The Half-Truth of Western Political Realism: A Buddhist Critique

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The parable of the blind men and the elephant is one of the oldest in the Buddhist canon. In the story, a king has taken an elephant to his palace and requested the city's blind men examine and describe the animal. One man, whose hand had landed on the trunk declares the elephant is like a thick snake, others, who felt the sides or legs describe it as a wall or a tree. Despite the partial "truth" captured by their subjective perceptions, they nonetheless misconstrue the elephant's actual nature. So too, Western political realists, in describing a seemingly conflictual world of atomistic, materially real, self-interested states in anarchy, misunderstand the world as it actually exists. This fundamental failure to distinguish between their perception and reality, between the world as it appears versus the world as it exists—realism's half-truth, if you will—is, ultimately, a delusion that helps perpetuate a world of conflict, war, and exclusion.

This article provides a Buddhist critique of Western political realism that maintains that the true nature of our existence—be it as individuals or states—is not as atomistic, independent entities. Instead, Buddhism claims our reality (including "ourselves") is *radically interdependent and impermanent.* Further, when we realize this basic truth, our natural underlying social disposition is equanimity and altruism, not selfishness. Together, Buddhist ontology and understanding of human nature offer a different starting point for thinking about ourselves and the world we live in, one it characterizes as deeply interdependent and one where the prospects for political cooperation are far-reaching. A Buddhist critique of political realism counsels that the failure to appreciate the full extent of interdependence and our root nature is the ultimate source of all conflicts, up to and including interstate war, whereas an understanding of our radical interdependence and human potential is the key to imagining a different vision for politics.

The article begins by briefly recapping the well-known theoretical assertions of political realism and its meta-theoretical foundation. It then contrasts this understanding of reality with a Buddhist perspective on basic ontology, human nature, politics, and international relations. It concludes with a summary of essential features of a Buddhist approach to thinking about the world, our role in it, and the type of political environments conducive to our higher nature. I argue that Buddhist principles for good government and statecraft provide principles for developing adaptable solutions to contemporary problems.

Western Political Realism

In the 1940s, Western "Realist" international relations (IR) asserted that the eternal verities and "objective laws" of international relations were the will to dominance; the inherent violence of human nature; and the natural competition and warfare among autonomous, sovereign states in anarchy (Morgenthau 1948, 4). These observations about human nature and state behavior were presented as immutable truths and are still held as such by many. The theory was based on Western European experience since the seventeenth century when the establishment of sovereign, independent units (states) became the cornerstone of Western IR theory. Sovereignty meant that state actors had the right to rule over a territory and the people within in it and were legally equal to all other states in terms of their autonomy and authority. Dominant Western "Realist" IR theory emphasized these independent, not interdependent,

states as actors operating in an anarchic environment, that is, one where there is no central authority to protect states from each other or to guarantee their security. It underscored the enduring propensity for conflict among these autonomous, self-interested states seeking security through self-help. Realists argued that, given these systemic conditions, international cooperation will be rare, fleeting, and tenuous—limited by enforcement problems in anarchy and each state's preference for larger relative gains in any potential bargain because of the state's systemic vulnerability. War, therefore, was perfectly normal, ethical, and well, "diplomacy by other means" (von Clausewitz, 1989).

In terms of meta-theoretical underpinnings, political realism conformed with the Enlightenment's classical scientific tenets regarding the physical world: material realism, objectivism, and localized causation. Ontologically, political realists adopted the Cartesian separation of subject from object, self from other, and mind from matter; epistemologically they endorsed the positivist assumption of the possibility of discovering law-like generalizations about social behavior divorced from ethics, much like scientists seeking to establish facts about the natural world; and, methodologically, they favored third-party, replicable empiricism. The predominant political conclusions flowing from this classical scientific foundation is that insecurity and conflict naturally arise in groups of inherently real, independent, and self-interested actors. Thus, the benefits of society are unlikely without a fear-based social contract domestically and by extension, the pursuit of a balance of power among self-interested states acting in an anarchic environment internationally.

The trump card of political realism has always been that, however harsh its depiction of political life and however dispiriting its predictions, it is "telling it like it is," and thus saving us from the greater harm that comes from embracing alternative, less realistic, perspectives. Machiavelli, for example warns us that "the manner in which men live is so different than the way in which they ought to live, that he who leaves the common course for that which he ought to follow will find that it leads him to ruin rather than to safety" (Machiavelli 1965, 76). Or, E. H. Carr who explained that "Realism tends to emphasize the irresistible strength of existing forces and the inevitable character of exiting tendencies, and to insist that the highest wisdom lies in accepting, and adapting oneself to these forces and tendencies" (Carr 1964, 10). Or Hans Morgenthau who tells us his theory appeals to historic precedent rather than to abstract principles, and aims at the realization of the lesser evil rather than of the absolute good.

Ironically, realism's alleged strength, that is, its unflinching observation of "reality," is, from a Buddhist perspective, its greatest defect. In truth, Buddhism argues, political realism is based on appearances, not reality, and appearances can be deceiving.

Buddhist "Realism"

Buddhism asserts that every functioning thing we perceive arises (and ceases) in dependence on its causes and conditions, its parts, and the minds that perceive it; like a rainbow that appears to our senses when heat, light, and moisture come together in a certain manner and dissolves when those conditions change. This principle is known as the *doctrine of dependent origination* expressed poetically in the verse:

When this is, that is

This arising, that arises

When this is not, that is not

This ceasing, that ceases. (SN.12:61).

The doctrine asserts that all phenomena (including our "self") lack or are empty of a fixed, inherent, or essential nature and, on analysis, can be decomposed into other, simpler elements or parts, and that all things are impermanent, the product of ever-changing causes and conditions. All phenomena are dependent on other phenomena and on an apprehending consciousness. Although we naturally believe the things we perceive exist inherently, the way things appear to our senses are deceptive and contradictory to the way in which they exist.

In Buddhist thought, *ultimately* the self and all other phenomena lack a fixed, inherent nature, although one may choose to refer to selves or objects in keeping with worldly conventions. The *conventional*, nominal reference to the self and other objects, up to and including nation-states, is meaningful if properly understood as mere name, however, because it can serve practical, functional purposes and because it can eventually lead one to understanding the ultimate nature of things through sustained analysis. For example, a tea kettle functions conventionally to make tea but it does not exist in an ultimate sense separate from its parts (handle, spout, etc.) or our mental designation of these parts as a "tea kettle."

Buddhism's doctrine of radical interdependence maintains, therefore, that the alleged separation between self and others and between enduringly real subjects and objects, which is the Archimedean starting point (ontologically) for realist, liberal, and even some constructivist and critical approaches to politics in the West, is ultimately incorrect, a misconception. According to Buddhism, the alleged separation is a "delusion" or "ignorance" (of the nature of reality). Instead, a Buddhist social paradigm necessarily begins with the fundamental truth of the essential interdependence and impermanence of all reality, including ourselves (the no-self doctrine). It asserts a radical interdependence between individuals and between humans and their social and natural environments.

Misunderstanding the deeper, radically interdependent nature of reality has grave consequences, according to Buddhism. It leads to problematic actions (karma) that result in continued suffering. Grasping and cherishing a false sense of independence and a desire for permanence keeps us locked in pervasive suffering (*samsara*). In short, all our problems, including complex political problems, and all the unwanted consequences of our actions flow from a basic misunderstanding of the radical interdependence of reality.

This fundamental ontological mistake leads to reifying oneself and objects of desire or aversion in the belief that protecting and cherishing ourselves and our desires and harming and destroying our enemies and aversions will bring us security and happiness. This tendency is only made worse in collectives, like states, nations, and institutions, which are projections based on a false premise (Macy 1979).

Paradoxically, and directly contrary to our ordinary belief, self-reification and grasping at self and objects, from a Buddhist perspective, do not bring happiness but only discord and dissatisfaction. The championing of the autonomous and independent self (and, necessarily, an alien other), from a Buddhist viewpoint, will not promote individual or social well-being. Instead this dualistic thinking will produce dissatisfaction, personal insecurity, incessant striving, conflict, and violence. Taken to its logical conclusion, clinging to an autonomous self and exalting self-interest are the sources of social and political division, and they perpetuate political systems, including our current international system, which have created military and environmental threats that could consume us.

The Buddhist ontology of interdependence and impermanence leads to a different starting point for the social/political world and individual well-being and a way out of this dilemma. Buddhism is the basis for a politics of radical interdependence and, ultimately, what Buddhists call "fearlessness," that is, caring equally for others' welfare. The latter connotes that individuals have the potential of overcoming perceived duality and accepting the creative possibilities and moral responsibility of open-ended impermanence and interdependence. According to the Buddha, one's nature, when realized through training the mind to understand the true nature of reality, makes equanimity, unselfishness, and cooperation our natural, underlying social disposition, not self-interest, because caring equally for all is only logical when one fully realizes the truth of our radical interdependence. Human nature in Buddhism contains the essence of enlightenment, a fully awakened being, called our "Buddha nature" in some Buddhist schools. This alternative view of human nature is the second major difference between Buddhist social theory and those of realism, a difference that follows from the first and fundamental difference: the Buddhist assertion that all reality is radically interdependent. As will be discussed in the next section, our political systems can and should, therefore, reflect and support individuals in recognizing this fundamental truth and in realizing their underlying nature.

Buddhist ontology encourages our connection with, not separateness from, others. By this logic, empathy (feeling with others) is fundamental to human nature, and altruism (acting on behalf of others) and cooperation are humans' deep-seated behavioral traits, our fundamental and unbound nature. "But what about all that bad behavior we witness daily," you ask. Buddhism explains that separateness and selfishness are the result of pervasive but

mistaken conceptions that lead to negative actions—greed (attraction to objects that do not exist as they appear and do not endure), anger (aversion to such false objects), false pride, and jealousy—and thus conflict and suffering. Buddhist logic does not deny the prevalence of our more selfish or conflictual traits that realists describe. Instead, Buddhism suggests only that a selfish, fearful orientation is not humans' fundamental nature and therefore ultimately is an erroneous starting point for designing political institutions and policies. While Buddhism acknowledges that individuals may behave in selfish or discordant ways, this behavior is considered the result of "adventitious defilements," like mud in water. Because these defilements are not part of one's true nature, they can be removed by following the teachings to reveal a root mind which is clear, altruistic, compassionate, and wise, like a Buddha's. For Buddhists, an innate empathetic and altruistic orientation is a real possibility because it accords with the how things actually exist, i.e. interdependently, and it is an option that can be chosen and worked toward.

Buddhism asserts that human beings only behave in ways that are selfish and often discordant if they misperceive the real nature of their existence and if they suffer from delusions about the nature of themselves and reality. If individuals remain attached to the notion of themselves as separate from, and in opposition to, other selves and all other things (the classical Western realist ontology), when push comes to shove they will act predominantly in selfish and non-cooperative ways. *From a Buddhist perspective, individual and social pathologies such as violence and destructiveness, or merely sub-optimal levels of cooperation, are ultimately linked to misguided efforts to find certainty and separateness in a world that is indeterminate and interdependent, not from our basic makeup* . According to Buddhism, the mistaken feeling of duality between the world and "us" feeds our incessant insecurity and fears and drives our preoccupation with power and control over others and our environments to secure ourselves.

Buddhist ontology provides a paradigmatic orientation that can unlock thinking about certain social possibilities that are fundamentally different from political realism which is based on Western, Cartesian assumptions. Buddhist philosophy does not change the widespread expression of selfish behavior; rather it treats that behavior not as human beings' ultimate nature, but as our choice, albeit a choice made under the pervasive delusion of duality. For Buddhists, dualistic thinking based on independent selves and objects is a constructed reality that can be deconstructed, not so much through clever philosophical discourse, but through hard work via mindfulness and meditation that teaches one to recognize and transform one's own thoughts, intentions, and emotions and the behaviors that ultimately flow from them.

Because, in Buddhism, political systems necessarily reflect the mentality of the individuals within them, that is to say, our present world is the expression of the collective karma of its inhabitants, the starting point of the work needed to organize a more cooperative society is self-transformation, but government and even the international system can structure themselves consistent with the fundamental wisdom of radical interdependence to provide supportive environments for the attainment of humans' true nature and lasting happiness. These helpful social provisions are known as "conducive conditions" in Buddhism. Buddhist social and political designs are instrumental: they exist not for their own sake, but as an important means for supporting individuals' progress along a path that culminates in wisdom and transcendence of suffering.

Radical interdependence as the nature of existence applies equally across the different "levels of analysis" in IR (individual, state, and state system), with primacy/originality given to the individual level. States and the state system are the summation, projection, and institutionalization of individual ways of thinking, an intersubjective consensus, as constructivists would say. The underlying nature of the state and state system is contingent on the individuals who compromise them, an assertion that reflects Buddhism's basic humanism. As discussed, these individual selves, in turn, lack a permanent essence. Individuals, states, and the state system are, therefore, all changeable phenomena. Individuals have the capacity to shape the character of their minds, and thereby, their institutions, such as the state and the state system.

Peace and social progress, therefore, depend ultimately on the individual. At an individual level, the ontology of radical interdependence and no-self implies an alternative ethics or way of being in the world. Primarily, this view encourages a reduced attachment to self and thus undercuts selfishness—the basic Western assumption about human nature (Harvey 2000). The movement away from an essentialist self toward no self implies "a drift toward

impartiality and impersonality, a lessening of the gap between persons since my relation to others is not so significantly different from my relation to my own past and future" (Perrett 2002, 375). By focusing more on a collection of experiences and less on an immutable self, we can view others and ourselves with greater equanimity. Through familiarity with no-self, a person experiences reduced egoistic concern and recognizes that the pursuit of her own welfare is not fundamentally different from her regard for the well-being of others. Operating under this ontological stance means our responsibility to our future selves rests not on selfishness, but largely on a pragmatic rationale: we are well situated to affect the well-being of ourselves (and our intimates), and therefore, should act to promote the welfare (or reduce the suffering) of those we are in the best position to help. Moreover, failure to look after our "self" would make us of little value to "others." This immediate concern, however, does not detract from our obligation to avoid harming and to promote the welfare of others more distant from ourselves to the extent we can do so. The Buddhist path for achieving this level of personal development is reducible to ethical conduct and shaping our thoughts and emotions to remove negativity and replace it with positive thoughts and emotions (such as generosity and compassion) through the practice of mindfulness, concentration, and meditation. These same practices can also lead ultimately to an "awakening" to the wisdom that realizes radical interdependence directly. This worldview is directly opposed to the egoism, separation of self from other, fear, insecurity, competition, domination, conflict, violence, and revenge that have traditionally been considered natural elements of realist politics and IR in the West. Radical interdependence, if realized, can lead instead to a sense of connection, community, tolerance, responsibility, and ultimately, a universal sense of humanity and a greater willingness to find common purpose according to Buddhism. As individuals develop these abilities, by extension, they develop more peaceful and cooperative social institutions, which, in turn, support individuals in their material and spiritual ambitions. The next section looks at the nature of the social and political institutions that Buddhism prescribes.

The Buddha on Politics

Early Buddhist literature addresses several political and international issues. While the primary purpose of the Buddha's teachings is the liberation of individuals from pervasive suffering, his teachings also acknowledge the interdependence of the individual with society and polity. The Buddha's teachings sought to mediate these relationships constructively. Although largely unknown in the West, the Buddha was an original and important political philosopher, and a rationalistic, humanistic, and democratic one at that. The Buddha's original social and political teachings include: rejecting the prevailing hierarchical social order of his day and asserting individual equality; appealing to human reason and pragmatism in solving real-world problems 20 centuries before the Enlightenment; offering a contractual theory of the state 2000 years before Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau; creating a model for an egalitarian, institutionalized, deliberative democracy in his order of monks and nuns a century before the origins of Western democracy; calling for a federation of like-minded states to keep the peace internationally two millennia before Kant's famous essay on perpetual peace; and arguing for environmentally sustainable economic growth ages before that idea occurred in the West.

What are the essential elements of the Buddha's normative vision for politics? The Buddha saw politics not as an end in itself but as an instrument that could either provide favorable conditions or create harmful obstructions for individuals' personal advancement. The Buddha recognized that government is necessary to provide social order and welfare and that its values, content, and processes should be consistent with the "dharma." "Dharma" has many meanings but here refers to the teachings of the Buddha and their realization, which are offered as universal or natural laws—such as the law of dependent arising and the suffering that results from ignorance of this basic truth. These laws are not created by the Buddha, they operate with or without him, but the Buddha realized these truths, revealed these laws, and recommended that we examine them and act accordingly; not through blind faith, but through a process of rational, critical, contextual, and skillful human assessment. A political system organized consistent with these basic truths could minimize the manifest forms of suffering for all members of society—especially for the least fortunate whose visible suffering is greatest—and play a positive role in an individual's attainment of higher forms of well-being.

What does it mean to say that political practices must be consistent with the dharma for their legitimacy? A fundamental principle of the dharma relevant to politics is the equality and dignity of all individuals. The Buddha stressed that all human beings have an inherent worth and capacity for enlightenment, so-called, "Buddha nature." In

contrast to the prevailing Brahmin teachings, the Buddha rejected the caste system and argued that virtues were distributed equally, not hierarchically, across society. Buddha states: "Now since both dark and bright qualities, which are blamed and praised by the wise, are scattered indiscriminately among the four castes, the wise do not recognize the claim about the Brahmin caste being the highest … [anyone can] become emancipated … by virtue of dharma" (DN, 27, 2012, 408). The dharma applies equally to everyone regardless of class, social status, gender, or economic circumstance. Because citizen and ruler alike are equal under the law of dharma, political institutions should reflect this basic truth. For its time these were truly groundbreaking social insights.

The Buddha's teachings also reflect the principle of equality when he prescribes that monarchy, the dominant form of government during his lifetime, should be based on popular consent (not divine right), conducted in consultation with the governed, even-handed in the application of justice, and conform to the dharma. Democracy, however, is the form of government where equality is paramount, and the Buddha's own political creation, the *sangha* (the order of monks and nuns), is governed by strict equality in its rules for admission, participation, administration, and dispute resolution.

Because of the equality and ultimate goodness of every individual (and because they all suffer), the Buddha taught that they are each worthy of our compassion and, at a minimum, should not be harmed by the state. Nonviolence or non-harm (*ahimsa*) is a natural corollary to the Buddha's teachings on the equality of human potential and the basis of the protection of individual rights. Perhaps the most direct example of this principle to politics is the Buddha's repeated admonition that a righteous ruler must follow the ethical precepts of no killing, no stealing, no lying, etc. More affirmatively, the successful leader must demonstrate compassion and care through the practices of kindness, equanimity, patience, and generosity. Nonviolence and equality are the bedrocks of Buddhist social justice, and good government requires moral and legal protection against the arbitrary use of power.

The third feature of the Buddha's political teachings is a tolerance for different political configurations and a pragmatic and non-doctrinaire approach to political questions. Rather than overtly endorsing a particular form of government, the Buddha, in befriending and advising republics and monarchs alike, implies that good governance can take more than one form but must allow for the maximization of individual happiness of its citizens. He recognized that different types of regimes could be considered legitimate if the spirit of the ruler and the ruled was in accordance with the dharma.

Nonetheless, the Buddha indicated a preference for democratic and representative forms of government, which were his birthright. In his teachings and prescriptions, the Buddha endorsed democratic principles such as citizen participation and free expression of opinion; deliberation, consultation, and consensus-building; voting and respect for popular consent; transparency via face-to-face meetings and public debate; primacy of the rule of law and limited government. We see these predilections in the Buddha's endorsement of republican principles in the *sutras* (teachings) and the incorporation of democratic principles into the rules governing the Buddha's own society of monks and nuns in the *vinaya*. The Buddha's teachings are directly relevant to contemporary politics and are compatible with the governance of a modern democratic state. The Buddha's political thinking parallels Western liberal democratic thought with its emphasis on equal rights, protection against tyranny via equality before the law, and participatory and deliberative governance.

The most important distinction between "dharmic" democracy and Western liberal democracy is Buddhism's emphasis on one's individual duties to others as much as one's individual rights, duties that exceed compliance with the law. Where liberal democracy has little to say about the moral qualities of what constitutes good governance beyond the values of equality of opportunity and protection of individual choice and instead focuses on the process of good governance not the substance (Garfield 2001), "dharmic democracy" delineates a clear duty of care owed to others and to the natural world as well. Fundamentally, in dharmic democracy individuals have a duty not only to avoid abridging other's freedoms, but to strive to develop a sense of universal responsibility and concern for all human beings and the natural world. Although this duty is everyone's responsibility, political institutions and their leaders should reflect these principles, and policy should encourage their inculcation and practice. The emphasis on responsibilities as well as rights follows directly from Buddhism's underlying ontology of dependent origination and a theory of causation that maintains our lives are not separate but deeply interdependent. Contemporary Buddhist

writer and monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, captured this difference in the context of the United States when he remarked: "We have the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast. I think we have to make a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast to counterbalance Liberty. Liberty without responsibility is not real liberty" (Hanh 2006, 137). "Freedom" in Buddhist thought means freedom from the chains of self-grasping ignorance, not the unbridled pursuit of "self" interest.

The Buddha on International Relations and Statecraft

The Buddhist conception of politics as serving the common good extends to the international realm where our humanity and fundamental interdependence ultimately transcend national, racial, and other barriers, which are, at most, only conventional distinctions. This is not to say that the state must wither away in Buddhism. States, like our conventional designation of our "selves" as distinctive individual entities, can function effectively as long as one recognizes their nominal, transactional, and dependent nature and avoids grasping at them as inherently real. States can serve an important function by equitably supplying public goods. Likewise, a system of such like-minded states can "exist" and function effectively, if one recognizes and does not lose sight of the deeper, interconnected nature of all things.

Thus, Buddhist statecraft is an international extension of Buddhist political and economic principles of equality, harmony, social welfare, nonviolence, conciliation, and mutually beneficial commercial exchange what has been summed up above as ruling in accord with the dharma, sometimes called "righteousness" in the Buddhist cannon. The Buddha discusses statecraft mostly in parables, introducing the concept of world-ruler (*cakkavatti* in Pali, *cakravartin* in Sanskrit), who would provide exemplary leadership for states in the international system. The cakkavatti is a lesser or worldly Buddha that provides for the material welfare (more than the spiritual welfare) of mankind. By example and generosity (not violent conquest), this ruler (either a single individual or a representative body) establishes an ideal government with the consent of the governed which is followed by a series of similar democratic and constitutional states based on shared principles. This loose network of ideal states would constitute an international political system that served the interests of worldwide peace and prosperity. One can see certain parallels here with Kant's vision of perpetual peace among like-minded representative states and with democratic peace theory and notions of an "international society" and cosmopolitanism principles of "non-harm" in modern Western IR writings, although Kant's underlying ontology was dualist.

Buddhist IR begins with the establishment of a righteous state, ruled by consent of the governed with policies consistent with the dharma. This government would work for the interest of its people with care, impartial justice, tolerance, and the equal promotion of material and spiritual welfare of society's members. In modern parlance, the exemplar would be an enlightened democratic welfare state guaranteeing freedom and economic security and promoting equality, tolerance, and care for its citizens (Jayatilleke 1967). In time, this model would extend naturally and infectiously or "travel" to other parts of the world, via the Buddhist metaphor of a rolling "Wheel of Dharma," much like the Buddha's initial teaching after his enlightenment set in motion a wheel of spiritual guidance. These other countries, in turn, would establish similar states with analogous governing principles and constitutions befitting their cultures. The international system would not be centralized empire, but a loose constellation of states revolving around an archetypal entity (Tambiah 1976).

In relating with other states, hostility and aggression is forbidden and the cultivation of friendliness and neighborliness and mutually beneficial commerce is endorsed, both to conform with the dharma and on grounds of expediency and efficacy, that is, aggression does not serve one's self interest in the long run. The Buddha counseled, "Hatred never ceases by hatred in this world. Hatred ceases by love—this is the ancient law" (Dhp. 2007, 105). A state could retain its army for defensive purposes but nonviolence is thought to be the higher ideal and Buddha counseled against the resort to war as a means of settling international disputes (King 2013). The first ethical principle in Buddhism is to refrain from killing or injuring any sentient being. There is little or no support for "just war" in Buddhism (Jerryson 2013; Jayasuriya 2009). The Buddha said that wars only perpetuate future conflict.

In sum, in foreign affairs, the state has the obligation not to commit aggression and to cooperate with other states in a spirit of friendliness and equality for the common good of mankind. Like all the Buddha's advice, this admonition was

offered for its practical benefits—it strengthened both the individual state and encouraged common bond of humanity that would bear fruit in international peace and prosperity. The Buddha's political doctrine of equality, democracy, popular sovereignty, and political institutions that serve the common good materially and spiritually find their ultimate fulfillment in a worldwide network of states each acting according to these principles. Hence, in Buddhism, states may exist, but they are artifacts that endure for the benefit of a broader humanity.

Implications for Today's Challenges

A Buddhist social theory necessarily begins with the doctrine of radical interdependence, which underscores an individual's responsibilities for others, not just the promotion of individual choice and self-interest. The Buddha's social formula gives greater emphasis to the duty of care we owe each other and our natural and social environments. This concern is reflected at a minimum in the principles of non-harm, nonaggression, and equality and ideally grows into an ethic of universal compassion. At a national policy level, this political orientation might translate into the promotion of democracy with an equal emphasis on individual freedoms and social and environmental responsibility, for example. Buddhist politics counsels that political systems must consciously weigh the balance between the independence and interdependence of individuals in society, and Buddhism's assertion of radical interdependence tells us our current exaltation of individualism does not reflect reality. Politics, in Buddhism, is not divorced from ethics and it recommends an emphasis on civic virtues. Politics should reflect society's aspirational values, especially the value of equality in terms of political access and avenues for participation and equality of justice under law. Beyond impartiality, politics and policy must also reflect ethical principles such as honesty and transparency, generosity, non-harm, forbearance, empathy, and a willingness to compromise. At the international level, a Buddhist approach might include initiatives that encourage a deeper recognition of our common humanity and equality over particularism and nationalism.

In a Buddhist perspective, these "obligations" to care for others broadly, both within and across societies, are not an imposition on, or at odds with individual freedom or particularistic identities, but an opportunity for individuals to find happiness and fulfillment that transcend the pursuit of personal desires or in-group advantage and gain real freedom from excessive self or national concern. Moreover, this alternative view of social reality is, for Buddhists, consistent with how all things actually exist (interdependently) and consistent with our abiding human nature, which is, at its core, altruistic. From a Buddhist perspective, the separation, insecurity, and fear that constitutes the starting point of Western social thinking, is based in ignorance, not truth. Because this deluded way of looking at ourselves and the world is pervasive, however, we must work the problem, "free our minds" as it were. Buddhist's call this exertion on behalf of ourselves and others the "perfection of effort." With effort, everything comes.

Buddhism's instrumental view of politics and its basic pragmatism and flexibility make it amendable to many different and culturally appropriate ways for putting its basic social principles into practice. In the East, Buddhism has shaped societies as diverse as India and China, and it is reasonable to assume that its social teachings can be integrated into Western social theory and practice too.

Although a Buddhist perspective is different from those that predominate in the West, it is not, fundamentally, an alien one. Buddhism, while ancient and "oriental" in its origins, at its core makes universalistic, not particularistic, assertions—suffering, for example, is a human condition as is the potential for liberation. And, as noted throughout, many Buddhist ideas parallel those of the Western Enlightenment and with the principles of modern welfare state democracies, liberal internationalism, international society, and cosmopolitan ethics. Having introduced this Eastern model to Western IR, and aware of their many common interests, this author encourages those concerned with a politics of human liberation to continue the dialogue.

Buddhism presents us with a wholly different set of assumptions about ourselves and our relationship to others and all things. It recommends political institutions and policies that comport with an ultimate ontological truth of radical interdependence and the ethical responsibilities a trainable mind entail. Einstein reminds us: "no problem can be solved by the same consciousness that created it." A Buddhist approach to today's international challenges represents at its deepest level an ancient, yet innovative, way of thinking about our social and natural worlds, our ethical responsibilities, and "ourselves."

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