

# ETHICS AND THE JĀTAKAS: CAN NARRATIVE SUPPORT A SECULAR ETHICAL CODE?

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by Sarah Shaw\*

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## ABSTRACT

*In many Southern Buddhist regions, the Jātakas offered ethical codes, an informal rule of law, and, indeed, in some areas such as Myanmar/Burma, a narrative means of communicating a code that could establish precedent in courts of law (Shaw 2006). Can they contribute now to the growing international discussion on secular ethics? Describing the Bodhisatta exercise of both sīla and the deep resourcefulness in Jātakas, that results in great adeptness at skill in means in variously described situations, Charles Hallisey coins the term ‘moral creativity’ with regard to these tales (Hallisey 2010). It covers, as he notes, not just the ability the Bodhisatta demonstrates in the five precepts, but also, through enactment in narrative, a means of demonstrating great resourcefulness in ensuring benefit – not only for himself but others too. Such moral creativity, he suggests, is crucial to a more nuanced understanding of Buddhist ethics as they are enacted in Jātakas. Citing commentarial stories from the Mahosadha/Ummagga Jātaka (J 546), Hallisey demonstrates that the Bodhisatta is often not just satisfied with doing ‘the right thing’, but prefers to do the positively helpful thing: the action or course of actions that ensure all parties are aided.*

*In this paper, I argue that ‘moral creativity’ is also a very helpful*

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*concept in attempting to teach Buddhist ethics to those who have not grown up within the tradition and absorbed Buddhist stories and tenets in their childhood. As some Buddhist understandings have filtered through to the international discussion about secular health and wellbeing, in the field of mindfulness teaching in particular the ethical has been underplayed and even ignored, though that balance is starting to be redressed (Williams and Kabat-Zinn 2011; Baer 2015; Brown 2016; Samuel 2016;). I conclude by suggesting narrative and the notion of 'moral creativity' that the Jātaka collection embodies, can help to communicate the principles of an ethical code, and a daily habit of mindfulness, that is applicable in secular contexts too.*

## 1. TEACHING BUDDHISM TO WESTERNERS

Before moving on to the stories, I would like to describe some of the difficulties one can find in introducing the topic of ethics in the West. For the last thirty years I have been teaching Buddhist theory and practice in the UK, at university and college level. These are both university classes and classes for adults who have an interest in finding out about Buddhist theory. When I first started teaching Buddhism, I noticed that the factors of the eightfold path involving speech, action and livelihood, did not arouse much interest. Material relating to non-self and dependent arising aroused considerable attention and discussion; information about different types of meditation and mindfulness techniques, so popular in the West, also prompted questions and debate. Monastic *Vinaya* was considered intriguing, as many had seen Buddhist monks and been impressed by their presence and wakefulness. Lay codes of practice and how to behave in the world, however, appeared less attractive and mildly boring, to all age groups. In discussion of *sīla*, it was clear that people were politely waiting to get 'to the more interesting stuff'. Much mid twentieth-century scholarship in the West, unfortunately, supported this stance. The notion that there were two types of Buddhism, a salvific kind that was aimed at monastics, and a lay version, simply directed at the possibility of a higher rebirth, fostered a kind of split in Western understanding, so that lay activities were seen as 'just' *sīla* based, and not of any great significance in attaining a soteriological goal. The notion embedded in *Jātakas*, often dismissed as being simple folk stories, that any

rebirth could further one's development of the ten perfections, and that the Bodhisatta himself needed many lives as a layman, as well as an animal, in order to perfect these qualities and to find the resources needed to teach as a Buddha, was until recently rarely discussed. Buddhism was, and still is sometimes, discussed purely for its 'theories' and no sense of context within a narrative or balanced discourse was allowed to intrude.

But any reading of the Bodhisatta vow suggests that the lay life itself, with *sīla* and generosity, can and is a crucial and key part of a full Bodhisatta path, or, if that is not the aim, a way in itself of enacting Buddhist principle. The *jātakas* are one of the nine limbs (*aṅga*) of the teaching (Shaw 2006). They demonstrate, as *Suttas*, Abhidhamma and Vinaya cannot, because the Buddha is in a teaching, monastic role, how the Bodhisatta, and others in the 'real' situations of the stories, deal with all sorts of new and unfamiliar problems in a 'lay' manner (Shaw 2010). So there is a natural predisposition to secular teaching in *jātakas*: they often take place when there is no Buddha, so no Buddhism, and the ideals and standards promoted are often applicable in a general sense too. The highest expression of this is seen, of course, in the pan-Indic ideal of the universal monarch, where a regal rebirth is seen as a possibility to develop the ten principles of kingship (*rājadhammas*), to rule by dharma not force, and to practise and encourage both *sīla* and the positives of a lay life – generosity, well performed skills in one's career, and the promotion of a just society (Shaw 2017). Meditation is also practised in such lives, as one of the rare *jātaka*-like *suttas*, the *Mahāsudassana Sutta* (D II 169–199), attests.

So, prompted by the advice of other teachers of Buddhism, I started to talk about the five precepts in connection with mindfulness of daily life, and more in terms of 'ethics' and 'mindful awareness of others' rather than morality. Indeed it struck me that ethical considerations and deliberations do form a great part of people's daytime thought and action, but that most of the time we did not really realise this. So, after teaching the five precepts, and the guidelines contained in the *Śīgalovāda Sutta* (D III 180–193) or the *Maṅgala Sutta* (Sn 258–269), I started to set the class a quiz to illustrate this point.

The quiz involves a series of about ten questions. I ask people to make answers that fulfil the five precepts. What is the right thing to do in a particular situation? Here are some sample questions, that illustrate some important issues raised by ethics in daily life:

i. Is it in accordance with the five precepts to pick up toiletries left for you in a hotel and take them all home with you?

ii. Is it right to take home a book someone else has left on a train when they leave?

iii. Do you kill a wasp buzzing around in your car on the motorway?

iv. A friend of yours has just got the sack from work and wants you to get drunk with them; what do you do?

v. Your friend is wearing a dress that does not suit her. Do you say so?

vi. If you see some vegetables and fruit left in a box at the side of the road, is it right to take them?

The answers to these questions vary considerably, but students all engage in thinking about the five precepts seriously. Some regard taking toiletries from a hotel just to take home is ‘taking what is not given’; others think it is not (1). The book taking arouses an interesting level of discussion. Some books feel throwaway, and so people feel no compunction on taking them home. Some, however, seem expensive and hard to find: the person who left it may ring the train company and may ask for it back (2). The questions always make people think about ethics in a new way, applicable to new situations, and recognise that this exercise of itself it requires creativity and adaptation. People debate the rights and wrongs of each one, and often have to come up with resourceful solutions. In the wasp situation, you don’t need to act hastily and kill the wasp; just stay calm, open the window, and it will eventually fly out. There is no need to break the first precept (3). In the situation of a friend losing a job, you don’t get drunk with your friend – you just need to think about the problem creatively, and with compassion. Why not suggest a meal out to chat instead? In that way you do not upset the friend, show empathy for their predicament, and also protect

them from their own self-destructive behaviours, which could have involved you both breaking the fifth precept (4). The question about telling the truth makes people laugh as of course it is necessary to be very creative to think of an answer that is truthful but will not upset their girlfriends or wives (5)! The one about the vegetables is a kind of trick question: in the UK, it would not be theft to take them if you lived in the country; there is an unwritten custom that if you have too many fruit and vegetables you leave them on the roadside for anyone to take. In cities, however, no one has heard of this custom, and you just would not take them at all (6). So, it is necessary then to consider local practices and customs, the people with whom you are dealing, and sometimes, to behave with tact and alertness. Is it rude and unkind to behave in this setting, in this way? Or is it appropriate and in accordance with the unspoken rules of a particular culture and setting?

The quiz shows many things: it shows that a moral code is not an abstract ideal, devoid of humane feeling and awareness of others. Good ethics and *sīla* often need resourcefulness, a willingness to adapt – and sometimes, some adjustment to where you are and the people you are living amongst. This exercise prove very helpful in understanding, in a lighthearted way, exactly what ethics means in practice, and how large a part it plays in our daily lives. It also demonstrates to students that such ethical considerations do indeed form a large part of our thought, and are often the cause of many of our problems, when they lead to worry or guilt. But perhaps most of all it shows how ethical thinking can be, and often is, creative too. The skilful mind (*citta*) in Abhidhamma describes factors such as the six pairs, spontaneity, if it is the first skilful *citta*, ethical path factors and mindfulness. And mindfulness is *always* in Abhidhamma accompanied by one of the divine abidings (DhS 9; Shaw 2019: 71–89). So, inbuilt into the notion of the healthy mind is the understanding that the mindful consciousness, well established, has a number of supporting features that *always* accompany it: self-respect (*hiri*) and fear of consequences (*ottappa*) for instance, that guard the mind, some friendliness towards the object, and, of course crucially, an inherent, even intuitive, ethical discernment. Each situation is different, and just as the skilful consciousness of the Abhidhamma suggests that the six pairs are present in

right speech, action and livelihood, so in new circumstances and confronted with new problems, we find that the five precepts, alongside their important concomitants, generosity and the divine abidings (*brahmavihāras*), require us to look creatively at each new circumstance as it arises. The quiz helps people to see this. Buddhism's ethical code is embedded in flexible adjustment to new conditions, and a sense of our interconnectedness with other beings: this is a potentially secular code, and one that it seems many can see applicable in their lives too.

So what has this to do with *Jātakas*? The precepts set the guidelines; but it is in the narrative traditions where resourceful adjustment to the surprising, the unfamiliar and the difficult, essential elements of a potentially secular ethical code, are most clearly seen, in ways that the other Buddhist genres, simply because of their different parameters and constraints, cannot. So, this is where it is helpful to look at these stories, which I often read with students in class. They sometimes present such situations in thought-provoking and also sometimes funny ways, and allow readers to view ethics, and the role it takes in their lives in a fresh and helpful way.

## 2. JĀTAKAS, EMBODIED ETHICS AND MORAL CREATIVITY

In *Jātakas* the Bodhisatta, usually as an animal layman, or god, and sometimes as a human ascetic, employs great quickness of wit, moral courage, and, usually, a sense of empathetic connectedness with other beings participating in the action, even when they are hostile. So let us explore Hallisey's notion of a 'creative morality', mentioned at the outset of this article and apply it to the 'ordinary' person, and a story where the Bodhisatta, while a human being deals with testing and difficult situations.

We find this very evident in some of the famous situations of the *Mahosadha-jātaka*. For it is here, it seems to me, that a kind of blueprint of good behaviour and skill in means is established by the Bodhisatta, as he demonstrates what it is to have skilful citta not as a Buddha, but as an 'ordinary' layperson in the world, interacting with others and getting into difficult situations just as we do.

In the riddles posed to the Bodhisatta he is in the position of the detective in a modern thriller story. He is still a child, of course, but

sorts out the mysteries that are presented them, and successfully fields the ‘trick’ riddles of the king, designed to wrong-foot him. Not yet accepted within the king’s court, he has to prove his credentials, which he does through what are in effect a series of legal test cases (*aṭṭā*). In these he finds solutions that help everyone: they detect wrongdoers and bring about the resolution of conflict and difficulty.

Let us take one simple example, that demonstrates a pattern we find in many of the detective puzzles. This is the third, ‘The Question of the Threaded Necklace’ (Ja VI 336). A certain very poor woman weaves together some threads of different colours and makes them into a pretty necklace for herself. She then decides to bathe in the water nearby. Another young woman, watching her, comes over to admire the woven thread necklace, and asks her how much it had cost her to make it, and what its measurements are, as, she says, she would like to make it herself. The friendly woman who made it, still bathing in the pool, urges her just to try it on for herself to see. But the admiring woman runs off with the necklace. When the first woman has got out of the pool, and accosts her, she claims she has made it for herself, and that she has stolen nothing. What to do? The Bodhisatta is approached. As in all these problems, the Bodhisatta spots the dishonest party immediately. But, exhibiting the ‘moral creativity’ which is the real hallmark of his wisdom, based in skilfulness, he devises a test that will demonstrate to everyone else too the real owner of the necklace. He asks each woman what perfume they usually wear. The thief says ‘All-flower bouquet’, clearly an expensive commercial amalgam of a number of flower essences. The poor woman says she cannot afford that kind of scent: the necklace was scented simply with panic grass, available to everyone. Here good *sīla* is clearly not enough: a sense of resourcefulness and the skill in means are what the Bodhisatta, in this situation, needs. We should also note that the impoverished lady is considered equal to the rich one in her need for justice, a demonstration of an egalitarianism in early Buddhist narrative that is often overlooked.

In other situations in this story the Bodhisatta likewise uses alertness and an attentiveness to others to settle a simple dispute that cannot be resolved otherwise (Appleton & Shaw I 196–202).

Other characters also demonstrate this. The Bodhisatta's wife, Amarā, for instance, is highly resourceful in spotting the malign motives behind the 'gifts' that arrive at her house, which will be seen as stolen property from the palace, and resourcefully marks a date and time that each one arrives, so that she can protect her husband from blame when he is subsequently accused of theft (Ja VI 364–370; Appleton & Shaw I 198–99, 242–249).

### 3. THE COLLECTIVE, YET SECULAR ETHICS OF THE PEOPLE

But there are other stories where the Bodhisatta, and the other characters, do not have self-confidence, and where all are troubled by the kinds of deliberations and doubts with which most of us in the modern world are all too familiar. In the *Kurudhamma Jātaka* (J 276; Ja II 365–381), the Bodhisatta is a king, of a great and noble people, but is tormented by self-doubt of an unhelpful kind. His kingdom is that of the Kuru, who are frequently praised in commentarial literature as being of exemplary behaviour and virtue. They are described as the audience of the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna-sutta* (M I 55–63), for instance (Ma I 227; Soma 1981: 17–18). According to the commentary, the Kuru laymen and laywomen dress in white and hear the teaching on *uposatha* days, thus rendering them also worthy of the address *bhikkhave* within the Buddha's discourse. In the *Kurudhamma-jātaka* (J 276), the good fortune arising from such exemplary *sīla* and generosity is explored.

In the 'present' story of this *jātaka* tale, which prompts the Buddha to tell the tale, the Buddha reproaches a young monk for killing a goose in play, saying that in times past even laity were more careful and alert to others in their dealings. He then tells the following story: The people of Kuru, who all kept the five precepts, were once ruled by the Bodhisatta. At that time the people of Kālīṅga suffered terribly from drought. The king sends brahmin emissaries to the state of the Kurus, where rain is plentiful, to plead for their rain-bringing elephant. This lucky symbol is a famously important feature of the *Vessantara-jātaka* too, as it is the gift of this elephant, also to Kālīṅga brahmins, that so enrages the less worthy populace and the king so Vessantara is exiled; the story's resolution sees it subsequently returned (Ja VI 488–494). The gift does not, however, bring the much-needed rain. So the king of the Kālīṅga

sends the emissaries back, asking them to find out the secret of the Kurus' good fortune. They take golden plates, on which to inscribe the findings of their research, and interview eleven key people in the city to find out what secrets they have to which they attribute their good luck. Starting with the king, the Bodhisatta, they ask each interviewee to give guidance and rules to take back with them. But each interviewee suffers from doubt, and poses obstructions to their engraving right at the outset. For each one feels he or she has a guilty secret and at first demurs.

Here we find out what the people of this exemplary state really think of themselves. The Bodhisatta-king feels his good code of action is compromised, and, because of doubt, finds his *sīla* does not gladden his mind (*cittaṃ āradheti*). In an arrow-shooting festival, he does not see one arrow land and thinks he must have inadvertently killed a fish. Worry (*kukucca*) over this still troubles him. The emissaries remind him:

*“But, great king, the volition (cetanā) ‘I will take life’ never arose for you. Without that consciousness (citta), there is no taking of life” (Ja II 372).*

Reassuring him with what is essentially an Abhidhamma understanding of the relationship between volition or intention, one of the seven universals of consciousness, and action (DhS 9), the emissaries record his account of the five precepts, but, on his advice, ask someone he considers better qualified than himself to speak of them. This is his mother. Yet she too suffers from comparable unhappiness: she feels remorse, for she feels she has given a nicer present to one daughter-in-law than the other. Again the emissaries reassure, saying a gift should be given as one wishes, but again are sent on, this time to her daughter-in-law. But she in turn feels that she has breached *sīla*, for she has looked on her brother-in-law with desire. Once more the messengers congratulate, saying that as no action has been committed on the basis of that moment, there is no breach of *sīla* in the world of action. And so it goes on, with each interviewee regretting some action or thought that they feel compromises their happiness. A driver feels he over-tired some Sindh horses when it rained, and they became exhausted. But, as the emissaries discover, the consciousness (*citta*) did not arise in the driver that wished the horses tired, and without that volition in the

moment, there was no correspondingly bad *kamma* (*acetanakaṃ kammaṃ nāma na hoti*). A business man thinks he has mis-measured some rice, making unfair allocations, but needs reassuring that ‘no consciousness arose in you relating to theft’ (*tumhākaṃ theyyacittaṃ n’atthi*). Finally, they are sent to the courtesan. She had been given a large sum of money by King Sakka to be his mistress. When her funds were running low, however, she had been on the point of accepting another client, and held out her hand – but had pulled it back immediately. The messengers reassure her; her *sīla* too is of the highest purity. Delighted with what they find in all the participants, they record the ethical code of each before returning home. Their city is thereupon immediately blessed with abundant rain; and the people of Kuru have been reassured in their doubts.

All Buddhists know the five precepts, the undertakings not to kill, steal, practise wrong or excessive sensory pleasures, lie, or become intoxicated. Here, however, the *jātaka* has explained the precepts in an embodied manner, by exploring their application in daily life, but also taking care that they do not become absurdly rigid and lacking in humanity. Doubting how one has behaved, and berating oneself for omissions, is not the same as *sīla*. The inhabitants are relieved to find that their doubts are dismissed. This is done so by using a simple mode of questioning about the state of mind present as the so-called culpable action is actually undertaken. What was the state of mind present at that time? Was it skilful (*kusala*), or was it unskilful? How does the volition of the moment relate to action? Can culpability on those terms be assigned to a time when the mental state was skilful? The whole story, and its funny explication of some of the pitfalls open to those earnestly trying to enact Buddhist principle, depends upon the notion of a healthy mind and skilful *citta*, and the understanding that excessive doubts and ruminations on the basis of past actions are not skilful, and indeed very unhelpful, causing the depression that each character feels. ‘Creative morality’, in the way the story ensures the messengers make the characters see their own doubts as unhealthy, is enacted, and by all participants in the narrative.

So, the story represents a collective goodness that is possible in the lay life – and, by having the Bodhisatta as a king, it demonstrates, as

many other *jātakas* do too, that the lay life is not just a compromised 'holy life'. It offers an arena where there are great possibilities to accrue the ten perfections in an existence that too may constitute an important lifetime in the achieving of one's soteriological aim, whether as a Bodhisatta, *arahat*, or *paccekabuddha*.

When people confront most Buddhist texts, the Buddha is the teacher. But he cannot enact ethics as a lay person would, creatively, in the world (see Shaw 2010). In these stories, he does, and the principles of such ethics are recognizable to anyone, anywhere. They also, importantly, do not need the Buddhist background story. Ethical principle is rendered humane and grounded, in the situations of 'real' people as they conduct their lives. The 'teachers' who explain the inhabitants' *sīla* within the story are brahmins from a less worthy state, themselves flawed, who are anxious for advice. This is a world without a Buddha, and even the Bodhisatta himself is not even in a teaching role. He too is a layman, subject to the hindrance of worry (*kukucca*), an unskilful *cetasika* in the Abhidhamma system. Yes, there are five ethical precepts, but they depend on the presence of an element ever crucial in Buddhist texts, volition or intention (*cetanā*). In modern psychological terms, 'rumination', the kind of thinking about the past that is depressive and self-destructive, is carefully warned against when considering the aspect of *sīla*. So the story goes to the heart of many of the problems associated with modern living, where such destructive self-doubt is so endemic. As has been noted:

Targeting rumination was considered particularly important because a tendency to rumination in nondepressed populations has been found to be predictive of subsequent onset of depression (Deyo et al. 2009: 265–271.)

This very human and nuanced understanding of ethics, and the five precepts, prevents an understanding of Buddhist principle that is abstract or formulaic: each situation is different, and it is volition as well as skill which is crucial.

One does not have to be a Buddhist to appreciate the psychological precision, compassion, and dramatic tension here: these really are secular stories, or more properly perhaps 'universal'

fables anyone can appreciate (Skilling 2019).<sup>1</sup> In the *Kurudhamma-jātaka* we see not only moral creativity, in a story that highlights and combats such potentially destructive ruminations, but also a compassionate and mindful discrimination in the midst of changing events. For mindfulness of the present moment, such ruminations are unnecessary and even harmful.

Such an embodied understanding is perhaps really only possible through a literary form. Repetition of the kind found in this story is key in oral literature and through employing it with comic rhythm, the story offers its explanatory commentary in what is a fabular *jātaka* world. It is a fictional device, that enacts the doctrine in an embodied way. As such, the *jātaka* fulfils an essential role in the transmission of this ethical doctrine. The *suttanta* explanations of the five precepts do not explore such scenarios at all, and simply deliver the content of the precepts in a general way as part of the teaching (A IV 245; A V 263). *Suttanta* methodology on this subject does not apply the precepts in a number of different ‘ordinary’ situations. There is no close examination of the feelings of those acting and behaving in the texts where ethics are described. In addition, in *suttas* the Buddha is always there as teacher, or implied as the validator of other teachers. The Abhidhamma only delineates the factors present on *whatever* occasion any consciousness arises; it is not applied to actual situations. So this story represents a kind of text that is essential in the Buddhist textual corpus to demonstrate how such things work in action. It has its own literary style and way of expression and applies the notion of intention (*cetanā*) to actual people, in their momentary experience, in *atīte*, once-upon-a-time land, where there are usually no Buddhas, and where all other *jātaka* stories occur. It makes sure that people really understand how the five precepts need to be taken in spirit, not as causes for self-reproach. Only in such a literary scenario could skilfulness be demonstrated not just in the participants but in the compassion with which the story asks each interviewee – and perhaps the listener too – to examine their own simple volition at the time of any given action. It is this, as the story attests, that lies at the heart of *sīla*.

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1. I have just read this article as I submit it, and prefer now the word ‘universality’ to ‘secularity’.

#### 4. SECULARISM AND JĀTAKAS

So how could such narratives be of use? It seems to me that the introduction of Buddhist stories could greatly help group and class discussion in the field of ethics, and bring it to greater prominence in psychological contexts too. I have found students greatly enjoy them, and find them helpful means of looking at their own attitudes to mental states and ethics too. As was mentioned at the outset, ethics can seem a bit boring to some students: linked to consideration of their own actions and mental states, and supported by narratives that humanise the precepts in an understandable and useful way, the whole field starts to become interesting, and particularly useful in association with practices and trainings concerned with developing mindfulness in daily life. It is the kind of small ethical dramas that are enacted in *jātakas* that cause us so much concern and worry, as much as the sometimes bigger ones.

Such an element does seem to be needed in some of the modern discourse about wellbeing and the movement towards a greater concern for psychological health. In modern Western psychology, the influence of Buddhist understandings of mindfulness have, of course, been significant (Williams & Kabat-Zinn 2011; Bodhi 2011, 2016; Baer 2015; Bishop et al. 2004; Harvey 2015). The area where no such development is particularly obvious, however, is that of ethics. In cultures working with an often misunderstood Christianity as their basis, words associated with any kind of morality can be unpalatable, and inappropriate for secular usage. In a western context, any discussion of ‘goodness’, or ‘skilfulness’ has to be qualified (Keown 2001: 119-120). The recent impact of the mindfulness movement has had a great effect, on the mental health and wellbeing of countless people. But is any consideration of ethics involved? if you look at otherwise very good online sites, where the application of mindfulness is taught in a secular context, it is noticeable that the field of morality is rarely mentioned (see, for example, ‘Mindfulness NHS’ 2017). Perhaps necessarily, no mention is made, as it so often is in Buddhist texts, of the relationship between *sīla*, or good ethical behaviour, and happiness (Virtbauer and Shaw 2018; M I 76; M III 170–178). This does not of course mean that ethics are not present, in clinical practice, participants

at either side of the therapist/client relationship, or in the teaching and practice of mindfulness. They are just not introduced as an obvious attraction, as possible benefit, byproduct, or indeed as a particular factor that might influence or shape, for ill or for good, the arising of mindfulness in any given practitioner. Those most experienced in administering and teaching mindfulness techniques are aware of attendant problems: as was noted recently by two of the most distinguished figures in the field, ‘the rush to define mindfulness within Western psychology may wind up denaturing it in fundamental ways,’ and as such there is ‘the potential for something priceless to be lost’ (Williams & Kabat-Zinn 2011: 4).

The reason for what is in some regards a sensible decision to downplay ethics in mindfulness training is fairly clear to those who come from traditional Western backgrounds, and of course explains why so many students in the UK find the whole field of ethics a little off-putting. In reaction to a rather punitive sense of what morality and goodness involve, based on our misunderstanding of Christian teachings on these matters, educated late twentieth-century westerners reacted violently against the perceived negative and destructive effects of guilt, worry, anxiety and tension that we felt our often flawed educational system had instilled. It should be stressed that Christian teachings, particularly those from the early days of the tradition, did not encourage excessive ‘scruples’. The notion of a ‘change of heart’ (*metanoia*), key to early Christian doctrines in particular, and became a kind of self-mortificatory ‘repentance’ that was felt to be enjoined by the church. Hebraic associations of guilt were also felt, again not accurately, to be encouraged within other faiths, such as Judaism.

So, many secular and modern Buddhist articulations of the *teachings* of mindfulness involve terms which are, quite deliberately, removed from any association any states of mind which could prompt unhealthy ruminations, and exacerbate mental trouble and a lack of health. In part to avoid such unhelpful personal interventions and perplexity, carefully termed guidance that encourages ‘bare attention’ and ‘non-judgmental awareness’ are frequently employed, cited and applied in mindfulness teachings (Bishop et al. 2004: 232; Nyanaponika 1962; Shaw 2019 153–8).

In this such instructions are highly effective, and in many cases essential ‘skills in means’ that successfully encourage practitioners to avoid the negative mental states of guilt, worry, and self-judgement. The terms, of course, derive from the *vipassanā* discourses of the twentieth-century Buddhism, where, again, they are regarded as importantly helpful terms to apply when training a particular kind of minimal, non-interventionist alertness in the practitioner for the development of insight (eg Nyanaponika 1962; see also, for comment, Bodhi 2011; Gethin 2011; Harvey 2015). Mindfulness teachers in the West understandably want to draw patients away from potentially unhealthy ruminations, and so do not really stress ethics.

But there is a risk that, to use the popular expression, the baby is thrown out with the bathwater. By excluding ethical considerations and the notion of volition from mindfulness programmes, many of our daily preoccupations and our sometimes unhelpful ‘ruminations’ are not fully addressed. As those involved in Buddhist practice and theory know, right mindfulness is considered just one aspect of an eightfold path, in which it features as an interdependent element in several domains, and where the practice of the three factors of right speech, right livelihood and right action are inseparable. In the *Abhidhamma*, mindfulness is a determinant of skilful consciousness; skilful consciousness cannot arise, in any situation, or any state of mind, without mindfulness, and, in the skilful *citta* involving action in the world, ethical considerations too. In the *Abhidharmakośa* a more universal application of mindfulness is suggested, where it features as a factor in all consciousness, as a universal (Pruden 1988–1990). This mindfulness however, needs purifying if it is to be regarded as a concomitant of a healthy, rather than an unhealthy state of mind (Cox 1992; Gethin 2011; Harvey 2015; Shaw 90–106). So mindfulness is associated with ‘goodness’ or ‘skilfulness’ in quite a fundamental way within Buddhist training, and indeed is felt to promote a kind of ethical instinct by its very existence. The *Questions of King Milinda* support this, where mindfulness is said to be like the ‘treasurer’ and ‘advisor’ to a universal monarch, able to discern what is good and make sure that what is not helpful to the mind or to others does not intrude (Miln 34–39). The traditional image of the gatekeeper for mindfulness, who rejects what is not

suitable, reinforces this (A IV 107). The story traditions allow such mindfulness to be demonstrated, rather than defined. They give a sense of a living tradition of skilfulness, of which mindfulness is just one, if essential component.

Can we include this ethical sense in our secular understandings of the wellbeing involved in a 'mindful' mind? Is it realistic to speak of ethical instincts in a secular context, and can we see the path factors of right speech, livelihood and action as realistic concomitants of an international and secular understanding of the healthy mind? In Buddhist texts, a stated link is made between mindfulness, ethical practice and happiness (Virtbauer and Shaw 2018). Can this be a link applicable in secular contexts too?

As I hope to have suggested in this brief paper, we can introduce ethics into the discourse about secularity, in particular where it relates to mindfulness and education in behaviours, and can do so in a number of ways. By citing the examples based on my own teaching experience of Buddhism, I have attempted to show how the subject of ethics can engage interest in students, and that it can be a revelation to many that we spend a great deal of time thinking about it and, unfortunately, regretting our omissions and falling victim to depression and guilt. By emphasising volition, a new perspective emerges on mindfulness of our own actions and thoughts, and of our understanding of ethics. It is in this regard that the Buddhist narrative traditions offer surprisingly helpful means of seeing one's own mental states in a mindful, yet ethical way; they do so with frequent humour and compassion too. When we consider secular mindfulness training we need not ignore such issues: indeed, in the fuller development of mindfulness practice, they can become a central feature in arousing a deeper, yet still secular notion of mindful living that permits also the undertaking of other spiritual paths, including Buddhism. Buddhist stories of the *jātaka* type engage interest, empathy and discussion. We can all relate to the situations they describe, and see our own mental patterns reflected in the way people respond to them. As Martha Nussbaum wisely noted a few decades ago: "[1] iterary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is itself, a part of content - an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth" (Nussbaum

1990, 3). Recent commentators on mindfulness note how it could be possible to consider the ethical, and indeed the spiritual, within an understanding of mindfulness training, that does not need to compromise secular principle (Baer 2015; Brown 2016; Harvey 2015; Samuel 2016).

As I hope has been suggested, we can see how *Jātakas*, through their compassion and integrity, embody, as well as describe, an understanding of ethics that could be directly translatable to the international stage. An understanding of this ‘creative morality’, that is not just reactive, passive and observational, but resourceful, generous and considerate of others too, could help the now pressing demands for a secular consensus of what constitutes well-being, the healthy mind, and a workable way for people of different traditions and backgrounds to relate with one another.

### ABBREVIATIONS

Pali Text Society editions used of the following:

A	<i>Aṅguttaranikāya</i>
D	<i>Dighanikāya</i>
DhS	<i>Dhammasaṅgani</i>
Ja	<i>Jātakatthavaṇṇanā</i>
M	<i>Majjhimanikāya</i>
MA	<i>Commentary to M</i>
Miln	<i>Milindapañhā</i>
Sn	<i>Suttanipāta</i>

Individual *jātakas* are denoted by J 276 etc.

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