
THE FORMATION OF MORAL VALUES: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN BUDDHISM AND NEUROSCIENCE FROM A VIETNAMESE PERSPECTIVE

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(Received 23 August 2024, revised 24 November 2024)

Abstract

With a particular emphasis on the Vietnamese viewpoint, this research investigates the junction of Buddhism and neuroscience in the framework of moral value development. Inspired by Buddhist teachings as well as modern neuroscientific studies, we investigate the complimentary insights these fields provide on the nature of the self, awareness, and moral action. The emphasis of Buddhism on compassion, mindfulness, and interconnectedness has profoundly affected Vietnamese moral standards, therefore influencing both personal behaviour and social conventions. Conversely, neuroscience questions conventional ideas of selfhood and free will and offers concrete data supporting the neurological bases of these moral values. We provide a comprehensive way to grasp moral value development by combining different points of view that respects both scientific investigation and spiritual wisdom. In the framework of Vietnam's changing cultural and ethical scene, this study prepares the basis for more investigation and pragmatic use of these discoveries.

Keywords: Buddhism, neuroscience, moral values, compassion, Vietnamese culture

1. Introduction

Emerging as a fascinating field of research with great insights on the nature of the mind, awareness, and moral values in recent years is the junction of Buddhism and neuroscience. Given Vietnam's history of Buddhism's major influence on ethical and cultural frameworks throughout millennia [1, 2], this conversation is especially pertinent. With an eye toward the Vietnamese viewpoint, this research aims to find the synergies and tensions between Buddhism and neuroscience by analysing the development of moral ideals across both lenses.

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Deeply anchored in Buddhist ideas, which stress compassion, mindfulness, and interdependence, the Vietnamese value system has since long developed ideals of social cohesion and unity. These ideals have affected not only personal behaviour but also social conventions and ethical standards across many centuries [3, 4]. Concurrent with this, modern neuroscience provides a complementary perspective on these moral principles based on scientific study of brain function, consciousness, and social behaviour [5]. Our research attempts to investigate how Buddhism and neuroscience together could generate a more complete knowledge of moral value creation, especially in the framework of Vietnam, by combining both points of view. This study covers the historical and recent effects of Buddhism on Vietnamese moral standards as well as how these values either coincide or contradict the insights given by current neuroscience. It draws on (and critically reflects on) the long-standing fascination in the West with the idea of a complementary relationship between Buddhism and science. This interest was driven by a post-Darwinian search for religious beliefs that could be reconciled with scientific truth. Such endeavour only became feasible once the so-called “Buddhist modernism” reinterpreted Buddhism as a rational system of thought rather than a religion, downplaying mystical elements in favour of those more aligned with modern scientific thinking [6]. This is why we will dissect the ‘philosophical Buddhism’ represented by Buddhist modernism, rather than exploring Buddhist religion as such.

Methodologically, this paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on primary Buddhist texts, contemporary Vietnamese scholarly work, and recent findings in cognitive neuroscience. Through this synthesis, we seek to provide a nuanced analysis that bridges spiritual traditions and scientific inquiry, offering new perspectives on how moral values are formed and sustained within a society deeply rooted in Buddhist philosophy.

2. The main characteristics of Buddhism and its historical development in Vietnam

Emerging in North India in the sixth century BCE, Buddhism has evolved from its geographical beginnings to become a prominent world religion that significantly shapes civilizations all throughout Asia, including Vietnam [1, 2]. Buddhism has not only become a religious practice with a sizable worldwide following but also a philosophical framework with ongoing applicability over the past 2,500 years. Its lessons still have great resonance in modern society since they offer insightful analysis of spiritual and moral existence.

Buddhism is fundamentally based on its human philosophy, which tackles the nature of human being, the rules controlling life, and the means to reach freedom from suffering. The Buddhist fundamental ideas are the ideas of impermanence and non-self. According to Buddhism, all things in the universe are transitory, always shifting, and interrelated. “The universe is a great system in which everything is dynamic, everything is correlated, nothing is isolated. The birth and death changes in all things are due to the reflection of the already active reality” [7, pp. 60-61]. The idea of a constant, unchangeable self is hence a

delusion. Like all other entities, humans are made of five aggregates: form, sensation, perception, mental forms, and consciousness; each of these are changeable [8]. This knowledge results in the idea of non-self, in which the person's self is understood as a transient and always shifting union of these components instead of a fixed, autonomous entity [9, p. 17]. Consequently, "the Buddhist philosophy noun refers to an individual as Santana - a stream of life or continuity" [10, p. 139].

The physical component consists of bones and flesh; the mental component consists of emotions including love, hate, and desire. These elements are temporary and illusory, hence the self is seen as a fiction. There is a passage in the Buddhist scriptures that reads, "Form does not differ from emptiness, nor does emptiness differ from form. The form is no other than emptiness, emptiness no other than form. The same is true of feelings, perceptions, impulses, and consciousness" [11, p. 71]. Though it stresses that this life is limited and conditional, Buddhism does not reject the empirical presence of people. As Buddhism teaches, the actual essence is realizing non-self, which goes beyond the constrained, self-centred viewpoint. Failing to acknowledge the impermanence of all things causes one to misinterpret their nature and leads one to falsely believe in the permanency and ownership of their life [3, p. 25].

Furthermore, Buddhism holds that, independent of their position, all living entities have the same enlightened character referred to as Buddha nature. This indicates that by moral development and spiritual practice everyone has the possibility to reach emancipation from the illusions of self and impermanence. This point of view emphasizes the inherent dignity and equality of all things and highlights the progressive and compassionate features of Buddhist humanism in comparison to a range of opposing modern notions.

Buddhism also stresses karma, the law of cause and effect that rules the whole cosmos including human life. This idea holds that every action, physical, spoken, or mental, has effects that mold one's future experiences [12, p. 33]. No higher power controls karma; it is an objective, impersonal rule of nature running always. According to the karma theory, people have responsibility for their actions as past actions influence their present existence which in turn impact their future. "Karma is understood as a set of objective laws of cause and effect, not belonging to anyone...No one promulgates this law and no one watches to force or watch it must be obeyed" [13, p. 9]. Karma - Cause includes all actions expressed in spirit, speech, and behaviour because karma is first of all action. "Karma is action, involving the relationship between action and the results of action and it has an impact on both the present and the future (including after death) of a person's life." [13, p. 19]. In actions (by body, voice, and mental activity) one has the ability to produce outcomes. Production of Effect is connected with Karma. Still, there must be a condition if the effect is to show. Thus, "if something completely new is born that is absolutely different from the cause, it is due to the impact of condition factors on the cause in the process of creating effects" [3, p. 26].

Buddhism names four fundamental forms of condition: Patīccasamuppāda (causes and conditions go together, in addition to the main cause, the condition here is the secondary cause), samanantara-pratyaya (all-cause and condition

influencing each other continuously), *àlambana-pratyay* (conditions that serve as objects of perception), and *adhipati-pratyaya* (conditions that support causes and conditions including accordant and resisting conditions) were the basic conditions later divided into many different activities. As Buddha once said: “Hey Bhikkhu, the Tathagata confirms that Volition is Karma, only having the will to act can be done by body, speech, or mind” [14, p. 209]. Volition-driven karma is “mind karma”. “Body karma” is the term used to describe the karma created by our acts, deeds, and body language. The karma of our words and statements is called “speech karma”. One can relate the cause of karma to a seed that might grow into a tree. Thus, referring to the law of cause and effect - karma also refers to the process of producing human karma depending on the absolute operating law of human life. Karma amply demonstrates how each person is accountable for their deeds and way of life. “I am the owner of Karma, the heir of Karma, Karma is the womb, karma is the relative, karma is the fulcrum” [15, p. 422].

Still another fundamental Buddhist concept is the philosophy of suffering. Buddhism holds that suffering—known as “*dukha*”—arises from impermanence, clinging, and ignorance and marks life fundamentally [16, p. 174]. Suffering shows itself as the inevitable cycle of birth, aging, illness, and death (*Dukkha-duktha*), the discontent resulting from the fleeting nature of pleasure and happiness (*Samskara dukkha*), and lastly the suffering resulting from the always shifting causes and conditions of human life (*Viparinama*). Humans are only illusions, non-self; nonetheless, humans always incorrectly believe they exist in reality, hence they develop desires, are entranced, and do not want to go, so producing illusions and pain. But Buddhism provides a means out of suffering by means of the eradication of ignorance and desire, therefore releasing one from the cycle of birth and death [13, pp. 43-45].

Buddhist practice has as its ultimate aim liberation, sometimes known as Nirvana. It marks the end of suffering and the reaching of total peace and escape from the cycle of rebirth. Buddhism stresses self-reliance on the road to emancipation rather than other religious traditions that promise redemption by divine intervention. Every person has the ability to reach Nirvana by means of moral development, focused attention, and wisdom independent of their socioeconomic level. “There is no class in the same red blood, no class in the same sticky tears. Every person is not born with a necklace or a tinka mark (a sign of nobility of the Brahman lineage) on the forehead” [10, p. 262]. Buddha repeatedly underlined that freeing oneself is the road to emancipation. “Be a lamp unto yourself,” the Buddha remarked in the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* from the *Digha Nikaya* as he was ready to enter Nirvana. Depend on yourself; do not rely on anything else. Use the *Saddhamma* as a candle; use it as a refuge; rely not on anything else. Yourself light the torch and then go forward [17, p. 584]. Leading practitioners via ethical behaviour, mental discipline, and the development of insight, the Noble Eightfold Path describes the steps required to reach this state [17].

It is important to remember that Nirvana is a state that humans can achieve in this life. “Nirvana achieved right in the present life with the human body still alive is called ‘*Savupadisesa-nibbhāna*’. When an Arhat, after the destruction of

his body without any remaining matter, attains Nirvana, at that time it is called ‘Nirvana without residue’ [10, p. 150]. Based on the claim that suffering can be eliminated, the path of liberation that contemporary Buddhism chooses is called ‘the Middle Path’ (or: Middle Way). In other words, it prompts followers not to immerse themselves in lowly sensual pleasures nor impose asceticism on their body. “Bhikkhu, the Tathagata, has abandoned both these extremes and found (realized) that the Middle Path (Majjhimâ Patipadâ or Madhya Pratipada) is the path that makes us see (cakkhu), know (nâna) and which leads to peace (vupasamaya), sublime wisdom (abhinnâya), enlightenment (sambodhâya) and Nirvana” [17, p. 783].

When Buddhism arrived in Vietnam, it took a distinct path of localization and entered right into the fabric of Vietnamese life. Compassion, tolerance, and peace defined this process, which let Buddhism grow in the particular cultural setting of Vietnam. Vietnamese Buddhism developed into two main forms: folk Buddhism, more closely related to the daily lives of the people, and scholarly Buddhism, which interacts with the great philosophical elements of the tradition [4]. This duality represents the various cognitive and emotional requirements of the Vietnamese people, therefore enabling Buddhism to become a natural component of both their religion and cultural identity. Rarely in any nation in the world is the same ideology comprehended in layers of meaning with various depths corresponding to the two kinds of scholarly and folk Buddhism. Not just as a religion but also as a fundamental component of Vietnamese national ideals, Buddhism has stayed an important force through centuries of political and social transformation. With its emphasis on moral behaviour and compassion, the human philosophy of Buddhism still shapes the value decisions and behaviour of Vietnamese people. We will explore this theme in greater detail in the section below.

3. Buddhism’s influence on Vietnamese moral values

Buddhism has been fundamental in forming Vietnam’s moral and ethical terrain, therefore impacting society expectations as well as personal behaviour. Core to this effect is the Buddhist virtue of compassion (karunâ), considered as a basic quality. As taught in Buddhism, compassion is a conscious practice meant to lessen suffering for others and oneself rather than only an emotional reaction. Vietnamese society has absorbed this ideal, which now serves as a compass for communal life and personal interactions [4, p. 304]. Still, compassion is related to other values. Buddhist human philosophy essentially stresses the development of virtues such as loving-kindness, compassion, joy, equanimity, non-self, and altruism. Various teachings reflect these ideas: the Six Paramitas, the Six Harmonies, the Ten Good Deeds, the Four Noble Truths, and the Four Immeasurable Minds — Loving-kindness, Compassion, Joy, and Equanimity.

The non-self and impermanence ideas inspire people to see the fleeting character of life and the illusion of a set self. Understanding these ideas helps people to let go of attachment to the ego, conquer greed and anger, and prevent giving personal needs first priority over those of others. Awareness of these

principles helps people to follow the law, live peacefully, and use tolerance in their social contacts by so strengthening their feeling of community and social responsibility.

Another fundamental Buddhist principle with a major impact on Vietnamese moral ideals is mindfulness (*sati*). Mindfulness is keeping a clear awareness of one's ideas, feelings, and activities, therefore improving self-control and moral behaviour. Mindfulness techniques are included into daily life in Vietnamese society, so motivating people to act with awareness and intention and so promoting a society of moral responsibility.

Moreover, the Buddhist idea of interdependence — *pratītyasamutpāda*— underlines how linked all entities and events are. Emphasizing the need of harmonic relationships and group well-being, this knowledge of interconnectedness has affected Vietnamese attitudes on social and environmental ethics. In this sense, moral principles are understood as part of a larger, linked web of social obligations and responsibilities rather than as separate personal decisions [3].

Karma, or cause and effect, holds that people should inhibit bad ideas and foster goodness. Emphasizing self-reliance — symbolized by “lighting one's torch” — this way helps one grow personally and achieve wisdom. The idea of the twelve causes and conditions emphasizes that ignorance is the source of pain and that only by means of wisdom and development one may recognize actual values like good and evil, fairness and injustice. In the modern environment, when knowledge is essential in all spheres of life, this idea is very important in helping people to reflect, having a “bright mind and pure heart.” A “pure heart” is someone who regularly develops moral qualities, follows good ethical standards, and behaves with integrity and compassion thereby helping the country and the society. A “bright mind” is someone who is committed to lifetime learning, preserves physical and mental well-being, is knowledgeable, creative, open-minded, and so forth.

The Vietnamese educational and family systems have strengthened these Buddhist ideas since moral education sometimes incorporates instruction on Buddhist ethics [18]. Emphasizing characteristics like humility, respect of others, and the value of community indicates the careful integration of Buddhist moral concepts into Vietnamese society [4]. Still, things are really more complicated than that. Nguyen [19] rightly reminds us that while Buddhism offers a major moral and ethical basis, the Vietnamese value system combines Oriental, Western, and Socialist ideas and thus cannot be reduced (in terms of its sources) to one predominant philosophical narrative.

We have identified five key areas where Buddhism's influence on the Vietnamese society (in terms of value formation) is particularly strong:

a) Orientation of Values and Moral Standards: In Vietnam, Buddhism offers a moral compass anchored in values such loving-kindness, compassion, equanimity, and generosity. Lessons like the Six Paramitas, the Ten Good Deeds, and the Four Noble Truths help one to reflect these ideals. Buddhism has been very important in forming Vietnamese people's ethical standards both historically and in modern culture by encouraging these values.

b) Identification of Ethical Obligations and Responsibilities: Karma and cause and effect in Buddhist theory stress personal accountability for one's actions. This point of view motivates people to behave ethically since they realize their actions have effects beyond their own. In Vietnam, this has strengthened a feeling of responsibility not just to oneself but also to the larger society, therefore guiding moral behaviour inside the framework of social laws and customs.

c) Encouragement of Proactive and Self-Conscious Moral Cultivation: Buddhism emphasizes the need of personal morality and self-awareness. By means of mindfulness and meditation, people are invited to actively grow their moral character. Overcoming ignorance and reaching emancipation are thought to depend on this self-directed development. Buddhist temples and educational retreats give people somewhere to practice these techniques in Vietnam, therefore promoting a moral and orderly way of life.

d) Improvement of Morality in Family Relationships: The moral dynamics of Vietnamese households have been impacted by Buddhism. Emphasizing filial piety, compassion, and harmony has helped to define the ideals guiding interactions among parents, children, and extended family members. Strong and harmonic family ties result from Buddhist teachings stressing mutual respect, caring, and ethical behaviour inside the family. Buddhism holds in the Anguttara Nikàya that four main similarities define a stable marriage: perception, beliefs, moral standards, and the capacity to share joy, equanimity, and altruism [15, p. 667]. The Sigàlovàda Sutta underlines even more the part that both couples have in preserving a harmonic partnership. It counsels the husband to love and be loyal to his wife, support her in running family matters, meet her material requirements, and honour her family. Likewise, the wife is urged to treat her husband kindly, be devoted, run the house carefully, and honour his family and friends [17, p. 543]. Buddhist philosophy also influences moral behaviour in family relationships — especially between parents, children, and grandparents. Filial piety is thought in Buddhism to be the cornerstone of human morality. This is seen in the Four Debts of Gratitude, where gratitude towards parents takes front stage. The Great Collection Sutra reflects this sentiment with the Buddha's teaching: "When there is no Buddha, then worship the parents. Worshipping parents is like worshipping Buddha. In the Four Debts of Gratitude, parents' grace is the foremost gratitude" [20, p. 329]. This emphasizes the great respect and regard for parents.

e) Enhancement of Ethics in Social Relations Among Young People in Hanoi: Buddhism's teachings on altruism, compassion, and tolerance have also influenced the social behaviour of young people in Vietnam, particularly in urban areas like Hanoi. Young people have been inspired to engage in charitable events and volunteerism by the Buddhist focus on communal welfare and selfless action, therefore developing ethical behaviour and social responsibility in their contacts with others [21, pp. 54-56]. Accepting Buddhist ideas on human life helps people develop moral behaviour based mostly on love and compassion. Fundamentally, this moral perspective stresses "not having hatred, ignoring anger; love; be considerate, kind, generous, and thoughtful; moving towards compassion and kindness; without malice or evil intent; and understanding that giving up hatred is the root of goodness (karma)" [22, pp. 275-276].

However, Buddhism's impact on Vietnamese moral standards is dynamic; it has changed in reaction to shifting political and social settings. The fortitude of these principles in facing external demands emphasizes how flexible Buddhist ideas are to fit contemporary problems. Reflecting a dynamic and changing ethical framework, Buddhist practices in modern Vietnam, for example, are progressively in line with worldwide movements for social justice and environmental sustainability [23].

More importantly, although Buddhist human philosophy presents many good principles, it also has potentially harmful moral effects on modern Vietnamese culture. These include: (1) The idea of patience and karma, which can lead to a passive acceptance of how things are rather than proactive behaviour to change the status quo; (2) An emphasis on inner strength and wisdom which can lead to neglecting material factors; this may lead to prompt some individuals to undervalue the importance of economic development; (3) The concept of self-cause and effect might encourage emotional responses rather than firm action against injustice and wrongdoing in society; and finally (4) a deeply entrenched personal belief in Buddhist ideas and rituals has in some cases led to the rise of superstition among certain segments of the population. This helps us to realize that although Buddhism has significantly changed the moral terrain of Vietnamese society, it is necessary to acknowledge both its advantages and drawbacks. It is readily apparent as we investigate these effects that a complicated interaction of spiritual, cultural, and philosophical components forms moral standards. We now consider neuroscience to help us broaden our knowledge even further. Neuroscience provides insightful analysis by looking at the biological bases of moral behaviour that both complements and occasionally questions the ethical frameworks set by Buddhist philosophy.

4. Neuroscience perspective on moral values development

Focusing on the biological and cognitive mechanisms underlying ethical behaviour, the field of neuroscience offers a complimentary viewpoint on moral principles. Researchers explore the intersection of Buddhism and neuroscience, highlighting both convergences and divergences in their approaches to understanding the mind. Buddhism's introspective methods and neuroscience's empirical observations offer complementary perspectives on consciousness, free will, and meditation [24]. Both fields recognize the illusion of a unitary self and the importance of compassion, with neuroscience identifying brain circuits supporting altruistic behaviours [5]. However, the relationship between Buddhism and cognitive science remains complex, with some scholars arguing for compatibility and others for incompatibility [25]. The dialogue between these traditions has led to insights on topics such as the distinction between rumination and meditation, pure awareness versus its contents, and the nature of perception [24]. This ongoing conversation continues to yield valuable perspectives on fundamental aspects of human experience and mental processes.

One of the key insights from neuroscience is the understanding of compassion as a deeply rooted aspect of human nature. Research on brain circuits

in charge of social and altruistic activities—such as the anterior cingulate cortex and the insula—have revealed that compassionate acts activate these areas [26]. These brain correlations imply that, influenced by evolutionary constraints to maintain social cohesiveness and survival, compassion is not just a learnt behaviour but also an inherent element of human cognition [27, 28]. “Current research in affective neuroscience suggests that combining compassion interventions in conjunction with both affective and cognitive empathy offers the most optimal likelihood that individuals will engage in pro-social behaviour,” as Stevens and Taber [27, p. 107925] point out. Further supporting this perspective is research in affective neuroscience, which shows that, especially in areas like the temporal-parietal junction and the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex, compassion may be developed by specific training, hence improving empathic accuracy and related brain activity. These results imply a neurological basis for moral ideals that transcends cultural and societal conceptions and show the possibility of compassion training to boost prosocial conduct and emotional control [5].

Neuroscience also challenges traditional notions of the self and free will, which are central to many moral philosophies. Cognitive neuroscience studies have shown that the brain functions as a collection of parallel processes with several neural networks in charge of different facets of thought, emotion, and behaviour. This scattered character of brain activity implies that, given the integration of several, usually subconscious, processes, the impression of a unitary self is an illusion. Addressing significant issues about the nature of moral agency and accountability, Jaeger and Gonpo [5] observe that “the conscious impression that our decisions are freely willed by a unitary self is an illusion.”

Researchers have also studied how these results affect the idea of free will more especially. Benjamin Libet [29] and subsequent studies, for example, have spurred discussion on whether unconscious brain processes precede conscious decision-making, implying that free will may be more limited than usually thought [30]. Some academics counter that these neuroscientific results demand a redefining that combines conscious and subconscious processes rather than necessarily refute free will [31]. Furthermore, current neuroscience holds that the self is an informational rather than a biological object resulting from cognitive processes, which has significant consequences for our knowledge of moral judgement and accountability [32]. From this point of view, the self is a real and observable construct that is absolutely important for moral behaviour and decision-making even if it might not be a material entity. Fascinatingly, Niebauer [32] contends that the brain—especially the left hemisphere in charge of language and pattern recognition—created the illusion of a steady, continuous self. Though these stories and patterns this hemisphere creates only reflect reality, they help us to believe in a continuing self. Consistent with Buddhist ideas on the illusion of a permanent self (*anātman*) that have long suggested the absence of a cohesive self, this illusion is a mental construct rather than a physical thing within the brain.

As we mentioned above, within Buddhism, the self is seen as a set of five aggregates—form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness—that interact to provide the experience of a continuous identity. On deeper inspection through techniques like mindfulness meditation, however, it becomes

clear that these aggregates are ephemeral and interconnected, which helps one to realize the self is a fluid, dynamic process rather than a fixed thing [5]. The Buddhist philosophy of *anatta*, or “no-self,” which holds that the self is only a handy title for a collection of physical and mental experiences without an abiding essence, depends on this understanding [Encyclopaedia Britannica, *skandha*, 2011, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/skandha>]. This perspective changes the emphasis from personal autonomy to relational and contextual ethics, therefore affecting moral ideals. Buddhist ethics promotes a more sympathetic and less ego-centric method of moral decision-making by realizing the interconnection and impermanence of the self. This perspective is conducive to the idea that ethical behaviour arises not from adherence to rigid rules, but from an awareness of the complex web of causes and conditions that influence actions.

Furthermore, neuroscience clarifies the function of mindfulness in moral action. Mindfulness techniques have been found in studies to cause neuroplastic changes in the brain that improve cognitive control, emotional regulation, attention, and mental agility [33]. These variations in prefrontal brain activity and amygdala activity point to mindfulness helping people respond to moral dilemmas with more calm and clarity. Executive functions including impulse control and decision-making—qualities necessary for ethical behaviour—rely on the prefrontal cortex. Through enhancing these regions, mindfulness techniques nascent to Buddhism help one become more capable of making deliberate and moral decisions [34, p. 270; 35, pp. 570-571].

By altering self-control circuitry, mindfulness meditation may also lower reward-seeking behaviours and improve prosocial outcomes [34]. This is congruent with research showing mindfulness helps reduce moral disengagement and impulsivity, therefore promoting a more consistent and ethical attitude to social contacts [36]. Moreover, mindfulness has been connected to higher compassion and empathy, fundamental components of moral judgment and ethical action [34]. Emphasizing the need of including mindfulness within moral education and practice, as Small and Lew [33, pp. 110-112] note, nondual awareness can be considered basic to the realization of the whole person and achieving the state of optimal well-being.

All things considered, neuroscience challenges conventional wisdom of selfhood and free will, provides insightful analysis of the biological underpinnings of moral ideals, and emphasizes the part compassion and mindfulness play in moral action. These results offer a rich setting for conversation with Buddhist ideas, especially in regard to the development of moral standards in a Vietnamese setting.

5. Buddhist integration with neuroscience

The interaction of Buddhism with neuroscience presents a special chance to combine several points of view on moral principles, awareness, and the self. Though they approach these ideas from opposite directions—Buddhism via introspection and experienced insight, and neuroscience through empirical observation and experimentation—they agree on several important issues.

(1) The awareness of the illusory character of the self marks one area of convergence. According to both Buddhism and neuroscience, the feeling of a unitary self is a construct created by the interaction of several processes. Whereas in Buddhism this is considered as the interaction of the five aggregates, in neuroscience this is understood as the outcome of complex brain networks acting in parallel. Emphasizing the need of attention and reflection in transcending the attachment to a fixed self, Jaeger and Gonpo [5, p. 3] state, “both traditions see these constructs as acquired illusions.”

(2) Still another area of integration is the part compassion plays in moral principles. Neuroscience has found the brain circuits linked to compassionate behaviour, therefore offering a biological basis for what Buddhism has long known to be a fundamental ethical ideal. Buddhist compassion is developed by means of activities that improve awareness of the suffering of others and foster a strong feeling of empathy and interconnectedness. By demonstrating that mindfulness and compassion practices can result in long-lasting changes in brain activity, neuroscientific studies confirm this and underline the need of these practices in moral growth [37].

(3) Integration of Buddhism with neuroscience also presents numerous difficulties, however. As Vörös [25] notes, there seem to be three distinct ways in which these two disciplines interact: (1) rejection, (2) acceptance, and (3) construction. While some academics [6, 35] contend that the variations in epistemology and technique make real integration challenging, others (comprising a majority) see opportunity for a productive conversation honouring the particular contributions made by every discipline [29, 32, 38, 39, 40, 41].

Nevertheless, we must take the criticisms coming from the field of science at their face value, which is why we will discuss them at some length below. We will follow Verhoeven [6] and summarize the contrasting views/approaches related to four distinct categories: (a) approach to reality; (b) nature of consciousness; (c) role of the self; and (d) purpose and methodology:

(a) Rooted on the idea of non-duality—that which rejects a clear separation between the observer and the observed, or between subject and object—Buddhism sees reality as an always linked process in which every event is dependent on one another and lacks inherent, permanent substance. Deeply experienced and emphasizing direct, personal insight acquired via meditation and mindfulness techniques, the Buddhist perspective of reality is quite intimate. Conversely, Western science is usually grounded on dualism, which preserves a clear separation between the observer and the observed. Many times, scientific investigation views the world as an objective fact that one might measure, count, and comprehend apart from the observer. To deduce the character of the world, the scientific method depends on empirical data, experimentation, and logical analysis.

(b) Considered in Buddhism as a dynamic, flowing process rather than a set substance, consciousness is intimately related to the idea of non-self (anatta), which holds that underlying our events there is no permanent, immutable self. With an eye toward understanding and transcending the illusions resulting from attachment and aversion, Buddhism sees consciousness as also shaped by karma

and the interconnectedness of all things. Neuroscience, on the other hand, usually approaches consciousness as a result of the brain. It seeks to comprehend it by means of neurological processes, cognitive activities, and physical structure of the brain. With an eye toward mapping and comprehending the particular brain regions and mechanisms involved in conscious experience, consciousness is sometimes seen as an emergent trait of complex neural networks.

(c) Buddhism questions the idea of a fixed, autonomous self quite fundamentally. According to the non-self theory, what we consider to be “self” is just a transient grouping of skandhas—aggregates—form, sensation, perception, mental formation, and consciousness. This knowledge helps one to see that the main cause of suffering is attachment to the self; so, emancipation is realizing the false character of the self. Although modern neuroscience is starting to question conventional wisdom of a fixed self by investigating the brain’s function in creating a feeling of identity, it still frequently functions within frameworks assuming a distinct, constant self. Typically, via neurological and psychological processes, the scientific study of the self is looking at how the brain generates a feeling of identity, continuity, and personal agency.

(d) Buddhist practice is finally meant to lead to spiritual emancipation, in which case suffering (dukha) will stop and Nirvana will become realized. Targeting direct experiential insight, the techniques used are meditation, ethical behaviour, and wisdom (prajna) meant to change the practitioner’s mind and life. With an eye toward understanding, forecasting, and control of physical events, science’s main objective is to increase knowledge of the natural world. Seeking objective and repeatable outcomes that can be generally used, the approach is based on observation, hypothesis testing, and empirical validation.

In Vietnam, where Buddhism is closely entwined with social and cultural norms, including neurological insights will help us to better grasp the development and implementation of moral ideals. This integration can offer a more complete perspective of ethics that respects Buddhist experience as well as empirical data of neuroscience. Examining how various points of view interact and contradict will help us to create a more complex approach to moral teaching and practice anchored in both scientific knowledge and spiritual insight. We agree with Vörös’ insistence on the need of keeping an open and critical approach in this multidisciplinary discussion because, the dialogue between Buddhism and cognitive science is part of a broader concern about reconciling first-person and third-person perspectives on reality [25, p. 67].

6. Conclusion

Within the framework of Vietnamese moral value development, this first investigation into the junction of Buddhism and neuroscience uncovers a complex and diverse conversation between these two fields. Though different in their epistemologies and approaches, both traditions provide complimentary understanding of the nature of consciousness, the self, and moral action.

With its emphasis on compassion, mindfulness, and the interrelated character of life, Buddhism has greatly affected Vietnamese moral and ethical

framework. Deeply embedded in the social fabric, these values still direct personal behaviour and communal interactions, hence fostering a feeling of social harmony and general well-being.

Conversely, neuroscience offers a contemporary, factual prism through which we may see the biological foundations of these moral principles. Neuroscience not only verifies many of the insights provided by Buddhism but also questions us to rethink conventional ideas of moral agency and responsibility by exposing the neural mechanisms behind compassion, the illusion of a unitary self, and the impact of mindfulness on the brain.

Combining these points of view provides a strong method for comprehending the development of moral value, especially in Vietnam where spiritual and cultural traditions are tightly entwined. As we have shown, neuroscience and Buddhism agree on fundamental ideas such the illusory character of the self and the role of compassion in moral action. These convergences imply that a conversation between several disciplines can result in a more complete and sophisticated knowledge of moral values—one that is guided by both empirical data and spiritual wisdom. We could contend that insights found in Eastern philosophies for millennia are starting to catch up with modern psychology and neuroscience [32, p. 174].

Still, there are several difficulties in this integration. The differences in approach between Buddhism and neuroscience, particularly in terms of first-person versus third-person perspectives, require careful consideration. Furthermore, the variations in epistemology between Buddhism and science can make integration challenging. Buddhism often emphasizes direct experience and subjective understanding, while science relies on empirical evidence and objective analysis. This fundamental difference can create barriers to seamless integration [35]. There is also a risk of misinterpreting or oversimplifying Buddhist concepts when trying to align them with scientific paradigms. This can lead to a loss of the distinctiveness of Buddhist teachings and an imbalance in the dialogue [35]. Hence, as academics like Vörös [25] remind us, negotiating these differences and promoting a positive multidisciplinary debate depend on keeping an open and critical dialogue. There is much possibility going ahead to widen this conversation and investigate fresh paths for including Buddhist and neuroscientific insights into moral education and practice. Their shared objective can serve as a foundation for productive dialogue and collaboration, particularly in areas like mental health and cognitive science [41]. This is especially pertinent in Vietnam, where the changing social scene presents chances as well as difficulties for using these integrated viewpoints to address modern moral and ethical concerns of relevance.

Finally, our work sets the stage for a more thorough investigation of how Buddhism and neuroscience might interact to guide moral values research. We eagerly await discovering deeper connections and creating useful applications that will help both individuals and communities to flourish as we keep improving and extending this work.

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