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STUDIES IN RELIGION, THEOLOGY, AND DISABILITY

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Disability and World Religions

An Introduction

Darla Y. Schumm and Michael Stoltzfus

Editors

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Series Introduction

Studies in Religion, Theology, and Disability brings newly established and emerging scholars together to explore issues at the intersection of religion, theology, and disability. The series editors encourage theoretical engagement with secular disability studies while supporting the reexamination of established religious doctrine and practice. The series fosters research that takes account of the voices of people with disabilities and the voices of their family and friends.

The volumes in the series address issues and concerns of the global religious studies/theological studies academy. Authors come from a variety of religious traditions with diverse perspectives to reflect on the intersection of the study of religion/theology and the human experience of disability. This series is intentional about seeking out and publishing books that engage with disability in dialogue with Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, or other religious and philosophical perspectives.

Themes explored include religious life, ethics, doctrine, proclamation, liturgical practices, physical space, spirituality, or the interpretation of sacred texts through the lens of disability. Authors in the series are aware of conversation in the field of disability studies and bring that discussion to bear methodologically and theoretically in their analyses at the intersection of religion and disability.

Studies in Religion, Theology, and Disability reflects the following developments in the field: First, the emergence of disability studies as an interdisciplinary endeavor that has impacted theological studies, broadly defined. More and more scholars are deploying disability perspectives in their work, and this applies also to those working in the theological academy. Second,

Buddhism and Disability

Stephen E. Harris

Although Buddhist texts do not theorize disability explicitly, the attention they pay to our vulnerability to suffering, the radical dependence and impermanence of everything that exists, and the fragility of health and life brings them into contact with several issues important to the study of disability. In Buddhist texts, explicit characterization of disabilities (e.g., blindness and deafness) as well as conditions partially overlapping with disability, such as long-term illness, are almost always negative.¹ Nevertheless, Buddhist texts value the recognition of suffering as conducive to a strong motivation to obtain liberation and develop compassion for others, and this recognition suggests Buddhists ought to value aspects of disabled experience. Further, the Buddhist commitment to the universal salvation of all beings implicitly commits them to making their teaching accessible to persons with mental or physical disabilities.

This chapter considers and develops these connections between disability and Indian Buddhism, drawing upon texts composed during the history of Buddhism in India, from the time of the Buddha in the fifth century BCE through the first millennium CE. The first section provides a brief introduction to the Buddhist religion and its main tenets. The next discusses how the Buddhist doctrines of impermanence and radical dependence undermine the depth of the binary opposition between able-bodied and disabled minds and bodies. This leads into a consideration of how these Buddhist insights relate to contemporary models of disability developed by scholars and activists to understand the relation between disability, physical and mental variation, and the environment. Although Buddhist ideas are compatible with multiple models of disability, they have a particularly strong resonance with the

human-variation model that stresses continuity between disabled and able-bodied persons. The next section examines negative portrayals of disability in Buddhist texts, and shows how this is in partial tension with the Buddhist affirmation of the value of becoming aware of human suffering, a commitment which implies a positive evaluation of certain aspects of disabled experience. The final section discusses the Mahayana Buddhist doctrine of skillful means, in which teachings are adapted for the psychological propensities of various people, and suggests that this doctrine provides a partial analogue to the contemporary practice of reasonable accommodation which seeks to make work and services accessible to persons with disabilities.

BASIC BUDDHIST TENETS

The religion of Buddhism was probably founded in the fifth century BCE in northern India by the man who would come to be known as the Buddha.² Relatively little is known with any certainty about his life. We know that he was a member of the Śākya clan in northern India and that his given name was Gautama (Gethin 8). Tradition says that in his late twenties he went on a spiritual quest and after many years of meditation and spiritual practice attained deep insight into the true nature of reality. At this time he took on the title of Buddha, a Sanskrit word that literally means "one who has woken up."³

What the Buddha woke up to are certain facts about the universe that most of us only dimly acknowledge, such as that everything that exists is transient and depends on other things for its existence. Most importantly, the Buddha discovered that there is no enduring self (*ātman*) or soul that accounts for our identity and persists throughout a lifetime. Rather, humans are comprised of five groups of interrelated momentary events called aggregates (*skandhas*) of physical matter (*rūpa*), feelings (*vedanā*), concepts (*samjñā*), awareness (*viññāna*), and miscellaneous mental factors like emotions and intentions (*samskāra*). The distinctive Buddhist claim is that there exists no enduring self or soul that possesses or stands in some kind of relation to these aggregates. All we are is an impermanent collection of these mental and physical aggregates in close causal relation.

One of the most powerful ways the Buddha's teachings have been conveyed is through a schema called "the four noble truths," which describes suffering (*duḥkha*); its cause (*samudaya*), which is craving; its cessation (*nirodha*), which is nirvana; and the path (*marga*) to achieving this cessation. The first noble truth refers to the fact that the lives of ordinary humans are pervaded by both gross and subtle sources of suffering. All of us have painful experiences such as physical suffering and emotional disappointment, but

Buddhists claim we also experience subtler forms of suffering. For instance, sensual pleasures cannot deeply satisfy us, and we find that our craving has increased after indulging in them. Further, because on some level we know things are impermanent, we experience a constant underlying anxiety that the good things we have will not last.⁴ Because these kinds of suffering afflict us, Buddhist texts claim any kind of lasting happiness is impossible without undertaking the Buddhist path to liberation.

Like Hinduism and Jainism, two of the other major Indian religions, Buddhism professes that after death we take rebirth in another body. This rebirth can be in either a positive form—such as that of a human or even of a deity who will live for many millions of years—or a negative form of existence, including some in various kinds of hells.⁵ All of these rebirths, including birth as a god or in a hell realm, are impermanent, and we will eventually take rebirth again. This cycle of continual rebirth and death is referred to as *samsara*, and escaping from it is the purpose of Buddhist teachings.⁶

Buddhists also believe that where we take rebirth in the future depends on our thoughts and actions in this life. A negative thought, such as anger or jealousy, or a harmful action, such as hurting another or stealing, creates a residue in the mind that can potentially cause rebirth in hell or as an animal. These imprints can also ripen to create the circumstances of one's present or future life. For instance, actions motivated by anger can lead to sickness or being the victim of violence. Likewise, positive thoughts and actions, such as compassion and generosity, will lead to good rebirths—as a human or deity—or to good conditions in present or future lives, like the possession of wealth or the ability to practice Buddhism. This is the Buddhist doctrine referred to by the Sanskrit word *ḥarma* (action), which indicates these positive or negative thoughts or actions that ripen into future results.⁷

For Buddhists, countless rebirths mean the problem of suffering lasts longer than the present lifetime. If it were not for karma, we could escape all suffering simply by dying, but karma forces continual rebirth, making it necessary to practice Buddhist teachings to escape the continual cycle of death and rebirth.

The second noble truth is craving (*trṣṇā*), which is the cause of suffering. Craving in Buddhism is more than merely wanting something; it is an unrealistic mental state that is driven by false expectations about the thing desired. Craving is caused by ignorance (*avidyā*), which in Buddhism is a deeply rooted belief that things exist in a way that they do not. Ignorance refers primarily to our belief that we possess an enduring self (*ātman*) that subsists throughout a lifetime and travels to the next life. It also refers to the belief that experienced objects endure, exist independently of causes

and conditions, and can bring lasting satisfaction. Because of ignorance, we view ourselves as enduring persons able to interact with a world of stable objects. In sharp contrast to expectations, everything exists as a radical flux of momentary dependent events. It is this mismatch between expectations and the world that causes suffering.

The third noble truth is that cessation of suffering and the cycle of death and rebirth is possible. This state of cessation is called *nirvana*, a Sanskrit word that means “blown out.” It is suffering and rebirth, as well as their causes—ignorance and craving—that are extinguished. This is the state the Buddha achieved when he reached enlightenment. The final noble truth is the path to cessation, the Buddhist method by which one eliminates ignorance and craving and achieves enlightenment. Buddhist texts develop a series of practices, including ethical discipline (*śīla*), meditative concentration (*samādhi*), and insight into the nature of reality (*prajñā*), that enable the practitioner to progress toward nirvana.⁸

The Buddha was said to achieve enlightenment in his mid-thirties, and then he spent the rest of his life teaching others this path to salvation. After achieving his goal, one method he used to help others develop the same level of realization was by founding a monastic order in which monks and nuns lived communally, leaving their householder lives behind. One reason becoming a monastic is conducive to liberation is that monks and nuns can devote most of their time to various forms of spiritual practice like meditation and listening to teachings by the Buddha and his senior disciples. Furthermore, householder life stirs up powerful negative emotions like greed and hatred, which develop as one pursues a career, seeks a mate, and so on. By leaving such distractions behind, monastics are better able to escape samsara by focusing on the work of removing the mental afflictions of ignorance and craving from the mind.

THE STORY OF THE BUDDHA AND THE THREE MARKS

A traditional method Buddhists use to express central Buddhist themes is telling the story of the life of the Buddha, who was said to have been born to a powerful king in northern India. The Buddha’s father was told by a sage that the boy would either become a great king or forsake worldly life and become a religious renunciant. Since the king wanted his son to inherit his kingdom, he devised a strategy to ensure the Buddha would not think of abandoning worldly pursuits. The king removed all signs of illness or aging from the palace in which the child grew up. All his attendants were youthful, and the older

relatives of the prince, including the king and queen themselves, wore makeup and dyed their hair to hide their advancing age.⁹

The young prince spent thirty years in idle happiness in the palace, enjoying leisure activities like sports and theater. He married a beautiful woman and had a son. The king’s plan was so completely successful that his son did not even know that aging, illness, and death existed. But one day he took a chariot ride outside the city walls and encountered a man stooped over with age. In response to the Buddha’s shocked inquiry, his charioteer explained what age is and that it afflicts all beings. Subsequently, the Buddha, still distressed by what he had seen, took three additional trips outside the city during which he encountered a sick man, a dead man, and finally a religious seeker who had renounced householder life.¹⁰ Horrified by his encounter with aging, sickness, and death, and inspired by seeing the renunciant, the Buddha abandoned his life in the palace. He engaged in various spiritual practices for five years until finally, during deep concentrated meditation, he attained perfect enlightenment. He then spent the next fifty years of his life teaching others the Buddhist path to salvation.

While the story is not historically accurate, its power lies in allowing us to imagine how horrifying it would be to suddenly discover that we are aging and will become sick and die. Although we all know on some level that this will happen, Buddhists claim that we hide the significance of these inevitabilities from ourselves. Contrast our relative indifference to the coming of death with the horror expressed by the Buddha in *Aśvaghōṣa*’s telling of the story:

Then, the king’s son, as he learned about death,
although steadfast, soon became despondent;
leaning his shoulder against the railing,
he said in a voice that was resonant:

“This is the inevitable end of all men;
yes the world rashly revels, casting fears aside;
The hearts of men, I suspect, must indeed be hard,
that they journey along this road so unperturbed.

Let us turn back our carriage, therefore, charioteer;
for this is not the time or place for pleasure groves.
For, perceiving death, how can sensible man,
keep on reveling here rashly at a time of pain.” (*Aśvaghōṣa* 81)

The trauma to the prince is so great that he despairs. He is incredulous that ordinary people are willing to go about life as usual, all the while knowing that death is on the way. This behavior, he says in the final verse, is

foolish. The story implies that all of us would have this violent a reaction to our mortality if we did not constantly hide these facts from ourselves. Massive delusion is a part of everyone's life.

Early Buddhist texts distinguish three errors in particular that ordinary humans make in relation to our experience. First, we experience impermanent (*anitya*) phenomena as if they were permanent. Although we appear to interact with a realm of relatively stable objects, Buddhists claim that everything we experience is actually composed of evanescent events arising and disintegrating in fragments of a second, an impermanence that exists at two levels. First, there is the ordinary level of change that all of us experience when objects break, people die, and so on. Second, this ordinary level of transience is itself made possible by a deeper radical disintegration of everything that exists at every second.¹¹

The second error all people make is experiencing dependently arisen objects as if they are independent and self-subsistent.¹² Buddhist texts place particular emphasis on the nonexistence of any enduring unitary soul (*ātman*) that makes us who we are. Buddhist texts extend their analysis of selflessness to any object composed of parts.¹³ The classic Buddhist example is the chariot.¹⁴ There is no single unitary object called a "chariot" that exists over and above the collection of chariot parts; rather "chariot" is a convenient name (*prajñapti*) given to the wheel, axle, carriage, and so forth when they are put together in such a way that they can be used to travel quickly. However, even though no enduring unitary chariot exists in reality, the parts are experienced as if they formed one unified, independent entity able to function on its own.

The final error humans persistently make is believing that objects and events composed of impermanent, dependent phenomena are capable of bringing lasting satisfaction. It is this error that causes the deeper forms of suffering described in the opening section. These three features—the impermanent, the selfless/dependently arisen, and the unsatisfactory nature of everything that exists—are referred to in Buddhist texts as "the three marks of existence." The Buddhist claim is that our cognitive systems make numerous deeply ingrained errors in processing experience that result in this massive misperception of objects in the world.¹⁵

One of the consequences of accepting these Buddhist insights about the fragility, impermanence, and dependence of all existence is that our ordinary beliefs about the relative stability of health, physical fitness, and the other properties commonly associated with being able bodied are deeply mistaken. In this way, the Buddhist emphasis on the three marks undermines the depth of a set of binary distinctions upon which usual ways of perceiving disability are predicated. The disabled body and mind is ordinarily contrasted to a

physically and mentally fit, able-bodied counterpart. Likewise, it is assumed that for able-bodied people, health and fitness are relatively stable and will continue. Finally, the able-bodied person is seen as independent, autonomous, and able to live successfully, in contrast to someone who is helpless, dependent, and disabled.

Buddhist insights affect how we view all these distinctions. Since Buddhists claim humans are massively deluded about ordinary features of our experience, the depth of the contrast between psychological disability and health is lessened. The Buddha as a young prince refers to ordinary people as insane for living their lives as if aging, sickness, and death did not exist. Psychological disabilities either arise from these underlying cognitive distortions or are insignificant in comparison. It is our ignorance of the impermanent and unsatisfactory nature of the world—not any particular medically recognized, psychological illness—that accounts for the deepest forms of suffering humans experience. Likewise, the Buddhist emphasis on radical impermanence undermines the distinction between physical and mental disability and a relatively stable, able-bodied norm. Human bodies and minds, like everything else that exists, are composed of radically impermanent events that originate and disintegrate continuously.

Finally, the mark of not-self, or selflessness, not only claims that things do not exist as unitary, independent objects but also implies how they do exist as dependently arisen phenomena based upon their parts, causes, and conditions. Emphasizing this highlights the fact that much of the stigma attached to many disabilities rests upon a series of relatively arbitrary distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable kinds of dependence. We claim that independence is not compromised when driving a car from home to downtown, but that independence is lessened if crutches or a wheelchair are used to get to the car. Having farmers, truck drivers, and grocery store clerks collaborate to make grocery shopping possible is somehow seen as consistent with independence, while using a personal care attendant to help reach items on a shelf is not. These examples can be multiplied without limit. The Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination lessens the contrast between able-bodied and disabled persons by emphasizing the radical dependence of everything that exists.

None of this means that Buddhists could not employ disability as a useful category to help distribute resources effectively and modify physical environments and social expectations to accommodate physical and psychological variety. Just as Buddhists hold that it is a useful fiction to group an assemblage of chariot parts together under the name "chariot," they can accept that labels like "blind," "deaf," or "developmentally delayed" may help facilitate

successful interaction with the world. All such labels, however, are merely employed for convenience, marking out certain variation from amid a much deeper continuity of transience and dependence that characterizes everything that exists.

Moreover, as Lynne Bejoian has emphasized, the focus of Buddhist practice is on ending the suffering experienced by all beings. Specific pain associated with any particular disability is simply one aspect of the suffering experienced by all. The frustration of limitations to mobility from a physical disability is less painful than the constant dissatisfaction experienced by all non-liberated human beings. Therefore, no stigma need be attached to disabled experience.

BUDDHISM AND MODELS OF DISABILITY

One of the contributions disability studies scholars have made to our understanding of disability is developing contrasting models that define disability and explain how and to what extent negative effects arise from specific mental and physical impairments. Disability scholars generally call the dominant mode of theorizing disability the medical model, which identifies disability with a physical or mental impairment and claims that the various disadvantages associated with disability arise because of the impairment.¹⁶ According to the medical model, disabilities are defects that interfere with ordinary human functioning and should be corrected whenever possible. The drawbacks to conceiving all disability under the medical model are that it views disabled persons, by definition, as defective, broken, and inferior to their able-bodied counterparts. Moreover, much of the frustration and pain experienced by disabled persons results not from impairment itself but from negative stereotypes and unfair treatment by able-bodied persons. The medical model errs in ignoring the effects of social barriers on persons with disability.

The minority model of disability seeks to remedy these defects.¹⁷ It claims that the negative effects of disability—such as difficulty finding employment, social isolation, and an inaccessible environment—are caused by the discriminatory treatment of society itself, similar to the way some ethnic groups have been marginalized by racial discrimination. For instance, according to the minority model, mobility difficulties faced by a paraplegic are caused by able-bodied people's refusal to adapt the environment with wheelchair ramps and the like, rather than the impairment itself. Likewise, it is prejudice, as well as a lack of workplace accommodations like flexible scheduling, that prevent some people with psychological disabilities from securing employment. The minority model serves as a needed corrective to the medical model's

overemphasis on the disabling role of impairment. It has acted as a powerful tool used by disability advocates in confronting abelist policies and attitudes and has contributed to the passage of disability rights legislation, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act. Nevertheless, although it correctly draws attention to the disabling effects of discrimination by society, the minority model's claim that *all* the negative effects associated with disability arise because of such discrimination is not realistic.¹⁸ For instance, many impairments cause or contribute to a level of physical or mental pain that severely limits activity but is not in any obvious way attributable to social discrimination.

A third model of disability, the human-variation model, to some extent synthesizes the insights of the other two. The variation model claims that disability occurs when human variation exceeds our present ability to adapt the physical and social environment.¹⁹ According to this model, all human minds and bodies exhibit certain variations, many of which are potentially disabling (Wasserman). Disability occurs when there is a lack of fit between certain kinds of variation and the existing physical and social environment. Therefore, what is considered a disability will change as technology improves, the physical environment is altered, attitudes change, and resources are distributed differently. Eyeglasses, for example, turn a formerly disabling impairment into a neutral variation. Wheelchair ramps and electronic doors likewise lessen the effects of mobility impairments, and given sufficient adaptation of the environment, many of these conditions would cease to be disabling at all.²⁰

Although these models of disability are sometimes presented as being in competition with each other, the insights of both the medical and minority models can be incorporated into the human-variation model. According to the variation model, the medical model goes wrong in ignoring the negative impact of social discrimination, but the variation model agrees with the medical model in accepting that variations play a significant role in the disabling of some persons. This model claims that both the lack of curb cuts and the physical condition that requires the use of a wheelchair are disabling factors. Likewise, the variation model claims that the minority model neglects the role of physical impairment but agrees that social discrimination is an important element of the social environment that can make certain kinds of impairment disabling. Both the anxiety disorder and the lack of workplace accommodations play a role in preventing successful employment.

In comparing the language of Buddhist texts to these models of disability, the closest match would be the medical model. Buddhist texts pay relatively little attention to disability but do emphasize illness as one of the sufferings

that should motivate us to escape from rebirth and *samsara* (Bodhi, *Connected*, 1844). Although scholars of disability have cautioned that it is misleading to associate disability too closely with physical or mental illness, there will be a great deal of overlap between some forms of long-term illness and disabling conditions.²¹ Further, Buddhist texts take an almost universally negative view of sickness. In the Buddha's first sermon, he lists it as one of the eight major kinds of suffering afflicted on beings in *samsara* (Bodhi, *Connected*, 1844). Likewise, we have seen that an encounter with a sick person was so disturbing to the Buddha that he renounced householder life. Moreover, other Buddhist texts claim that certain disabilities, like blindness or mobility impairment, are karmic effects of past negative actions (Mrozik 30).

Note that the explicit way Buddhist texts treat illness and, on occasion, certain kinds of disability is, on the face of it, closest to the medical model. Illness and disability are seen as negatives, and there is seemingly no awareness that social discrimination accounts for at least part of the negative effects associated with disability. This is not surprising. Buddhists rarely, if ever, observe disability as an object of theoretical concern. It has taken the insights of several generations of disability activists and scholars, who themselves drew upon previous work in feminism and the academic study of race, to develop models of disability like the minority and human-variation models, which begin to recognize the disabling force of society itself. Keep in mind that the ancient Indian environment would be much less hospitable to physical disability than our contemporary one. Therefore, it is not surprising that Buddhist texts view disability as an intrinsically negative phenomenon.

Although the language they use resonates most closely with the medical model, relatively minor modifications could be made to Buddhist characterizations of illness and disability to adapt it to the variation model. Texts that stress the negative aspects of illness and disability could be amended to acknowledge that these ill effects depend on the environment as well as the impairment itself. The doctrine of karma could also be altered slightly to clarify that the bad effect of a negative action is not the disability itself but rather having to experience that disability in environments not suitably adapted to it. Buddhist texts do not present their doctrine this way, but this does not keep us from noting that there is no deep conceptual tension between Buddhist commitments and a human-variation understanding of disability.

Moreover, there is a sense in which Buddhist insights resonate more strongly with the variation model than the other two models. The medical and minority models sort the world into categories of disabled and able-bodied people. They do acknowledge that there will be boundary cases in which it is not clear if a person has a disability and that people acquire or lose disabilities

as life progresses. Nevertheless, they tend to view disability as something that divides people into two groups that do or do not possess it. By contrast, the variation model emphasizes continuity between disabled and able-bodied persons, in that all humans already exhibit variation that could become disabling in a particular environment. The fact that our world possesses many different environments with different levels of accessibility further suggests there will be a lack of determinacy over who is disabled. Likewise, in a given environment, the same variation may present itself to disabling or innocuous extents by able-bodied persons in the same environment. Minor scoliosis, for instance, is unlikely to be disabling in most environments, whereas more severe cases may be. This suggests that the human-variation model views all humans in a spectrum of potentially disabling variation with no sharp boundaries drawn where categories of disability begin and end.

All of this resonates with Buddhist insights regarding universal dependence and impermanence. The Buddha, as a healthy young prince, and the old man he meets on his chariot ride are both already afflicted with aging, and they each possess a body with a fragile equilibrium that can be upset at any moment. Buddhist texts emphasize what on some level we already know: anyone can enter the category of disability at any time, and given the close relationship between illness, aging, and some kinds of disability, our fragile and decaying human bodies will all become disabled at some point if death does not intervene first. It is exactly this insight that led the young prince to renounce his kingdom in search of spiritual salvation.

Of the three major models of disability, the minority model seems most at odds with Buddhist insights. The minority model often stresses the potential positive aspects of disability, likening the experiences of people with disabilities to cultural experiences shared by ethnic minorities. Many authors writing from the minority model perspective seek to foster a sense of unity and pride in the disability community and explore aspects of disablement that can be viewed as positive. Moreover, the model is characterized by its claim that impairment is not, in itself, a negative but only becomes so because of societal oppression.

On the one hand, this conflicts with the Buddhist appraisal of disability as the result of negative karmic action. In addition, Buddhists extend their claim that no enduring self exists to all objects with parts and claim that partite objects only exist as useful ways of talking about groups of causally interacting parts. Ethnic, racial, and other social categories—such as Hispanic, homosexual, and disabled—will also be merely useful ways of talking, drawing attention to certain kinds of difference out of a vast spectrum of

variation. In fact, the Buddhist monk Śāntideva makes exactly this point in relation to biological sex:

What discerning person would be attached to form, which is
just like a dream?
Since the body does not exist
then who is a woman and who is a man?²² (126; 9.87)

Since even the physical body is only a useful fiction, properties of the body such as biological sex will only be real by convention as well.²³ Although Śāntideva does not extend this point to disability, the same analysis applies.

There is, then, at least the appearance of tension between the minority model, which stresses the importance of recognizing disability as a source of pride, and Buddhist thought, which emphasizes the ultimate nonexistence of any such category. Nevertheless, we should remember that even though Buddhists do not think the names we give to partite objects correspond to mind-independent reality, they also do not deny their pragmatic efficacy in helping us navigate through our lives. To return to the classic example, understanding the collection of chariot parts as a unified object called “chariot” helps us use it to get around quickly. Buddhists can also affirm the efficacy of social categories like disability; they can, for instance, recognize that providing additional parking privileges to persons with mobility impairments increases community access.

There is no obvious barrier to emphasizing the possibility of sharing experiences and building a community among persons with certain kinds of disabilities while keeping in mind that the various disabilities we recognize are all ways of talking about how pluralities of impermanent mental and physical moments causally interact. After all, Buddhist monks and nuns use various classificatory schemes in organizing their monastic communities, even though they recognize that all such classifications are merely useful ways of talking. Therefore, although we might recognize more friction between Buddhist insights and the minority model, there is no reason to hold that the Buddhist doctrine of not-self is incompatible with the minority model’s emphasis on aspects of disabled experience as a source of identity and pride.

BUDDHISM AND THE NEGATIVE APPRAISAL OF DISABILITY

Although Buddhist texts pay relatively little attention to disability itself, they do talk about it as a negative effect of karmic action. As previously discussed, Buddhist karma theory claims that a harmful action—such as lying, stealing,

or killing—or even a negative intention—such as a moment of malicious thought or covetousness—creates a karmic seed that ripens at some point in the future. Negative effects of karmic action include not only rebirth in a negative realm, a short life, or poverty but also a number of conditions that overlap with certain kinds of disability. “The Shorter Exposition of Action,” for instance, links hurting others with sickness in future rebirths, and lack of attention to Buddhist teachings to low intellect (Nāṇamoli and Bodhi 1053–57). Likewise, the *Lotus Sutra* claims that acting disrespectfully toward the sutra, or those who revere it, can result in rebirths without sight, or with various diseases (Watson 324).²⁴

In addition, a number of Buddhist texts mention disability as one of several impediments to progressing on the path to liberation. The great Indian Buddhist master, Nāgārjuna, provides a list of eight impediments that make spiritual practice difficult or impossible:

63: To be reborn with false beliefs, or yet
As animals, or pretas,²⁵ or in hell,
Deprived of Buddha’s words, barbarians
In border lands, or reborn dull and dumb,

64: Or born among the long-lived gods—
Of these eight defective states that give no opportunity
You must be free, and, finding opportunity,
Be diligent, to put a stop to birth. (Nāgārjuna 52–53)

The verses mention low intellect and muteness explicitly, but commentaries explain this also includes damaged sensory faculties and missing limbs (Tsong-kha-pa 118). What is jarring about these verses is that these disabilities are grouped together with rebirth in negative realms and living in an uncivilized land with no access to Buddhist teachings as conditions that interfere with an ability to progress toward enlightenment. Again, disability seems to be presented as an inherently negative impediment to living a valuable life. Part of the explanation for such remarks is that the physical and social environment in ancient India would have been particularly hostile to many types of disabilities; for instance, there would not have been trained interpreters to facilitate communication with the deaf.

Although Buddhist writers make remarks like these, which characterize disability as simply a defect, we also find a spirit of inclusiveness throughout the history of Buddhism that seeks to make its teachings accessible to many different kinds of people. In early Buddhist texts the Buddha provides a great variety of training tools to help people advance toward enlightenment. Study and sitting meditation are emphasized for the intellectually acute and

physically able, but many alternative practices are also offered, including making offerings to monks and nuns—or simply visualizing offerings to the Buddha—chanting Buddhist scripture or mantras, and recollecting the good qualities of the Buddha. Great emphasis is also placed on the intention with which one acts, so physical disability provides much less of an obstacle to making spiritual progress than might at first be apparent (Bodhi, *Numerical*, 963).

Another feature of Buddhism that has implications for the value of disability is its emphasis on the great value of a human birth. Among all the possible forms of rebirth—be it as a human, an animal, a god, or in a lower realm like hell—human rebirth is seen as ideal for making progress toward liberation. Śāntideva expresses this attitude by emphasizing the rarity of human rebirth in verse 4.20 from *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life* (*Bodhicaryāvatāra*):

Therefore, the Blessed One stated that human existence is extremely difficult to obtain, like a turtle's head emerging into the ring of a yoke on a vast ocean.²⁶ (41)

The reference is to a turtle that surfaces once every hundred years in a great ocean. The chance of attaining a human rebirth, according to Buddhism, is less than the possibility that the turtle will randomly put its head through a single ring floating on top of the water. This is because the number of animals is incredibly vast, including insects and beings in the various heavens and hells. Śāntideva goes on to praise the value of this rarely attained human birth in helping us progress toward liberation in 7.14:

Upon finding the boat of human birth now, cross the great river of suffering. O fool, there is no time for sleep, for this boat is hard to catch again. (78)

Human birth is so precious because humans encounter just enough suffering to be aware of the need to practice Buddhism but not so much that it overwhelms us and makes practice impossible. Rebirth as a god results because of massive amounts of karmic merit created through good actions like generosity. Yet, in the verse quoted by Nāgārjuna, rebirth as both a god and a hell-being is an impediment to progressing toward enlightenment. The problem with rebirth in hell is that the torments experienced preclude spiritual practice. The gods face the opposite problem. Since they experience no explicit pain and dwell in pleasure for countless years, they have no motivation to practice Buddhism. However, Buddhist gods do eventually die, after which they face the possibility of being reborn in a realm with great

amounts of suffering. Moreover, Buddhist gods still experience the subtler kinds of suffering like the inability to gain any kind of lasting satisfaction from enjoying sense pleasure. The gods, therefore, are much like the Buddha as a young prince enjoying himself in the palace with no awareness that illness and death are on the way.²⁷

In addition to providing motivation to practice Buddhism, Śāntideva also points out that suffering has other aspects that help us progress toward liberation in 6.21:

Suffering has another quality since arrogance diminishes because of despair, and one feels compassion for beings in the cycle of existence, fear of sin, and a yearning for the Jina.²⁸ (64)

Experiencing a limited amount of suffering reduces pride and deepens our compassion for others. These remarks show that a human rebirth containing some experience of fragility and pain can be, from a Buddhist perspective, a good thing since it can help us progress in our practice toward liberation; however, human rebirths in which very little suffering is experienced, like that of the young Buddha growing up in his palace, would be deficient in comparison.²⁹

Following this logic to its conclusion suggests that Buddhist texts should value certain aspects of disabled experience as a potential aid to achieving liberation. Although they differ as to its underlying cause, all models of disability acknowledge that disabilities are often accompanied by a great deal of pain and frustration. For an advanced Buddhist practitioner, the additional frustrations that accompany disability could be an aid in motivating a strong commitment to Buddhist practice and in developing compassion for other suffering beings. From the perspective of Buddhist practice, disability might be seen as a negative only for those at relatively early stages of progress who have not yet developed the fortitude and mental flexibility to experience additional pain and frustration without becoming discouraged. Rather than being seen as intrinsically negative, disability could be considered an advanced training for those dedicated toward progressing quickly toward enlightenment.

One of the contributions contemporary disability activists and scholars have made is in drawing attention to the possibility that aspects of disabled experience can be positive (Smith 21–24). For example, Deaf people have developed their own culture, using their own language—American Sign Language—to communicate. Other authors emphasize the possibility that

impairment of one sense organ may lead to increased development of other mental abilities. For instance, a recent study shows that blind persons perform better than seeing persons in recalling certain information (O'Neil; Silvers).

From the Buddhist perspective, some persons with disability are also in a privileged epistemic position in the sense that it is easier for them to understand the fragility and dependence of everything that exists. Since Buddhists claim that humans make an ongoing series of cognitive mistakes, whereby we experience, among other things, the impermanent as permanent and the dependent as independent, it is possible for some able-bodied people, especially when relatively affluent, to live the majority of their lives without deeply acknowledging the impermanence and vulnerability of the human condition. Buddhists see such ways of life as wasting the precious opportunity of being human. In this sense, the friction between disabled bodies and minds and the environment may be seen as an aid to making spiritual progress. Buddhists would still be committed to removing the pain and frustration that accompanies disabled experience; the purpose of all Buddhist teachings is to eliminate suffering. Nevertheless, this acknowledges that some persons with disability might be in a better position to initially recognize the fragility that underlies all human experience.

MAHAYANA BUDDHISM AND SKILLFUL MEANS

In very early Buddhist texts, there is no clear distinction drawn between the enlightenment of the Buddha and that of his disciples; the Buddha is distinguished, rather, in his achievement of being the first to attain awakening and in his consummate skill as a teacher of others (Bodhi, "Arahants"). As Buddhism continued to develop, however, it began to distinguish between two levels of spiritual accomplishment. The ordinary goal most people pursue is that of individual liberation, in which one eliminates craving and ignorance and escapes from suffering and rebirth. The higher goal is that of full Buddhahood, a process which takes an almost inestimable amount of time and requires a commitment to an arduous process of virtue development in which one completely removes all traces of ignorance and craving and develops the ability to teach and benefit others effectively.

Someone who undertakes the more difficult goal is called a *bodhisattva*, a being (*sattva*) who aims for the awakening (*bodhi*) of a fully enlightened Buddha.³⁰ The bodhisattva takes a vow to liberate all sentient beings from suffering and to take innumerable rebirths in order to develop the skill to effectively do this. Buddhists who stress the desirability of becoming bodhisattvas eventually begin to refer to themselves as the Mahayana (great

vehicle), whose goal is the liberation of all; this contrasts with the early Buddhist teachings that aim for individual liberation. Śāntideva is renowned for his power in phrasing the Mahayana aspiration to benefit all beings.

May I be a protector for those who are without protectors, a guide for travelers, and a boat, a bridge, and a ship for those who wish to cross over.

May I be a lamp for those who seek light, a bed for those who seek rest, and may I be a servant for all beings who desire a servant.

To all sentient beings may I be a wish-fulfilling gem, a vase of good fortune, an efficacious mantra, a great medication, a wish-fulfilling tree, and a wish-granting cow. (35; 3.17–19)

Many Buddhist texts affirm both the aspiration for individual liberation and the bodhisattva path of liberation for all beings as worthy aims. As Mahayana Buddhism developed, however, greater emphasis continued to be placed on the bodhisattva goal, until it became portrayed as a far superior option than individual liberation. Liberating all beings implies a commitment to making Buddhist teachings accessible to disabled persons, since they are among the beings to be liberated. But an even stronger implicit commitment to making teachings accessible can be found by examining the Mahayana doctrine of skillful means (*upāya*).

We have already seen at the end of the last section that early Buddhist texts offer diverse methods—including various forms of meditation, chanting, making offerings, and visualization—which help different kinds of persons to effectively practice Buddhism. In addition, early Buddhist texts portray the Buddha as teaching in many different kinds of ways to persons of various dispositions; he uses stories and parables for some and offers philosophical discussion for others. Skillful means, a Mahayana Buddhist teaching specifically developed to benefit persons with particular psychological dispositions, is a continuation of this commitment to flexible pedagogy found in the early texts (Pye 51–52).

The *Lotus Sutra*, a Mahayana text that is particularly influential in developing the concept of skillful means, provides a number of stories that illustrate the bodhisattva's skill in teaching sentient beings of various psychological dispositions. In perhaps its most famous story, a father is unable to convince his children who are fascinated by their toys to leave a burning house. He finally succeeds in doing so by telling them that there are various kinds of carriages waiting for them to play with outside. The *Lotus Sutra* explains that

the bodhisattva must employ divergent strategies because the psychological makeup of humans differs greatly (Watson 56–62). In particular, given the presence of craving, anger, and delusion in our minds, people will often not understand what is in their best interests. The children will not leave the burning house because of their attachment to their toys, so the father diverts them toward other attachments to get them out. The toys represent samsaric pursuits, the father is the Buddha, while the carriages are different forms of Buddhism designed to appeal to different kinds of practitioners (59–60).

The justification for developing skillful means, therefore, is to minister to beings with various psychological tendencies. The doctrine does not explicitly address the issue of accessibility for disabled persons, although psychological disabilities themselves are instances of psychological variation, and so the explicit purpose of skillful means already partially addresses concerns about disability accessibility. Moreover, it is a small step from adapting Buddhist teachings to various psychological dispositions to adapting them to be disability accessible. A commitment to making teachings accessible to all beings is powerfully expressed in the following image from the *Lotus Sutra* that compares Buddhist teachings to clouds raining down on different kinds of plants:

Kashyapa, it is like the plants and trees, thickets and groves, and the medicinal herbs, widely ranging in variety, each with its own name and hue, that grow in the hills and streams, the valleys and different soils of the thousand-millionfold world. Dense clouds spread over them, covering the entire thousand-millionfold world and in one moment saturating it all. The moisture penetrates to all the plants, trees, thickets and groves, and medicinal herbs equally, to their big roots, big stems, big limbs and big leaves. . . . The rain falling from one blanket of clouds accords with each particular species and nature, causing it to sprout and mature, to blossom and bear fruit. Though all these plants and trees grow in the same earth and moistened by the same rain, each has its differences and particulars. (Watson 98)

The image acknowledges the different propensities of sentient beings and claims Buddhist teachings are able to benefit them all. Although there is no explicit mention of disability, this guiding commitment to universalism implicitly commits Buddhist authors to develop their teachings to be accessible to disabled bodies and minds.

In contemporary society, the practice of businesses or workplaces changing their ordinary policies and ways of doing business to make them accessible to a person with a disability is called reasonable accommodation. For instance, a grocery store might have an employee help a person of short

stature reach items high on a shelf or a supervisor might remove nonessential tasks, like climbing stairs to fetch mail, from the duties of a mobility-impaired administrative assistant. On occasion, we find something very close to reasonable accommodation in texts describing how the Buddha teaches others. One of the clearest examples of this is in an early Buddhist text that tells how the Buddha taught a monk of very low intelligence. The monk is unable to remember any of the teachings the senior monks give to him. To compensate for this, the Buddha gives him a clean cloth and tells him to say “removal of impurity” repeatedly while handling it. As the cloth becomes dirty, the monk suddenly realizes his mind is likewise defiled with negative mental states like anger and greed. After realizing this insight, he quickly progresses to liberation (Cowell 15–21).

Other Buddhist texts offer even more imaginative descriptions of how Buddhas can modify their teachings for beings of various psychological propensities. For instance, the Mahayana text, the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, portrays Buddhas in alternate universes using radically different means to minister to beings there. Some teach by light emanating from their body, others by special kinds of food, others attract beings through their physical beauty, and some even teach through silence (Thurman 86).

More down-to-earth examples of how a bodhisattva should accommodate disabled persons are given by the Mahayana monk Asaṅga, who offers lists of activities the bodhisattva should carry out to benefit others. In relation to disability, the bodhisattva should minister to the sick, guide the blind, carry persons without legs when necessary, and, significantly, communicate through hand gestures with the deaf (54). These examples show how the doctrine of skillful means begins to overlap with contemporary methods of reasonable accommodation. Since Mahayana Buddhism seeks to make itself accessible to all, when bodhisattvas encounter disability they adapt their teachings and behavior to benefit these beings.

CONCLUSION

When disabilities are mentioned in Buddhist texts, they are portrayed as the negative results of past karmic action and as obstacles to spiritual practice. This may be because disabilities are often accompanied by great amounts of physical or emotional pain, and Buddhists hold that pain results from past negative actions. Buddhist texts also emphasize the limited access people with intellectual disabilities and sensory impairments have to Buddhist teachings. This may explain why the language used in Buddhist texts is similar to the medical

model which characterizes disabilities as intrinsic defects and impediments to human flourishing.

One benefit of comparative work between Buddhist and disability studies, therefore, is in highlighting the role societal attitudes and inaccessible environments play in creating these negative results that accompany disability. Limitations associated with particular disabilities, such as blindness and mobility impairment, can be lessened or even eliminated by appropriate accommodation and adaptation of the environment. A natural effect of accepting these insights would be an even greater commitment by contemporary Buddhists in making centers and practices accessible to disabled practitioners. There are also aspects of Buddhist theory itself that are conducive to rethinking usual characterizations of disabled persons. In particular, Buddhist texts pay extraordinarily careful attention to the impermanence and fragility of everything that exists. Disability is only a particularly visible manifestation of these ever-present underlying conditions. This insight undercuts any deep division between disabled and able-bodied persons and lessens stigma attached to disability.

Another area of intersection between disability studies and Buddhism is their shared concern with adapting practices to increase overall access to persons of various abilities. In Buddhism, this is expressed in the practice of skillful means, in which teachings are adapted for persons of varying psychological dispositions. Some of these adaptations resemble the contemporary practice of reasonable accommodation in which services or workplaces are made accessible to persons with disabilities. A natural development of Buddhist inclusive tendencies would be to integrate reasonable accommodations into Buddhist centers such as wheelchair ramps, no-step entrances, fragrance-free policies to help those with chemical sensitivity, and sign-language interpretation for teachings. Just as important will be the adaptation of particular Buddhist practices. Prostrations to a statue of the Buddha, for example, can be replaced by visualization of prostrations for those with mobility impairments, and sitting meditation periods might be shortened for those whose disability interferes with concentration. Many centers are already making adaptations like these to help disabled practitioners.

A final area in which Buddhists can benefit from the insights of disability scholars and advocates is the attention they have given to positive aspects of disabled experience. Buddhists claim that our propensity to deny the radical impermanence and fragility of existence prevents us from deeply practicing Buddhism and liberating ourselves from suffering. In relation to Buddhist practice, therefore, disability will be advantageous to the extent that it helps an individual accept these facts. Buddhist centers can also recognize that the

participation of people with disabilities may enhance the spiritual health of a center. Since many disabled people have dealt extensively with physical or psychological pain, and the breakdown of the body, they have much to teach about the truths Buddhists emphasize like impermanence and suffering. Likewise, displaying the flexibility necessary to accommodate disabilities while maintaining the efficacy of Buddhist practices aids a center in avoiding rigid attachment to particular elements of practice.

Attention to the work of scholars and activists in the disability movement, therefore, can play an important role in the development of contemporary Buddhism. First, the traditional view that disabilities are negative results of past karmic action can be rethought. Second, contemporary practices of reasonable accommodation can be employed to facilitate the Buddhist commitment to expanding the availability of Buddhist teachings. Finally, positive aspects of disabled experience can be recognized, in relation to both the practice of disabled Buddhists and the overall spiritual development of Buddhist centers. Likewise, disability studies can benefit from the careful analysis of impermanence, fragility, and suffering developed in Buddhist texts, which suggests all humans lie somewhere in a spectrum of dependence and vulnerability that is often erroneously attributed to disabled persons alone.