

**Meditation in context: Factors that facilitate prosocial behavior**

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### **Abstract**

Contemplative science experienced tremendous growth in the past five years in part through new attention to the social processes and prosocial outcomes associated with meditation. Despite this growth, questions persist about the mechanisms and contexts through which meditation increases or fails to increase prosocial behavior. In this article, I draw on Buddhist traditions and empirical efforts to understand the ethical and relational contexts that promote prosocial behavior. In summary, meditation promises a viable approach to increase prosocial behavior, but future research will require a careful, holistic examination of contemplative contexts that foster those outcomes.

### **Highlights**

- Examines contemplative contexts in Buddhist traditions that are expected to impact meditation.
- Reviews research on the impact of contemplative contexts on prosocial behavior.
- Reviews methodological innovations that move beyond self-report measures.
- Provides recommendations for future research on meditation and prosocial behavior.

Mindfulness, lovingkindness, and compassion meditation appear to offer viable approaches to increase prosocial behavior. Research findings suggest these different forms of meditation increase prosocial behavior across different delivery mechanisms and social contexts, including face-to-face [1,2] and audio-based instruction [3–5]. Moreover, single-session meditation exercises as brief as five minutes increase prosocial behavior in virtual environments [6,7]. These findings have garnered attention for the potential impact of meditation to address societal problems (e.g., Mindful Nation UK; URL: <http://themindfulnessinitiative.org.uk>).

Despite adoption of meditation in public sectors, questions surround its efficacy to promote prosocial behavior. Two issues in particular have surfaced. First, a recent meta-analysis concluded that randomized controlled trials of meditation yielded moderate positive effects on prosocial outcomes [8]. Meditation increased prosocial outcomes under certain conditions, for example, when the comparison group was inactive in nature, thus calling into question the conclusiveness of the evidence [8]. Second, the application of meditation in environments that may contradict prosocial goals, such as in corporate settings to foster productivity and economic gain, raises concern about the absence of ethical components [9,10]. To advance the field, future research must examine the contextual variables that determine when meditation increases or hinders prosocial behavior. In this article, I discuss contextual variables within Buddhist traditions, review current evidence on those contextual factors, and offer methodological recommendations from social psychology for future research on those variables.

### **Contemplative Contexts in Buddhism**

Most scientific research on meditation investigates practices adapted from Buddhist traditions; thus, Buddhist scholarship can offer theoretical insight into the contextual variables of meditation [11,12]. In particular, this inquiry has revealed the contextual features that scientific

research has typically ignored [13]. In this section, I consider the ethical and relational contexts of Buddhist practices and review recent research on those contexts to understand how meditation might facilitate prosocial behavior.

**The Ethical Context.** The Buddhist prescription to reduce suffering, known as the Eightfold Path, calls for three simultaneous modes of training: wisdom, mental stability, and ethics (i.e., virtuous conduct) [14–16]. These three modes are not linear, but rather develop in a mutually dependent and reciprocal relationship [15]. Various meditative practices support the cultivation of virtuous mental states and behavior. Meanwhile, action motivated by virtue and wisdom enhances the effectiveness and progression of meditation practice [15]. A vast number of practice forms, rituals, and philosophical positions evolved throughout Buddhism to facilitate all three modes.

In contrast to Buddhist traditions, many modern mindfulness programs emphasize an ethically *neutral* context. Yet an ethically neutral context could lead to problematic applications of mindfulness-based training [9]. Mindfulness practice motivated by personal gain or self-improvement, for example, could fertilize the self-centered processes that cause chronic dissatisfaction (i.e., greed, hatred, and delusion) [15]. These concerns have fueled debate and confusion about how mindfulness promotes ethical outcomes such as prosocial behavior [9].

One source of confusion stems from the definition of mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” [17]. According to a classical understanding of mindfulness, a practitioner relies on mental stability to differentiate states that contribute to suffering from those that contribute to flourishing [18]. One cultivates virtuous mental states, which empower and are also empowered by mindful awareness. In contrast, non-judgmental awareness stems from the category of *non-dual* meditation practice that

experiences mental states from a perspective that is not identified with subject-object duality [11,17]. From a non-dual perspective, all mental states are constructions, independent of the ethical desirability of the content of a mental state. Thus, in non-dual mindfulness, a practitioner experiences the arising and dissolving of states—including so-called destructive emotions—without fixating on them, by recognizing them as dualistic mental constructions. Nevertheless, non-dual traditions assume that the success of these practices depends on allegiance to an ethical code in daily life [11]. Ethical ways of being support, and are supported, by meditative practices that attune persons to the non-dual nature of reality. From classical and non-dual perspectives, it follows that an ethical context is necessary to yield prosocial behavior.

In support of the Buddhist emphasis, recent findings demonstrated that combining ethical teachings with mindfulness training led to higher levels of prosocial behavior compared with a mindfulness program that did not involve such discussion [19]. In this study, ethical instruction included discussions of virtuous qualities such as generosity, gratitude, and kindness as well as common human experiences such as the quest for happiness. After six training days, only the ethical mindfulness group offered increased charitable donations.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the secular, non-ethical training *reduced* or *increased* prosocial behavior depending on the levels of dispositional empathy that participants had prior to the study: those low in dispositional empathy decreased prosocial behavior after secular mindfulness whereas those high in dispositional empathy increased prosocial behavior.

The interaction between an ethical context and pre-existing dispositions parallels an ongoing effort to integrate social and personality psychology. Most personality and social

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<sup>1</sup>A separate study revealed that ethical mindfulness training did not yield increases in prosocial behavior compared with standard mindfulness training, yet the two conditions did not control for the amount of time spent in meditation, suggesting the results are inconclusive [20].

psychologists generally take an *interactionist* perspective in which personality factors and situations interact to produce behavior [21]. In this view, situations (the meditation program to which one is randomly assigned) and chronic dispositions (trait empathy) modulate prosocial behavior. Research on meditation and prosocial behavior coincides with the interactionist perspective: meditation can increase prosocial behavior, but its emergence depends on the interaction between situational and more chronic dispositional variables.

The ethical context that accompanies meditation might have some impact on social processes aside from practice itself. For example, mere exposure to lovingkindness language without explicit meditation practice is sufficient to alter sensitivity to others' pain [22] and discussion of lovingkindness yielded more positive attitudes toward the self, though actual practice led to more positive attitudes toward others [23]. In summary, these findings suggest that the intentions and expectations that participants develop surrounding contemplative practice likely impact the outcomes.

**The Relational Context.** A second contextual feature that is apparent in all forms of Buddhism includes the deep relationality between a practitioner and the array of teachers, bodhisattvas and Buddhas that came before and those who embody enlightened virtues and practice in the present [24–26]. In Tibetan Buddhist traditions, for example, practitioners engage in “preliminary practices” (*ngondro*), which precede non-dual practices [27]. There are multiple phases of *ngondro*, but one particular practice involves visualizing and taking refuge in a lineage of teachers, enlightened beings, and spiritual community, which is traditionally repeated across thousands of iterations. Over time, succinct variations of these practices are invoked prior to each session of non-dual practice. Meditation sessions are also concluded with a dedication to others and the intention to continue the practice post-session. This relational context is a key feature of

Buddhist cultures [27,28] that likely facilitates the cultivation of love, compassion, and prosocial behavior [13]. This relational context also appears in non-Buddhist contemplative traditions [29]. Cultural contexts are likely to participate in the constitution of a meditation practice, yet many scientific studies remove meditation from that context [13].

Recently, preliminary practices have been adapted for a western audience by John Makransky into a program called Sustainable Compassion Training (SCT) [25,26; also see work by Brooke Lavelle, 30]. A key feature of SCT includes the practice of *receiving care*. In the receiving care stage, meditators visualize a “benefactor” or a “caring moment” in which another being—such as a friend, teacher, mentor, poet, writer, social activist, or an animal—provides a source of love and compassion. The meditator evokes the caring moment as a visible expression to help activate the love and compassion that exists as a potential in the practitioner’s mind. The process of receiving care then becomes a basis for *extending care* to others [25,26,30].

The traditional *ngondro* practice and the Western analogue of SCT closely follows patterns observed throughout social and developmental psychology. Research on attachment processes in adult relationships has revealed that priming representations of secure attachment figures increases self-transcendent values and prosocial behaviors [31,32]. In addition, the presence of supportive relationship partners attenuates neural responses to threat [33], suggesting more resources available for extending compassion in difficult situations. The extent to which relationality supports meditation-induced prosocial behavior remains an empirical question.

### **Social Psychology Methods for Investigating Meditation**

Social psychology is known for its theoretical and methodological innovations for measuring social processes and behavior in settings that reflect the world in which people live. Moreover, virtuous states and behaviors most often occur in social and relational contexts



[12,34]. Hence, social psychological methods offer an ideal approach to test the influence of contemplative contexts on prosocial behavior. In this section, I review social psychological methods that demonstrate the impact of meditation on prosocial behavior.

A large amount of meditation research has relied on self-report, but these measures are subject to a number of biases [35]. Retrospective self-report measures require a person to aggregate numerous experiences over time, which reveal beliefs about the self rather than actual experiences [36]. Instead, social psychologists employ indirect measures to assess the impact of meditation on prosocial behavior. Indirect measures used in the meditation literature include non-verbal behaviors indicating affiliation, interest, or a lack of hostility [37] and expressions of sadness in reaction to others' suffering [38]. Games from behavioral economics that involve monetary transactions offer a measure of costly generosity. Various studies demonstrated that meditation enhances donations [3,5,39–41]. Although useful, economic transactions are potentially limited by the expectation that meditation should make a person more charitable.

Social psychological methods that model real-world scenarios offer the ability to overcome the limitations of self-report and participant expectations. Through such an approach, researchers can employ measures of prosocial action when participants themselves are not aware that they are being observed. In this vein, my collaborators and I have used confederates (i.e., actors and actresses ostensibly participating in research studies) to assess prosocial responding. In one example, we measured whether a participant offered his or her seat to a suffering confederate, despite the inaction of other sitting confederates. Participants who completed a mindfulness or compassion meditation program offered their seat to the suffering confederate at a much higher rate (50%), compared with those in a wait-list control (15%) [1]. Moreover, we replicated these findings using mindfulness trainings delivered via a smartphone application [4].

Other measures of prosocial behavior include reductions in hot sauce used to punish a transgressor [42,43]; willingness to include an ostracized individual in the online ball-tossing game “Cyberball” [6,7]; email messages written to an ostracized individual [7]; and visual attention to scenes of suffering measured with eye-tracking [44]. Although such measures require more time and resources, they are necessary to accumulate more conclusive data than those offered by self-report measures.

### **Coda**

On my view, we can arrive at two firm conclusions. First, meditation training in a variety of forms increases prosocial behavior [8,45–47]. Second, the ability of meditation to increase prosocial behavior depends on important moderating variables. On the latter conclusion, we need more data to better understand the nature of those moderators. Theory and initial findings suggest the ethical context, the relational context, and pre-existing personal dispositions shape the outcome of meditative programs. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether the ethical context needs to be articulated explicitly, or whether a teacher or group of facilitators can rely on modeling that context implicitly. In a similar manner, it remains to be seen whether a sense of relationality can arise implicitly through group practice, perhaps as a result of the teacher’s skills in group stewardship [48], or if relationality as an explicit framework for and target of contemplation is a more robust means to promote prosocial outcomes [30].

In closing, I wish to echo a cautionary note about the goal to isolate active ingredients of a meditation program [49]. As reviewed in this article, a consideration of Buddhist traditions indicates that contemplative training involves a range of practices that support each other through their integration [12]. Empirical data that illuminate the mechanisms by which meditation increases prosocial behavior will ultimately advance our field, but the attempt to

isolate an active ingredient could fundamentally change the nature of the meditation practice [13,49,50]. Over time, the field needs theoretical development that takes a holistic lens on the array of practices and interrelationships that yields sustainable and inclusive prosocial behavior.

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