THE BODY: WHAT VIPASSANA MEDITATION REVEALS ABOUT HOW WE ARE CONNECTED TO THE WORLD

Joo Heung Lee*

I recently completed a brief refresher course in Vipassana meditation after some personal setbacks disrupted my fledgling practice and accompanying equanimity. It was much needed. My mojo is back, and I know more definitively than ever that the key to my personal happiness is daily meditation. The reason why this is so important is that (as I said previously) Vipassana meditation is to the mind what physical exercise is to the body: it is necessary for good health. It is actually more vital than physical exercise insofar as the body can be exercised while the mind is on autopilot, whereas meditation requires the vigilant awareness of the intertwining of mind and body. In other words, it is possible to have a healthy body while possessing a diseased mind (e.g. "meatheads") whereas a healthy mind will invariably lead to a healthier body. This is not to say that a Vipassana meditator cannot suffer from cancer. But a meditator who has cancer will be in much better shape than a non-meditator who is similarly afflicted. The bottom line is that the mind and body are inextricably tied together, and a well-ordered soul is axiomatically (as philosophers East and West have recognized since ancient times) one in which the mind rules over the body.

Before I develop the centrality of the body in mediating the mind's relation to the external world, I would like to tackle a topic that has baffled philosophers (both professional and amateur) since the dawn of history: the meaning of life. Simply put, the meaning of life is to become the best person you can be. The key is how one defines "best." Hedonists and Epicureans insist that the best life is the most pleasurable one. In my opinion (actually, not just in my opinion), this is patently wrong. We come closer to the truth with Aristotle's virtue ethics, which maintains that the good life is the happy life. Happiness is irreducible to pleasure. There is a rational component to happiness that excludes considering only animal pleasures. Actually, Aristotle himself insists that animal pleasures (eating, sex) do contribute to the happy life. This is where Buddhist ethics would somewhat diverge from Plato's greatest student. For a Buddhist, the happy life is the purely rational life. In this respect, Buddhists come closer to Plato than Aristotle does. However, whereas Plato insists that it is possible to divorce the soul from the body, Buddhists would say (in concert with Aristotle) that this is impossible—at least in this life.

This is one of the major reasons why a Buddhist ethics also diverges from Jewish, Christian, and Islamic ethics. With some iconoclastic exceptions, the Abrahamic faiths tend to suggest that the body corrupts the purity of the soul. Judaism arguable esteems the body more than its daughter religions. Even so, like its daughters, Judaism establishes a fairly strict separation between the sacred realm of Yahweh and the profane world of human beings. In conjunction with this dualism, the Abrahamic faiths typically define the good life as one in accordance with the laws of God. So human goodness is defined by divine standards imposed externally. Buddhism, on the other hand, understands human goodness to be a function of

* Dr. JOO HEUNG LEE, Associate Professor, Oakton Community College, Email: JooHeungLee@yahoo.com.

behavior conducive to happiness and the minimization of suffering on our own terms. This is not to say that we exclusively define the nature of happiness. Rather, it is nature which dictates what we need to do to be happy. The *Dhamma* (or *Dharma*) is nothing else but this law of nature.

The law of nature dictates that to live in this world is to be embodied. This is why we cannot pretend that we are purely rational agents immune to the exigencies of the body. In other words, this is why Kant is wrong. Kant argues that the commands of reason must be obeyed irrespective of the demands of sensibility. Thus, the moral law for Kant manifests itself in the form of an imperative. What the Buddha realized is that there is no such thing as a categorical imperative. All imperatives are hypothetical. The moral law only applies insofar as one wants to be happy. For Kant, happiness is a negligible consideration. Not so for the Buddha. Happiness IS the *telos* of human life (in concordance with Aristotle), and the *Dhamma* dictates that this can only be achieved through mastery of our animal impulses—not through a command of reason or even habitual practice, but through eradicating the roots of our egoism through the dispassionate observation of sensation.

What the Buddha saw very clearly (in fact, this is the very meaning of the word "Vipassana") is that the ego is the source of all of our misery. It blinds us to the fact of our interconnectedness with the world. This is why Nietzsche's "ethics" also falls short. Nietzsche insightfully recognized that Kant's categorical imperative "smells of cruelty." He rejected any morality that imposed its demands externally (despite Kant's insistence that the moral law was a function of autonomy). However, Nietzsche's solution to the problem of morality was to celebrate the ego over against any (imaginary) transcendent commandments. Consequently, Nietzsche's philosophy comes across as pessimistic—despite his insistence that he was the great affirmer of life. He dooms himself to a miserable life of solitude on the mountaintop, alone in his certainty that only the individual matters. It is not an accident that Nietzsche is considered a forerunner of Existentialism. Similarly, despite his attempts to distance himself from his "teacher" Schopenhauer, he ultimately shares with the ultimate pessimist a very negative view of humanity as a whole. It is an interesting coincidence that the fundamental Buddhist concept of *Anicca* (impermanence) is pronounced as a rejection of Nietzsche (A-Nietzsche).

Schopenhauer was one of the first Western philosophers who incorporated the insights of Buddhism into his thought. Specifically, Schopenhauer's description of the Will's indiscriminate urge TO BE mirrors the Buddhist concept of *tanha,* or thirst (typically translated as "desire"). According to Buddhism's Second Noble Truth, *tanha* is the root of all suffering. It is responsible for the development of separate individuals, all of whom greedily chase after their sustenance no matter the cost to everything else around them. However, Buddhism prescribes a remedy to the misery that inevitably results: the Noble 8-fold path. This is the path of liberation from the ego and its accompanying suffering. Schopenhauer similarly diagnoses moral evil to be a function of the ultimately illusory concept of the ego. For Schopenhauer, moral goodness is reducible to egolessness. Whereas he argues that this is a capability that individuals possess more or less innately, Buddhists insist that this is something any human being can cultivate through the practice of meditation. Therefore, whereas Schopenhauer throws up his hands in despair over the patently obvious fact that most of us are fundamentally selfish, Buddhists smile with the understanding that the appropriate attitude towards the ignorant is not contempt but compassion.

Arguably, the most compelling analysis of morality throughout history has been in terms of the Golden Rule: *Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you*. The reason the Golden Rule works so well is that most of us share similar desires. Based on this, the Utilitarian argument that the *summum bonum* is to maximize the collective happiness of the greatest number seems to make sense. Yet, the problem with the Golden Rule is that many of the things that give us happiness (i.e. pleasure) are quite mundane. How would one compare the pleasure that dozens of human beings may get from eating a good steak versus the pain the cow experienced while being butchered? Peter Singer, applying Utilitarian principles to Animal Ethics, argues that there is no comparison: human pleasure from eating animals is negligible compared to the pain of the animal being eaten. Proponents of human exceptionalism argue otherwise. From a Buddhist perspective, both sides miss the point. Pleasure should NEVER be a consideration when determining the morality of an action. The only factor that counts is suffering. Of course, occasionally there has to be a trade-off, and that is when Utilitarian considerations might apply. Nevertheless, by and large, the majority of situations that fall under the purview of Utilitarianism would not qualify (at least not for the same reasons) as applicable to Buddhist ethics.

The Western philosopher who I believe comes closest to a Buddhist ethics is Henri Bergson. In his classic work *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, Bergson articulates a more primordial ground for our noblest impulses than the imperative formulation of Kant and moralities based on traditional religion. In contrast to traditional moralities, which are concerned with maintaining the cohesion of the hive through an us-versus-them mentality, this higher morality embraces humanity as a whole—a universal love that Buddhists call *metta* (the Greek/Christian concept of *agape* is similar). Whereas traditional morality pushes from behind, this higher morality appeals from in front. Great moral visionaries have never compelled their adherents through force of any kind, as their charisma gained them followers just by the goodness that they radiated (Siddhatta Gotama, Jesus, Kong Fuzi, and Martin Luther King are some of the more prominent examples). Complementing Bergson's idea of a higher morality based on universal love with Schopenhauer's focus on the alleviation of suffering through egolessness, we have something close to a Buddhist ethics. The only thing missing is a practical road map to moral goodness, which for Buddhists is the Noble 8-fold path.

The Noble 8-fold path can be subdivided into three categories: *Sila* or Morality (Right Speech, Right Actions, Right Livelihood); *Samadhi* or Mental Discipline/Meditation (Right Exercises, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration); and *Panna* or (Experiential) Wisdom (Right View and Right Thoughts). What is distinctive about Buddhist ethics compared to its Western counterparts is the addition of meditation to the classic dialectic of theory (*panna*) and practice (*sila*). This is exactly why *panna* is not really "wisdom" in the traditional sense of *theoria*. It is actually more akin to the Aristotelian notion of *phroenesis* (practical wisdom). The key point is that a complete morality is not possible without mental discipline—it is not just a matter of training oneself through habit (as Aristotle maintains) but getting at the root of our impulses through intensive meditation. This is how we are capable of transcending our narrow individuality and/or allegiance to the group to which we belong towards an embrace of all living beings.

The universal love (*metta*) aspired to by Buddhists is, needless to say, against our biological nature. We tend to care almost exclusively for the people and things in closest proximity to us. This is, in fact, the presentiment behind Carol Gilligan's

Ethics of Care. Gilligan rejects Kant's abstract formalism based on reason in favor of concrete emotions. At this, a Buddhist would have no quarrel. Where they diverge is in Gilligan's preferential treatment for the relationships that mean the most to us. Buddhism, in contrast, insists that our moral sensibilities should extend equally across all living things—not based on a categorical imperative but on a universal love akin to that described by Bergson. Again, this is not something that comes easily. The difficulty of applying *metta* expansively is summed up in the famous mandate to love one's enemy.

It is well known this is what Jesus asked us to do. But the radical nature of this injunction has typically been underappreciated. Just think of how impossible (almost offensive) it would seem to forgive and embrace the murderer of your child. This is exactly the message of the gospels. According to the Buddha, the only way to accomplish this almost impossible feat (at least for the vast majority of us) is through the practice of meditation. In contrast to Christians, who believe that faith is sufficient to acquire this kind of love, Buddhists insist it takes the hard work of mental discipline. Ironically, Nietzsche (the apotheosis of atheism) seems to understand the implications of the command to love one's enemies better than most Christians. Nietzsche at least understand that one must respect one's enemies before one can love them. However, with Nietzsche, it ends at respect—and at that; his respect is usually tinged with contempt from a sovereign height. Kant also remarks on the command to love one's enemy. The only way he can make sense of this is as a form of respect (practical love): he dismisses love based on sensibility as "pathological." In contrast, this is exactly the kind of love that Buddhists aim to cultivate. In addition, unlike Aristotle (who limits this kind of friendship to virtuous men) and Gilligan (who focuses care on those who most matter), the Buddha insists that *metta* should extend across the whole spectrum of living beings.

In everyday life, by and large, we choose who and what we care. Although we can care about a wide range of things, we care most about our fellow human beings. Kant understood this to be a function of our exclusive proprietorship of reason. Only a rational being can be found culpable for his or her actions. Those who we find utterly beneath us draw scant attention in terms of moral indignation: it is pointless to get angry at a dog for harming a child. Instead, we blame the adult human who *ought* to have been more responsible. Now if this adult were mentally impaired, this would also typically absolve him or her of responsibility (but in that case, they should not be in possession of a potentially dangerous animal). The point is that moral responsibility comes with the presupposition of rational agency (something Kant understood well). In addition, we tend to select as friends only those who we find worthy of esteem.

In modern capitalist societies, wealth allows individuals to be ever more selective about the company we keep. The hoi polloi can be kept at a distance, except insofar as they are relegated well-defined positions of servility. Furthermore, wealth allows people to revel in their power, participating in what Nietzsche calls "the right of the masters." So it is easy for the 1% to be gracious (even though so few of them are), as they are able to soar above the dialectical power games that structure human relationships. Still, unless one is utterly solitary (and Aristotle famously defined man as a political animal), other egos will always resist being reduced to mere objects in the solipsistic worlds of the affluent few. Moreover, even if you are one of the lucky ones blessed with riches, does that give you the right to use people as a mere means to your selfish ends? The obvious answer is "No!" As self-evident as this appears, using

people seems to be the *modus operandi* for the majority of us on a daily basis. As Schopenhauer well understood, the ego is imperious in its demands, and if an individual were given the choice between the destruction of the world and the destruction of his/her self, there is little doubt how most of us would choose. This is because trapped in the prison of separate individual consciousnesses; the destruction of the self is equivalent to the destruction of the world.

What Buddhists understand is that the idea of a separate individual consciousness is in fact what is illusory (despite Descartes' famous *cogito*). The apprehension of *anatta* (or non-self) follows from the experiential understanding of *anicca* (impermanence) that comes with meditation. The truth is that the separate self is an illusion, and we are all interconnected. However, this is a powerful illusion. It takes much hard work to dispel. Still, what more worthy endeavor is there in life? As Aristotle recognized, we are not born virtuous. We can become excellent human through practice—not just through habitual actions but also through the mental discipline that gets at the root of our underlying selfishness. The cultivation of saintliness (to use a historically loaded term) is accompanied by a genuine humility: if you see yourself as saintly, you are far from saintly. Humility is a function of the attenuation of the ego, which is equivalent to the development of moral goodness. Meditation enables one to generate love and compassion *for all*—even those whom others might designate as beneath them (it is not an accident that "inferior" human beings are often described as dogs).

Ironically, the only effective way of dissolving the self is to withdraw into the self. There are many post-moderns (I used to be one of them) who argue that the self can be disrupted by the transgression of limits (e.g. Georges Bataille, *Fight Club*). Nevertheless, the conscious attempts to dismantle ego integrity becomes a project that ultimately reestablishes the preeminence of the ego: one reasserts control over the situation (Bataille recognized this in the Marquis de Sade but failed to see that his own attempts fell into the same trap). Vipassana meditation, in contrast, does not aim at dissolving the self: the realization of *anatta* comes as a by-product of the experiential awareness of the impermanence of our sensations. Which finally brings us back to the topic of the body.

The individual interacts with the world through what Buddhists (along with Aldous Huxley and Jim Morrison) would call the six sense doors: vision, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and mind. The sense door of mind is typically omitted in Western catalogs, which says something about how the West divorces the mind from the body. Buddhists, in contrast, recognize that they are inseparable. Regardless, the mind, like most of the other senses, presupposes a space between consciousness and the object of perception: the visual object is external to the perceiver, sound must travel as waves to the eardrum, the mental object (or *cogitatum*) is not identical to consciousness or *cogito* (even though it depends on it). Smell and taste are somewhat different (which explains Proust's predilection for these senses), but they depend on a chemical incorporation of the external stimuli that is also predicated on a divide between subject and object. Only touch is unmediated. Touch requires direct contact between subject and object that attests to a continuity of Being. During meditation, all the other senses are quieted: your eyes are closed, it is silent, you are not eating, strong perfumes are discouraged (despite the incongruous employment of incense by some), and the mind is calmed by focus on the breath. In this way, one can become acutely mindful of the sensation of touch. Normally, we are so distracted by the other senses that we overlook the variegated activities of our bodies at the cellular level.

Life is motion. While sitting silently, one becomes aware of how every cell of the body is responding to the contact between mind and matter. In this way, we realize that we are interconnected to all that is.

Socrates famously proclaimed that all evil was a result of ignorance. Socrates was right. What we are ignorant of is our interconnectedness to Being. Vipassana meditation dispels this ignorance (or *moha*). Without the normal filters in place to mediate our relationship to the world, we become vulnerable. We feel the pain of others as if it were our own—because it is. We can no longer pretend that we are invulnerable in our fortresses of solitude, outside of space and time in the realm of things-in-themselves, because to be embodied *is* to exist in space and time. The awareness of sensation during meditation (and extending outside it to "the real world") reminds us that everything is constantly in flux—including our "selves." The illusory sense of self comes from the five aggregates (*skandhas*): body, sensations, perceptions, consciousness, and mental habit patterns (*sankharas*). These heaps perpetuate the illusion of separate existence. However, they can be overcome through mental discipline. Heraclitus famously said that you cannot step into the same river twice (he was the one philosopher from the past that Nietzsche unequivocally admired). It is not only the river that is constantly in flux. You cannot step into the same river twice because neither the river nor "*you*" are identical moment to moment. Once you come to realize this, you are able to liberate yourself from the prison of the ego, and you are well on your way towards the happiness that comes with the experiential understanding of your interconnectedness to all that is.