

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

RELIGION  
AND EMOTION

*Edited by*

JOHN CORRIGAN

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2008

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016  
www.oup.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
The Oxford handbook of religion and emotion / John Corrigan, ed.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-57021-4

1. Religions—Handbooks, manuals, etc. 2. Emotions—Religious aspects—  
Handbooks, manuals, etc. 3. Theologians—Handbooks, manuals, etc.
4. Philosophers—Handbooks, manuals, etc. I. Corrigan, John, 1952—  
BL41:O94 2007

204 2—dc22 2007007041

## CONTENTS

Contributors, ix

Introduction: The Study of Religion and Emotion, 3  
*John Corrigan*

### PART I RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

1. Buddhism, 17  
*Maria Heim*

2. Islam, 35  
*Anna M. Gade*

3. Hinduism, 51  
*June McDaniel*

4. Japanese Religions, 73  
*Gary L. Ebersole*

5. Judaism, 95  
*Joel Gereboff*

6. Christianity, 111  
*Andrew Tallon*

7. New Religious Movements, 1  
*Douglas E. Cowan*

### PART II

8. Ritual, 143  
*Pamela E. Klassen*

9. Sexuality and the E  
*Jeffrey J. Kripal*

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

Printed in the United States of America  
on acid-free paper

## CHAPTER 1

# BUDDHISM

MARIA HEIM

BUDDHISM deals directly with the emotions as a chief concern of its doctrine and practice, in ways perhaps more central than some of the other traditions considered in this volume. The Buddha's core teaching of the Four Noble Truths begins with an emotional truth, that is, that life inevitably involves sorrow, suffering, and grief (*dukkha*). This foundational truth is shared across the diverse range of Buddhist schools and traditions that developed across Asia, and now globally, in Buddhism's twenty-five-hundred-year history. The Buddha grounded his teachings on recognizing the fragility and uncertainty of the human condition: none of us will elude the frustrations, disappointments, grief, and fear of living in a world that is inherently unstable and impermanent. We will all experience the loss of those we love, observe the decline of our youth and health, and ultimately face our own deaths.

This painful reality is met directly as the first of the Buddha's teachings, but it is followed by three further truths that offer a means of escaping this plight. In what is sometimes seen to be modeled on a medical diagnosis, the Four Noble Truths follow a physician's analysis: the symptom (life entails suffering), has a cause (craving), a cure ("awakening"), and a "prescription" that leads to the cure (the "Noble Eightfold Path"). The First Noble Truth involves the intuition that we can know the nature of the world directly through our emotions—we know affectively of our fragility and vulnerability in a world that is constantly changing. The cause of our suffering is a bottomless craving or desire that takes many forms, but is chiefly the desire for pleasure and permanence and an aversion to pain and change: we want health, stability, the enduring presence of the people we love, and lasting life. The answer to our suffering is to cease this desire, and the name for this ceasing is *nirvāṇa*, in which we extinguish desire and ignorance and awaken to the true nature of the world. This experience is sometimes interpreted as the opposite of

suffering and thus a kind of bliss, although it is a reality that is beyond the conditioned nature of ordinary experience and understanding. Finally, the means to this awakening are enjoined in the Eightfold Path, that is, eight “right” practices: holding right views and practicing right resolve, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. These practices comprise the Buddhist path of morality and insight.

Given their foundational concern with human vulnerability to suffering, it is not surprising that Buddhist traditions developed various systems of knowledge that explore human feeling with great subtlety, and advanced certain technologies to redress the pain in our emotional experience. But we should note at the outset that in the various languages used by Buddhists there is no term that corresponds exactly to the generic category “emotion,” and thus emotion as such is not theorized in Buddhist thought. This observation reminds us that emotion is not a natural category or kind but is but one way that modern English speakers demarcate human experience.<sup>1</sup> We should also recognize the historical particularity in which the contemporary use of the word *emotion* holds sway. During previous periods in Western thought, people used the language of the “passions” or the “affections” where we use the term *emotions*, emphasizing in the case of the passions turbulent impulses either beneficial or harmful to the soul, and, in the case of affections, our reactions to how things and mental states move or affect us. While there are important areas of overlap with the earlier concepts, the term “emotion” is of more recent vintage, stemming from the early seventeenth century, in which an emotion was a physical perturbation or disturbance. In time, the term took on the sense of a disturbance or agitation of the mind, and came to be defined, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as “a mental ‘feeling’ or ‘affection’ (e.g. of pleasure or pain, desire or aversion, surprise, hope or fear, etc.), as distinguished from cognitive or volitional states of consciousness.”

Here emotion is defined in contrast to thought and will, and it is mental rather than physical. We might also notice in this definition a sense that an emotion is a discrete experience with one particular valence: pleasure or pain, desire or aversion, surprise, hope or fear. The possibility that emotions might be related to more enduring moods or dispositions is not raised, nor is the prospect that they might be complex states of mind inhabiting thoughts, beliefs, and various other feelings in one and the same episode. The category emotion is often defined, as it is here, by reference to that which it includes and classifies, enumerating various lists of emotions, such as pleasure, pain, desire, and so on.<sup>2</sup>

Whether in the context of the passions, the affections, or the emotions, the partitioning of the mind into three faculties—*affective*, *cognitive*, and *volitional*—runs deep in Western philosophical discourse.<sup>3</sup> Reason is often depicted as being at war with the passions, and which of them prompts the will is a matter of considerable philosophical dispute. In other discussions, emotions or passions are seen to be cognitions or motivations of a certain sort, and efforts are marshaled to determine where and how the affective, cognitive, and conative overlap.<sup>4</sup> This tripartite

division of the mind may be particular to the West, for we find no analogue of it in Buddhist systems of thought. This is not to say that we cannot identify experiences in Buddhist psychology that correspond (often very roughly) to these different functions, or to deny that this framework might yield insights when applied to Buddhist thought, but only to suggest that what we isolate out as emotions are in Buddhist thinking so interwoven with cognitive and conative value that the framework itself can seem artificial.<sup>5</sup>

Consider, for example, compassion, an experience dear to Buddhists that is also currently receiving attention from cognitive scientists. To feel compassion involves a cognition that someone is suffering. This is not as obvious or straightforward as it may seem. To discern suffering in the world entails vital modes of attention, sensitivity, and awareness. Compassion also entails a feeling of sympathy or concern and a motivation to alleviate the suffering. It can involve a behavior in the form of an altruistic act. Cognitive scientists, some of whom are working with and learning from Buddhists, are discovering that compassion may be expressed on the face, and it may have a bodily component.<sup>6</sup> We might also see compassion as a disposition, an inclination or virtue of a person that characterizes a trait as well as an episode. Compassion’s contexts and applications also form a large part of its meaning and significance, as we will explore in several places in this essay. Like compassion, other “emotions” can be seen to be multifaceted phenomena, which suggests a complexity that may not best be served by a traditional Western division of faculties.

Buddhist descriptions of mental processes invite us to think differently about how human experience might be described. The discussions treated here, drawn from diverse genres from South Asia, also invite us to reflect on how Buddhist thinkers have shaped human experience in distinctive ways through their analysis of affective life. We turn first to the Abhidhamma texts as the most systematic rendering of early Buddhist treatments of psychology, and a body of knowledge that continues to occupy an important place in certain Theravāda and Tibetan communities. We will then consider meditation techniques and their work with mental processes, as another entry into the territory of the emotions. Finally, we will look at how certain literary traditions invoke and explore affect and how the meaning and significance of emotions are located in narrative context. Our approach aspires to be neither systematic nor exhaustive in describing these various kinds of reflection on emotions, nor will we attempt to survey all that might be labeled an “emotion” in Buddhist thought. Rather, our aim is to begin to consider how Buddhists in different contexts have thought formally about affective experience and what it entails for human life.

## CLASSIFICATION AND METAPHOR IN THE ABHIDHAMMA

The Abhidhamma literature offers terminology that is both narrower and much wider than the English "emotion," but no single term coincides exactly with it.<sup>7</sup> The term "feeling" (*vedanā*), which designates painful, pleasurable, or neutral impressions the perceived world makes on us when we experience an object, is a narrower conception than emotion. It would not include, for example, emotions like pity, anger, surprise, and so on but is rather the bare reaction to a stimulus. Feeling is one of five formations that constitute a human being; the others are the material body, perception, dispositional and intentional activity, and consciousness. Feeling is also said to be present in every moment of consciousness. In our conscious experience in the world, we are constantly feeling and reacting to stimuli.

A much broader designation than both this sense of feeling and the English word *emotion*, on the other hand, is the list of all phenomena or states described in the Abhidhamma. The method of the Abhidhamma is analytical, abstract, and scholastic; its lists attempt to break down human experience into its most irreducible elements and their interrelations. On the face of it, this would seem to be an essentialist move, but the literature's many listings and classifications of the irreducible happenings of experience show them to be multifaceted events that resist a static or absolutist interpretation of a human being. In its listings, the Abhidhamma offers intricate and precise terminology for a wide canvas of experiences ranging from bare sensory contact with the world to experiences achieved through advanced meditation. Among these states or events we can locate what we would call emotions,<sup>8</sup> but they are mixed in with other experiences—dispositions, inclinations, habits, and ways of knowing—that might have emotional force but would not always be considered emotions in Western psychology or philosophy. Many of these states have both mental and physical attributes, demonstrating a mutual dependency of body and mind or even a lack of duality between them. In addition, many of these states have at once cognitive, conative, and affective qualities. One and the same state can involve emotional salience, thoughts and judgments, and motivations and volitions.

While we are unable in the space provided to present a full overview of early Buddhist psychology,<sup>9</sup> the Abhidhamma typologies are worth considering at some length because they describe a distinctively Buddhist attempt at ordering and analyzing the complexity of human experience. While the tradition itself does not make this distinction, implicit in the Abhidhamma project is the assumption that it is describing innate experiences that, in their barest forms, are not the product of culture or social life. The states the Abhidhamma lists depict a generic template of human experience. For example, the operations of shame and self-assessment, which are often taken by other scholars and traditions to be learned or social emotions (see Ebersole, chapter 4 in this volume, for example), are listed in the

Abhidhamma as natural occurrences built into human psychology. Two factors do the affective work of self-evaluation: shame itself (*hiri*) and an experience of apprehension or fear of one's evil action (*ottappa*). These potentialities may be weaker or greater in an individual and are much subject to development in moral training and meditation techniques, but they are listed in Abhidhamma texts as "powers" or resources of our natural endowment. In addition to being listed as powers, they are also called "guardians of the world." They are affective factors humans possess that make us wary of our own potential for evil and thus can protect the world from our damaging incursions on it.

The Abhidhamma tradition offers two main strategies in its treatment of psychology—classification and metaphor—that are often encountered in other treatments of the emotions as well. In its canonical texts, the Abhidhamma consists primarily of lists, definitions, and classifications that can be challenging for the modern interpreter coming to them without the aid of a commentary. Yet lists and taxonomies are crucial for our efforts to understand Buddhist approaches to emotions, since much of the theory itself is embedded in its choices of classifications. We know the particular nature of shame and apprehension, for example, according to how they are classified—as powers and as guardians of the world. But the tradition also offers commentaries that expand on these classifications and provide further definitions of essential psychological terminology. Such definitions often proceed through simile and metaphor. They offer rich and vivid explorations of human psychology finely tuned to the nuances of experience.

It is noteworthy that the Abhidhamma texts classify states in moral and religious terms; all states can be designated good, bad, or neutral. The term I am translating as "good" or moral (*kusala*) is defined in Abhidhamma as that which is salutary, blameless, and skillful.<sup>10</sup> States that are good are wholesome, free from faults or stains, and make one proficient at promoting happy results. "Bad" (*akusala*) is the reverse—bad mental states lead to unhappy results, blemishes on one's disposition and character, and illness and decay in one's body and mind. Mental states such as hatred or anger that lead to violence, destruction, or pain, for example, are considered unhealthy and immoral.<sup>11</sup> The moral shadings implicit here may recall the moral sentiment tradition in Western philosophy in which emotions carry with them a sense of their own approval or disapproval. Like the moral sense theorists and those influenced by them in the Western tradition (Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith, for example), the study of affect is for the Abhidhamma theorists a kind of philosophical anthropology in interpreting how our natural inclinations have moral valence.

Further classification of states in the Abhidhamma marks out categories and divisions of mental life that have no analogues in English or modern Western thought. Rather than attempt to describe all of these, I will offer several examples of different kinds of description that will provide glimpses of how this system works. A basic principle of Abhidhamma analysis is to search for the roots and underlying causes of experience. We can understand our experiences only through determining their causes and relations with other events. For example, six motivational

“roots” with strong emotional salience are seen to drive much of human action and experience and exhibit Buddhist concerns with causality and interdependence that guide Abhidhamma interpretations of experience. There are three bad roots: greed, hatred, and delusion; and three good roots that are the opposite of these: nongreed, nonhatred, and nondelusion. Though these roots are deeply planted in the human psyche from actions (karma) in this and previous lives and prompt much of what we do and think, they are also *felt* experiences.

The term for greed, which can also be translated as “passion” or “lust,” is a disordered desire or inclination, a grasping and clinging to things in the world. One commentary describes greed as adhering fast to its object like meat thrown on a hot pan, or the stain of lampblack sticking to fabric.<sup>12</sup> Hatred, a close ally to anger, is hostility and ill will described in quite graphic terms, with the commentary piling on similes to bring out the quality of the experience: hatred is like the ferocity of a snake that has been beaten, it spreads like swallowed poison, it burns like a forest fire, and it gives offense like an enemy seizing an opportunity.<sup>13</sup> Delusion, which we might normally think of as merely cognitive error, has affective qualities. Delusion in the Buddhist view is not mere ignorance but rather is described as an intransigent fidelity to wrong views, stubborn persistence in holding false doctrines, and a perverse and stupid rejection of right views; clinging to wrong views can also be drifting in a bewildered state of confusion in which one is suspicious and fearful like a person lost in a wilderness thick with thieves, wild beasts, and evil spirits.<sup>14</sup> The good roots are the opposite of these, and can be interpreted in terms of positive states—being generous, loving, and wise—but are also often described simply as the absence of the bad states. To be free of hatred, greed, and delusion is to enjoy a quiet, happy, and clear mind.

Another important classification refers to certain “latent tendencies” that underlie conscious experience (also as the result of past karma), and are manifested under certain conditions. They are seven: sensuous desire, aversion (or anger), conceit, wrong views, doubt, craving for existence, and ignorance. These factors are part of one’s disposition in ways that one may not even be aware of yet govern one’s ways of being in the world. For example, anger is here seen as a subterranean current lying dormant until it erupts.<sup>15</sup> A related classification defines four of the latent tendencies—sensuous desire, craving for existence, wrong views, and ignorance—as *āsavas*, a term with no ready English equivalent but that can be translated as taints or “oozings” such as those that seep from a wound. These psychological factors are also largely subconscious yet inform the quality of one’s experience and interactions with the world. Full manifestations of the latent tendencies and taints do not appear out of nowhere. Emotions in this sense do not spring on us from external causes or seize us unbidden; rather they spring from deeply seated sources that generate our experience and interpretation of the world.

Lest these categories seem to emphasize only a negative or problematic psychology, we might also consider some of the more positive categories or good mental events. We encounter, for example, a rich psychology of happiness in this literature. One variety of happiness (*somanassa*) is considered in a listing of eight

good or moral faculties, which also includes faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, wisdom, consciousness, and vitality. As a “faculty,” this kind of happiness governs and rules over other mental states and habits of the mind, making one agreeable and optimistic. It colors and frames the rest of one’s experience. Two other varieties of happiness are described as well: joy (*pīti*) and pleasure (*sukha*). These are listed as “factors of absorption,” a term that gets at their quality of focusing and intensifying one’s experience of other mental states and their objects.<sup>16</sup> Joy is described as gladdening the mind and body and is manifested by a sense of elation. Moreover, according to the *Atthasālinī*, there are five kinds of joy: lesser joy, momentary joy, recurrent joy, transporting joy, and pervading joy.

Lesser joy is able to raise the hairs of the body. Momentary joy is like a flash of lightning moment by moment. Recurrent joy is like a wave on the ocean shore, falling and falling on the body as it breaks. Transporting joy is strong, it makes the body sit straight up and even lifts it into the air. . . . When pervading joy arises the entire body is saturated like a full bladder, and it gushes forth like a great flood of water springing from the womb of a mountain.<sup>17</sup>

Notice what these kinds of joy do to the body and the very visceral, physical descriptions of them, suggesting how essential bodily experience is to them. Elsewhere, joy is also classified as an element of human intentions or dispositions (*sankhāraakkhandā*),<sup>18</sup> emphasizing its constructed nature, perhaps the enthusiasm we bring to certain experiences. Pleasure, on the other hand is a feeling, a reaction to pleasing stimuli. The *Atthasālinī* says that “joy is when one weary from the desert wilderness sees or hears of water at the outskirts of the forest, while pleasure is when one enjoys the water in the shade of the forest.”<sup>19</sup> Joy is anticipation, excitement, and enthusiasm; pleasure is the relishing of an enjoyable experience.

This brief example suggests something of the subtlety Abhidhamma analysis brings to human experience and how classificatory choices cast light the different shades and qualities of happiness. We might also be struck by the earthy and evocative language of these descriptions and their reliance on metaphor. These experiences come to life when joy is described in quite bodily terms as crashing upon us like an ocean wave or hatred is felt like a beaten snake lashing out. The use of simile and metaphor in describing emotions is ubiquitous in this literature. This may be in part because many emotions are so tied to vivid bodily experience that they can arise perhaps only through physical sensations, images, and representations. This is most clearly observed in cases in which the very terminology for an experience is a metaphor—the oozings or taints, for example.

At the same time, the use of metaphor in the commentaries adds philosophical substance to its conceptions. Abhidhamma taxonomies can go only so far to elucidate concepts. Much of the rest of the work is done through exegesis in which metaphor is perhaps the most useful of the commentator’s tools. Iris Murdoch is correct to argue that “metaphors are not merely peripheral decorations or even useful models, they are fundamental forms of our awareness of our condition,” and that it is “impossible to discuss certain kinds of concepts without resort to

metaphor, since the concepts are themselves deeply metaphorical and cannot be analyzed into non-metaphorical components without a loss of substance.<sup>20</sup> There may be something inherently elusive about affective phenomena that requires us to know them only in terms of more concrete and tangible experiences. Coaxing the intangible into graspable realities is critical philosophical work.

Murdoch is also right to recognize that metaphors often carry a “moral charge,” though she does not explicitly connect this moral charge to metaphor’s aesthetic impact.<sup>21</sup> Even as they do essential conceptual work, metaphors operate on our sensibilities to move us in certain directions. Our emotional reactions to these descriptions are themselves morally shaded. When we recoil in disgust from experiences described as the oozeings that seep from a wound and when we are drawn irresistibly toward the delight that lifts us into the air, the text is deliberately shaping moral sensibilities. Buddhist traditions are keenly aware of the power of the aesthetic use of language to stimulate moral sentiments, an issue to which we will return in our examination of meditation techniques and literary treatments of the emotions.

## CULTIVATING THE AFFECTIVE LIFE

While Abhidharma has sometimes been called a descriptive philosophy in its attempt to reveal human experience in its most irreducible and subtle events, it should also be understood as part of a larger program shared by other Buddhist texts to learn to manage one’s psychological life through meditative contemplation. Part of figuring out what emotions are is learning to see how they can be altered or changed. While newcomers to Buddhism sometimes assume that meditation involves a stoic retreat from the emotions, in fact, meditative techniques in various Buddhist traditions are much more complex than this portrait suggests and depict a range of different relationships one develops with one’s own mind. In early Buddhism, the chief word that we translate as “meditation” is “cultivation” (*bhāvanā*). To cultivate one’s mind is to take an active role in uprooting harmful thoughts and emotions, planting beneficial ones, and providing the right conditions for the nurturing of a peaceful, harmonious mind. Assumed here is that the mind is pliable; while we may struggle with deeply rooted tendencies and dispositions leading us to anger or hatred, for example, these can be slowly dug out, eliminated, and replaced with positive dispositions and experiences. The Buddha once asserted: “I do not see any single thing that, if developed and cultivated, is as pliant and workable as the mind.”<sup>22</sup> Buddhist meditation techniques are practical guidelines for eradicating dispositions and motivational roots that cause us and others suffering.

Meditation in all Buddhist traditions involves reflexivity, in which one learns to observe one’s mental processes. Learning to watch the rising and falling of

emotions is to begin to stand clear of them. For example, in anger—a particularly powerful and consuming passion that threatens to overwhelm one entirely—a part of the mind can learn to stand back and observe the rage arise, noting its conditions, its arc, and its dissipation. To see something as conditioned is to help dispel its force, for what is conditioned will end. To observe mental episodes and habits in this way does much of the work of liberating us from them; one is no longer swallowed whole by the anger. Some traditions of meditation are not unlike modern cognitive therapy where one sorts through one’s habits of thinking and consciously alters them. Santideva, a key thinker in the early Mahāyāna traditions and an important authority for Tibetan Buddhists, describes an intriguing repertoire of strategies for surmounting anger by intensive scrutiny of one’s inner life. One first becomes aware of anger’s horrors and destructiveness and how it leads to harm for oneself and others. Convinced of its addictive and malevolent nature, one actively seeks to diffuse and contain it by observing what causes it and how one might respond differently. The virtue of patience or forbearance is a key weapon in one’s arsenal against anger. In strength and fortitude, one becomes unflappable even in the face of wrongs and violence committed against one; as one develops, one comes to revere all beings, even hostile enemies, enjoying a mental state that “drives away the sorrows of the world.”<sup>23</sup>

Not only can meditation techniques ameliorate and eliminate negative emotional experience and dispositional traits but they can also be deployed to enrich one’s experience of positive mental experience in ways conducive to mental health and morality. One schema of moral sentiments involves four “immeasurables” or “sublime states” that describe four varieties of love: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. Each of these emotions is regarded both as other-regarding and as bringing about happiness in one experiencing it. Loving-kindness refers to a feeling of friendliness toward all beings, wishing that they could all be happy. Compassion is a strong desire that beings not suffer; it is, notably, a positive experience that the texts insist is not a condition of sadness: in it, one is not consumed with pity or dismayed by suffering but rather is concerned and involved with the fate of others. Sympathetic joy is taking real pleasure in the happiness of others, being delighted by their successes. Finally, equanimity is the experience of impartiality and evenness in one’s regard for all beings—it is a feeling, not an absence of feeling or dispassion, as it is sometimes mistaken to be. These states are said to be “immeasurable,” in that one cannot get to the bottom of them: properly cultivated, they go on and on, in every direction.

The immeasurables are encountered in meditation traditions across the Buddhist world, where they are approached in the context of practice. One meditation technique from the Theravāda tradition suggests a strategy for developing these feelings of love by first directing them toward those close at hand. By experiencing the particular qualities of these feelings toward those one already loves, one comes to “inhabit” them in ways that are immediately accessible. Once one knows these feelings well and can call them up readily, one can begin to expand them to include others, directing them to neutrals and even enemies, and eventually to all beings.

The following text explores the love parents have for their children in its varieties and subtleties, to illustrate the nature of these different kinds of love, which would then be expanded toward others.

When a baby is in the womb, the parents think with *loving-kindness*, “when will we see our child healthy and endowed with all his major and minor limbs?” Then when this tender creature lies on his back and cries and wails because of being bitten by lice or fleas or because of being bothered by troubled sleep, the parents hear this noise and feel *compassion*. Furthermore, when the parents observe the youth in his most desirable years, either at the time of play when he runs and races or at the time he sleeps, their minds become tender, like a hundred fluffy balls of cotton soaked in the finest clarified butter. The parents’ minds are satisfied and joyous. They have *sympathetic joy* at that time. Then, when the son is able to provide adornments for his wife and settle in his own house, the parents become even-minded and think, “Now our son can live on his own.” In this way they have *equanimity* at that time.<sup>24</sup>

These kinds of love are rich with content and value. They are happy experiences where pleasure is being taken in the other in these very concrete ways. Starting with the immediate and concrete love toward one’s intimates, the meditator learns to expand gradually the narrow spheres of emotional reach, and the love becomes unlimited.

## THE IMPACT OF EMOTIONS IN LITERATURE

Buddhist literature is fertile ground for exploring the content of emotions and their power in human life, and the very artfulness of literature can prompt sensitivity and compassion in its audience. Many stories from the Buddhist world are expressly invoked to create analogical ties with others through stimulating emotional experience. Two narratives from an early tradition of autobiographical poems grapple with grief in ways that are deeply sensitive to our human vulnerability to loss. The vivid and profound feelings of love, especially in the form of parental love that we have just seen, may be matched only by the sorrow of the loss of those we love, illustrating a key Buddhist truth that “from love comes sorrow.”<sup>25</sup> At the same time, these stories suggest that grief can lead to truth and is a particularly affective route to awakening itself. Both stories we will consider explore the depths of the sorrows of mothers who lose their children.

The story of Paṭācārā is one of the most moving of all tales in Buddhist literature.<sup>26</sup> As a young woman from a well-born family, Paṭācārā disobeyed her parents and eloped with a household servant. When she was about to deliver her first child, she, in the tradition of Indian women, wanted to return to her natal

home and give birth in the presence of her family. On the way, however, she gave birth on the side of the road, and then decided not to return to her family after all. When she was pregnant with her second child, she and her husband and first child set out again, but she again went into labor before reaching her parents’ house. Unfortunately, the young family was caught in a terrible storm, and when her husband went in search of some kind of shelter for Paṭācārā while she delivered, he was bitten by a snake and died immediately. Paṭācārā spent the night in labor exposed to the storm; she crouched with her body to try to protect her babies from the lashing rain and wind. When morning arrived, she went in search of her husband, only to find him dead. Taking the two little ones, she continued to her parents’ home but found she had to cross a river swollen from the rains. In her weakened state she was unable to carry both children across the river and so left the older child at the river bank and carried the newborn across, setting him down on the far bank. While she forged the river to reach the other child, a hawk swooped down and carried off the baby. As she thrashed about in the water trying to ward off the hawk, the older child thought she was beckoning him in, and he entered the river and drowned. By now the wretched woman was nearly insane with grief and shock and sought only to reach her parents’ home. As she was going, she met a traveler coming from the direction of her home town, and she asked him for news of her parents’ household. He begged her to ask her about any other house but that one. At her insistence, he revealed that in the storm her parents’ house had collapsed, and everyone in it had perished.

At this Paṭācārā did go insane and in her horror and grief tore her clothes. She wandered naked—a most vivid physical image of her vulnerability and loss—and was abused and reviled by people who encountered her, which may indicate a certain hardness in human beings that leads us to shun and despise the unfortunate. Eventually she encountered the Buddha, who did not reject her but instead drew her near and pierced through her grief. She regained her senses, became a nun, and was eventually awakened. She came to her awakening by one day gazing sadly at water from her water pot trickling in streams on the ground. A little water flowed only so far, a second spilling of water flowed further, and a third flowed yet further. This image she took to indicate the larger and universal truth that some die in youth, others in midlife, and yet others in old age, and that her experience is part of the universal flow of life in *saṃsāra* in which karmic destinies prevail over life and death for all beings. She was thus led out of the particularities of her own sorrow.

A second story also involves a mother’s grief. Kisāgotamī was a young woman from a poor family who married a kind and well-born young man.<sup>27</sup> Despite his fondness for her, her in-laws were quite derisive of her until she finally bore a son. In traditional Indian values concerning women, bearing a son enhances a woman’s status considerably, and Kisāgotamī came to be very happy. Unfortunately, the child died as a toddler, and she was left bereft and confused, never having encountered death before. Taking the child’s body on her hip, she roamed about seeking some sort of medicine that could help him, but was met only with scorn.



Finally a kindhearted and wise man sent her to the Buddha. The Buddha offered to help, but required her first to bring him a mustard seed from a household in which no one had ever died. She readily agreed to go in search of it, but discovered before long that such a thing is impossible, for no one lives in such a family. In her awareness of the universality of death and loss, her own sorrow was assuaged, and she, like Paṭācārā, joined the monastic order.

Like Paṭācārā's, Kisāgotami's grief, gently guided by the Buddha, led her outside of herself into an awareness of others' pain—no one can escape death and the loss of those they love, and no one is unique in their claims of suffering. This knowledge is not only crucial for providing the wisdom of the First Noble Truth that life for all of us entails unavoidable pain, but it also has affective resonance. The loneliness and isolation of grief is here diffused by her knowing that others have shared it. In fact, Kisāgotami's poems invoke Paṭācārā as she ponders Paṭācārā's grief in the context of her own. Her poem brings her into dialogue with Paṭācārā, whose tale of loss is even greater than hers, and in some verses she even takes Paṭācārā's story as her own, using the first person: "Going along, about to bring forth, I saw my husband dead. Having given birth on the path, [I had] not yet arrived at my own house. / Two sons dead and a husband dead on the path for miserable [me]. [My] mother and father were burning upon one [funeral] pyre." Then Kisāgotami shifts to the second person, addressing Paṭācārā: "Miserable woman, with family annihilated, you have suffered immeasurable pain, and you have shed tears for many thousands of births."<sup>28</sup> In this intriguing instance of intertextuality, Kisāgotami gains some distance from her own sorrow by her compassion and empathy for Paṭācārā, telling Paṭācārā's story as her own. She is able to reach outside of herself and form an empathetic bond with someone else, which allows her some detachment from her own consuming grief. As she seeks to comprehend the bottomless, unfathomable sorrow of the loss of even one child, she considers Paṭācārā's loss of her entire family, and ultimately the loss of all one's loved ones throughout all previous lives, which we have all experienced in our migrations through *samsāra*.

A modern example of the power of others' stories to help us interpret and manage our own emotions can be seen in Anne Hansen's work with Cambodian refugees from the Khmer Rouge. When asked about their experiences of the Khmer Rouge genocide, her informants responded by invoking Buddhist stories, and often, like Kisāgotami, told the story of Paṭācārā. Her story with its harrowing losses and helplessness and ultimate triumph stood in for their own, in which they, too, had suffered the deaths of their families, homelessness, nakedness, and social rejection. Charles Hallisey and Anne Hansen suggest that configuring their own trauma through telling Paṭācārā's story simultaneously created "empathetic involvement" with the particularity of her condition and gave them distance from their own condition to achieve some degree of detachment and thus relief from it. If this is so, then the power of literature not only provides the ability to access, interpret, and articulate aspects of our own experience that are still inchoate, raw, and unspeakable

but it also can pull us out of ourselves in ways that keep us from being entirely consumed by our emotions. Telling Paṭācārā's story allows those suffering grief an "accessible means of regaining possession" of themselves.<sup>29</sup>

## THE SENSIBILITIES OF FRIENDSHIP

In considering meditative and literary techniques aimed at prompting and cultivating certain emotions, we find that we have traveled considerable distance from the Abhidhamma's bare description of the natural template of human experience. We have come to consider the social aspects of emotions—that is, how they originate in and through our interactions with others and with modes of social life. Although in Abhidhamma lists the person is represented quite unproblematically abstracted from social context and the narratives that constitute human life, in many other Buddhist reflections we find a deep sensitivity to how others condition our affective life, especially in ways deemed ethically and soteriologically significant. Buddhist thinkers have had much to say particularly on the affective aspects of faith, gratitude, generosity, and friendship. The emotions associated with these values are often key clues to discerning what Buddhists regard as important and significant in human life. For example, in literary, ritual, and doctrinal contexts, the Buddha is sometimes referred to as the ultimate "Good Friend." Buddhists seek friendship with him and express it with acts of gratitude and devotion. He offered friendship to both Paṭācārā and Kisāgotami during their darkest moments and provided refuge and solace, and it is his friendship that they recall as enabling the turning point in their sorrow.

Close attention to context is necessary to appreciate fully the nuances of friendship and the social nature of other emotions. The relationship between the Buddha and Ānanda, his closest disciple, attendant, and friend, evinces a quite complex relationship of care and friendship that can serve as one example in which the full meaning and significance of a set of emotions can be glimpsed only through consideration of the contexts that give rise to it. A small detail in one account of the Buddha's death signals an intriguing linking of grief and love. At the time when the Buddha's death grew near, Ānanda, who was not yet spiritually awakened, began to weep. The Theravāda texts depict the Buddha's body in his final hours and days as getting old and frail, falling apart like an old cart held together by straps. Ānanda, foreseeing the loss he was about to face when the Buddha would no longer be present in the world, could not refrain from weeping. The Buddha comforted him by recalling to mind Ānanda's careful and loving attendance on him. "Ānanda, you have attended me for a long time with loving physical activities, with loving verbal activities, and with loving mental activities, in ways that were beneficial, happy, consistent, and measureless."<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Ānanda had been his personal attendant

for over forty years. The Buddha wanted Ānanda to remember him in the context of these quite concrete activities of care and service. Grief is here conquered by love; by recalling the tenderness of his own love toward the Buddha, Ānanda's grief is ameliorated. The commentary on this passage explains with some detail what is meant by the "loving physical activities":

This means that Ānanda, with a loving mind, gave [the Buddha] gifts and performed physical acts of care such as washing his face and so forth. And this was *beneficial*, meaning increasing his welfare. And they were done with pleasure and happiness, not with pain or small-mindedness. *Consistent* means that this was done with two sides, that is, some people do such acts of care only in one's presence but not when others are around; others do them only in the presence of others, but not when they are absent. But he was not divided in this way. *Measureless* means without limits. This means that his loving physical activities were so great that the world is too narrow and the heavens are too small to contain them.<sup>31</sup>

The text is trying get at the experiential content and value of these feelings associated with love, care, and generosity through an exploration of the friendship between these two men. The text's insistence that the memory of their friendship linger on these loving physical activities suggests that the friendship does not exist separately from the actions and habits that constitute it. We are also struck with how the infinite or the measureless resides in these concrete, mundane actions of care and love—washing the Buddha's face has so much love that it cannot be contained in this world.<sup>32</sup>

We might also notice that it is difficult to talk about friendship with this degree of nuance and feeling without attending to the narratives and contexts in which it occurs and noticing its small moments of tenderness, its slight gestures of intimacy, and the ways it is known in the body. This seems to be an important feature of emotions that we must recognize as we learn how to describe them—we need to know what contexts and circumstances give rise to the emotions, how they are held, expressed, or generated in gestures of the body, and how it is that intricate relationships with others, with all of their actions, habits, and rituals, themselves constitute emotional sensibilities. A related set of inquires, which unfortunately we lack the space to pursue, involves the social mores and cultural aesthetics that make emotions possible. Once we acknowledge the importance of their situatedness in interpreting the very meaning of emotions, we must then be attuned to cultural forms that give rise to and constrain emotions and their modes of expression.<sup>33</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

From this cursory and somewhat selective treatment of Buddhist approaches to emotions, we have discerned contrasting approaches to them. The Abhidhamma lists attempt to depict the barest descriptions of human affect, while its commentaries

show how particular emotions are known through simile and metaphor. Meditation practices and narratives stimulate and develop certain emotions, encouraging a greater awareness of the human condition through explorations of grief, love, and other affective experiences. They are particularly attentive to the moral and soteriological dimensions of affective experience, and how our human emotions can be managed to make us more compassionate, loving, and generous, and less angry, greedy, and hateful. One feature revealed in all of these discussions is that Buddhist traditions are interested in increasing our awareness of our emotional life—what one modern interpreter has described as becoming "sensitive to our own sensitivity."<sup>34</sup> A better understanding of our condition entails a deeper sensitivity to how we are intricately connected with the world and others. Depictions of Buddhism that portray its aims solely in cool and dispassionate terms should be revised in light of considerable evidence from the tradition that demonstrates close attentiveness to and work with affective experience.

Robert Solomon argues that emotions "lie at the very heart of ethics, determining our values, focusing our vision, influencing our every judgment, giving meaning to our lives."<sup>35</sup> Scholars of religion and ethics do well then to investigate emotions, because through them we can detect the things religious traditions care most about. In Buddhist traditions, emotions are important clues to our own fragility and vulnerability that can, when properly guided by the Buddha or his teachings, lead to insight about the contingency of human existence. At the same time, many of the experiences described in this essay contain the seeds of the infinite—the "immeasurable" experiences of love, the endless tears we have shed from losing our loved ones, the gesture of love and devotion to the Buddha that is so great that the world cannot contain it. Emotions betray our vulnerability and exposure to the world, even while they contain the potential to allow us to transcend it altogether.

## NOTES

1. Even within the context of the modern West, the category of emotion is not settled, and there is no clear and universally agreed upon criterion of what counts as an emotion. See Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, "Aristotle on the Metaphysical Status of *Pathos*," *Review of Metaphysics* 38 (1984): 521–46, for a useful overview of Western philosophical treatments of emotion and why contemporary discussions of them are beset with "conflicting intuitions" about what they are.
2. Paul Ekman in *Emotions Revealed* (New York: Times Books, 2003), for example, defines the category emotion according to what it includes. By examining facial expressions across diverse cultures, he argues for a class of universal human emotions deeply embedded in the species: anger, sadness, fear, surprise, disgust, contempt, and happiness.
3. The Greeks were content with a bipartite psychology dividing the mind into rational and passionate faculties (though they were certainly aware of various volitional forces). It was Augustine who gave us a fully articulated tripartite psychology that has been with us in different forms ever since.

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