

The Transformation of the Self in Mahayana Buddhism

A Theoretical Study

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RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AT the ultimate level, it is often said, leads to a radical transformation of the self. The union with the Supreme Being, Brahman, in the Upanishads, and nirvana in Buddhism correspond to a fundamental and radical change in the way the self apprehends itself and the world. Tao in Taoism, Brahman in the Upanishads, and nirvana in Buddhism embody absolute knowledge, the true form of the self and the world. The realization of Brahman and nirvana is the transcendence of the false understanding of the self and the world, and the realization of the true nature of the self and the world. Once the self attains true knowledge it overcomes bondage and suffering, which afflict mundane existence, and achieves total freedom. Self and its existential condition are transformed as the conception of the self and the world are transformed.

One of the most distinctive features of man is that he is a conscious being. Thought provides the basic framework by which human beings define and apprehend the world and the nature of the self. The form of thought determines the form of conceptual systems, and the form of conceptual systems shapes the form of individual and social action. Knowledge, founded upon thought, gives form, order and meaning to individual expressions. The nature of the self is defined by the conception of the self. For the conception of the self determines its expressions—expressions which define the self.

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The notion that mind defines the nature of the self as well as that of the universe is the basis of some religio-philosophical systems. "Mind is, indeed the self, mind is, indeed the world, mind is indeed Brahman," insists *Chandogya Upanishad*.¹ *Dhammapada*, purportedly the very words of the Buddha, begins with the statement: "All that we are is the result of what we have thought: it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts."² In Mahayana Buddhism and in the Upanishads different mental states are seen as leading to different experiences and expressions of the self.

THE TWO MODES OF THOUGHT

The idea that the nature and expressions of the self are determined by the mind is central to Mahayana philosophy. The form of the universe and the nature of the self, as understood by the self, are dependent upon different mental states. The Mahayana theory of the destiny of the self and the transformation of the self is based upon a model of two modes of knowing or two truths.³ Nagarjuna, the foremost philosopher of Mahayana Buddhism, emphasizes that "the teachings of the doctrines by the Buddhas is based upon two truths: truth relating to worldly convention and truth in terms of ultimate fruit."⁴ True knowledge of the self and the universe is ascribed to one state of mind, and false understanding of the self and the universe is ascribed to another state. There are two radically different ways of knowing the world and the self.⁵ One form of knowing produces human bondage

¹ S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanishads* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953), p. 471.

² Irving Babbitt, *The Dhammapada* (New York: Oxford University, 1936), p. 3.

³ Mervyn Sprung, "The Madhyamika Doctrine of Two Realities as a Metaphysic," in M. Sprung, ed., *The Problem of Two Truths in Buddhism and Vedanta* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1973); T. R. V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1955), pp. 232-33; Frederick Streng, *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1967), pp. 144-46.

⁴ David J. Kalupahana, *Nagarjuna. The Philosophy of the Middle Way* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p. 331.

⁵ In contemporary times it was Lucien Lévi-Bruhl (see his *Primitive Mentality*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1966) who proposed the model of the dichotomic modes of thought. His work remains highly controversial, yet his theory continues to be very

THE TRANSFORMATION OF SELF

and suffering, while the other releases human beings from suffering and leads them to freedom. The nature and destiny of the self change as consciousness shifts from one state to another. Nirvana or salvation involves the transformation of the self and life through the transformation of consciousness.

The two fundamental ways of knowing are the discriminating mode of thought and the non-discriminating mode. Conventional knowledge is identified with the discriminating mode of thought, *vikalpa* or *vijñāna*. The prefix *vi* means to cut, divide or separate. This mode of thought is based upon sense perception, upon objective aspects of phenomena.⁶ The objectifying consciousness differentiates and discriminates things using qualitative characteristics and designations. In this mode of thought, things are seen as independent objects with characteristic marks (*lakṣaṇa*). "All that is *lakṣaṇa* is dual, divided," states Nagarjuna, and "all that is divided is a particular existent entity."⁷ The discriminating mode substantializes, particularizes, and isolates phenomena. It gives rise to *prapañca*, the differentiated universe of independent objects, of name and form.

The objective perception and understanding, according to Mahayana Buddhism, is a false construction of the universe. The true nature of reality is emptiness (*śūnyatā*), i.e., beyond objective categories.⁸ Emptiness is synonymous with interdependent-origination (*pratityasamutpāda*). "We state that," asserts Nagarjuna, "whatever is dependent arising, that is emptiness."⁹ Interdependent-origination represents both the immanent relationship of entities and their dynamic unfolding.

First of all, the true form of the self and the universe, according to Buddhism, is dynamic transformation. Impermanence (*anitya*) is the

relevant (see Donald Wiebe, "The Prelogical Mentality Revisited," in *Religion*, vol. 17, 1987; pp. 29-63). Two basic forms of mental processing are indicated in recent research into right and left brain dichotomy.

⁶ Mervyn Sprung, *Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 212.

⁷ K. Venkata Ramanan, *Nāgārjuna's Philosophy as Presented in the Mahā-Prajñāpāramitā-Śāstra* (Varanasi: Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan, 1971), p. 77.

⁸ Edward Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom Books* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1958), p. 89.

⁹ Kalupahana, p. 339.

nature of reality. "All existing things," Buddha stresses in the *Dhammapada*, "are transient. He who knows and sees this ceases to be the thrall of grief."¹⁰ In the famous dialogue between King Milinda and the Buddhist monk Nagasena the latter compares reality to an uninterrupted succession of states. Even someone named Nagasena cannot be said to exist.¹¹ Existence is transformation. Dynamic-unfolding is the form of the universe and, therefore, the nature of all beings. An unchanging entity in a changing universe is impossible. The idea that the universe is a dynamic reality can be found in other religious traditions.¹²

Secondly, things are interdependent in their dynamic unfolding. Every being presupposes all other beings; every being is dependent on everything else. There are many striking images in Buddhist literature, especially in *Avatamsaka Sutra*, illustrating the interdependence of things. The most famous of these is the picture of the vast net of pearls in Indra's heaven in which every pearl reflects every other pearl. In the dialogue between King Milinda and Nagasena the interdependence of entities is illustrated by means of the image of the chariot.¹³ Every part of the chariot derives its identity and significance in relation to the whole, every other part. No part of the chariot can be understood in isolation. Many impressive illustrations of the interdependence of things can be found in Hua-yen Buddhist works.¹⁴

Interdependent-origination means that entities are in immanent relationship with one another in their dynamic unfolding. Since beings are in intrinsic relationship with one another, none has a discrete, independent self-identity or self nature. Everything participates in everything else. The self reflects all other selves, and all other selves reflect the self.

The recognition of interdependent-unfolding requires a distinct mode of perception. The discriminating, dividing mind fails to recog-

¹⁰ Babbitt, p. 43.

¹¹ Lucien Stryk, ed., *World of the Buddha* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), pp. 90-95.

¹² K. S. Bose, *A Theory of Religious Thought* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1991), pp. 9, 78-79.

¹³ Stryk, pp. 91-92.

¹⁴ Steve Odin, *Process Metaphysics and Hua-yen Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982).

THE TRANSFORMATION OF SELF

nize the intrinsic relationships between things, because it relies on conceptual categories that embody no relationships. An entirely different mode of thought is required to recognize the dynamic-relational nature of things. This mode of thought comes into full realization in nirvana.

In a recent work, I have proposed a model of two modes of thought to explain socio-cultural forms, especially religious expressions.¹⁵ These two modes are the objective mode and the dynamic or active mode. Modern science is based on the former. Mathematical equations embody the ideal form of the objective mode of thought. In a mathematical equation, say, $a + b = c$, the terms a , b and c are static or conserved. They have no self-dynamism of their own. Moreover, the terms have no innate relationship with one another. To relate them, external relational elements (+, -) have to be inserted between the terms. In the objective mode, things are defined in terms of their objective, characteristic features (color, mass, height, etc.). Objective categories and concepts are static and embody no relational meaning. When viewed in terms of such categories, things appear as self-sufficient existents separated from one another, and to have identities independent of time.

Underlying religious forms and doctrines, on the other hand, is a specific way of apprehending the world that is very different from that governing modern science. In this mode of thought, things are grasped dynamically, i.e., in terms of action, and not in terms of static qualitative features.¹⁶ Action necessarily involves more than one element, and forms an indivisible whole. The wholeness of every act implies that the participant elements are in a necessary unity, i.e., the motion of every element is in immanent relationship with all other elements in motion. The very form of every dynamic element, in a given action, is defined by its relationship with other dynamic elements. In other words, things understood dynamically, through active interaction, are seen as in intrinsic relationship with one another. In juggling the juggler and the moving objects form an indivisible totality in which none has an in-

¹⁵ Bose.

¹⁶ The grasping of the world through spontaneous, unmeditated action is often stressed in Zen practices. When asked to describe a fan a Zen monk opened it and fanned himself, another closed it and scratched his neck with it (Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen*, New York: Penguin Books, 1957; pp. 135-153). *Maitri Upanishad* exhorts men to comprehend through the body and not through the senses (Radhakrishnan, p. 822).

dependent identity. The manifest form of the juggler in action is defined by his relation to the circling objects.

The other is grasped dynamically and relationally in action. The dynamic perception produces an organic world of interdependent beings. I have used the model of the dynamic perception of reality to explain religious forms and doctrines found in three different religious traditions.¹⁷ The notion of Brahman in the Upanishads and the Chinese categories of Tao, yin-yang and the five-phases (water, wood, fire, metal and earth) were shown to derive from the dynamic apprehension of the world. The model could explain the form and social function of various religious doctrines and practices, for instance, of the Lugbara of Uganda. The origin, form and function of religious expressions can be accounted for by the dynamic-relational understanding of the universe. Not only a symbolic system but also a system of knowledge can be constructed on the basis of this mode of thought.

The Buddhist model of discriminating thought can be identified with the objective conception of reality characteristic of modern science. The dynamic-relational conception of things, represented by the term interdependent-origination, can be equated with the religious understanding of the universe. In the objective mode, things are seen as independent of each other; in the dynamic mode they are seen as in relationship with one another. These two ways of seeing are to be assumed as basic dimensions of the mind. Their form and inner structure are entirely different. Their contrasting forms give shape to different forms of knowledge and human expressions. They have profoundly different consequences upon the way the self recognizes itself and the world.

A fundamental distinction between two basic modes of thought is present in other religious traditions. In Hindu, Islamic and Christian mysticism, the unifying vision of the universe is equated with God or absolute knowledge, while the perceptions of the world as multiplicity is identified with false knowledge.

¹⁷ Bose.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF SELF

MODES OF THOUGHT AND THE SELF

The self caught within the discriminating mode of thought comes to see no relationship between itself and others; an unbridgeable chasm comes to separate the self and the other. In this way of seeing the self recognizes itself as an autonomous reality independent of other selves. This leads to self-centeredness and egotism. To such a self its own needs and desires become paramount. According to Asanga, discursive thought is "the base of the reifying view, egoism and pride."¹⁸ Because of this mode of seeing, says Asvaghosha, "ordinary men imagine that I and Mine are real and cling to them in their illusions."¹⁹ The impulse to acquire and possess derives from this mode of thought. Aryadeva and Nagarjuna also attribute hubris, ego, greed, lust, anger, etc., to discursive thought.²⁰ Those who are caught in this mode of thought long for false glory and empty achievements. A particular mode of thought constitutes the self in a specific fashion.

Interdependent-unfolding embodies a radically different perception and understanding of the self. It leads directly to the notion of no-self (*anatman*). "In many respects it is possible to assert," Inada observes, "Buddhism is a philosophy of *anatman*."²¹ The self is a dynamic, spontaneous unfolding. It is in active interaction with the world at every moment. For this very reason, it is always and necessarily in relationship with the world and other selves. The very being and identity of the self is defined by its relationship with other selves and the world. The self has no reality without the world. It has no self-sufficient, isolated existence. Nagarjuna states: "Buddha, you declare all elements of existence [are] devoid of self; you liberate men from belief in the individual being."²²

¹⁸ Janice Dean Willis, *On Knowing Reality: The Tattvārtha Chapter of Asāṅga's Bodhisattvabhūmi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 128.

¹⁹ Yoshito S. Hakeda, *The Awakening of Faith* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), p. 49.

²⁰ Karen Lang, *Āryadeva's Catuḥśataka* (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1986), p. 79; Ramanan, p. 100; Sprung (1979), p. 207.

²¹ Kenneth K. Inada, "Problematics of the Buddhist Nature of Self," in *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 29 (1979), pp. 141-158.

²² Sprung (1979), p. 148.

Nirvana is the direct, personal recognition of the interdependent existence of the self and other beings: "Those who dwell on interdependent origination," states the *Gandavyuha*, "[are] ultimately free from delusion in regard to all things."²³ The self has to come to a felt relationship with the world to recognize the interdependence of things. In nirvana, the self recognizes inside that it is in inner relationship with other selves. Nirvana is the dynamic-relational perception of the self and the world. In nirvana, one achieves the ultimate insight into the true nature of the self and the universe. Once the self realizes the unity of itself and other selves, then it gains wisdom. Selflessness, according to Aryadeva, "is the door to tranquillity."²⁴

In the recognition that the self is in intimate relationship with other selves, the self-centered ego is annihilated. The self becomes selfless. The desire for wealth, power and fame, the hallmark of the egoistic self, is extinguished. In true knowledge, the self sheds its isolation and abolishes its estrangement from the world. It recognizes that the world participates in its being. The self achieves communion with the universe.

The realization that one's self is in an inescapable relationship with other selves leads to a deep, abiding concern for the well-being of others. It leads to reciprocity and communality. For the well-being of one rests on the well-being of all. The very identity of the self is dependent on other selves. In nirvana, the self recognizes its ultimate commitment to and solidarity with other beings. Nirvana, in relation to human society, is the realization and affirmation of human solidarity and communality. Compassion (*karuna*) toward all sentient beings flows inherently from nirvana. Those who dwell in nirvana dwell in compassion. Compassion is an intrinsic aspect of the Bodhisattva, the enlightened self. The *Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom* observes: "A Bodhisattva enters the concentration on friendliness, and strives to save all beings. He enters the concentration on compassion, and directs pity and compassion towards beings. He enters the concentration on sympathetic joy, and resolves to make beings rejoice."²⁵

²³ Thomas Cleary, *Entry into the Realm of Reality: A Translation of Gandavyuha, the Final Book of Avatamsaka Sutra* (Boston: Shambhala, 1989), p. 332.

²⁴ Lang, p. 115.

²⁵ Edward Conze, *The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 133.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF SELF

I have shown elsewhere that the notion of Brahman, the Supreme Being, embodies the dynamic-relational nature of all beings.²⁶ According to *Kaivalya Upanishad*: "By seeing the self in all beings and all beings in the self one goes to Brahman, and by no other cause."²⁷ Tao is a concept similar to Brahman. Tao is the active principle of all beings, and Tao unites all things.²⁸ The notion of the Supreme Being is a very prevalent one. I have argued that, irrespective of cultural backgrounds, this symbol embodies the unity and solidarity of all beings.²⁹ The knowledge of Brahman or Tao is the realization that all beings are in intrinsic relationship with one another in their dynamic unfolding. The unity with the Supreme Being, salvation, is thus the full realization of solidarity that encompasses all people.³⁰ In the works of the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart and Sufism, God, absolute truth, corresponds to both universal unity and love.

Intimate interpersonal relationships are characterized by solidarity and reciprocity, mutual commitment and concern. In such relationships the self recognizes itself as in an innately felt relationship with other selves: it participates in other selves, is part of their life-activities. Interdependence is the very nature of intimate relationships. Another vital aspect of such relationships is that they provide an environment in which the self can express itself naturally and authentically, as here one's intrinsic identity is valued and accepted unconditionally. The true self, according to Buddhism, is the natural self. The stress on the natural, spontaneous expression of the self is especially evident in Zen teachings.³¹ Unity and spontaneity are central elements in Taoist teachings also. In nirvana and in intimacy the self achieves a sense of freedom: for in both the self is free to express its true identity. Freedom and solidarity are essential aspects of nirvana and intimacy. It is not in the absence, but in the presence of relationships of commitment that

²⁶ Bose, pp. 10-19.

²⁷ Radhakrishnan, p. 929.

²⁸ Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968); Bose, pp. 80-84.

²⁹ Bose (1991), pp. 16, 41, 82; (1994) "Religion and Revolution," *The Journal of Religious Studies*.

³⁰ The fundamental unity of religions may have the dynamic-relational conception of the universe as its basis.

³¹ Watts, pp. 154-73.

the self is able to express its authentic identity. True freedom is inseparable from shared responsibility. Another feature that intimacy and nirvana share is that both are beyond words or ratiocination. Nirvana, it may be argued, is intimacy in its universal extension; conversely, intimacy is nirvana confined to a limited domain.

The ultimate religious understanding, as represented by nirvana, Tao, Brahman or God, is the direct recognition of the dynamic-relational nature of all beings, including the self. This mode of understanding, it can be argued, is the basis of intimacy, solidarity and reciprocity. Religious knowledge is a way of thinking, and it generates a specific pattern of interhuman relationships.

Nirvana is the full realization of a vital dimension of the human self. It is not an abstract experience distanced from concrete life. Nirvana (true knowledge) and *samsara* (the practical world), Nagarjuna emphasizes, are absolutely identical.³² Nirvana, just as intimacy, is part of our everyday experience. However, our perennial tendency to conceptualize and calculate drastically limits this experience.

The true nature of man and all beings is solidarity. True knowledge is the knowledge of this reality. The discriminating mind produces a false picture of the world by creating the illusion (*maya*) that the self is an independent, self-sufficient reality. This makes human beings organize their individual and social life in a way that produces unhappiness and anguish.

The root cause of human suffering (*dukha*) is the false conception the self and the world (*maya*). "The afflictions and karmic action arise," Nagarjuna points out, "from hypostatizing thought."³³ Buddhism discovers the source of human suffering in the objectifying mind, and the ego-centered self that arises from it. "Buddhism finds the source of all evils and sufferings, in the vulgar material conception of the ego-soul," Suzuki observes, "and concentrates its entire ethical force upon the destruction of the ego-centric notions and desires."³⁴ The discriminating mind produces craving and "from craving comes grief."³⁵ The more tightly people get trapped in the objectifying con-

³² Kalupahana, pp. 366-67.

³³ Sprung, 1979, p. 171.

³⁴ Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), p. 146.

³⁵ Babbitt, p. 34.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF SELF

consciousness, the more intense their self-centered desires grow.

To transcend bondage and suffering, all objective concepts, views and theories, the ground of the ego-centric self, have to be completely uprooted.³⁶ The term emptiness, which repudiates the conceptual representation of the world, is the antidote for all views. The human self is a dynamic, spontaneously unfolding reality. As soon as the self succeeds in extinguishing the discriminating mind—the detached, calculating mind—it automatically comes into an active, participatory relationship with the world. The spontaneously acting self, unconstrained by conceptual categories, experiences itself and the world dynamically and relationally. In nirvana, the self realizes its true identity and, therefore, freedom. As the mind shifts from the objective to the dynamic understanding, the self is radically transformed. What was an egoistic self, concerned with its own desires, becomes one which recognizes its inborn solidarity and reciprocity with all beings as its essential nature. Nirvana involves a radical transformation of the self through a radical transformation of consciousness. The direct knowledge of the Supreme Being (Brahman, Tao, etc.) involves a similar transformation. To achieve human solidarity and reciprocity, the objectifying consciousness has to be put to rest, and the world has to be grasped through participatory action uncontaminated by conceptual categories.

Consciousness, according to Mahayana Buddhism, is the determining ground of individual behavior. Mind constitutes both the form of the universe and the character of the self. “It is in accordance with one’s thought,” says Nagarjuna, “that one realizes all things.”³⁷ To transform the individual and society, consciousness has to be transformed. Mahayana doctrines are aimed at transforming human beings and their life-world through the transformation of consciousness.

Religious understanding, I have proposed, is based upon a dynamic-

³⁶ Florin Giripescu Sutton, *Existence and Enlightenment in the Lankavatāra-sūtra* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 143; Kalupahana, p. 223. The effort to make the individual give up the objective conceptual orientation is strikingly evident in Zen practices (Watts, pp. 135–53). Nagarjuna’s dialectical demolition of conventional conceptual categories, in his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, is intended to destroy our faith in objective reason.

³⁷ Ramanan, p. 71.

relational perception of things, and modern scientific thought upon a static, nonrelational definition of things. These dichotomic modes of thought have opposing structures, and produce radically different conceptions of the self and self's relation to other selves. These two ways of understanding lead to two opposing patterns of interpersonal behavior and relationships. The transforming power of religion derives from the particular conception of the self and the world that characterizes religious understanding.

The two modes of thought are recognized as universal aspects of the mind in Mahayana writings. This means that human beings, everywhere, are caught between the conflicting impulses produced by these two modes of knowing. In nirvana, the set of impulses deriving from the discriminating mode are extinguished and those deriving from the nondiscriminating mode are fully realized.

Unlike mere objects, human beings are conscious beings who constitute their nature in thought. Any study of man should begin with the mind.

Self-conscious understanding is a central concern in the study of human expressions, including religion. The basic factors shaping individual behavior, beliefs and attitudes, according the above discussion, are to be found in modes of thought. In the knowledge of these factors the self recognizes how consciousness determines its expressions, its being and existence. It becomes self-conscious. Self-conscious knowledge is vital if we wish to transform our lives. Only a self-conscious person is capable of seeing clearly the conditions that produce well-being on the one hand and suffering on the other. The enlightened self is the self-knowing self. Man is the author of his destiny. Buddhist teachings are intended to make everyone recognize the fundamental elements shaping his/her existence.