

Robert J. Goodman

Affect is central to human experience and influences a variety of downstream psychological processes, including preferences, attitudes, and decision making (Zajonc, 1980). Alongside other species, homo sapiens are biologically predisposed to reflexively approach what feels pleasant and avoid what feels unpleasant, and while this certainly serves a variety of adaptive functions (e.g., reproduction and survival), the capacity to regulate the influence of affective responses on subsequent thoughts and behaviors is a hallmark of human adaptation (Oschner & Gross, 2005). Despite our felt sense of being rational, affective responses inform many of our most deeply held moral values (Haidt, 2000). For example, the emotion of disgust is tightly intertwined with moral intuitions, and people who are particularly sensitive to disgust are predisposed to endorse particular ideological orientations that are antithetical to the pro-social values espoused by major world religions, such as authoritarianism (Hodson and Costello, 2007) and prejudice toward a variety of outgroups, including LGBTQ people (Dasgupta et al., 2009; Inbar et al., 2009; Terrizzi et al., 2010), immigrants (Navarrete & Fessler, 2006) and Muslims (Choma et al., 2012). The present paper proposes that the religious value of tolerance could be advanced if people were better able to regulate the emotion of disgust.

Despite a variety of empirically studied emotion regulation strategies (Gross, 2013), one technique that may be particularly promising for disgust regulation involves training a particular quality of attention known as mindfulness: an open, equanimous awareness of present-moment experiences (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Analayo, 2013). Preliminary research from our laboratory indicates that mindfulness is less cognitively demanding than alternative emotion-regulation strategies (e.g., cognitive reappraisal, response modulation, and distraction) and attenuates a neural marker of emotional stimulus appraisal during an early phase of the emotion generation process (Brown, Goodman & Inzlicht, 2013; Goodman et al., 2015).

While numerous Westernized variants of mindfulness training have demonstrated robust improvements in the domain of emotion regulation, there are reasons to suggest particular practices derived from a seminal Early Buddhist canonical text on mindfulness training -- the Satipatthana Sutta (MN 10) -- may actively target the regulation of disgust as a first step in mindfulness training. To this end, we have developed an intensive 5-day mindfulness training program in collaboration with renowned scholars of Early Buddhism known as Four Foundations of Mindfulness Training (FFMT). We present research that explores the effect of FFMT on neural changes in disgust regulation and examine whether these mindfulness-induced neural changes moderate the effect of mindfulness training on a variety of prosocial outcomes consistent with the values of major world religions (i.e., reduced prejudice and particular ideological orientations). By conjoining Early Buddhist and Western psychological conceptualizations of mindfulness and cutting edge techniques in social and affective neuroscience, the present work addresses the question of HOW biology and psychology interact to produce religious expressions. We suggest one proximate mechanism responsible for the expression of religious tolerance involves developing the skill to adaptively regulate the emotion of disgust.