

# Mindfulness-Based Ethical Living

*A User's Manual*

Stephen Batchelor

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**path** *verb, intransitive*

to proceed to a destination without impediment in community with others

# Preface

On four consecutive Saturday afternoons in October 2022, I offered a series of three-hour online workshops for the Buddha Stiftung in Heidelberg on what was then termed “Mindfulness-Based Human Flourishing.” Around ninety people from all over the world attended the programme.

By the end of the course, it became clear that the term “human flourishing,” despite being widely used today to translate the Greek term *eudaemonia*, was problematic. By emphasising *human* flourishing, the term could be taken to suggest that the flourishing of non-human life is somehow less important. Indeed, taken literally, human flourishing could be seen as the principal cause of the environmental crisis that now threatens all sentient life on earth. Moreover, throughout the history of all cultures, the flourishing of certain human individuals and societies has often, if not always, been achieved at the cost of other humans and non-human lives *not* flourishing. Shortly after the course ended, three of us independently came up with the phrase “Ethical Living” to replace the disquietingly value-free notion of “Human Flourishing.”

Mindfulness-Based Ethical Living (M-BEL) is founded on early Buddhist catalogues and lists: the thirty-two virtues and skills, four tasks, four paths, four colours, four elements, four facts, four immeasurables, and four commitments. In the same way that mindfulness-based therapies such as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) are inspired by Buddhist meditation techniques, M-BEL draws inspiration from Buddhist ethical values. Although Buddhist in inspiration and origin, M-BEL shares neither the religious and metaphysical commitments of the Buddhist religion nor its authoritarian hierarchies of power.

This text is an expanded and edited version of my notes for the eight talks I gave during the course. In addition to serving as an introduction to Mindfulness-Based Ethical Living (M-BEL), I hope it will also serve as a discussion document for the further development of the project. Bear in mind that what you are reading here is very much a work-in-progress. One day, perhaps, it will evolve into a fully-operational “User’s Manual” for the practice of M-BEL.

I am grateful to Jochen Weber and Saskia Graf of the Buddha Stiftung, Heidelberg, who organised and hosted the course. I would also like to thank Carmel Shalev, Caroline de Vos, Mike Slott and Ayda Duroux for their ongoing input and support.

Stephen Batchelor  
La Sauve Majeure, France

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# One

## What is M-BEL?

Mindfulness-Based Ethical Living (M-BEL) is a system of practical philosophy, contemplation and ethics designed for anyone who seeks to care for their own and others' lives.

In particular, M-BEL addresses those who seek a philosophical and ethical context for their practice of mindfulness meditation.

M-BEL integrates secular mindfulness practices, such as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), with Secular Dharma.

Secular Dharma is derived from Buddhism but has discarded the traditional metaphysics of karma, rebirth and the four noble truths. It is focused on responding to the present and future needs of this world and age (*saeculum*).

As with Secular Dharma, M-BEL is founded on an early Buddhist catalogue of thirty-two virtues and skills, correlated to four tasks, four paths and other lists of virtues. In returning to the sources of Buddhist tradition, practitioners of Secular Dharma and M-BEL seek to rethink from the ground up what Gotama — the historical Buddha — taught. They strive to find an idiomatic language, which is intelligible for anyone irrespective of their knowledge of or interest in Buddhism.

The thirty-two virtues and skills on which M-BEL is founded are represented abstractly in a collage (**Figure 1**).

Every one of the thirty-two pieces of this collage is a discarded scrap of paper, plastic or cloth with no intrinsic value that is now given meaning and value by becoming part of a greater whole.

Each of the thirty-two pieces of the collage are of the same size (8cm sq.) but not of the same shape. Likewise, each of the thirty-two virtues and skills, despite their different qualities, bear a similar weight or value in their relationship to the whole.

We could think of the entire collage as a body and the thirty-two elements as its parts — each of which is necessary for the healthy functioning of the whole.

M-BEL is embedded in a *Cartography of Care* (**Figure 2**), at the heart of which lie these thirty-two virtues and skills.

Spend a few moments familiarising yourself with this chart, which will serve as a road-map for the theory and practice of M-BEL.

The *Cartography of Care* divides the thirty-two virtues and skills into four columns. Each column represents a **task** to be recognised, performed and mastered. Each task corresponds to a **path** and involves a different modality of mindfulness.

**Column One:** The first task entails embracing life with existential mindfulness, thereby embarking on a path of formation.

**Column Two:** The second task entails letting reactivity be with therapeutic mindfulness, thereby embarking on a path of unification.

**Column Three:** The third task entails seeing the stopping of reactivity with contemplative mindfulness, thereby embarking on a path of vision.

**Column Four.** The fourth task entails cultivating a path with ethical mindfulness, thereby embarking on a path of cultivation.

The thirty-two virtues and skills can thereby be categorised according to these four tasks and paths:

The first task of embracing life on the path of formation entails cultivating **four foundations of mindfulness** [1-4], **four resolves** [5-8] and **four steps of creativity** [9-12].

The second task of letting reactivity be on the path of unification entails cultivating **confidence** [13], **courage** [14], **mindfulness** [15], **focus** [16] and **discernment** [17].

The third task of seeing the stopping of reactivity on the path of vision entails cultivating **mindfulness** [18], **equanimity** [19], **focus** [20], **stillness** [21], **joy** [22], **enthusiasm** [23] and **wonder** [24].

The fourth task of cultivating a path on the path of cultivation entails cultivating **perspective** [25], **imagination** [26], **mindfulness** [27], **focus** [28], **application** [29], **voice** [30], **work** [31] and **flourishing** [32].

Practitioners of M-BEL are conscious of how **mindfulness** [1-4, 15, 18, 27] is the *only* virtue/skill that is included in each of the four tasks and paths.

M-BEL is grounded in a naturalistic worldview based on four primary **colours** (yellow, red, white, blue), four **elements** (earth, fire, air, water) and four **seasons** (summer, autumn, winter, spring).

The rhythm of the seasons mirrors the rhythm of the four tasks and paths, thereby emphasising the conditional, interrelated and dynamic nature of these tasks.

The four tasks and paths are further correlated with four **facts** of life (suffering, arising of reactivity, stopping of reactivity, a middle way), four **immeasurables** (love, compassion, rejoicing, equanimity), and four **commitments** (Beings are boundless; I will care for them all. Reactivity is inexhaustible; I will let go of it all. Gateways are numberless; I will enter them all. Treading the path with care has no end but I will reach it.).

M-BEL is conceived as a collaborative project, which leaves behind the patriarchal and hierarchic power structures often found in Buddhism. Authority is distributed throughout the community of practitioners rather than concentrated in an expert. This text can be freely shared with anyone.

Stephen Batchelor sees himself as a facilitator rather than an authority in the development of M-BEL.



# Two

## Embracing Life

I am alive.

I am awake, I breathe, I experience the world through my senses, I am embedded in and dependent upon a world of other beings, from microorganisms to plants to animals to other humans like myself.

I have been born and will grow old and die. I am aware that my life is constantly moving towards its end. I am finite and vulnerable. I suffer. This is the condition of all beings who are born on this earth.

I both see and am seen. I am mindful of others and others are mindful of me. I see the world and am a part of the world. I am already in relationship to what is other than myself.

How does one embrace this life *fully*?

How might we understand and comprehend our existential condition, be open to life without bias, preference or reactivity, and risk embarking on a path that takes us out of repetitive cycles, which keep us stuck and unfulfilled, thereby enabling us to flourish as the kind of persons we aspire to be?

This, I would argue, will first require becoming more mindful, resolute and creative in all areas of one's life.

## 1. Mindfulness.

This necessitates training oneself to be mindful of bodies, feelings, mental states and ideas, both one's own and those of other humans and animals.

**Bodies [1]** are our primary sites of survival and flourishing, through their sexuality, reproductive capacity, bearing of and rearing offspring. We feed, clothe and shelter our bodies and defend ourselves when threatened. Much of this behaviour is driven by how we react to **feelings [2]** of pleasure, pain and indifference.

We are aware of how others feel not only through what they say but through how they appear to us in their faces and bodies. To know how another person feels does not require telepathy but a heightened sensitivity to the nuances of their body-language, the timbre of their voices.

In addition to how we feel about what is impacting us, we are also mindful of the **mental states [3]** that these feelings evoke. We find ourselves seduced by pleasure and repelled by pain. We can be moved to compassion by someone's suffering one moment, while consumed with envy of another's success the next.

Mindfulness includes bearing in mind the key **ideas [4]** that govern and influence how we live, many of which are inherited from our forebears, educators, priests etc. In adopting a practical philosophy like M-BEL, we adopt a conceptual model, such as that of the four tasks, then bear those ideas in mind, recollecting them when necessary, so that they provide an alternative operational frame within which to lead our life.

In embracing life, M-BEL is "mindfulness-based" in the sense that we pay close attention to these four existential foundations of our experience: bodies, feelings, mental states and ideas.

The four foundations of mindfulness enable us to be grounded in embodied awareness (body), emotional intelligence (feeling), and psychological insight (mind), which are held within conceptual models (ideas), or operational frames, which, consciously or unconsciously, we recollect and keep in mind.

## 2. Resolve

To embrace life means to resolve not just to live but to live well, to be resolute in realising those goals which give meaning to one's life.

Embracing life, letting go of reactivity, seeing it stop, and cultivating a path in life: these are the meaning-giving goals that serve as the core of M-BEL.

The four resolves are a conceptual model that offers another way of configuring the four tasks. Such resolve is a commitment to understanding the inner and outer conditions of one's life on earth. This understanding places one in a position to work with those conditions in order to align them with the realisation of one's ethical goals.

The four resolves are: **to create conditions (a) for reactivity not to arise [5], (b) for letting reactivity be [6], (c) for virtues and skills to arise [7], and (d) for sustaining and increasing virtues and skills [8].**

Resolve is therefore about identifying and relinquishing the conditions that prevent one from living ethically, while creating and sustaining the conditions that enable ethical living. In this sense, resolve has less to do with instilling a determined motive in one's mind and then pursuing it with forceful effort than with understanding how one's goals are realised through patiently establishing the conditions needed for them to emerge organically.

The logic underpinning the four resolves mirrors the logic of the four tasks, which is also based on creating appropriate conditions for one's goals to be realised. Thus the embracing of life is the condition for letting reactivity be; letting reactivity be, the condition for seeing reactivity stop; and seeing reactivity stop, the condition for cultivating a path.

Such resolve is equally concerned with the outer social, economic, and political conditions of our lives as well as the inner philosophical, psychological and spiritual conditions of our lives. Its practice therefore extends into our social and political engagement, our work and livelihood, as well as our formal practice of mindfulness.

In traditional Western terms, this resolve is focused on finding a balance between an active life (*vita activa*), and a contemplative life (*vita contemplativa*).

### 3. Creativity

To embrace life is to rise to the challenge of living well, which means overcoming the obstacles that stand in the way of realising one's goals.

To embrace life, therefore, requires the creativity needed to solve problems.

In the context of embracing life, creativity is primarily about problem solving.

A problem could be defined as “a situation which for some reason appreciably holds up an organism in its effort to reach a goal.” (Quoted by Hannah Arendt. *The Life of the Mind*, p. 175)

Such obstacles could be external, e.g. a repressive political or religious system, persecution, poverty etc. It could also be a physical illness or injury. Or it could be psychological: lack of motivation or self-worth, depression, anxiety etc.

Creativity is the capacity to imagine effective ways of overcoming the obstacles that stand in the way of realising one's goals.

Creativity involves the **aspiration** [9] to realise a goal; the courage to risk setting out on a path with no guarantee of success and to **persevere** [10] in spite of hardships; the **intuition** [11] needed to make judgments and choices that might go against the grain of what is familiar and habitual; and the willingness to keep **experimenting** [12], learning from one's mistakes, often finding solutions by serendipity, and continuously refining and improving one's skills.

From the perspective of M-BEL, embracing life is more than just meditatively accepting life as it is, but engaging with it mindfully, resolutely and creatively.

# Three

## A Path of Care

The *Cartography of Care* (**Figure 2**) is like a coded map that we are invited to decipher. This requires the imagination to configure these elements in a way that speaks to our condition today — in which we seek a way of life that responds to the individual and collective suffering of our world, in which our inner and outer lives are brought into harmony rather than letting one side predominate. We can ponder this *Cartography* as we might a game of chess.

Care can be thought of as the overarching ethical sensibility which includes all other skills and virtues and to which they all tend.

In this sense, care can be compared to the whole body — particularly as represented in archetypal forms of human fulfilment — while the thirty-two skills and virtues can be compared to the parts of the body.

If I truly care for myself, another person or animal, or life on earth as such, I will do whatever I can to prevent their suffering and enable their flourishing.

I empathise with those for whom I care. Care entails a sense of worry, anguish, and concern. If I care for someone, I too will suffer when that person suffers.

Just as the body cares for itself (the hand may not be in pain, but it naturally reaches out to the foot that has been injured), so do embodied beings spontaneously care for all those within their circles of empathy.

Flourishing entails expanding the empathetic circle of care. We come to care not just for this or that particular person or family or community but for the body of life itself. The commitment related to the first task is: “Beings are boundless; I will care for them all.”

How do you care? In M-BEL, the four tasks describe a *practice* of care. **Embracing** life, **Letting** reactivity be, **Seeing** its stopping, and **Actualising** a path (ELSA) are the four essential elements of care.

Here is an example of the practice of care. Imagine a therapist in her office. There is a knock on the door. The door opens to reveal the client. The therapist embraces the presence of that person, while also embracing her reactions to the client. She lets certain reactive habits (“O no, not him again!” “Great, her again!”) be. She grounds herself in a balanced, non-reactive state of attention, then she reaches out to him or her with caring gestures or words and the therapy session begins.

Since all this happens so fast, such care can be also understood as a single task with four facets, or simply a fourfold task.

If we look at this more analytically, *care* can be broken down into the *four tasks*, each of which can be further broken down into specific sets of the *thirty-two virtues and skills*.

## Reactivity

Reactivity is a central concept of M-BEL.

Reactivity is what prevents you from caring. Reactivity gets in the way of care, it blocks the path of care.

Reactivity arises when the organism encounters a situation in life that triggers a reactive pattern. Reactivity happens to us. We do not choose it. It is the legacy of our biological, psychological and cultural conditioning.

By paying mindful attention to reactivity, we realize how little control we have over the inner workings of our own life. So much of what goes on inside us is not the result of our own choices but happens to us without our consent.

Reactivity is like fire (cf. elements and colours). It flares up and once it has caught hold, becomes increasingly difficult to extinguish.

Reactivity is an “autonomous complex within the psyche” (C.G. Jung’s definition of neurosis). It invades us and takes over. It operates independently of our will. I cannot switch it off. And if I try to suppress it, it only seems to reinforce it (cf. Freud and the unconscious drives of the Id).

Some reactivity is instinctual and selective, like jumping aside to avoid treading on a snake. This provides survival advantages. But much reactivity is psychologically conditioned by past experiences since our childhood, such as a sense of low self-esteem from being denigrated and abused. Rather than provide survival advantages, reactivity can make us more insecure, neurotic, narrow minded and opinionated.

Reactivity can be an internalized social habit as much as a personal psychological habit. Racism, sexism, homophobia and other socialized prejudices are perpetuated and reinforced not only by individuals but by media, political parties, religious groups and so on. Notice how voices in our heads can suddenly speak up with unwanted racist or sexist remarks that make us feel ashamed.

To reduce the destructive impact of reactivity requires, therefore, both outer (socio-political) and inner (psychological-contemplative) work.

Reactivity is a kind of death, where our capacity to live fully is prevented by the tight hold of a mental or emotional patterning. We are able to go about our daily routines but are uncomfortably aware of being constrained and troubled by a knot of reactivity within our body-minds.

Unlike care, which expands the circle of empathy, reactivity contracts the circle of empathy to the point where the only people who matter are *me* and those I consider *mine*.

Once triggered, a reactive pattern remains as a knot in the stomach, a tightness in the chest, an underlying feeling of frustration and rage, as a compulsive worry, as catastrophising. It keeps repeating itself to the point where it crystallises into a constant low-level anxiety, a slightly nauseous feeling, or a panic that we keep suppressing.

Reactivity reduces our experience to survival mode alone. “How am I going to get through this? How am I going to cope? How am I going to get what I want?” become the only things that matter.

We admire those who even in the most extreme situations of suffering (e.g. a concentration camp or battlefield) are still able to care for others rather than be overwhelmed by their own plight. We are inspired by those who adhere to their vision of what an ethical life should be despite the pressure to give in to the fear and panic that rise within themselves and are visible in the faces, words and actions of those around them.

Such care is central to what it means to be fully human. We praise those who act with heroism and courage in such situations, who remain true to their values rather than succumb to the instinct of self-preservation alone. This has nothing to do with belonging to a particular religion or culture, but is common among followers of all religions, philosophies, political systems etc.

M-BEL works with reactivity by first embracing it, which is the first task, and then mindfully letting it be, which is the second task. The challenge is not to react to reactivity but simply to see it for what it is. In embracing our life, we embrace not only what we sense and feel, but also how we respond and react to situations and people.



# Four

## Letting Reactivity Be

After the long days, warmth and light of summer where everything is in bloom, we now approach autumn. The days become shorter, the nights longer, the weather cooler. Leaves turn brown and red, then, in their own time, fall from the trees to shrivel, crumble and rot, becoming compost to support further growth of other plants in the spring.

Likewise, after embracing life in all its tragicomic fullness through becoming more mindful, resolute and creative, we now turn inward to work more intensely on ourselves.

We move from a path of *formation* to a path of *unification*.

Like the passage from summer to autumn, this movement is a seamless flow rather than two separate phases.

In relating to someone who suffers, we often find ourselves naturally responding with generosity, kindness, care, love and wisdom, virtues which we value and wish to cultivate further.

But we may also find ourselves reacting with selfishness, dislike, and confusion (i.e. entrenched reactive habits), and feeling disappointed in ourselves.

This reactivity is also to be embraced, recognised and accepted for what it is rather than denied, resisted and suppressed. Denial, resistance and suppression are often just other forms of reactivity.

The conceit “I am a mindful person” can become another blockage or obstacle, a repetitive and habitual pattern, which prevents rather than enables flourishing. “As a meditator, I should not be feeling this way,” we might say to ourselves. With friends and colleagues, we are concerned to preserve an image of the “mindful” person we aspire to be, who never gets flustered and always remains calm. It gives us an identity and status that we wish to protect and promote.

Reactivity is good at infiltrating itself into and corrupting those parts of ourselves that we consider caring, wise and non-reactive.

As part of the process of unification, **mindfulness** [13] shifts into another gear. Rather than remembering to embrace life, we now remember to let reactivity be. We move from the *existential* mindfulness of the first task to the *therapeutic* mindfulness of the second task.

“Let This Be” becomes our mantra. Whenever a reactive pattern arises, we notice it as the consequence of previous conditions over which we no longer have any control. Rather than assenting to its imperatives, we watch it play itself out. This may take some time. We learn to welcome and live with it as simply a part of who we are, but without being seduced by it and letting it determine what we think, say and do.

Reactivity sometimes feels so relentless that we wonder whether we can ever overcome it.

Yet if we cannot free ourselves from the control of deep-seated reactive patterns, it will be difficult to find the perspective and imagination needed to flourish as the kind of person we aspire to be.

We realise that our own inner turmoil as well as the social, economic, political and religious pressures of outer circumstances, e.g. the expectations of others (both real and internalised), hinder our flourishing.

To overcome the constraints of reactivity that confine us to a kind of inner aridity in which we feel that we are going round in circles and nothing new can be initiated, we need both confidence and courage.

These are summed up in the commitment connected to the second task: “Reactivity is inexhaustible; I will let go of it all.”

Here we can look to MBSR and MBCT for therapeutic interventions that can help us open up a space of non-reactivity whence we can find the freedom to respond rather than react to life.

M-BEL includes therapeutic mindfulness but explicitly frames it within a wider context of other practices of care. In M-BEL, therapeutic mindfulness is *built on* the foundation of having already committed oneself to being existentially mindful, resolute and creative [first task]. At the same time, this therapeutic mindfulness *establishes* the foundation for dwelling in a contemplative, non-reactive space [third task], and then embarking on a path of flourishing as an autonomous ethical agent [fourth task].

**Confidence [14]** is built upon the resolve cultivated in the first task. It has to do with having a clear sense of purpose and a commitment to care for those who suffer.

Confidence is also rooted in our deepest intuition (Cf. creativity) as to what constitutes a good and meaningful life, and our admiration for those people who have succeeded in embodying and realising such a life and thereby serve to inspire us.

This intuition is probably formed through socialisation — history, education, culture, theatre, literature, etc. — rather than being an innate “God-given” quality, a “fundamental goodness,” that exists apart from the world of conditions.

In this case, it means having the confidence that I too can free myself from the power of reactivity to become my own person — no matter what it may take.

**Courage [15]** is the strength of heart to remain true to what we value despite all the pressures and temptations and vacillations that tend to undermine us. It is the inner strength to manage the often painful struggle with reactivity: this is hard work that can exhaust us. We may experience dark nights of the soul.

Rather than becoming more broadly attentive and mindful of our own and others' bodies, feelings, mental states and ideas, now we **focus** [16] that mindful attention entirely on reactivity as it arises in our moment-to-moment experience.

We train ourselves to remain unmoved by whatever thoughts and images our scattered and sluggish minds present us. Even in the midst of turmoil we remain still.

Such focus enables us to **discern** [17] more clearly what is going on in our experience and how to work with it. As the mind becomes more still and collected, we can begin to understand better the feelings, perceptions and inclinations that give rise to and trigger reactivity. We learn to distinguish better between what is to be cultivated (virtues and skills) and what is to be let be (reactivity).

Through probing and analysing our experience with discernment enhanced by mindfulness and focus, both we and our world are revealed with greater granularity. We become capable of noticing with greater precision the very first stirrings of reactivity within us, thereby nipping the impulse in the bud before it overwhelms us.

The five powers of mindfulness, confidence, courage, focus and discernment, i.e. the virtues and skills cultivated on the path of unification, nurture a unified inner sensibility that is configured from them all.

Over time this sensibility allows us to witness the loosening of reactive thoughts and emotions, and their falling away like leaves in autumn. Even if they remain around, they get less in our way. We discover a certain freedom and ease that begins to open up as a clearing in the tangled forest of our lives.

Our shit becomes the manure for our flourishing.

# Five

## A Non-Reactive Space

I am drawn to the catalogue of thirty-two virtues and skills (which lies at the heart of the *Cartography of Care*) not only because it is a foundational matrix that may go back to the Buddha, but because of its aesthetics.

I enjoy the playful dynamic of multiples of fours and eights, which was perhaps employed originally as an aid to memorisation in a pre-literate society.

“Four” reminds me of the four nucleotides that make up DNA, out of which all life is configured. The way in which these elements are organised according to the four paths and tasks provides a glimpse of the underlying *logic* of care.

M-BEL seeks to render these thirty-two skills and virtues fit for purpose in a secular world. This entails sometimes filling in blanks (e.g. the four steps of creativity, imagination, work) as well as reinterpreting and expanding other elements.

Some might find that the *Cartography* is too linear: it moves from left to right, step by step, along a (straight) line. It might strike you as too rationalistic, too calculating, too much the product of the left hemisphere of the brain.

Yet a line can always become a circle. Imagine the thirty-two virtues and skills arranged as a circle with no beginning and end, where application, work, voice and flourishing (the last four elements of the

fourth task) morph into mindfulness of bodies, feelings, mind-states and ideas (the first four elements of the first task)...

You can start the practice of M-BEL anywhere because life often gives you no choice where you start.

Since this process takes place in time, it could be better imagined as a spiral rather than a circle: it turns in cycles but, like the seasons, with each turn it evolves and grows.

Or better still, we could think of it as a *positive feedback loop*.

When the output of a system affects the system itself, this is known as a feedback loop. When a woman is about to give birth, uterine stretch receptors signal the brain to release oxytocin, which triggers contractions, which trigger the stretch receptors, which release more oxytocin, allowing a child to be born into the world. Or a ripening piece of a fruit, which releases a gas called ethylene, which triggers the ripening of nearby fruits, which themselves release ethylene, and so on.

Metaphorically, this model shows how one can move from reactivity to creativity, from a life that goes round in familiar circles to a path that embarks on a journey into the unknown. In this sense, it is similar to being born anew. (It is a happy coincidence in English that “reactivity” and “creativity” are anagrams of each other.)

This emphasises how the logic of care in M-BEL is understood as a process that is grounded in and mirrors natural life rhythms, such as the seasons. Embracing life with non-reactive attention leads to letting reactivity be, which leads to the next phase in the loop: seeing reactivity come to a stop, which leads to the fourth phase: cultivating a path, which enables us to embrace life that much more fully.

Reactivity and non-reactivity should not be thought of in binary terms as two separate states but as poles of a spectrum along which we are constantly moving back and forth. They can co-exist: part of you is still and mindful, considering ironically how another part of you is consumed by a nagging anxiety or a compulsive fantasy.

We are *already* familiar with what it is like to be non-reactive. Whenever we relax into a state of physical or mental rest, whether through meditation or simply by taking a pause or break in what we

are doing, we experience moments of non-reactivity. Whenever we feel content, in balance and harmony with our surroundings, in the company of a good friend, we enjoy what it is like to be in a non-reactive state. When we find ourselves in a creative flow of activity, we likewise find an untroubled, joyful, and effortless sense of being alive.

In M-BEL we learn to pay more conscious attention to this experience of non-reactivity.

We learn to recognise and *dwell* in non-reactivity. This is the untroubledness (*ataraxia*) to which the Sceptics and Epicureans of ancient Greece aspired, the nirvana of the early Buddhists in India, the non-action (*wu-wei*) of the Taoist sages in China.

Love and compassion likewise are non-reactive qualities in which we come to dwell rather than emotional qualities we struggle to develop.

Dwelling and pathing: these two primary modes of being human (stillness and motion) underpin the entire practice of M-BEL.

Non-reactivity is present as soon as we become mindful. For when mindful of a reactive pattern, the mindfulness itself is *not* reactive.

Now, as we embark on the third task of seeing reactivity stop, we cultivate the contemplative mindfulness that enables us to *dwell* in (i.e. valorise and sustain) such non-reactivity. This is a practice that requires equanimity, focus and stillness.

Over time we become familiar with the taste and feel of non-reactivity in body, feelings and mind. A quiet non-reactive space begins to open up and stabilise in our lives.

This non-reactive space is experienced as *depth*, like an abyss. It constitutes the vertical as opposed to the horizontal dimension of the path.

This non-reactive space is the “hinge” on which the path turns, the space in which we move from a less reactive life to a more responsive life.

This non-reactive space is the axis of the path. It is like a well-greased and well-made axle that remains still but enables the wheel to move without any resistance caused by grit or irregularities in the metal or wood of the axle.

This non-reactive space is still and unmoving but it is what makes both activity and movement possible. You cannot see it with your eyes but you feel it in your body.

It is comparable to winter, when the trees have shed their leaves, the plants have withered and died, snow covers the ground, and all is quiet and still. Yet the seeds of trees and plants lie dormant, awaiting spring beneath the frozen ground.

Ice is non-reactive. It is hard, crystalline and transparent. An icy landscape doesn't move. It is an expanse of stillness and silence.

The colour associated with this task is *white*. The element associated with this task is *air*, the invisible element we breathe and through which we move.

Non-reactivity is not passivity, a static state in which nothing happens. This would make it no different from from an impediment, which is one of the features of reactivity. Non-reactivity is a dynamic space that is “the still point of the turning world, neither flesh nor fleshless;

Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,…” [T.S. Eliot. *Burnt Norton*].



# Six

## The Care of the Soul

The third task — seeing the stopping of reactivity — is also a practice of care: the care of the soul.

Seeing the stopping of reactivity is to embark on a path of vision. Such vision is supported, enhanced and sustained through mindfulness, equanimity, focus, stillness, joy, enthusiasm and wonder, which can be understood as seven facets of being awake. We could compare them to seven facets of a well-cut diamond.

In December 2020, while on a personal retreat, I started developing a thirty minute reflective meditation on these seven facets. It went through a number of iterations, but eventually settled into the form I have been doing as my daily meditation practice since then.

Performed regularly, I have found that it helps illuminate, expand and confirm the non-reactive space, the depth dimension of the path, in which one aspires to dwell.

This meditation might be thought of as a central inner core or pillar in the practice of M-BEL.

Rather than offering further thoughts on this practice, I invite you to find a quiet place to sit down and do it yourself.

As a reflective meditation, it entails *imagining* these seven facets of being awake at different points in the body.

It is strange how just by naming and imagining a mental quality, such as mindfulness, at a point in the body one is able to evoke a “feeling” of its presence. Perhaps this is because part of what we mean by the word “mindfulness” is configured by the language to which that word belongs. Following Wittgenstein, we do not know what mindfulness is because we have somehow gained special knowledge of the non-physical, mental stuff to which the word “mindfulness” corresponds. Mindfulness is not a “thing” that exists in a realm separate from and independent of language and culture. If we know how to use the word “mindfulness” in the language-game called English, that is enough for us to know what mindfulness “is.”

I will present this meditation as a series of numbered steps. Spend about three minutes on each step. Having established a “feel” for the particular virtue located at a specific point in the body, just let your attention rest there without further reflection or analysis, allowing yourself to sense it *somatically*.

**One.** Find a comfortable seated position, then settle your attention on your breath (or whatever object of meditation helps you calm and focus your mind). Once you have achieved a degree of stillness, then become aware of the entire body, imagining it as a body of care replete with the thirty-two virtues and skills — though there is no need to itemise or locate each one.

**Two.** Imagine **mindfulness** [18] at the crown of your head. Rather than being mindful of physical sensations, feelings or mental states, recollect and pay close attention to non-reactivity itself. To help with this, turn your attention to the contact of your buttocks with your chair or cushion. Recognise how the inanimate chair or cushion on which you are sitting is not reactive at all. Let yourself sense and feel that quality of non-reactivity. Then become mindful of the extent to which non-reactivity is present in your own inner experience at this moment.

**Three.** Imagine **equanimity** [19] at the base of your spine. Equanimity is a balanced, non-reactive state of awareness that is neither pulled towards what attracts you nor recoils from what repels you. It is a centred, radical acceptance of what is happening to you in this moment.

**Four.** Raise your attention from the base of your spine to imagine **focus** [20] in the lower belly, a few centimetres below the navel. This focus is where all your energies, physical and mental, are collected and aligned.

**Five.** Raise your attention from the lower belly to imagine **stillness** [21] at the navel. This is the calm, grounded, unmoving centre of experience. It lies at the core of what it feels like to dwell in non-reactive awareness.

**Six.** Raise your attention from the navel to imagine **joy** [22] in the center of the body at the level of the heart. Focus on any pleasant feeling of well being, however slight, that you are experiencing now. If you cannot find any such feeling, then gently smile to yourself, or wish yourself and others well, then rest in the pleasure that the smile or well-wishing evokes.

**Seven.** Raise your attention from the heart-centre to imagine **enthusiasm** [23] in the throat. This refers to the energy, courage and perseverance to path and flourish. Bear in mind the commitment correlated to the third task: “Gateways (i.e. situations in life) are numberless; I will enter them all.”

**Eight.** Raise your attention from the throat to imagine **wonder** [24] in the centre of the brain at the level of the ears and eyes. Such wonder is the astonishment and perplexity about the sheer fact of being here at all. It can be thought of as a spectrum that runs from curiosity to amazement. Every now and then, quietly ask yourself: *What is this?* Then rest in the silence that follows, opening yourself to what it feels like to be a being who can become a question for itself. Occasionally, alternate this question with the phrase: *I don't know*, then rest in the silence of not-knowing that follows.

**Nine.** Raise your attention from the centre of the brain to once more imagine mindfulness at the crown of your head. Extend this mindfulness to the entire body, aware of the seven facets of being awake as a pillar running from the base of your spine to the top of your head. Then conclude the meditation by dwelling in the non-reactivity which, refracted through mindfulness, equanimity, focus, stillness, joy, enthusiasm and wonder, infuses the totality of your embodied experience.

This meditation is about cultivating a non-reactive awareness, rooted in equanimity, focus and stillness, enlivened by joy and enthusiasm, and culminating in wonder. Wonder is a non-reactive questioning, through which we let go of habitual, comforting opinions and rest in an open and curious frame of mind — about what is going on in general, and about how I should live in particular. We can learn to *dwell* in such wonder without feeling compelled to find an answer.

One is now on the threshold of embarking on a path as an autonomous agent, no longer determined by the past conditioning of a religion, a political system, one's ethnicity, gender etc.

This non-reactive space is a space of *freedom*, where choices can be made with greater sensitivity, clarity and understanding. It is, therefore, an *ethical* space: a space in which one is freed to make decisions to think, speak and act in ways that not only develop one's own character and allow one to flourish, but also engages creatively with the social, political and economic structures of the world in which we live with others.

As winter moves into spring, the ice begins to melt and water begins to flow.

# Seven

## Creating A Path

A path is an unimpeded and purposeful space, created by others for others.

It is purposeful because it leads to a destination; it is unimpeded because it allows us to walk or run freely without any hindrance; and it is created by those who have preceded us, just as we, by using it, maintain it for those who will follow.

A path is like water because it *flows*. Like the French, we should perhaps talk of *cheminer*: to path; *cheminement*: pathing, rather than walking *on* a path, as though the path were something different from who we are. To path is to proceed toward a destination without impediment in community with others. To path is to be fully alive, to flow, whether we are contemplating something in silence, offering advice to a friend, or working together on a shared project.

This path, which is the purposeful movement of our very existence, needs to be kept clear of obstacles and pursued with care. In this way, it is (and we are) cultivated and enabled to thrive.

The transition from *dwelling* in the stillness of contemplating a non-reactive space to the *motion* of cultivating a path is like the transition from winter to spring, from night to dawn, from dormancy to vitality, from potentiality to action.

The uniform whiteness of a wintry landscape gives way to the first green shoots and buds of spring. With the coming of spring, farmers prepare themselves for the planting of seeds, the tilling of the soil, the cultivation of crops. After the long dark quiet and rest of winter, they rejoice in the first signs of spring but also realise that now the hard work begins that will last until the end of autumn.

Like the farmer's crops, the path is to be *cultivated*.

In moving from the third task (seeing the stopping of reactivity) to the fourth task (cultivating a path), we shift from the depth and stillness of contemplative wonder (*What is this?*) to the breadth and engagement of ethical wonder (*What should I do?*), i.e. from contemplative perplexity to ethical perplexity.

The **perspective** [25] of this path is one of ethical uncertainty. When faced by the suffering of an other being, I find myself longing to respond to and relieve that suffering but am frequently bewildered and confused about what to do. I aspire to lead a skilful and virtuous life, but in response to a specific instance of suffering, I often discover that I *don't know* what to do. For I realise how little I understand the complex situation of the other's life; how little time I have in which to make a decision and act on it; and how, regardless of the nobility of my intentions, I cannot know in advance what the consequences of my actions will be. At the same time, I cannot *not* act. The failure to respond would be an ethical failure.

Each time I ask myself: *What should I do?* I initiate an ethical relationship with others and the world, which is grounded in uncertainty yet animated by the longing to do good.

This is an ethics of uncertainty, an ethics that accepts and embraces *risk*. Since I cannot know with certainty what is the right thing to do, I can only judge what appears to be the most caring, wise, and appropriate thing to do in the situation. Moral precepts and rules provide me with broad guidelines, but cannot make up my mind for me when confronted with the uniqueness and ambiguity of a particular dilemma.

Before deciding what to do, I need to be able to **imagine** [26] what to do. On the one hand, this requires the *empathetic imagination* to feel what it is like to be the suffering person (or world). On the other hand, it requires the *creative imagination* to respond to that person's (or world's) suffering in a wise and caring way.

Imagination is linked to creativity: the ability to solve problems by means of aspiration, perseverance, intuition, and experimentation. In this way, we learn over time from our ethical successes and failures, thereby honing our moral compass.

In the context of the fourth task, **mindfulness** [27] means constantly to keep in mind (a) what one has decided to do, (b) why one has decided to do it, and (c) how well or poorly one is doing it.

**Focus** [28] in the context of the fourth task means to remain constant, steady and undistracted in the pursuit and realisation of one's ethical goals.

Perspective, imagination, mindfulness and focus — the first four phases of this eightfold path — still belong to the inner, contemplative life. Without them our actions tend to be thoughtless and automatic, dictated by habit, custom and instinctive reactivity. But in order for us to flourish as the kinds of persons we aspire to be, these private virtues need to be translated into public words and deeds, which have the power both to change us and impact the lives of others. They thus require conscious and continuous **application** [29] in the world we share with other human beings and other species.

The challenge presented to aspiring authors in creative writing workshops is to “find your own **voice** [30].” Rather than writing in a style derived from other authors you admire, you are encouraged to speak from the core of your own unique experience. Likewise, the internalised “voices” of reactivity drown out your own distinctive voice. To find your voice entails differentiating what *you* have to say from what all the other internalised voices in your head are urging you to say. And, crucially, this also requires finding the courage to say it.

It is through your voice, through what you have to say, that you participate in the public realm, the *polis*, shared with others. You are able to engage in conversations with your fellow citizens about how to flourish together in this world without hindering the flourishing of others. This is the realm of *politics*.

Historically, we can see how the ability of certain societies to flourish is achieved at the cost of others being unable to flourish. While individual citizens in ancient Greece might have flourished, they did so only because women and slaves were forced to lead unfree lives of child raising and servile labour. The same is true for us living in privileged countries today: we have the leisure to enjoy consumer goods

manufactured by others in sweatshops in the “developing” world, which the workers who produce them have neither the leisure nor income to enjoy themselves.

Consider, likewise, how human flourishing is frequently achieved at the cost of other species *not* flourishing. Think of the meat and dairy industry that requires vast numbers of animals to be killed; or industrial farming methods that destroy bird and animal habitats and reduce the biodiversity of plant species. Awareness of these realities brings us back, again and again, to the ethical question: *What should I do?*

To expand this question about “doing,” consider how you would answer the simple question: *What do you do?* Your answer is likely describe your **work** [31].

Ideally, your work is a vocation. It is what you feel deep down *called* to do. (“Vocation” and “voice” are cognates.) As the mind becomes more still and attentive, you may be able to hear better what this calling is. To follow a calling might put you into conflict with other voices (those of parents, educators, priests, politicians — both actual and internalised) that also call out to you. Your calling is an ethical call to become the kind of person you most deeply and intuitively aspire to be.

Engagement in meaningful work is often what provides human beings with the strongest sense of leading a flourishing life. Meaningful work is what contributes to the construction of the human realm: its institutions — hospitals, governments, museums, temples, schools etc. Hannah Arendt calls this realm the “human artifice” in contrast to the natural world.

Our work is rendered visible through the artefacts we create and leave behind us when we die, be that a book of poems or a railway station or a system of psychotherapy. This is the work of *homo faber* (“Man the Maker”): creative beings who use tools and technologies to transform their environment and exercise control over their destiny.

Yet such work is not the same as the labour of the woman in a sweat shop in Bangladesh manufacturing underwear for sale in Europe, or the peasant farmer producing a cash crop of coffee in Nicaragua. Such labour leaves no lasting trace in the human artifice: it is in the service of consumption, producing the same goods (underwear and coffee) that need to be endlessly replaced. Under such conditions, to what extent can people’s lives be said to flourish? Is there dignity in such work?



For many labourers, whatever dignity there is in such work is derived from it enabling future generations to receive an education that will allow the kind of flourishing life that their parents were unable to enjoy. In the few societies that have not succumbed to the imperatives of industrial capitalism, however, dignity and satisfaction can be found in the simple daily tasks that allow a community to sustain itself in balance with the natural world. (This was Gandhi's vision for India, which has long since been abandoned.)

We might have abolished slavery, but millions continue to live enslaved to the demands of a capitalist economy, the greed of landlords, the rule of unelected politicians or military dictators. For Arendt, such work is that of the *animal laborans* ("The Labouring Animal"), who undertakes gruelling and alienated labour simply in order to survive.

Performing meaningful work and labouring in order to survive are present in all of our lives to some degree. In the course of a single day, we find ourselves doing what we feel called to do as well as having to do jobs and chores that are tiresome and unfulfilling but pay the bills.

Today, survival has assumed another meaning beyond simply surviving from day-to-day. In creating the human artifice through our work and maintaining our lifestyle through the labour of others, we now realise that we are endangering the **flourishing** [32] and very survival of humans and other species. Unless we act together to avert it, the climate catastrophe towards which we are heading may result in the sixth mass extinction of life on earth.

Yet rather than irresponsibly imagine a future no longer tied to the earth, whether through being reborn in a heaven or establishing a colony on Mars, we need to focus on the flourishing of earthly life itself as our primary longterm goal. *All species* should have the *right* to flourish.

Why? Because *life is worth living*. It is a wondrous mystery that we and humming birds are alive at all. In caring for life, I long for all living beings not to suffer but to flourish. Even if my actions might at times seem to contradict this intention, this is the kind of person that I ultimately aspire to be.

# Eight

## The Ethics of Mindfulness

Let's look again at the collage [figure 1] of the thirty-two virtues and skills. As we have seen, these virtues and skills are correlated to the four tasks and four paths, and lie at the heart of the *Cartography of Care* [figure 2].

Of these thirty-two virtues and skills, twelve — nearly half of them — are found in the first task of embracing life. This reflects how embracing life is an ethical formation and discipline through which we become more mindful, resolute and creative in our lives in the world with others. The four foundations of mindfulness, the four resolves and the four steps of creativity provide a twelve-fold framework for grounding ourselves existentially in the world.

The task of embracing life is a *Bildung*, a process of life-long learning and practice that forms character as well as refining knowledge and skills. It is an education, a drawing out of your potential and making it actual.

The second and third tasks — of letting reactivity be and seeing it stop — have five and seven elements respectively, which may seem to violate the principle of fours and eights. But remember that five plus seven equals twelve, which is exactly the same number of elements as we find in the first task. The logic of the *Cartography* thereby suggests how the kind of ethical living envisioned in M-BEL aims at achieving a balance between an active life in the world (first task) and a contemplative life of the mind (second and third tasks).

The fourth task — cultivating a path — turns out to be evenly divided between four contemplative virtues (perspective, imagination, mindfulness, focus) and four active virtues (application, voice, work, flourishing).

Therefore, the total number of thirty-two virtues and skills can be divided into two sets of sixteen ( $4 + 4 + 4 + 4 = 16$ , and  $5 + 7 + 4 = 16$ ), thus further confirming the principle of balance and harmony between the active and contemplative dimensions of human existence as the basis for ethical living.

Remember that M-BEL is *Mindfulness-Based Ethical Living*. The *Cartography* shows us clearly that mindfulness is the *only* virtue/skill that is present in each of the four tasks and paths.

Having examined each of the four tasks in some detail, we can now better understand how mindfulness assumes a different character or modality according to which of these tasks is being performed. This leads us to another fourfold model of mindfulness: *existential* mindfulness, *therapeutic* mindfulness, *contemplative* mindfulness, and *ethical* mindfulness.

- (1) **Existential Mindfulness** entails paying close attention to one's life situation [bodies, feelings, minds, ideas], in support of cultivating resolve and creativity. It is to bear in mind what needs to be done to establish a foundation for flourishing. (*First task / Path of formation*)
- (2) **Therapeutic Mindfulness** involves being mindful of letting reactivity be, with confidence, courage, focus and discernment. It is to hold in mind what needs to be done in order to free one from the entanglements of reactivity that hinder flourishing. (*Second task / Path of unification*)
- (3) **Contemplative Mindfulness** requires being mindful of dwelling in non-reactivity, with equanimity, focus, stillness, joy, enthusiasm and wonder. It is to keep in mind, expand and stabilise a non-reactive space in which new possibilities for action can emerge. (*Third task / Path of vision*)
- (4) **Ethical Mindfulness** is concerned with being mindful of and focused on what one should do, grounded in a perspective of ethical perplexity that fosters empathetic and creative imagination, which motivate one's application to the tasks at hand, finding one's voice to participate in the

public realm, engaging in meaningful work, and cherishing the flourishing of all life on earth.  
(*Fourth task / Path of cultivation*)

The *Cartography of Care* thereby reveals how the existential, therapeutic and contemplative practices of mindfulness culminate in the practice of ethical mindfulness. But what kind of ethics is understood here?

The ethics of M-BEL is formed and inspired by different ethical perspectives. Principal among these are:

**An ethics of uncertainty:** a Socratic/Buddhist approach that emphasises suspicion of knee-jerk moral certainties and acknowledgement of how in acting ethically one is taking a risk without any certainty of a desired outcome. Such uncertainty allows the time for the thoughtfulness needed to consider other possibilities and see things from different points of view.

**An ethics of care:** a feminist approach developed by Carol Gilligan and others that emphasises interpersonal relationships, benevolence and responsiveness in ethics rather than the more masculine virtues of justice, duty and obligation derived from abstract moral standards.

**A virtue ethics:** an approach with roots in both Buddhist and Greek philosophy, which emphasises the importance of cultivating virtues, i.e. dispositions of character to think and act well in every area of one's life in order to achieve fulfilment and flourishing.

**A situational ethics:** an ethics inspired by Christian thinkers, which emphasises the uniqueness of every moral dilemma, and the need to respond to it pragmatically with love, even though this might conflict with other moral goods.

As a balanced combination of a contemplation and action, M-BEL aspires not only for personal flourishing but to create flourishing communities that embody the thirty-two virtues and skills at its core. In the long term, it would aspire for the emergence of a culture rooted in such values.

M-BEL is not alone in such an endeavour but part of a wide-ranging coalition of potential allies that share many of its core values. Who might some of these allies be?

1. Secular, Engaged, Naturalistic and other Buddhists who find themselves marginalised by or alienated from orthodox Buddhist traditions and institutions.
2. Practitioners of other mindfulness-based interventions — MBSR, MBCT, MBSC, MBSA, ELSA etc. — who seek a more comprehensive philosophical and ethical framework for their mindfulness practice.
3. Practitioners of Positive Psychology, Non-violent Communication, Effective Altruism, Action and Commitment Therapy (ACT), and comparable contemporary approaches to the achievement of wellbeing and flourishing.
4. Practitioners of other like-minded philosophical and religious traditions, e.g. Stoics, Existentialist and Pragmatist philosophers, Taoists, Middle Way thinkers, Quakers, Unitarians.

There are doubtless many others, not included in any of these groups, who might benefit from M-BEL. At heart, M-BEL is addressed to anyone who seeks a practice that integrates philosophy, contemplation and ethics as a way of life that responds effectively to suffering and enables people to grow and flourish.

How M-BEL might be realised in practice remains to be seen. As a first step, it would be valuable to develop an extended modular course (somewhat on the lines of MBSR etc.), where practitioners could meet together, either online or in person, to explore M-BEL in greater detail and find ways to put its vision into practice.

Since the thirty-two virtues and skills are divided into six sets, this could offer a framework for a six-day or six-week programme:

1. The Four Foundations of Mindfulness
2. The Four Resolves (= the Four Tasks)
3. The Four Steps of Creativity
4. The Five Powers

5. The Seven Facets of Being Awake
6. The Eightfold Path

This text is a discussion document rather than a definitive account of M-BEL. It provides little more than an outline that needs to be further fleshed out and developed into a fully-fledged User's Manual. The areas that appear to require most attention in this regard would be the following:

**Science:** In order to clarify, for example, the central concept of reactivity, we need to look particularly to evolutionary biology and cognitive science for an evidence-based underpinning for such ideas.

**Humanities and Arts:** This would entail further elaborating the concepts of creativity and imagination in order to explore ways of articulating the vision of M-BEL by means of the practice and appreciation of literature, art, music, film, dance, theatre etc.

**Society and Politics:** To flesh out the educational and formative dimension of M-BEL, we need a better understanding of how to embrace life in terms of resolve and creativity. If we are to develop the communal, social and political dimensions of M-BEL, we need to considerably clarify and expand the concepts of application, voice, work and flourishing.

**Buddhism:** Where does M-BEL stand in relation to Buddhism? What is the relationship between M-BEL and Secular Dharma? Although informed by early Buddhist catalogues of virtues, to what extent is M-BEL Buddhist (or Dharmic)? Is it a heretical departure from a venerable tradition or a much needed evolution of that tradition? Or something else altogether?

And let us not forget the commitment correlated to the fourth task: "The path of awakening has no end; I will reach it."