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The Co-Dependent Arising of Liberation: An Exploration of Buddhist Thought and Social Justice Models

By Emily Ward

Abstract: The language of liberation is prevalent in both spiritual and activist communities: the intersection of these practices, of liberating ourselves on the planes of embodied existence and beyond, interests me deeply. While the limitations of language are frequently expounded in Buddhism, the similarities between Buddhist and social justice terminology are what initially piqued my interest in exploring how key ideas from each field could be enhanced by mutual understanding. While much work has already been done in the field of Socially Engaged Buddhism, I hope to contribute to it by examining two models I have found useful in teaching racial justice: Tema Okun’s “Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture” and Bobbie Harro’s “Cycle of Socialization.” For each of these models, I will outline key Buddhist teachings such as dependent origination, no self, compassion, and karma that I believe offer opportunities for further illumination and support. There are, of course, a diverse array of Buddhist teachings and beliefs that vary across lineages and are open to interpretation. As I cannot hope to represent the whole scope of Buddhist belief here, my use of the word “Buddhism” will remain general, drawing largely from the broad strokes of Mahayana beliefs, with occasional reference to Chan/Zen more specifically.

Keywords: Socially Engaged Buddhism, Social Justice, White Supremacy, Karma, Liberation
Introduction

The language of liberation is prevalent in both spiritual and activist communities: the intersection of these practices, of liberating ourselves on the planes of embodied existence and beyond, interests me deeply. Although the limitations of language are frequently expounded in Buddhism, the similarities between Buddhist and social justice terminology are what initially piqued my interest in exploring how key ideas from each field could be enhanced by mutual understanding. While much work has already been done in the field of Socially Engaged Buddhism, I hope to contribute to it by examining two models I have found useful in teaching racial justice: Tema Okun’s “Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture” and Bobbie Harro’s “Cycle of Socialization.” For each of these models, I will outline the Buddhist teachings, such as dependent origination, no self, compassion, and karma, which I believe best offer opportunities for further illumination and support within the field of social justice.¹

White Supremacy Culture

In 1999, Tema Okun published her seminal work on the characteristics of white supremacy culture, or “the ways in which these ruling class elite or the power elite in the colonies of what was to become the United States used the pseudo-scientific concept of race to create whiteness and a hierarchy of racialized value in order to [...] define who is fully human and who is not.”² In 2023, she continues to update her website on the topic to explore new learnings and provide free resources for folks interested in racial justice. While there are nine key characteristics of white supremacy culture, I will focus my attention on three that I think Buddhism is particularly well suited to dismantle: individualism, binary thinking, and worship of the written word.

¹ There are, of course, a diverse array of Buddhist teachings and beliefs that vary across lineages and are open to interpretation. As I cannot hope to represent the whole scope of Buddhist belief here, my use of the word “Buddhism” will remain general, drawing largely from the broad strokes of Mahayana beliefs, with occasional reference to Chan/Zen (slightly) more specifically.

Individualism

Our cultural assumption that Individualism is our cultural story - that we make it on our own (or should), without help, while pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Our cultural attachment to individualism leads to a toxic denial of our essential interdependence and the reality that we are all in this, literally, together. ³

Okun’s explanation of individualism references “essential interdependence” which is supported by the Buddhist notion of dependent origination. While she likely means interdependence as a social/relational reality, the deeper, metaphysical meaning can apply as well. According to dependent origination, nothing can exist without a myriad of causal connections and conditions: things cannot create themselves, and cannot exist independently. ⁴ Remove any condition or cause, and the phenomenon would cease to exist. This interrelatedness is also referred to as emptiness because no eternal, independent essences exist, i.e., everything is empty, or void, of lasting, essential nature.

With this definition in mind, what does emptiness mean for individualism? In the social context, the focus of individualism is often related to the beliefs held by individuals possessing power and privilege who attribute their socio-economic success to their individual efforts while ignoring their privilege and the systemic factors that make their success possible. As a current example, hetero-cis-white-man and billionaire, Elon Musk, credits his financial success to his own intellectual prowess, but rarely considers the impact of immense privilege he holds being the son of a white man who co-owned an emerald mine in South Africa—an immediate product of European colonization, theft, and capitalization of the resources of the global south. ⁵ Dependent origination, in denying that anything can cause itself, challenges us to evaluate our social location relationally. Instead of assuming, ‘I alone have created myself out of nothing and I owe no thanks to any people or circumstance,’ we are asked to

⁵ Gabrielle Bienasz, “Who Is Elon Musk’s Dad, Errol Musk?” Entrepreneur, July 15, 2022. https://www.entrepreneur.com/business-news/who-is-elon-musks-dad-errol-musk/431538. While this paper primarily focuses on racial and economic iterations of social justice, I think it is important to name the additional identities held by Musk that contribute to the compounding of his privilege.
investigate our inherent dependency and relinquish the attachment to ‘bootstrap’ mentality. It is in emptiness that “everything without exception is realized as it is in its suchness and yet as interrelated and interpenetrating each other.”

Dependent origination also explains the Buddhist concept of no-self. Ultimately, there is no lasting, essential self within us; we are merely bundles of fleeting phenomenal experiences, aggregates of “physical form, bodily feelings, emotions, perceptions and thinking, and consciousness itself.” This, of course, does not mean that self-reference is not useful (and perhaps necessary) in everyday life. To illustrate, “[T]he Buddhists view the sense of self as comparable to the visual illusions such as the ‘impossible fork’ illusions. As a lone drawing, of course, the fork is perfectly real, but what it depicts is impossible.” In Chan/Zen Buddhism in particular, the two realities of the fork (as illustratively real, but ultimately unreal) are ontologically, not just epistemologically, existent: we exist in both realities simultaneously, though we may phenomenologically experience only the mundane. Unless we are a Zen Master, we likely are not experiencing the world in its complete nonduality. While for the sake of language and communication talking about our ‘selves’ is useful, understanding that “the sense of self arises from an on-going process of appropriation (upadana) of the embodied streams of experience into a self-model that ‘perfumes’ all further cognitive operations” is an important lens for subverting individualist tendencies. It is simple for us to believe we have selves, yet we must not fall into the trap of believing our perceived experience of having a self is ultimately true.

The specific emptiness of the self similarly subverts the individualism of white supremacy culture. Masao Abe beautifully shares:

When each human self insists on an absolute, substantial selfhood, serious conflict will inevitably arise… Realization of no-self naturally entails the realization of the relativity and

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7 Peter Adamson and Jonardon Ganeri, Classical Indian Philosophy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 54.
10 Diarmuid Breathnach, Class Lecture (Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, CA, June 2023).
interrelation between human selves. Self is not a closed and fixed entity, but an open and relational entity through which self and others dynamically interact without the loss of their relative self-identities. This is the true nature of self. Accordingly, through the realization of no-self, one can awaken to the true nature of self… [And] to the true nature of everything else.  

No-self leads to selflessness. Selflessness, or compassion, is central to Buddhism and, I would argue, central to social justice movements. Truly, “[w]ithout compassion, the work of restoring intercommunal relations and promoting tolerance has less chance of success, for it is human relationship that provides the bonds of peace.” Compassion and emptiness are deeply intertwined with each other and with nondualism.

Before continuing, I offer a note of caution about conceptualizing no-self and conventional selves: conventional does not mean unimportant. The empty, nonessential, temporary nature of the aggregates that comprise our conventional selves does not negate their worthiness of compassion. We are worthy of compassion and liberation not just in the freedom from attachment to false selves, but in our embodied lives. “On our spiritual paths, we are told, “We are not our bodies.” This is correct from the standpoint of absolute truth (paramartha-satya). But it is not true for our daily, lived-experience on the plane of relative or conventional truth (samvrtti-satya) in a diverse, multi-racial society where so many suffer from the three poisons […].” Liberation will be discussed more in-depth later, but for now, acknowledging that conventional or embodied liberation is helpful for folks to realize ultimate liberation is sufficient.

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14 Lay-persons meeting the physical needs of monastics by providing food, shelter, etc., is evidence of how having conventional needs met frees up capacity for spiritual advancement/enlightenment/liberation.
Binary Thinking

Our cultural assumption that we can and should reduce the complexity of life and the nuances of our relationships with each other and all living things into either/or, yes or no, right or wrong in ways that reinforce toxic power.\(^\text{15}\)

Closely related to emptiness is nonduality—a transcendence of binaries, even those as esoteric as ‘being’ and ‘nonbeing.’ In fact, “Buddhist nondualism, as it came to be understood in China, does not involve an erasure of difference or a denial of its reality, but rather a restoration of the otherwise ‘excluded ground’ between ‘being’ and ‘nonbeing’.”\(^\text{16}\) Or, as the verses attributed to the third Chan patriarch say,

The arising of other gives rise to self; 
giving rise to self generates others. 
Know these seeming two as facets 
of the One Fundamental Reality.\(^\text{17}\)

It is the ego, the false sense of self, the *ahamkara* or ‘I-maker’ that separates us from others and interprets the phenomenal experiences of the causally linked aggregates that make up our ‘selves’ as *ours*. When we conceive of self and ownership, we create non-self and non-ownership: dualisms and binaries.

Binary thinking reinforces the power white supremacy culture gains through separation, categorization, and (de)valuation. The construction of race, for example, is at the core of the culture. White supremacy needed to create the binary of white and non-white in order to devalue and disenfranchise people of the global majority. Without racial categories, it would have been much more

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\(^{15}\) Tema Okun, “Either/Or & the Binary,” White Supremacy Culture.


difficult for white folks to justify the enslavement of West African peoples: if white and Black did not exist, how would white people protect themselves from being enslaved? The creation of discrete categories provided a solution. When we understand that reality is empty and nondual, we can move beyond the artificial, illusory binaries that reinforce narratives of cultural dominance like white supremacy.

**Worship of the Written Word**

Our cultural habit of honoring only what is written and only what is written to a narrow standard, even when what is written is full of misinformation and lies. Worship of the written word includes erasure of the wide range of ways we communicate with each other and all living things.18

As someone who has been effectively conditioned to work in Western academia, I have included this characteristic as a reminder that reading peer-reviewed journal articles and writing papers is not the only epistemically valuable way of learning or exchanging knowledge. Chan Buddhism especially diverges from the notion that studying scripture is the only way to become enlightened. The Chan understanding that “one must obtain understanding in the medium of circumstances and events by never losing mindfulness anywhere” directly countered the predominant “Chinese associations of writing with authority.”19

This claim that direct experience is a valid form of learning (and transmission) provides an alternative that is relevant to modern white supremacy culture. There are countless examples of how (English) literacy tests, rules of grammar, requirements for written documentation, and more have been used to oppress people of the global majority in the United States:20 though exploring this characteristic in-depth is beyond the scope of this particular paper, simply knowing that “[t]he Way is beyond

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19 Hershock, “Chan Buddhism.”
20 Tema Okun provides many specific examples of this particular vein of oppression on her website.
language” shows that it is possible for multiple epistemologies and pedagogies to be accepted along with the privileged one of written communication.21

Hopefully, the interrelatedness of the Buddhist notions of dependent origination, compassion, and personal experience have become evident through this discussion. There is not a one-to-one correlation of emptiness challenging individualism or compassion challenging binary thinking, but an interconnected web of Buddhist concepts and experiences that are available to resource social justice advocates in dismantling the equally sticky, interlocking ideals of white supremacy. Books could be (and have been) filled on any one of these concepts alone, and I hope this serves as a jumping-off point for further investigation into how Buddhism can dismantle white supremacy.

**Socialization & Karma**

The second model of social justice I want to examine is Bobbie Harro’s “The Cycle of Socialization,” which demonstrates how individuals are conditioned by oppressive norms through all levels of engagement from interpersonal/familiar relationships to institutional/cultural structures prior to birth and throughout their lives. The socialization process is pervasive, consistent, circular, self-perpetuating, and often unconscious. It helps explain how we come to hold many of our biases about different groups of people, and it is kept in motion by ignorance, insecurity, confusion, obliviousness, and fear.22 Those core components of the cycle echo the qualities of akusala (unskillful, unenlightened, unwholesome) actions: greedy, hateful, and ignorant.23 Socialization’s inherent inertia can be daunting for those interested in overcoming the oppression of social norms: we do nothing, and the cycle continues.

Matthew MacKenzie’s article “Enacting Selves, Enacting Worlds: On the Buddhist Theory of Karma” illuminates how “we also enact our world(s) through karma—that is, that our patterns of action and reaction bring forth meaningful worlds, which, in turn shape these very patterns for better or for

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21 Seng-ts’an, “Hsin-hsin Ming.”
worse.”24 In this way, the compounding of our karma, particularly as it is affected by the kleśa-vāsanā (habituated tendencies of affliction),25 resembles the cycle of socialization.26 MacKenzie shares a simple illustration of how this works on an individual level: “Each time the thief steals, she may find it that much easier to steal (or that much harder to avoid stealing) in the future.”27 While the rotation of the cycle of socialization may seem more neutral than the ‘negative’ karmic pull of kleśa-vāsanā, it is important to remember that part of the insidious nature of socialization is its pervasive normalcy. We are conditioned to overlook our conditioning, remaining inert and thereby permitting (even encouraging) oppression to continue—a continuation far from neutral.

It is of the utmost importance to note that karma is a term loaded with negative implications,28 and my discussion of it here is for the purpose of encouraging mutual understanding between those interested in Buddhism and those interested in social justice; it is by no means intended to support victim blaming, or imply that those experiencing oppression are responsible for their circumstances. The similarities of the kleśa-vāsanā to the characteristics at the core of the cycle prompted my exploration of this possible connection between the two frameworks, and the aforementioned framework for dependent origination helps explain how the deep interconnectedness of our being leads to the co-creation of our conventional reality. When ignorance, greed, and hate are so deeply rooted in our social structure, the pull of the karmic arc keeps us trapped in the wheel of samsāra as ‘individuals’ and enactors of our shared conventional reality. Ignorance begets ignorance. Our collective ignorance begets the social fruits of ignorance and perpetuates the cycle of socialization. In this way, Harro’s cycle can be likened to samsāra. “[T]he Buddhist concern is with a karmic arc that works all too well. Insofar as the karmic arc is affected by afflictions (klesa) such as ignorance, grasping, and self-centeredness, it constructs and

27 MacKenzie, 195.
28 In American society I often hear karma spoken about as a determining force that punishes us for our actions: for example, a friend might console another who was cheated on by saying ‘karma will get that person, don’t worry.’ I also hear it used as an excuse to blame people for the difficulties they experience instead of considering systemic issues: a housed person upon seeing an unhoused person may say ‘that person must have done something really bad to have this karma.’
reconstructs samsaric experiences and worlds. Thus, the normal operation of the karmic arc is ultimately pathological.”29 One could easily argue that the “normal operation” of the cycle of socialization is pathological, too.

**Liberation**

In Buddhism, liberation is characterized by escaping saṃsāra, the cycle of rebirth that keeps us suffering, as, according to the first of the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths, is the defining characteristic of human existence.30 Luckily, liberation is possible if we cease living in attachment to our ignorant notions about reality, like selves. In Chan Buddhism, the crux of practice is to understand experientially the true nature of reality as empty and drenched in the action potential of Buddha-nature. As Peter Hershock explains,

> Dispelling ignorance of our own Buddha-nature does not involve cultivating or acquiring anything; we need only end the relational paralysis that prevents us from conducting ourselves as enlightening beings. This does not require special conditions or implements. It does not require extensive study or training. It can be accomplished here and now, in the midst of our own day-to-day lives.31

Recall that due to dependent origination, we are not really selves. This does not preclude, however, us (conventionally) possessing Buddha-nature. Ultimately, there can be no essence to Buddha-nature as everything is empty; however, we can enact this nature relationally, as in reality, Buddha-nature is the latent potential for enlightened, compassionate action in the present moment that is available for all actions and causal relationships.

If we interpret enlightenment as the antidote to suffering via releasing from the bonds of ignorance, we can see how enlightenment is ‘spiritually’ liberatory. In social justice spaces, however,
liberation is more concrete: it is about the critical transformation of systems that inequitably horde and distribute socio-economic power to individuals and groups as dependent upon how ‘close’ they are to the privileged normative identity. Social liberation seeks to dismantle the systemic privileging of certain identities over others. Practically, this can look like a range of institutional renovations from creating accessible healthcare to abolishing prisons to providing universal basic income to other imaginings surpassing our current capacity to hope for.

Harro assures us that liberation is possible. Disrupting socialization often requires “a critical incident that creates cognitive dissonance,” making oppression impossible to ignore.” This ‘awakening’ to oppression is a necessary step before uprooting our entrenched beliefs, coalition building, and creating sustainable change. Just as the Eightfold Path includes right knowledge, embarking on the cycle of liberation means we must learn to see the world as it really is and become aware of the invisible systems of oppression that permeate all aspects of society. In Harro’s models, gaining new insight is key for liberation. In Buddhism, awareness of our karmic habits is necessary for liberation, and luckily, “Buddhism posits that if behavioural patterns can be learned, they can be unlearned.”

Conclusion

I have noticed in myself a tendency to view Buddhism through the Western stereotype of lone, monastic Zen Masters living separate from society, avoiding the conventional reality, and practicing compassion in meditative, disembodied ways. Through research for this paper, I have come to appreciate that this stereotype is undeserved (as most stereotypes are), finding instead a wealth of practitioners who resonate with my concerns about both ultimate and conventional liberation. As former Zen priest, Zenju Earthlyn Manuel writes in her book, The Way of Tenderness,

Today, using such ancient teachings to promote favorable blindness, we end up turning away from the very types of lived experiences that motivated such teachings to begin with. We must look our embodiment in the face in order to attend to the challenge it presents. Only then will we come to engage each other with all of what we are—both the relative and the absolute, the physical and the formless.\textsuperscript{34}

I am not alone in my concerns about spiritual bypassing, and I am not alone in my commitment to unlearning, relearning, and seeking justice both ultimately and conventionally. While I did not provide a comprehensive overview of social or \( \text{samsāric} \) liberation in this paper, I hope that sharing the characteristics of white supremacy and the cycles of socialization and liberation helped shed some light on how the two types of liberation can be understood together.

\textsuperscript{34} Zenju E. Manuel, \textit{The Way of Tenderness} (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2015), 27.
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