

o8 Resisting the Tyranny of the Tribe: An exploration of suffering, political discontent, and tribalism

‘Every Inch a Vermeer’

In the *Cankī Sutta* the Buddha explains that one ‘preserves the truth’ when one states merely what one believes, but does not jump to an unshakable conclusion on the basis of that belief. In other words, one does not insist that the belief is definitely true, and anything contrary to it false.^[1]

I could not help thinking of the Cankī Sutta when, a while ago, I read an account of the fall from grace of Abraham Bredius, who in the 1930s was the world’s leading scholar of Dutch painters and especially of the master Johannes Vermeer. In 1937 Bredius was shown a recently discovered painting, ‘Christ at Emmaus’, which seemed to be the work of Vermeer. Bredius was convinced of its authenticity, and wrote, ‘We have here — I am inclined to say — the masterpiece of Johannes Vermeer of Delft. Quite different from all his other paintings and yet every inch a Vermeer.’ He added, ‘When this masterpiece was shown to me, I had difficulty controlling my emotions.’ In the words of the journalist Tim Harford (whose account of Bredius’ story I am drawing on), ‘That was precisely the problem.’^[2]

The painting was, of course, a fake. Nevertheless, the entire Dutch art world was sucked into believing it to be genuine on the strength of Bredius’ judgement. How could the supreme scholar in the field make such a big error with such resounding confidence (‘every inch a Vermeer’)? Perhaps we should not single out Bredius so unkindly, for his case was far from unique. Better to ask, how is that intelligent, well-educated individuals sometimes make dogmatic judgements that are well wide of the mark, even in relation to topics that they know a great deal about?

Still, Bredius’ case can help us find an answer to that bigger question. His error can be understood from a Buddhist viewpoint, as a manifestation of an ‘underlying tendency’ (Sanskrit *anusaya*), or what we might call a *predisposition*. Bredius had a fascination with Vermeer’s religious paintings, of which only two were known to exist, one of which Bredius had originally and wrongly claimed *not* to be a Vermeer. Having acknowledged his mistake, he had then openly speculated that other religious paintings by Vermeer might exist and yearned to discover one.

The forger who painted ‘Christ at Emmaus’ knew of Bredius’ wish to find another religious painting by Vermeer. He knew that Bredius wished to redeem his earlier error. He knew that Bredius would be strongly

inclined to see the painting as a Vermeer, as a vindication of his views and desires.

Tim Harford sees the problem in these terms: ‘Recall that Bredius wrote, “I had difficulty controlling my emotions.” That was a truer statement than he knew. *When we are trying to interpret the world around us, we need to realise that our expertise can be drowned by our feelings.*’ [My emphasis]

Predispositions and Tribes

According to Buddhist psychology, what Harford describes as ‘feelings’ incorporates not one but three distinct factors, operating together to make up what I am calling a ‘predisposition’. Whenever our mind comes into contact with an object, an interplay occurs between our habitual desire (*saṃskāra*), our perception (*saṃjñā*), and the related feeling tone (*vedanā*). (In Buddhist psychology, ‘feeling tone’ simply refers to our response to a stimulus as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.) All three — desire, perception and feeling tone — are partly ‘hardwired’ in the human body, but they are also partly malleable. Perception, for example, depends not just on what we see, but also on how we interpret it, and that depends in turn upon the way that our experience has taught us to interpret it. Different people perceive the same object in different ways according to their different *views*.^[3]

But of course, most of us don’t form views through a process of rigorous and independent examination of the world around us. Our views tend to reflect those of the group we belong to. That group might be defined by some permutation of factors like nationality, class, race and so on. Sometimes it is defined by a rejection of these things, and the embrace of a different unifying principle, such as a political ideology or a religion. Either way, each of us belongs to a group, a ‘tribe’. Our tribal identity equips us with — or from another angle, imprisons us in — a set of *predispositions*. It conditions us to perceive things in a particular way, to have certain desires, and to experience specific things as pleasant or unpleasant or indifferent. The existence of these predispositions is crucial to the argument I wish to make in this essay.

As a scion of a wealthy and cultured Dutch family, and a famous art connoisseur, Bredius had a strong predisposition of desire (*saṃskāra*) to be the person to discover an unknown religious Vermeer masterpiece. When he saw the painting ‘Christ at Emmaus’, he perceived (*saṃjñā*) what he was predisposed to perceive. And with that perception arose an intensely pleasant feeling tone (*vedanā*).

Had Bredius been familiar with the Cankī Sutta, he might — just possibly — have spared himself the stain on his reputation incurred by a second serious error in the authentication of a painting. He might at least have been more tentative in his attribution. We are not *preserving truth* when we unthinkingly allow our predispositions to determine our interpretation of things or events. Whenever we experience a strong feeling tone — whether pleasant or unpleasant — we should take this as a warning sign to look carefully at our desires and interpretations before jumping to a judgment.

Bredius' error was perhaps the product of his longing for status within his 'tribe'. But many failures to preserve truth are produced by conflict or rivalry *between* tribes. This point leads me from painting to politics. Unfortunately, in my view, people on both the right and left of the political spectrum often fail to exercise caution when they experience pleasure, displeasure or indifference in response to political events.

In this essay I wish to expand on this theme through an exploration of suffering, social and political discontent, and tribalism. This is not an argument against political engagement, but it is an argument for *considered* political engagement. It is an argument for 'resisting the tyranny of the tribe', for resisting internal and external pressures that can push us to make ill-considered judgments.

The Lost Tribe of Somewhere

I am going to start by looking at an example of suffering. Or rather, an example of a *refusal* to see suffering — a blindness rooted in a set of conditioned predispositions. When we look around the world today, we can't fail to see a lot of suffering in the form of political persecution, war, disease, environmental degradation, famines, droughts, floods, wildfires, earthquakes, racial and sexual discrimination, unemployment, and other factors. The list is long. Yet sometimes we may fail to see, or we may underestimate, suffering nearer to home.

In the American presidential elections of 2016 and 2020, the Brexit vote in the UK in 2016, and in other recent changes in the Western social and political world — not least in Europe — we have seen a great deal of public discontent, inspired largely by the negative effects of globalisation and a perceived loss of sovereignty and control. This has produced considerable resentment of the institutions and elites seen as responsible for these negative effects. Such reactions span the political spectrum of right and left, including, for example, the original emergence of Syriza in Greece, and the *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests) movement in France.

In focusing on expressions of discontent in the West, I do not mean to downplay suffering elsewhere in the world, or to rank the severity of suffering experienced by people in different places. I only wish to draw attention to sources of discontent in the Western world that until recently have not received much careful scrutiny. I believe the reason for this relative disregard is a resistance, stemming from our predispositions, to looking outside a narrow range of sources of information — sources that tend to confirm our settled views. A widening of our perspective is vital if we want to go beyond simplistic labelling, and to understand the wellsprings of what is often called ‘populism’.

To begin, I would like to draw your attention to some writers who I believe offer important insights into the suffering at the heart of popular movements of discontent. Most of these writers are not Buddhists, but their ideas are often very compatible with Buddhist thought because they draw our attention to the web of *conditions* from which such political responses arise. Even if you disagree with their overall outlook, a fair consideration of their arguments should, I think, give you much to reflect on. Underlying their explanations of popular discontent is a recognition of the effects of economic dislocation on large sections of the population that have been ‘left behind’ by globalisation and rising inequality. But they also go beyond the familiar critique of globalisation to trace more complex relations between economic, social and cultural forces.

The first author is David Goodhart, a former journalist and editor on the Financial Times, whose book ‘The Road to Somewhere’ was published in 2017. The book refers primarily to the UK, but its insights are widely applicable. He argues that our society has fractured into two ‘tribes’. On one hand are those who are socially and geographically mobile, the ‘Anywheres’; on the other are those more rooted in local identity, the ‘Somewheres’. According to Goodhart’s schema, the Anywheres make up about twenty-five to thirty per cent of the population, and are well educated (with at least an undergraduate degree). They often live far from their parents. In Goodhart’s words, they tend to favour ‘openness and autonomy, and are comfortable with social fluidity and novelty’. The Somewheres comprise about half of the population, and are less well educated. They are ‘more rooted’, and ‘value security and familiarity’. In contrast to the ‘Anywheres’ they place a much greater emphasis on local and national attachments. [\[4\]](#)

The Anywheres tend to dominate society with achieved identities based on educational and career success. The Somewheres are likely to be older, and tend to find the rapid changes in the modern world unsettling.

There is a deep conflict in values between the Somewheres, who cherish local community, patriotism and the traditional family, and the Anywheres, who cherish the identities they have achieved through academic and career success. Moreover, the Somewheres experience a loss of their culture and a marginalisation of their views in the public conversation. In Goodhart's view the responses and attitudes of the Somewheres deserve more sympathy and respect than they tend to receive in public discourse, and should be seen as every bit as legitimate as the Anywheres.

Heads We Win

In 2020 David Goodhart published another book, 'Head Hand Heart', which elaborates on these themes. Goodhart argues that over the last fifty years we have built societies that heap status, respect and dignity on highly educated 'cognitive elites' (the Heads) while taking away status, dignity and respect from manual workers (the Hands) and people who care for their families and fellow citizens (the Hearts). Goodhart writes that the 'brightest and the best' today outdo the 'decent and hardworking'. He argues, 'Qualities such as character, integrity, experience, common sense, courage and willingness to toil are by no means irrelevant, but they command relatively less respect.'^[5]

Michael Sandel, a professor at Harvard University Law School, has shone further light on the ascendancy of the 'Heads'. His most recent book is entitled 'The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?'^[6] Sandel wrote the book in an attempt to make sense of the events leading to the election of Donald Trump as US President in 2016. Like many others, he sees the election as 'a moment of populist backlash'. But, he asks, backlash against what?

In an interview he explains:

It seemed to me that there was more to this backlash than simply the loss of jobs, and the wage stagnation that resulted from globalization. There was more to it also than ... ugly sentiments of xenophobia, misogyny, and racism ... It seemed to me that entangled with these ugly sentiments were some legitimate grievances that the mainstream parties had missed and had failed to address. *Central to those grievances was anger and resentment against professional and meritocratic élites, who seem to be looking down on those less fortunate, less credentialed than themselves.*^[7] [My emphasis]

He calls this tendency of the professional and meritocratic elites 'meritocratic hubris', and explains:

It's the tendency of those who land on top to believe that their success is their own doing, the measure of their merit, and, by implication, that those who struggle, those who were left behind, must deserve their fate as well. It's the tendency to forget our indebtedness to family, teachers, community, country, and the times in which we live, as conditions for the success that we enjoy. The more we believe that our success is our own doing, the harder it is to see ourselves in other people's shoes, the harder it is to feel a sense of mutual responsibility for the fate of our fellow-citizens, including those who aren't flourishing in the new economy.[8]

Sandel argues that at the heart of the resentment of many working people is the sense that the work they do isn't respected in the way it once was. Not only the economy but also the culture has left them behind.

Deaths of Despair

The most tragic indication of the damaged morale of working-class Americans is the increase in what have been called 'deaths of despair'. The term was coined by Anne Case and Angus Deaton, two Princeton University economists, and is the title of their recently published book, 'Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism'. A few years ago Case and Deaton made a disquieting discovery. Throughout the twentieth century, as modern medicine pushed back disease, life expectancy steadily increased. But from 2014 to 2017 in the USA, it stalled and even declined for three straight years.

Mortality rates were going up, Case and Deaton found, because of an epidemic of deaths caused by suicides, drug overdoses, and alcoholic liver disease. They called them 'deaths of despair' because they were, in various ways, self-inflicted. Such deaths, which had been mounting for more than a decade, were especially frequent among white adults in middle age. For white men and women aged 45–54, deaths of despair increased threefold from 1990 to 2017. Case and Deaton discovered that the increase in deaths of despair was almost all among those without a bachelor's degree.

The deaths of despair, Case and Deaton conclude, 'reflect a long-term and slowly unfolding loss of a way of life for the white, less educated working class'. Those without a degree have experienced a marked decline in quality of life, with increases in their levels of pain, ill health, and serious mental distress, and declines in their ability to work and to socialize. Their experience of family and community has become much more unstable.[9]

In one of the most compelling accounts of white working-class discontent, Arlie Russell Hochschild, a sociologist at the University of California, spent five years amongst conservative working people in the southern United States. She wanted to ‘get out of a left bubble’, to try to understand and to act as the translator of the ‘deep story of the radical right’. In her book ‘Strangers in Their Own Land’ Hochschild wrote this about her working-class hosts:

You are a stranger in your own land. You do not recognize yourself in how others see you. It is a struggle to feel seen and honored. And to feel honored you have to feel—and feel seen as—moving forward. But through no fault of your own, and in ways that are hidden, you are slipping backward.[\[10\]](#)

In a more recent conversation she draws attention to the tension experienced by white working class people between the belief that ‘I am responsible for my own fate’ and the impact of forces beyond their control, such as globalisation.[\[11\]](#) Because they believe that they are responsible, they feel a tremendous guilt. She argues that Trump spoke to them when no one else was speaking to them. He lifted their sense of guilt with the promise of a better tomorrow. And he assuaged their guilt by providing them with people to blame, scapegoats who take on the sin of the tribe.[\[12\]](#)

In Buddhist Terms

If I were to put what these authors are telling us into a Buddhist perspective, what might it look like? Here is my Buddhist ‘take’ on their insights. The authors are giving us a different perspective on political discontent, a perspective that reveals its emergence from *a web of conditions*. The ‘Somewheres’ — the ‘hands’ and ‘hearts’, the white working class, especially those without degrees — have been hit by the eight worldly winds (*the lokadhammas*), those stormy gusts of pleasure and pain, gain and loss, praise and blame, and fame and infamy.

By force of circumstances mostly out of their control — the impact of globalisation, automation and so on — they experience physical and mental *pain*. After an era of job security and steady incomes, they now experience job insecurity and the relentless *loss* of income, with a consequent decline in living standards and social status. Within the family and community these losses are accompanied by *blame*, sometimes self-inflicted. On top of all that they have been subjected to *infamy*, most notoriously when Trump supporters were labelled as ‘deplorables’ by Hilary Clinton in 2016. In essence, they are experiencing an aspect of existence that is even more fundamental than the eight worldly winds, namely *impermanence*.

Their conditioned response is resentment at the liberal elite that looks down on them, a sense of injustice at the way the system works, and anger at threats to their way of life. Combine that with latent ‘ugly sentiments of xenophobia, misogyny, and racism’ (Michael Sandel’s words) and you have a combustible mixture.

So much for the Somewheres. Next, what can we say, from a Buddhist perspective, about the Anywheres — the ‘heads’, the professional and meritocratic elites? In Abhidhamma terms, we might say they are subject to ‘inflation’ (*mada*) and ‘superiority conceit’ (*mana*). Having successfully striven to get ahead of others in an intensely competitive meritocracy, they have chosen to take all the credit for their own success. They no longer appreciate the fortunate conditions that nurtured them, or the help they have received from others. Worse, they look down on those they see as failures, those who are struggling economically, and who in their eyes are culturally backward. Consequently, they have lost the ability to sympathise with the Somewheres.

The Wrong Tribe?

When I have discussed with friends the arguments put forward by authors like Goodhart, Sandel, Case and Deaton, and Hochschild, some have raised a question that deserves a response. They wonder, in effect, whether I am expending too much concern on the wrong tribe. Why have I chosen to focus on the white working class? What about other ethnic groups?

Perhaps partly it is because I come from a family of white shipyard workers in the north of England, where in the last decade there has been a clear shift from left-of-centre to right-of-centre politics (as so clearly evidenced by the General Election results of December 2019). As someone who still holds left-of-centre views, I want to understand what has happened. By understanding it, I may learn something new, about others and myself.

But partly also, it is because when I look around at the media — and at the Buddhist circles I move in — I find that whilst, understandably, much is said about suffering among ethnic minorities, much less is said about white working-class people. Indeed, to show concern for them is seen as somehow downplaying the suffering of ethnic minorities. As I said earlier, this is a refusal, based on conditioned predispositions, to see suffering where it actually exists. The suffering is, in fact, very real.

As we have seen, that suffering is highlighted in the work of Anne Case and Angus Deaton, though they stumbled across it almost by accident. As I explained earlier, they discovered a rise in ‘deaths of despair’

amongst white working people, particularly *those without college degrees*. It is important to note that Case and Deaton do not argue that education, or the relative lack of it, can by itself explain the trends in mortality. Rather, they argue that a bachelor degree is increasingly used to separate people in the labour market. Without a degree, the range of jobs — and hence the opportunities for enhanced income and status — available to young people entering the job market has dramatically narrowed in recent decades.

By taking a closer look at the growing importance of degree qualifications, we can also address my friends' suspicion that I might be neglecting the suffering of ethnic minorities. In a recent research paper, Case and Deaton examined life expectancy in adulthood, breaking down their data by sex, race and educational level (primarily, whether a person holds a college degree or not). The paper covered the period 1990 to 2018, and sought to identify *overall* trends in that period (not short-term ups and downs). Their chief findings were as follows.

1. For those with degree level qualifications, whether men or women, whether white or black, life expectancy in adulthood increased over the period, and did so at a *faster* rate for black men and women than that for white men and women.
2. For black men and women without a degree, life expectancy in adulthood *increased*.
3. For white men and women without a degree, life expectancy in adulthood *decreased*.

Case and Deaton conclude that by the measure of life expectancy in adulthood, those with a college degree are now more like one another, irrespective of race, than they are like those of the same race who do not have a degree. As measured by life expectancy in adulthood, over the period from 1990 to 2018 white people without a degree have fared worse than other groups. Admittedly, by the absolute measure of life expectancy in adulthood, black people are still in a worse position overall than white people in 2018 — but by a significantly smaller margin than in 1990.[\[13\]](#)

What is my personal response to this research? Whilst remaining open to further research findings, my tendency is — or perhaps I should say, my personal conditioning leads me — to agree with recent comments by Peter Franklin on Case and Deaton's research. He writes:

Of course, lifespan isn't the only measure of inequality. Nor does any recent improvement in racial justice erase centuries of slavery, segregation and racism. Nevertheless, on this most basic measure of well-being, the class gap (as signified by level of formal education) is now much bigger than the race gap.[\[14\]](#)

Tricks of the Tribal Mind

To describe the ‘Anywheres’ and the ‘Somewheres’ as *tribes* is not simply a touch of irony or whimsy. Inherited from evolutionary foundations, human beings have an innate tendency to divide and form groups. We are prone to seeing ourselves and the groups we identify with as correct and the others as wrong. Such tribalism can lead to antagonism and conflict. Far from having faded into a primitive past, tribal antagonisms have recently become much more evident, and perhaps actually fiercer, through the emergence of social media such as Twitter and Facebook. Tribalism is a powerful factor in the rise in discontent, sharp political division, and conflict in our modern world.

As I explained earlier, Buddhism offers us a way to understand tribalistic behaviour as the manifestation of our *predispositions*: that is, the habitual patterns created by the interplay between three things, namely our desires, our perceptions (which include our views or beliefs) and our feelings of pleasure, displeasure or indifference. But why don’t we learn? Why is it so hard to grow out of our harmful predispositions?

American Buddhist Robert Wright draws our attention to two psychological mechanisms, identified by modern psychology, that operate to maintain and even harden our predispositions. They are ‘confirmation bias’ and ‘attribution error’.^[15] We could perhaps see these as two aspects of what Buddhist psychology calls ‘unwise attention’ (*ayoniso manasikāra*). This is the tendency to pay attention only to those aspects of a thing that relate to our desires (and accord with the views that bulwark those desires) while ignoring other aspects.

Firstly, confirmation bias. To explain this, Wright asks us to reflect on how people sustain a belief in the face of contrary evidence — something we all do in varying degrees. The answer, he tells us, is that we don’t really face all the evidence. We tend to notice and retain evidence that is consistent with our predispositions. And we either do not notice or reject evidence that does not support our views and beliefs. This is confirmation bias. It is driven by what I have called our predispositions. We reject evidence inconsistent with our views, in the way that we reject food we do not like, or recoil at the sight of a spider. Wright explains:

The thought of embracing unwelcome evidence makes you *feel* bad. You may even have an urge to, in a sense, attack it—find the critical factual error or logical flaw that you know must be propping it up. Evidence that supports your views is, on the other hand, attractive, appealing—so much so that you’re happy to promulgate it without pausing to fully evaluate it; you love it just the way it is.^[16]

And what is attribution error? Wright explains that there are two ways we process people’s behaviour. We either attribute it to their disposition

(their character) or to their situation. If someone from an opposing group does something good, then we are likely to attribute their behaviour to special circumstances, to the situation, and therefore as exceptional. If they do something bad then we attribute it to their disposition, and therefore as typical. With people from friendly groups, it is the other way around.

Confirmation bias and attribution error can affect us as individuals, but they operate powerfully at the level of the tribe. When our own tribe becomes antagonistic to another one, we become prone to labelling people according to which tribe they belong to, instead of seeing them as individual human beings. Our tribal affiliations thus shape our predispositions — our habitual patterns of desire, perception and feeling tone.

Robert Wright tells us there is a lot of evidence now in psychology that when we look at any person, we react at the level of feeling tone (*vedanā*). Do we, at first sight, like, dislike or feel indifferent to that person? And that shapes the way we behave towards that person. The feeling tone, of course, does not emerge from a vacuum, but is conditioned by our (often biased) perceptions and habitual desires.

This is particularly true when we identify people by the group they belong to. Our predispositions kick in. This tendency towards tribal division is intensified when the worst things done by members of either tribe are injected into the social media feeds of the other tribe. In such circumstances we need to remind ourselves that these ‘viral spectacles’ are atypical. Wright comments:

The reason you’re watching (say) a Trump supporter throw a fit over having to wear a mask in a supermarket isn’t because that’s typical of Trump supporters but, on the contrary, because that’s the most obnoxious thing any Trump supporter in the entire country was seen doing that day.

Or ... the reason the social media feeds of Trump supporters ... featured a left-wing protester celebrating the killing of a Trump supporter in Portland (‘I am not sad that a fucking fascist died,’ she said to scattered cheers on the streets of Portland) is because that was the most reprehensible thing a left-wing protester was seen doing that day.[\[17\]](#)

In such circumstances people can give way to their predispositions and lose perspective. The downward spiral of tribal antagonism then takes another turn. Instead, Robert Wright advises, when we are tempted to share something tribe-related on social media, we should stop and examine the feeling tone behind that temptation. He writes:

Is it a pleasurable feeling? Does the pleasure derive from a sense that the post you’re about to share is testament to the badness of the other

tribe? *Then don't use that feeling as a guide!* Instead, ask yourself whether sharing the post will achieve some concrete good that outweighs the bad.[\[18\]](#)

More than that, we need to be strong enough to *'refuse to submit to the tyranny of the tribe'*. It's worth emphasising that the tyranny of the tribe can present itself as the sophisticated musings of media commentators and others, and not just as the baying of the mob.

Keeping the Tribe in Line

A real danger of intense tribal conflict is the suppression of internal dissent: members of each tribe are expected to defend, or at least not criticize, the behaviours of their tribemates. Wright gives examples of when suppression of internal dissent is worth defying.

For example: if you're a Black Lives Matter supporter and you see a video of a speaker at a BLM protest in Washington calling for the murder of police, condemn that. If you see a video of BLM protesters surrounding sidewalk diners and intimidating them into professing allegiance, condemn that. And reward fellow condemners with shares or likes.[\[19\]](#)

'If it feels good, share it' is all too often our unthinking rule. Instead of giving way to feeling tones of pleasure or displeasure, social media users need to pause and reflect on the consequences of online actions. And they need carefully to examine their own predispositions.

Along with the suppression of internal dissent within groups, we now see the wider phenomenon of 'cancel culture'. In a recent article it was reported that Americans are becoming increasingly cautious about sharing their political opinions. Sixty-two percent of Americans described today's political climate as one that 'prevents them from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive'. This was a sentiment shared across the political spectrum. More than fifty percent of liberals and seventy-five percent of conservatives hesitate to share some of their political views. Both of these percentages have risen in recent years alongside the rising debate over cancel culture.[\[20\]](#)

In an article published on the Persuasion web platform — set up to counter suppression of dissent and to foster freedom of exchange between people of different perspectives — Jonathan Rauch contrasts genuine criticism and cancel culture:

Criticism marshals evidence and arguments in a rational effort to persuade. Cancelling, by contrast, seeks to organize and manipulate the social or media environment in order to isolate, de-platform or intimidate ideological opponents. It is about shaping the information

battlefield, not seeking truth; and its intent — or at least its predictable outcome — is to coerce conformity and reduce the scope for forms of criticism that are not sanctioned by the prevailing consensus of some local majority.[\[21\]](#)

Transcending the Tribe

So where does all this leave us when we seek to engage politically? We need to be aware of the power of what I have called our predispositions — the interplay between habitual desire (*saṃskāra*), perception (*saṃjñā*) and feelings of pleasure, displeasure or indifference (*vedanā*) to drive attachment and commitment to our views, and opposition to other views.

We all have such predispositions — patterns or tendencies that may be partly unconscious — that condition our responses to events. According to Buddhism, as unenlightened human beings, we have an underlying tendency (in Sanskrit, *anusaya*) to form such predispositions, and it generates much of our suffering. As individuals, our predispositions can lead us astray, as when a pre-eminent art expert ruins his reputation by proclaiming a fake painting ‘every inch a Vermeer’. But not just as individuals. Our predispositions come to us in large measure from the groups we belong to. Consequently, whole societies can split into mutually unintelligible ‘tribes’, blind to one another’s pain or anger.

Our predispositions manifest when they are triggered by feeling tone — that experience of pleasure or displeasure that accompanies any sense experience, whether it be the pleasant taste of our morning coffee or the annoying news headline we view over the brim of the coffee cup. But by becoming aware of feeling tone, we can create a gap in which we can spot the habitual, conditioned aspect of the desires and perceptions that are generating the feeling tone. Seeing that, we have a chance of breaking out of the predisposition and responding in a less fixed and more appropriate way.

Critical awareness of feeling tone is therefore the first step towards critical awareness of one’s predisposition as a whole, including one’s perceptions (which, you will remember, include one’s *interpretations* of what is perceived) and one’s habitual desires. This awareness can restrain us from jumping too quickly to a single-cause explanation of an event. It can foster a sense of the true complexity of things, and a due consideration of alternative explanations. I know from my own conditioning of twenty-five years of political activity how quickly I can alight on one explanation to the exclusion of other potential contributory causes.

We need to cultivate that critical awareness. That means developing the habit of questioning oneself — questioning one’s feeling tone, together with the perceptions and desires that underlie it. To make this a truly practical proposition, I offer readers the following six questions as potentially useful tools for self-scrutiny.

1. Am I critically aware of the way my conditioning — my background, upbringing and life experiences — has shaped my predisposition; that is, my characteristic views, desires and feelings?
2. How *fixed* am I in that predisposition? In political questions, am I prepared to step outside of my right or left-wing bubble, as Arlie Hochschild did, to investigate other points of view? How widely do I read to obtain news, information and opinions?
3. When I promote certain views — for example by sharing a story on social media — have I adequately investigated the facts behind the story or the view? (Obviously, it is not possible to become an expert on every story or view, but it often *is* possible to check basic sources and facts, or to look for and weigh up alternative interpretations.) How far can I trust the sources I customarily use?
4. How prepared am I to defend the rights of those I disagree with to present their views?
5. Am I prepared to stand up as an individual and argue against the dominant group view?
6. Can I see beyond labels, and engage imaginatively with the experience of others and their suffering?

To conclude, here is another quotation from Jonathan Rauch. He is writing about the characteristics or traits of wisdom. His definition of wisdom appeals to me because it covers much of what I think is needed of us if we are to engage politically.

Again and again, modern scholarly definitions mention certain traits [of wisdom]: compassion and prosocial attitudes that reflect concern for the common good; pragmatic knowledge of life; the use of one’s pragmatic knowledge to resolve personal and social problems; an ability to cope with ambiguity and uncertainty and to see multiple points of view; emotional stability and mastery of one’s feelings; a capacity for reflection and for dispassionate self-understanding. [\[22\]](#)

References

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[4] David Goodhart, 'The Road to Somewhere', C. Hurst and Co., 2017

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Anne Case and Angus Deaton, 'Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism', Princeton University Press, 2020

[10] Arlie Russell Hochschild, 'Strangers In Their Own Land', The New Press, 2018

[11] Arlie Hochschild in video interview 'How to Fix Democracy, Season 2' at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6hzjztOKpkk>

[12] In private conversation about Arlie Hochschild's reporting, it has been put to me, how can we find any common ground with people who express straightforwardly racist views that must be called out and condemned as immoral? Hopeless as this may seem, according to the Greater Good Science Centre at the University of California, Berkeley, there are ways that can be used to overcome barriers between groups, such as mutual story-telling, even to the extent that a black piano player can individually befriend and persuade over two hundred members of the Ku Klux Klan to leave the organisation. The key, according to the Greater Good Centre, is to see and communicate with people as individuals not as members of groups.

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_to_beat_stereotypes_by_seeing_people_as_individuals?utm_source=Greater+Good+Science+Center&utm_campaign=bf653def1a-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_GG_Newsletter_Aug_28_2019&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_5ae73e326e-bf653def1a-51663267

[13] Anne Case and Angus Deaton, 'Life expectancy in adulthood is falling for those without a BA degree, but as educational gaps have

widened, racial gaps have narrowed'. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in the United States of America, available at <https://www.pnas.org/content/118/11/e2024777118>

[14] Peter Franklin, '[America's disturbing death statistics](https://unherd.com/thepost/americas-disturbing-death-statistics/?mc_cid=e2deob407d&mc_eid=82d8334b78)', at https://unherd.com/thepost/americas-disturbing-death-statistics/?mc_cid=e2deob407d&mc_eid=82d8334b78

[15] Robert Wright, 'Beyond Tribalism: How Mindfulness Can Save The World' (Tricycle Online Course 2019)

[16] Ibid.

[17] Robert Wright, 'Tips for avoiding a civil war', 4 September 2020, at <https://nonzero.org/post/avoiding-civil-war>

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Brady Africk, 'How real is cancel culture?' at <https://blog.thefactual.com/media-and-cancel-culture>

[21] Jonathan Rauch, 'The cancel culture checklist' at <https://www.persuasion.community/p/the-cancel-culture-checklist-c63>

[22] Jonathan Rauch, 'The Happiness Curve: Why Life Gets Better After Midlife', Bloomsbury, 2018

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