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Courage of Care.

This special issue of  
*The Arrow Journal* was produced in  
partnership with the  
Buddhist Studies Program at  
Union Theological Seminary.

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ISSN 2768-055X (Online)  
ISSN 2768-0568 (Print)

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# THE ARROW

*A JOURNAL OF WAKEFUL SOCIETY, CULTURE & POLITICS*

*THE ARROW JOURNAL* explores the relationship among contemplative practice, politics, and activism. Inspired in its founding by the teaching and social vision of meditation master Chögyam Trungpa, *THE ARROW* welcomes the insights of multiple contemplative lineages for achieving a kinder, healthier, and more compassionate world. We encourage dialogue on wisdom and knowledge arising from methods of contemplative inquiry, ways of embodied knowing, and intellectual disciplines. In doing so, *THE ARROW* provides a critical and much needed space for investigating the meeting point of contemplative wisdom and pressing social, political, and environmental challenges.

Cover and issue art by Maria Renee Johnson  
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# C O N T E N T S

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# Chief Editor's Introduction

BROOKE D. LAVELLE



I am so excited to share this special issue of *The Arrow Journal*, "Movement Dharma: Towards a Buddhist Movement Chaplaincy," with you all. We co-produced this issue with Union Theological Seminary's Buddhist Studies Program, which I now call home, out of a shared sense of commitment to liberatory praxis and around a core set of questions concerning the dharma and its relevance and accessibility in these times.

American Buddhism stands at a critical juncture. While Buddhist communities have grown significantly across the United States, contributing contemplative practices and philosophical insights to millions of practitioners, Buddhism remains largely absent from public discourse on the urgent moral and social challenges of our time. Unlike Christian, Jewish, and Islamic traditions, which have developed robust frameworks of public theology, Buddhism has yet to develop a sustained, visible public theological voice in the American context.

This absence is not due to any inherent limitation in Buddhist thought. Buddhist scriptures offer profound resources for addressing contem-

porary crises, and many of our Buddhist communities have a distinguished history of public activism. Yet in recent years, the relative silence among Buddhist spiritual leaders on urgent crises—from Gaza to the climate crisis to rising authoritarianism—have been, frankly, astounding.

Those who have been on the front lines organizing and, to put it bluntly, saying what needs to be said and doing what needs to be done, are also facing their own sets of challenges. Our movements themselves are facing profound challenges in the face of fascist political regimes, including heightened uncertainty, fracturing, burnout, and new forms of silo-ing.

At Union, we're convening a Praxis Group on Buddhist Civic and Spiritual Leadership and Movement Dharma to meet these challenges. Together with a team of Buddhist scholar-practitioners, movement chaplains, and activist-organizers, we are building a framework for a Buddhist Public and Liberation Theology, to help us understand and address Buddhism's lacking public political voice, and to help us imagine what a Buddhist Movement Chaplaincy—or a Movement Dharma—might contribute at this moment. This work is unfolding alongside rich lineages of spiritual activism from diverse wisdom and religious traditions.

Union Theological Seminary is a natural home for this project. For nearly 200 years, Union has been a globally recognized seminary and graduate school of theology where religious life and scholarship meet to reimagine the work of justice. *The Arrow's* lineage has also been pointing us toward understanding and enacting enlightened society. It is an honor and a gift to be in partnership, and to bring our deep, thoughtful, and committed communities together for this project.

The essays in this issue are written by several members of this new Praxis Group, as well as Union's Buddhist Studies community more

broadly. Several other scholar-practitioners contributed beautiful essays and articles to help work out and work through some of the core concerns of our overall Movement Dharma Project.

Mishka's opening essay wrestles with the term, "Socially Engaged Buddhism": "Isn't the dharma—by way of its cosmology, ontology, ethical frameworks—by default 'socially engaged'?" she asks. Her reflections call us to consider what this term does for us—and also what it might distort. Santosh Rout's article unpacks the pillars of Ambedkar's "Dhammology" and situates it within the broader field of socially engaged Buddhism. He then places Ambedkar in dialogue with W. E. B. Du Bois and Howard Thurman, before turning to what a contemporary Buddhist movement chaplaincy might learn from all three.

Tendor's interview on the movement for a Free Tibet brings struggles for liberation into sharper focus. He reflects on the lack of Buddhist public engagement not only in relationship to Tibet, but also Gaza, and calls us to consider what courage and the bodhisattva vow might really ask of each of us.

Rebecca's essay considers the relationship between Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of "spiritual activism" and the principles and practices of the bodhisattva path undertaken by Buddhist movement chaplains as a means of coalition building and bridging. Ayo's interview, "Was the Buddha Movement Chaplain?", explores themes of exile and how leaving the familiar can support political and spiritual awakening.

Chris brings teachings on "selflessness" to bear on our movements. His essay challenges the focus on "community" in our circles, and invites us to consider how loosening our grip on the comforts of certain aspects of identity might help us *actually* practice solidarity. Robbie calls our attention to frameworks in general and asks us specifically to consider how nondual Buddhist ontologies might help us navigate complexities concerning justice and abolition.

Sean's essay on his time on Hart Island is a stunning example of chaplaincy, and the arts of ac-

companiment, bearing witness, and transmuting suffering. We were even further moved by Sean's mentionings of the datura plant, which we found in the portfolio of this issue's guest artist, Maria Renee Johnson. It felt like a divine coincidence, and also a confirmation that her beautiful, earthy work—which captures and reflects so many of the dualities and tensions inherent in movement dharma—was the right art for this volume.

Adam's essay is worth the read. (We are waiting for the book!) Building an effective Movement Dharma calls us to understand various models of transformation found within in our spiritual and political lineages. We can't wait to study this one together. And speaking of studying, please get a copy of Jessica's book, *Just Awakening*, which just won the Numata Prize. It was a joy to interview her.

Huge gratitude to Mishka for dedicating such joyful, tireless energy to editing and laying out this issue, and for being such a gifted writer, thinker, and collaborator! I am grateful too, to my friend and colleague, Monika, our special guest editor, for giving so much of herself to this project, as she does for so many other people and communities she cares for. Her insights, energy, and care are reflected in these pages. Thanks also to our beloved Erika Arthur for editing and moral support. And last but certainly not least, thanks to Greg Snyder, founder of Union's Buddhist Studies Program, for his endless visionary capacity, enthusiasm, and committed collaboration.

Thanks again to all of our contributors for being so very generous with your writing and wisdom. May the courage, care, and vision called forward in these pages be realized, for benefit for all!

With care,

Brooke D. Lavelle, Ph.D.  
Co-Director, *The Arrow & Courage of Care*  
Program Director, *Buddhist Studies at*  
*Union Theological Seminary*

## Co-Editor's Introduction

### MISHKA ERDENESANAA



#### An Ode to Vultures, Sky Burial, and Kali Ma

*My eyes adjust to darkness. More evolved creatures know this, do not fear dusk but come fiercely alive in its violet tunnel. Coyotes, bush cats, vultures—eternal mothers and daughters conceived by wind, winged pneuma. From what other scavengers can I learn? What tricksters and soldiers? I am dim, stunned.*

I recently rediscovered these words I scrawled in a journal entry five years ago, steeped in grief. The sense memory of that darkness feels appropriate to autumn's approach here in the northern hemisphere. What insight could I offer in the yearly descent to darkness, in an age of darkness? Like I did five years ago, I must defer to the crepuscular and carrion-eating. Like the vultures that eat flesh from sky burials, I want to keep my eyes open to the life-sustaining potential in death: the death of our sociopolitical systems, of our expectations of civilization, of my ego.

Easier said than done. What about the

death of entire species and languages, of our most innocent, of the children that James Baldwin reminded us are “always ours, every single one of them, all over the world”?

The need to grieve and bury our dead is overwhelming. This is treacherous work—work that one cannot easily turn back from, once started. But in doing so, in doing the shadow work and meeting our unmet needs and resourcing ourselves, it can be easy to forget that it's not the full extent of the work. Like Persephone returning to the earth's surface each spring, rejoicing in what sunlight and life exists can realign with our intentions. As one of my dharma teachers once reminded me, “You do not need to feel guilty for having access to joy or resources or love. Do not hoard them, but do not disrespect their preciousness, which mirrors the preciousness of our suffering, by ignoring them. Let it all move freely.”

That phrase—the preciousness of bliss (joy, contentment), which mirrors the preciousness of suffering—haunts me. The separation does not exist. The guru principle reminds us that every facet of experience can be seen as an extension of the guru. When approached with curiosity and equanimity, the moment of contact and reaction with anyone and anything can teach us about our psychological, physical, and spiritual impulses. Even the crumbling of outdated or oppressive systems can feel terrifying: the death of what we know. In bardo practices, we are urged to remain steady, lest the visions of our karma draw us into a painful, distorted new incarnation. Perhaps the movement chaplain is analogous to a bardo guide: to be patient at these sites of transformation—to hold the zone, to steward the death of what needs to die, and to pay attention to what we create in the wake.

In the *Devī Māhātmya*, Kali Ma—the tantric goddess of time and death—assists Durga in subduing the demon Raktabija and his countless manifestations. In other accounts, even Yamarāja (the Lord of Death) fears her, suggesting that something in her representation and energetic archetype challenges the finality of death itself. Lord Siva, her consort, by some accounts lays down before her to try to quell her rage, lest she destroy the universe itself. The moment of her enraged body touching the devoted, loving body of her consort subdues her wrath.

This moment of contact brings me to tears. In it, I feel the potency of her wisdom distilled: to transmute the violence and disorientation of death and darkness—to absorb its charge and be fueled by it—but never at the expense of our tenderness. To metabolize impermanence and destruction in service of connectedness and continued life, in whatever surprising forms it may take. In Hindu cosmology, we are said to be in an age of darkness: a Kali Yuga. In such times of contraction, even "true" dharmic teachings become hard to distinguish from false or distorted ones.

Working on this issue has afforded me an intimate view of how chaplains, spiritual leaders, teachers, and organizers conceive of the work, and some of what's being done. I have learned so much from the wisdom and generosity of everyone who's helped this special issue come together.

May all of our work, not limited to the page, be in service of liberation for all. May Kali Ma remain close and help us cut through delusion and ego-clinging and harm, over and over. May the countless deaths, of beings and systems and ways

of being, never be in vain. May all beings, without exception, be free.

With metta,

Mishka Erdenesanaa

# Guest Editor's Introduction

MONIKA L. SON



Since the second reign of Trump began, I have wondered whether to live by Buddhist vows in this moment requires us to question the way that training in those vows has been presented. In my own training and mentoring of chaplains, I have felt, again and again, the limits of spiritual care when it is imagined only as something that happens beside an individual bed, in a zen-do or interview room, or at the threshold of a personal crisis. I have observed the need for care in the community meetings, anti-ICE trainings, interfaith gatherings, and movement spaces where people are simultaneously holding collective grief while building collective possibility. The crises that draw me toward this work are political, economic, ecological, and deeply intimate. I care for and love the many beings with whom I am in relationship. When they hurt, I hurt, and I am not alone. This hurt lives in our bodies. It lives in the ways we have been taught to separate ourselves from one another, from the Earth, from history, and from the consequences of the institutions we

participate in. Movement chaplaincy matters to me because it begins to address the underlying roots of the conditions that cause that separation, and because it asks how vows can keep us connected to our spiritual orientation without asking us to disappear into our own personal political conditioning.

Movement dharma is an invitation to bridge our practices and movements, to unify practice and action, contemplation and politics, self-care and collective care. I think of movement dharma as teachings and practices that support a weaving of these forms together. I come alongside communities in many contexts. I steward conversations around death and dying, facilitate discussions on gender justice in the classroom, hold spaces for those suffering from climate anxiety, and guide spiritual formation for student chaplains. I am also a steward to those who steward: movement builders and organizers, caregivers of loved ones who are chronically ill or dying, and organizations that are impacting justice work. At the heart of this work lies a question I hear often in movement and spiritual communities: How do we continue to serve, organize, and care for one another when the world feels like it is falling apart and we are already exhausted?

In those moments, I often invoke Glassman Roshi's question: "Who are we cooking for? Even though it may seem as if we are cooking for ourselves, we are always cooking for everybody at the same time. This is because we are all interconnected." As a Buddhist movement chaplain, this teaching reminds me that how I nourish my own formation is also connected to the nourishment of those I come alongside. There are people inside our movements and spiritual communities who are carrying responsibility, tending to others,

navigating threats, nervous system and trauma activation, and trying to remain human while doing demanding work. What I am referring to is beyond assessing for burnout; I am curious about what nourishes people to stay in relationship to what they are tending, from a space of resource as well as discernment, that includes compassion and attention to what will best serve. When we do not see spiritual life and the material conditions of people's lives as one, "we are locked into a worldview that separates us from reality."

The shape of the question as I understand it now is: As a movement chaplain, how can I be formed into a person capable of staying in relationship to both the spiritual and material conditions of people's lives? For me, movement chaplaincy/dharma is a formation, training in a culture of relationality, discipline, wholeness, and clear discernment that supports acts of compassion and interdependence. It is a chaplaincy that asks what kinds of practices, communities, rituals, and ethical commitments make it possible to stay porous without being flooded, devoted without becoming obedient, and accountable without losing our uprightness.

During my own formation, there were two salient experiences that helped me understand what movement chaplaincy might mean in practice. The first took place in the relative quiet of a Zen monastery. The second unfolded across the streets of New York City. They could not have looked more different, yet both taught me about the possibilities for emergent interdependent collective action and practice.

At Upaya Zen Center, I spent mornings in *samu*, scrubbing toilets, oiling wooden panels, tending altars, and doing what was needed alongside others. I came from an achievement-driven academic world where I had learned to measure myself through recognition, productivity, and individualism. At Upaya, much of the work was

intentionally quiet for the benefit of the collective. My body softened into the simple dignity of cleaning, bowing, and sweeping. I now understand those mornings as part of my formation in movement chaplaincy: preparation not to leave the temple for the world, but to recognize the whole world as a moving temple. Samu taught me to notice the conditions that sustain collective life and the labor often hidden within it. Not only the physical labor but the intentional stewardship of formation that asks us to shift our relationship to one another, to our lives, and to our actions.

Over time, I came to see that these conditions extend far beyond monastery walls. Movement chaplaincy asks us to attend to these conditions without separating political and spiritual life. That understanding became especially vivid during the Day of Remembering Our Interdependence ([mahasanghanyc.com](http://mahasanghanyc.com)) when Buddhist practitioners, teachers, community leaders, interfaith clergy, medics, artists, and neighbors walked across New York City. I was one of the organizers, but I was moved by our collective practice that emerged throughout the day. In places marked by struggle and memory, like the South Bronx, Staten Island, the African Burial Ground, and the Metropolitan Detention Center, I witnessed community leaders who spoke about housing, health care, childcare, labor, and dignity. At the African Burial Ground, standing with Indigenous elders, I felt the ground itself move from the cries of the buried dead, the original peoples of the land, enslaved Africans, and immigrants. Those of us gathered there were not separate from one another; we were standing inside, alongside one another, together, one living fabric.

At the Metropolitan Detention Center, we placed our palms and foreheads against the prison wall and took turns "holding" the burden of those detained inside. I remember the heat, the thirst, the ache in my heart, and the feeling of

my own limitations. I could not open the doors and let people free. I could not undo the violence of the building. But I could stay. I could pray. I could feel my body in relationship with the bodies inside and with the practitioners beside me. We were led in metta, prayer, chant, and prostration. We were invited to see not only the violence of the prison, but also the seeds of violence within ourselves. That day taught me that a public movement dharma is a way of going up and down the mountain at the same time.

Bernie Glassman Roshi's teaching that "we go up and down the mountain at the same time" has become one way I understand that we practice in the very midst of crisis. We bear witness not from a distance, but as participants in one body. We act not as a departure from spiritual life, but as one of the ways spiritual life becomes real. To go up and down the mountain at the same time is to embrace a non-dual view of the spiritual and political; to keep asking how formation can accompany action, and how action can keep deepening our commitment to one another and what matters.

My orientation to movement chaplaincy is not just as a field of care, but as an essential field of ethical formation. It shapes people who can listen, respond, organize, mourn, imagine, and act without reproducing the very patterns of domination they seek to interrupt.

I am concerned for our current movements. I have seen how movements ask people to keep moving even when they are exhausted, grieving, afraid, or in conflict. Activists and organizers are often expected to be endlessly resilient, strategically clear, morally certain, and emotionally available while navigating internal tensions, burnout, disappointment, and loss. I know of that pressure in myself. I know the temptation to confuse urgency with aliveness, or sacrifice with commitment. Movement chaplaincy is a way to create spaces where grief is honored, conflict is held with

dignity, and spiritual imagination is treated as part of the work rather than an afterthought. It cannot replace organizing, leadership, or analysis. It can, however, deepen these lineages by examining what kind of people and communities we are becoming as we struggle for collective liberation.

There is a koan and an image that stays with me in this conversation, which Case 89 from the Blue Cliff Record:

Yun Yen asked Tao Wu, "What does the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion use so many hands and eyes for?"

Wu said, "It's like someone reaching back groping for a pillow in the middle of the night."

Yen said, "I understand."

Wu said, "How do you understand it?"

Yen said, "All over the body are hands and eyes."

Wu said: "You have quite a bit there, but you've only said 80 percent of it."

Yen said: "What do you say, Elder brother?"

Wu said, "Throughout the body are hands and eyes."

The Bodhisattva of Great Compassion is described and displayed as having many hands and eyes throughout the body. I return to this image because it helps me imagine compassion not as something I possess or dispense, but as some-

thing distributed through a body larger than my own. One hand reaches, another steadies, another cooks, another writes, another chants, another organizes, another rests. One eye sees what I cannot see. Another eye observes what I would have missed. Movement chaplaincy, as I understand it, asks how our movements might cultivate not more hands and eyes, but deeper ways of seeing, deeper ways of reaching, limitless ways of holding, and luminous ways of responding together in the dark, with one foot grounded in practice and the other, ready to act with compassion.

For this reason, I see this special issue of *The Arrow* as an invitation to gather language around what many communities and dharmic lineages have already been doing for generations. Movement chaplaincy is not a new invention so much as an emerging language and orientation for ancient and ongoing forms of accompaniment, ritual, protection, prayer, public witness, liberatory care, and compassionate action. Together and collectively, I believe more continues to emerge. I need this language too. I need ways to understand the forms of care I have received, the practices that have held me, and the communities that have taught me to keep turning toward the world. I believe our movements need spiritual leadership that can bear witness to suffering while helping us remember our collective capacity for transformation. We need practices that do not ask us to choose between the cushion and the street, between inner liberation and structural change, between tending the self and tending the world. We need ways of giving ourselves to what is larger than ourselves without abandoning the ground of conscience, embodiment, and care that allows us to remain whole. We need to go up and down the mountain at the same time.

Our commitments may at times be unrecognized, challenged, or even misunderstood by Buddhist teachers, Buddhist institutions, or the communities we serve. Movement chaplaincy is not formation in order to choose one loyalty over another: What is right for me, what is right in the

dharmic, or what is right for my communities. It is formation on the edges of political life, in living those tensions with openness, compassion, ethical clarity, and moral uprightness.

I also want to speak honestly about the tensions inside this work. Giving myself to a movement does not mean surrendering my conscience, my limits, or my ethical and moral discernment. The risk is not only burnout, though burnout is real. There is also the risk of confusing belonging with compliance, strategy with wisdom, or collective commitment to nonviolence with the silencing of questions that still matter. For Buddhist chaplains, this can be especially tender. How we practice and define movement dharma has real consequences. If our movements are to help create a more liberated world, then the ways we practice within tensions must include the ways we meet real political constrictions, disagree with one another, rest while others work, lead while others follow, and find our own dharmic paths that may not be traditional ones. These practices are not secondary to the work; they are part of the world we are already making.

Monika L. Son



*For the Movement Chaplains, Healers, Activists and Leaders  
And the Dharma Teachers, Wisdom Keepers, and Seers  
May our shared wisdom, love, and struggle be of benefit  
to all beings everywhere.*



1. Do not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. Buddhist systems of thought are guiding means; they are not absolute truth.
2. Do not think the knowledge you presently possess is changeless, absolute truth. Avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. Learn and practice nonattachment from views in order to be open to receive others' viewpoints. Truth is found in life and not merely in conceptual knowledge. Be ready to learn throughout your entire life and to observe reality in yourself and in the world at all times.
3. Do not force others, including children, by any means whatsoever, to adopt your views, whether by authority, threat, money, propaganda, or even education. However, through compassionate dialogue, help others renounce fanaticism and narrowness.
4. Do not avoid contact with suffering or close your eyes before suffering. Do not lose awareness of the existence of suffering in the life of the world. Find ways to be with those who are suffering, including personal contact, visits, images, and sounds. By such means, awaken yourself and others to the reality of suffering in the world.

—*Thich Nhat Hanh, The Fourteen Precepts of Engaged Buddhism*  
(From "Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism," 1993)



## Becoming the Refuge: On Socially Engaged Buddhism

MISHKA ERDENESANAA

### Shantideva Prayer

May I become at all times, both now and forever  
A protector of those without protection,  
A guide for those who have lost their way,  
A ship for those with oceans to cross,  
A bridge for those with rivers to cross,  
A sanctuary for those in danger,  
A lamp for those without light,  
A place of refuge for those who lack shelter,  
And a servant to all in need  
For as long as space endures,  
And for as long as living beings remain,  
Until then may I, too, abide  
To dispel the misery of the world.

This prayer sits on my altar beside *thangkas*, statuettes, offering bowls, and a *mala* passed down through three generations. I am supposed to read this prayer every morning, along with taking refuge. I do, most mornings. But some days, I rush past it on my way to class, work, or errands.

My root teacher recently reminded us to practice confession: to take stock of our commitment to the practice, how we experience the practice, and where

we struggled. In arguably every tradition, we inherit words and aspirations larger than our capacity to live them. We recite vows that feel easier to understand in the abstract than in our living, breathing, bleeding, perpetually moving world. We say “all beings” and sometimes, if not often, proceed through a day organized, more or less, around the needs and concerns of an atomized “I”.

Some Fridays, I hit snooze instead of going to the immigration court accompaniments I committed to. Sometimes I look past the unhoused mother asking for help, or screen the call of someone who I know needs me.

Then, inevitably, the Shantideva Prayer brings me to tears, if I approach it with an open heart and (figuratively or literally) on my knees. It forces me to stoke the flame of bodhicitta in my heart. It reminds me to find the medicine of my own liberation within, and oriented toward, the suffering and liberation of all beings. It breaks my heart enough for me to muscle up and do the damn thing.

The phrase “Socially Engaged Buddhism” can be useful. It names a recognizable body of Buddhist movements and practitioners who embodied the dharma through physicalized, blood-sweat-and-tears responses to war, poverty, caste, colonialism, ecological destruction, systematic racism, and other Goliath-like manifestations of collective suffering. The modern history of Socially Engaged Buddhism spotlights figures including Thích Nhất Hạnh, B. R. Ambedkar, A. T. Ariyaratne, Sulak Sivaraksa, and the 14th Dalai Lama. We can trace institutions, movements, schools, and organizations that have lived Buddhist ethics into the public world.

Yet the phrase confounds me. Isn't the dharma—by way of its cosmology, ontology, ethical frameworks—by default “socially engaged”? I understand the bodhisattva vow as promising to reincarnate over and over, all the while stewarding the cessation of suffering, until all beings are free: to refuse to get off the carousel, so to speak, until the carousel as such no longer exists. At first, it sounds like an insane promise to make.

But the promise hinges on a felt understanding that one's liberation is inseparable from the liberation of others. The dedication of merit refuses to allow the fruits of practice to isolate within the practitioner. The doctrine of dependent origination renders the idea of atomized existence absurd. Indra's Net offers a gloriously psychedelic image of beings whose lives reflect and condition one another infinitely. Even the *Triratna*—Buddha, Dharma, Sangha—

grounds liberation in relationship. In this context, it begins to feel insane not to make such a vow.

The tension I'm pointing to, perhaps, is not that Buddhism lacks a theory of social engagement. It's that theories are remarkably easy to keep theoretical and conceptual, and are incredibly seductive in feeding yet another layer of illusion: of fulfilling commitments without bleeding for them. These conceptual frameworks remain mental schema we handle, with varying degrees of faith and devotion, until they become something else: lived obligation. Ken Jones describes this movement from interior, individualized practice toward social action with a humility that I find more compelling than many calls to activism. "The humility of mindfulness," he writes, "lives out the sufferings of humanity and shares them." The practitioner must accept both the helplessness of relieving suffering and "the unrefusable need to do so." For Jones, inner acceptance is not an alternative to outer effectiveness; it is what makes outer effectiveness possible.<sup>1</sup> This is a difficult proposition. It suggests that contemplative life does not culminate in withdrawal from the world but in a transformed, intimate relationship to its messiness and dynamism.

Almost two years ago, I sat in a course on Socially Engaged Buddhism in the halls of a school whose institutional history itself emphasizes engaged theology and social activism. We studied the peace work of Thích Nhất Hạnh and Vietnamese Buddhist monastics during the war: negotiations on behalf of refugees, eleventh-hour political negotiations to prevent "boat people" from dying at sea, and physically forming corridors through which civilians escaped gunfire.

We studied Ambedkarite Buddhism and its transformation of Buddhist identity into an instrument of caste resistance. We traveled deep into the practical, ideological, and theological foundations of several movements: in which religious practice is not a sedative or escape from social reality, but a direct, embodied path to building the courage, language, and relationships necessary to confront it. If Socially Engaged Buddhism has to be named, institutionalized, and taught as a discrete movement, what of the Buddhist lineages and ancestral blueprints that long preceded it?

...

One major factor seems to be how little of Buddhist histories reaches many Western practitioners.

In a recent interview with *The Arrow*, Buddhist scholar and psychiatrist Joe Loizzo urged looking beyond the selective 20th-century genealogy of Socially Engaged Buddhism. Doing so recovers a complex history of Buddhism subverting political power. He pointed toward the likes of Ashokan traditions, liberative conceptions of medicine and ecology, the Vimalakīrti Sutra's challenges to monastic Buddhism, and the Kālachakra cycle's political and cosmological imagination.

These histories are not stories of Buddhist "purity" corrupted by politics or the world "out there." There was never such purity to recover. Buddhist practice has always lived alongside (and often through) kings and empires, monastic institutions and armies, social hierarchies and systems of patronage. Buddhist communities have both challenged political orders and depended upon them. The history is, then, less comforting than a simple story of "engaged Buddhism" might suggest. But that may be exactly why we need it.

If we imagine Buddhist practice as private, atomized, and contemplative and then encounter dharmic political engagement as a modern phenomenon, we fall into the trap of conceiving "the social world" as somehow external to the dharma. "Politics" becomes something that Buddhists may choose to engage or not. The longer, more contextualized history asks different questions: What happens when the dharma encounters power? And maybe an equally uncomfortable one: What happens when power encounters the dharma?

Robert Bobilin's comparative study of Buddhist and Christian movements for justice in Thailand and Sri Lanka offers another way into this question. His subject is not Buddhism in isolation (including but not limited to monastic life), but religious movements attempting responses to concrete structures of suffering.<sup>2</sup> That distinction matters. Religions posit elaborate ethical frameworks without necessarily producing ethical institutions. Religious communities, like political communities and like individuals, develop habits, inherit and assemble histories, remember some forms of suffering and forget or inflict others.

Perhaps what we sometimes call a community's "collective shadow" can be examined through a Buddhist vocabulary of habituation: What suffering have we trained ourselves not to see? What forms of speech have we normal-

ized? What histories have become inconvenient? What kinds of violence do we recognize immediately, and which do we encounter as background noise or necessary collateral damage?

...

Donald Rothberg, a sociologist, dharma teacher, and leading scholar of socially engaged spirituality, raised another difficulty in a recent conversation with *The Arrow*: the relationship between inner transformation and outer action. First we work on ourselves; then, perhaps, we go into the world. Yet we know this distinction is illusory. Rothberg recalled Thomas Merton's image of inner awakening as something like a shy animal that emerges only when it feels safe. The image is beautiful to me, in large part because it refuses the fantasy or overly mystified experience of spiritual work. We are ethically required to respond, Rothberg said, even when it is difficult to know how to respond.

Hegel's "slaughter-bench of history," Rothberg noted, offers a grim reminder: people who believe themselves to be "doing good" inevitably participate in systems that reproduce suffering.<sup>3</sup>

I have practiced within Tibetan Buddhist traditions—Nyingma and Gelugpa primarily—with teachers and sanghas shaped by Mongolian, Thai, Tibetan, American, and many more histories. I've seen firsthand how we can meditate without knowing or caring about the histories or peoples whose practices we have inherited. We can recite vows without asking what they demanded of the people who first spoke them, or of those killed, imprisoned, or exiled for following them. We can invoke compassion while imagining "politics" as an unfortunate distraction from, or a yet unattainable arena of, spirituality.

This separation feels particularly strange in traditions whose ritual and symbolic worlds are so thoroughly embodied. The Buddhist imagination is full of bridges and boats, medicine and refuge, hungry ghosts and polluted lands, kings and beggars, bodies and landscapes. The world is not merely the setting in which practice occurs. It is the field in which practice means something. Of course, I say all of this, in part, as a reminder to myself: my own form of confession.

Even the language of refuge resists privatization. To take refuge is not simply to realize an interior state of compassion or bodhicitta. A bridge is useful because someone is trying to cross something. A sanctuary matters because someone is in danger. A lamp matters because there is darkness. Refuge is what we can, and must, become for another and ourselves.

...

Many mornings, I still rush through the Shantideva Prayer despite the tearful promises I made to and with my teacher and dharma siblings, before our lineages.

Maybe that is not evidence that the prayer, or I, have failed. Maybe it is evidence that I am still learning to live up to what it asks. To become a protector of those without protection is not simply to become a more compassionate person. To become a bridge does not simply mean cultivating a quality of mind. To become a refuge requires knowing something about what makes other people unsafe. It requires attention to institutions and histories, to language and power, to the distribution of vulnerability, and the painful and life-saving shadow work within ourselves and our collective. It requires physical labor and concrete, practical skills of all kinds.

I don't think that every Buddhist should be an activist or organizer—on the contrary. Nor do I think that Buddhism offers a single or superior political pathway. The history of Buddhist communities is too complicated, and Buddhist teachings too internally diverse, for those to be possible or worth working toward.

If karma means anything, our intentions and habits matter beyond the boundaries of private consciousness or our peace of mind. If sangha means anything, then it is not merely a group of people who happen to practice in the same room or have the same teacher(s). If refuge means anything, then refuge must become something we not only take, but also offer.

May I become at all times, both now and forever  
A protector of those without protection,  
A guide for those who have lost their way,  
A ship for those with oceans to cross,

A bridge for those with rivers to cross,  
 A sanctuary for those in danger,  
 A lamp for those without light,  
 A place of refuge for those who lack shelter,  
 And a servant to all in need  
 For as long as space endures,  
 And for as long as living beings remain,  
 Until then may I, too, abide  
 To dispel the misery of the world.<sup>4</sup>

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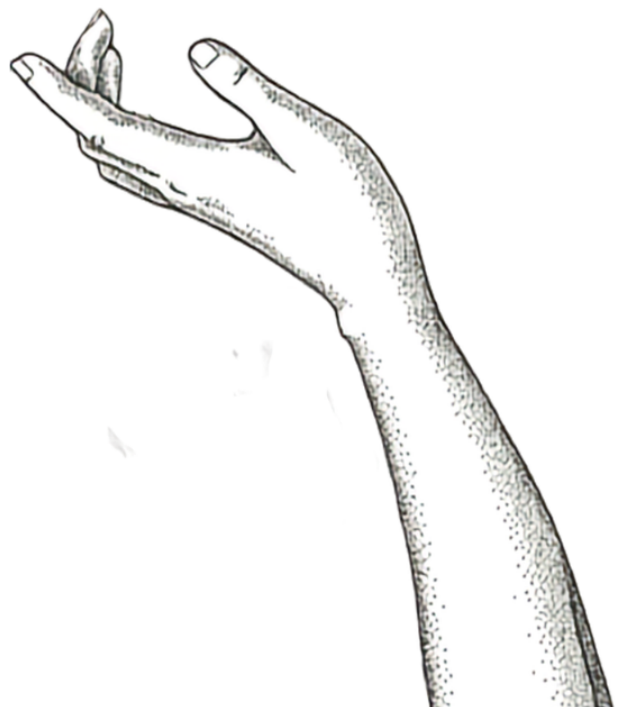
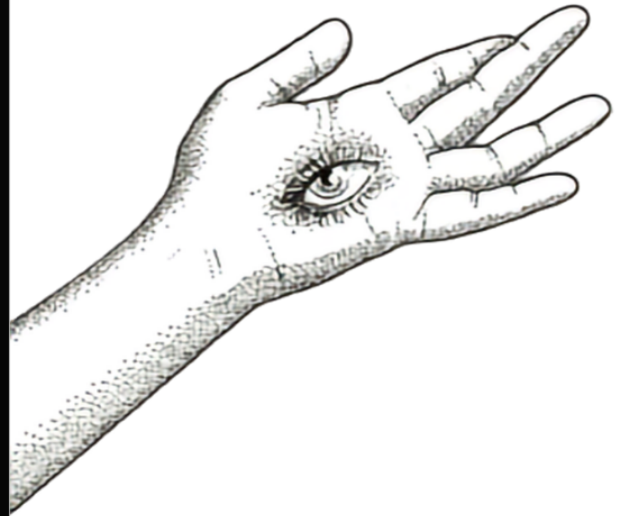
“Freedom of mind is the real freedom.  
A person whose mind is not free though  
he may not be in chains, is not a free  
man.\*

One whose mind is not free, though he  
may not be in prison, is a prisoner and  
not a free man.

One whose mind is not free though  
alive, is no better than dead.  
Freedom of mind is the proof of one's  
existence.”

—— *Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar,*  
*Writings And Speeches: A Ready*  
*Reference Manual*

\*[removed: “slave”]





## Navayāna Buddhist Ministry: Dr. Ambedkar's Dhamma and the Making of a Buddhist Movement Chaplaincy for Social Democracy and Liberation

SANTOSH I. RAUT

WE ARE IN urgent need of spiritual leadership equal to the interlocking social, economic, political, and ecological crises of our time – crises that are, at their root, relational and dualistic, born of the many ways human beings have learned to treat one another as separate, as ranked, as disposable. Nearly seventy years before this call was written, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar arrived at strikingly similar terms for a comparably total crisis. In 1956, nearly a decade after Indian Independence, Ambedkar embraced Buddhism, an act that opened a new window through which to view Indian history, particularly for the lower castes and all those who had long suffered under the hierarchies of the caste system. The process of building a new India had already set in motion a range of competing ideological visions, each seeking to reconstruct a national culture capable of honouring both the proud heritage of the ancient past and the egalitarian promises of the modern future. This search drew many creative thinkers toward a progressive and experimental modernism in art and culture, pursued as a common project across ideological and sociological divides.

Yet despite genuine good intentions and shared dreams of a modern India, the country continued to suffer under the weight of entrenched caste divisions and inter-religious tensions. Historical figures such as Kabir, Raidas, Tukaram, Ayothee Dasa, Narayana Guru, Periyar Ramaswamy, Basavanna, and the great social reformer Mahatma Jyotiba Phule had tirelessly fought for the eradication of untouchability and, in the face of severe opposition, worked toward the education of *Shudras*, Untouchables, and women in pre-modern caste-based society. For these reformers, liberation from caste exploitation, gender oppression, and cultural subjugation—the achievement of liberty, equality, and fraternity—was of paramount importance. Without such liberation, the suffering and exploitation endemic to the Indian socio-cultural environment would continue to be perpetuated by those who wielded dominant power in both society and state.

The forces that proclaimed a vision of a new India—forces largely led by dominant-caste intelligentsia—could therefore offer little genuine inspiration to the cultural and artistic expression of the nation's downtrodden. It was precisely this reality that led Dr. B. R. Ambedkar to chart a distinct course of evolution for the marginalized and progressive masses of the nation. What was a source of cultural pride for some was, for others, a source of deep pain and historical hurtful humiliation. The social struggle to claim what was rightfully due became a defining imperative for most of the lower castes in post-independence India.

Ambedkar saw no hope for these communities within the confines of a Brahmanical-Hindu culturally hierarchical society. His vision for India's downtrodden combined the possibilities of democracy with the promises of egalitarian Buddhist philosophy, a vision that lay explicitly outside the inhuman caste system and the fragmented cultures it produced. His ideas of a free India were anchored in the principles of Justice, Dignity, Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, which he conspicuously enshrined in the Preamble of the Indian Constitution. Buddhism, for Ambedkar, provided the philosophical foundation upon which a democratic, egalitarian, and casteless Indian society might be built.

The acute awareness of inequality and exploitation created the urgent need to free human beings from all unequal systems and to integrate this aspiration into the central teachings of the Buddha's compassionate humanism. Dr. Ambedkar was firmly of the opinion that genuine reform could only take place through a transformation of the heart and mind. In his philosophy, religion does not exist for its own sake but must always serve the development of the human person. His revolution was non-violent, oriented toward peace and harmony among different castes and religions, with the ultimate aim of establishing true humanity in a free India. These were the foundational ingredients of Ambedkarite cultural and socio-spiritual imagination and, this essay will suggest, they are also foundational ingredients for any contemporary Buddhist movement chaplaincy that hopes to hold both the intimate work of bearing witness and the structural work of transformation.

The flowering of oppressed people's creative expression in independent India came much later, following the unprecedented social liberation of formerly Untouchable communities in the 1970s. This awakening took the form of an oppressed—*Dalit*, if I may use the political category—cultural and literary movement, which first emerged in Maharashtra before spreading across other regions of India. Guided by a new aesthetic shaped by the spiritual philosophy of Buddhism and the humanistic vision of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, a new culture and creativity emerged, seeking to offer an egalitarian model and a transformative message to Indian society. The

awakening of Buddhist creativity brought about a sea change in the form and content of literary and dramatic arts since the 1970s, yet it remained to be more fully expressed in the visual and performing arts—forms which, in the contemporary context, have become among the most elitist and esoteric of all cultural practices.

*They alone rise who strive. Some of you nurse the wrong notion that you will not rise in this world. But remember that the age of helplessness has ended. A new epoch has set in. All things are now possible...*<sup>1</sup>

The path that Ambedkar charted for Indian society to bring about radical transformation was comprehensive, operating simultaneously at the socio-political, cultural, psychological, and spiritual levels. Notably, he understood both the self and culture not as fixed, unchangeable givens, but as dynamic and revisable categories. It is here that Buddhism, with its foundational emphasis on experience as flux and transformation, plays a dominant role—a role that Ambedkar himself exemplified through his own journey of conversion and renewal, and a role that positions his thought as an early and rigorous instance of nondual approaches to relational crisis: Ambedkar refused to separate the inner transformation of mind from the outer transformation of social and political order, treating each as incomplete without the other.

### Where to Go? A Brief Overview of Dr. Ambedkar's Quest for a New Identity

Ambedkar's lifelong quest for a new human identity reached its culmination just two months before his death. On October 14, 1956, at Deekshabhoomi in Nagpur—now remembered as the site of the Great Mass Conversion—he embraced Buddhism along with several hundred thousand of his followers. In doing so, he infused a new confidence into his people and into Indian society at large, leaving behind the inherited identity of caste and declaring his new Buddhist identity as a “new birth.”<sup>2</sup> At his conversion ceremony, while delivering his speech and administering the 22 vows, he declared: “I am reborn today.”<sup>3</sup>

This declaration was both a deeply personal act of conviction and a conscious effort to lay down a path that others could follow, a path toward a new human identity, or what may be called the recognition of the true Human-Self. It is also significant that in this project of transforming and contextualizing identity, Ambedkar deliberately chose a religion of Indian origin, one that could both legitimize the claims of the Untouchables and affirm their rightful place within the Indian heritage.

Ambedkar firmly held that the Buddha was an Enlightened person, not a god in the conventional sense. He emphasized that while human beings possess both body and mind, mere physical freedom is insufficient. For a full human life, freedom of the mind is of prime importance. Through his conversion, Ambedkar thus made a successful attempt to emancipate the Untouchables from their identity crisis, restoring them with new moral confidence and providing them with a new, dignified sense of self.

Recent scholarship on what is now widely termed Navayāna or Ambedkarite Buddhism has clarified just how deliberate this reconstruction was. Ambedkar's own text, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, reframes the Buddha less as a teacher of release from the cycle of rebirth than as a teacher of social emancipation and ethical practice; *dukkha*, the suffering at the centre of the Buddha's teaching, is recast in explicitly social terms—as inequality, humiliation, and structural oppression rather than only the inward suffering born of craving and attachment. Liberation, in this reading, is not release from samsara alone but emancipation from oppressive social structures and the building of an ethical community grounded in equality.<sup>4</sup> This is precisely the move that makes Ambedkar's Buddhism a resource for movement chaplaincy rather than only for individual pastoral care: it insists, as a matter of doctrine and not merely of application, that the mind cannot be liberated in isolation from the social body it inhabits.

### The Role of Buddhism in Dr. Ambedkar's Vision

Buddhism is, without question, an inseparable part of ancient Indian heritage. It erects a path of emancipation and liberation from suffering for all human beings, irrespective of caste, colour, race, or gender. Historical and cultural memory are indivisible parts of the human self. Lower-caste people have been systematically denied many forms of rights within the Indian caste culture, a reality that testifies to the painful degradation of human existence wrought by untouchability and the caste system, practices that remain disturbingly present in contemporary Indian society.

Buddhism transformed the hierarchical trajectory of Indian cultural history. As the Buddha taught, every self possesses an equal capacity to achieve Buddhahood (*sambodhi*), and this capacity is entirely independent of caste. The enlightened self is, by definition, beyond discrimination of birth, caste, race, colour, or gender. Each person can attain enlightenment; the self therefore holds an equal potential for inner development and cannot be denied its capacity for growth on the basis of birth or social origin.

Ambedkar truly recognized that the concept of caste, and indeed all forms of inequality, is ultimately rooted in the mind. He acknowledged this in one of his most celebrated insights:

*The greatest thing that the Buddha has done is to tell that the world cannot be reformed except by the reformation of the mind of man, and the mind of the world.<sup>5</sup>*

This was, for Ambedkar, the great project of reconstructing Indian culture: reviving the egalitarian and humanistic values already latent within the Indian heritage, specifically through a return to Buddhism from its own native soil. He elaborated on the transformative function of religion in the following terms:

*The function of the Dhamma (religion) is to reconstruct the world, is to cleanse the mind of its impurities and to make the world the kingdom of the righteousness. Its function must promote learning open to all and must break down barriers between man and man, and should teach that the Worth not Birth is the measure of man.<sup>6</sup>*

It is important to distinguish Ambedkar's philosophical position from that of Karl Marx. While both were concerned with the liberation of oppressed people, Ambedkar's struggle for emancipation was not aimed merely at material goals or the acquisition of political power. Rather, it sought the spiritual transformation of human beings, a transformation modelled on the enlightenment of the Buddha himself. Ambedkar led his struggle by recognizing both self-respect and the spiritual needs of the human person:

*With justice on our side, I do not see how we can lose our battle. The battle to me is a matter of joy... For ours is a battle not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation of the human personality.<sup>7</sup>*

Unlike Marx, Ambedkar affirmed the necessity of religion for a free society, while insisting that not every religion is worth having. In his celebrated essay *Buddha or Karl Marx*, he wrote:

*Religion is necessary for a free society, not every religion is worth having. Religion must relate to the facts of life and not to theories and speculations about God or soul or heaven or earth. It is wrong to make God..., soul..., animal sacrifice as the centre of religion. Real religion lives in the heart of man and not in the Shastras (sacred texts). Man and morality must be the centre of religion. If not, religion is a cruel superstition. The function of religion is to reconstruct the world and to make it happy and not to explain its origin or its end. Worth and not Birth is the measure of man. What is important is high ideals and not noble birth.<sup>8</sup>*

## Applied Theology: The Fundamental Pillars of Ambedkar's Dhamma

The passages assembled above are not, on close reading, a loose collection of aphorisms. Taken together, they constitute what might be called Ambedkar's applied theology, or, adapting Paul Tillich's phrase, a reasoned discourse of ultimate concern addressed not to metaphysical speculation but to the concrete reconstruction of persons and societies. Scholars have already begun to describe Ambedkar's mature religious writing in comparably systematic terms, reading *The Buddha and His Dhamma* as an instance of Ambedkarite Buddhism functioning as a liberation theology in its own right.<sup>9</sup> What follows unpacks six interlocking pillars of that applied theology—a first attempt at what this essay proposes calling a Dhammology, a systematic, socially engaged account of the Dhamma's public and political function, offered in the same rigorous, applied spirit in which Ambedkar himself worked.

### I. The Anthropocentric Principle: Religion for Human

Ambedkar inverted the customary relationship between religion and the human person. Where conventional religious authority typically subordinates the person to doctrine, scripture, or priestly office, Ambedkar insisted that religion exists solely for the development of the human person and possesses no legitimate purpose apart from that end. A religion that demands the sacrifice of human welfare, dignity, or reason to preserve its own institutional or doctrinal continuity has, on this principle, already failed the only test that matters. This anthropocentric reversal is the axis on which the rest of Ambedkar's applied theology turns, and it anticipates by decades what the field of socially engaged Buddhism would later formalize as a defining commitment: that Buddhist practice is validated by its capacity to relieve concrete suffering and reconstruct social relations, not by its fidelity to inherited cosmology.<sup>10</sup>

### II. Moral Centring and the Metric of Worth

If religion exists for man, then man and morality—not God, soul, ritual, or scripture—must occupy religion's centre. Ambedkar's formula, worth and not birth is the measure of man, functions simultaneously as ethical claim and sociological indictment: it names the single criterion by which any human being's standing ought to be judged, and it exposes the caste order's founding violation of that criterion, since caste assigns worth by accident of birth rather than by ethical achievement. This pillar reorients the entire apparatus of religious value away from ritual purity and toward character, conduct, and contribution—precisely the reorientation that socially engaged Buddhist ethicists

have identified as central to any Buddhism capable of addressing structural, rather than merely personal, forms of suffering.<sup>11</sup>

### III. Fallibilism and the Rejection of the Sanatan

Ambedkar's insistence that nothing is infallible, nothing is binding forever, and everything is subject to inquiry and examination performs a double labour. Doctrinally, it echoes the Buddhist teaching of *anicca*, impermanence, extended from the psychophysical world to social and religious institutions themselves: no social arrangement, however ancient or however sanctified as *sanatan*, or eternal, can claim exemption from critical scrutiny. Philosophically, it also carries the unmistakable signature of Ambedkar's training under John Dewey at Columbia, where he absorbed a thoroughgoing experimentalism that treated every belief, institution, and social arrangement as a hypothesis to be tested against its consequences for human flourishing rather than a fixed truth to be defended.<sup>12</sup> Fallibilism, in Ambedkar's hands, becomes an emancipatory doctrine: if nothing is *sanatan* (eternal), then the caste order's claim to eternal, scripturally sanctioned status is itself falsified by the very impermanence Buddhism teaches.

### IV. Process Ontology: Being Is Always Becoming

Ambedkar's claim that being is always becoming extends the fallibilist principle from social institutions to the self. Just as no social arrangement is permanent, no self is a fixed, finished substance; the human person, like everything else in a universe governed by dependent origination, is always in process, always capable of further ethical and spiritual development.<sup>13</sup> This process ontology underwrites Ambedkar's own biography: his conversion was not merely a change of religious label but a lived demonstration that identity itself is revisable, that the Untouchable-self assigned at birth is not a metaphysical destiny but a social construction that can, through disciplined effort, be unmade and remade. The same conviction underlies contemporary socially engaged Buddhist accounts of social transformation, which likewise refuse to treat oppressive social identities as fixed, and instead approach both self and society as sites of ongoing, intentional becoming.<sup>14</sup>

### V. Radical Equality: Worth and Not Birth

Building on the moral centring described above, Ambedkar's applied theology insists that all human beings are equal in the one sense that finally matters religiously: each possesses, as noted earlier in this essay, an equal capacity for sambodhi, for enlightenment, entirely independent of caste, race, colour, or gender. What is important, in Ambedkar's own words, is high ideals and not noble birth. This pillar supplies the doctrinal warrant for the constitution-

al principles of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity that Ambedkar enshrined in India's founding document: the Constitution's egalitarianism is not, on this reading, a secular import grafted onto an indifferent religious tradition, but the political expression of a prior and more fundamental Buddhist claim about the equal worth of all persons.

#### VI. Universal Maitri: Loving-Kindness Owed Even to the Enemy

The final and most demanding pillar is Ambedkar's insistence that loving-kindness or fellowship toward all must never be abandoned, and that one owes it even to one's enemy. This is *maitri* raised to its most exacting standard: not benevolence extended selectively to allies and co-religionists, but a discipline of compassion that holds even under conditions of betrayal or defeat. Ambedkar's own political biography contains a striking, if bitterly contested, instance of this pillar in practice. In September 1932, during the crisis precipitated by Mahatma Gandhi's fast unto death against separate electorates for the Depressed Classes, Ambedkar chose to negotiate rather than allow Gandhi to die, signing the Poona Pact in exchange for reserved rather than separately elected seats—a settlement Ambedkar himself would later condemn in the sharpest terms as a coerced surrender of his people's constitutional safeguards.<sup>15</sup> Subsequent Ambedkarite scholarship has read this episode as exposing a fundamental asymmetry between two spiritualities of nonviolence: Gandhi's fast functioned, in this critical reading, as an instrument of moral coercion deployed in defence of caste Hindu political hegemony, while Ambedkar's decision not to let Gandhi die, even at what he himself judged to be ruinous cost to his own community's political power, enacted precisely the unconditional *maitri* his later Dhamma would make central to Buddhist ethics—loving-kindness extended to an adversary at real and reckoned cost, rather than proclaimed only where it was safe or costless to do so.<sup>16</sup>

Read together, these six pillars describe an applied theology that is anthropocentric in orientation, ethical rather than metaphysical in centre, fallibilist and processual in epistemology, radically egalitarian in its account of human worth, and unconditional in its demand for loving-kindness. This is precisely the profile scholars of socially engaged Buddhism have identified as characteristic of the movement Thích Nhất Hạnh named engaged Buddhism in Vietnam decades later—a Buddhism whose contemplative and ethical resources are deliberately mobilized toward the transformation of unjust social structures rather than reserved for private cultivation<sup>17</sup>. Ambedkar's Navayāna Buddhism, formulated a full generation before that term entered wide circulation, stands as one of engaged Buddhism's earliest and most systematically worked-out in-

stances—a Dhammology, and the specific historical resource this issue's call for a Buddhist Movement Chaplaincy might most productively theorize forward.

### Du Bois and Ambedkar: The Colour Line and the Caste Line

Ambedkar's insistence that worth, not birth, is the measure of the human person places him in direct and, as recent scholarship has begun to document, historically documented conversation with W. E. B. Du Bois. The two men corresponded directly: in 1946, Ambedkar wrote to Du Bois asking whether the condition of India's Untouchables had ever come to Du Bois's attention, and noting the affinities he perceived between the position of the American Negro and the position of the Untouchables of India.<sup>18</sup> Du Bois wrote back expressing sympathy and familiarity with Ambedkar's cause. That exchange has become a touchstone for a growing body of comparative scholarship reading caste and race together—not as identical systems, since they emerged from distinct histories, economies, and theological justifications, but as cognate technologies of what one recent study calls graded, birth-ascribed exclusion, in which institutions, law, labour, religion, and the habits of everyday life combine to lock human beings into a hierarchy with no visible exit.<sup>19</sup>

Du Bois's concept of double consciousness—the sense of always viewing oneself through the eyes of a contemptuous other, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity—offers a vocabulary for something Ambedkar diagnosed from within Indian caste society: the psychological wound of untouchability, in which the self is taught to experience its own humanity as a claim that must be proven rather than a fact already given. Ambedkar's insistence, discussed further below, that freedom of the mind must accompany and often precede political freedom is his own formulation of the same problem Du Bois named for Black Americans.<sup>20</sup> Both thinkers refused programs of liberation that addressed only the external, legal, or economic dimensions of oppression while leaving the inner architecture of humiliation untouched, which is precisely the refusal that a nondual Buddhist movement chaplaincy is called to renew.

Du Bois pursued this same problem, a decade before he ever heard of Ambedkar, through a sociological study of the Black church in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). In the chapter “Of the Faith of the Fathers,” Du Bois traces the Black church from its origins under slavery to its status, by the turn of the 20th century, as the social centre of Black life in America—the one institution the enslaved and their descendants had been permitted to build and govern largely on their own terms, and which therefore came to carry, alongside its religious functions, the weight of the community's political organizing, mutual aid, education, and collective memory.<sup>21</sup> This is an early and precise description

of movement chaplaincy: a spiritual institution that does not merely accompany a people's suffering but becomes the very infrastructure of their liberation. Ambedkar's post-conversion program pursued an almost identical institutional logic. He did not intend his followers' Buddhism to remain a private conviction; he called for the mass building of viharas, the establishment of Buddhist societies (the Buddhist Society of India, founded in 1955), and the transformation of Deekshabhoomi itself into a site of ongoing collective pilgrimage and organizing—a Buddhist analogue to the institutional role Du Bois observed the Black church playing for a comparably disinherited people.

Du Bois's opening chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," also gives the wound of double consciousness its most famous image: the veil, which Du Bois describes as both affliction and a granted second sight, a heightened, doubled perception of the social world available only to those forced to live inside its exclusions. Ambedkar's own writings return again and again to a structurally similar claim—that the Untouchable's exclusion from the well, the temple, and the public road produced not only material deprivation but a peculiar, involuntary clarity about the mechanics of caste that dominant-caste reformers, however sympathetic, could not fully share. For both thinkers, this doubled or heightened perception was not merely a burden to be alleviated; it was also, potentially, a resource—the very vantage point from which a truer and more universal account of freedom could be constructed. Du Bois's ambition, that the problem of the twentieth century would be recognized as the problem of the colour line the world over, finds its Indian counterpart in Ambedkar's ambition for Prabuddha Bharat: both men insisted that the particular wound of their own people, honestly reckoned with, opened onto a universal diagnosis of the modern world's unfinished democratic project.

### A Textual Postscript: Ambedkar, Du Bois, and Their American Interlocutors

The Ambedkar-Du Bois correspondence deserves to be read not as a single clean instance of mutual recognition but as one exchange embedded within a longer, more uneven circuitry of comparative anti-racist thought, one worth unpacking in some detail for what it reveals about the texture of transnational solidarity. Ambedkar arrived in New York in 1913 to study under Dewey, Edwin Seligman, and James Shotwell at Columbia, and while he left no direct first-hand account of his proximity to Harlem during those years, his later writing shows a sustained, textually documented engagement with African American history that predates his correspondence with Du Bois by at least a

year: in his 1945 pamphlet *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, Ambedkar draws extensively on Herbert Aptheker's *The Negro in the Civil War* (1938).<sup>22</sup> Aptheker was, in the assessment of the historian Robin D. G. Kelley, one of the very few white scholars of his generation to take Black history seriously as a discipline, and he later served as editor of Du Bois's own papers—a detail that places Ambedkar's reading, however indirectly, within Du Bois's own intellectual orbit well before the two men ever corresponded.<sup>23</sup>

The correspondence itself, preserved in the Du Bois papers at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, is brief but precise. In an undated 1946 letter, Ambedkar identified himself to Du Bois as a longtime student of the Negro problem, and pointed to what he judged a natural and necessary parallel between the position of India's Untouchables and that of American Negroes, requesting copies of the recent petition to the United Nations submitted on behalf of Black Americans. Du Bois replied on July 31, 1946, enclosing a statement from the National Negro Congress and offering general sympathy and future assistance, while noting that the NAACP was preparing a more comprehensive submission of its own.<sup>24</sup> No further correspondence between the two men survives.

Du Bois's own prior engagement with Indian affairs, though genuine, was considerably less precise than Ambedkar's engagement with Black America. His editorials in *The Crisis* during the early 1930s addressed the Communal Award and the resulting Poona Pact crisis in terms that later commentators have judged to reflect only a partial grasp of caste politics' internal complexity.<sup>25</sup> The Black American commentator who engaged Indian caste politics with unusual precision in this period was instead the journalist George S. Schuyler, who argued in his Pittsburgh Courier column that India's deeper trouble lay in internal race, class, and religious bigotry rather than colonial rule alone, expressed sharp skepticism toward Gandhian nationalism, and identified India's untouchables—organizing, in his account, under courageous and well-trained leadership he did not name but almost certainly meant Ambedkar—as the closer analogue to Black Americans' own struggle, one requiring self-led mass movement rather than elite intercession.

This asymmetry had an unexpected and consequential American afterlife. The historian C. Vann Woodward, one of the first mainstream white historians of the United States to reckon seriously with the machinery of Jim Crow in his landmark study *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1957), recounts in his memoir *Thinking Back* (1986) a wartime meeting with Ambedkar in New Delhi, where he served as a naval officer. Ambedkar, Woodward recalls, questioned him closely about the condition of Black untouchables in America and opened to him what Woodward called an ancient world of Indian segregation by caste,

shown to him from the vantage of its victims. Woodward names that encounter, alongside the emerging civil rights movement, as one of the two decisive influences behind his own reckoning with American segregation.<sup>26</sup> Ambedkar's testimony thus reached American historiography of race not primarily through Du Bois's own intellectual lineage, as a simple narrative of Black–Dalit solidarity might predict, but through an unlikelier and less remarked channel entirely.

This layered, asymmetrical record—Ambedkar's sustained textual engagement with Black American history; Du Bois's more occasional and institutionally mediated attention to Indian caste; Schuyler's unusually precise but largely private analysis; Woodward's transformative chance encounter—resists any simple narrative of parallel or synchronized movements. It is best understood as one link within a much longer chain: Jyotirao Phule had already dedicated his 1873 anti-caste polemic *Gulamgiri* (Slavery) to American abolitionists, urging his countrymen to take their example in emancipating the Shudras from Brahminical bondage, and nearly a century later the Dalit Panthers of Maharashtra would name themselves explicitly after the Black Panthers, declaring a close relationship with that American struggle.<sup>27</sup> What this fuller record offers a Buddhist movement chaplaincy is not the comforting myth of instant, complete mutual recognition between struggling peoples, but a more honest and more useful model: solidarity built, unevenly and across long distances, out of partial understanding, chance encounter, and patient textual labour—the same slow, unglamorous work that undergirds any durable movement infrastructure.

### Howard Thurman, the Religion of Jesus, and the Religion of Ambedkar's Buddha

If Du Bois supplies a vocabulary for the psychological wound of graded exclusion, Howard Thurman supplies a fuller template for what a politicized, contemplative spiritual leadership addressed to that wound might look like – one worked out not only on the page but in the concrete, decades-long labour of institution-building. Thurman—mystic, theologian, dean of chapel at Howard University and later at Boston University, and a formative influence on the nonviolent theology of the civil rights movement—drew a sharp distinction in *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949) between Christianity as a religion of empire and what he called the religion of Jesus: a spirituality forged among the disinherited, the poor, the occupied, and the marginal, and addressed to those who stand, in his phrase, with their backs against the wall.<sup>28</sup> For Thurman, mystical experience was never an endpoint; it opened outward, of necessity, into involvement with the social world.<sup>29</sup>

Ambedkar performed a structurally identical operation on Hinduism and on Buddhism itself. He did not reject religion as such—he rejected a particular religious order that had, in his analysis, been constructed to sanctify hierarchy, and he sought instead a religion of the disinherited, one whose very metaphysics refused birth as a measure of worth. Just as Thurman distinguished the religion of Jesus from the Christianity that had been used to justify slavery and segregation, Ambedkar distinguished the Dhamma of the Buddha from the Brahminical order that had, in his reading, absorbed and neutralized earlier reform movements. Both men insisted that the test of a religion is whether it can be received, without translation or apology, by the most degraded members of a society—and both concluded that a religion failing this test is not a religion worth having, in Ambedkar’s own phrase, but a cruel superstition. Thurman’s biographers describe him as an activist mystic whose contemplative depth was inseparable from, rather than opposed to, his role as one of the philosophical architects of a mass movement—a description that could stand, almost without alteration, as a description of Ambedkar’s own vocation.

The parallel deepens when we turn from Thurman’s writing to his practice. In 1935 and 1936, more than a decade before Ambedkar’s own conversion, Thurman led a delegation on a pilgrimage of friendship to India, Ceylon, and Burma, where he met with Gandhi and absorbed, at close range, the same Gandhian vocabulary of nonviolent mass movement that would shape the Indian freedom struggle. Thurman did not, on that journey, meet Ambedkar, and the two men’s encounters with Gandhian nonviolence remain instructively asymmetrical. Thurman received satyagraha as spiritual method and carried it home as a durable resource for the Black freedom struggle; Ambedkar, only three years earlier, had experienced Gandhian nonviolence from the other side of its exercise of power. In September 1932, during the crisis over separate electorates for the Depressed Classes, Ambedkar was compelled to negotiate at Gandhi’s prison cell during Gandhi’s fast unto death, ultimately signing the Poona Pact and trading a stronger constitutional safeguard for reserved seats within caste Hindu-dominated constituencies, a settlement Ambedkar would later denounce as a coerced surrender. As discussed more fully below, a body of subsequent Ambedkarite scholarship reads this episode as revealing the fault line between Gandhi’s more religiously conservative deployment of ahimsa and the liberal, eventually Buddhist, spirituality of nonviolence Ambedkar would go on to articulate—a fault line this essay’s discussion of *maitri*, above, takes up directly. Thurman returned from his own 1935–36 journey convinced that spiritual community had to be built, not merely preached, as an alternative social structure. In 1944, together with Alfred Fisk, he founded the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco, the first major interracial,

interdenominational, and intercultural congregation in the United States, organized explicitly around the conviction that the segregated church had parted company with the religion of Jesus. Thurman later named the ideal this church attempted to embody the beloved community, a fellowship in which people could remain distinct and unique selves while sharing what he called a deep harmony of spirit, and which he elaborated at length in his 1971 book *The Search for Common Ground*.

Ambedkar's Great Mass Conversion at Deekshabhoomi is best understood as the Indian, Buddhist counterpart to Thurman's Fellowship Church: not a metaphor or a private confession but an enacted, institution-founding movement chaplaincy, in which several hundred thousand people were simultaneously received into a new religious community explicitly built to dissolve the very hierarchy their old religious community had enforced. Where Thurman built one interracial congregation as a working demonstration of the beloved community, Ambedkar convened a mass, nationwide re-founding of an entire religious civilization on egalitarian terms—the same aspiration, enacted at a different order of magnitude. Both men understood, against every impulse toward purely private or purely political solutions, that liberation required a durable spiritual institution capable of holding grief, ritual, formation, and organizing together over the long term—which is exactly the capacity this journal's call asks a Buddhist movement chaplaincy to theorize and build for our own moment of interlocking crisis.

### Personality, Personhood, and the Reclamation of the Human Self

Both Thurman and Ambedkar arrived, from within distinct American philosophical inheritances, at personality as the central term for the human dignity their theologies sought to protect and restore. Thurman's usage was shaped by decades of immersion in Boston personalism, the school of American liberal philosophy and theology founded by Borden Parker Bowne at Boston University and carried into its third generation, during Thurman's own tenure as dean of Marsh Chapel, by his close friend and colleague Edgar Sheffield Brightman—the same department whose personalist teaching would shortly afterward shape Martin Luther King Jr.'s own account of ultimate reality as most fully disclosed in personality. For personalists, personality was not a psychological attribute layered onto an otherwise neutral human substrate; it was, in Brightman's own formulation, the fundamental metaphysical reality, the ground on which any theory of value, including the value of the disinherited, had to be built. To speak, as Thurman did, of the sacredness of human personality, and to insist that God is mindful of the individual, was therefore to make not merely a sentimental but a metaphysical claim: that the contempt

heaped on the disinherited attacks not only their social standing but reality's own deepest structure.

Ambedkar arrived at strikingly similar vocabulary by an entirely different route. Dewey himself, in an early essay, *The Ethics of Democracy* (1888), argued that any social arrangement should be judged by whether it enables the fullest growth of personality in each of its members, and warned against arrangements that cultivate the personality of the few at the expense of the many. Ambedkar carried this Deweyan charge directly into his critique of caste: caste, on his analysis, systematically and by design stunted the growth of personality among the many in order to concentrate its cultivation among the few. This is the deeper philosophical register beneath what might otherwise read as rhetorical flourish when Ambedkar described his own struggle, at the 1942 All-India Depressed Classes Conference, as a battle for the reclamation of the human personality: he meant this in something close to the quasi-metaphysical sense Thurman's personalist teachers meant it—a claim about what is ultimately real and ultimately owed to every person, prior to and independent of caste, birth, or racial classification.

Read together, Thurman's Boston personalism and Ambedkar's Deweyan pragmatism converge, from opposite ends of the North Atlantic philosophical world, on a single applied-theological conviction: that no political or religious order which diminishes the personality of any human being can be called either democratic or dharmic. Thurman's contemplative discipline of cultivating what he called an interior sanctuary, in which the self's status as subject rather than object could be renewed against the daily erosions of contempt, and Ambedkar's insistence that freedom of mind must precede and secure freedom of body, name the same discipline from within two different spiritual vocabularies: the cultivation, under conditions of structural humiliation, of an unsailable inner ground from which the work of collective liberation can proceed without being poisoned by the very contempt it opposes. This is, in nuce, the contemplative core a Buddhist movement chaplaincy must supply alongside its work of protest and accompaniment—not withdrawal from struggle, but protection of the practitioner's, and the whole movement's, capacity to remain a subject and not be reduced to a function of the conflict.

### Democracy as a Mode of Associated Living

A second, closely related convergence concerns the two men's shared conviction that democracy is finally a matter of the heart before it is a matter of institutions. Ambedkar's most direct statement of this conviction borrows, almost verbatim, from his teacher: in *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) and again in

his address to the Constituent Assembly on November 25, 1949, Ambedkar defined democracy, following Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916), as primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience, and as an attitude of respect and reverence toward one's fellow human beings, rather than merely a form of government. Ambedkar did not simply import Dewey's formula, however; he grounded it, in his final decade, in the Buddhist virtue of *maitri*, treating loving-kindness as the affective substance that alone could sustain associated living across the very lines of caste that Hindu social organization had been designed to prevent people from crossing. Where Dewey supplied the philosophical grammar of democracy as shared, cooperative experience, Ambedkar supplied its Buddhist affective ground: a democracy without *maitri*, on his reading, degenerates into the merely procedural, majoritarian, and ultimately hollow ritualism that a graded caste society could tolerate indefinitely without ever becoming just.

Thurman approached the same insight from within the register of Christian mysticism and the lived experiment of Fellowship Church. His and Fisk's congregation was, in effect, an attempt to build associated living, in Dewey's and Ambedkar's sense, from the ground up, seat by seat, in a single sanctuary—to discover empirically, as Ambedkar might have put it, whether respect and reverence across racial difference could be sustained not as doctrine but as congregational practice. Thurman's later reflections in *The Search for Common Ground* extend this experiment into a more general claim, that democratic vitality is sustained not primarily by argument but by the cultivation, in ordinary people, of a felt sense of interdependence, moral courage, and a civic imagination capable of holding open a future not foreclosed by present division. Ambedkar's *maitri* and Thurman's beloved community name, from within two distinct religious idioms, the same discovery: that the survival of any democracy depends on spiritual and affective resources no constitution, however well drafted, can supply on its own—resources that a Buddhist movement chaplaincy, attentive to both thinkers, is uniquely positioned to cultivate at scale.

### Ambedkar's Human Self and the Modern Democratic World

Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism carries significance far beyond the positive transformation of the degraded identity of the Untouchables in India. Embedded in this act is a deeply philosophical approach to reconstructing the entirety of human relationships in a democratic society.

Every individual requires equal standing in the public sphere. Yet the Untouchable-self had been rendered a blemished and undignified presence in public life. Ambedkar's conversion was an attempt to revive Indian culture with a new moral feeling and a new identity of pride—an identity comparable, in the

context of the modern state, to the concept of citizenship. He sought for each citizen of the nation to recognize themselves through a modern Human-identity. In his view, all members of the modern nation-state are equal before public law; once a person identifies as a 'citizen,' they must not be subordinated by the specific rules or obligations of any class or caste community. Citizenship argues for a common inheritance of public goods, free from discrimination.

A society aspiring to become a truly democratic nation must morally acknowledge that the maximum participation of all people in every sphere of public life is not merely desirable but necessary. Yet in practice, citizens in the public sphere have been grouped or reduced to separate, hierarchically ordered identities, degraded and inferior identities set against those of dominant, upper-caste groups, a dynamic that forecloses the possibility of genuine citizenship for many.

Ambedkar also recognized that purely political reforms are insufficient to address the deep social conservatism embedded in society. In this context, he proposed a secular role for religion in cultivating the moral values necessary for a modern democratic society. The propagation of the Buddha's teaching, the Dhamma, was, for him, an effective means of revolutionizing and transforming culture toward a more humane society. He elaborated:

*Buddhism teaches social freedom, economic freedom, intellectual freedom and political freedom... equality not only between man and man but between men and women.*<sup>40</sup>

Ambedkar held that democracy is, in essence, another name for equality. He used the Sanskrit word *maitri* (loving-kindness) at times as a synonym for democracy, signalling that the ethical foundations of democratic life must be grounded in genuine care for others. In his view, the caste system represented a standing denial of democratic ideals: democracy for the people, of the people, and by the people, not merely in form, but in substance and fact.

Ambedkar's 'Buddha' was therefore not intended solely for ex-Untouchables. His significance is far broader. In turning to the Buddha, Ambedkar was attempting to extend the reach of reason into the moral sentiments of Indian society as a whole, challenging the cultural common sense of the entire nation and offering a philosophical foundation for genuine democratic and secular life.

His turn to Buddhism gave a new social and cultural identity not just to former Untouchables, but to India itself. Buddhism reformulates the past by recovering India's most humane and egalitarian historical epoch. Ambedkar sought to use Buddhism as a transformative instrument for modern democratic society, what I might aptly call an 'epistemological revolution' at the centre

of the cultural transformation needed for India to become truly democratic and truly secular.

Ambedkar thus erected a new architecture of self, culture, and identity for India, built upon the values of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, and Justice, values he held to be the true measure of humanity. He never denied the need for morality and the sacred in everyday life, and sought to define the genuine meaning of Human-Identity through these ethical commitments. Buddhism, for him, was a new and equal social order for modern Indian society: a supplement and inspiration to Indian democracy, and an ideal model for a discrimination-free world. This was the vision he dreamed for India and expressed through the concept of Prabuddha Bharat—an Enlightened India.

### Navayāna Buddhist Ministry and Chaplaincy:

Ambedkar did not understand the Dhamma as a private consolation to be practiced alongside, and safely insulated from, the work of politics. He understood it as the very basis on which a new governance, and eventually a new set of social and moral relationships, would have to be built. Democracy, on this understanding, is not primarily a mechanism of representation or a set of procedures; it is, first and last, a moral practice—a daily, embodied discipline of regard for other persons that either is or is not present in a society's actual relationships, whatever its constitution formally promises. This conviction is the ground on which Ambedkar's Navayāna Buddhism produces two distinct but inseparable modes of public religious labour, which this essay names, in the vocabulary of ministry and chaplaincy.

### Ministry: Buddhist Leadership and Deep Democracy

Ambedkar's ministry begins with a deliberate act of linguistic substitution. Of the French revolutionary triad he otherwise embraced for the Preamble of the Indian Constitution—Liberty, Equality, Fraternity—he judged fraternity the weakest and least equipped term, a borrowed Enlightenment abstraction too thin to carry the ethical weight deep democracy required. In its place, in his final years, he reached instead into the Buddha's own vocabulary and named the true ground of associated living maitri. Fraternity, in ordinary usage, describes a horizontal solidarity among those already alike—brothers among brothers. Maitri, as Ambedkar redeployed it, makes no such assumption of prior likeness: it is a discipline of active goodwill extended across difference, hierarchy, and even enmity, the same virtue this essay's sixth pillar traced through Ambedkar's own conduct at the Poona Pact. Deep democracy, in Ambedkar's Navayāna vocabulary, is therefore not fraternity's polite handshake among equals

who already recognize one another, but maitri's harder discipline of extending recognition to those a society has not yet agreed to see as equals at all.

This is ministry in the fullest sense: Buddhist leadership answerable for justice, charged with holding a community and its governing institutions accountable to maitri rather than to caste, and responsible for keeping deep democracy from collapsing into the merely procedural. Ambedkar's own account of the Buddhist Sangha supplies the institutional model. He described the Sangha not as a community of world-renouncing ascetics but as a fellowship of the self-cultivated dedicated to social service, a working model of a society already living the Dhamma it preaches, whose members remain free to serve and instruct the laity. A Sangha understood this way is not a retreat from public life but a rehearsal space for it—a body of trained, disciplined leaders whose task is to model, in miniature, the associated living the wider society has not yet achieved. This is precisely the office a Buddhist movement chaplaincy today is asked to fill: not chaplains as passive companions to suffering alone, but ministers, in Ambedkar's sense, answerable for the justice of the whole community and disciplined in the harder, unequal work of maitri.

### Dhamma and Saddhamma: The Theological Hinge

Central to this reading is the specific way Ambedkar redefines Dhamma itself. In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Dhamma names an individual's way of life—free of the supernatural, grounded in morality, and practiced in relation to other people; it shows a person the way to nirvana, understood not as an otherworldly release but as control over passion, achieved through righteousness in this very life. But for Ambedkar, Dhamma in this personal sense is not yet enough. Dhamma becomes fully social only when it ripens into *Saddhamma*, the true Dhamma, whose purpose is to clear the mind of every impurity and to build, on this very earth, what Ambedkar repeatedly calls a Kingdom of Righteousness. Where Dhamma can remain a private pursuit of moral and spiritual value, Saddhamma insists on a macro view of collective well-being, refusing to let the laity console themselves with an imagined heaven while the social barriers of caste and untouchability remain standing on earth. This distinction—between a Dhamma of private conscience and a Saddhamma of public and social righteousness—is the theological hinge on which Ambedkar's entire re-storying of the Buddha turns, and it is precisely this hinge that a purely devotional or purely philological reading of *The Buddha and His Dhamma* tends to miss.

The contemporary relevance of this hinge extends beyond specifically Buddhist contexts to any situation in which human communities face fundamental choices about how to respond to scarcity, difference, and social conflict. *The*

*Buddha and His Dhamma* may not have been composed as a text meant to be read devotionally in the manner of scripture, and yet Ambedkar's followers have read it in precisely that way—as sacred text, as constitution, and as social program at once. What that fact suggests, at minimum, is that the boundary religious studies typically draws between a religious text and a political or social text is itself a boundary shaped by caste privilege—one further instance of an epistemic enclosure, an unexamined disciplinary habit that quietly protects the assumption that spiritual and political concern belong to separate genres, when Ambedkar's own hinge between Dhamma and Saddhamma was constructed precisely to deny that separation any legitimacy.

### Chaplaincy: Ordination as the Healing of Caste Trauma

Where ministry addresses the justice of the whole community, chaplaincy in Ambedkar's Navayāna sense addresses the wound of the individual and the family: the transgenerational trauma, the accumulated atrocity, and the psychological fracture untouchability inflicts across a lifetime and across generations. Ambedkar found the theological warrant for this healing work not in abstraction but in the Buddha's own recorded conduct, and he returns to it repeatedly in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* and in his public addresses. The Buddha personally ordained Upali, a barber of low occupational caste, and did so ahead of the Sakyan princes who had sought ordination alongside him, thereby giving Upali monastic precedence and requiring the highborn to bow to the lowborn as a matter of settled sangha discipline. He sought out and personally ordained Sunita, a sweeper regarded as untouchable even by the standards of his own day, over the protests of the city's elite; he received Sopaka and Suppiya, untouchables raised by a cemetery guard, and Suprabuddha, a leper shunned by his community; and among the first women's monastic order he ordained Prakrti, a Chandala woman of outcaste birth, alongside Mahaprajapati Gotami and Yashodhara.<sup>43</sup>

Each of these ordinations functions, in Ambedkar's retelling, as something closer to recognize as a chaplaincy intervention than a doctrinal footnote: a formal, public, ritually enacted reversal of untouchability's social death, performed by the highest religious authority available and binding on the whole community that witnessed it. To be received into the Sangha was to be declared, irrevocably and in public, a fit vessel for the highest human attainment the tradition recognized—the precise inversion of the message caste delivers to the outcaste every day of an ordinary life. Ambedkar's own insistence, discussed earlier in this essay, that freedom of the mind must precede and secure freedom of the body finds its clearest doctrinal precedent here: ordination does not merely improve the outcaste's material circumstances, it directly repairs the

psychological fracture inflicted by generations of ritual humiliation, by publicly and irreversibly re-narrating who the person ordained actually is. A Buddhist movement chaplaincy attentive to atrocity, to caste trauma, and to the accumulated psychological injury of structural humiliation has, in these episodes, an inherited technology of repair: not merely accompaniment at the bedside of suffering, but ritual, public, doctrinally authorized re-narration of the sufferer's own worth.

Ambedkar's own manner of address to his community, in the Marathi and English speeches he gave throughout his life, extends this same chaplaincy register from ancient precedent into modern practice. Readers of those speeches have often remarked on a register of address that is less that of a distant statesman than of a figure speaking with the direct, unguarded tenderness of a parent—attentive to his community's exhaustion, its shame, its capacity for joy, addressing it as one addresses those for whose whole future one feels immediately and personally responsible. This same widely attested concern extended well beyond his own Mahar community to the Shudras, women, and outcastes of every region of India, and, as the postscript above traces in detail, to the position of Black Americans under Jim Crow, whom Ambedkar studied, cited, and wrote to directly. Ministry and chaplaincy converge here: the same figure who reconstructed Buddhist doctrine to found a new deep democracy also spoke to his own people, and reached toward the oppressed of other nations, with what can only be called pastoral care.

### A Precedent Before the Name

Before the terms "socially engaged Buddhism" and "Buddhist chaplaincy" entered circulation in the West, Ambedkar had already thought deeply, systematically, and at civilizational scale about precisely what those terms now name. Contemporary scholarship on socially engaged Buddhism and Buddhist chaplaincy can, this essay suggests, be legitimately inspired and instructed by returning to this earlier, fuller synthesis of ministry and chaplaincy—a synthesis that grounded deep democracy in maitri, that made ordination a technology for healing caste trauma, and that never allowed the pastoral register of direct address to be separated from the political register of constitutional reconstruction. This is the fullest sense in which Ambedkar's Dhamma supplies the basis not only for a new governance but for a new social and moral relationship, and it is this fuller synthesis, more than any single doctrine or biographical episode, that the following section asks a contemporary Buddhist movement chaplaincy to theorize forward.

## Toward a Buddhist Movement Chaplaincy: Nonduality as Political Practice

Buddhist chaplaincy, as it has taken institutional shape over the past two decades, has predominantly focused on accompanying individuals in crisis—hospital rooms, hospice beds, prisons, and, more recently, protest lines and encampments—rather than theorizing what Buddhism itself, beyond the general skills of presence and bearing witness, might offer to movements for justice and liberation as such. Programs such as Upaya's Chaplaincy Training and the Sati Centre's Eco-Chaplaincy training have begun to name movement chaplaincy explicitly among their fields of practice, describing chaplaincy as compassionate service oriented toward systems change and reaching from the intrapsychic to the global.<sup>44</sup> Cohorts of Buddhist chaplaincy students, such as those organized at Maitripa College around the Daring Compassion Movement Chaplaincy curriculum, have likewise begun to ask how showing up at protests, de-escalating conflict, and holding ritual space for grief and celebration might be grounded specifically in Buddhist practice and view rather than borrowed wholesale from adjacent chaplaincy models.<sup>45</sup>

Recent critical scholarship has also warned that Buddhist chaplaincy, left untheorized, risks reproducing exactly the dualism it claims to dissolve. One recent formulation calls for a liberation approach to Buddhist chaplaincy that reckons openly with the legacies of settler colonialism, white supremacy, and anti-Asian racialization inseparable from Buddhism's arrival in Europe and North America, and that resists a race-blind Buddhism narrowed to silent meditation and extracted into commodified mindfulness.<sup>46</sup> This is precisely the caution Ambedkar's own example answers in advance. Ambedkar did not receive Buddhism as a decontextualized technique of inner peace; he received it, and rebuilt it, as an explicitly raced, casteed, and politicized tradition—a Dhamma whose good news is addressed first to those the existing social order has degraded. Scholars of chaplaincy have already begun to note that Buddhist teachings on nondualism and non-discrimination are particularly suited to the chaplain's work of remaining open and present across lines of difference;<sup>47</sup> Ambedkar's contribution is to show what happens when that same nondual orientation is scaled up from the bedside to the ballot box, from the individual sickbed to the whole sick society.

This is the theoretical opening named Movement Dharma. A Buddhist movement chaplaincy adequate to our present crises cannot rest content with the important, necessary skills of accompaniment: holding space at an action, de-escalating a confrontation, tending to activist burnout and moral injury, offering ritual at moments of loss and victory alike. It must also, following

Ambedkar, offer what the call for this issue names transformative vision—a theorized account of how nonduality, rightly understood, dissolves not only the self's inner divisions but the social divisions of caste, race, class, and empire that the call identifies as fundamentally relational and therefore, correctly, as fundamentally spiritual problems. Ambedkar's insistence that the world cannot be reformed except by the reformation of the mind of man, and the mind of the world, is not a retreat from the political into the psychological; it is a refusal to separate the two. That refusal is the beating heart of a Buddhist movement chaplaincy worthy of the name.

Read alongside Du Bois's account of double consciousness and the Black church as the institutional seedbed of collective liberation, Thurman's distinction between the religion of empire and the religion of the disinherited—a distinction he did not merely write but built, congregation by congregation—and Ambedkar's own fusion of ministry and chaplaincy, Navayana Buddhism offers contemporary movement chaplains, Buddhist and otherwise, a fully worked historical case of politicized spiritual leadership operating at civilizational scale: a leader who bore witness to suffering without flinching, who ordained the sufferer as a sign of that suffering's end, and who simultaneously offered his people a transformative vision of their own collective liberation, articulated not as metaphor but as constitutional and religious fact.

### Conclusion: Ambedkar's Legacy for a Multifaith, Multiracial Democratic Society

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's engagement with Buddhism was neither an act of mere religious sentiment nor a retreat from political life. It was a carefully reasoned philosophical intervention, one that sought to place the dignity of every human being at the very centre of India's democratic project. By drawing on the egalitarian ethics of Buddhism, Ambedkar challenged the structural violence of the caste system not only through law and politics, but through the deeper transformation of culture, identity, moral consciousness, and spirituality—the six pillars of applied theology, and the fused ministry and chaplaincy, unpacked above.

In the context of a multifaith, multiracial world, Ambedkar's thought carries enduring relevance well beyond the borders of India. Read alongside Du Bois's diagnosis of the colour line and his account of the Black church as the living infrastructure of a disinherited people's collective life, and Thurman's recovery—in both word and founded institution—of the religion of Jesus for those with their backs against the wall, Ambedkar's Buddhism demonstrates that religion, far from being incompatible with democracy or with movement

work, can serve as a vital moral resource for both, provided that religion places human worth above ritual hierarchy, and compassion above inherited privilege. His vision of maitri as the ethical foundation of democratic life offers a bridge between spiritual traditions and constitutional values, one that speaks across communities of faith, communities of reason, and communities of struggle alike.

The principles of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, Dignity, and Justice that he enshrined in the Constitution of India are not merely legal provisions; they are, for Ambedkar, the ethical grammar of a truly human civilization. His dream of Prabuddha Bharat, an Enlightened India, remains both a historical aspiration and a living challenge, a call to every generation of politicized spiritual leaders and politicized facilitators to continue the unfinished work of building a society in which no person is diminished by the accident of birth, and every person is recognized, in the fullest sense, as a human being—a potential Buddha.

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## Endnotes

- 1 For details see B.R. Ambedkar's speech at a *Meeting of Untouchables, in February, 1933, Bombay*.
- 2 Ambedkar's 22 Vows at the conversion ceremony, October 14, 1956, Deekshabhoomi, Nagpur, India. Eleanor Zelliot, *Ambedkar's Conversion*, Critical Quest, New Delhi, 2005, p. 25.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Menšíková, *Navayana Buddhism and Social Emancipation in Modern India*, Journal of Global Buddhism 2023, Vol.24 (2): 64–82, (2023); also Witkowski, as cited in *Navayāna Buddhism and the Conditions of Religious Continuity*, Religions 17.7 (2025): 821.
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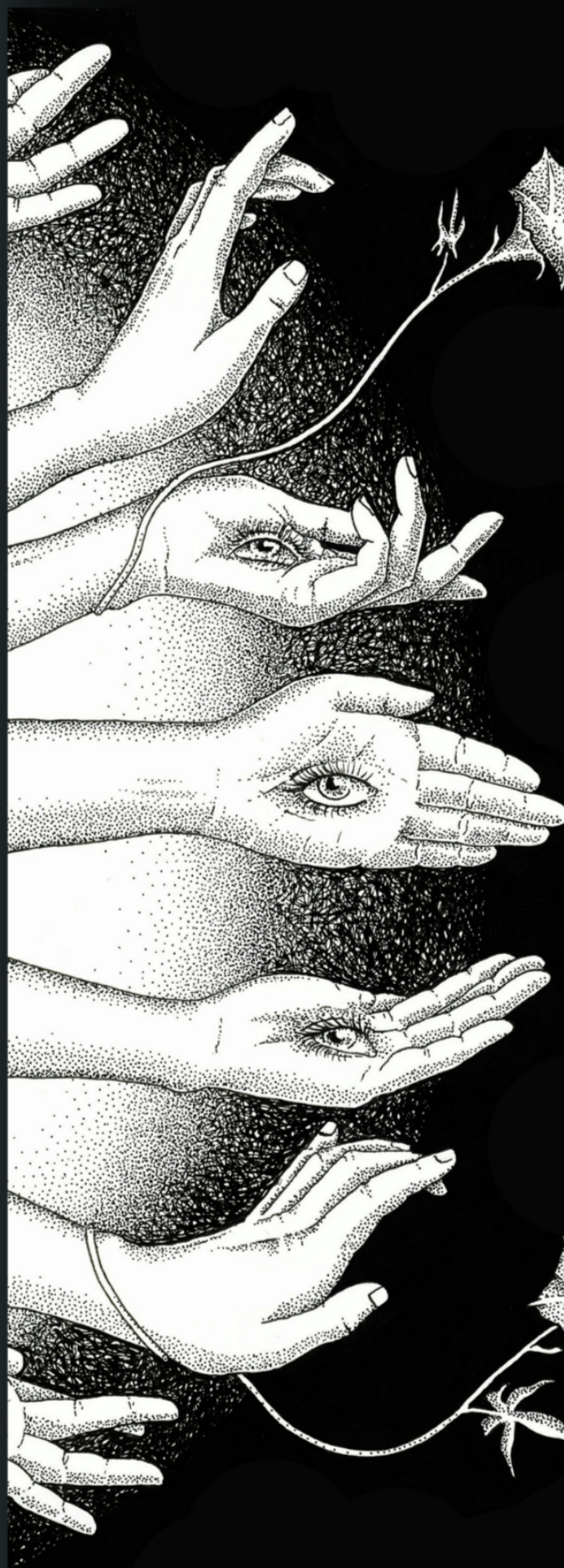
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“Oh, Nobly Born, you who are the son  
or daughter of the Buddha,  
Remember who you are in these times  
of change. Remember the Buddha  
who has taken birth in your own  
form. Step out of the small self, out of  
the body of fear, And rest in  
generosity and kindness of heart. Rest  
in your own true virtue and wisdom.  
Rest in the graciousness of patience,  
The dedication and equanimity and  
compassion You share with all life.  
That is who you really are. Trust it,  
rest in your own true nature.

– *W.Y. Evans-Wentz, THE TIBETAN  
BOOK OF THE DEAD [OF THE  
GREAT LIBERATION ON  
HEARING IN THE BARDO], 1960*





## Interview | *Rangzen*: The Movement for a Free Tibet and a Call for a Decolonial Movement Dharma TENZIN (TENDOR) DORJEE

**C**HIEF EDITOR'S NOTE: The following interview with Tenzin (Tendor) Dorjee, Director of Research and Advocacy at Tibet Action Institute, and former director of Students for a Free Tibet, took place over thali and momos in Jackson Heights, Queens. It has been lightly edited for clarity and flow.

I was eager to speak with a leader of Rangzen—the Tibetan Freedom movement—about Buddhist movements for liberation and the perceived support for this movement among contemporary Buddhist practitioners in North America. In the spirit of this special issue on Movement Dharma, which aims to (re)awaken political consciousness and engagement among Buddhist practitioners, it felt necessary not only to center indigenous decolonial movements, but also to honor the lineage and culture of Tibetan Buddhism, from and through which so many of us practice and have received teachings.

Tendor and I met shortly after the self-immolation of Tibetan activist, Logba Rangzen. In protest of China's ongoing occupation and cultural genocide of Tibet, Logba Rangzen self-immolated in front of the United Nations on July 2, 2026, the day after China announced its Ethnic Unity Law. The law, which effectively assimilates China's 56 officially recognized ethnic minorities—including Tibetans—into a unified Chinese national identity, sparked international protests and condemnation. Logba Rangzen's self-immolation marked the first known Tibetan self-immolation in the U.S.; more than 170 Tibetans, aged 15 to 81, have self-immolated since 2009. Relatively few of these have made the U.S. news.

-Brooke Lavelle

**Brooke:** Thank you for joining me, Tendor, for this interview. And thank you for the work that you do and have done for the Tibetan people.

Before we hit record, you were sharing a bit about Lobga Rangzen's self-immolation just a few weeks ago outside of the U.N. He was a local activist and also your friend. It feels like a poignant place to begin.

**Tendor:** Yes, it's so sad. Lobga was an incredibly committed activist. Though no one knew he was going to do it, he totally renewed awareness for the movement.

I'm aware that many Westerners don't really get self-immolation; it seems extreme. There's a lot of silence around it, and maybe even fear around it, too.

**Brooke:** What do you think is in the fear? Do you think we fear our own lack of courage? Or fear what action(s) collective liberation might really take?

**Tendor:** Yes, maybe we fear our own inadequacy. I personally believe life is precious; though I wouldn't challenge another's thought-out decision. But I do think these actions challenge us to ask ourselves what it is that we are really willing to risk in service of liberation.

## On Political Silence and Inaction: The Theological Challenge

**Brooke:** I want to ask you about the relative silence. Not only in relation to self-immolations, but also to the movement for a Free Tibet—and to political struggles in general—among North American Buddhist practitioners. What do you think accounts for the relative inaction?

**Tendor:** I think there are both geopolitical and theological reasons. Theologically, I have a few different theories. One is that I feel there is a big distinction between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. In terms of Buddhist vehicles, Mahayana is known as the greater vehicle, or self-proclaimed greater vehicle. I think of it as kind of the more reformist, activist-y kind of vehicle where the whole idea is to get enlightened so that you can help everybody else.

**Brooke:** And for those who might not be familiar with these different Buddhist vehicles, Mahayana as a vehicle emerged later (around 2nd century CE)

and, socio-historically speaking, was seen as a kind of social response to—or a critique of—Theravada and its concern with individual liberation.

**Tendor:** Yes, exactly, [Mahayana was] a response. My understanding is, of course, shaped by my upbringing. I was brought up in the Tibetan Buddhist world, and my understanding of Theravada is shaped by that. Basically the way I'd put it is that, in Theravada, the theological frame is that the entire system of rebirth and all of samsara is hopeless—it's just all suffering. The only thing you can really do—or should even try to do—is to get out! And that orientation becomes a scriptural or theological basis for culture and political praxis.

I don't know if that stance is accurately reflected in the real, lived practice of Buddhism in Theravada Buddhist countries, but when I went to Sri Lanka to speak with Theravada Buddhists, I did get this impression that Sri Lankan Buddhism is very empirical in its approach. It's rational, even realistic. And the most realistic thing that you can do in a world that's burning is get out. I've been thinking about theological frames for some time.

In contrast, in Tibetan and Tibetan Buddhist activist circles, one thing that you see reflected again and again is the Mahayana principle of others before self. If you are fine, but if others are on fire, then you're not fine. It's actually your job to help everybody else.

This is not the entire story, of course, and I should add, all people never live up to the principles of their tradition, right? But even having a principle of serving others, or a recognizable figure, like Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, who says, "I want to be the last person left behind in samsara! Shepherd everybody else beyond samsara into nirvana or freedom! And only then can I cross over, too!" This Mahayana and Tibetan Buddhist rhetoric—all of this mythology, the bodhisattva ideal, all of the Jātaka tales (a collection of moral stories of the Buddha's previous lives)—just have this impact on the way people think. Wisdom and compassion are central to the Mahayana vehicle.

I grew up in a Tibetan school where these kinds of stories—like the famous Jātaka tale of the Buddha giving his flesh to feed a starving tiger and her cubs—are told all the time. There isn't any Tibetan Buddhist who doesn't know that story; it's everywhere. I think people don't really learn much from scripture, but people learn from stories. Stories just have such a huge influence.

**Brooke:** I'm going to generalize for a moment, too, because there are a lot of different American Buddhisms, as well as different lineages and phases of transmission of Buddhism to the West. It might be fair to say that a lot of what came through popular dominant discourse was the rational, contemplative tra-

ditions and practices, and not so much of the mythology or cultural framework which you are gesturing toward. In some cases, the mythology or cosmology was consciously rejected, downplayed, or outright dismissed.

**Tendor:** That's right. That's what I was alluding to earlier. When I went to Sri Lanka, my impression was that there was a huge focus on meditation, and specifically mindfulness. Lots of sitting practice and walking meditation. In interview after interview after interview, I came to this realization—which may be wrong—which is that this is why American Buddhism is all about mindfulness and meditation and nothing else. It's the prevalence of features of the Theravada tradition and the confluence of that style with American culture. Tibetan Buddhists never talk about mindfulness! Most Tibetan Buddhists never meditate! I mean, seriously. If anything, many of us will go to a group prayer session or something, and then when we pray, then some meditation happens, right? But the idea of meditation as a consciously recognized practice, where you tell yourself, "Now I'm meditating!" is just not part of Tibetan Buddhist culture in an authentic way. Unless you are like a mountain retreat meditator or something. But even then, that's a fraction of what you're learning, not the whole. There's an entire world view—an entire culture—that is not captured through mindfulness practice. Tibetan Buddhism is a whole system; mindfulness is just one very tiny piece of it.

### A Theological Disconnect?

**Brooke:** I think there's a lot to say about the transmission of different vehicles and schools of Buddhism to the West: how they adapted, assimilated to survive, interacted with, resisted, and even adopted features of American culture like whiteness, individualism, capitalism, and so on.

There are of course many Mahayana and Tibetan Vajrayana practitioners in the West who have a different theological orientation, as you described. Many of them are also affiliated with lineages, like Thích Nhất Hạnh and Plum Village, within which there is a strong history of what folks call Socially Engaged Buddhism. And various Vajrayāna communities, in my experience—I'm thinking particularly of Shambhala—do teach about Buddhist cosmology and mythology. There also are a large number of heritage Buddhists in the west shaping how Buddhism is practiced. These folks don't necessarily privilege the same theological frame of individual liberation as Theravada practitioners might, though that frame may be activated through/by certain features of American

culture. Given that, what else do you think accounts for the relative political silence and inaction among contemporary Buddhist communities, particularly in North America?

**Tendor:** To be honest, I haven't been paying much attention to Buddhist communities lately because they haven't been doing anything for the movement!

**Brooke:** I get it! And, to be fair, there are numerous accounts of silencing occurring in dharma groups, particularly but not exclusively related to political issues, including the genocide in Gaza.

**Tendor:** Right! This is getting to the other challenge. Politically, there can be a cost to action. And if there's money involved, you have something else to lose.

I'm familiar with many Buddhist communities suppressing the discussion of Tibetan history, and now they're also suppressing the discussion of Palestinian history. And Gaza is out there in its own league; it is so extreme—and so in your face—that there shouldn't even be a question about speaking out. It's hard to understand the silence, unless you consider it in terms of political costs. It can be hugely devastating to speak out on Palestine.

This helps us understand some of the silence around Tibet. Now Palestine is the issue, but in the late '80s and into the '90s, Tibet was the issue. Back then, if someone was not active on Tibet, then they probably were not involved in activism in general. And today, if someone is not taking action on Palestine, or thinking about Palestine, I'd say they probably don't care about any other struggles.

From your view, do you think any Buddhist communities are doing anything meaningful related to Palestine?

**Brooke:** With few exceptions, like the Sacred Justice Coalition and One Earth Sangha, I've not seen specifically-Buddhist organizations or communities doing anything explicit in support of Palestine. At least not as Buddhists. This is another issue worth mentioning that we'll come back to, which is that many Buddhists are active, just not as Buddhists.

## Inaction: The Political Challenge

**Tendor:** This is bringing us into the other challenge—the political challenge—and perhaps the disconnect from the Buddhist theological frame. But, you know, Buddhists weren't always this quiet politically.

In the 1990s, Tibetan Buddhist teachers brought a lot of people into political activism. There was a very famous teacher called Geshe Wangyal based in New Jersey. He was an ethnically Kalmyk-Mongolian Tibetan Buddhist who founded the first Tibetan Buddhist Center in the U.S. For context, the Kalmyks and Mongolians have historically been the original protestors or activists for Tibet. When Tibet was originally invaded, the first protest outside the United Nations was a group of Kalmyks protesting China.

**Brooke:** Geshe Wangyal was Bob Thurman's teacher, right?

**Tendor:** Geshe Wangyal was everybody's teacher: Jeffrey Hopkins, Robert Thurman, anybody, it seems, who contributed to the Tibetan cause. And somehow he's one of the least known.

I mean, he's not unknown... The thing is, the more I meet people and ask about how they came into the Tibetan cause or into Buddhism, they often reference Geshe Wangyal. Many streams flow back to him. Wow! He certainly made a lot of people aware of the Tibetan political plight. It was an era when I think many Buddhist students came to the cause and became supporters of the movement.

The '87-'89 protests in Lhasa put Tibet into the spotlight. Then, of course, there are the Freedom Concerts with Adam Yauch and the Beastie Boys. There's an amazing podcast I will send you called "Freedom Needs a Soundtrack". It's the story of how these concerts came to be and how they made the world pay attention to Tibet. I was listening to it last week, and there is this amazing story of the woman, Erin, who meets Adam Yauch in Nepal while she's there as a foreign exchange student. She becomes interested in Tibet. Then she runs into Adam Yauch. She tells Adam about Tibet, and he becomes interested. And then they organize the concerts.

It's a mind-blowing story to me. Every single step of the way, there were these Tibetan Buddhist teachers, like some monks who come here to take part in the concert, help with something. And each of these people say something that has a huge impact on Adam or Erin or somebody who then mobilizes to do certain things.

So I think the '90s was a very good example of Buddhist teachers playing a big role in political activism. Right now, there is a general kind of disconnect among the Buddhist community about anything political. And there is another way in which Buddhists are not necessarily disconnected from activism in general, but they are disconnected from the Tibetan cause. Why? Because I think the price is high. There are some causes where the price of participation is higher than others. If somebody supports freedom and democracy in Burma right now, they don't really pay a price. But, like I mentioned, if somebody supports Palestine, they pay a big price. And in the '90s, when somebody supported Tibet, there was no price to pay. Nobody paid a price.

But between 2002 and, let's say, 2005, as the geopolitical landscape shifted, the price for supporting Tibet increased. During this time, China started to become rich and more powerful, geopolitically.

Suddenly, these Buddhist practitioners and teachers find themselves in a situation where, on the one hand, your political participation or speech is punished directly by the Chinese government through visa denial. Or their families are punished back home in Tibet. Or their access gets cut off if they're a scholar.

So on the one hand is China's punishment. That's the stick. There's a carrot component to it, too, which is the funding. Lots of Chinese donors are funders of Buddhism now. And over the last 20 years, I'd say, there are more and more Chinese people who are discovering and attending Tibetan Buddhist teachings.

As China became more powerful, people began to switch their priorities. Once they started rationalizing their changing behavior in response to the threat of punishment, they started becoming silent. And once they get in the habit of going silent, they also start justifying the silence.

## Toward A Buddhist Public and Liberation Theology

**Brooke:** I do think there are a number of Buddhists who want to be more active politically. And I do think there are Buddhists who already are active politically. Some of those politically active Buddhists are informed by their dharma; others do not necessarily know how to link their dharma to their justice work. In other words, they default in their justice practice to other theological or political frameworks. (And sometimes, when that happens, their sanghas critique them for not being Buddhist.) I think—and this is the premise of our work at Union on Movement Dharma—this in part because we don't have a worked-out Buddhist Public or Liberation Theology. Also I think it's because we're still building an American Buddhist culture—with ontological frames,

practices, stories, myths, and prophetic visions—that can help us address the crises of our time.

I'm curious what you think about all of this.

**Tendor:** Absolutely. I think that this is totally key.

I remember this one time I was on a bus to Vermont, and I was seated next to this older white American woman who identified as Buddhist. So we started talking about everything, you know, and she asked me what I did. I told her I was working for an organization, Students for a Free Tibet, and that we did a lot of political activism. And then she says, “You know, I used to go to those protests and all those things, but I stopped.”

“Why did you stop?” I asked. She explained that she felt that protesting and other forms of activism were putting out too much negativity in the world. She seemed to suggest that, as one deepens in Buddhist practice, they'd naturally become more aware of and concerned about negative energy and anger, and thus less likely to engage in activism.

This really struck me; it was as if she was forgetting or misperceiving the fact that she was actually part of the world, and also part of the solution to the world's challenges. Activism in service of freedom or justice...how can that be negative? I think there is an immense disconnect in certain Buddhist circles between personal practice and the world we live in. And an immense amount of toxic positivity. You know what I mean? It's like this unreal, fake, performance-driven expectation that you have to be positive every single minute of your day. Right? Be calm, be detached, be mindful, never get angry, never get stressed.

It's spiritual bypass. I think John Wellwood coined that term. It's everywhere, and it's profound. And I think it reveals a real lack of an understanding of Buddhist philosophy and practice, a lack of a framework for engagement, as you suggested.

In the absence of a good framework, people are going for the easy-to-grab, lower-hanging, superficial framework. Even counterproductive frameworks. Those are especially easy for those who misunderstand Buddhism to grab.

## Toward a Movement Dharma

**Brooke:** What sort of Buddhist teachings and lineages should we look to in developing this framework?

**Tendor:** I think karmic theory is central. And it's been so misrepresented and misunderstood as fate.

**Brooke:** Yes! Which removes our agency....

**Tendor:** Exactly. Understood as fate, it takes away your agency, it takes away other people's agency, right? That understanding is like the opposite of karmic theory! The Tibetan word for karma is *lé*, which just means action. If we try to re-imagine or re-understand the essence of the Buddhist concept of karma as action, then taking action is what you're supposed to do. Action makes the world, right? So that means that action makes injustice and action makes justice, basically. And if compassion is the foundation from which you take action, then you can create an entirely different kind of world, right? Different agency, different action, different reality. You can change reality!

**Brooke:** Yes, I resonate. Sounds like a misunderstanding of karmic theory, and also a fear of agency. Which brings us back to a lack of courage.

**Tendor:** Yes! And to come back to your question, I do think karmic theory has tremendous potential for us working towards justice and liberation, and even for Buddhist practitioners who are lost politically, or eager to become more involved politically.

I actually think Buddhism has something distinctive to offer these movements. Not just karmic theory, but also non-duality.

**Brooke:** Non-duality as reality and a kind of relational awareness?

**Tendor:** Yes, an experience of—how to say—a stance of non-domination. Sounds paradoxical in a way, but Buddhism involves mastery over the self... You're not trying to achieve dominion over earth, over animals, over people. The notion of submission to a separate or external God doesn't exist.

**Brooke:** Relational power... makes me think of self-sovereignty and not only Buddhist contemplative teachings but also martial teachings.

**Tendor:** Yes, self-sovereignty. *Rangzen*.

**Brooke:** You know, I was reading an essay on the Epic of Gesar on the way over.

**Tendor:** Yeah. That's great. I didn't know Gesar talks about self-sovereignty.

**Brooke:** I was reading the beginning of the epic which describes a time in which the kingdom of Tibet, and specifically in the regions of Kham and Amdo, is taken over by demons who were very powerful tantric practitioners. This is key. They were practitioners who got slightly twisted, and got drunk on their own magic and power. And then they started fucking shit up because they lost the view.

What I love about this frame is that those practitioners are salvageable. They're not enemies to be destroyed, but rather saved, or brought back into alignment. Gesar gets summoned down from the heavens and is basically like, "Y'all, you messed up! You took that practice power and forgot your vows, and you became selfish and dangerous!" Gesar, the warrior, reincarnates to help liberate them.

This is amazing to me: these practitioners are so powerful that they need a spiritual warrior to tame and liberate them. What this text is also saying then is that these Buddhist practices are so powerful. They're insanely powerful. You need an adept warrior to come down who has view. Who's sovereign, but is also relationally non-dominating. Isn't that a cool starting point?

**Tendor:** That's really cool. He's not trying to kill them. Oh, that's amazing actually. He's a warrior who's trying to wake them up. Oh my god. I already love it. It's a very cool premise.

I mean, that's the first time I've ever been interested in finding out what happens about Gesar. That's such a great setup.

**Brooke:** I love it, too, because it speaks to the power of these Buddhist traditions and practices—spiritually, relationally, psychologically. I feel like we've overlooked so much from our spiritual traditions that can really serve our justice and liberation movements.

**Tendor:** That's super cool. That's way cooler than I thought. Gesar. I had no idea.

Gesar is so much deeper than Odysseus. So apparently, Chögyam Trungpa was saying this is actually a model for an enlightened society.

**Brooke:** Right, right, right. I mean, this is all part of a longer story. But it's a political framework. And one that speaks to building a culture of practice—back to your emphasis on story, and ontological frames and technology, and political praxis—a kind of movement dharma.

**Tendor:** Movement Dharma is a good name—I like it. There's something about the word "movement" that I really like. You're not stationary, you're not still water. You're in motion. But it's also a community. It's like a moving community.

Whenever I think of our friend, Lobga Rangzen, who self-immolated a few weeks ago, I think of how he was such a movement guy. He lived the movement. He breathed the movement. I've known him for 20 years and have seen him around various actions and events, and all he really ever talked about was the movement. And injustice everywhere, really. He never really talked about anything else.

He was also hands-on. He did logistical work, grunt work. He showed up. He helped out. He organized funds, he helped build libraries, he did renovations, he helped get his brother a kidney. He made so many things happen in our community. And I'm sure there are things that I don't even know about. And he did everything in such a way that nobody really knew that he was involved, which is the classic bodhisattva way. Help people but don't let everybody know. Do it behind the scenes, not for attention. That's just how he was. He was an amazing guy.

And he will live on. He was an incredible inspiration.

Usually when we hear a story of someone's life, we measure it like a loss of life. But he gave it up willingly. I've interviewed people through my research to try to understand what goes on in the minds of folks that self-immolate. What I've learned is that the way they think about it is kind of like calculus: they think, 'Can I make a bigger impact overall for the movement with this kind of extreme action, rather than a gradual slow burn for the next 80 years?'

I can understand that thinking but, to me, there's nothing more precious than a life. And even if it means freedom for a million people, if the price of that freedom is one life, we shouldn't give it. That's my inclination.

Lobga lived a beautiful, joyful life. And he brought that joy to others. We know what he gave up. Not just his life, but the quality of his life. I keep thinking about how much he gave up. He gave up hanging out with his friends in Jackson Heights, eating momos late at night. And being an example to so many over the long haul. I know he will live on in us.

**Brooke:** It's both so very sad and also so moving: it feels like a charge and a call to reinvest, to recommit, to serve.

May Tibet be free!

*Support the Movement for a Free Tibet:* <https://studentsforafreetibet.org/>

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**TENZIN (TENDOR) DORJEE** is Director of Research and Advocacy at Tibet Action Institute. His research examines the influence of religious beliefs on political preferences and conflict behavior, and the links between transnational repression and political participation. His dissertation, titled “Religious Routes to Conflict Mitigation: Three Papers on Buddhism, Nationalism, and Violence,” is advised by Andrew Nathan and Jack Snyder. Tendor was a Charlotte Newcombe Dissertation Fellow (2023-2024) with the Institute for Citizens and Scholars, and the Inaugural Stephanie G. Neuman Fellow (2021-2022) at the Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies. His work has been published by the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Politics and Religion*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Comparative Education*, *The Washington Post*, *The Journal of Democracy*, *China Brief*, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict.



## Spiritual Activism and Movement

### Dharma: a feminist coalition

REBECCA ESHO GREENSLADE

THIS ESSAY CONSIDERS the relationship between Gloria Anzaldúa's feminist cosmology—specifically her notion of “spiritual activism”—and the principles and practices of the bodhisattva path undertaken by socially engaged Buddhist chaplains. Undertaking this comparative analysis is a form of coalition building; an act of dialogue and bridging of spiritual epistemologies and practices that to date, have had minimal engagement with each other. Writing from the vantage point of how my own engagement with spiritual activist writings and praxis has enriched my understanding of how to actualize the bodhisattva path, I suggest that Anzaldúa's cosmology can augment how Buddhist chaplains might engage with social justice concerns through locating our bodhisattva vows and practice within more radical politics of spirit perspectives. Reciprocally, placing an ethical Buddhist framework—in this case, the Zen Peacemakers “Three Tenets”—in dialogue with Anzaldúa can offer further spiritual technologies through which to actualize Anzaldúa's feminist epistemological and ethical vision in service of a movement dharma for current times.

#### The Bodhisattva Path

Attention! Attention!

Raising the Bodhi Mind, the supreme meal is offered to all the hungry spirits throughout space and time, filling the smallest particle to the largest space. All you hungry spirits in the ten directions, please gather here. Sharing your distress, I offer you this food, hoping it will resolve your thirst and hungers.

**Supplication for the Raising of the Bodhi Mind.**

**Vow to feed the hungry spirits.**

I was introduced to this verse from The Gate of Sweet Nectar Liturgy—chanted in zendos across the world—by Roshi Eve Marko, a dharma teacher with the Zen Peacemakers Order, during my Zen Buddhist Chaplaincy training. It has stayed with me since. What is this short verse referring to? I understand it to be expressing a politics of care. It is an invitation to *all* those with hungry hearts—those hurting, those feeling lost, those feeling left behind or alone—to come and share a meal together. It is an aspiration to feed everyone, to tend to our thirsts. In this respect, the bodhisattva's intention is to become the supreme meal itself, a site of hospitality and accompaniment where no-one leaves hungry.

What does it mean to raise the Bodhi Mind? Bodhi Mind is the enlightened mind. Zen teacher and founder of the Zen Peacemakers Order, Bernie Glassman, said the mind of enlightenment is for the sake of all beings. The raising of Bodhi Mind is the awareness that we are all one interdependent body. What helps us realize this is practicing non-exclusion. Through embodying an unedited existence in our everyday lives, we become the supreme meal. We become bodhisattvas of hospitality.

*Bodhisattva* is a Sanskrit word that is a composite of *sattva*, or 'being,' and *bodhi*, or 'awakened'. The bodhisattva is anyone who, motivated by compassion, wishes to attain Buddhahood for the sake of all beings. The bodhisattva chooses to stick around in the material world—the world of suffering. Rather than following a solitary pursuit of meditating their way out of suffering, a bodhisattva meditates their way *towards* suffering. Two-thousand six hundred years ago in Bodh Gaya, when Shakyamuni Buddha reached his right hand to touch the Earth, calling her to bear witness to his awakening, he did not then spiritually depart from this world. He stuck around for the next forty years, traveling and sharing his pragmatic teachings, before dying of dysentery by the side of a road. The Buddha died lying in his own shit. In Zen, Avalokiteśvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, is known as the "Perceiver of the Cries of the World". She refuses to leave the material world until she can no longer hear a single cry. I am sure that even Avalokiteśvara struggles right now as she listens to the live-streamed daily cries of genocides currently taking place in Palestine, Sudan, and Congo. The bodhisattva's awakened heart must also be, I think, a broken heart.<sup>1</sup>

On one level, we could argue the vow to feed the hungry spirits is an impossible, even grandiose, endeavor. And yet, the bodhisattva vow is more than an impossible promise. It is an expression of profound yearning, of active hope, an inexhaustible commitment to not stop practicing and serving until every single being is free from suffering. A bodhisattva enters this impossible

work wholeheartedly. In this respect, through living by vow, the bodhisattva commits to imagining otherwise liberatory possibilities of our co-existence.

Zen teacher and climate activist David Loy describes the bodhisattva path as a “spiritual archetype that offers a new vision of human possibility.”<sup>2</sup> This vision counters decades of neoliberal mechanisms that keep us away from each other, that alienate us from each other’s suffering and that have removed the very commons that enable us to practice accompaniment and care. It is a vision that, I think, accompanies Gloria Anzaldúa’s vision for the role of spiritual activist. Both are visions characterized by a recognition of our interdependent nature, by understanding the role, function and impact of delusion, and by a non-dual and loving politics. Both are characterized by a vision of becoming the supreme meal and vowing to feed all the hungry spirits.

### Spiritual Activism: inner work, public acts

The inner/outer work makes bridges between the life of the mind, the life of the body, and the life of the spirit, the life of the collective. In the moments of connection between the inner and outer worlds the soul and the physical world come together, intersect. Spiritual activism stitches the two fabrics together.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout her writings, Anzaldúa centers a politics of spirit that insists upon the vital and reciprocal relationship between spiritual practice and social transformation. She refers to this radically inclusionary politics as “spiritual activism.” While not the first to coin the term, her work has been pivotal in bringing it into feminist scholarship and praxis. She began to use the term spiritual activism more explicitly in her later writings to demonstrate her politics of spirit, which AnaLouise Keating describes as “a visionary, experimentally based ontology, epistemology, and ethics grounded in and based on a metaphysics of radical interconnectedness.”<sup>4</sup> Epistemologically, it is based upon a metaphysics of interconnectedness and relational ways of theorizing. Ethically, it involves specific actions designed to critique, challenge and intervene in social injustice and oppression. Spiritual activism is a call to action that necessitates us turning towards our interior selves in order to foster a depth of self-awareness and new ways of knowing (*conocimientos*) that enable us to see and intervene in social transformation. Conocimiento is a deeply reflective consciousness-raising practice that cultivates a seeing and opening towards—without attachment to—various constituent parts of the self. For Anzaldúa, this interplay of inner and outward actions fosters personal and social healing; it alloys the “traditional practice of spirituality (contemplation, meditation and private rituals) [and] the technologies of political activism (protests, demon-

strations, and speakouts).”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, spiritual activism is concerned with how spiritual practices and perspectives can be utilized to understand and intervene in systemic oppressions such as racism, ableism and homophobia. As both theory and praxis, spiritual activism seeks to engage with social justice concerns and activist commitments.

Like Anzaldúa’s conception of spiritual activism, there are two reciprocal aspects of practice for the bodhisattva – the inner and the outer. The first year of Buddhist Chaplaincy training with Roshi Joan Halifax and the faculty at Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe is referred to as “inner chaplaincy.”<sup>6</sup> This is the ongoing work of spiritual formation, studying and receiving the Sixteen Bodhisattva Precepts, sitting in Council practice together, reflective writing, daily meditation and working with spiritual mentors to bring awareness to the wounds that speak our stories, so that we don’t serve others through them or from them. We undertake this “inner” work to understand that there is no inherent “me” that exists separately from the rest of the world. Therefore, there is no “other.” And this wisdom, or insight, becomes actualized through how we live and act in the world. The second year is referred to as “outer chaplaincy” where we begin to explore areas of ministry and the pragmatics of serving from a Buddhist perspective. An important early Japanese Zen Master, Shih-t’ou wrote a poem called ‘Song of the Grass Roof Hermitage.’ It contains the line: “Turn around the light to shine within, then just return.”<sup>7</sup> Shih-t’ou wrote this over a thousand years before Anzaldúa wrote, “now let us shift...the path of *conocimiento*... inner work, public acts.”<sup>8</sup> Both urge us to turn the light towards yourself, illuminate what needs attention, and then return to serve. Act as Light in the Dark.<sup>9</sup> *Inner work, public acts.*

I have come to understand the bodhisattva path, and by extension, the work of a Buddhist chaplain, also as a bridge, an undertaking of the work of bridging, of spanning a divide, of creating and existing in moments of community—whether accompanying someone as they depart this material life, carrying a backpack with blankets, water and a pocket-sized book of prayers for protestors, winding their way through segmented prison corridors to sit with an inmate, or facilitating a restorative justice effort that holds both grace and accountability within a transgression that caused harm, or, even bridging—stitching together—the parts of ourselves that loudly surface in silent meditation, the Buddhist chaplain must practice so that they acquire the skills of a bridge builder, offering temporal bridges that might generate shifts, that might open, change and break hearts. The work of bridging is also central to Anzaldúa’s world view. For example, in “La serpiente que se come su cola,” she writes of herself in third person:

Her body was the bridge, the link between the external world and the inner one. She wanted to make that bridge a channel for the descent of the spirit. She wanted to re-connect her bonds of kinship with all life. She wanted a bridge of communication to non-human world.<sup>10</sup>

In Zen Buddhism, we talk about "crossing the other shore." This crossing is, as Thích Nhất Hạnh teaches, a journey from the shore of suffering to the shore of well-being. The vehicle, or boat, to get to the other side is *prajña*—meaning 'wisdom'—the non-dual wisdom I have just described and which I find to be embodied within Anzaldúa's writings. In her preface to *this bridge we call home*, Anzaldúa tells us that "it's not just about one set of people crossing to the other side, it's also about those on the other side crossing to this side".<sup>11</sup> Her words mirror the training Buddhists tempted to dwell comfortably on the shore of well-being receive—not to stay there. Our ethical commitments—our bodhisattva vows—are to find ways of helping others across, to build bridges. To do so, we endeavor to understand why some folks want to stay where they are, what stories they are holding onto, what wounds prevent movement. Like the spiritual activist, the Buddhist movement chaplain practices cultivating a justice-orientated awareness that imagines and invites ways of co-habitation—however momentary—that move beyond dualistic and binary modes of relating. And, as Thích Nhất Hạnh reminds us in his simple, sweet language, "It's nice to cross the stream of suffering together, hand in hand."<sup>12</sup>

Might we consider the bodhisattva as *la nepantlera*, one who tries to "facilitate passages between worlds,"<sup>13</sup> to see the world anew, actively choosing a constant process of undoing, of rupture and renewal, of ethical inquiry, of letting go of old narratives and opening to new ones that are rooted in commitments to social justice and transformation? Anzaldúa tells us that, "for nepantleras, to bridge is an act of will, an act of love, an attempt towards compassion and reconciliation, and a promise to be present with the pain of others without losing themselves to it."<sup>14</sup> Like nepantleras, can the bodhisattva embody a site of liminal possibilities where we pray for everything and also for nothing, where spiritual and material become indistinguishable, where we are guided not by prescriptive codes of conduct, but by these acts of will, love, and attempts towards compassion and reconciliation, struggling with the bodhisattva ethical precepts and living our way towards actualizing our Buddhist names?<sup>15</sup>

One framework for approaching this bodhisattva path are guidelines known as the "Three Tenets," the foundational teachings of the Zen Peacemakers Order. Like Anzaldúa's spiritual activism, the Three Tenets are also rooted in epistemological and ethical commitments towards personal and social transformation and could offer further resourcing for the nepantlera also navigating

the practice of staying upright and present when walking charnel grounds, confronting and crossing difficult thresholds.

### The Three Tenets

There are two main lineages to the formation of Upaya's Buddhist Chaplaincy training and work. The first is the socially engaged Buddhism of Vietnamese Zen teacher Thích Nhất Hạnh. The second are the teachings of Roshi Bernie Tetsugen Glassman, a dharma heir of Japanese Zen teacher Maezumi Roshi, who merged spiritual teachings with social action, leading to the formation of the Zen Peacemakers Order. Both Thích Nhất Hạnh and Roshi Bernie Tetsugen Glassman were teachers of Roshi Joan Halifax and have been formative in her actualization of a chaplaincy program that centers the bodhisattva as activist—or as I argue, centers the bodhisattva as spiritual activist. Roshi Joan understands Shakyamuni Buddha to have been a social reformer and calls for a revision of Buddhism based upon the misunderstandings that many white, western Buddhists have been caught in—namely that Buddhism is an apolitical practice. Perspectives of neutrality and apoliticality enable the bypassing of suffering and social responsibility. By contrast, Roshi Joan teaches an interpretation of Zen Buddhist practice that is highly political and asks of her chaplaincy students that we also turn towards political engagement and social transformation as part of our practice. In this respect, interconnectedness is the basis for a politicized movement dharma. Through placing the Three Tenets in dialogue with Gloria Anzaldúa's spiritual activist vision, I envisage a movement dharma in coalition with a feminist politics of spirit.<sup>16</sup> The Zen Peacemaker way of life is characterized by The Three Tenets. These are non-linear, applied precepts for the socially engaged practitioner and guide the work of Buddhist chaplaincy. These are: not-knowing, bearing witness, and compassionate action.

### Not-Knowing: letting go of fixed ideas about yourself, others, and the universe<sup>17</sup>

According to the Buddha, life is constantly in flux, which means it is constantly unstable. Yet, we look for, and solidify, belief systems that make life feel more solid than it really is. Not-knowing is a practice to help us set aside our fixed points of view. Roshi Ekyoku Nakao describes not-knowing as “a flash of openness or a sudden shift to being present in the moment.”<sup>18</sup> *Now let us*

*shift*... When we open to presence, there is nothing to depend on. Rather than filling up with self-interest, differentiation and opinion, not-knowing empties us so we can meet what arises from a place of unconditioned openness, rather than a place of conditioned reactivity. Non-knowing is a courageous, open mind that does not rely on conceptual knowledge or concepts. Perhaps this first tenet of non-knowing holds similarities with *la nagula*'s phenomenological possibilities—a form of knowing that decenters the ego and is, by extension, less defensive, more open and porous. Anzaldúa describes *la nagula* as when “you give up investment in your point of view and recognize the real situation free of projections—not filtered through your habitual defensive preoccupations.”<sup>19</sup> In Zen, we call this *shoshin*, or beginner's mind; not-knowing mind. When we cultivate *shoshin*, we shift into a new relational consciousness—one that supports personal and coalitional transformation.

Not-knowing is not ignorance. It is grounding ourselves in immediate experience, bringing full awareness without the fixation, centering ourselves in this boundless web of interconnection, which is so often severed because of fixed views. When we practice not-knowing, we expand our capacities for care *because* nothing is excluded. Zen students often hear the phrase, “not-knowing is most intimate.” This statement seems counter-intuitive, yet I have come to understand that releasing our preconceptions connects us more fully to others. We move beyond what we think we know into undiscovered, more intimate relational possibilities; here, instead of finding fault with the present, we meet it as it is—whatever it is.

The first tenet of not-knowing aligns strongly with Anzaldúa's vision for alliances built out of recognition of our interdependence, rather than from the enclosure of fixed identities where differences are utilized to build walls, in contrast to bridges that can help us find our way to each other. Not-knowing is the starting point for Buddhist chaplains entering a restorative justice process, for example, or meeting a prison inmate for the first time. Not-knowing as both principle and praxis enables us to open towards and to recognize the humanity in everyone. This practice of recognition is a consistent theme throughout Anzaldúa's work. She writes:

This work of spiritual activism and the contract of holistic alliances allows conflict to dissolve through reflective dialogue. It permits an expansive awareness that finds the best instead of the worst in the other, enabling you to think of *la otra* in a compassionate way.<sup>20</sup>

Not-knowing is one way to approach cultivating our capacities for this reflective dialogue and expansive awareness. It enables us to reach what Anzaldúa describes as, when the slash between *nos* (us)/*ostras* (others) is dropped:

“when the bridge will no longer be needed—we’ll have shifted to a seamless *nosotras*.”<sup>21</sup> In this respect, not-knowing becomes the very fabric of the bridge, built through a recognition of our interconnectivity that transcends yet does not erase identity categories. In fact, in *Light in the Dark*, Anzaldúa aligns the Buddhist teaching of non-self with *nos/ostros*. Through not knowing, we begin to see that we are not separate from others. It is also the precursor to bearing witness.

### Bearing Witness: to the joy and suffering of the world

One of the simplest yet most impactful teachings I received on my chaplaincy training is “strong back, soft front.” Can I center myself with equanimity (strong back) and stay open with compassion (soft front)? To bear witness is to bear witness not only to the suffering and joys of others, but also to the suffering and joys of ourselves. It is continuous inner work and outer work. To bear witness is to find a center from which to live into the fullness of our humanity and to recognize that fullness in others—in all others.

Bearing witness is not being a bystander. But it is, to quote Roshi Joan Halifax, “about the courage to face the whole catastrophe, with humility, curiosity, and openness, and to let the situation enter you fully.”<sup>22</sup> Letting the situation enter you fully is characteristic of Anzaldúa’s writing. Her embodied writing praxis demonstrates to us how bearing witness is not only to be affected but is also the capacity to host that affect *and* to inquire into that affect. We encounter this in her intimate reflections about her relationship to her body, sharing the shame and abnormality that accompanied a hormonal condition that caused her to menstruate from three months old and develop breasts at age six, and again in writing about the later devastation of a Type 1 diabetes diagnosis: another bodily betrayal and loss that, through her practice of *autohistoria-teoría*, she inquires into and integrates. As a 49-year-old woman navigating treatment for breast cancer, I have turned repeatedly to Anzaldúa’s writings on illness in particular: her words a steadying breath, a reminder to lean into my own treatment with eyes and heart wide open as new thresholds ask to be crossed. Strong back, soft front. Bearing witness is a refusal to collapse into our tendencies to turn away from suffering, and in Anzaldúa’s case, manifests clearly in how she writes from and into her own sufferings.

Above my writing desk sits a citation from Anzaldúa: “when I write, I hover.”<sup>23</sup> “Hovering” has become an important spiritual practice for me. I have come to understand bearing witness to be an act of hovering, whether through sitting in daily meditation (*zazen*), paying close attention to what arises with-

out intervening, or in the re-reading of a text, or leaning into the opaque edges of a nascent idea that is forming. Through learning to hover, I am learning to bear witness. Hovering is to let the situation enter us fully before turning towards the next new thing. Hovering is to bear witness to our tendencies to resist discomfort. It is to stay close to the nepantlera-bodhisattva dilemma when faced with a threshold to cross—do we refuse or do we transform? Hovering is the pause from which our discernment and capacity to compassionately act arises. To hover is to move with the dharma.

### Compassionate Action: that arises from Not Knowing and Bearing Witness

What is the effect of these two embodied practices? These practices help us learn how to “listen to the ‘small still voice’... within us which can empower us to create actual change in the world.”<sup>24</sup> When we do so, we are compelled to act. These practices help the Buddhist chaplain discern and intervene in systemic oppressions such as racism, ableism, and transphobia. We begin to understand how Buddhism is not a neutral teaching. When we commit to the inner work of seeing more clearly, we transform our relationship to what Buddhism calls the “three poisons”—greed, hatred, and delusion—and cultivate what Zen teacher Frank Ostaseski describes as a fearless transparency. As our vision clears, we are compelled towards compassionate action, a tenet rooted in our intimate relationships with our ancestors, with one another—human and other-than-human—and with our communities.

I am reminded of these two sentences from Anzaldúa in *La Prieta*: “I believe that by changing ourselves we change the world... a going deep into our self and expanding out into the world. And yet, I am confused as to how to accomplish this.”<sup>25</sup> The first time I read this, I cried in relief at Anzaldúa’s uncertainty, at her not knowing how to reconcile the contradictory and challenging aspects of her life and work, yet whilst at the same time meeting this uncertainty with the vulnerability and humbleness that infuse her writings. This radical interconnectedness that is foundational to her spiritual activism does not necessitate that we always know *how* to act in the world, yet we are compelled to do so. We are compelled towards compassionate action.

A favorite Zen teaching is when a young monk asked Master Ummon, a Chinese teacher in the Tang period, “What are the highest and most profound of all the Buddha’s teachings?” Master Ummon replied, “An appropriate response.” Out of *all* the Buddha’s teachings, Master Ummon considered discernment and the capacity to make choices appropriate to the situations we find ourselves in to be more valuable than knowledge of the Buddhist *sut-*

*tas*, hierarchies of spiritual attainment or cosmological insight. This, for me, is compassionate action. As chaplains, we enter each situation without knowing what will be asked of us or whether we can meet it. We draw on our spiritual practice, respond as appropriately as we can, and trust the integrity of that response.

What does compassionate action look like? It might look like organizing, mobilizing, creating conversations, writing, offering a ritual or ceremony, sitting in silence, sharing knowledge and resources to enable decision-making. It *is* perseverance. It might involve tending your own wound that a situation has pressed and opened, so that you do not act from it. Compassionate action is rooted in the body and an everyday vernacular. It might mean the offering of prayer and conscious, collective breath. It involves attending to the ‘we,’ not just the ‘I.’ Sometimes, compassionate action is closing the bridge, putting up a barrier, when hostility and aggression will not enable alliance but harm it. But it is always the public act our inner work is in service of.

This paper has attempted to articulate how Anzaldúa’s theory and praxis of spiritual activism—“a visionary experientially-based epistemology and ethics, a way of life and call to action”<sup>26</sup> is in deep alignment with movement chaplaincy. So far, the reciprocity between these two spiritual practices has been relatively unexamined, and therefore unrealized. Yet, coalition building requires us to build and cross bridges towards each other. When we do so, we encounter otherwise ways of (re)imagining our spiritual practices, learning from and with each other in our shared commitment to social transformation. We expand and enrich our epistemological and ethical frameworks, trying new ways and possibilities of thinking and practicing together. Engaging with Anzaldúa’s scholarship has afforded me different perspectives through which to understand and actualize my bodhisattva vows. The charnel grounds Buddhist movement chaplains step into and bear witness from are also “Borderlands,” unstable and passing-through places where possibilities of coalition building arise, where the collective benefits of spiritual practices such as zazen meditation, compassionate presence and ensoulment can compel us to act as Light in the Dark. And, through locating movement chaplaincy as form of spiritual activism and by placing it in dialogue with Buddhist ethical frameworks, such as the Zen Peacemakers Three Tenets, we expand the possibilities how Anzaldúa’s feminist politics of spirit can be actualized, operating as both bridge and intervention into the separations and severances of contemporary life.

### Dedication

I am grateful for opportunities to write where my relationship to Zen Buddhism is not sidelined as a personal, individual practice, but part of the broader, ongoing polit-

ical commitment I undertake as a feminist psychotherapist and Buddhist chaplain. It underpins every line of this writing and is indebted to the lineage of Zen women who have preceded me and paved the way for this practice life. I include Gloria Anzaldúa in this lineage with deep bows for all she continues to show me in how to actualize my bodhisattva vows.

*A version of this paper was presented at Les Altravesades en Comunidad: Coalition Building as Light in the Dark, El Mundo Zurdo 2024, May 16-18, Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas.*

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## ENDNOTES

1. Parker J. Palmer coined the term "politics of the broken-hearted" in *From Healing The Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit* (Jossey-Bass, 2011) where he considers heartbreak as not only a personal, but political condition. Parker distinguishes two features of broken heartedness; firstly the shattered heart of many pieces, a fragmented explosion and "unresolved wound that we too often inflict on others" (232). Secondly, he envisages a heart *broken open* "into largeness of life, into greater capacity to hold one's own and the world's pain and joy" (232). The *broken open* heart, is, I think, a bodhisattva's heart.
2. David Loy, "Enter ... the Bodhisattva." *Lion's Roar*, April 16, 2006. <https://www.lionsroar.com/enter-the-bodhisattva-november-2012/>.
3. Cited in AnaLouise Keating, *The Anzaldúan Theory Handbook*, (Duke University Press, 2022), 203.
4. AnaLouise Keating, *The Anzaldúan Theory Handbook*, (Duke University Press, 2022), 203.
5. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, (Duke University Press, 2015), 15.
6. Now in its twentieth year, the Upaya Buddhist Chaplaincy Training Program was founded by Roshi Joan Halifax. The training is rooted in a systems perspective and compassionate action intended to serve individuals, communities, our environment and world.

7. Shih-r'ou. "Song of the Grass-Roof Hermitage." *DailyZen*. December 22, 1999. <https://www.dailyzen.com/journal/song-of-the-grass-roof-hermitage/>.
8. Gloria Anzaldúa "now let us shift – the path of *conocimiento* – inner work, public acts," in *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating (Routledge, 2002) pp: 540 – 578.
9. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, (Duke University Press, 2015).
10. Cited in AnaLouise Keating, *The Anzaldúan Theory Handbook*, (Duke University Press, 2022), pp: 26-27.
11. Gloria Anzaldúa, "(Un)natural bridges: (Un)safe spaces," in *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation*. ed. Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating (Routledge, 2002), 4.
12. Thích Nhất Hạnh, "Going to the Shore of Non-Suffering." *A Buddhist Library*. August 13, 1997. <https://www.abuddhistlibrary.com/Buddhism/G%20-%20TNH/TNH/The%20Other%20Shore/The%20Other%20Shore.htm>
13. Gloria Anzaldúa, "(Un)natural bridges: (Un)safe spaces," in *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation*. ed. Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating (Routledge, 2002), 1.
14. Gloria Anzaldúa, "(Un)natural bridges: (Un)safe spaces," in *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation*. ed. Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating (Routledge, 2002), 4.
15. In a formal ceremony known as *Jukai*, when a Zen student receives the Sixteen Bodhisattva Precepts, we are also given a dharma name. I received the name 'Esho' from Tenshin Roshi Fletcher in 2016, which means 'wisdom blossoming'. I received it as an instruction, as a precept to apply and an inquiry to embody.
16. See Victoria Guentín, "Shifting Toward a Spiritualized Pedagogy: Gloria E. Anzaldúa and Thích Nhất Hạnh in Dialogue" (PhD diss, The Ohio State University, 2012) for a useful discussion between spiritual activism and socially engaged Buddhism.
17. The sub-headings of The Three Tenets I am using here are as described by Zen teacher Roshi Egyoku Nakao in "The Three Tenets," Zen Peacemakers, accessed May 7, 2024. <https://zenpeacemakers.org/the-three-tenets/>.
18. Roshi Egyoku Nakao, "The Three Tenets," Zen Peacemakers, accessed May 7, 2024. <https://zenpeacemakers.org/the-three-tenets/>.
19. Gloria Anzaldúa, "now let us shift – the path of *conocimiento* – inner work, public acts," in *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating (Routledge, 2002), 569.
20. Gloria Anzaldúa, "now let us shift – the path of *conocimiento* – inner work, public acts," in *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating (Routledge, 2002), 572.
21. Gloria Anzaldúa, "now let us shift – the path of *conocimiento* – inner work, public acts," in *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating (Routledge, 2002), 570.
22. Roshi Joan Halifax, "Practicing the Three Tenets and G.R.A.C.E. in our Imperiled World," Upaya Zen Centre, accessed May 3, 2024. <https://www.upaya.org/2016/11/practicing-three-tenets-and-grace/>.
23. Gloria Anzaldúa, "When I write I hover," in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Duke University Press, 2009), 238.
24. Gloria Anzaldúa, "El Mundo Zurdo," In *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by*

- Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), 195.
25. Gloria Anzaldúa, "La Prieta," In *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), 208.
26. AnaLouise Keating, "I'm a citizen of the universe: Gloria Anzaldúa's Spiritual Activism as Catalyst for Social Change." *Feminist Studies* 34. No.1/2 (2008): 53-69. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20459180>.





## Interview: Was the Buddha a Movement Chaplain?

PAMELA AYO YETUNDE

**G**UEST EDITOR'S NOTE: I was excited to sit down with Pamela Ayo Yetunde JD, MA Th.D, who through her work as a chaplain and educator of chaplains has been an inspiration in my own journey. Her ability to speak directly to the tensions that arise as we attempt to situate identity, culture, and practice as Buddhist practitioners (Black & Buddhist) alongside the invitation to create compassionate communities in a polarized world (Casting Indra's Net), has been deeply motivating in my formation as a movement chaplain. In this interview, Ayo argues that Buddhist practitioners are called not only to witness suffering but also to engage actively in addressing its causes. We reflect on why the practice of leaving what is familiar is important for "awakening" both politically and through the dharma. We explore the concept of "exile" to describe the suffering experienced by people displaced by many political systems in this moment, and how movement chaplains must remain open-hearted to those experiencing oppression while also recognizing their own vulnerability within systems of exclusion. Dr. Yetunde also stresses that the work of change is never the work of one person alone but that all change emerges from countless causes and conditions and contributions of generations before us. We end the interview with Ayo's invitation to Buddhism: to grapple more directly with questions of justice, power, and collective action.

—Monika L. Son

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### Political Awakening and the Dharma

**Monika:** Thank you so much, Ayo, for spending time with me to talk about what's going on with movement dharma and movement chaplaincy. Can you

share a little bit about yourself, your work, and your orientation to this idea of movement chaplaincy?

**Ayo:** First, thank you for inviting me to be in this conversation. I think it's time to have it. The things that are happening in the United States and the world necessitate a different type of conversation and response. I wish we didn't have to have this conversation, but I feel like we must.

I didn't grow up in a political family. We almost never talked about politics. I grew up in Indianapolis, Indiana in the early '60s and '70s, and there were some taboos about what we could talk about, politics being one of them, religion another, and money was another. We are about to enter at least two of those taboos, and it's important that we do. As I was growing up and becoming more aware of the ways that people get in the way of other people's well-being, self-determination, freedom, and so on, I began to feel like I wanted to say something about it, but not just so I could hear myself speak, but so that we could live better together, so that we could have a coexistence that was harmonious and joyful and didn't invite or require that kind of opposition.

Growing up in the '60s and '70s in Indianapolis included race riots, white flight, boycotting, busing, and all that kind of stuff. So it was in college that I began to get the notion that I could be an advocate or an activist on issues that were important to me. That became more solidified the summer after I graduated from college. In the mid-'80s I went to Zimbabwe and Zambia with an organization called Operation Crossroads Africa Incorporated. On that trip, in my group of Americans, was a person who became a famous novelist and rapper. I don't have permission to name her, but I want to say/can say that she gave me a political education, especially in post-colonial African thought, that blew my mind. I came back to the States and eventually went to law school where I learned how to articulate issues and advance causes. Later I was introduced to Buddhism and engaged Buddhism through the teachings of Thích Nhất Hạnh. So that's a little bit about my background.

**Monika:** Thank you for sharing that. One of the things that resonates for me too is this desire to care about justice that emerges from our political awakening or political consciousness. I wonder if becoming (more) politically conscious prepares us to receive the dharma in some way? And does exposure to the dharma prepare us to be more politicized?

I also wonder what you think about how other contexts shape what we see and think about identity, including our own identity, and how perhaps even a different kind of identity awareness emerges. I know that, for me, as

someone who grew up in New York City as a daughter of Dominican immigrants, traveling to other parts of the U.S. was when I first started to become conscious of being a Black woman because everyone was like, “What!? You’re Black and you speak Spanish?” And although my parents did talk about politics, we didn’t talk about Blackness. There are moments perhaps in one’s own trajectory and in the process of coming into political consciousness that makes one realize or see things that perhaps one could not or did not see before. I sometimes think that as ungrounding, uncomfortable, and painful as they can be, these new learnings are gateways into seeing something we need to see, especially about our connection to the collective. For those of us who engage in Buddhist practice and Buddhist study and chaplaincy, are there “new learnings” (things that unground us or make us uncomfortable) that we are missing, that we have yet to be aware of? I wonder what you think about those threads.

### Leaving Home as Spiritual and Political Practice

**Ayo:** Well, there’s a lot there. I want to pick up on what’s coming to me at this moment, which is, you know, there are many Buddha origin stories. A common thread across the Buddha origin stories is that the Buddha departed from everything familiar to him. One day the Buddha left the gate of the palace to experience what the world outside was like. Upon encountering suffering (an old man, a sick man, and a dead man), he understood that his life in the palace was a way of grasping onto a false idea or delusion. His wealth would not protect him from being sick, growing old, or dying. He left the palace to liberate his grasp from that which kept him in delusion. He left what was familiar to him. And to your point, Monika, about leaving home, leaving what is familiar to us can be painful because culture shock is painful. So, we’re all acculturated, right? And we become habituated to that which is familiar to us. If you believe that there’s such a thing as this homeostasis, that even when we try to leave, there are forces, people, customs that try to pull us back.

I remember when I told my mother and my aunt that I was going to Zimbabwe and the first thing they said was, “No, you’re not going,” and then they gave me a list of reasons why I shouldn’t go. They’d never been there. They had never been out of the country. They feared that I was going somewhere dangerous: Africa. What 22-year-old young woman is going to Africa with this organization? I said, “Yes, I’m going. I’m going and I’m selling all my valuable possessions,” of which I only had one [laughs], which was my bike. So I sold that, raised the money, and went.

That's the part of the Buddha story that I think we just gloss over: the pain that arises when we leave that which is comfortable to us and enter into something that is, whether we know it or not, uncomfortable. There's going to be some level of discomfort with change/difference. It could be the language or the alphabet or the spices in the food or the ways of being. What's the gift in that kind of change? Yeah, the gift can be painful or uncomfortable, but it teaches us something. First, I think of humility. For example, all these people do things completely differently than how I do them and how we do them back home, and they seem to be okay with it. Maybe we've been judging them about it. Maybe we thought our way was superior, and they seem to be completely fine with the way they do things. This is one thing: to be able to check ourselves and check the superiorities that we tend to keep within ourselves unconsciously, deeply embedded in our culture and the way we do things. I think too about how that gift can be paid forward. Maybe we have heard this term, "the ugly American," when we travel abroad and begin to impose our will—our cultural will—on others and act out when people are not impressed by us. Then we can return to our origins—our home, lineage, ancestry—with the humility that there's a big world out there with countless customs, belief systems and ways of being in the world. And they're not going anywhere. We're not going anywhere.

So when conflict arises, how can we be with each other in a way that respects one another so that we can coexist with one another? I think that's a way to begin to think about the gift that comes from the pain of leaving that which is familiar to us.

I forgot to mention that I lived in the Netherlands for two years. While in the Netherlands, I learned about various movements. Nuclear disarmament was the primary one we focused on and the conflict between Eastern Europe and Western Europe back when the Berlin Wall was still up, when apartheid in South Africa was deeply ingrained, and when there was no freedom of speech in the press in Poland. I was getting an education in the varieties of ways people oppress other people throughout the world. My first job out of law school was with the Immigration and Naturalization Service as a political asylum officer. I got to hear stories about the ways people were persecuted and why they left and came to the United States.

**Monika:** Something about what you shared—the many ways that people oppress other people and what that experience is as a Black woman coming from the United States and bearing witness to that—you are holding multiple views. I think of your work in political asylum, witnessing and hearing people's stories. What preparation does one need in order to build the capacity to do that work? You have talked about the Buddha, the continual leaving of home and

opening to that pain. It feels like those two things are happening simultaneously, that your own willingness to continue showing up, and bearing witness and hearing others' experiences is also a way of continuing to leave what is familiar.

### Exile, Narratives of White Supremacy, and Causes of Suffering

**Ayo:** Well, as I was listening to you, Monika, the word "exile" came to mind. There's a lot of talk right now about deportation, mass deportation, resistance, and rebellion against mass deportation as it is executed in the United States right now. The flight of people throughout the world fleeing authoritarianism, fascism, food insecurity, war, all the ways that we destroy each other. I must say that having grown up in the United States with the diversity—the beauty of its diversity—for us to collectively turn against what has made us a wonderful country to live in in many ways, in the interest of whitewashing the country... let's be clear. Whitewashing: that's the motivation behind all of this.

We got plenty of space. We have plenty of resources. We are not lacking more people in this country. The word "exile" comes to mind. And we in this country are being invited to rubber stamp the causes and conditions of being in exile. That suffering is a kind of suffering that I think might be beyond, it might be beyond my vocabulary to speak about it. It's sobering. It's dangerous. It reflects the worst parts of us. It comes out of the delusion of scarcity mentality. And of course, the varieties of supremacies that are peppered into all of this. It's the worst of us. And so my hope is that in chaplaincy and in movement chaplaincy in particular, as that field is recognized and growing, is that I can remain open, mind and heart, open to the causes and conditions of exile, while also being in the category of people worthy of being exiled, right? I do not fulfill any dreams of the white supremacist notion of what the United States is supposed to look like. And so I am, you know, a threat while also trying to remain open to those who are threatened.

**Monika:** That's so powerful and sobering, and what's alive for me is the grief of that. The heaviness of that. Are there particular teachings that you turn to? What feels important to share right now, as you say that "in this country we are being invited to rubber stamp the causes and conditions of being in exile"? What is a teaching that can help us discern, especially for those of us, and I want to say for me too, who do not fit that white supremacy model of an ideal American? I think, too, of those of us who are in the work of activism from the dharmic perspective—how do we stay open? I struggle with not getting caught up in the causes and conditions that others have placed on my body. That feels

really challenging, always. What is something that is a resource for you, when you get pulled out of center? A teaching that you turn to in these times? What is alive as we have this conversation?

### Buddha's Origin Stories and the Role of a Movement Chaplain

**Ayo:** Well, sometimes we must be a little creative if we're looking for justification in the sacred texts for the impulses that we feel. But there are stories in the sutras and in the many Buddha origin stories where the Buddha leaves his place of comfort. Some of the stories show the Buddha going from grove to grove to speak about what he learned, attracting people to his movement from grove to grove. Well, Buddha, why don't you just stay in one damn grove and just teach and teach and let people come to you? If they want to, they hear about you, they come. But the Buddha did move; he traveled from town to town. His followers adapted his teachings to the contexts and cultures of the locations in which they found themselves. There's movement there. And so, if Buddhist practitioners are wondering, how do I not get caught up—stuck or fixated in the attacks on identity, or someone else's deluded ideas of myself or my communities—like you put it, Monika—I hear this a lot—how do I protect myself from getting caught up in that misery while at the same time attending to it? Maybe we can take some inspiration from the stories of the Buddha: being in movement, gaining traction, gaining momentum towards what? I would argue towards enlightenment, to begin with, towards helping bring people out of ignorance. I think about all the ways, especially in the United States and other countries like this, that people are kept ignorant. We are now living in a time where the U.S. government, especially the powers of the executive branch, sues news outlets and the news outlets settle for millions. They sue law firms, and some [law firms] have settled for millions. They sue universities (that offer a variety of knowledge perspectives) and the universities settle. What then becomes the impulse for someone who feels like I want to say something about these political actions, and I want to say it from a Buddhist perspective?

As a Buddhist practitioner, what am I doing? What in the dharma do I turn to? What steps am I taking to follow Buddha nature? To help myself and others come out of ignorance? To be in movement towards enlightenment [not ignorance or delusion], towards collective enlightenment [clarity and intention]? When I think about the momentum towards movement, the momentum towards a movement [dharma] that delivers us out of ignorance, how do we create momentum towards a Buddhist movement that doesn't

reproduce domination, exile, or othering? Again, how do we as Buddhists not get caught up in the misery and pain while, at the same time, attending to it? Who is there to help us disentangle from being caught up in somebody else's diluted attacks on our being? That's where the movement chaplain comes in.

**Monika:** As you were talking, I was reminded of the July 12th walk, the Day of Remembering our Interdependence, and thinking about how it was a way to really publicly demonstrate how our faith and practice invite us to bear witness to suffering, as well as the many ways that community comes together to transform suffering. It is not just about seeing suffering, but also changing it, changing those causes and conditions over time. Maybe that is movement chaplaincy too, coming together to do both, bear witness and act. This walk began with a small group of lay Buddhist lay practitioners who sat down and said, "We're doing this walk even if we're the only ones doing it!" And then we had 200 people sign up and others support the planning.

I also think of a lot of our Indigenous brothers and sisters, paying it forward to seven generations, not actually ever knowing whether we will see the fruits of what we do in this lifetime. Our ancestors had this vision, whether they are buddhist ancestors or movement ancestors in movement spaces, I think about movement ancestors—civil rights, labor rights, queer rights, climate change—all these movements that have prepared us to benefit in so many ways we cannot even name. I think about what kind of inspiration or motivation we can bring to our practice, to the dharma. How about you? As you continue to teach and practice and be involved in your work, what are the things that you are feeling excited about exploring and engaging with in terms of these questions about activism and the dharma?

**Ayo:** Engaging in this conversation right now: I love it! What if we were just doing our own thing, thinking our own thoughts, trying to only make change by ourselves or with a few people? That would be very discouraging. So having conversations like this is important. The work, the platform, the hospitality of Union Theological Seminary is very inspiring. I love the fire that comes out of Union. I mean, it's just hot. It's heat! It's melting, molten theological imagination and prophetic witness. We are going to have this Thích Nhất Hạnh engaged Buddhism stream coming out of a progressive Christian seminary, attracting people like us who are here for this conversation but maybe don't know each other. That is very inspiring to me, because I know when we bring our hearts and our heads together—even when we do not agree on everything, I trust deeply that our hearts have already been revealed to one another in

different ways. When we come together, it's going to be something else: that heat, that molten heat, that lava is going to continue. And it may be expressed in different ways. It may be practiced in different ways, but I know ultimately the stream is towards the ocean of humanity and love and compassion. That's what I'm looking forward to.

### Reclaiming Ancestor Practice

**Ayo:** I want to say something also, Monika, about calling on the ancestors and how important that is. One of the wonderful things about Buddhism and other traditions is the invitation to really check our sense of self, our egos. We can convince ourselves that things that are done in the world are only done by us. I made all this happen, right? No, there were causes and conditions and people and non-people—galaxies, universes—that existed long before we came into the picture. We offer our little fraction of something, right? The calling on the ancestors is a way of helping us understand what our right relationship is to reality. It's an opportunity to practice gratitude which, for me, resolves so many things. To be able to practice gratitude, to recognize that we might make a fraction of a contribution, it may go unnoticed. We don't do it to be noticed, right? We do it because then those who come after us may have a little something—something that they can work with. And we will die not knowing whether that ever happened or not, largely. But we don't live for that, right? That's why I think ancestor veneration is important.

I also think it's important in terms of liberative practice because settler Christians punished Black folks and people from other parts of the world for venerating ancestors. When we practice in this way, it's a way of reclaiming our ancestors to honor them. And in doing so, we honor ourselves.

### What Keeps Buddhists from Engaging in Movement Building?

**Ayo:** One other thing: in the Buddhisms that I'm familiar with, there are teachings about hindrances to meditation as ways of understanding the mind, but also as ways of encouragement. Like, yes, now I know that I experienced this [resistance to practice]. This resistance is commonplace, so systematizing the causes [of resistance] as the hindrances, normalizes the psychological phenomena related to meditation, right? And I can work with it, and then we return to practice, right? I hope that in our work [on movement dharma] that we will identify some of the hindrances to forming movements, even if that means calling into question Buddhist practices. I think that we can arrive at ways of

identifying those hindrances, working with those hindrances, and maybe creating new practices that would encourage us to learn how to work with each other better. That would go a long way towards the movements that we sense. We need to either live into or create or co-create that which can help us live the kind of lives that we want to live together. Because there's something important to uncover here; there must be reasons why Buddhists, across the board in the United States, tend not to be movement leaders, tend not to be called on to be movement speakers, oftentimes are absent from interreligious dialogue with movement makers. What is this absence when there are many Buddhists throughout the country from coast to coast? What explains that? When we also say that our core values include loving kindness, compassion, truth, clear seeing, awakening, and so on? How is it that we can hold these values but also be still in times of movement? It's complex, right? It's complex.

### A Buddhist Response Toward Authoritarianism

**Ayo:** I think of Japanese Buddhists [not just Japanese Buddhists, American Buddhists of Japanese descent]. That's important to underscore especially now, because even having status as a citizen of the United States doesn't protect you. I think of what Japanese American Buddhists had to do to survive in the internment camps, what they had to do to survive and prove that they were not a threat to the United States. I think of what they had to do! Most of the Buddhists I know do not feel threatened by U.S. authoritarianism and fascism because most of the Buddhists I know are not Japanese American Buddhists. But (in our country) Japanese American Buddhists were interned, despite their nationality as Americans, for being Japanese *and* being Buddhist (keeping Duncan Ryuken Williams in the back of my mind)! How do we as Buddhists respond to these kinds of threats? What is our response? Right now, White Christian Nationalism is a threat to every U.S. citizen who is not Christian. What is our response? It's complex. And so there's work to do! And we [Buddhists] have a lot to do and a lot to learn from each other.

**Monika:** That's right. Thank you for saying that. You are pointing to things that need to be named for us to consider and disentangle. This feels like a good place to end. Thank you so much for the generosity of your time and wisdom.

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## Nobody's Movement: Anattā and the Practice of Coalition

CHRIS HOFF

### An Old Practice

EVERY WEEK, IN church basements and rented rooms across the world, people gather in one of the largest and most durable mutual aid movements in modern history—doing so without using full names. The anonymity at the center of 12-step culture is usually explained as protection, a shield against stigma. But anyone who has spent time in these rooms knows it does something else. Anonymity is a design decision about the self. It keeps any individual identity, any biography, any credential from becoming the center of gravity. The 12-step traditions say it plainly: principles before personalities. What holds the room together is not who anyone is, but what everyone is there to do. Eighty-plus years before anyone was theorizing movement chaplaincy as such—though it has arguably existed for much longer than its name—a fellowship of folks struggling with addiction had already built a movement architecture around the deliberate backgrounding of the self.

Our movements for justice and liberation are repeatedly disrupted, fractured, and sometimes destroyed by foregrounded subjectivity, by the demand that identity sit at the center of collective life. The Buddhist teaching of *anattā*, no-self, offers movement chaplains something beyond just presence and accompaniment. Anattā is not mere metaphysical curiosity. It is a coalitional practice, and our movements need it now.

### How Movements Come Apart

It's such a common dilemma that most organizers can narrate it from memory. A coalition forms around shared urgency. Energy gathers. Then, somewhere in

the second or third season of the work, the questions shift. Who is authorized to speak? Whose experience is centered? Who has standing, and who has failed to earn it? The struggle against the external condition becomes a struggle over the internal composition of the group. Positions harden into identities, and identities harden into borders. People are expelled or exhaust themselves in adjudication. The original matter of concern, what gathered everyone in the first place, recedes behind the work of policing who “we” are.

Bernice Johnson Reagon named this dynamic in 1981, speaking at the West Coast Women’s Music Festival.<sup>1</sup> Coalition work, she insisted, is not done in your house. If you feel comfortable in your coalition, you are probably not doing coalition work. What she understood, and what movements keep forgetting, is that longing for the barred room—for a space with shared language, shared analysis, shared wounds—eventually turns the movement inward and eats it.

I have written elsewhere about this longing under the guise of community.<sup>2</sup> The Critical Art Ensemble called community the liberal equivalent of the conservative fantasy of family values: an imagined coherence that does not exist in contemporary culture and functions politically as a purity project.<sup>3</sup> When community becomes the goal of movement work, it starts asking questions of membership: Are you enough like us? Have you earned your place? Arturo Escobar’s account of “one-world world”-ing names the deeper mechanics.<sup>4</sup> We install as default a single way of relating, belonging, and knowing, and end up either assimilating or expelling plurality. Even our most self-consciously inclusive spaces reproduce this monoculture when they demand consensus of identity, though what the work requires is alignment of stakes.

Coalitions are not grounded in shared identity, but in what Bruno Latour called “matters of concern,” and they tolerate what many communities cannot: partial agreement, temporary alignment, difference that stays different.<sup>5</sup> The clinical question I have learned to ask, in the therapy room and in movement spaces alike, is not “where is your community?” but “who are your allies in this chapter, even the unlikely ones, even for now?”

Here is the problem that coalition literature leaves mostly untouched. Coalitions keep collapsing into communities. The gravitational pull of foregrounded identity is not a strategic error that better facilitation can fix. It is an ontological habit. It comes from understanding the self as a fixed, bounded, essential thing that must be recognized, protected, and centered before common work can proceed. As long as that picture holds, the coalition remains what Reagon called: a place you can barely stand to be.<sup>6</sup> What would it take to loosen the picture itself? Here, the dharma offers that which organizing methodology might not provide.

### Judith Butler's Invitation, Half Complete

In earlier clinical writing, my co-authors and I described therapeutic work with an evangelical missionary family whose son came out as queer.<sup>7</sup> The available cultural script offered that family a brutal either/or: renounce the faith or reject the son. What enabled another path, though, was a refusal to center competing identity claims of gay versus Christian. We conclude that chapter by aligning with Judith Butler's call: to prioritize coalitions and alliances over identity claims.<sup>8</sup> In that family's case, the common struggle was named as family unity. Once this anchored the work, the identities previously positioned as mutually annihilating could coexist—not resolved, but no longer asked to fight to the death.

Butler's invitation is particularly fitting for our contemporary times, and it maps directly onto movement life. What it lacks is an account of how. Backgrounding identity is easy to prescribe and nearly impossible to perform, especially for those facing violence based on these identities. For most of us, identity is not a position we hold, but what we take ourselves to be. You cannot simply set down what you believe you are made of. Butler points to the destination. Fortunately, Buddhist ontology has spent 25 centuries building the road.

### What Anattā Actually Teaches

In the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta (SN 22.59), the Buddha's second discourse, the argument proceeds by examination rather than decree.<sup>9</sup> The Buddha suggests we take up each of the five aggregates—form, feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness—and look for the self in it. In doing so, we realize form changes and afflicts us; it cannot be the self we imagine, sovereign and enduring. The same holds for each aggregate. What we call a "self" is a process, a confluence of conditions, arising and passing, with no fixed essence. Nāgārjuna would later radicalize the point by declaring that the self is empty: not because it is nothing, but because it is dependently originated. The self is real the way a river is real, as pattern rather than substance.<sup>10</sup>

Two important clarifications matter here, because anattā is routinely weaponized and misread.

First, anattā is not identity erasure. The tradition's "two truths" doctrine holds that the conventional self, the self with a name, a history, a social location, a body that is racialized and gendered and read by power in particular ways, is real at the level where politics happens. Emptiness does not dissolve the fact that some bodies are stopped by police and others are not. Any deployment of no-self that tells marginalized people to get over their identities is not dharma, it is spiritual bypass performing dominance in robes. The teaching is

subtler. Identity is real, *and it is not ultimate*. We can inhabit our qualities and alliances fully without their gripping us. The Zen tradition I practice in has a phrase for this: “holding lightly.” You can hold a position, a wound, an identity, with complete seriousness and still know it is not final fact.

Second, anattā is not a belief to adopt, but a practice to undertake. Nobody argues themselves out of self-grasping. Loosening occurs by many means. It sticks through sustained contemplative training, through the repeated, embodied discovery that the borders of the self are more porous than they present themselves to be. This is why the teaching belongs to care practices rather than relegated to political theory. Chaplains are practitioners and carriers of practice. Rather than offering better ideologies of selfhood, they can offer movements disciplines through which the grip relaxes.

### No-Self as Coalitional Practice

Place anattā next to the movement fracture I described, and the dilemma becomes clearer. What tears coalitions apart is not identity as such, but identity grasped as essence: that who I am is a fixed and bounded thing whose recognition is the precondition of common work. Purity politics is self-grasping performed at collective scale. To demand that the group mirror me before I move with it is to project onto the movement’s body the same clinging the Buddha located in the aggregates. In the exhaustion organizers describe—the vigilance, the adjudication, the anticipatory defensiveness—just some emotional effects of that clinging. This is *dukkha*, ‘suffering,’ at movement-scale.

Anattā reframes what a coalition is. If the self is process rather than substance, then the coalition does not gather preexisting, finished selves who must negotiate their borders. It gathers streams of conditions that are already interpenetrating, already co-arising. Difference is no longer a border to defend, but the actual experience of dependent origination. Reagon’s unbearable coalition becomes bearable because there is no fortified self requiring the room to feel like home, not because the discomfort disappears.

This also highlights and shifts Butler’s earlier invitation. Backgrounding identity claims is no longer a strategic sacrifice, something surrendered through gritted teeth for the sake of the cause. From the vantage of two truths, it is simply accuracy. The identity claim was always conventionally real and ultimately empty. A movement culture shaped by anattā can invoke identity as *up-āya*, skillful means, foregrounded when the moment requires witness or repair, backgrounded when the moment requires alliance, without either move experienced as betrayal. In the missionary family, this is exactly what happened, though we did not name it in dharmic terms at the time. Gay and Christian

did not stop being real. They stopped being ultimate, and family unity, a shared stake rather than a shared essence, could do its gathering work.

What might this look like as practice? This is the question movement chaplains must answer. Some of it already exists and needs only to be recognized. The 12-step architecture of anonymity and rotating service positions is applied anattā, whether or not anyone in the room has read a sutra. Principles before personalities is the two-truths doctrine rendered in A.A.-basement language. A Buddhist movement chaplaincy could make such design patterns explicit and teachable through leadership structures that rotate before identity can become concrete. This dynamism can meet forms that open with the shared stake, or matter of concern, rather than the round of self-locating, conflict practices—ones that ask Stephen Madigan's relational question: What does this coalition need right now, rather than the adversarial question of who has standing?<sup>11</sup> And beneath the structures, contemplative training itself, offered not as stress reduction for burned-out organizers, but as the slow work of loosening the grip that makes coalition unbearable. The chaplain's distinctive offering moves beyond accompaniment. It is the transmission of 2500-year-old wisdom for holding the self lightly enough that common struggle can hold us.

### The Bodhisattva Does Not Ask Who You Are

There is a figure in the Mahayana imagination worth placing at the end of this argument rather than the beginning. The bodhisattva vows to liberate all beings, and the vow is indiscriminate. It does not screen for affinity. It does not ask whether the beings in question share an analysis, a lineage, or a language of self-description. In this sense, the bodhisattva moves as the coalitional figure, committed to a common struggle so vast that no identity claim could ever be adequate to it.

Our movements do not need everyone to take that vow. But they need people in the room who have practiced its logic, who can sit in the coalition's discomfort without reaching for the barred door. Our movements need us to watch identity claims rise in ourselves and others and know them as weather rather than ground. We can train for this role, and training people for it may be among the most concrete things Buddhism, per se, has to offer the movements now forming and fracturing around us. The question movement dharma puts before us is not whether the self is empty. The tradition settled that long ago. The question is whether we can build movement cultures spacious enough to act like it, and what happens to our coalitions when we do.

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## Buchanan & Buddha: Ontologies of Justice and the Carceral State

ROBBIE MADFIS

WITH ROUGHLY TWO million people in custody, the United States incarcerates more people per capita than nearly any other country in the world.<sup>1</sup> For people born in 2001, 1 in 5 Black men, 1 in 8 Hispanic men, and 1 in 20 white men can expect to be imprisoned during their lifetime.<sup>2</sup> This was not always the case. In "Are Prisons Obsolete?" Angela Davis points out that there have been two periods in U.S. history with drastic increases in the prison population. The first took place during Jim Crow, when a series of laws were passed aimed at criminalizing recently freed Black Americans.<sup>3</sup> The second was between 1972 and 2009, when U.S. prison populations grew by nearly 700 percent.<sup>4</sup> During this same period, the United States saw a stark rise in the proportional use of so-called "supermax" units, facilities where people are often held in solitary confinement for months or years on end and where any pretense of rehabilitation has been abandoned. The U.S. spends nearly half a trillion dollars annually on policing, courts, corrections, and immigration enforcement, more than the total defense budget of any other country in the world.<sup>5</sup>

This article explores the modern ontologies and paradigms that have both fueled and justified this latter expansion of carcerality in the United States. It further considers the possibility that what is at stake in these ontological frames is not merely the degree to which they accurately reflect the underlying reality they purport to describe, but their impact on actively shaping the possible realities, behaviors, and responses of the societies and people subject to their frame. The final section explores an alternative paradigm rooted in Buddhist thought and historical practice as well as examples from indigenous cultures

and literature as case studies in the possibilities that become manifest with a shift in underlying frames.

### A Modern Ontology of Justice

A full historical account of the modern U.S. criminal justice system is beyond the scope of this article, but a brief overview of the ontological frames and paradigms that have shaped and remain operative within our political and justice systems is called for. While countless paradigms simultaneously influence any society, S. M. Amadae argues that our modern political ontology is in large part Hobbesian.<sup>6</sup> Hobbes saw the basic units of social reality as atomized individuals, capable only of acting in their own self-interest. Human nature is characterized by “a perpetual and restless desire of power after power.”<sup>7</sup> In this view, humans are driven by fear, making true cooperation nearly impossible, as every person is perceived as a threat to the self-interest of every other. To avoid the “brutish” life this nature implies, Hobbes proposes a social contract that appoints an all-powerful sovereign capable of coercing the citizenry into cooperation through threat of violence. Hobbes imagines the threat to be so severe as to outweigh any potential utility an individual might gain through non-cooperation (by violently stealing another’s property or breaking a contract, for example).

Although Hobbes himself emphasized the importance of consent to the social contract and conceded that rights and political obligation play an important role in providing legitimacy, Amadae shows that later liberal theorists, namely James Buchanan, who won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1986 and was a foundational influence on the policies of Reagan and Thatcher, pushed the Hobbesian frame even further. Buchanan describes the logical conclusion of this strict utility maximization: the ideal situation for an individual becomes one “that allows him full freedom of action and inhibits the behavior of others so as to force adherence to his own desires. That is to say, each person seeks mastery over a world of slaves.”<sup>8</sup> In extending this utility-maximizing logic to all contexts, Buchanan concludes that trust, obligation, and other higher ideals play no role in rational human behavior. He proposes, and through his influence helps to bring about, a post-constitutional condition in which “the individual abides by existing law only because he is personally deterred by the probability of detection and subsequent punishment.”<sup>9</sup> While early modern philosophers were careful to distinguish between crimes of desperation and crimes of greed, the Buchanan frame collapses any meaningful distinction between the hedge fund manager stealing client funds and the unhoused person stealing to avoid starvation.<sup>10</sup> All criminality is at base motivated by self-interest. The implication is that all citizens are would-be criminals, only momentar-

ily deterred from criminal self-enrichment insofar as the threat from a coercive sovereign outweighs the potential gains of criminality.

Free will in this frame is paradoxically absolute and individual, while simultaneously non-existent. As Howard Zehr observes, “Western laws and values are often predicated on a belief in the individual as a free moral agent. If someone commits a crime, she has done so willfully. Punishment is thus deserved because it is freely chosen.”<sup>11</sup> And yet, as rational utility-maximizing actors, we are by definition incapable of making any choice that is not totally self-interested, and in that sense, we have no free will at all. From this paradox, guilt becomes inherent and fundamental, and this notion is reflected in the statistics. Of the roughly 70,000 federal criminal defendants each year, only 0.4 percent are acquitted at trial; nearly 90 percent plead guilty before any trial takes place; and defendants who exercise their right to a trial often face dramatically harsher sentences if they lose. This threat of additional punishment for asserting one’s innocence, known colloquially as the “trial penalty,” is part of the coercive structure of the state.<sup>12</sup> A legal system that extracts guilty pleas at such an extreme rate must be seen as treating guilt not as something to be determined, but as a presupposition inherent to the relationship between the state and its citizenry.

Ironically, instead of the minimalist state championed by Reagan, this modern frame demands a maximalist security and surveillance state, one “so powerful that each and every act of injustice could be found out and punished, and every citizen would know this, and hence never consider such an activity.”<sup>13</sup> The state’s role is only to deter violence through the threat of violence. Institutions of policing and law become merely dominant players in the cycle of violence rather than solutions for ending it.<sup>14</sup> Violence cannot be eliminated, only monopolized.

In “Conflicts as Property,” Nils Christie illustrates how, in this modern frame, conflict is no longer a matter between two people or two parties, but between a person and the state. Criminal law is explicitly defined as a violation against the state, and the state, not the person harmed, is designated as the victim.<sup>15</sup> Christie describes this as a process whereby conflicts, rather than being a matter between two parties, become “other people’s property—primarily the property of lawyers,” with the parties directly involved moved to the periphery or absent altogether.<sup>16</sup> What is lost in this paradigm is the possibility of addressing the harms experienced or of any resolution between perpetrators and the persons or parties harmed. The “truth” of a case is determined by the state and by lawyers, and does not require any consensus view from the parties involved.

## Why Frame Matters

“Because there is no fixed realness, everything is being constructed through our own minds... We can learn to shift reality by thinking differently, which allows us to experience hope. Hope is a belief in change.”<sup>17</sup>  
—Lama Rod Owens

Careful readers of Hobbes may point out that the Hobbesian ontology described above is something of a caricature of his actual writing. Hobbes did emphasize the need for citizens to consent to the social contract and the capacity for certain obligations to be sustained absent coercive threats. While Buchanan pushed the Hobbesian frame further than Hobbes himself, in a manner that has undoubtedly shaped our social, political, and criminal systems, the U.S. system, for all its faults, still contains corners—if ever shrinking—where notions of cooperation absent coercion, of reformation, and of mutually acknowledged rights and norms still exist. The caricatured Hobbesian view plays an influential role, but it is by no means the only frame operative in our worldview. The Quaker concept of prison as penitentiary (the idea that prison ought to be a place where someone is sent for penitence and ultimately reformed enough to re-enter society) still has some, if fading, resonance in our criminal justice system. Modern abolitionist thinkers like Angela Davis and Mariame Kaba point out that the contours of the modern carceral system in the United States have in large part been shaped by white supremacy, the aftermath of slavery, and the political response to Black freedom movements.<sup>18</sup> These frames and others operate alongside and in tension with Hobbes.

What is at stake in all of these frames is not merely a question of how accurately or inaccurately they describe the underlying reality of human nature, but a question of how we want to approach and react to the world around us. In *Changing Lenses*, Howard Zehr writes that “paradigms shape our approach not only to the physical but also to the social, psychological, and philosophical world . . . they shape what we ‘know’ to be possible and impossible.”<sup>19</sup> Amadae goes further, describing how the operationalization of game theory—a subfield of economics that purports to show trust and cooperation to be irrational in many scenarios—actually shapes the behavior of the societies it claims to describe. As she writes, “Not only does the model itself become indistinguishable from the reality it models, but this superposition of the model over the lived world gives rise to the uniquely neoliberal subject who internalizes the limiting guidelines of what can count in a rational judgment.”<sup>20</sup> This effect has been documented empirically, showing that students who study economics behave less cooperatively in experimental settings than their peers, and that defection rates increase in proportion to the degree of economics study.<sup>21</sup>

The implication of this meta-frame, that our ontological frames shape our underlying ontology, shifts the task from carefully sketching the map that matches a static and unchanging territory, to creatively designing the territory we want to inhabit. Our power to actively shape society and our relational behavior through the stories we tell about ourselves empowers us with a choice. Do we want to continue to tell a story of self-interested, atomized individuals incapable of trust and cooperation, in need of a maximally secure surveillance state with a monopoly on coercive violence? Or do we want to draw a different map and live in a different world?

### A Different World

“It’s time for a jailbreak of the imagination in order to make the impossible possible.”<sup>22</sup> —Mariame Kaba

Myriad alternative frames exist alongside and in tension with the Western modern paradigm. Past and present Indigenous cultures across the world have distinct systems built on relational rather than atomized dynamics. Restorative justice traditions offer alternatives to the carceral model, and modern abolitionists like Mariame Kaba have developed and built upon transformative justice processes aimed at addressing harm while transforming the conditions that produce it. Fiction writers like Ursula K. Le Guin and Octavia Butler have imagined futures built on solidarity, mutual aid, and non-hierarchical relationality. This next section explores what one possible alternative system of justice might look like when built on a Buddhist ontological frame. A necessary caveat is that there is no single, static “Buddhist” frame, but rather a multitude of ever-shifting ontologies, momentarily and imperfectly held by people and peoples who identify as Buddhists. This article will necessarily construct a somewhat artificially coherent ontology from pieces of the less coherent whole.

### Emptiness

Two high-level Buddhist concepts are most relevant for constructing an alternative paradigm: emptiness and karma. Counter to some colloquial understandings, the idea of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is not a claim about the complete unreality of everything, but rather the lack of independent, eternal, or self-contained reality of anything. If our modern justice system relies on a carceral logic with fixed and essentialized identities of offender and victim, then emptiness insists on the lack of any such essentialized or fixed identities. Someone who causes harm is not essentially harmful and need not be indefinitely constrained from causing more harm.

Emptiness proposes that everything exists in a state of dependent co-arising, a constant flux that arises and changes in relation to everything else. No-self (*anattā*) is the concept of emptiness applied to the self: the essentialized, egoistic, separate self is a delusion that leads to attachment, greed, and ill will. When we wake up to the truth that all things are empty, including and especially ourselves, and that we exist in interdependent relationship with everything else, attachment, greed, and ill will dissolve. In stark contrast to the Hobbes/Buchanan view of humans as atomized individuals, Buddhism views all beings as continuous with the whole, such that self-interest is only conceivable from a state of delusion. Where the Hobbesian frame holds that humans are inherently selfish and threatening, such that greater liberation produces greater threat, in the Buddhist frame, humans are inherently interconnected and loving, only momentarily deluded with greed, such that greater liberation leads to greater well-being for all.<sup>23</sup> Lama Rod Owens makes this point in his book, *The New Saints*: “The carceral state is not based on justice or virtue. It is a fundamental expression of delusion that has indoctrinated our minds, bodies, speech, actions, dreams, and imaginations. We must give up on the idea of justice and commit to liberation . . .”<sup>24</sup> In this framing, the path to greater flourishing is through liberation, not through coercive power.

Emptiness further serves as a powerful tool for recognizing and cutting through the frames that are shaping our worldview. Emptiness applies not only to concepts of selves and objects but to everything, including Buddhism and emptiness itself. In this way, emptiness challenges us to acknowledge our perception of any essential nature as delusional projection, and recognize the very concepts shaping our reality as themselves existing in a constantly shifting flux.

### Karma

The word *karma* comes from Sanskrit, meaning “action” or “deed.” For Buddhists, karma is the idea that all actions both have their roots in the past (causes and conditions) and sow the seeds for future actions. Traditional understandings emphasize how karma works across lifetimes, influencing the status of future rebirths and serving as an explanation for variable levels of suffering and fortune across society. In this understanding, karma creates its own consequences, eliminating the need for a sovereign to impose external punishment. As David Loy frames it, “we are punished not for our sins but by them.”<sup>25</sup>

Many practitioners arguing for an engaged Buddhism point out that karma can also be understood as our social and psychological conditioning. Our habits of thought, speech, and action actively shape who we are.<sup>26</sup> Collective karma goes further to show how we are constructed not only through our personal tendencies but through our social and historical contexts. Collective

constructions such as race, class, gender, caste, and capitalism are karmic forces shaping our behavior. In contrast to the Hobbesian frame in which free will is both absolute and non-existent, karma frames our actions as neither totally free nor completely determined, but conditioned, and conditioned in such a way that the conditioning can itself be changed.<sup>27</sup> This understanding of karma creates a Buddhist understanding for transformative justice where we are called to respond to harm not through coercion, but through transformation of the underlying causes and conditions creating the harm.

### The Suttas

Several Buddhist scriptures, taken together, offer a compelling counter-frame to the Hobbes/Buchanan world. The Aggañña Sutta (DN 27) offers the closest Buddhist analogue to Hobbes's state of nature. The story describes a primordial state of abundance, populated by beings who are "mind-made, feeding on delight, self-luminous."<sup>28</sup> Conflict is not present at all in this original state. It is only at some later point, when greed is introduced, that deceit, theft, and violence arise. To deal with these newfound issues, the beings decide to appoint a governing sovereign "who would show anger where anger was due."<sup>29</sup> This governing being is a direct parallel to the sovereign in Hobbes's social contract, with one important difference: for Hobbes, the sovereign is necessary because human nature is fundamentally self-interested and uncooperative. In the Aggañña Sutta, by contrast, beings naturally exist in self-luminous abundance, and only later (and only a subset of them) develop a greed born of attachment.

It is in this frame that the Cakkavatti-Sihanāda Sutta (DN 26) describes the central duty of government as providing for the needy, not acting as the coercive threat of violence called for by Hobbes. The story tells of a monarch who goes against the advice of his royal seer to "provide money to the penniless in the realm."<sup>30</sup> Once the monarch cuts off support for the needy, poverty becomes widespread, leading to theft, violence, and societal collapse. The king attempts to impose order by executing a thief; however, instead of remedying the situation, the state violence leads to the people arming themselves in response, manifesting the very violent citizenry it meant to restrain. All vices are ultimately traced back to a failure to care for the needy:

From not providing money to the penniless, all these things became widespread—poverty, theft, swords, killing, lying, backbiting, sexual misconduct, harsh speech and talking nonsense, desire and ill will, wrong view, illicit desire, immoral greed, and wrong custom, and lack of due respect for mother and father, ascetics and brahmins, and failure to honor the elders in the family.<sup>31</sup>

In contrast to the Hobbes/Buchanan model of justice, where harms are committed by individuals acting from absolute free will, harms in this frame manifest from the social conditions of poverty and desperation. Much less attention is given to the individual committing the immediate harm than to the broader causes and conditions giving rise to that harm. As Mariame Kaba writes, “harm originates from situations dominated by stress, scarcity, and oppression,” so prevention means “mak[ing] sure that people have support to get the things they need.”<sup>32</sup> The war on crime of the Hobbes/Buchanan frame becomes the war on poverty in the Buddhist frame.

In the *Aṅgulimāla Sutta* (MN 86) we are given a direct account of criminal reformation. *Aṅgulimāla* is a notorious serial killer wreaking havoc and terrorizing a kingdom. One day, the Buddha enters *Aṅgulimāla*’s territory, where *Aṅgulimāla* tries to chase him down. Despite walking very slowly and deliberately, the Buddha always remains just out of reach of his pursuer. When *Aṅgulimāla* calls for the Buddha to stop, the Buddha replies: “*Aṅgulimāla*, I have forever stopped—I’ve laid aside violence towards all creatures. But you can’t stop yourself from harming living creatures.”<sup>33</sup> This retort reaches *Aṅgulimāla* in ways that all the king’s attempts at punishment and coercive violence could not. *Aṅgulimāla* renounces his life of violence and joins the *Saṅgha*. Studying under the Buddha, he goes on to attain full liberation. The king later remarks with amazement on “how the Buddha tames those who are wild” with mere teachings, while he himself could not tame *Aṅgulimāla* “with the rod and the sword.”<sup>34</sup> Teaching and rehabilitation are upheld as the real solutions to criminality, and coercive violence is deemed ineffective.

## Traditional Tibet and Other Cases

### Tibet

In *The Golden Yoke: The Legal Cosmology of Buddhist Tibet*, Rebecca Redwood French provides a detailed overview of a justice system in pre-Communist Tibet rooted in a Buddhist ontology.<sup>35</sup> I include it here along with two briefer explorations of alternative justice systems as helpful case studies, not as perfect examples of what a society should strive for (there are many seemingly less-than-enlightened elements of each system), but as a practical illustration of how a working justice system can operate when grounded in an alternative paradigm.

The focus of the legal system of traditional Tibet was the individual mind (*sem*), and the underlying belief that a mind free from mental afflictions is peaceful, cooperative, and capable of enlightenment, while a mind that is afflicted creates conflict. “Thus, the goal of the legal system was to calm the mind”

and to release the mind from affliction so that it can return to a state of clarity and harmony.<sup>36</sup> All conflicts were considered to have an immediate cause, the superficial context directly surrounding the surface event, and a root cause: the afflictions underlying the conflict. There are six root afflictions (desire, anger, pride, ignorance, doubt, and incorrect view) and twenty secondary afflictions, including belligerence, resentment, spite, jealousy, and deceit.<sup>37</sup> Where the Hobbesian belief that humans are fundamentally selfish eschews the concept of reconciliation, since the parties never had a conciliatory relationship in the first place, the Tibetan ontology that human minds are fundamentally conciliatory and only momentarily afflicted orients the justice system toward social repair. Instead of crime being handled by the state and lawyers, the preference was to have all conflict handled by the parties involved and their immediate community, with official court proceedings existing only as a last resort. The goal for every judicial process was to reach consensus among the parties around the truth of the situation and an agreement to resolve the strife. This meant that cases were never permanently closed; if either party no longer agreed to the resolution, the case could be reopened at a later date. For this reason, coercion was rarely used, as it was seen as ineffective for reaching lasting consensus.

When conflicts could not be resolved within the community, they were brought to court officials for consideration. Officials were trained to consider the uniqueness of each case. Punishment was decided on a case-by-case basis and there were no fixed sentences or guidelines. The punishment itself was often designed with the goal of restoring the community to harmony and rehabilitating the offender. Karma was also taken into account, and judges could rationalize a lack of immediate punishment by appeal to presumed repercussions in future rebirths. Harm-doers were often required to pay compensation, not only to the immediate victim of a violent act but often to the larger community, reflecting a more interconnected view of social harms.

### Navajo Justice

Tibet is not a unique example. Indeed, we find countless alternatives to the modern paradigm of carcerality, not only in other Buddhist societies, but throughout Indigenous cultures, contemporary justice movements, and fiction writing. In his article on Navajo justice concepts, “Life Comes from It,” the Honorable Robert Yazzie details how in contrast to Western legal systems and their concern with social control, the Navajo legal ontology describes the law not as something created by humans and enforced by authority figures, but as something fundamental, “the essence of life” that exists “for better thinking, planning, and guidance.” Instead of serving as a site of judgment and coercive punishment, Navajo law is viewed as the source of a “healthy, meaning-

ful life.”<sup>38</sup> From this foundation, Yazzie describes Navajo law as “horizontal,” lacking hierarchy and as highly pragmatic, focused on problem solving. Legal proceedings, rather than working to determine right and wrong or winner and loser, focus on ensuring the continued well-being of all involved. For this reason, Navajo law is closely related to Navajo healing practices, in that both follow the same two-step process “driv[ing] away or remov[ing] the cause of illness; and second, restor[ing] the person to good relations in solidarity with his or her surroundings and self.” Where the goal of the modern Western legal system is to coercively subdue and punish the inherently criminal citizenry, Navajo justice is focused on restoring people to a natural state of good relations by means of solidarity. Navajo justice maintains a wariness toward power structures, recognizing the insidious danger of coercive power and its capacity to lead to tyranny. For this reason, it outright rejects the use of prisons and considers coercive use of authority a form of witchcraft.<sup>39</sup>

### Practicing the Future

In their book, *Emergent Strategy*, adrienne maree brown writes that “all organizing is science fiction,” and “science fiction is simply a way to practice the future together.”<sup>40</sup> *The Dispossessed* by Ursula K. Le Guin serves as one prime example of the countless works of fiction that allow us to practice an alternative future. In it, Le Guin describes two sister planets, Urras and Anarres, each the other’s moon. The society of the former closely resembles our modern, capitalist, individualist society with an explicitly Hobbesian ontology. On Urras, “The law of existence is struggle—competition—elimination of the weak—a ruthless war for survival.”<sup>41</sup> The latter is an anarchist society founded on principles of mutual aid, solidarity, and interdependence. On Urras, there is material abundance, but stark inequality, and the lower classes must be coerced into working the drudge tasks and fighting the wars that keep the society functioning. Consequently, there is a sprawling surveillance and police state along with mass incarceration. On Anarres, there is no private ownership, no governmental hierarchy, no prisons, no police, nor any other form of coercive or punitive structures. Anarres is plagued by frequent drought and food shortages, and this material scarcity is seen as the ground for the social cooperation, mutual aid, and interdependence. Rather than an ideal, cooperation becomes the only pragmatic means for collective survival. The novel’s protagonist explains, “We have neither prey nor enemy, on Anarres. We have only one another. There is no strength to be gained from hurting one another. Only weakness.”<sup>42</sup>

It is important to note that all of these examples have their complications. In traditional Tibet, corporal punishment such as whipping was quite com-

mon, and though rare, capital punishment and even mutilation were possible punishments for “big crimes done during times of peace.”<sup>43</sup> The Tsang and Dalai Lama codes also engendered a rigid social hierarchy that devised a variable compensation system depending on the rank of the victim. For the Navajo Nation, Yazzie points out that the modern Peacemaker Court explicitly incorporates elements of “the vertical justice model” with its coercive enforcement, and members of the Navajo Nation today will choose between “using the peacemaking process or the Navajo Nation version of the adversarial system.”<sup>44</sup> Le Guin goes out of her way to show that Anarres is far from an enlightened society. One early scene of the novel depicts Anarresti children playing at being prison guards and brutalizing one of their fellow playmates who is in the role of criminal,<sup>45</sup> and throughout the novel several characters argue that a bureaucratic and majoritarian rule persists on Anarres in all but name. These complications are noted not to disqualify these examples as meaningful cases, but to highlight how multiple frames can be, and indeed always are, operating on a society at once. Societies can simultaneously be oriented toward restoration and harmony, and create their own cycles of violence and coercion.

## Conclusion

A few weeks ago, I joined roughly a thousand people in an attempt to rescue around twice as many beagles from a notorious breeding facility in Blue Mounds, Wisconsin. The facility has hundreds of documented animal welfare violations, including vivisection and the removal of vocal cords without anesthesia. As we approached with hands up, armed with little more than flowers, we were met by hundreds of police officers and private security personnel dressed in full riot gear. Over the course of several hours, we were brutalized with tear gas, rubber bullets, and bean bag guns. Anyone who approached the fence surrounding the facility was liable to be pepper sprayed.<sup>46</sup> I witnessed one officer pull down the safety goggles from an elderly woman’s face so he could apply pepper spray directly to her eyes. After hours of this abuse, we eventually retreated without rescuing any of the dogs (although the broader campaign later negotiated for the release of 1,500, and the entire facility was eventually shut down).

Many of the same police officers who brutalized the peaceful rescuers later spoke about how they themselves had dogs at home, whom they loved and cared for. It can seem frustratingly incoherent that someone could simultaneously love their own pet dog, while violently defending a corporation’s capacity to mutilate, torture, and kill those very same animals. Simpler to believe that those who commit such violence are consistently and coherently violent through and through. Such an understanding of violence allows us to ignore

the uncomfortable reality that the police officers who beat up grandmothers in the name of defending corporate animal abuse are not somehow deviant, defective, or altogether different from the rest of us, but in fact, reflect our very own human capacity for violence when subject to the right (or wrong) ontological frame. Indeed, it is this very capacity for internal inconsistency as humans that makes our choice of ontological frames so important.

From the very first chapter of *The Dispossessed*, the people of Anarres and Urras consider each other as alien species, not only inhabiting, but born of other worlds. However, Le Guin makes clear throughout the novel that the two are not separate species. The Anarresti are descendants of revolutionaries who were shipped off of Urras only a few generations ago. They are the same people, but their two opposing ontological narratives make them from, literally and figuratively, two different planets. And yet, Le Guin shows how even these seemingly alien worlds are not static or separate, but exist in a porous flux. The same revolution that birthed Anarres continues to operate below the surface of Urrasti society and the egoistic and self-interested tendencies of Urras remain operative, if often in the shadows, in the people of Anarres.

In *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, Mariame Kaba points out that “the systems live within us”<sup>47</sup> and that retribution and vengeance are “conditioned in us.”<sup>48</sup> We must be careful not to fall into the same ontological thinking that justifies carcerality by viewing those who create harm as inherently violent or deviant, but recognize the power and multiplicity of the underlying frames operating on all of us, and consciously and repeatedly choose the frames that reflect the world we want to live in. Buddhism provides one powerful alternative frame among many with which we may, if we so choose, construct a world built not on self-interested, atomized, and alienated individuals, but on a solidarity born of our interconnection and interdependent liberation.

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## Hart Island

SEAN FENTRESS

*"Then Judas, who had betrayed Him, saw that he was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests ... and they took counsel, and bought with them the potters field to bury strangers in."*

—Gospel of St. Matthew (27:3-8)

WHEN A SPIRIT, a mindstream, a bundle of karmic tendencies slips from the body like a tight shoe, or—for the materialists—when the life force of an organism is stamped out by the natural laws of death, its once-animated form is left behind. What will come of this form?

From the beginning, homo sapiens have devised an abundance of ways to deal with our dead. We bury them (in the ground, at sea, in caverns), burn them, entomb them (the Great Pyramid!), compost them (green burials), and ceremonially dismember them on high mountain plateaus where carrion eaters have received human corpse offerings for generations (look up "Tibetan sky burial" for more on that one).

But what of the dead who, in the cold atomization of modernity, die alone, unclaimed, anonymous, or in the care of loved ones unable to afford multi-thousand-dollar burial fees?

Here in New York City, our answer to this question is Hart Island—a 130-acre strip of land off the coast of the Bronx in Long Island Sound, that for the past 157 years has been used as a "potter's field," a final destination for those departed beings deemed by the city to be unclaimed or unidentified.

Until 2021, Hart Island was managed by the Department of Corrections, closed to the public. All interment labor was performed by inmates of Rikers Island for 37 cents an hour. Control of the island has since been transferred to the Department of Parks and Recreation, and burials are now conducted

by city contract workers.<sup>1</sup> The public can now register for tours held on select Tuesday mornings through the NYC Parks website.

Hart Island wasn't always a potter's field. As with all land "belonging" to the American Empire, it used to be stewarded by people the empire has desperately tried (and failed) to disappear, all but scrubbed from our nation's records. In 1654, one Thomas Pell purchased the land from the Siwanoy people, and so began a surreal progression of piecemeal ownership through many different hands, each with their own idea of what to do with the humble island.

A brief list of Hart Island's previous incarnations: host of underground bareknuckle boxing matches; training ground for the 31st Infantry Unit of U.S. Colored Troops during the Civil War; home of the Industrial School for Destitute Boys; a quarantine site during the Yellow Fever epidemic (1795-1804); an insane asylum; a Civil War POW camp; Navy barracks during WWII; a jail for New York's incarcerated overflow; a Phoenix House narcotics rehab facility (which occasionally held music festivals, drawing names like The Velvet Underground and Janis Ian); and underground storage for supersonic missiles during the Cold War (1955-1961).<sup>2</sup>

Since becoming a public cemetery in 1869, roughly a million New Yorkers have found their final resting place in Hart Island's vast grid of trenches. An estimated one-third to one-half of them are children under five years old who died in NYC hospitals; in many such cases, a parent had signed papers authorizing a "City Burial," often unaware of what exactly that meant.<sup>3</sup> Hart Island burials spiked during the AIDS epidemic of the '80s and '90s, when, amidst ignorance and chaos, funeral homes started rejecting bodies killed by the virus. The first 35 AIDS patients to be buried on the island were interred individually, 14 feet deep; the only individual interments on the island. A particularly potent grave marker on the southernmost tip reads "SC-B1-1985": Special Case Baby 1. This marks the island's first infant known to have died of AIDS. The child's grave stands entirely on its own, several yards off from the other already isolated AIDS patients. SC-B1's identity remains a mystery.

When I took the public tour at the end of June, six Urban Park Rangers served as our guides, and I noticed at least half of them quietly weeping throughout the tour. SC-B1 had the whole team choked up. As Ranger Lenora tried her best to get through an explanation of the grave without breaking down, we heard intermittent bursts of clatter that sounded like hundreds of distant firecrackers going off at the same time. It was the NYPD's training facility shooting range, we were told, which stands just across the channel: the sonic shadow of a militarized and omnipresent police state.

Nowadays, Hart receives about 1,500 pine boxes annually, each labeled with whatever information on the deceased is available, along with an identifi-

cation number. Then into the mass-grave trenches they are buried, perhaps first receiving a blessing from Hart Island's staff chaplain (a position formerly held by my root teacher, Lama Justin von Bujdoss), all of it mutely witnessed by the wind-swept, corpse-laden island.

For many, learning about Hart Island—and the city's machinations played out upon it—doesn't sit well. But the phenomena of the unclaimed dead is a reality, so what would we have the city do differently? What is the dharmic approach to the situation? Dharmic as in not only preventing harm, but actively relieving suffering as well. I don't know the answer to this question, but I know it is worth asking.

For one thing, we can begin to envision a reality where the spiritual virus of capitalism is dismantled, and with it burial fees that price out entire populations from "claiming" their dead loved ones. As it is, rituals of honored identification and remembrance are being withheld by the marketplace of death industry. As a simple given, let us insist that whenever possible the remains of all human beings be processed by their own communities exactly according to their deepest wishes. Let's also address what I think is an all-too-common and perhaps unconsciously-made assumption of the karmic equation here: that there is some inherent lack of dignity in being buried on Hart Island. But is there?

On the relative level, there's no fault in being disturbed by the prison-industrial complex and its essentially unpaid labor practices—the blatant continuation of what was once called slavery in America—and by the notion of a remote and closed-off burial ground of mass graves for the anonymous and the cast aside. Isn't it our responsibility to heal the spiritual ails that give rise to phenomena like Hart Island, where the pain of being declared forgotten and abandoned, faceless and nameless, hangs like a mist? Of course, it isn't that simple. It never is.

We want to define everything, to make it hold still, because then we can get our footing. We can conjure some illusory ground on which to stand. We pin it down, define it, make sense of it, and project meaning upon it. Now that it means something, we can judge it. Discussing Hart Island with Lama Justin, he told me, "You know, my feeling about Hart Island is that people project a lot onto this place that is sacred. What makes it sacred? The bodies make it sacred. This being the resting place for so many people. The fact that it holds the remains of those who died from the flu pandemic of 1918, and before that from Yellow Fever and Typhoid, the AIDS crisis, COVID... This is what makes it sacred."

Still, we may well feel a righteous anger at what appears to be unjust. But justice for whom? Justice for the deceased? Or justice for the living left behind

who struggle to make sense of an urban planning conundrum? And perhaps the real question: do justice and death ever mix? Then there's the prison labor aspect. I know many of us recoil at the idea of people in custody burying bodies for less than a dollar a day, but, as both Lama and the Urban Park Rangers pointed out, such a work assignment was a coveted position. The job was peaceful, out in nature, and one was a lot less supervised. Lama went on to say, "These places are complex. When we only look at things from the view of one particular location to power, everything else becomes colored by that. And this is exactly what dharma is about too. When we shift perspective to a much wider lens, we see all the complexity, and that complexity also reflects a tremendous amount of beauty, an existential beauty."

And on the absolute level, what about the dignity of Hart Island's vast community of the dead? From this perspective, the whole question becomes absurd. In reality, there is not an iota of "dignity" taken from the lives, and deaths, of these beings. There is no such thing as an undignified death. Beings take birth, remain for a time at the intersection of awareness and appearances (i.e. experience), and depart. All life—and thus all death—is a playful expression of awakened mind, freely dancing in the not-two-ness of form and emptiness. So whether a body lies in Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn (a kind of polar twin of Hart Island, where in the mid-19th century wealthy Manhattanites would send their dead on river-crossing ferries to the Gowanus Bay, and then by horse-drawn hearse to Greenwood), or in Hart Island, there is no real distinction to be made. One is not of greater worth than the other. A mindstream took birth, the material vessel expired, and its molecules scattered in space-time. Our divine nature is inalienable. Nothing and no one can diminish the inherent worth of consciousness taking form, and dropping form. The only dance there is. Breathing in, and breathing out.

When I visited Hart Island, I asked one of our guides how the city is facing the inevitable day the island reaches capacity. She said they have yet to re-use a single plot, though estimates place that juncture of critical mass coming within the next 10 to 20 years. As of now, there is no plan for how to proceed beyond that point. Also at play is how climate change is acting upon the physical dimension of Hart Island. The southern part of the island is only one or two feet above sea level. It flooded during Sandy, and there was considerable erosion on the shoreline that had to be mitigated by FEMA support. So even the land itself is not fixed.

Lama Justin told me how peaceful he found the land to be when he was still the chaplain of Hart Island. Back then, the island was teeming with *Datura*—a nightshade flower, ghostly white, that is both lethally poisonous and extremely psychoactive, depending on the dose. Since the Parks Department took over,

the island has been manicured and well-kept; clean lawns have replaced the wild overgrowth of the DOC years. *Datura* has been used for millennia as a ritual hallucinogen by cultures spanning from India to the Indigenous Americas. Lama Justin felt the plant spirit was right at home on the charnel island. In Buddhist tantra, much focus is given to the idea of transmutation. We practice in order to transmute the five poisons (attachment, aversion, confusion, jealousy, and pride) into wisdom. These energies themselves, whether experienced as poison or wisdom, are one and the same. It's what we do with them, how we relate to and identify with them, that is transformed.

The plant spirit of *Datura* can kill you, or it can be a visionary guide. There are endless healing modalities that can cause incredible harm, whether by being taken out of context, administered in excess, or used to treat the wrong ailment. Governments use forced isolation and sensory deprivation as instruments of torture. The Tibetan practice of dark retreat (Lama Justin's heart practice) can vaguely resemble such methods in form, but when done voluntarily and held within the container of a spiritual tradition, a qualified teacher, and techniques developed over millennia, it has the potential to be profoundly healing. Medicine can be poison, and poison can be medicine. Healing technology, whether medical or spiritual, is not fixed either.

What is the poison when it comes to Hart Island? Is it death? Poverty? Societal values? And can there be transmutation for its buried beings? I think so. The site of such transmutation is in how we, the living, hold them in our hearts and minds. How we connect with the dead, both in spirit and on the physical plane. This is where movement chaplaincy and Hart Island can blend into fertile ground. If you are passionate about chaplaincy and social activism, visit the island, take a public tour. Bear witness to the grave sites and to the land itself. As both spiritual practice and fuel for your activism, see their sacred nature, indestructible and utterly beyond the causes and conditions that led them there. Allow whatever afflictive emotions may come to arise unobstructed, blooming into their innate wisdom nature, and let that wisdom energy pervade all your activities in the world.

As Lama Justin said, "The grief is shared by all, grief is not just the pain of the dispossessed, or the pain of the poor. The wealthy feel grief, the wealthy feel loss as well. Solidarity with those who have less means who are buried on Hart Island—solidarity with marginalized communities—is an existential thing, and it's beautiful. But political liberation and spiritual liberation are not the same, from the Buddhist view." Political freedom and political power do not ensure the transmutation of attachment, aversion, confusion, jealousy and pride. Certainly, political freedom is conducive to the work of spiritual liberation, but we ought not to confuse the two as interchangeable. Nor should we

wait until political freedom has been secured to begin our spiritual liberation practice; an error which would only lead to the stuckness of samsara grinding on forever.

Having taken the ferry across the channel through the hazy dawn, Lama and his colleagues (the aforementioned Rikers inmates) set foot onto the forgotten shore of New York's forgotten dead. Meditating on impermanence and the inherently liberated nature of mind, always armed with a Bible, Torah, and Qur'an (in case the deceased's faith tradition could be identified), and reciting prayers from his own Vajrayana Buddhist tradition, Lama Justin would set about blessing each pine box that came off the New York City morgue truck. Throughout the COVID pandemic, he returned to the island many, many times.

It's a special sort of chaplaincy, when all those in your spiritual care are already dead, and you'll never see their faces. If you're lucky, you might have a few scattered details of their identities. The Buddhist chaplain knows that time does not exist, and that all those past iterations of the land are invisibly vibrating, always. Spiritual care is happening on the subtle planes of sheer presence, of softly uttered prayers and quiet bows. Eventually, Charon comes back, chaplain and inmates reboard the ferry, and they begin the journey back to the land of the living. The cool dark of night embraces the island, the ghost flowers bloom, and the forgotten dead dance upon supersonic missiles, singing together in the rich acoustics of abandoned mental asylums.

Meanwhile, across the Long Island Sound, 8.5 million New Yorkers breathe in and breathe out, each one respiration closer to the Universal Fate of all sentient beings.

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Let me respectfully remind you,  
Life and death are of supreme  
importance,  
Time passes swiftly and opportunity  
is lost  
Let us awaken, awaken. Take heed!  
Do not squander  
Your life.

— Evening Gatha (Upaya Zen Center)





## Author Interview: Just Awakening: Yogācāra Social Philosophy in Modern China

JESSICA X. ZU

**J**UST AWAKENING: *YOGĀCĀRA Social Philosophy in Modern China*, by Jessica X. Zu, is a work of “liberation Buddhology” that explores how early 20th-century Chinese intellectuals drew upon Yogācāra philosophy to build an irresistible, revolutionary activist movement to bring forth a nonviolent, just society. The book, which just won the prestigious Toshihide Numata Book Award in Buddhism, offers a compellingly clear account of what Zu terms “socio-soteriology”, a new revolutionary project of social philosophy and praxis.

**Brooke:** I was tremendously excited to talk with you about your book, Jessica, and to introduce our *Arrow* readers to this outstanding text. As a community, we’ve been engaging deeply with concerns around collective liberation and themes of pluriversality, and the question of how to build more loving, just, relational, and non-dominating communities and societies. Your book offers us a path forward, and it also speaks directly to the heart of this special issue, “Movement Dharma,” and its concerns with what the dharma might offer this moment.

**Jessica:** Many thanks, Brooke, for inviting me here and for helping me broaden the implications of my book beyond its narrow academic interest. I’m excited to share my two cents with *Arrow* readers and learn from them how to keep scholarship relevant and accountable to the frontline activists building our pluriversal futures of relational non-domination.

**Brooke:** I love this phrase, “relational non-domination”; I think it is such a clear and powerful way of communicating freedom in connection. What brought you to this book, to Yogācāra Buddhism, and to your own understanding of collective liberation, or freedom?

**Jessica:** To be honest, when I chose to work on modern Yogācāra, I had no idea that it has such deep connections with social justice and epistemic justice, especially how to do scholarship when your own knowledge tradition was the target of what Boaventura de Sousa Santos termed “epistemicide.” How to survive and gain the power to make one’s own system legible in an epistemicidal environment, and how to do *prefigurative scholarship* that refuses to reproduce our inherited patterns of epistemic domination, but instead builds toward Santos’s vision of “ecologies of knowledge” or Arturo Escobar’s vision of pluriversal futures. Also, I only got to know about Escobar’s and other visions of pluriversal politics after my book was published and after some readers brought up this connection.

What brought me to research for this book was a combination of personal aspirations and academic viability. This is my dissertation book, so it was meant to be a tenure book, meaning that I wrote this book for academic readers only so that I get job security to produce more scholarship later. But I was doing my second PhD, so I needed it to be about things I care deeply about. I was born and raised Pure Land, the kind of low-brow easy path for common folk without much epistemic authority. Chinese Pure Land has long worshiped the ancient Buddhist philosophers Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu as Pure Land ancestors, role models to emulate. So, when I was a kid, my Pure Land aunties (most of them illiterate or semi-literate) would often cite verses—purely from memory—in our daily conversations. We would refer to each other as dharma brothers, and they would reward me if I could recite verses like:

心意識了名之差別。 (*Twenty Verses, T. 1590*)

(*Mind [Citta], Intellect [Manas], and Consciousness [Vijñāna] are differentiated by name.*)

內識生時似外境現。由假說我法 有種種相轉 彼依識所變 此能變唯三; (*Thirty Verses, T. 1586*)

(*When the internal consciousness arises, it manifests as if it were an external objective realm. The metaphors of ‘Self’ [Atman] and ‘Phenomena’ [Dharmas] are conventionally designated, evolving into various manifestations. These manifestations are based on the transformations of consciousness, and these consciousness-transformations are of only three kinds.*)

不生亦不滅，不常亦不斷；不一亦不異，不來亦不出。( *Root Verses of the Middle Way, T. 1564*)

(*Neither arising nor ceasing; neither permanent nor annihilated; Neither identical nor different; neither coming nor going.*)

Then later on, when I grew up and got into college, I realized that they were using very high-brow scholastic Yogācāra and Mādhyamaka treatises by Vasubandhu and Nāgārjuna. This contrast caused quite a bit cognitive dissonance for me: what does an abstruse scholastic treatise have to offer to my mostly illiterate Pure Land aunties who were just trying to survive and, at the same time, make sure kids like me do not starve?

Academically, few scholars have seriously studied Yogācāra in modern China as philosophy. So I figure, I owe myself to give it a try. Also, as a Pure Land practitioner, my vision of Pure Land is the father of modern Yogācāra, Yang Wenhui's; he literally wrote that Amitābha's Pure Land was like a modern school where everyone can learn whatever they want for free, not just free of tuition, but also with free food and free boarding. Getting into a PhD program supporting me to nerd out on Yogācāra is very much like living in Pure Land for a few years.

**Brooke:** Thank you for sharing some of your personal history! Your book centers on the work of Lü Cheng, a 20th century Chinese Yogācāra thinker, and other contemporaries concerned with building a nonviolent, just society. What was happening in movements for justice in China at this time, from which this work emerged? What is the relationship between Lü Cheng's liberation work and actual movement organizing on the ground?

**Jessica:** I chose to work on Lü Cheng not because he has broad on-the-ground impact. The institute he helped build, 支那內學院 ('China Inner Learning Institute') has abysmal social impact but, academically, they were the best of their time, well-respected by most Chinese intellectuals as a force to wrestle with. This broad recognition by the mainstream, non-Buddhist, Confucian, Christian, secular intellectuals, for me, means that they've done something right in dealing with the epistemic domination and in making themselves legible in the secularizing world. The secularist knowledge system, at the time, meant everything Western: social Darwinism, a mechanical worldview where objective truths reigned supreme, individualism, "survival of the fittest," and later turned into class struggle and clash of cultures.

Their lack of social impact, I now understand, is not due to lack of effort (everyone at the Inner Learning Institute was working so hard, under dire living conditions), but due to lack of supportive conditioning. Twentieth-century China was tumultuous. Not unlike the apocalypse in Octavia Butler's *Parable* Series. For example, in 1943-44, Lü Cheng relocated the Inner Learning Institute to Chongqing, due to the Japanese invasion. While he was teaching

Yogācāra bodhisattva ideals—ideals of democracy—the Japanese war planes were dropping incendiary bombs, the city was burning, and there were decaying corpses on the street. The government could not clean them up fast enough. Under such conditions, when everyone else was shouting “survival of the fittest,” Lü’s courage to say “survival of the friendliest” and refusal to fall back into what Walter Wink called “the myth of redemptive violence”—meaning using “good” violence to end “bad” violence, which in reality only legitimizes violence as a means to solve social conflict and leads to new structures more abusive, more domineering than the oppressive infrastructures they tore up—for me, that’s brave and amazing, and his vision needs to be kept alive for generations to come.

**Brooke:** What, if any, parallels can we draw between those struggles and the struggles in our movements right now, especially in regards to violence and the logic of domination?

**Jessica:** So many that I can see. If our goal is to dismantle what bell hooks termed “dominator culture,” and to build pluriversal futures of care and love, then Buddhist traditions have a lot to offer. For example, casteism is the oldest form of racism, or any birth-based discriminative social arrangements of domination-submission. Buddhist traditions, for about 2500 years, have recorded in writing their own struggles and failures to dismantle different mutations of dominator cultures and dominator systems and most important of all, dominator mentalities. All those written records are treasure troves for us to learn from both their successes and failures as we move forward.

Many Buddhist or *buddhist* groups are doing that right now. My own terms *socio-soteriology* and *liberation Buddhology* are just a more academically legible way to express what many Black Buddhists and Ambedkarites and engaged Buddhists are already practicing. For example, Larry Ward on America’s racial karma, or rev. angel kyodo williams’ “without inner change, there can be no outer change. Without collective change, no change matters.” Or what Dr. Rima Vesely-Flad observed in her work on Black Buddhism regarding “the practice of stillness in the movement for liberation.” Or Dr. Kamilah Majied’s book *Joyfully Just: Black Wisdom and Buddhist Insights for Liberated Living*. Or my personal favorite, Ayo Yetunde’s *Casting Indra’s Net*. There are so many out there.

As a practitioner of pluriversal futures, I think we need multiple approaches and to think long-term. Dominator cultures have been with us for at least 2500 years if we trust Buddhist records, or even four or five thousand years if

we trust Walter Wink's identification of the first recorded myth of redemptive violence. The way out of it (I hope it won't take another 2500 years; I don't think the earth ecosystem can survive that long) will be a long-term, decentralized, prefigurative movement—prefigurative in that our own social relations within the movement need to practice relational non-domination.

As a scholar, I personally think academia needs a revamp. With insights from quantum physics, biology, chaos studies, critical theorists who used quantum physics to reimagine our social ecological economic life (Karen Barrad, Lauren Berlant, Denise Ferreira da Silva and so many others), objectivity is no longer a tenable epistemic standard. So our current academic structure that separates STEM from humanities is untenable. In place of objectivity, I think in a pluriversal future where we practice ecologies of knowledge, the Yogācāra 3 Cs are still useful guidelines or epistemic standards: karmic efficacy (*consequences* of actions), local/regional *coherence/clarity* of one's knowledge system (global clarity is an impossible dream), and intersubjective *corroboration* practiced with the spirit of organized skepticism. Like Robert Merton pointed out in the 1940s, and Naomi Oreskes has recently restated and expanded, what make sciences scientific is *not* merely the objects of our study (nature vs. culture/society), or our methodologies, but our social relations (scientists practice organized skepticism, and the burden of proof is on the ones who make new claims). Then what Lü Cheng was doing with his scholarship was scientific, not some revival of Buddhist idealism.

Also, once “objectivity” as an epistemic standard is discarded, we can no longer pretend to be value-neutral; neutrality has often served to sustain the status quo anyway. The reason is that, in my friend/colleague Luke Kemp's terms (author of *Goliath's Curse*), scholarship tends to reproduce the one-percent view, because only the elite in the past could engage in conspicuous consumption and thereby left us ample archeological and textual remains to study. Standpoint epistemology will be more tenable in taking seriously the standpoint of the marginalized. If our primary sources are mostly from the one-percent, neutrality reproduces the one-percent view. To get out of that loop, we need to “intentionally look for things,” aka standpoint epistemology. But Lü Cheng would add that we need empathy, an empathy grown out of meditative insight into our deep intrinsic interdependence. Once the boundary between self and other dissolves, even if just for a moment in a highly regulated environment of meditation, when we produce scholarship, we will become more mindful to stop reproducing epistemic domination such as a view from nowhere (i.e., objectivity), and instead practice relational accountability and organized skepticism.

This is why inner change and institutional change must go together. Or what Shawn Wilson has pointed out in *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*, if research doesn't change you as a person, you are not doing it right. Or using bell hooks' words, how do we hospice dominator cultures? It's all about love; we need to use love and care to hospice the dominator mentalities, the internalized will to submit or dominate, then we act in mutually supporting ways. There is no self to be liberated from *dukkha* (which is mostly translated as 'suffering,' but I think it means 'precariousness of life and systems'), but also patterns of thought, action, and institutional settings that need to be liberated from domination-submission patterns, metapatterns that interlock one form of oppression with another and lead everyone and everything into the whirlpool of precarious life. They need to go. But there is no self to be liberated. Only patterns of domination-submission controlling relations that need to be relinquished.

In more concrete terms of how to train students and future scholars, academia remains an institution based on meritocracy; knowledge production is not free circulations of information, because information is not truth (Yuval Harari's insight, not mine). And truth is costly. We need to train scholars to find out truths. Academia has to be based on meritocracy. That said, this hierarchy has to be temporary and confined in learning environments; if the goal and practice of teaching are not to help students grow into intellectual equals, then it's domination. Same relation applies to scholars from different disciplines, since scholars are increasing practicing multi- or cross-disciplinary research. The goal of such collaboration is not to make everyone develop the same expertise in all related fields, that's just impossible. The goal is to make scholars understand all relevant fields as intellectual equals—"equal" meaning we are informed enough to practice organized skepticism, able to ask and check validity of evidence, examine the logic, and see if the evidence and logic lead to the new claims. Of course, none of this is my invention; Lü Cheng did that in the 1920s, '30s, and '40s. I discuss his scholarship and method of critical thinking grounded in compassion and meditative insight at length in Chapter Six of my book.

I don't know what pluriversal futures of academia would look like; nobody knows. If somebody says "I know exactly how the future is going to be," I'd be very careful and probably stay away from that person for a while. As a processual philosopher and thinker, for me the world is nothing more than a vast dynamic network of relations, constantly evolving, like the Chinese classic *The Book of Change*. Or Octavia Butler's "God is change." So the future is open-ended, yet to be made. There's no predetermined god's plan. A pluriversal future has to be an open project with decentered, popular participation where

our differences are enriching and broadening our futures. Just like in a symbiotic relation, differences are mutually supporting and enlivening.

**Brooke:** Do you have a future goal or hope for your body of work?

**Jessica:** I think a goal I'd like to achieve in my lifetime is to build up a processual paradigm as a new room of power in academia. Olufemi Taiwo is my inspiration. Academic disciplines are buildings with rooms built up under conditions of colonialism and epistemic erasure of many cultures practicing processual relational ethics and relational non-domination. Of course, it has to be a collaborative project. In May of this year, Professor Emmanuel Ofuasia just organized an online conference of processual philosophies in understudied traditions. My friend Shuchen Xiang and I are co-editing a special issue in *Topoi* (a top-tier journal in philosophy) on process philosophy and relational ethics. We hope to get more scholars involved in building this new room.

Personally, I feel scholars like me who are trained in Buddhist studies and Chinese philosophy need to bear more responsibility. Academic studies in humanities are text-heavy, privileging Chinese and Buddhist cultures that have ample written records. Writing is an expensive technology and often serves the state government's need to control its subjects. But if scholars in Chinese and Buddhist philosophy can build up this new room, a processual paradigm of knowing, then we can offer tools for building up legibility and communication channels of many other oral cultures. Like what James C. Scott referred to as communities practicing the "art of not being governed," and like the indigenous kinship worldview, Africana philosophy such as *ubuntu*, andriene maree brown's cohort in emergent strategies, decolonial scholars like Eduard Glissant's *poétique de la relation* and *philosophie de la relation*, and pretty much what *The Arrow* readers have been practicing. This way, we don't need to always refer to Western analytic philosophy as a shared target, even if we spend time criticizing them, it's still Eurocentric, and distracts us from more difficult jobs of building up lateral relational accountability among the 99 percent of world cultures who practice relational processual philosophy.

Also more recently, I found out that processual theology is equally deeply rooted in Christian traditions. Catherine Keller's *Cloud of the Impossible* traces this mystical processual and pluriversal theology to the 15th-century theologian Nicholas of Cusa. And Lyla June Johnston, an indigenous scholar, has noted that "we are all Indigenous." She said that even self-identified white people have claims to their Indigenous roots before the witch hunt killed those processual kinship worldviews by lynching our mothers and grandmothers. Grace Ji-Sun Kim's book *When God Became White*, also links God with the

Asian Chinese notion of *Qi* and empathetic resonances. I find them fascinating. But it's not my field. I'd love to learn more. Scholars well-trained in these areas: please come and teach us.

Apologies for this long answer. But it's about scholarship, and why we need scholars. I cannot shut up.

**Brooke:** I love learning all of this! And I resonate with your note on the need for scholarship. I wonder if you have thoughts on how Yogācāra teachings might help us navigate the division and fracturing—and even "one-world-ing"—occurring within our movements around identity, ideology, and so forth?

**Jessica:** This one I have to guess. I grew up a Yogācārin (a follower of the school of mind-only), which says that we each create our own cosmos from our storehouse consciousnesses. So the worlds are already divided, fragmented. What amazes me often is that, sometimes, what I want to say could manage to gain some intersubjective resonances. I don't have existential angst when seeing division and fracturing; that's just the way things are in samsara. When disagreements and conflicts occur (they are doomed to occur, that's dukkha, samsara), I just find ways to turn them into opportunities of mutual growth. Of course, growing up a Buddhist under Communist secular atheism, I know about this one world dictated by historical materialism; that's negative peace built upon epistemicide of my Pure Land aunties', my dharma brothers' wisdom. Under such conditions, no mutual growths are possible, because of structural violence; so, I find ways to protect my own mental health at the very least and maybe offer some emotional and material support to a few others when I have the bandwidth. I suspect people would find Black Buddhist teachers like bell hooks, or *buddhist* teachers like Alice Walker and Kazu Haga's insights more useful. And for those interested in collective actions, I highly recommend Ambedkarite thinkers. They know better how we can build up and sustain healthy intersubjective worlds and shared realities.

I also lack any concrete experiences in any movements. I got two PhDs, which means I spent most of my 50-plus years of life in academia and will continue to mostly live in academia. Academia is not an ivory tower. There's plenty of politics involved. And identity politics mostly show up for me when we do scholarship across the racial line. For example, regarding my recent article on Octavia Butler, I have friends asking me whether I felt anxious about writing about a Black author. I see where the question is coming from. But I didn't suffer such identity anxieties. I'm a Buddhist, identities are all delusions. For me, it's more important to practice relational accountability; I want my scholarship

to be held accountable to people who love and read Butler, activists like those who published the book *Octavia's Brood*, philosophers who care about relational ethics and processual worldview. I want to show the amazing philosophy of relational non-domination that Butler enfolded in her storytelling and how her methods are core to doing processual philosophy, not through abstractions and universalization but through storytelling, so we can continue her imagination of other possible worlds. And she did using the *Dao de jing*, the Chinese classic, and also cited quite a bit of Buddhist stuff in her stories. To dismiss her insight as Black Orientalism would be so wrong on so many levels. To square her purely in the box of Afrofuturism would be so impoverishing to human imagination, to our ancestral inheritance.

But I understand these questions are not going to go away, we live in a racist world, so identity politics are just facts of life for now. I remember when Yountae An visited USC. When we discussed his book, *The Coloniality of the Secular: Race, Religion, and Poetics of World-making*, someone asked him about being ethnically Korean but writing about Franz Fanon, Edouard Glissant, Sylvia Wynter, Aime Cesaire, and many other Caribbean decolonial thinkers and their spirituality/religiosity in their decolonial movements. His response was similar; I cannot remember exactly what he said, but he grew up in the U.S., in a multi-ethnic environment and he said something like I don't know what it means to be Korean and I just wrote this book because I share their concerns and decolonial goals and I have something meaningful to say in this book. For me, that's relational accountability—scholarship motivated by care, learning from, and building up, supporting one another for a less oppressive future.

**Brooke:** What capacities and concepts feel most essential for those of us engaged in the project of building a Buddhist Public and Liberation Theology and a Movement Dharma?

**Jessica:** I don't think I know enough to comment. I think you, *The Arrow* readers, and practitioners/activists of movement dharma need to teach me where you would like support in terms of epistemic legitimacy and authority, and I'll see how I can find ways to assist you. As a middle-aged, over-educated Asian woman, I don't think anything I say will be taken seriously in this racist world. But given my credentials—both Buddhist studies and theoretical physics are disciplines with high entry barriers—I can find some ways to lift up or make legible marginalized people's insights, theories, practices, and worldviews that are productive for birthing our pluriversal futures. It just breaks my heart to see most people can easily imagine the end of human species on earth instead of imagining the end of capitalism, casteism, racism or any other dominator

myths. I often feel so powerless, so I cannot advise, but I can find ways to assist those who lead these on-the-ground efforts for concrete social and economic change.

On a side note, I remember you asked me on a different occasion about certain anti-intellectual attitudes among activists. I actually can empathize with them, it's not fun when your own ancestral knowledge system and lived experiences are dismissed and made illegible by the mainstream. Thenmozhi Soundararajan, an Ambedkarite Buddhist who grew up in the U.S., once mentioned that she was in a Buddhist course and her professor told her Ambedkarite Buddhism is not true Buddhism. I really can empathize with her because I cannot remember how many times scholars and practitioners told me Pure Land is not really Buddhist or is watered-down, diluted Buddhism. So I think it's important to keep a critical distance from certain kinds of dominator epistemologies; this deconstructive/non-cooperative attitude is healthy to a certain degree. But there's another side—a more constructive side—we need to pay attention to: how do we keep alive pluriversal epistemologies and build up our epistemic power to counter the ongoing epistemicide? For this kind of constructive work, we need to know all the details of the epistemic domination then find ways to hospice them, keep them confined to their proper place, refuse to overgeneralize them, and build new patterns, new relations, new epistemologies that are more conducive to pluriversal world-making.

**Brooke:** What's next for you?

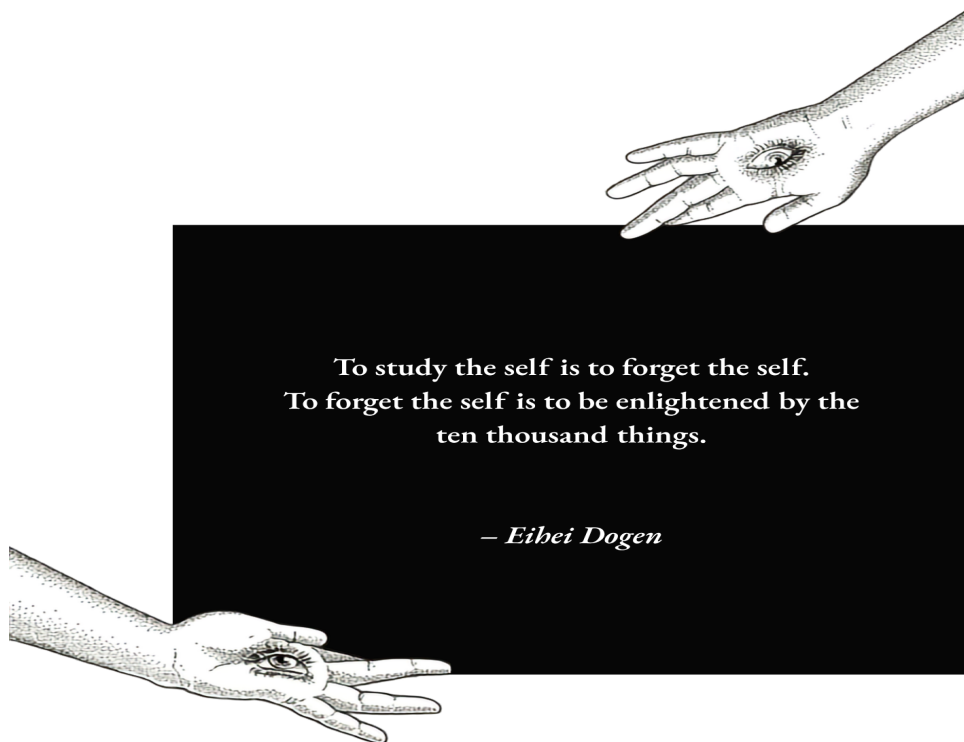
**Jessica:** I'm working on a new book, *The Quantic and The Social: Rebirths of Processual Epistemologies*. It's based on 15 to 20 years of brooding on this question that I got repeatedly as soon as people knew I had a PhD in physics: "Why do people keep making ethical claims based on their understanding of quantum physics? What does the quantum have to do with the social?" I think now, I can offer some clarity to this question: quantum gravity dealt a heavy blow to the substance metaphysics grounded in the birth of objectivity and academic disciplines, which silenced so many world philosophies by calling them superstition, wisdom traditions, anything but philosophy. When scholars like Catherine Keller, Denise Ferreira da Silva, and Karen Barrad, even B. R. Ambedkar, make ethical claims based on quantic notions, I don't think they are claiming to be physicists at all—and I have identified quite a few recurring and repeated over-generalizations of what quantum physics can and cannot support, many recurring philosophical non sequiturs. But despite all these slip-pages, they are making a legitimate claim about the impossibility of objectivity

and its complicity in epistemicide in the social realm, and they are calling for rebirthing the pluriversal epistemologies that our ancestors had been practicing for a long, long time.

Once quantum physics is out there, it's no longer possible to imagine a nature full of predetermined, mutually exclusive substances neatly arranged along some fixed hierarchy, void of human involvement. Carlo Rovelli (a well-respected scholar of quantum gravity) proposed a kind of reinterpretation of Nagarjuna as relational ontology based on quantum insight, that the world is just layered relationalities, always in flux. If this is true, then objectivity/subjectivity in our social practices of producing knowledge is like what Karen Barrad termed an agential cut (somewhat arbitrary), so there's no neutrality, everything is value-laden. Then this kind of natural philosophical insight supports social philosophies of *isonomia*—egalitarian, democratic arrangements—without any need for a center, a state, or a ruler. Order is *not* hierarchy; it's emergent and will change. Stability is not static; it's dynamic, symbiotic, always full of conflicts, but conflicts can become opportunities for growth into new patterns of mutually-supportive relationalities.

So the book *The Quantic and The Social* is my effort to build bridges between STEM and humanities and give legitimacy to these socio-ethical claims based on insights learned from quantum physics. The goal of this book is so that we can work together toward the pluriversal knowledge articulated by Brandon Vaidyanathan on how to reform science and technology: "Rather than serving the status quo [which Brandon defines as DEF: domination, extraction and fragmentation, an underlying systematic logic of all knowledge production today], could spiritual intelligence help us reimagine the design criteria for new technologies? What might AI systems look like that were intentionally designed for reverence instead of domination, receptivity instead of extraction, reconnection instead of alienation?" Humanists have started doing so since at least the 1960s and if we count people like Lü Cheng, we started this project as soon as science was becoming the dominant knowledge paradigm in the 1920s. Mainstream scientific knowledge producers have a lot to learn from the humanists.

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"You expect results with no effort. So delicate you are, and in so much pain!  
While in the clutches of death, you act like an immortal. Hey, miserable one, you are destroying yourself!"

—*Shantideva, Bodhicaryavatara,*  
*"Diligence," v.14*





## Cadences of Freedom: Path and Politics Towards a Buddhist Movement Theology

ADAM LOBEL

TIBET'S FIRST MONASTERY, Samye, still rests beneath the Hapori mountains, overlooking a bend in the Yarlung River valley. Here, in the late eighth century, a semi-mythical debate is said to have unfolded that would shape centuries of Buddhist reflection on the path to liberation. Though the historical details remain contested, and memory has been refracted through later sectarian views, the story of this debate is repeated to this day because it gathers competing visions of how freedom unfolds through time—its cadence, its causes, and the strange ways it arrives.<sup>1</sup>

On one side of the debate stood the Indian scholar Kamalaśīla, associated with a gradual path of study, ethical discipline, meditation, and the patient cultivation of wisdom. On the other stood the Chinese Chan teacher Moheyan, remembered for emphasizing sudden immediacy, nonconceptual awareness, and the effortless recognition of mind's nature. Embedded in their disagreement lay a topography of questions about action, causality, and time. Freedom might emerge through sustained cultivation or through the abrupt disclosure of what has always already been present. Awakening can resemble gradually transforming a deeply ingrained habit, suddenly opening one's eyes, or simply allowing one's eyes to be the color they already are.<sup>2</sup> Each image carries a different account of what practice does, how causes work, and where freedom resides.

These questions also haunt theories of political transformation. Societies change through patient organizing, institution-building, education, and the slow transformation of conditions. They also change through ruptures and collective uprisings that no organizer could have planned. Movements build alternative forms of life while confronting the powers that constrain them.

They transform institutions, withdraw from them, seize them, smash them, prefigure other worlds, and sometimes discover capacities for collective action that seem to have always been present, and perhaps natural. Each of these approaches contains its own implicit theory of transformation, its own tempo or cadence through which freedom becomes possible—patiently ripening across long durations, erupting in sudden breaks, pulsing through repetition and return, drawing a future possibility into the present, or slowing to stillness as the effort to transform falls away.

The stakes of such issues intensify amid climate mutation, disaster nationalism, end-times-fascism, resurgent authoritarianism, masked government militias rounding up and deporting people, and renewed debate over the limits of civil resistance.<sup>3</sup> Many of us are heartbroken, frustrated, and longing for collective solidarity and response. As social movements struggle against oppressive leaders and against the deeper economic and cultural conditions that produce them, questions of transformation become unavoidable. Movements are again confronting old strategic tensions between protest and institution-building, disruption and construction, local ecological experiments and large-scale political coalitions, while asking how resistance to domination relates to the cultivation of social and multispecies worlds.<sup>4</sup> I bring these tensions into conversation with centuries of Buddhist reflection on liberation because Buddhist traditions have developed unusually intricate accounts of how freedom is cultivated, disclosed, embodied, obstructed, enacted, and sometimes discovered to have been present all along.<sup>5</sup>

I write in service of what might be called a Buddhist movement theology. Latin American Liberation Theology modeled how religious traditions could enter struggles against oppression and collective suffering.<sup>6</sup> A Buddhist movement theology will have to ask what resources Buddhist theories and practices of liberation offer for understanding social, ecological, and political transformation. This requires reading Buddhist paths as more than instructions for private awakening, unsettling the familiar assumption that spiritual transformation happens first “inside” an individual and is subsequently extended “outward” into society. Once confined to the individual practitioner, liberation can be readily absorbed into the wellness industry and sold as resilience, self-management, and personal optimization.<sup>7</sup> Yet I think that Buddhist path theories can also be creatively reinterpreted as forms of freedom taking shape through solidarity, institutions, ecologies, cultures, and collective life. Political struggle, in turn, exposes collective, relational dimensions of bondage and liberation that individualizing forms of Buddhist modernism often leave untouched. Aspects of a movement theology could emerge from this encounter, where Buddhist soteriology is tested and transformed by the historical conditions of collective

struggle. By bringing these archives together, we may enrich our understanding of the multiple cadences through which freedom appears as we face the poly-crises of our times.

The paths explored here can therefore be approached as practical frames through which movements understand what transformation is, how it happens—how to “do” it. Does change require patiently constructing the conditions that make freedom possible? Transforming the latent habits and desires through which subjects reproduce existing worlds? Emptying the foundations that make an order appear necessary? Interrupting those worlds through rupture? Living the desired future in the present? Or learning when willful, planned, transformative striving itself has become another obstacle? These are different cadences of transformation, shaping what organizers notice, what actions become imaginable, and what speeds and capacities movements cultivate. Part of the aspiration of this essay is that organizers, leaders, movement chaplains, and Buddhist practitioners may become more nimble by learning to recognize and move among different cadences of transformation without unconsciously treating any single cadence as the only tempo of change itself. Instead, a plurality of temporalities is called for.

This also means resisting the temptation to convert Buddhist soteriology into a political program. I do not believe that Buddhism contains the secret to contemporary political transformation, nor that political theories of change are simply applications of Buddhist ethics. I am bringing two archives of transformation into experimental proximity, allowing each to illuminate problems within the other. The encounter moves in both directions, challenging both sides.

Unfortunately, in our times, we must problematize even the term ‘freedom,’ which has become contested in contemporary political discourse.<sup>8</sup> Across Europe and the United States, movements of authoritarian nationalism increasingly invoke the language of freedom to defend exclusion, xenophobia, racism, patriarchy, deregulation, and resistance to democratic accountability, producing what Wendy Brown describes as authoritarian or “ugly freedom.”<sup>9</sup> The freedom explored in this essay belongs to a different tradition—it’s not just about sovereign independence or unrestricted individual choice. It refers to practices and forms of life that expand the capacities of human and more-than-human communities to flourish together. Sometimes, as we will see, freedom can be an indwelling capacity or basic condition of existence. How such freedom dwells, emerges, is cultivated, is enacted, and transforms historical life provides the pulse for what follows.

This inquiry is necessarily selective and limited by my own situatedness. I focus primarily on idealized and theoretical descriptions of paths of liberation

as they appear in classical Buddhist texts and contemporary scholarship. Questions of concrete spiritual exercises, lived practice, institutional and regional history, ethnography, and sociological specificity remain largely outside the scope of this initial study. Such perspectives would undoubtedly complicate and enrich the picture presented here, but including them would require a different kind of project. I have also omitted entire traditions, for example Pure Land Buddhism, that could substantially complicate the taxonomy developed.<sup>10</sup> The traditions discussed here contain astounding internal diversity, centuries of debate, and multiple competing interpretations. The categories employed throughout this article should therefore be understood as selected, ideal generalizations. The same is perhaps even more true for the partial and limited selection of political theories that I juxtapose with Buddhist pathways.

My own formation in Tibetan Buddhism, especially Nyingma, Shambhala, and Dzogchen, and as part of Western convert dharma, inevitably shapes the categories and prejudices through which the material is arranged. The movement through gradual causality, latency, emptiness, sudden disclosure, tantric enactment, effortlessness, and plural approaches to transformation inherits the Indo-Tibetan doxographical imagination even as I place it into conversation with contemporary political thought.<sup>11</sup> The account offered here is therefore necessarily provisional and somewhat generalized and the political theories I explore are often ideals more than concrete tactics. The aspiration is to open a field of inquiry that others may refine, complicate, and contest.

### Sudden Political Rupture, Gradual Political World-Building

Vincent Bevin's *If We Burn* takes us on a journalistic journey through the wave of protests that swept the world during the 2010s, dwelling especially on Brazil in June 2013.<sup>12</sup> A small increase in São Paulo bus fares catalyzed demonstrations organized initially by students, anarchists, bike activists, veterans of Brazil's punk scene, and autonomous organizers. Police responded to the protests with brutal force; public sympathy surged and packed crowds multiplied from across the political spectrum, bursting forth from a diverse range of grievances. What began as a local protest over public transportation soon drew in office workers, union members, futebol supporters in their team jerseys, neighborhood and religious groups, families, nationalists, and divergent political currents. For a brief period, the ordinary coordinates of Brazilian political life were suspended. Millions of people discovered capacities for collective action that no party, government, or movement leader had orchestrated.

The difficulty came with the movement's success. Protesters could disrupt the rhythms of urban life, force concessions, and draw millions into the

streets—but they had no plan to translate this energy into a durable political project, or even if this was desired. One organizer later told Bevins, “We had planned every single detail, down to the moment we would succeed. But we had absolutely no plan for what came after that.”<sup>13</sup> The leftist autonomous movements that helped catalyze the uprising watched as the demonstrations expanded far beyond them, attracting nationalist and right-wing forces whose political aspirations were radically different from their own. Dilma Rousseff, the former left-wing guerrilla and Workers’ Party president, was impeached in 2016; her predecessor Lula da Silva was imprisoned; and in 2018 Jair Bolsonaro—a far-right military officer who praised Brazil’s military dictatorship, attacked environmental protections, advocated opening the Amazon to mining and agribusiness, and supported missionary efforts to assimilate isolated Indigenous peoples—won the presidency.<sup>14</sup> The political forces that eventually occupied the opening bore remarkably little resemblance to many of those who had first taken to the streets.

Bevins returns repeatedly to this problem across the uprisings he chronicles. Movements became extraordinarily skilled at disruption, mobilization, and delegitimation, effectively punching a hole in the existing political order. They knew how to open a breach, not how to inhabit it. But others did. Organization persists on the other side of rupture, as capital, political parties, corporations, media networks, churches, military institutions, and movements of the right may be better prepared to occupy an opening than the insurgents who created it. The capacity to rupture an existing order and the capacity to shape what emerges afterward belong to different political temporalities.<sup>15</sup>

The Zapatista movement emerged through another cadence. Six militants entered the Lacandon jungle in 1983 hoping to establish a revolutionary guerrilla nucleus. Years of encounter with Maya communities transformed the revolutionaries themselves; Marcos later described the process as having been “defeated” by the Indigenous peoples they had expected to lead.<sup>16</sup> Out of that defeat, the movement metamorphosized from a guerrilla project into one increasingly rooted in local forms of collective life, Indigenous traditions, village assemblies, forest logics, and practices of autonomy. More than a decade of largely invisible preparation preceded the more visible January 1, 1994 uprising, when masked rebels infamously occupied towns across Chiapas and declared ¡Ya Basta! Enough! Enough violent land dispossession, enough severe inequality, enough domination of one world by another. The spectacular rupture was then followed by decades of autonomous municipalities, schools, clinics, cooperatives, food systems, and iterative experiments in self-government that continue to this day. The event opened historical and geographical space, and it was collective world-building that learned how to inhabit it.

It would be easy to cast the São Paulo eruption as a cautionary tale and Chiapas as a model, but that is not my point. Doing so would flatten what is most illuminating about the comparison in terms of the issues of this essay. The Brazilian eruption revealed latent capacities for collective action that no amount of centralized planning could have produced on command, while the Zapatista uprising depended upon rupture as much as the patient preparation that preceded and followed it. Their histories carry several temporalities at once: long preparation, sudden openings, improvisation, reversals, and the slow construction of forms capable of enduring.

Lenin recognized this unstable relation between preparation and event more than a century ago. Writing in 1901, he distinguished the slow work of organization from the moments of historical acceleration for which no movement can simply plan:

We have spoken continuously of systematic, planned preparation, yet it is by no means our intention to imply that the autocracy can be overthrown only by a regular siege or by organized assault. Such a view would be absurd and doctrinaire. On the contrary, it is quite possible, and historically much more probable, that the autocracy will collapse under the impact of one of the spontaneous outbursts or unforeseen political complications which constantly threaten it from all sides. But no political party that wishes to avoid adventurous gambles can base its activities on the anticipation of such outbursts and complications. We must go our own way, and we must steadfastly carry on our regular work, and the less our reliance on the unexpected, the less the chance of our being caught unawares by any “historic turns.”<sup>17</sup>

Revolutionary movements, Lenin argued, must devote themselves to systematic preparation while recognizing that history rarely unfolds according to plan or control. Autocracies often collapse through unforeseen crises, spontaneous uprisings, and sudden turns of events—such as extreme weather, drought, famine, recessions, or pandemics. Yet no movement can responsibly organize itself around the expectation of such moments—you can’t plan on that which is spontaneous. Preparation remains necessary, even though the decisive opening may arrive unexpectedly. Similarly, I’ve heard Zen teachers say that though enlightenment is an accident, meditation is making oneself accident prone.

Every theory of liberation, whether spiritual or political, contains an implicit rhythm—a cadence, a style of how freedom breaks through, is created, or unfolds through time. As Antonio Negri argues, revolutionary practices do not merely occur within historical time but actively create new temporalities,

opening forms of collective action that generate new futures and reorganize the very conditions of political causality.<sup>18</sup> This essay asks how different paths of both spiritual and political liberation cultivate distinctive temporalities and, in doing so, open the very time in which freedom unfolds.

By cadence, then, I mean more than whether transformation happens quickly or slowly. A cadence is the patterned movement and tempo through which change becomes possible—the relation between preparation and rupture, repetition and interruption, effort and release, present practice and an anticipated freedom. Political and contemplative paths offer forms in which these moments hang together, shaping what practitioners cultivate. In this sense, we have returned to Samye. The old dispute between gradual cultivation and sudden awakening was already a dispute over the cadence of freedom—whether it ripens through causes cultivated across time or breaks through in an immediacy that cannot be produced by them. We can return to these older questions anew today.

### I. Gradual Transformation: Causality, Action, and the Long Arc of Freedom

Early Buddhist traditions developed some of the most sophisticated causal theories of liberation in the history of religious thought. As Buswell and Gimello observe, the iterations of the path became one of the master organizing frameworks of Buddhist thought itself.<sup>19</sup> The Buddha's teaching of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) describes phenomena as arising through causes and conditions: "When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises."<sup>20</sup> Suffering is therefore conditioned rather than fixed. Alter the conditions and another way of acting becomes possible.

Karma, literally "action," extends this causal logic through time. Intentional actions of body, speech, and mind leave traces that shape future perception, habit, and action. Repeated anger makes angry reactions easier, just as generosity strengthens generosity, and sustained attention enhances the capacities of attention itself. Buddhist practice works within these recursive processes, cultivating conditions through which greed, hatred, and delusion gradually weaken while wisdom, compassion, concentration, and ethical sensitivity become increasingly, gradually, available.

The Four Noble Truths express this causal architecture in the form of a medical diagnosis: suffering is recognized, its causes diagnosed, the prognosis of its cessation proclaimed, and a path of healing prescribed that will bring an end to the causes of suffering. Like a physician tracing illness to its source before offering treatment, the Buddha presents liberation as a practical, causal response to a causal universe. The path is also a theory of transformation: chang-

ing the conditions through which experience is produced changes the forms of experience that can arise.<sup>21</sup> Later Buddhist scholastic traditions formalized this intuition through increasingly elaborate accounts of paths and stages, perhaps most influentially through the Five Paths of accumulation, preparation, seeing, cultivation, and no-more-learning.<sup>22</sup>

Early Buddhist practice also places emphasis on Right effort, which often comes along with developmental causality. The Four Right Exertions instruct practitioners to prevent unwholesome qualities from arising, abandon those already present, cultivate wholesome qualities not yet developed, and stabilize those that have appeared.<sup>23</sup> Ethical discipline and meditation are here deliberate, intentional ways of reshaping the conditions of experience. Gradual practice approaches therefore include the two dimensions of cultivating wholesome capacities while also relinquishing whatever obscures them. Gradual cultivation has always contained this double movement.<sup>24</sup> Some capacities must be nourished; other habits lose their hold through cessation, restraint, or abandonment.

This gradual path also harbors a practical paradox. Nirvāṇa—the ultimate goal of the cessation of suffering—is repeatedly described as the unconditioned, the unborn, and the unmade, while every step of the path belongs to conditioned existence.<sup>25</sup> Ethical conduct, meditation, concentration, and wisdom all arise through causes and conditions. How can conditioned activity disclose what is itself unconditioned? How can intentional effort culminate in freedom from striving? How do you try really hard to stop trying?<sup>26</sup> Can you use habits to eliminate habits? Related paradoxes reverberate throughout the Buddhist tradition and become one of its great engines of philosophical creativity.

One influential Buddhist response to related entrapping paradoxes of karma and causality came to emphasize relinquishment. Progress was measured by the removal of specific defilements and not the production of new states. Through the path, obscurations dissolve and attachments fall away—leaving nothing behind.<sup>27</sup> Buddhist traditions developed remarkably different responses to the paradox of conditioned action, and much of the history traced in this essay can be read as experimentation with its causal grammar. Gradual paths cultivate the conditions for liberation; later traditions increasingly ask whether freedom can really be produced at all.

## 2. Political Gradualism

On an environmental justice tour through Newark, New Jersey, sponsored by GreenFaith, I once heard a story from two Christian ministers who organized against the multinational corporation, Honeywell. Decades of carcinogenic industrial pollution from a chrome factory had contaminated their communi-

ties, river, and land. Meetings, lawsuits, coalition building, coalitions collapsing, public education, disappointments, people becoming distracted or giving up, and small victories accumulated until—almost unimaginably—the company was held accountable and required to finance a massive cleanup. Their campaign lasted thirty-three years. Its victory emerged through a persistence grounded in a faithful patience that exceeded what the dominant system expected.

Many influential traditions of political organizing inhabit a similar cadence. Freedom grows through the patient reconfiguration of conditions: capacities cultivated, relationships woven, institutions built, communities slowly becoming capable of actions that were previously impossible. Paulo Freire condensed this temporality into a question: “What can we do now in order to be able to do tomorrow what we are unable to do today?”<sup>28</sup> The American civil rights movement offers one of its clearest expressions. Rosa Parks, the lunch-counter sit-ins, the Edmund Pettus Bridge, and Martin Luther King Jr.’s address at the Lincoln Memorial endure as spectacular moments, yet they rested upon decades of church organizing, leadership development, legal strategy, political education, and disciplined collective training in places like the Highlander School. Parks’ refusal on the bus emerged from years of preparation. What appears retrospectively as a sequence of decisive events was experienced from within as a long, hard apprenticeship in liberation.<sup>29</sup>

Much of the organizing tradition can be read through this same temporal logic. Laurence Cox describes movements as sites of collective learning in which victories and defeats accumulate into practical knowledge; Ella Baker, Saul Alinsky, Marshall Ganz, Grace Lee Boggs, adrienne maree brown, Dean Spade, and Rob Hopkins develop different practices of leadership formation, relationship-building, mutual aid, adaptive emergence, institution-making, and ecological resilience.<sup>30</sup>

Gandhi united such gradual cultivation directly to confrontation and civil disobedience. Before campaigns of satyagraha, participants underwent prolonged formation within the disciplined life of the ashram, cultivating non-violence, self-restraint, simplicity, communal service, and spiritual practice. Spinning cloth, building schools, and reconstructing village life belonged to the same movement as boycott, noncooperation, marches, hunger strikes, and civil disobedience. Patient formation prepared people to endure the intensity of direct action.<sup>31</sup>

Modern Engaged Buddhism largely inherits this cadence. Across Thích Nhất Hạnh’s communities of mindful living, Sulak Sivaraksa’s activism, the Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka, Joanna Macy’s *Work That Reconnects*, and contemporary Buddhist responses to white supremacy and ecological crisis,

meditation, ethical formation, community-building, and political action reinforce one another across long durations.<sup>32</sup> Macy's account of the Great Turning plays with different temporal movements which simultaneously undertake actions that block or slow destruction, construct life-sustaining systems, and cultivate shifts in consciousness through which different forms of life become imaginable.<sup>33</sup> Something close to the double movement of Buddhist gradualism appears here at collective scale, interrupting the causes of suffering while cultivating conditions conducive to liberation. Such a reading resonates with David Loy's proposal that the poisons of greed, ill will, and delusion have become institutionalized in modern societies, and therefore need to gradually be transformed systemically.<sup>34</sup>

The strengths of gradualism return us, however, to the causal problem already encountered within Buddhist paths and at Samye. If freedom depends upon accumulated causes, what becomes of the unplanned or unconditioned? And if those who seek transformation have themselves been formed by the conditions they hope to transform, how deeply can intentional action reach without reproducing habits already sedimented within perception, desire, and agency? The next Buddhist cadence begins within this problem, descending beneath deliberate action toward the latent conditions from which action itself arises.

### 3. Latency and the Formation of the Subject: Enter the Unconscious

If gradualism explores how liberating causes mature through time, the Indian Buddhist philosophical and contemplative school of Yogācāra—literally, the “practice of yoga” school, and often known as “Mind Only”—asks where those causes reside before they ripen. If each moment of consciousness arises and disappears, how do past actions continue shaping the future? Yogācāra developed the language of karmic seeds (bīja) and the ālaya-vijñāna, or storehouse consciousness, partly in response to this problem.<sup>35</sup> Intentional actions leave latent traces that remain dormant until conditions allow them to ripen, like seeds planted in the soil of mind. Perception is therefore neither immediate nor neutral, for every experience and world already bears the imprint of accumulated tendencies shaping what can be seen, touched, desired, remembered, feared, and imagined.

The work of liberation now sinks beneath deliberate intention into these deeper habitual formations of self and world. From the perspective of storehouse consciousness, intentional efforts at transformation can themselves arise through sedimented habits of dualistic perception, reproducing the very forms of subjectivity they seek to transform. The one trying to change, and the way they attempt to make change, are the problem. Yogācāra consequently locates

a decisive dimension of practice in transforming these karmic and dualistic habits at the basis of consciousness, culminating in what it calls *āśraya-parāvṛtti*, the “revolution” or “transformation at the basis.”<sup>36</sup> The causal cadence has shifted. Accumulating liberative actions remains important, while the very basis from which perception, intention, and action arise has itself become a site of transformation.

Although classical Buddhist paths often foreground the liberation of the individual practitioner, the logic of Yogācāra offers ways to open beyond methodological individualism. Jessica Zu’s *Collective Liberation* challenges the widespread assumption that Buddhist liberation concerns primarily individual transformation.<sup>37</sup> If consciousness is conditioned through language, institutions, education, and economies, then liberation also possesses social dimensions. Zu calls this a socio-soteriological framework, in which awakening depends upon the collective conditions through which consciousness is formed.

Focusing on twentieth-century Chinese Yogācāra thinkers such as Taixu and Yinshun, Zu argues that the storehouse consciousness came to describe not only the karmic traces of individuals but also the shared worlds through which societies reproduce attachment, ignorance, and suffering across generations. Schools, economies, political institutions, and cultural traditions become sites of karmic formation, making social reform, education, and collective flourishing direct extensions of Yogācāra’s account of liberation, not merely external applications of Buddhist ethics.<sup>38</sup>

*In my mind, this speaks to one of the primary challenges that a Buddhist movement theology will need to overcome: the notion that inner, individual transformation needs to be secondarily applied to outer, collective change.* We will never discover the collective solidarity required for political change if we rely exclusively on the notion that change starts from within autonomous subjects and then “extends out” into collectives. The socio-soteriological model Zu proposes offers another way forward. The subject who meditates, votes, organizes, desires, fears, or acts has itself been formed through collective histories and relations, so personal and social transformation interact within the processes through which subjects and worlds continually produce one another.

Yogācāra diagnoses and practices of transformation can therefore be brought into proximity with contemporary theories of hegemony, ideology, and collective identity. Antonio Gramsci’s account of cultural hegemony explores how entire populations come to experience a particular social order as natural and inevitable.<sup>39</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe similarly argue that politics involves the construction of collective, affective identifications through which political subjects come into being.<sup>40</sup> Political struggle concerns the contested production of subjectivities capable of acting together, charged

with emotional potency and prepared for conflict. Yogācāra approaches a comparable problem through the language of karma, asking how entire worlds of perception, desire, and meaning become collectively reproduced in relation to action and subjectivity.

There is also a deep structural affinity between the storehouse consciousness and Freud's account of the unconscious.<sup>41</sup> Conscious experience emerges from processes that largely escape consciousness—we often do not know why we do what we do. Personality, memory, perception, and habit persist through latent formations operating beneath ordinary awareness. Both accounts offer ways of explaining continuity without appealing to a permanent self, although the philosophical and soteriological projects of Yogācāra and psychoanalysis remain profoundly different.

Psychoanalytic political thought pushes into social life, which is organized through desire, fantasy, enjoyment, and symbolic identifications, shaping how people live. Following Lacan, ideology persists partly because it organizes enjoyment (*jouissance*), binding people to enjoy forms of life they may consciously criticize or even wish to escape.<sup>42</sup> Psychoanalysis calls us into the unconscious conditions and desires through which every politics becomes possible. Lasting social change concerns institutions, laws, and distributions of power while reaching as well into the libidinal and unconscious mechanisms, images, and fantasies through which subjects repeatedly reproduce existing relations. Although their analytical approaches differ profoundly from Yogācāra, they converge in directing attention toward deeper layers of latency that precede deliberate intention. The idea here is that freedom may require something other than intentional efforts to change. The work of transformation reaches beneath explicit beliefs and efforts to improve, toward generative conditions from which experience, subjectivity, and collective worlds emerge.

Organizers already work within this terrain when they speak of changing narratives, cultivating political imagination, building collective will, or creating new forms of common sense. Systems theorist Donella Meadows approached a related problem through her influential account of “leverage points”—places where interventions can alter the behavior of complex systems.<sup>43</sup> Among the deepest leverage points are the “mindset or paradigm” from which its structures and rules arise. Yogācāra offers its own theorizations and practices for intervening in latent habituation and perception. Across these very different traditions, transformation reaches into the often unconscious generative conditions through which collective worlds are both shaped and shaping.

#### 4. Empty Paths: Indeterminate Groundlessness and the End of Causality

If Yogācāra descended from conscious, willed, gradual transformations into the hidden latency of consciousness, tracing the karmic seeds that are the mechanisms through which worlds cyclically reproduce themselves, the Perfection of Wisdom (Prajñāpāramitā) and Middle Way (Madhyamaka) traditions of emptiness descend still further. The very ground of consciousness proves groundless. Consciousness conditions worlds and worlds condition consciousness; karmic habits shape institutions and institutions shape karmic habits; liberation unfolds through causes and conditions. Yet under the rigorous Middle Way analysis, every apparent foundation proves empty. Karmic seeds, consciousness, dependent origination, subjectivity, practices, the storehouse consciousness, and eventually the Buddhist path itself lose the solidity and independence they first seemed to possess.<sup>44</sup> Everything collapses into uncertainty, like falling into an abyss as the search for an ultimate ground exhausts itself.

Emerging in India around the beginning of the Common Era, the Perfection of Wisdom literature and the Madhyamaka philosophy associated especially with Nāgārjuna develop *sūnyatā*, emptiness, as a radical extension of dependent origination.<sup>45</sup> Causes and conditions function, yet none possesses independent or intrinsic existence. There is no final substrate beneath the process—not a self, not consciousness, not karmic seeds, not social systems, not the Buddha, not even the path. A seed becomes a tree because neither seed nor tree possesses an isolated essence. Soil, rain, fungi, insects, sunlight, seasons, and time participate in its arising. Emptiness names the absence of intrinsic existence through which things arise dependently and can become otherwise than they are. Even emptiness cannot become the hidden ground beneath this relational field: emptiness itself is empty.<sup>46</sup>

Nāgārjuna folds this analysis recursively back upon Buddhism itself. The path, practitioner, practices, stages, teachings, and awakening all become objects of analysis. His critics immediately recognized the implications. If all things are empty, surely the Four Noble Truths, meditation, liberation, the path, and even the Buddha must lose their status as ultimate foundations for religious truth? Nāgārjuna accepts the radical conclusion. Ethical action bears fruit, meditation transforms the mind, compassion alleviates suffering, and the Buddha taught the Noble Truths, yet none depends upon intrinsic existence in order to function. Indeed, if something possessed a fixed essence, it could never become otherwise. The efficacy of the path belongs to dependent arising itself. It is because the path is empty that transformation remains possible.<sup>47</sup>

The analysis reaches causality itself. “No thing anywhere is ever produced / From itself, from another, / From both, or without a cause.”<sup>48</sup> Nāgārjuna

proceeds to examine causes, conditions, and effects, without replacing rejected theories of causality with an intrinsically existing causal mechanism of his own. From this critical analysis, even the Buddhist path dissolves. The gradual journey to liberation is emptied of any ultimate ground.

The distinction between the entrapment of *saṃsāra* and the liberation of *nirvāṇa* also shifts in this empty space. Conventionally, suffering and liberation remain utterly distinct, bridged by the causal, gradual path of practice like taking a raft from one shore of a river to another. Ultimate analysis, however, discovers no independently existing *saṃsāra* from which we need to escape and no independently existing *nirvāṇa* to which we need to arrive. There is “not the slightest difference” between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*.<sup>49</sup> Awakening concerns a transformation in perception and knowing, rather than migration between separate metaphysical realms. The bodhisattva therefore “courses” in the Perfection of Wisdom here and now, discovering emptiness within the very conditions that once appeared to separate bondage from freedom.<sup>50</sup> The entire path shifts from a journey toward somewhere else into a recognition of the nature of the journey itself.

Suffering remains painfully consequential within conventional life, even as the persons, identities, afflictions, causes, and aggregates through which suffering appears dissolve under analysis. Emptiness releases the intrinsic existence of suffering itself. Some interpreters therefore speak provocatively of realizing *nirvāṇa* through recognizing that there is no inherently existing suffering to eliminate, for even *saṃsāra* has never possessed the solidity it first appeared to have, and therefore liberation cannot become a solid metaphysical destination waiting at the end of the path.<sup>51</sup> As grasping relaxes, the distinction between path and goal, *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, bondage and freedom begins to shift and freedom increasingly concerns release from the impulse to secure any state, certainty, or view.

The Middle Way ideal of non-abiding *nirvāṇa* (*apratiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa*) therefore emerges. The bodhisattva does not settle into a final liberation removed in a different dimension from suffering beings but continues the work of liberation without becoming fixed in either *saṃsāra* or *nirvāṇa*.<sup>52</sup> Awakening dwells nowhere because there is nowhere for it finally to settle and compassion remains inseparable from this openness, precisely because nothing has reified into a fixed end-goal of escape. No transformative, effortful path of causality must be practiced, and no final, certain state must be maintained.

We might therefore speak of an empty path. Ethical discipline, meditation, philosophical inquiry, vows, and compassion continue to matter, but they no longer derive their authority from an ultimate metaphysical foundation. They

function because they are empty, not despite it. The practitioner encounters the emptiness of the world, the emptiness of the causal path, and the emptiness of the Buddhism that seemed to traverse the journey toward freedom.

This changes how a Buddhist movement theology might engage political transformation. Movements require strategies, institutions, analyses of power, organizing practices, and visions of worlds worth struggling for. An empty path opens up the possibilities of strategies and visions that can guide action without hardening into set strategies, guarantees of how history must unfold, or final images of what liberation must become. Political forms can then be inhabited, contested and revised without requiring freedom to settle permanently within any of them. The possibility is to act amid suffering and domination while allowing the path, the political subject, and the anticipated ends of struggle to remain groundless and indeterminate.

### 5. Empty Politics: Unfinished, Apophatic, Fugitivity

The political implications of the Middle Way include the emptiness of both fixed positions and foundations. If persons, phenomena, and even the Buddhist paths are empty of intrinsic existence, then political life is also bottomless and endless, unfolding without an ultimate ground. No institution, ideology, identity, political goal, or worldview can claim absolute authority; there is no solid political task. Every political formation emerges through contingent historical conditions, remains open to revision, and participates in an ongoing web of relationships that exceed it. Emptiness transforms the way political causality, goals, and foundations are valued, opening indeterminacy as a political site.

This could deepen the conception of collective democratic deliberation. Democratic life is an ongoing practice of deliberation, disagreement, experimentation, and collective learning. Political legitimacy arises from the continual encounter of partial, relative perspectives, each capable of correcting and enriching the others without ever dissolving disagreement into final, stable consensus.<sup>53</sup> Democracy is here an ever-unfinished, always-incomplete politics of remaining responsive to changing conditions, contingent forms of suffering, and voices that had previously remained unheard.

The institutions that organize collective life are also unfixed and incomplete. Roberto Unger calls this “deep freedom” and argues that markets, legal systems, constitutional arrangements, and social organizations appear necessary only because their contingency gradually disappears beneath historical sedimentation.<sup>54</sup> Institutions begin to look natural or inevitable precisely when they cease to be experienced as historical creations and political imagination returns when this illusion dissipates, revealing that even the most stable arrangements remain ever-revisable achievements and unfixed structures.

These perspectives suggest what might be called an empty politics that mirrors the empty path above. Political life need not be destroyed by the absence of ultimate, shared foundations nor secured by their recovery. This is significant during periods where the conditions for collective meaning-making are often unstable. Contingency itself becomes the condition of democratic responsiveness. Just as dependent origination leaves phenomena free from independent essences, through their relationality, political communities remain open and transformable because they possess no final essence that a people must ultimately realize. And the endless search for a stable shared meaning can release.

### *The Apophatic Turn*

The Middle Way reveals the contingency of causes and conditions, yet its analysis goes further and withdraws every attempt to discover an ultimate ground beneath them. A similar movement appears within post-structural continental political philosophy where the central issue shifts from the revisability of institutions to the ontological status of political community itself. Upon what, if anything, does collective life ultimately rest? Is there a people waiting to be realized, a shared identity beneath social conflict, a common destiny that is the goal of history?

Even the notion of a common or a community—as in the commune or communism—can be deconstructed. For Jean-Luc Nancy, community is neither an organic unity from the past fractured by history nor an ideal social form waiting to be achieved in the future.<sup>55</sup> It exists only in what he calls being-with—the exposure of singular beings to one another prior to every shared identity, nation, race, religion, or political program. Community takes place in relation itself, in the fragile and unfinished space opened whenever human beings encounter one another without coinciding in a common essence. The absence at its center is the very condition that allows plurality to remain alive, not a deficiency awaiting completion and solidity. Community cannot be represented as a unified People, a recovered Nation, or a final Common because every attempt to close the space of being-with simultaneously suppresses the plurality from which community emerges. Like the Middle Way's emptiness, relation has never depended upon an underlying substance; community and common-ness exist only in the ongoing event of being exposed to one another, without final ground and without final closure.

Across deconstruction, negative political theology, non-philosophy, and what has sometimes been called “the Big No,” we can see a recurring suspicion toward every attempt to identify the final subject of history, the definitive revolutionary class, the authentic people, or the social order that would finally reconcile political life with itself.<sup>56</sup> Post-structural critique is often mistaken for

relativism, political paralysis, or quietism. The point is not the all-too-common caricature of postmodernism as cynical constructivism. Political life continues to require ethical ways of living together and creating institutions, but without grounding them on certainty and metaphysical foundations. The political and ethical moment comes precisely when we don't know what to do, don't have a set order or rule to simply follow, and perhaps don't know who we are.<sup>57</sup>

*Fugitivity: Political Transformation Without a Destination*

Forged through the histories of slavery, racial capitalism, and colonial domination, another political cadence emerges within what Cedric Robinson has called the Black Radical Tradition: practices of fugitivity and refusal, and forms of life that exceed the structures designed to capture them.<sup>58</sup> While much Western political theory has imagined emancipation through recognition or inclusion within a shared public sphere, where excluded subjects become visible, assert rights, and claim their piece of the proverbial pie, a radical dimension of Black resistance refuses this placating logic. Maroon communities, hidden gatherings, underground networks, coded songs, mutual aid, improvised kinship, escape itself, and stolen moments and gestures of joy embody forms of life only partially available to the institutions that seek to govern and enslave them. Fugitivity offers an empty political causality—a form of refusal and freedom that unfolds without final destination.

Like fugitivity, Saidiya Hartman's notion of waywardness recovers the genius, friendships, desires, pleasures, experiments, and ordinary practices through which Black people, especially women, fashioned meaningful lives from an archive of slavery and segregation.<sup>59</sup> Fred Moten and Stefano Harney gather related practices of study, care, improvisation, and collective sociality under the name of the undercommons.<sup>60</sup> Ungovernable forms of collective learning are already teeming beneath and alongside the university, corporation, and state, withdrawing from complete capture while generating possibilities for living together.

Fugitivity imagines freedom without relying upon a predetermined historical end or the establishment of a final political order. The violence of slavery, anti-Blackness, and racial capitalism remains devastatingly real, yet no regime succeeds in exhausting the possibilities of life. Every apparatus leaves a remainder, a gap, something that exceeds its grasp, and freedom appears as an excess already moving within the cracks and breaks of the present.<sup>61</sup> Calvin Warren identifies a form of Black mysticism in Moten's work, abandoning ontology—a paraontological excess that eludes capture while sustaining Black sociality, creativity, and collective life.<sup>62</sup>

Read alongside the Buddhist Middle Way, fugitivity resonates with the logic of the empty path and non-abiding nirvāṇa. Freedom is non-abiding—not at home in the dominant order and not setting up a new established state. As the Middle Way dissolves the apparent solidity of bondage, liberation, and the path itself, fugitivity breaks the political assumption that emancipation must culminate in a determinate destination. Suffering, racial domination, and anti-Black violence cannot be denied through mystical negations, but neither does the world that produces and explains them exhaust the possibilities of freedom. Fugitivity offers an apophatic political causality, a mode of freedom without final destination, eroding and morphing the present through ways of living that refuse complete incorporation into the worlds that seek to contain them.

#### *Can Emptiness Remain Empty?*

However, every politics of emptiness eventually encounters the Hegelian insight that negation is never simply subtractive, never just a break; it is “less than nothing,” a generative, active negativity.<sup>63</sup> Contradiction keeps generating new determinations, as karma is said to keep producing new world realms and bodies. Every interruption reorganizes the context it interrupts, and this very emptying becomes the condition for another configuration requiring negation . . . and on the wheel spins. History unfolds through this restless labor of negation.

The dialectic cannot finally rest in empty openness or in the breaks alone; silence is the enabling space for the echo. Emptiness itself may be part of the relentless, churning cycles of the dialectic. Whether the apophatic traditions explored in this essay genuinely escape this Hegelian grammar—or whether they disclose another understanding of negation altogether—remains an open question. Here we find ourselves at perhaps the furthest reaches of the empty path. Another possibility then begins to appear in teachings that speak of awakening as already present, unconditionally complete—not the result of a path but somehow indwelling from the beginning. What kind of path could there be if awakening does not await the future at all?

## 6. Sudden Paths

Buddha Nature teachings describe buddhahood as already present, radiant and always shining, obscured but never absent, like the sun concealed by clouds or a jewel hidden beneath rags and garbage. An already-present, indwelling and immanent awakened nature now needs to be linked to a temporal process through which it becomes manifest, and practice therefore assumes the logic of disclosure. Here we witness a change in the cadence of causality in which awakening is not the fruit of the path but is now its deepest condition. This

literature transforms the causal problem of liberation by relocating the source of awakening itself.<sup>64</sup> Earlier Buddhist paths largely understand enlightenment as the fruit of accumulated causes and conditions. As Dorji Wangchuck observes, Buddhist soteriology repeatedly oscillates between developmental and revelatory models of liberation.<sup>65</sup>

The familiar opposition between “sudden” and “gradual” conceals a far more diverse landscape than later polemics suggest.<sup>66</sup> It’s not as simple as the Samye debate seems, with a one-dimensional choice between developmental and immediate causalities. Some teachers advocated sudden awakening followed by gradual cultivation, others gradual preparation culminating in sudden breakthrough, while still others developed more nuanced, hybrid syntheses. Across these differences, however, awakening consistently belongs to the logic of unmanufactured, uncontrived recognition. The classical metaphors are revealing: clouds part to reveal the sun, a traveler discovers that a priceless jewel has been sewn into their robe all along, a mirror is wiped free of dust, or a mirror doesn’t even need to be wiped, for it is already shining.

Awakening consists in recognizing what has always been there. Yet latent habits continue obscuring perception, conduct, and embodied life. Cultivation therefore remains indispensable, although its function and temporality has changed. Practice no longer produces or causes enlightenment—it discloses what was there from the start.

Chan/Zen is one of the most radical expressions of this approach to the path.<sup>67</sup> If awakening is already complete, what role remains for cultivation? Without collapsing either into the other, the Chan teacher Guifeng Zongmi’s famous formula—sudden awakening, gradual cultivation—was an influential reconciliation of these positions, holding together two temporalities.<sup>68</sup> Awakening belongs to the sudden temporality of disclosure while cultivation belongs to the gradual temporality. Recognition occurs in an instant, a flash, a lightning strike, whereas embodiment unfolds diachronically through time. There does not have to be a choice between suddenness and gradualism, for Zongmi gathers both into a single account of liberation that would influence East Asian Buddhism. The indwelling immediacy of awakening and freedom is already present, practice suddenly reveals what has always been here, and the path is gradually learning how to inhabit that recognition.

Yet Dōgen, the founder of the Soto Zen school, famously asked in his youth what many of us wonder when we hear of the fullness of Buddha Nature: If awakening is already complete, why should one practice at all?<sup>69</sup> This question led to a radical reimagination of practice and path. Zazen meditation, for Dōgen, no longer occupies the interval or path separating ignorance from enlightenment like a bridge between entrapment and liberation, or a

method joining cause and effect, means and ends. Instead, Dōgen's teaching of practice-realization (*shushō ittō*) gives sudden awakening another temporal cadence. The posture, breathing, and activity of just sitting constitute realization's very expression, awakening enacted.

For Dōgen, awakening appears in the activity of sitting itself, each period of *zazen*—and ultimately each gesture and each blade of grass and each frog jumping into a pond—embodying the enlightenment of the Buddha beneath the bodhi tree. As he repeatedly insists, practice and realization, cause and fruition, means and ends, belong to a single gesture in which no trace remains.<sup>70</sup> Every period of *zazen* is complete, while remaining inexhaustible, renewing awakening continually. Suddenness no longer belongs exclusively to the cadence of an exceptional breakthrough interrupting ordinary time as it flows with the rhythm of continual enactment. Dōgen describes this in a triad of practice-realization-expression. Realization continually expresses as a form-of-life whose appearance is simply sitting *zazen*.

## 7. Sudden Politics: Anarchism and Immanent Freedom

Buddha Nature teachings relocated the source of awakening. Buddhahood is here uncaused, disclosing what has always been present. A comparable perspective may be seen in certain strands of anarchist thought. At its philosophical core lies a suspicion of *archē*: the founding principle that commands, that claims both the authority to rule and the right to organize life from above.<sup>71</sup> Classical anarchists such as Proudhon challenged precisely this assumption, arguing that cooperation, reciprocity, and mutual aid are capacities already latent within collective life.<sup>72</sup> Kropotkin emphasized that cooperation and mutual aid are intrinsic social capacities, already present.<sup>73</sup> Political pathways become the discovery, the allowing, and the cultivation of conditions already here, under which self-organization can flourish.

Seen from the perspective of temporality, anarchism is analogous to sudden awakening. Developmental political theories typically understand freedom as a future achievement secured through institutions, laws, or revolutionary transition. Anarchist traditions trust that freedom is already present, even if it is obscured. The slogan of May 1968 captured this intuition: *Sous les pavés, la plage*—"Beneath the pavement, the beach." The beach is already there and is disclosed when the pavement is lifted. Chan imagines awakening in much the same way. Clouds part to reveal the sun; a mirror is freed from dust, and sometimes without polishing the mirror at all. Practice uncovers and expresses, performing freedom.

Confidence in immanent freedom has led some philosophers to describe anarchism as an ontology of spontaneity. Anarchism challenges assumptions

within Western political thought that every legitimate social order requires a principle standing above (or grounding) collective life from which authority descends. Across different historical moments, that grounding principle has appeared as God, Nature, Reason, History, Sovereignty, Capital, People, or the Subject. Yet anarchist thought trusts that social order arises immanently through the relations and capacities of living communities themselves, without the need for a ground or controlling order. Politics is anarchical insofar as it reveals “the sudden revelation of the ultimate anarchy on which any hierarchy rests.”<sup>74</sup>

Similar intuitions appear within several strands of what has been named ‘Daoist anarchism,’ where spontaneous cooperation belongs to the natural unfolding of life itself.<sup>75</sup> Freedom emerges as structures of domination loosen their grip, allowing creativity, reciprocity, mutual-aid, and self-organization already latent within the coursing of things to flourish.<sup>76</sup> The historical connection between Daoism and Chan is well-established, and here we can see both traditions viewing liberation as unfolding through the release of immanent, natural capacities.<sup>77</sup>

The affinity, however, should not be romanticized, for Chan Buddhist institutions have historically served authoritarian states and militant nationalism no less readily than movements of liberation, and contemplative realization does not automatically generate political transformation or ethics.<sup>78</sup> Glenn Wallis warns that Buddha Nature itself can become another unquestioned metaphysical authority and master narrative—a spiritual analogue to the sovereign principles anarchism seeks to dismantle.<sup>79</sup> The deeper convergence between Chan and anarchism may be in their shared suspicion of every final authority. The Chan injunction to “meet the Buddha and kill the Buddha” evokes the radicality of such refusal. Awakening cannot finally depend upon scripture, institution, doctrine, teacher, state, or even Buddhism itself. As all these master narratives fall away, left with nothing at all, there is freedom, spontaneously awake and shining.

Murray Bookchin defines spontaneity as “behaviour, feeling and thought that is free of external constraint, of imposed restriction.”<sup>80</sup> This rejects the common assumption that spontaneity means impulse, chaos, or the absence of organization. Instead, spontaneous action arises through auto-activity and tends toward organic, non-hierarchical forms of association. Here anarchist spontaneity is practical and strategic, and the revolutionary task is now envisioned as the removal of the structures that inhibit innate capacities, including the need for centralized command and control. Bookchin’s account suggests a similar temporal logic to Chan expressed as political strategy and tactics.

Awakening and freedom are approached as capacities disclosed through the relaxation of constraint, not through external direction and command.

Both Chan and anarchism reorganize the causal structure of freedom. Freedom is the ground from which transformative practice unfolds. Mutual aid, self-organization, and prefigurative forms of politics embody this structure by attempting to live the social relations they seek instead of postponing them until after a revolution.<sup>81</sup> This logic of immanent freedom prepares the transmutations of Vajrayāna, or tantric Buddhism. Enlightenment is disclosed, recognized, and expressed, but it is also enacted, ritualized, and embodied as the path itself.

## 8. Tantra: The Goal Is the Path

The sudden traditions transformed the causal temporality of liberation by locating awakening in the present rather than exclusively at the end of a path. Buddhist tantra or Vajrayāna makes another move. Instead of practicing toward buddhahood as a distant result, tantric practice takes the result itself as the path. Vajrayāna is traditionally described as a fruition vehicle (*'bras bu'i theg pa*). The future result becomes the present method, bending time. Tantra takes the ends as means, the goal as the path, drinking the juice of the fruit from the beginning. Practitioners rehearse, visualize, enact, chew, digest, perceive, perform, embrace, and embody awakened existence here and now.<sup>82</sup>

The temporal cadence of such practices reveals the underlying causal logic. The practitioner is first initiated into the final perspective and ritually empowered to experience the perspective of buddhahood. An enlightened name, dress, royal implements, bodily comportments, sacred sounds to utter, and guidance for awareness and perception initiate the practitioner into this awakened perspective. Once this future goal has been experienced in the present, daily rituals re-member and stabilize the initiatory encounter. The end becomes the means; the goal becomes the daily method of practice.

Such participatory logic is enacted through an extraordinarily copious repertoire of ritual, sensory, and embodied practices. Initiations, ritual circles (*maṇḍalas*), sacred sound and letters (*mantras*), bodily gestures (*mudrās*), offerings, ritual dance, subtle-body yogas, sexual practices, and elaborate liturgies reorganize perception through the body itself. Speech becomes mantra, gesture *mudrā*, space *maṇḍala*, and the practitioner's own body is recognized as exactly the body of a buddha, teeming with countless billions of Buddhas within Buddhas within each hair pore.<sup>83</sup> Buddhist tantra shifts from encounters with an external Buddha toward ritual identification with awakened embodiment pulsing and swirling within.

Tantra elaborates this alchemical imagination into its most controversial territory through sexuality and violence. Mahāyoga literature, for example, repeatedly explores the dangerous proximity between buddha and demon, compassion and wrath, liberation and death.<sup>84</sup> Charnel grounds, blood, sexuality, wrathful deities, and the rites of “union and liberation” (sbyor sgrol) arise from the perspective that exactly those forces most feared or rejected by ordinary consciousness can become energies of awakening when transformed through methods. This is an extraordinarily dangerous claim, and I have seen how ideal conceptions of tantric transmutation can simply excuse abuses of power. Practices promising liberation can equally become rationalizations for domination and exploitation.

Yet precisely this danger reveals tantra’s broader political significance. Politically, it raises the possibility that transformation need not proceed solely through purification, removal, or exclusion. Violence, domination, rage, shame, trauma, arrogance, desire, and power become materials for collective transmutation—the manure of experience—rather than toxins to be expelled like incarcerated people.<sup>85</sup> Here tantra resonates with Georges Bataille and strands of surrealism and situationist art that sought to release energies repressed by bourgeois order through transgression, the erotic, the uncanny, and excess.<sup>86</sup> Audre Lorde offers another politics of the erotic, reclaiming it as a source of embodied knowledge, creative power, and collective potency, released from the suppression that sustains racial, patriarchal, and capitalist domination.<sup>87</sup> This tantric political analogue opens an inquiry into whether even the most toxic dimensions of collective life can be metabolized into new forms of relation, reusing their energies, like taking a homeopathic remedy. Such a possibility demands extraordinary ethical discipline and communal accountability. As oligarchy, techno-fascism, fossil fuel-capitalist accelerationism, and a resurgent, outraged right metastasize, social transformation may require more than resisting domination—it may also require learning how to tap into and transform the libidinal and material energies through which domination persists, to use them differently.

## 9. Prefigurative Politics and the Truth Event

Prefigurative politics performs a strikingly tantric temporal structure. Carl Boggs coined the term to describe the practice of creating within present politics “those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal.”<sup>88</sup> Instead of postponing freedom until after the revolution, thereby separating means from ends, prefigurative movements attempt to embody the forms of collective life they seek within the practices of the movement itself. Democratic assemblies, mutual aid, cooperative econo-

mies, transformed relationships, overcoming fixed hierarchies, liberated spaces, and experiments in communal life become both means and ends. The desired future becomes a practice in the present. The goal begins to operate causally before it exists historically, bending time.

This orientation has appeared across anarchist, feminist, autonomist, alter-globalization, Occupy, cooperative, and ecological movements, where splitting strategy and goal, means and ends, becomes increasingly difficult to maintain.<sup>89</sup> How a movement organizes, distributes power, makes decisions, resolves conflict, and cares for its participants already participates in the world it hopes to create. Political transformation becomes partially performative—another world comes into being through the practices that enact it.

Yet the tantric analogy also exposes questions within prefiguration. If the future is enacted through forms available to us in the present, how does something genuinely new enter history? How can political practice exceed the desires, identities, habits, and imaginaries already conditioned by the world it seeks to transform? Prefiguration bends the future into the present; it does not by itself explain the arrival of a possibility for which the present possesses no adequate image or even imagination.

#### Badiou: Event, Fidelity, and the Production of a Truth

Alain Badiou approaches political transformation from the other side of this problem, asking how something genuinely new can erupt into a situation without being reducible to the possibilities already containing it. An event breaks into a situation without being derivable from the knowledge, identities, and possibilities through which that situation has been enframed—it's unthinkable.<sup>90</sup> The Paris Commune, the Cultural Revolution, May 1968, or a surprise encounter with love can disclose a possibility that had been impossible to recognize from within the coordinates of the existing paradigm. The event makes something possible that, until its occurrence, could not simply have been planned as the predictable outcome of what preceded it.

Yet the event alone changes remarkably little. It can disappear almost as quickly as it arrives. A truth comes into existence through fidelity: the prolonged work of drawing out the consequences of what the event has disclosed.<sup>91</sup> Political subjects are themselves produced through this fidelity. We cannot first find a fully formed revolutionary subject who subsequently decides to remain faithful to an event; subjectivity takes shape through the sustained sequence of actions, experiments, decisions, and consequences by which an event is made true in a world. Notice the strange temporality here: a past event is retroactively made into a truth event by subjects who remain faithful to its occurrence in the past.

Here sudden and gradual temporalities cross again. The event occurs as rupture, while fidelity unfolds through effort and duration. Something becomes possible all at once—like a bolt of lightning—and then must be lived, tested, extended, and organized through time. The temporal structure recalls Zongmi's sudden awakening and gradual cultivation, although Badiou's event does not disclose an awakened nature already waiting beneath appearances. It introduces a truth whose consequences must be constructed based on what already happened.

Read beside tantra and prefiguration, Badiou therefore gives us another cadence of ends and means. Tantra begins from the fruition and practices it now. Prefiguration embodies desired social relations within present political life. Badiou begins with an event that reveals an unforeseen possibility and asks how fidelity can make that possibility consequential. In each case, linear causality bends: the end is no longer simply the passive result waiting at the conclusion of a sequence. Once glimpsed, encountered, or enacted, it begins reorganizing the present.

## 10. Spontaneous Natural-Freedom and the Suspension of Causality in Dzogchen

Among Buddhist traditions, Dzogchen offers one of the most radical responses to the causal paradox running throughout this essay: how can causal, conditioned practices that work within time disclose the uncaused, the unconditioned, timeless freedom? How can unfree conditions allow for freedom without reproducing the habits of subjugation? We have seen how earlier Buddhist approaches answered related questions with a diversity of strategies. In each case, contemplative life retained a recognizable architecture of transformational causality, however radically reconfigured. Dzogchen does not simply revise the relation between means and ends, effort and realization, or present and future. It refuses the entire causal complex through which contemplative practice has ordinarily been understood.<sup>92</sup>

Dzogchen, the Great Perfection or Great Completion, is often presented in Tibet as an advanced or ultimate instruction emphasizing that no transformational causality is necessary—all is already complete/perfect (*rdzogs*) and great (*chen*) as it is. Dzogchen's singular rhetoric of effortlessness (*rtsol med*) and "natural freedom" or "self-liberation" (*rang grol*) describes a style of contemplation requiring neither willful striving nor a transformative process with a goal. As the nineteenth-century teacher Dudjom Lingpa famously phrased it, this is "Buddhahood without meditation."<sup>93</sup>

Teleology, disciplined effort, rational agency, self-control, gradual development, and the distinction between path and fruition form an interdependent structure or constellation. Together they organize practice as movement from an initial condition toward a desired end. Effortful striving connects beginning and end. The influential fourteenth-century author Longchenpa compares this structure to the pin securing the baggage on a pack animal. Pull out the pin and the whole arrangement collapses.<sup>94</sup> Dzogchen removes the pin. Once causality no longer provides the fundamental grammar of contemplative life, effort, attainment, practice, and even the willful agency of the practitioner can no longer occupy the places they once did.

Longchenpa writes:

Without having to be sought, everything occurs naturally.... Since effort—which creates causes and effects, whether positive or negative—is unnecessary, immerse yourself in genuine being, resting naturally with nothing needing to be done. The expanse of spontaneous presence entails no deliberate effort, no acceptance or rejection.<sup>95</sup>

Instead of substituting one technique for another, the rhetoric of this approach annuls the entire causal logic through which spiritual training has been conceived, inviting effortless non-action. Its concern is to relax and release the compulsion to organize contemplative life through striving, anticipation, achievement, and teleological movement. Practice shifts from pursuing transformation to relaxing the habitual, causal structure of transformation itself—and this is its cadence.<sup>96</sup> This is a distinctive cadence of contemplative life grounded in confidence that freedom is always already completely available. Practice no longer builds towards realization, nor primarily prefigures or expresses it. It introduces practitioners to an effortless condition, inviting attention from becoming awakened to recognizing (ngo shes) the freedom already underway. This is a path of freedom rather than to freedom.

For this reason, Dzogchen frequently speaks of a “pathless path,” non-meditation (sgom med), or even a vehicle beyond cause and effect. These evocative and poetic expressions emerged within highly disciplined and ritualized tantric contemplative communities. As David Germano argues, Dzogchen suspends the ordinary transitivity of contemplative practice—the familiar grammar in which a practitioner intentionally applies techniques to produce a future realization.<sup>97</sup>

Perhaps no term better expresses this than rang grol, natural or auto-freedom, sometimes translated as “self-liberation.” Freedom is allowed to show itself through non-interference. Because of the empty basic condition of all things, appearances themselves possess an intrinsic capacity for release once

grasping relaxes. Causal Buddhist path structures of means and ends are not only reconfigured—they are refused.

### 11. Destituent Potential and the Political Critique of Realization

What form of politics might share resemblances with such a radical refusal of transformation itself? The Dzogchen style of practice shares affinities with a form of politics called destituent potential, which derives in part from Giorgio Agamben's sustained critique of operativity. Dzogchen renders inoperative the contemplative apparatus organizing practice through means and ends, effort and accomplishment, subject and object. Agamben seeks an analogous suspension of the political and metaphysical apparatuses organizing life through productivity, identity, function, and command.<sup>98</sup>

Much of Agamben's philosophy circles around the political and metaphysical problems of potentiality, the relationship between means and ends, and how something is "realized." Across his writings, he repeatedly interrogates the assumption that possibilities achieve fulfillment only by becoming actual, that liberation culminates in a realized order, and that human life reaches completion through determinate ends.<sup>99</sup> Both Agamben's philosophy of inoperativity and Dzogchen explore forms of practice that suspend operative grammars organized around means and ends, striving and accomplishment, command and obedience. As I have argued elsewhere, this amounts to a patient deactivation of realization itself—releasing human capacities from the compulsion to culminate in completed identities, perfected institutions, or finished works.<sup>100</sup>

The political theory of destituent potential belongs within this same inoperative constellation. Constituent politics founds new institutions, laws, and sovereign orders. It partakes of the relentless, violent historical dialectic of revolutionaries who overthrow the current law only to replace it with a new law—the revolutionaries become the police. The concept of destitency first emerged from the Argentine militant-research collective *Colectivo Situaciones* in the wake of the December 2001 uprising, where it named a form of collective action that sought to depose constituted powers without founding a new sovereign order in their place. Their rallying cry was ¡Que se vayan todos!—"All of them must go!"<sup>101</sup> Destituent politics refuses the apparatuses already governing us, suspending the relations through which laws command, identities solidify, and institutions present themselves as necessary without constituting a new law. As we saw in the insurgencies in Brazil earlier, here a hole is punched in history, and very carefully not filled with a new law. Existing forms of life become available for different uses—opened for free play—because the mechanisms that captured them have lost their hold.

This is also a temporal logic. Messianic time, for Agamben closely following Walter Benjamin, is the present suspension of the logic of realization. The Kingdom, revolution, or classless society cannot simply be installed as historical goals toward which the present marches. The unrealizable acts within history by rendering existing forms of power inoperative, refusing to replace them with a new order, bringing the dialectic to a standstill, a Sabbath.<sup>102</sup> Kieran Aarons therefore argues that destituent potential is inseparable from messianic time: unrealizable demands interrupt and deactivate the logic of realization from within history.<sup>103</sup>

Yet withdrawal, desertion, and deactivation do not automatically interrupt the material persistence of police, prisons, colonial occupation, ecological devastation, or capitalist infrastructures. Institutions continue exercising coercive force even after their legitimacy has been withdrawn. Idris Robinson therefore challenges where Agamben appears most vulnerable, distinguishing destitution through withdrawal from the destructive work of dismantling the apparatuses that continue reproducing violence.<sup>104</sup> Destituentcy may require more than refusing to constitute another order. Sometimes the machinery itself must be broken.

At the center of Agamben's philosophy, however, stands neither revolution nor withdrawal but form-of-life. Politics concerns how life inhabits its own activities. Agamben's notion of gesture offers a paradigm: gesture neither produces an external work nor merely performs an action. It exposes "the action in action," "the thought in thought," and "the speech in speech," releasing activity from the instrumental logic that ordinarily captures it.<sup>105</sup> Gesture is action freed from goals while revealing the very being of action as it is performed. Agamben explicitly connects this with Buddhist non-action: an inoperative space at the core of every doing.

Agamben concludes Karman by linking non-self and nirvāṇa directly to this inoperative action:

Nirvāṇa is not another world that is produced once the world of aggregates has been annulled, another thing that follows the end of all things. But neither is it a nothing. It is the not-born that appears in every birth, the non-act (akṛta) that appears in every act (kṛta)...<sup>106</sup>

Inoperativity, he continues, opens when the apparatuses connecting action to means and ends are rendered inoperative—a "politics of pure means."<sup>107</sup> Here we can see a resonance with Dzogchen, for both suspend the operative grammars through which practice becomes organized around actualization or telos. Action can be spacious, responsive, playful, and unforced.

However, if inoperativity loosens domination and Dzogchen relaxes teleological striving, what becomes of solidarity, agency, and active, collective creativity? We have returned to the issue of opening a hole in history and refusing to enter it. For destituent potential, this refusal is the political practice itself. Must political transformation culminate in destitution, or can freedom also compose, institute, and create without immediately reproducing constituent power?

## 12. Toward a Plural Political Ontology and the Four Fields

In a tenth-century Dzogchen text discovered in the Dunhuang caves called *The Lamp for the Eye of Contemplation*, the Buddhist vehicles are distinguished by their characteristic pedagogies and the style of their teachers.<sup>108</sup> A gradual teacher patiently disciplines students through causes, conditions, and antidotes. A Chan teacher abruptly and playfully interrupts conceptual elaboration through direct pointing. A tantric Mahāyoga teacher powerfully initiates students into the ritual technologies of tantric transformation. The Dzogchen teacher, however, is not defined by any single method. Because Dzogchen encompasses and transcends the previous vehicles, its teachers draw freely upon all of them according to the capacities, dispositions, and circumstances of each student. The highest teacher is recognized less by commitment to a single method than by a pragmatic, responsive capacity to discern what is needed here and now.

Left political movements may also be understood as ecologies of heterogeneous practices, each contributing to an overall political ecosystem rather than competing organizational models vying for hegemony. Rodrigo Nunes develops this argument in *Neither Vertical nor Horizontal: A Theory of Political Organization*, written in the aftermath of the alter-globalization movement, the uprisings of 2011, Occupy, and the subsequent return of parties and electoral projects on the Left.<sup>109</sup> These experiences sharpened a persistent organizational tension. Vertical forms—parties, leadership, centralized coordination, durable institutions—can concentrate power and sustain action across time, with all the familiar dangers of hierarchy and bureaucratization. Assemblies, networks, affinity groups, and other horizontal forms distribute agency and create room for participation and experimentation, but often face different problems as movements seek durability, coordination, and scale. Nunes argues that the choice between them is false. His ecological approach understands political organization as a differentiated ecology in which parties, assemblies, unions, affinity groups, mutual aid networks, artist collectives, trauma healers, educational groups, and direct-action campaigns occupy different niches, scales, and temporalities, forming relations of cooperation, tension, competition, and mutual dependence rather than congealing into a single organizational form.

Erik Olin Wright arrives at a related strategic pluralism from a different direction: in *Envisioning Real Utopias*, his lifelong attempt to develop an emancipatory social science beyond the opposition between revolutionary overthrow and reformist accommodation, he distinguishes ruptural, interstitial, and symbiotic transformations as different ways of eroding and displacing capitalist social relations.<sup>110</sup> Kim Stanley Robinson's speculative novel *The Ministry for the Future* imagines something similar at the scale of planetary climate crisis: institutional reform, central banking, technological innovation, ecological restoration, mass organizing, direct action, sabotage, and forms of violence and nonviolence operate simultaneously through actors positioned both within and beyond existing institutions, suggesting that navigating the coming century may require no single revolutionary subject or privileged strategy but a dense assemblage of heterogeneous forms of intervention.<sup>111</sup> Political possibilities within the polycrises of our times lie in cultivating an ecology capable of sustaining multiple strategies, temporalities, and forms of organization. Work on movement ecology developed by the Ulex Project among other strategists, similarly argues that successful movements depend upon an ecology of complementary capabilities—disruptive, institutional, narrative, cooperative, prefigurative, and resilient—distributed across many organizations like an ecosystem rather than embodied in a single strategic form.<sup>112</sup>

I think the ecological image goes further still, opening into ontological considerations. If different political practices emerge from different ways of inhabiting reality, politics may require a plurality of political ontologies or worlds.<sup>113</sup> If every practice of liberation—whether spiritual or political—contains an implicit cadence, revolutionary practices do not merely occur within historical time but actively create new temporalities.<sup>114</sup> Times of insurgency, communal occupations, drumming and dancing during a territorial encampment, general strikes and blockades, and refusals to work generate new temporal world horizons, reorganizing what a society understands to be possible, urgent, and real. As we saw in both the Brazilian protests and the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, insurgent movements produce new historical times within which previously impossible forms of collective life become thinkable and livable.

Recent work in political ontology and cosmopolitics argues that political difference often concerns more than competing interests or strategies. What is at stake are different worlds.<sup>115</sup> This inquiry has already been taken up in the *The Arrow Journal* issue “The Power of the Pluriverse,” which explored pluriversal approaches to movement practice, justice, and liberation.<sup>116</sup> As the Zapatistas famously declare, “The world we want is one in which many worlds fit.” Isabelle Stengers's cosmopolitics names the difficult practice of composing relations within a cosmos whose members and terms cannot be determined in

advance, slowing the demand that a single authorized world—whether that of modern science, the state, or “humanity”—decide which worlds, beings, entities, and claims are entitled to political existence.<sup>117</sup> A pluriverse, a world where many worlds fit, points toward ongoing practices that enact worlds.

The typology of diverse paths to spiritual and political liberation developed throughout this essay might tentatively conclude with a similar possibility. It’s been my aspiration that the overall impact of this exploration will be to enrich the multiple cadences in which spiritual and political transformations can be inseparable—that contemplative change and political change might hang together in a range of different cadences. The Buddhist traditions examined here can certainly be read as competing doctrines or successive contemplative developments. They may also be understood as distinct ontologies of transformation, each illuminating different relationships among causality, temporality, practice, freedom, and collective life. Read politically, they invite us into a plurality of strategies and temporalities, toward a plurality of political worlds.

In my own work, I have explored this possibility through four equiprimordial Fields that coexist without reducing to one another.<sup>118</sup> The Mossrock Field names an ecological politics of place, material reciprocity, and multispecies belonging. The Wildfire Field cultivates the symbolic, psycho-social, and affective conditions through which new world visions become imaginable. The Lit Ocean Field gathers practices of nondual awareness, inoperativity, Sabbath, and effortless participation that loosen the compulsions of production. The Empty Space Field hospices exhausted worlds while destituting dominant forms of life that can no longer endure, lovingly allowing them to naturally-free, leaving space for fresh potentialities. These Fields are like the habitats and thresholds of living ecosystems—they overlap, nourish and challenge one another, and disclose irreducible dimensions of spiritual-political existence.

We might ask what kinds of worlds different paths of transformation make possible, for different worlds call forth different temporalities. Within mutating climates and altered technological landscapes, as old stories of progress fade, our task today is to live within ongoing collective attunements toward what freedom calls forth from us here and now.

The ideal image of the compassionate bodhisattva is often conceived cosmologically, as a practice of worlding: the creation and cultivation of world-realms in which freedom can flourish. Mahāyāna Buddhism has long imagined this possibility through the image of buddha-fields (buddhakṣetra) and Pure Realms.<sup>119</sup> These are pedagogical worlds intentionally created by bodhisattvas—dynamic expressions of enlightened compassion in which entire worlds become conducive to awakening. Landscapes, fruit orchards, ecosystems, social relations, teachings, architecture, bridges, waters, lotus flowers, melodious

songs, incense, and refractions of light participate in liberation. Every feature of these worlds is an expression of compassionate skillful means, enworlding, enveloping, and emplacing beings who dwell in these realms.

Read alongside contemporary political ontology, buddha-fields may be seen as cosmopolitical worldings—worlds compassionately composed so that diverse beings may live, practice, and awaken together. The bodhisattva's highest activity may be the compassionate creation, protection, and continual tending of worlds expressing freedom.

If the Buddhist archives surveyed here offer various possibilities for contemporary political theories of change, it may be that no single temporality, strategy, or ontology exhausts the possibilities of freedom. Freedom unfolds in different tempos: gradually and suddenly, through disciplined cultivation and spontaneous recognition, through building institutions and sometimes dismantling them, through reform, revolution, rupture, and prefiguration—and, at the edges of political action, through effortless inoperative destitution. The bodhisattva creates with the plural cadences of world-creating wisdom and skillful means, participating in the continual composition of multi-species ecosystems in which countless beings live freedom together. If the techno-optimist oligarchs of our times fantasize about dominating corporate digital metaverses uploaded into the cloud—consuming entire ecosystems and bodies in an extractive flight from Earth—perhaps freedom today calls for much more visionary, compassionate, ecological, world-creation, allowing the effortless completion that has always thrived right here.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 “The Tibetan Samyé Debate: Challenges and Responses,” panel presented at the 17th Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, Vienna, August 2014, subsequently published in *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 39 (2016–17); Sam van Schaik, “The Great Perfection and the Chinese Monk: Nyingtik and the Debate at bSam yas,” in *Buddhism Between Tibet and China*, ed. Matthew Kapstein (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2009); Paul Demiéville, *Le Concile de Lhasa: Une controverse sur le quiétisme entre bouddhistes de l’Inde et de la Chine au VIII<sup>e</sup> siècle de l’ère chrétienne* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale de France, 1952).
- 2 Peter N. Gregory, ed., *Sudden and Gradual: Approaches to Enlightenment in Chinese Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1987), esp. Luis O. Gómez, “Purifying Gold: The Metaphor of Effort and Intuition in Buddhist Thought and Practice,” 67–165. Thanks to Gaylon Ferguson for the analogy of allowing your eyes to be the color they are.
- 3 Richard Seymour, *Disaster Nationalism: The Downfall of Liberal Civilization* (London: Verso, 2024). Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor, *End Times Fascism: And the Fight for the Living World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2026).
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- 8 Annelien de Dijn, *Freedom: An Unruly History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).
- 9 Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).
- 10 Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Robert M. Gimello, eds., *Paths to Liberation: The Mārga and Its Transformations in Buddhist Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1992); Dennis Hirota, ed., *Toward a Contemporary Understanding of Pure Land Buddhism: Creating a Shin Buddhist Theology in a Religiously Plural World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000). I apologize to my former professor for not making space for Shinran in this article!
- 11 To get a sense of traditional doxographies that influence my account, see: Dylan Esler, *The Lamp for the Eye of Contemplation: The Samten Migdron by Nubchen Sangye Yeshe*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022); Adam S. Lobel, *Allowing Spontaneity: Practice, Theory, and Ethical Cultivation in Longchenpa’s Great Perfection Philosophy of Action* (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2018); David Higgins, *The Philosophical Foundations of Classical rDzogs chen in Tibet: Investigating the Distinction Between Dualistic*

- Mind (Sems) and Primordial Knowing (Ye shes) (Vienna: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien, Universität Wien, 2013).
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  - 13 Bevins, *If We Burn*, 184.
  - 14 Bevins, *If We Burn*.
  - 15 Bevins, *If We Burn*.
  - 16 Gloria Muñoz Ramírez, *The Fire and the Word: A History of the Zapatista Movement*, trans. Alex Ogg (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2008).
  - 17 Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, “Where to Begin?,” in *Collected Works*, vol. 5, May 1901–February 1902 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1961). This is the epigraph of Adrian Johnston, Badiou, Žižek, and *Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), which raises these questions through the work of Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek. Both grapple with the relationship between gradual conditions and disruptive events. For Badiou, who we will encounter later, transformative truths emerge through events that cannot be fully explained by the situation that precedes them. For Žižek, revolutionary ruptures arise from contradictions already incubating within an existing order yet still arrive with an irreducible element of contingency and surprise. Johnston’s subtitle is an obvious influence on the title of my essay.
  - 18 Antonio Negri, *Time for Revolution*, trans. Matteo Mandarini (London: Continuum, 2003).
  - 19 Buswell Jr. and Gimello, eds., *Paths to Liberation*.
  - 20 Sa’ yutta Nikāya 12.61, “Assutavā Sutta,” in Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Sa’ yutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000).
  - 21 Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), esp. 59–84; Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 50–87.
  - 22 Buswell Jr. and Gimello, eds., *Paths to Liberation*. The five paths (pañcamārga) are accumulation (sa’ bhāramārga), preparation/application (prayogamārga), seeing (darśanamārga), cultivation (bhāvanāmārga), and no-more-learning (aśaik’ amārga).
  - 23 Sa’ yutta Nikāya 49.1 (Sammappadhāna Sutta), in Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Sa’ yutta Nikāya* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 1527–28.
  - 24 For the early Buddhist vocabulary of cultivation and abandonment/relinquishment, see Rupert Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening: A Study of the Bodhi-Pakkhiyā Dhammā* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992).
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  - 26 Edward Slingerland, *Trying Not to Try: Ancient China, Modern Science, and the Power of Spontaneity* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2014).
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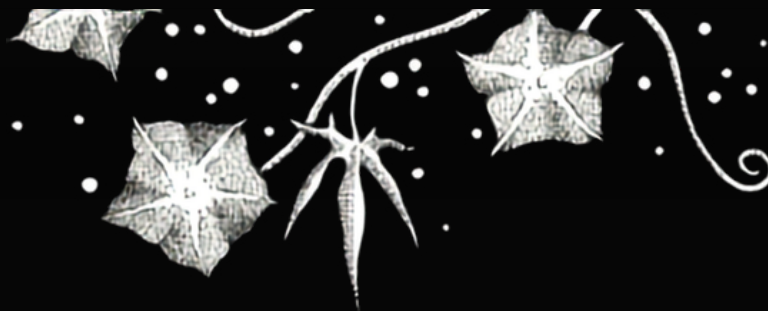
“And now as long as space endures,  
As long as there are beings to be found,  
May I continue likewise to remain  
To drive away the sorrows of the world.

The pains and sorrows of all wandering beings—  
May they ripen wholly on myself.  
And may the virtuous company of the Bodhisattvas  
Always bring about the happiness of beings.

May the doctrine, only cure for sorrow,  
Source of every bliss and happiness,  
Be blessed with wealth, upheld with veneration,  
And throughout a vast continuance of time, endure!

And now to Manjughosa I prostrate,  
Whose kindness is the wellspring of my good intent.  
And to my virtuous friends I also bow  
Whose inspiration gave me strength to grow.”

—*Shantideva, Bodhicaryavatara, “Dedication,” vv.55-58*



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VOLUME 13 | ISSUE 1 | FALL 2026

