more active and confrontationally political response to the incongruities in Cambodian experience emerged in various millennial movements. Hansen describes a number of Buddhist millenarian movements led by charismatic figures who claimed authority based on prophecies of a righteous king whose leadership would usher in the arrival of the next Buddha, Metteyya. These figures interpreted the misery and violence around them within traditional cosmological ideas that located their historical moment of degeneration as the final

descent before an imminent and utopian Dhammic order was restored. They offered channels for civic unrest as well as social criticism and reform, even as they emphasized the traditional trope of moral purification as the principal means whereby individuals and society could hasten the arrival of the next and better age.

Another response was the reconstituting of textual learning, also a kind of purification according to traditionalist models but one which took distinctive forms in the modern context. Hansen charts a process of modernist Buddhist reform that was influenced heavily by reformist ideologies initiated by King Mongkut in neighboring Thailand. King Mongkut's reform and innovations in the Dhammayut have been well-documented: his demythologized and rationalist construction of Buddhism, the bureaucratization and centralization of Buddhist institutional structures, and his stress on the authenticity and purity of monastic practice which would be established through an educational system for monks emphasizing study of the Vinaya. Delegations of Khmer monks sent to Bangkok returned with "reformist zeal" and new agendas about how to interpret and practice monasticism in Cambodia (99). This modernist project ultimately prevailed over traditionalists' resistance, in part, because it resonated and colluded with French colonial agendas.

Like Eberhardt and Desjarlais, Hansen thinks in complex ways about the simultaneous presence of both the local and the translocal, and how they can mutually inform one another. She shows how the main writings of Khmer Buddhist modernism were "simultaneously expressive of the translocal and transhistorical ethical dimensions of Buddhism and geographically and temporarily situated in the ordinary lives of Khmer Buddhists" (16). She makes use of Steven Collins' language of the "Pali imaginaire"—what he calls the "mental universe created by and within Pali texts"—as she attends to what is translocal and what is creatively and distinctively Cambodian in her vernacular literary texts (162). Particularly compelling is her tracing of the language of "purification," an idea that carries substantial weight in the Theravada thought world as well as in the historical moment in Cambodia on which she focuses. "Purification" becomes enlisted in the modernist project to describe the purifying of texts, of understanding, of language, and, most of all, of moral conduct by both monastic and lay Buddhists, all in the name of restoring Buddhism to its pure and authentic roots.

While she looks at a wide array of sources—including funeral biographies of monks, compendia of morality, ritual manuals, sermons, folklore compilations, translations of Pali texts, periodicals, memoirs, and French colonial ethnographies, travel accounts, articles, and correspondence—Hansen devotes a good part of her narrative to the

thought of Ukñā Suttantapīṭhā Ind, a modernist intellectual active in the 1920s. Ind locates moral agency not so much in terms of the traditional and cosmic temporal order, but in the here and now of ordinary people finding their way the modern world. His manual on moral behavior, the *Gatilok*, trains its readers in the fine art of moral discernment (*satisampajañña*). For Ind, moral discernment is both mindfulness of one's own perceptions and actions, as well as discrimination about others' moral characters. People are not automatically mature moral agents (small children have little discernment); only with careful development of their qualities of awareness can they, over time, develop moral agency.

For Ind, people vary in the degree to which they are combined with worldly (*lok*) and Dhammic influences just as gold alloy varies in the amount and grade of copper present in it. Like informants in Eberhardt's and Desjarlais's books, Ind is attentive to radical particularity—how humans are unique “admixtures” of worldly and Dhammic influences—even while there are certain lessons that are always the same and the trajectory of the course of an ideal life has recognizable patterns (163). Moral discernment cultivates the study of the particularities of one's enmeshment in the social world, what Ind calls the “circumstances and occasions,” in which people find themselves (165). Contra Kant, there are no ways of imagining human moral agency in a manner somehow abstracted from or transcending the particularities of context. Moreover, “the circumstances and occasions in which humans beings must try to act morally are always imperfect, entangled, attached, corrupted” (170). Ind's discovery of human nature occurs through complex narratives, where people are comprised in and through their encounters and relationships with others. People learn to be moral in and through seeing clearly the messy contexts that constitute who they are, rather than by somehow transcending those circumstances and then acting upon them. There is little stress on individualism or autonomy in this vision of human life and Hansen shows how “the greatest problem for moral agents is the unavoidable interpenetration of the actions or karma of one's self and others” (164).

#### 4. Conclusions

These three studies offer recurrent themes that have genuine prospects for developing the study of empirical ethics in ways that can reach outside of Buddhist studies. For example, we see how Buddhist thinkers in these texts (and elsewhere) are particularly insightful about the ethical qualities of human perception and the active processes of awareness and attention. Morally relevant activity occurs

long before we must begin rational decision making about how to act, and in vital (but often hidden) ways everyday activities of perception and attention effect how we arrive at decisions or even frame the problems we face to begin with. These insights appear recurrently in both normative Buddhist sources and in the accounts of ordinary Buddhist lives, from Ind's advice on how to practice moral discernment to Mheme's descriptions of his own experience.

All three of these books put *time* into ethical reflection. They share an interest in the temporal aspects of morality, in how human beings change, mature, and interpret themselves differently over the life course. The Buddhist thinkers considered here do not imagine a moral agent apart from the stages of the life process or from larger forces of cosmos and history. The attention to the life course gives us a new angle into the use of biographies in ethics. Biographies have sometimes been studied by ethicists when thinking about the ideals embodied in extraordinary lives, but here we see how attention to the life stories and changing sensibilities of ordinary people reveal possibilities for more refined conceptions of the human being *in process*, in childhood, middle age, and old age.

Finally, the sources here explore (rather than suppress or deny) the intersubjective nature of the human condition. Who we are is shaped and inflected by others at a very fundamental level. Buddhist theories of karma, though sometimes held up as advancing an ethic of autonomous individualism,<sup>3</sup> in fact provide insight not so much into the ways in which we act freely and autonomously, but rather into the highly conditioned (though certainly not determined) nature of our interactions with others over time. To take seriously what it is to be human in a karmic reality is to be profoundly aware of a person in time, formed by past events and enmeshed in complicated entanglements with others in past and present. The intersubjective and conditioned reality of human experience is a—or perhaps *the*—chief problematic that ordinary people in Buddhist contexts, as well as intellectuals like Ind, grapple with as they figure out how to act morally in the messy contexts of human life.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See, as just one example, Richard Gombrich's recent book *What the Buddha Thought*, which reinforces yet again his longstanding commitment to the idea that the Buddha's interpretation of karma as intention affirmed notions of autonomy, conscience, free will, and individual responsibility (Gombrich 2009, 13).

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to the participants of the Harvard Divinity School's lecture series and conference on "Moral Worlds and Religious Subjectivities" in 2009 for clarifying my thinking on some of the points made here. I also thank John Reeder for reading and commenting on an earlier draft.

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