

2

Buddhist Models of Self: Politics when People Matter

Georgios T. Halkias

The Venerable Ānanda sat next to the Blessed One and addressed him:

“Reverend Master, I have heard it said again and again ‘the world is empty, the world is empty.’ But in what sense is it said that the world is empty?” “Ānanda, it is because it is empty of self and anything belonging to self that the world is said to be empty.” (SN, III. 196)

The Politics of the Consuming Self

Many Buddhist texts recommend that a ruler best fit for public office is he who governs according to the precepts of *dharma* and exercises moderation and moral prudence in the domains of law and economy – not unlike the philosopher-king in Plato’s *Republic* who draws his authority from the maxim *the knowing is wise and the wise is good*.¹ Plato and later Aristotle envisioned a political order immune to the superficial excesses of democracy in Athens. They directed their critiques at the shortcomings of a social system that placed its faith on “the majority’s ambivalence to a comprehensive social justice” that led to “political instability, often tending to war and tyranny and the lack of moral virtues.” In their view, democracy in Athens promoted “injustices occasioned by a superficial and selfish ethic of egalitarianism,” the “widespread pursuit of indolent pleasures,” and “the absence of genuine social and moral aims” (Corcoran, 1983: 16-17).

¹ This view is eloquently summarized by Socrates in the *Republic*: “Until philosophers are kings, or the kings and princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy, and political greatness and wisdom meet in one, and those commoner natures who pursue either to the exclusion of the other are compelled to stand aside, cities will never rest from their evils, – no, nor the human race, as I believe, – and then only will this, our State have a possibility of life and behold the light of day” (Book V, 737). Plato’s famous metaphor in the *Republic* of the polis as a tripartite division of the soul clearly indicates some of the complexities involved in the process of organizing the state according to higher principles. For a discussion on Buddhist perspectives on kingship, see Halkias (2012).

The moral degradation of political life was a circular phenomenon, for the sort of popular leaders who possessed and profited from these vices supported in turn political structures that legitimized their own interests. Although we may not necessarily side with the Greek philosophers' solution to these problems, we can relate with their appraisal of the political ills of their times. It is not my intention to add yet another critique to an ongoing instrumentalization of democratic principles by liberal capitalist regimes and political machines. Ever since economic prosperity has become the cornerstone, if not the whole edifice of public policy almost universally, people, communities and the physical environment are increasingly treated as resources, investments and potential capital. This utilitarian view of humanity and the natural world is reinforced by an equally debilitating and short-sighted vision of individualism perpetuated by social institutions, educational establishments, mass media, family settings and the global market. The universal promotion of an appetitive and selfish individual is built on the premise that the individual is the best, indeed the only qualified judge of its own interests, and therefore he should be entitled, encouraged and made as free as possible to fashion a life based on the gratification of desires and wants. Since the self is conceived and shaped in terms of appetites, wants and aversions, it comes to reflect the image of its greedy, unsatisfied, and immodest maker: the global market.

Today we live in the age of so called 'mass democracy,' brandished and marketed in the media as the world's 'universal religion' with its own production and reproduction of truths about human nature with an emphasis on associated rights such as, freedom of choice, equality, self-determination, and so forth, but regrettably with little discourse on the duties of individuals who are meant to represent and uphold such rights. In his critical studies, Michel Foucault challenged the mass mythology of the 'individual self' as it is invariably linked with the legitimization of political and economic exploitation processes in our societies, and with institutional regimes of domination. He writes:

I think that if one wants to analyze the genealogy of the subject in Western civilization, he has to take into account not only techniques of domination but also techniques of the self... he has to take into account the interaction between those two types of techniques... He has to take into account the points where the technologies of domination of individuals over one another have recourse to processes by which the

individual acts upon himself. And conversely, he has to take into account the points where the techniques of the self are integrated into structures of coercion and domination. The contact point, where the individuals are driven by others is tied to the way they conduct themselves, is what we can call, I think government.²

In my understanding, knowledge of the processes through which the self is constituted as a subject, however these are derived and explained, cannot be separated from the broader sphere of human culture and expression, including political awareness and economic action embedded in our views, language and actions. "Governing people, in the broad meaning of the word is not a way to force people to do what the governor wants; it is always a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts between techniques which assure coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by himself."³

Inspired by Foucault's critique, in the following paper I wish to frame some of the economic, environmental and social problems that we face today because of unhealthy and unviable models of individuality and gear the discussion on alternative 'cultures of self,' which directly or indirectly challenge the proximity of self-experience in the construction of subjectivity that lies at the foundation of contemporary economic, political and social forms of rationality and organization. Instead of relying solely on administrative interventions and remedies towards our problems, such as, price regulation and incentives, formulation of laws and public policy, etc, I believe that there is a great deal we can learn from the philosophical orientation of Buddhism concerning a set of practices of the self essentially different from the ones that traditionally influence and shape global discourses on politics and economics.

Garfield (2002: 207) notes that "Buddhism neither precludes nor entails liberal democracy nor does it advocate a specific form of government." The Buddha remained silent about such matters, except for the general guidelines that the goal of any social or political order is the maximization of happiness and minimization of suffering for all beings, and the cultivation of virtuous traits of character such as compassion, patience, generosity, wisdom and so forth. The

² Foucault (1993: 203-204).

³ Ibid.

contrast between the two respective orders is nevertheless real and can be properly emphasized in two ways:

Liberal democratic theory legitimates its goods on procedural grounds; Buddhism legitimates any procedures on the grounds that they produce appropriate goods. Second, and related, procedures of particular kinds are constitutive of liberal democracy, whereas commitments to particular social goods are constitutive of Buddhist societies in very deep ways: whereas liberal democratic societies may differ widely (or one may change wildly over time) with respect to some particular vision of the good (say free education, universal health care, or a minimum wage) and remain recognizably democratic, any society that abandoned election, open access to offices, or transparency of the judicial process would ipso facto no longer count as liberal democracy. There is, however, also a sense in which a specific conception of the good is built into most Western liberal democracies beyond the necessary implication of some minimal conception of the good by the procedural commitments and the initial presuppositions of the contractual situation: most liberals – whether they acknowledge it or not – tacitly supplement democratic principles with a heavy dose of Judeo-Christian values, including the presumption of human domination over the earth, of the sanctity of individual property, of the primacy of individuals over collectives, of the legitimacy of violence in the service of a legitimate cause, among others.⁴

Garfield (2002: 210) is keen to observe that Buddhism and liberal democracy are diametrically opposed on this issue, namely, “the direction of legitimation as between procedure and conception of the good.” Although he will go on and argue that they are capable not only of fusion, but compatible and complementary in a deep sense, I contend that there is another fundamental tension between the two that lies in the philosophical view of the individual. In Buddhism, while the individual is subject to ethical formulation and creative transformation, the ‘self’ per se is not a privileged subject of discourse,⁵ but a

⁴ Garfield (2002: 207). He concludes this section by noting that “any society that abandoned commitment to non-violence, to maintaining the welfare of the least advantaged, to providing health care and education to all its citizens, and to facilitating spiritual practice for those who aspire thereto would cease to be recognizably Buddhist.”

⁵ Among western scholars, there have been a variety of approaches to the Buddhist understanding of self and its denial; for an informative examination see Collins (1994) and Tillemans (1996).

developmental response to ever-shifting causes and conditions in the social and natural world. It can be localized as an object of knowledge only in conventional terms and not in a metaphysical sense as an 'owner of experiences,' 'a thinker of thoughts,' and 'an agent of actions.' In this respect, the 'self' does not need to be discovered, according to some schools of psychoanalysis, in the dungeons of the unconscious; nor be incessantly interrogated to speak about itself in self-assuring monologues; or be incited to express its 'true nature' against the repression of an ostentatious social order. Rather, this sense of 'I' (the ego-self) arises and ceases like a reflection in a mirror in dependence on internal stimuli (thoughts, emotions) and external attractions (sense objects).

The Ethical Management of Self: A Buddhist Approach

Buddhism has much to offer to a gradual synthesis of ethical, social, and soteriological factors that at once define a set of transformative practices and methods while challenging our common perceptions of what constitutes an individual. Common to all Buddhist schools and traditions is a set of psychosomatic categories that constitute the 'self.' These are known as the five aggregates (*khandhas*): forms, feelings, perceptions, dispositional formations (habitual patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting) and consciousness. The first of the aggregates refers to six sense organs and their corresponding objects of perception – i.e., eye and the visible objects, ear and sounds, nose and smells, tongue and tastes, body and touchables, and also mind with its corresponding thoughts. The remaining four aggregates are mental processes, while all five constitute a complex of relations and experiences that makes up a person and each moment of self-experience. From a Buddhist perspective, there is nothing substantial to the five aggregates that are empirically subject to change from moment to moment. Any essential identification with them is misleading as is the notion of 'ownership,' which may be understood as a reflective mode of such identification. Clinging onto the notion of an unchanging and ongoing substance, compelled to think, feel, and act as though one had an inherent self to protect and preserve, is the very root of suffering. "The slightest encroachment on the self's territory (a splinter in the finger, a noisy neighbour) arouses fear and anger. The slightest hope of self-enhancement (gain, praise, fame, pleasure) arouses greed and grasping. Any hint that a situation is irrelevant to the self (waiting for a bus, meditating) arouses boredom. Such impulses are instinctual, automatic,

pervasive, and powerful. They are completely taken for granted in daily life” (Varela 1993: 62).

Essential to the understanding of how suffering arises by mistakenly identifying with the aggregates and fostering an objective sense of their ownership is detailed in the ‘Four Noble Truths.’ These are called ‘truths’ not as a matter of religious faith or doctrinal convention, but because their ‘truth value’ derives from empirically verifiable reflections of human experience. The first Noble Truth states that the human predicament is defined by lack of satisfaction and accompanying forms of suffering (*dukkha*). This is an experience shared regardless of one’s religious beliefs, social and ethnic status, and individual circumstances. Everyone, everywhere at some point suffers – at birth, in sickness and in death – but also when confronted with an infinite variety of psychophysical experiences including, but not limited to unfulfilled needs, failing aspirations, mental and emotional anguish, and physical discomfort.

In the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta* (*Setting in Motion the Wheel of Dharma*), the Buddha proclaimed that lack of satisfaction is a pervasive human condition, but he did not single out an ‘I’ that suffers. This is a crucial point. Instead of highlighting a personal experience of suffering the Buddha avoided theorizing on a substantive ‘I’ outside the field of perception and experience, not unlike the thesis promoted by the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) that ‘self identity’ is fiction.⁶ The field of neuroscience confirms the Buddhist view of the doctrine of ‘a non-localizable, non-substantial self’ (*annatā*) that has challenging implications not only for the cognitive sciences but also for economic theory (Zsolnai 2011). Significant is the work of Francisco Varela and others (1993) in a direction that frames the alienation of abstract individualism along the lines of believing in an essentialized, permanent and fixed self.

⁶ There are fruitful parallels between Buddhism and Hume on that matter, as noted by Lesser (1979:58): “[Hume concludes] that ‘[persons] are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in perpetual flux and movement.’...Buddhist writers typically make the same point by analyzing a person into the ‘Five Aggregates’ [*khandhās*]. Since a person is nothing more than the sum of these five aggregates, and since soul, in the sense of a permanent unchanging subject of consciousness [viz., the self], cannot be identified with one or more of the five, soul cannot exist...It seems clear that Hume and the Buddhists say the same thing for the same reasons: both analyze the ‘soul’ [viz., *sense* of self] into a series of events or processes, and do so because this is what experience reveals.”

Dispelling the fiction of an immutable self predisposes us to respond to life with a renewed humility and openness without channelling our quest for self knowledge into new forms of egocentric narcissism. It is evident, yet not fully explored, that our self-notions shape our cherished socio-political beliefs and expectations concerning the arrangement of our collective experiences and our participation as citizens of a planetary ecosystem that has felt the disastrous strains of unbridled consumerism. Long time ago, Veblen (1899) noted how our economic reality inspires us to channel our predatory impulses to achieve social status through consumption. Magnuson (2011: 98), commenting on Veblen's work, notes a present-day circularity of self-serving thoughts informing our actions and our actions in turn informing our way of thinking about ourselves and the environment. He writes: "This ongoing, mutually reinforcing process becomes reified into institutional structures. These institutional structures evolve into systems, which control economic activity. In this way, economic activity can be directed in a pathological way, and at the same time reinforce pathological ways of thinking."

This brings us to the second Noble Truth that investigates the roots of dissatisfaction in our lives, which have much to do with an understanding of 'who we are' as they do with the ways we talk or remain silent about it and which in turn reinforce our perception as suffering subjects. The origins of suffering are inseparable from our craving (*tanha*) 'to become something or someone' (*bhava tanha*), 'to gratify sense pleasures' (*kama tanha*), and to resort to all kinds of mental, emotional and physical stratagems to satisfy our desires and avoid that which is physically, mentally and emotionally unpleasant (*vibhava tanha*). Craving after self-gratification is never fulfilled in any ultimate or final way precisely because there is no self to occupy and fill with pleasure. The acknowledgement that suffering originates in ignorance of the relational nature of desire leads us to the third Noble Truth that states that "all that is subject to arising is also subject to ceasing." In other words, *dukkha* ceases when we eradicate the cause of suffering – namely, ignorance in regards to desire's mode of arising and ceasing. Individuals who do not pathologically cling onto a notion of a fixed identity are more apt to assess complex situations with clarity and be more effective in making decisions which are not overshadowed by destructive emotions and self-referential thoughts. They also enjoy a higher degree of happiness and contentment, for the "more bounded, unique and independent is

our sense of self, the more we tend to take personal responsibility and blame ourselves for failure to make the 'right' choice" (Ash 2007: 210).⁷

Stated from another perspective, suffering is caused when our three root impulses, 'passion/desire towards desirable objects,' 'aggression/anger towards undesirable objects,' and 'delusion/ignorance towards neutral objects,' are essentialized and turn into greed (*lobha*), enmity (*dosa*), and deluded habits (*moha*). These 'poisons' affect individuals and their relations with others and they have implications for institutions, society and the natural world at large. As summarized by Helena Norberg-Hodge, the Director of International Society for Ecology and Culture, our actions need to ensure that politics shift from the 'virtues of products' to the 'virtues of people':

The three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion are to some extent present in every human being, but cultural systems either encourage or discourage these traits. Today's global consumer culture nurtures the three poisons on both an individual and societal level. At the moment, \$450 billion is spent annually on advertising worldwide, with the aim of convincing three-year-old children that they need things they never knew existed, such as Coca-Cola and plastic Rambos with machine guns. Before the rise of consumerism, cultures existed in which this type of greed was virtually nonexistent. Thus we cannot conclude that the acquisitiveness and materialism of people trapped in the global economic system are an inevitable product of human nature. Instead we need to recognize the near impossibility of uncovering our Buddha natures in a global culture of consumerism and social atomization.⁸

⁷ Kriger and Seng (2005) building on the work of contingency leadership theorists, argued that effective leadership behaviour depends on four aspects namely: 1) on-going observation by the leader of subtle changes in his or her surrounding environment; 2) on-going real-time self-observation of the often subtle changes in the inner world of the leader (i.e., complex interactions among thoughts, feelings, intuitions, inspirations, and creative imagination); 3) an on-going aspiration to transcend the duality of "self" and "other" (to "self-actualize" in the terminology of Maslow); and 4) a deep wish to serve others to eliminate or decrease human suffering.

⁸ Helena Norberg-Hodge (2001: 21). There have been several important studies published on the topic of Buddhist economics and ecology inspired by the pioneer work of E.F. Schumacher *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (1973). In his important contribution to Buddhist economic theory, Payutto (1994: 42) comments that in classical economic models, unlimited desires are controlled by scarcity, but from a Buddhist perspective they are controlled by an appreciation of moderation and the objective of well-being. He explains that "when the goal of economic activity is

The fourth Noble Truth is prescriptive in that it outlines the practical means and methods for the cessation of the cause of ignorance and its accompanying forms of discontent. These means are subsumed in the 'Eightfold Path,' comprising eight stages of ethical management: 1) right view, 2) right intention, 3) right speech, 4) right action, 5) right livelihood, 6) right effort, 7) right mindfulness, and 8) right concentration. These aspects of self-practice do not form distinct disciplines in a hierarchical or sequential order. They are in mutual support to each other, while central to all is the right view of no-self, which leads to the development of wisdom (*pañña*). The notion of 'right' is here understood as the perfection of practice that stems from the union of application and knowledge, while all preoccupations, beliefs and actions informed by the existence of a perpetual self are wrong views (*micchādi*). The five aggregates that represent all the psycho-physical aspects of individuality bear the characteristics of impermanence, suffering and mutability and therefore cannot be taken as permanent substances; they are *anatta* (no-self). A person holding wrong views concerning the aggregates will not be released from suffering and suffer precisely for holding such mistaken conceptions. More on this point the Buddha defined six wrong views (MN. I.2): "There is self existing in me, there is self not existing in me, I recognize self as self, I recognize self as not-self, I recognize not self as self, the self which exists in me and which feels, experiences here and there the fruition of good and bad deeds, is permanent, stable, eternal and unchangeable."

The cultivation of right intention is based on good will, non-violence and non-attachment. As for right speech in the *Abhaya Sutta* (MN 58), the Buddha instructs Prince Abhaya when it is proper not to speak at all, and when it is proper to speak only at the right time. Concerning remaining silent: "In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be unfactual, untrue, unbeneficial, unendearing and disagreeable to others, he does not say them. In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, unbeneficial, unendearing and disagreeable to others, he does not say them. In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be unfactual, untrue, unbeneficial, but endearing and agreeable to others, he does not say them. In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, unbeneficial, but endearing and agreeable to others, he does not say them." In all

seen to be the satisfaction of desires, economic activity is open ended and without clear definition-desires are endless. According to the Buddhist approach, economic activity must be controlled by the qualification that it is directed to the attainment of well-being rather than the "maximum satisfaction" sought after by traditional economic thinking."

other cases, the proper time of speaking ought to be observed: “In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, beneficial, but unendearing and disagreeable to others, he has a sense of the proper time for saying them. In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, beneficial, and endearing and agreeable to others, he has a sense of the proper time for saying them.”⁹ Central to the discourse of right speech is sensitivity towards the effect language has on others. Nowhere is it expressed that what is endearing but untrue should be uttered – in other words, freedom of speech is not free of responsibility.

The practice of morality (*sīla*) is dependent on right speech, right action (i.e., abstaining from killing, stealing and sexual misconduct), and right livelihood that precludes making profit from occupations that harm sentient beings. Five inappropriate ways of making a living are listed in the *Vaniija Sutta* (AN 5.177): 1) commerce in weapons and instruments of killing; 2) trading in human beings (slavery, prostitution, etc); 3) trading in animals for meat consumption, including breeding them for that purpose; 4) manufacturing and selling intoxicants, drugs and alcohol; and 5) trading in poisons or substances whose purpose is to kill.

Lastly, right effort or endeavour requires making a conscious effort to forsake harmful thoughts, speech and actions, and prevent their habitual or new arising. At the same time it entails cultivating virtuous qualities that have not arisen and sustaining those which are present. Right mindfulness necessitates familiarizing oneself with a vigilant yet detached observation of physical and mental phenomena as they arise and subside in the present moment, while right concentration entails withdrawing from unwholesome mental attitudes, stilling thoughts and judgments, and remaining mindful, balanced and alert with internal assurance. Right effort, mindfulness and concentration lead to mental stability and meditation (*samādhi*).

At the crux of the matter are misleading views of individuality perpetuated in social and ideological mechanisms, and in political and economic institutions. A Buddhist approach challenges Cartesian dualism that divides the world between self and other, and assigns the individual a monadic consciousness alienated and detached from the larger contexts from where he emerges, and on which his happiness and prosperity depends upon. The absence of an essentialist concept

⁹ Translated from Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

of self does not lead to nihilism or radical relativism, but makes the cultivation of individuality possible as the by-product of human discipline and effort, while self-control and agency are not theorized outside the path of cultivation. Unlike Western liberal political thought where humans are abstract bearers of particular rights, in Buddhism individuals are relational, context-embedded beings where these abstract rights may be of little consequence if they do not correspond to a pragmatic goal that leads to harmonious co-existence with others and freedom from suffering.

The Bodhisattva Training: The Discipline of Self as Altruistic Practice

The training of the bodhisattva, from Sanskrit a 'being geared toward awakening' offers an integrated model for self cultivation as a form of altruistic practice. In Mahāyāna contexts, a bodhisattva trains in six types of disciplines known as *pāramitā*, a term that has been commonly translated as perfections. The Eightfold Path is included in the six perfections and there are many interpretations of the *pāramitā* relevant to different life aspects and activities. Here I have divided them in two groups insofar as the first three require the presence of others for their perfection and the last three concern self-application. This division is arguably artificial, but it may well serve the purpose of illustrating an eventual synthesis at a later stage of integration where self and other are no longer conceived as immutable structures in competition or symbiosis with each other, but as operational categories in a nexus of intentional and unintentional interactions.¹⁰

A. Perfecting oneself through the other

The Discipline of generosity, giving of oneself (Skt. *dāna*)

The acknowledgement of the first Noble Truth may trigger empathy and compassion not just towards friends and family, but also towards strangers and foes, since everyone regardless of their relationship to us experiences suffering at different times and at various degrees of intensity. Hence, equanimity should guide the discipline of giving that may include material assistance (i.e., money,

¹⁰ While both Śravakayāna and Bodhisattvayāna schools agree on the conventional existence of self, they radically differ on the necessity for there to be anything, like the elements (or dharmas) which are said to exist substantially. Although these are important philosophical differences, they do not bear in the overall argument of this paper.

food, shelter), providing services in the form of sharing knowledge, understanding and empathy, and also offering protection to those who are afraid, require protection such as, children, elderly, animals, and so forth. Like all disciplines this one is practiced to perfection when it is executed with a mind free from ulterior motives, expectations and self-recognition. Generally, there are two types of advantages in the perfection of the discipline of generosity: 1) being of service and benefit to others, and 2) cultivating non-attachment towards one's own possessions and accomplishments and thus minimizing the poisons of greed and miserliness. It also implies placing others before oneself, offering with generosity one's time, being available and sensitive to their needs and upholding the most skilful means to bring about their welfare.

The Discipline of morality and proper conduct (Skt. *śīla*)

Generally there are two aspects of morality: avoiding negative actions, thoughts and speech which are harmful to self and other, and cultivating what is positive and constructive. There are many ways of discussing the importance of ethical discipline for the welfare of individuals embedded in communities and the physical environment. Morality applies equally to thought-patterns, speech-acts and physical actions, and there is a variety of ways for developing moral sensibility in these respects. Generally speaking, the practice of morality involves avoiding ten unwholesome actions: 1) killing sentient life-forms; 2) taking what was not given; 3) engaging in sexual misconduct; 4) lying; 5) giving into divisive speech; 6) speaking harshly; 7) chattering with frivolity; 8) harbouring covetous thoughts; 9) having hostile thoughts; and 10) holding onto false views about the self and the world. The notion of 'karma,' which means both 'action' and 'intention' plays an important role in Buddhist discourses on morality, for it prescribes consequences to every gross and subtle action. The Buddha stated: "It is intention (*cetanā*) monks, that I call *karma*; intending one does karma through body, speech, or mind" (*Aṅguttara Nikāya*, III, 410).

The Discipline of patience, tolerance and forbearance (Skt. *kṣānti*)

The importance of being tolerant and acceptant of different opinions and maintaining flexibility in one's dealings with others are vital qualities of the discipline of patience. Patience also implies forbearance in the face of obstacles, opposition and frictions that rise during the course of daily life; carrying on

despite difficulties without losing our composure and inner tranquility, and being free of resentment, irritation, or retaliation. Feeling grateful for the lessons one receives from others contributes to the development of tolerance and it is fundamentally a non-violent approach to conflict resolution. It is a method for developing objectivity towards oneself and others equally.

B. Self-perfection with effort and through awareness

The Discipline of diligence and effort (Skt. *vīrya*)

Diligence is an antidote to laziness and despair. It implies a consistent level of inspiration for discovering new things and for exerting and maintaining a driving force, zeal and sufficient energy to complete tasks and accomplish the responsibilities entrusted in one's post and during one's life. Perseverance, endurance and fortitude are virtues subsumed in this discipline and are essential qualities for learning, self-development and seeing things to an end.

The Discipline of one-pointed concentration (Skt. *dhyāna*)

This training requires maintaining concentration and mindfulness during one's work, learning not to get distracted by surrounding events or by one's inner thoughts and emotions. Through a peaceful and steady mind, we can easily accomplish our objectives. In the Buddhist teachings, there are numerous meditation techniques for cultivating mastery over one self, learning to be unmoved by external distractions and maintaining 'inner peace' regardless of the ways phenomena appear in the world and in one's own mind. Essential to all mindfulness techniques is the observation of one's experiences (mental, emotional or physical) as discontinuous and momentary. A moment of consciousness arises, dwells for an instance and then it vanishes only to be replaced by the next moment of consciousness. We do not need to have faith in Buddhism to justify this kind of perceptual framing. It is validated by experience.

The Discipline of wisdom (Skt. *prajñā*)

This is no ordinary wisdom that comes through age and experience, but one that arises through investigating, recognizing and accepting reality as it is without being carried away by the deception of the physical senses and our mental fabrications of how things should be. In its practice this is the most crucial of

disciplines for it properly informs the other five by relinquishing false notions concerning the self and the world as two events that occur independently of one another. At the heart of the perfection of the discipline of wisdom is the acceptance that phenomena, in an ultimate sense, neither arise nor cease. “Moment by moment, new experiences happen and are gone. It is a rapidly shifting stream of momentary mental occurrences. Furthermore, the shiftiness includes the perceiver as much as the perception. There is no experiencer, no landing platform for experiences” (Varela, Thomson and Rosch, 1991: 60). This is a radical break from substantializing thinking and an active proscription towards cultivating mindfulness and awareness of the present. It generally has three stages of training: at first one has to listen, learn and rely on the authority of expert testimony of those proficient in these methods; the second relies on the application of inference and logical reasoning; and the third relies on direct experience that usually comes through meditation and single-pointed concentration into the nature of reality (Conze 1975: 164).

When the *pāramitā* of wisdom is refined, all other disciplines are perfected by minimizing vested interest, which is to say they are performed without clinging unto a notion of doer, a notion of doing, and the notion that something has been done. The awareness that the nature of interactions in which the self engages actually changes the structure of perception allows for a more textured understanding of our mental processes, while conceptions of ‘self’ and ‘other’ are exposed as dual constructions of a singular perceptual process.

With the recognition of previously unperceived patterns of conditioning in which the self is implicated, the possibility of cognitive transformation is made possible and personal growth is enhanced. As the barriers between mind and self-interpretive contexts are challenged, causes and their effects, things and their attributes, and the mind of the inquiring subject and its object are seen to be equally co-dependent on the other. These insights are articulated in detail in the Śrāvākayāna and Bodhisattvayāna teachings, and especially in the work of the Mahāyāna philosopher Acharya Nāgārjuna. In the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, on the chapter on causality (1:1), he succinctly states: “Neither from itself nor from another, nor from both, nor without a cause, does anything whatever, anywhere arise.” In other words, no thing, aspect or attribute exists autonomously solely by virtue of its own nature, or being. This is a reformulation of the doctrine of psychophysical causation, or co-dependent origination (*pañiccasamuppāda*), a

cardinal teaching of the Buddha that denies the possibility of any permanent substance.¹¹

The philosophical implications of the doctrine of emptiness and dependent origination are far too many and fall beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, the lack of fixed substances in the world implies that there is a good chance that expanded forms of consciousness and higher-order of thinking can emerge in all of us despite rival claims held by theories of social or biological determinism. Emptiness is no other than the condition and promise for fullness. The interdependence and mutual conditioning of phenomena suggests that people have an effect on their environment not only by their physical actions, but also through their mental attitudes, what in some schools of thought has been called “cognitive autopoiesis.”¹² In every act of understanding there is, potentially or partially, an evocative power to influence one’s surroundings in concrete and tangible ways. The inverse holds true as one’s environment may have a positive or negative effect on one’s actions and mental dispositions. In fact their deep-rooted interrelation is conventionally translated through the concept of causation (*karma*), which can be worked out in both positive and negative consequences. Karma is a process of intention that gives rise to volitional action, the accumulation of effects, tendencies and responses, both wholesome and unwholesome. Awareness of one’s intention may serve as a direct method to cut the chain of repetitive patterns of suffering and one’s conditional and compulsive mode of arising.

From Self to Selflessness and Back: The Relational Self

We must die as egos and be born
Again in the swarm, not separate and self-hypnotized
But individual and related.
(Henry Miller, *Sexus*).

¹¹ Majjhima Nikāya (28): “Whoever sees dependent co-arising sees the doctrine.” The truth of the conditioned production of suffering (*saṁsāra*) is philosophically elaborated through the standard formulation of the twelve-link origination which, according to the Buddhist tradition, the Buddha discovered during the night of his enlightenment. He recognized that in its reverse order it revealed the way to liberation from discomfort (*nirovāṇa*). Thus, the standard presentation of the twelvefold formula explains the second noble truth, namely that there is discontent, its reverse enumeration explains the fourth noble truth, namely that there is a path that leads beyond frustration.

¹² For Varela et al (1980) and in subsequent publications the concept of *autopoiesis* (Grk. for self-creation) has been increasingly associated with cognition.

Current economic and political models uphold personal freedom on the grounds that society exists for the fulfilment of the individual defined according to universal rights. Following this reasoning, social, political and economic institutions are created by man as a necessary institutional framework within which the individual formulates, pursues and protects his own goals. The much vaunted freedom of choice characteristic of Western society is grounded therefore, in a concept of self according to which an individual regulates his conduct and shapes his choices according to his own perceived needs and wants with little interest towards the needs of his family, community and the natural world. If the relationship between the personal, social and political 'self' can be more clearly delineated, then the processes of socialization, political development and liberal democracy may become better understood both in their obvious benefits and unseen shortcomings. Payutto (1994b: 8-9) notes that in our current democratic climate, we tend to give more attention to our rights and liberties, and "we forget that there are duties required of us." He explains that "rights must arise with duties, and those who perform their duties will value their rights highly. It is the duty of a democratic government to create an awareness of the importance of duties, so that people understand that rights obtained are to be offset by duties performed."

In my paper, I have attempted to introduce the concept of the individual from a Buddhist perspective, and it might be useful to summarize some of the different levels of analysis implied by such a concept. The study of self in Buddhism requires a multileveled approach, for understanding at any one level should be compared and eventually reconciled with all other levels. At the beginning level of analysis, we acknowledge active human agents in society. This seems so basic and it goes without saying - after all, every known community seems to have found it necessary to assign distinct names and responsibility to its members. However, this type of investigation is only a first step and takes us almost nowhere. Both in Buddhism and in western models, the individual must be conceived to be capable of motivated action and initiating decisions; in other words, the individual must constitute a locus capable of action. As argued by Collins (1994: 67), "one might say that human beings are articulated conceptually as agents, by themselves and in relation to each other, in different ways, in different discourses." Nevertheless, the notion of the individual's volition does not turn him into an independent and substantial entity. The mind and the physical body of man are not understood as singular units but as the by-

production of aggregates arising according to causes and conditions. The sense of relative individuality that emerges must be 'illuminated from within'; that is to say, it is crucial that the individual becomes aware of what he designates as self and by extension his actions which are predicated or capable of being predicated upon this notion of self or I. At a deeper level of analysis, the emptiness of self is not merely a discovery but a discipline. When one's awareness looks upon itself, it realizes that there is no hidden substance or self lurking in or beyond the process of investigation, and that it cannot be affected in any fundamental way from the objects that manifest within the cognitive field. Becoming cognizant of the cognitive act is a basic activity of intelligent systems, but when one correctly understands the cognitive process as a conditioned phenomenon, one abandons a self-centred investigation into the past, present and future. The Buddhist teachings provide a variety of skilful techniques to illustrate how cognition shapes our perception of the world rather than reflecting a fixed external reality already in existence. The examination of oneself through mindfulness/awareness meditation is devoid of the practice of confession as there is no hidden subject to be discovered, purged or freed, but the very process of being conscious of the self emerging as a relational process of the five aggregates.

I have attempted to show that a nuanced reading of Buddhist scriptures does not centre on a false dichotomy between self and non-self, but rather on the species of individuality that are possible and desirable following the application of the teachings on selflessness and impermanence. The phrase 'self-conscious' is appropriate if by this we understand that it is at this point that the individual begins to clearly differentiate between an unimpeded field of awareness (Skt. *nirvāṇa*) on the one hand, and notions of individuality reified by craving and clinging after elusive and impermanent phenomena (Skt. *saṃsāra*), on the other. The ethical training outlined in the 'eightfold path' and the 'six *pāramitā*' is particularly important in that it allows for a holistic intervention against false attributions of agency and possession towards people and things that lack both capacities, while dispelling behaviours that result from acting in accordance to misleading attributions.

The combination of these approaches to the subject of individuality yields the type of view we may label as the discipline of the 'relational self' embodying a

concept of the self in an interdependent and expanded sense.¹³ 'Relational-model' theories of mind have been described by Mitchell (1988:3-4) as follows:

In this vision, the basic unit of study is not the individual as a separate entity whose desires clash with an external reality, but an interactional field within which the individual arises and struggles to make contact and articulate himself. Desire is experienced always in the context of relatedness, and it is that context which defines meaning. Mind is composed of relational configurations... Experience is understood as structured through interactions.

What may emerge from our observations of a Buddhist notion of a 'centerless self,' is the production of a 'relational self' dependent upon causal operations that manifest in changing contexts and along ever-shifting connections transpiring in the natural and social world. These ways of looking and assessing our individual subjectivity bear implications beyond the fields of psychology and cognitive studies. The discourse on selflessness is very much a prescriptive discourse on self-cultivation, renunciation and liberation from bondage that is suffering. One cannot theoretically recreate or anticipate the results of personal and social transformation, one has to embody the transformation and experience the world through it. The self-abandoning/self-cultivating approach of Buddhism offers a fundamental challenge to existing models of individuality and the politics of self as constructed by consumer-based structures operating under the banner of democracy. The ideas, beliefs and dogmas that we hold about who we are, are in fact not restricted to the level of ideology. They figure at the source of our present environmental, economic and social crises in that they reflect in direct and concrete ways the kinds of systems (educational, social and political) we support willingly or unwillingly, consciously or unconsciously. Foucault's comments in the preface to Gilles Deleuze's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (xiii) resonate with some of the concerns that we addressed here:

Do not demand of politics that it restore the 'rights' of the individual, as philosophy had defined them. The individual is the product of power. What is needed is to 'de-individualize' by means of multiplication and displacement, diverse combinations. The group must not be the organic

¹³ The concept of 'relational self' has been used by several heterogeneous schools of psychoanalysis; for a discussion of related literature and debates, see Schapiro (1994).

bond uniting hierarchized individuals, but a constant generator of deindividualization.

The starting point for social change in a democratic system cannot rest on the demands we place on governing others, but on the demands we place on defining and governing ourselves. In other words, the self is not defined according to its civil rights and right to liberty, but as a liberating discipline and form of practice.

References

- Ash, C. (2007). Happiness and Economics: A Buddhist perspective. *Society and Economy*, 29: 201-222.
- Collins, S. (1994). What are Buddhists doing when they deny the self? In *Religion and Practical Reason: New Essays in the Comparative Philosophy of Religions*, ed. Frank Reynolds and David Tracy. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 59-86.
- Conze, E. (1975). Buddhist *Prajñā* and Greek *Sophia*. *Religion* 5.2: 160-67.
- Corcoran, P. (1983). The Limits of Democratic Theory. In *Democratic Theory and Practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Deleuze, G. & Felix Guattari. (1983). *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1993). About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self (Transcriptions of two lectures in Dartmouth on Nov. 17 and 24, 1980), ed. by Mark Blasius. In *Political Theory*, Vol. 21, No. 2: 198-227.
- Garfield, J. *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Halkias, G. T. (2012, forthcoming). The Enlightened Sovereign: Kingship and Buddhism in Indo-Tibetan Traditions. In *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, ed. Steven Emmanuel. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell Publishers.
- Kruger, M. and Yvonne Seng. (2005). Leadership with Inner Meaning: A contingency theory of leadership based on the worldviews of five religions. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16: 771-806.
- Lesser, A.H. (1979). Consciousness It/Self. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 5: 2, 141-152.
- Magnuson, J. Pathways to a Mindful Economy. In *Ethical Principles and Economic Transformation - A Buddhist Approach*, ed. Laszlo Zsolnai, 79-107.
- Maturana, H., and Varela, F. (1980). *Autopoiesis and cognition: The realization of the living*. Boston: C. Reidel.
- Mitchell, S. (1988). *Relational Concepts in Psychoanalysis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Norberg-Hodge, H. (2002). Buddhism in the Global Economy. In *Mindfulness in the Market Place: Compassionate Responses to Consumerism*, ed. Allan Hunt Badiner. Berkeley: Parallax Press, 15-48.
- Payutto, P.A. (1994a). *Buddhist Economics - A Middle Way for the Market Place*. Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation.

- _____. (1994b). *Buddhist Solutions for the Twenty-first Century*. Translated by B Evans. Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation.
- Rāhula, W. (1985). *What the Buddha Taught*. London: Gordon Fraser.
- Schapiro, Barbara A. *Literature and the Relational Self*. New York: New York University Press.
- Tillemans, T. (1996). What would it be like to be selfless? Hinayānist versions, Mahāyānist versions and Derek Parfit. *Asiatische Studien / Études asiatiques*, 50 (4): 835-852.
- Varela, F., Thompson, E. & Rosch, E. (1991). *The Embodied Mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Veblen, T. (1899). *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: The Viking Press.
- Zsolnai, L. (2011). *Ethical Principles and Economic Transformation - A Buddhist Approach*. New York: Springer.