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Engaged Buddhist Praxis and Critical Psychology

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Abstract

This essay argues for the relevance of Engaged Buddhism to critical psychology. The teachings of Vietnamese Zen master, Thích Nhất Hạnh or Thầy (teacher), as an embodiment of Engaged Buddhism, are an amalgamation of the wisdoms of both the Theravāda tradition and the Madhyamaka (Middle Way) School of Mahāyāna Buddhism, which was founded by Nāgārjuna and which emphasizes the principle of *Śūnyatā* (emptiness) - a principle eloquently immortalized in the *Heart Sūtra*. From the Mahāyāna perspective, we inter-are because the self is made only of non-self elements, which include not only the Five *Skandhas*, but also everything in the universe from the Big Bang onwards. The doctrine of *anattā* (non-self) encourages neither psychosis nor irresponsibility; in fact, it stands for the exact opposite, as is clear from Hạnh's philosophy of interbeing with its radical emphasis on a worldcentric ethic, which is foundational for Engaged Buddhism as liberation praxis. Thầy's words encourage us to see how profoundly interconnected we are with all sentient beings and everything else, which is a much needed practical philosophy in times like these when we are faced with ecological disasters, such as climate breakdown and environmental racism.

Keywords: Engaged Buddhism, critical psychology, praxis, interbeing, Thích Nhất Hạnh, self, mindfulness

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I have written elsewhere about Engaged Buddhism, as a theoretical resource for critical psychology, whether in terms of regulating negative emotions (Beshara, 2015), psychologically constructing reality (Beshara, 2016), or thinking about morality - as opposed to values and ethics - in critical psychological research (Beshara, 2017). A few other scholars have also considered the relationship between Buddhism and critical psychology (Chakkarath, 2014; Cohen, 2010; Stanley, 2012; Vithanapathirana, 2013), but in general it is an under-explored research area.

Stanely (2013), for example, has written about mindfulness as a groundless ground for critical (discursive) psychology, that is, he is interested in building “a psychology without foundations” (p. 61). I define psychology, from a critical perspective, as *the discourse of psyche* (Beshara, 2019), which is in contrast to the mainstream understanding of psychology as *the science of psyche* qua behavior, cognition, or brain. Consequently, Buddhist psychology - as explicated in the *abhidharma* (meta-teaching) - provides us with a theoretically sophisticated discourse of psyche, which is akin to the psychoanalytic account of the subject, wherein the ego is decentered. This decentering of the ego opens up the possibility for a Buddhist-informed relational ontology, or unconscious, as a groundless grounding of critical psychology not only as a scholarly field, but also, and more significantly, as a liberation praxis.

It is true that mindfulness has been for quite some time, and continues to be, a buzzword, which speaks to the exoticization of Buddhism in Euro-America; therefore, I share the skeptics’ (e.g., Friedman, 2016) concern regarding the omnipresence of the mindfulness discourse, which is promoted as a panacea, particularly in the Global North. This shallow, and capitalistic, approach to mindfulness - what Purser (2019) calls “McMindfulness” - appropriates an ancient meditation practice and removes it from the long history and ongoing context of Buddhist praxis in the Global South. McMindfulness is marketed to spiritual materialists as an affordable, and guaranteed-to-work, self-help product - and it is now even included in the training of soldiers, most prominently in the United States.

Instead, I view Buddhist psychology as a critical psychology and Engaged Buddhism as a radical praxis from the Global South, which does not mean that all Buddhist theories and/or practices are automatically, or inherently, liberating. For example, one must not ignore the right-wing politicization of Buddhism for the building of a fascist project, such as by the 969 Movement in Myanmar under the leadership of Ashin Wirathu.

Furthermore, I regard meditation as a radical qualitative research method (Beshara, 2017) - not be confused with Wilhelm Wundt's introspective method, which has been dismissed in the history of psychology in favor of the experimental approach. Along this line, Wallace (2009) makes a compelling argument for Buddhism as a contemplative science, which posits a third position beyond the methodological debates in European philosophy of science regarding empiricism versus rationalism or naturalism versus humanism.

The current debate winner, and recipient of generous research funding, is scientism. Scientism is not science, but ideology. For example, the experimental (or scientific) method is ideologically promoted as objective or infallible, but, of course, the history of psychological experiments testifies to many of them being unethical (e.g., the Little Albert experiment, the Milgram experiment, and the Stanford prison experiment). In other words, Buddhism as critical psychology stretches our understanding of the scientific by including contemplative research methods such as meditation. As such, it rejects scientism, or the ideological marriage between science and capitalism. This marriage presents us with a discourse on objectivity coupled with a fantasy about progress, which together cover up serious unethical practices of domination in the name of instrumental reason.

There is a universal appeal to Buddhism, which speaks to its continued relevance, but then we can also speak of Buddhisms or the particular adaptations of Buddhism to different cultural contexts (e.g., India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Tibet, China, Korea, Japan, Europe, USA, etc.). However, I am interested in the link between the singularity of being and pluriversal truths, that is, bypassing cultural particularities for the sake of international solidarity.

Furthermore, following Morton (2007), I consider the contemporary misreading of "western Buddhism" (e.g., Žižek, 2001) as being exclusively ideological, particularly from the perspective of continental philosophy, as a function of Hegel's original misinterpretation (e.g., equating emptiness with nothingness). Additionally, the capitalist class's misuse and abuse of Buddhist theories/practices, in the Global North, ought not to be confused with the theories/practices themselves, many of which are more than 2,500 years old. In other words, they predate the racial capitalist world-system. In this context, particularly given the Chinese occupation of Tibet, it is worth noting the Dalai Lama's tongue-in-cheek remark in 2011: "I consider myself a Marxist...but not a Leninist." He then added, "We must have a human approach. As far as socioeconomic theory, I am Marxist." This remark, which is clearly aimed at the Chinese Communist Party, speaks to the anti-capitalist potential of Buddhism as a Global Southern liberal praxis and, therefore, enacts a dual critique of the capitalist commodification of Buddhism in Euro-America (i.e., McMindfulness) and the authoritarian socialist rejection of Buddhism in China as a thing of the past. The dialectical move is sublating Buddhism, that is, affirming what is liberating in the praxis and cancelling what is not.

Engaged Buddhism (King, 2009; Queen, 2000), which grew out of the context of the anti-American/Vietnam war protests and the civil rights movement, is inherently political because it is socially engaged with the ongoing reality of oppression. From

the perspective of Engaged Buddhist praxis, systemic injustices (e.g., environmental racism) are *duḥkha* (suffering or unsatisfactoriness) and they not only impact the world, they also affect *sanghas* (Buddhist communities), which drove williams, Owens, and Syedullah (2016) - as racialized Buddhist practitioners - to co-author the influential book *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation*.

Throughout this paper, I am concerned less with Buddhism as a religion, and more with Engaged Buddhism as both a critical psychology and a secular (but radical) praxis of liberation (cf. Batchelor, 2017). However, I must confess that the secular-religious binary, which I implicitly invoke here, should not be taken for granted since definitions of the secular and the religious are never neutral, but are rather heavily contested (cf. Asad, 2003; Berger, 1999; Helderman, 2019; Jackson & Makransky, 2000; Josephson-Storm, 2017; King, 2001; McMahan, 2008). Therefore, my use of the term 'radical' is meant to signify a materialist critique of secularist ideology, or how secularism (like scientism) often colludes with global racial capitalism. In other words, my invocation of the secular *qua* radical is meant to evoke Edward Said's (1983) notion of "secular criticism" and Mourad Wahba's (2022) argument for secularization as a process. To put it differently, to say that Engaged Buddhist praxis is secular signifies that it is worldly, or "a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which [it is] located and interpreted" (Said, 1983, p. 4). To qualify this praxis as radical suggests that it is both anticapitalist and antiracist since it enacts a materialist critique of the global ideology of racial capitalism.

This essay is divided into three sections: in the first section, I begin with a personal/political reflection on practicing in the Plum Village tradition; in the second section, I unpack the Buddhist critical psychological perspective on the self, which essentially deconstructs the psyche (i.e., pulling the psychic rug from underneath psychology's feet); finally, in the third section, I closely read a quote from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche in order to think with him about the mind's true nature, therefore, I end by emphasizing the psyche's ontological emptiness (or interbeing), which aligns with the psychoanalytic view of the unconscious as the psychosocial link between the subject and the Other.

Personal/Political Reflection: Practicing in the Plum Village Tradition

I have been studying Buddhism for years, and my experience has consistently ranged from confusion to bliss because I did not know how to make sense of all the different teachings of, and contradictory interpretations within, Buddhism. For many years, I was not sure which path was for me as I continued to look for a teacher.

I was drawn to Buddhism after learning about Hinduism through yoga when I was in high school back in the year 2000. You can imagine the strange situation I was in: living in Egypt - a Muslim-majority country - and growing up as a secular Catholic (albeit ethnically Coptic); I am lucky though that my parents are, for the most part, freethinkers. Nevertheless, they were disturbed when I told them that I wanted to

take refuge in the Three Jewels, eventually they learned to accept and respect my choice. After years of practicing meditation in several traditions (e.g., TM, Sri Chinmoy, and Zen), I came across the teachings of Thích Nhất Hạnh in 2011 by stumbling across his wonderful book, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, which I remember stood out to me in a very vivid way at Seminary Co-op Bookstore in Hyde Park (Chicago, IL). It literally jumped out of the bookshelf at me.

In 2012, I contacted the administrators of the Order of Interbeing website and they directed me to contact Al Lingo, whom I did reach out to and, ever since, he has been my dharma teacher. I remember the monastics telling me that I was fortunate to be living in Georgia near such a venerable dharma teacher, who I later learned was actively engaged in the civil rights movement and worked directly with Martin Luther King Jr. Incidentally, Al, along with Thầy, consider MLK Jr. to be a *bodhisattva*. From the perspective of Engaged Buddhism, social justice warriors are *bodhisattvas*.

In the fall of 2013, I was privileged to receive the Five Mindfulness Trainings (or Precepts) from Thầy during a wonderful ceremony on my five-day retreat at Magnolia Grove Monastery in Batesville, MS. Now, my dharma name is Embodied Practice of the Heart. I share this story to express my appreciation of the moral law of karma in the context of dependent origination. I am very grateful for having practiced in the Plum Village tradition and for continuing to be in dialogue with my dharma teacher. I chose this specific path, or it chose me, for many reasons, but it has a lot to do with the fact that Thầy's teaching style is integrative and straightforward, yet sophisticated and poetic. In other words, his paradoxical teaching style embodies Thiền (Zen).

I am happy to report that I am now less confused about Buddhism, yet I do not presume, or aspire, to understand everything Buddhism-related. I recognize the diversity and the complexity of the theoretical teachings, but grounding myself in practice makes the *dharma* relatable. For instance, my understanding of *Śūnyatā* deepened when I started to think of it in terms of *Tathāgatagarbha* because initially I was more used to the developmental model of Buddhism, wherein one cultivates good karma through wholesome means. In the discovery model, however, we are already Buddhas, that is our nature, but we fail to see our Buddha-nature because layers of confusion are blinding us. The discovery model puts a spin on the traditional interpretation of bodhi (enlightenment), as a stage out there to be reached. If we already are Buddhas, and the nature of our minds is pure, then we only need to settle the mind in its natural state, which, ironically, is a difficult thing to do because of how rigidly neurotic we have become after years of cultural conditioning - a function of racial capitalist superegoic demands.

I learned that the origin of all dualisms is *manas-vijñāna*, the seventh layer of consciousness according to the Yogācāra (Mind-Only) School. In addition to the traditional six consciousnesses related to the six sense organs identified by Theravādans, the Yogācārins added two more layers of consciousness subtler than mind consciousness. The eighth, and deepest, layer of consciousness is *ālaya-vijñāna* (storehouse consciousness) and it is where all of our karmic seeds are

stored - these seeds are what get reborn depending on our karma, or how we think, speak, and act in this life. In many ways, *ālaya-vijñāna* is a proto-theorization of the unconscious and we can reframe karmic seeds as karmic signifiers through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis, particularly if we are interested in a psychosocial account of subjectivity, which is crucial in collective liberation.

The Two Truths doctrine (cf. The Cowherds, 2010) collapses ontology and epistemology because Buddhism's soteriological framework is essentially pragmatic, wherein *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* inter-are. Thầy teaches interbeing using the following metaphor: "No mud, no lotus" (Hạnh, 2014). Happiness (the lotus) is made only of non-happiness elements, such as *duḥkha* (the mud). I remember in one of Thầy's dharma talks, he claimed that even *bodhisattvas* suffer, but the difference between them and us is that they know how to suffer well.

The Buddhist path in the context of the Six *Pāramitās* - especially *prajñā* (wisdom), which informs our skillful means - is an alchemical process of sorts, this is particularly the Tantric vision of transmuting (cf. sublimating or cathecting) the energy of anything, which inherently is neither good nor bad - but simply a display of primordial awareness, one of the fundamental forces of nature not addressed by most physicists. The reason for the exclusion of consciousness in the natural sciences is partly a question of methodology; contemplative scientists (e.g., Buddhist adepts) use meditation as a radical qualitative research method (Beshara, 2017) to investigate the nature of the mind and reality in an introspective, yet rigorous manner. Speaking of which, I have personally benefited a great deal from learning about the differences between *śamatha*, *vipaśyanā*, and other meditative practices.

Mindfulness is based on *vipaśyanā*, which is the practice of non-judgmentally watching our thoughts come and go. The point of the practice is to realize that we are not our thoughts, or to disidentify from them, which is the opposite of Descartes's famous equation (i.e., thinking = being). In this sense, Buddhism is theoretically more aligned with psychoanalysis than it is with either philosophy or psychology. In fact, Thầy often says: "I think; therefore, I am not" and, strangely, Lacan has also uttered the same exact words (as cited in Bailly, 2009, p. 75). In Buddhist psychology, identifying with our thoughts is seen as an Imaginary process of ego solidification. In psychoanalysis, our unconscious thinking is a function of the Other's discourse. Whereas the theoretico-practical link between engaged Buddhism and critical psychology is under-explored, the literature on the relationship between Buddhism and psychoanalysis is fecund (Moncayo, 2012; Fromm, 1960/2013; Safran, 2003).

Although, I am skeptical of devotional practices due to my mistrust of the Abrahamic faiths, I recognize the Buddhist logic behind the use of devotion. For instance, today in the Global North there is a cultish worship of celebrities and a religious obsession with money, so why (Buddhists would ask) not direct our energies toward a symbol that represents our perfect nature instead? I remember coming across a talk years ago on how Buddhists are not idol but *ideal* worshippers. Nevertheless, my commitment is to Engaged Buddhism as both a critical psychology (or discourse of psyche) and a secular (but radical) praxis of liberation.

Mindfulness allows us to witness our excessive discursivity, which Buddhists call Monkey Mind. Developing our skill of discursive awareness through meditation - a skill that was not available to introspectionists in the early history of psychology and, hence, why their methodology was swiftly dismissed - can afford us an encounter with the unconscious, which can be liberating since it involves a recognition of the split between unconscious thinking and false being. Buddhist meditation essentially entails resting in this very split, or gap, between thinking and being. In other words, Buddhism provides us with the tools for developing an awareness of both the ego and the unconscious; as such, it can complement psychoanalysis.

Bodhicitta, which Hạnh (1998) translates as "the mind of love" and which Welwood (2000) interprets as "the heart of awakening" is something that I ethically care about. In fact, my first peer-reviewed article is on the importance of being centered in our heart consciousness (Beshara, 2013), which can be qualified with terms like empathy (feeling into) and compassion (suffering with). Grounding critical psychology in a relational ontology makes sense given the field's commitment to socio-environmental justice and politico-economic liberation.

Welwood's (2000) descriptions of the three elements of mind, i.e., "movement, stillness, and awareness" (p. 50) and their inter-play, shed light on the dynamics of the *mindstream*. He further unpacks the mindstream when addressing the alchemical Mahāmudrā/Dzogchen tradition:

> "The ultimate practice here is learning to remain fully present and awake in the middle of whatever thoughts, feelings, perceptions, or sensations are occurring and to appreciate them … as *dharmakaya* - as an ornamental display of the empty, luminous essence of awareness." (p. 123, emphasis in original)

To add to what I wrote earlier about how *bodhisattvas* know how to suffer well, I find the following insight about depression qua *duḥkha* from Welwood (2000) to be quite enlightening: "in sadness there is a fullness of heart, a fullness of feeling in response to being touched by the sweet, transitory, ungraspable quality of human existence" (p. 177). He seems to be describing compassion, which literally means co-suffering. Again, it is vital for critical psychologists in general, and psychoanalysts in particular, to know how to suffer well since they are tasked with the ethical responsibility of reducing psychic distress in the world, whether they do this through pedagogy, research, activism, or clinical practice.

Chögyam Trungpa (1973) makes a similar point regarding using our suffering as a resource by stating, in a counterintuitive manner, that disappointment "is a good sign of basic intelligence" and "the best chariot to use on the path of the dharma" (p. 25). Later in *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, he claims, "Sudden enlightenment comes only with exhaustion … One must make the journey because … at the point where you begin to be disappointed you get it" (p. 203). As critical psychologists, particularly clinicians, we work with mud (psychosocial distress under racial capitalism) and we plant critical (anticapitalist and antiracist) seeds through our

collective liberation praxis in an effort to see the sprouting of beautiful lotuses (just and egalitarian societies). What is interbeing but another term for solidarity?

Trungpa (1973), in his predictably unconventional way, equates the *trikāya* (or bodies of the Buddha) with the three basic principles of being. To him, *Śūnyatā* is *dharmakāya*, energy is *saṃbhogakāya*, and the quality of manifestation is *nirmanakaya* (p. 231). Traditionally, *dharmakāya* is understood as the teachings of the Buddha on the nature of reality, *saṃbhogakāya* as the grounding practices, and *nirmāṇakāya* as the physical body of the historical Buddha (Hạnh, 1998, p. 156). The key feature in both interpretations is that the Buddha is alive and well through the Three Jewels of *dharma* (teachings), *sangha* (community), and Buddha - the latter signifying our true nature.

Hạnh (1988/2009) writes: “perfect Nirvāṇa is the state of non-fear” (p. 40). It comes under a chapter titled “Freedom” in his commentary on the *Heart Sūtra*. Whereas fear is a product of ignorance, confusion, and dualism; love is the freedom from fear (Krishnamurti, as cited in White, 1995). To experience fear, there must be a subject who is afraid and an object that is feared. Hạnh (1988/2009) presents us with a radical vision of fearlessness in the post-9/11 era, wherein terrorism is a politically charged word that has an affective (and ideological) grip on us, and for this very reason, I think we must seriously consider his liberatory alternative to our oppressive cultural habits. In other words, conservative fears are often reactionary (e.g., hate speech/crimes) and radical love can be revolutionary (e.g., solidarity). Earlier in the book, Thầy writes, “If you look at anything carefully and deeply enough, you discover the mystery of interbeing, and once you have seen it you will no longer be subject to fear” (Hạnh, 1988/2009, p. 25), which I interpret to mean that because we are empty (or inter-are), we should not fear birth, death, ourselves, and/or others.

Of course, we have evolved to experience fear because it has survival value and that is a natural and useful aspect of our being biological animals, but many of the ways we experience fear today has less today with survival and a lot more to do with cultural neurosis, something that Engaged Buddhist praxis is well equipped to address since it links personal transformation with social change. If Engaged Buddhism as critical psychology can contribute an insight into the discourse of psyche then it is that we are neither biological nor cultural beings, for we are empty, that is, we inter-are unconsciously as psychosocial subjects, that is, as subjects linked to the Other.

Deconstructing The Self, or Pulling The Psychic Rug from Underneath Psychology’s Feet

The concept of self is one of the core theoretical concerns in psychology, but the question has troubled European philosophers since ancient Greek times as epitomized in the Delphic axiom: *know thyself*. Psychology, which is concerned with theorizing subjectivity, literally means *the study of psyche*. There are so many terms, however, that have come to be associated, or conflated, with psyche, such as: soul,

spirit, mind, person, individual, self, and ego, to name but a few. This multitude of meanings speaks to the complexity and elusiveness of self as a sign.

In my readings of English-translated Buddhist *sūtras* (texts; literally, threads), I have noticed that these terms and others often get used interchangeably, which can be confusing, but perhaps this bewilderment is a function of the dualistic nature of language. In contrast to the European philosophical tradition with its strong emphasis on signs (i.e., signifiers/signifieds), the common goal in the three major Buddhist traditions of Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna seems to be getting practitioners away from the reification of concepts and the limitation of language via grounded practices (e.g., meditation) that eventually can allow the practitioner to experience Ultimate Reality, which is both nonconceptual and translinguistic because it is nondual.

According to Buddhist teachings, there is no self, but this is expressed in different ways depending on the level of analysis. For instance, Rahula (1959/1974) argues - from the Theravāda perspective - against the notion of "an abiding, immortal substance in man or outside, whether it is called Ātman, 'I', Soul, Self, or Ego" (p. 55) using the doctrines of *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination), the Five *Skandhas* (aggregates), and *anattā* (nonself) to support his position. In other words, the self should be understood simply as a label, which is functionally practical on a relative level, but in the end it refers to the fluctuating system of psychophysical processes known as the Five *Skandhas* (i.e., form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness). It is worth noting here, as Rahula (1959/1974) points out, that the Buddha rejected both misinterpretations of the doctrine of *anattā*: namely, the eternalist and annihilationist theories (p. 62) - for a survey of the scholarly debates on *anattā* from a Theravāda perspective see Collins (1990).

The teachings of Vietnamese Zen master, Thích Nhất Hạnh or Thầy (teacher), are an amalgamation of the wisdoms of both the Theravāda tradition and the Madhyamaka (Middle Way) School of Mahāyāna Buddhism, which was founded by Nāgārjuna and which emphasizes the principle of *Śūnyatā* (emptiness) - a principle eloquently immortalized in the *Heart Sūtra*. From the Mahāyāna perspective, the self "is made only of non-self elements" (Hạnh, 1998, p. 126) because we inter-are. The non-self elements include not only the Five *Skandhas*, but also everything in the universe from the Big Bang onwards; after all, "we are made of starstuff" to use Carl Sagan's (1980) words. The doctrine of *anattā* encourages neither psychosis nor irresponsibility; in fact, it stands for the exact opposite, as is clear from Hạnh's (1998) philosophy of interbeing with its radical emphasis on a worldcentric ethic:

> "We get caught in the sign 'self,' because we think there are things that are not self. But when we look deeply, we see that there is no separate, independent self, and we become free of the sign of self. We see that to protect ourselves, we have to protect everything that is not ourselves." (p. 151)

These words encourage us to see how profoundly interconnected we are with all sentient beings and everything else, which is a much-needed practical philosophy in

times like these when we are faced with ecological disasters, such as climate breakdown and environmental racism. Also, Thầy reads 'self' as a sign, which confirms my thesis about Buddhist (critical) psychology as the discourse of psyche.

In the context of the Three Dharma Seals, Hạnh (1998) maintains, "From the point of view of time, we say 'impermanence,' and from the point of view of space, we say 'nonself.' Things cannot remain themselves for two consecutive moments, therefore, there is nothing that can be called permanent 'self'" (p. 132). From the Theravāda perspective, we learned about the doctrine of *anattā*, but our understanding of nonself can deepen with the principle of *Śūnyatā* from the Mahāyāna perspective. There is no self because the self is empty, which is to say, "it is empty of a separate, independent existence [or that it is] full of everything" (Hạnh, 1988/2009, p. 7). It is a common mistake among European philosophers to misinterpret the principle of *Śūnyatā* as a nihilistic nothingness, but that is far from the truth, as I will show later.

From the Vajrayāna perspective, Trungpa (1973) proposes that the "hard way" (p. 77) - one of two ways on the true spiritual path - involves a process of dismantling, undoing, opening, and giving up "the basic structure of … ego we have managed to create" (p. 81), which sounds like a spiritual emergency/emergence (Grof & Grof, 1989). The hard way entails a painful deconstruction of the self, which is understood to be false because of how fixed and reified it has become as a result of our karmic conditioning. Whether we use the hard way or the open way, the goal is emptiness, which in the Tibetan tradition takes the form of *Tathāgatagarbha* (Buddha-nature). This is Trungpa's (1973) description of the twofold process of undoing the ego: "We start by dealing with neurotic thoughts and emotions. Then false concepts are removed through the understanding of emptiness, of openness" (p. 197). From this perspective, Buddha-nature is our essential nature, and everything else is an illusion. The true spiritual path then involves cutting through this illusion (i.e., spiritual materialism) that is caused by our ignorance or confusion, so that we can directly experience the mind's true nature.

Anne Carolyn Klein (1995/2008) uniquely blends feminism with Buddhism to reconcile both essentialist and postmodernist theories of the self. Her thesis is that "mindfulness simultaneously demonstrates the self's constructedness and its identity … Because mindfulness allows one to become centered in one's changing self, it is both a physical and mental grounding, and this grounding is the beginning of constructive personal strength" (p. 82). With great success, Klein is able to cut through a number of false dualisms (e.g., mind-body, subject-object, and self-other) using not only post-structuralist theories but also Buddhist practices, which aim to ground our experience in "the nonconceptual, the unconditioned, and the primordially pure and empty" (p. 200). In brief, Klein is proposing that we marry the developmental and discovery models in Buddhism. Whereas the developmental model presupposes that a practitioner may reach enlightenment only after going through a certain number of psychospiritual stages, the discovery model posits that we are already enlightened beings but we just do not know it yet. By cultivating mindfulness through meditative practices, we can gradually recognize our Buddha-nature, which is an embodiment of primordial awareness.

It is key to stress here that while interbeing is nondual it does not signify psychotic oneness; this dialectical paradox is succinctly captured in the following Zen proverb: “not one, not two.” Interbeing points to the complex reality of interdependence, or the fact that the psyche does not, and cannot, exist in a vacuum. In other words, psyche is psychosocial; therefore, the discourse of psyche is a psychosocial discourse. One of the fundamental differences between critical psychology and mainstream psychology is the latter’s obsession with the experimental method as the way to truth. This explanatory approach, which assumes linear causality, is premised on the laboratory setting functioning as an artificial, or acontextual, vacuum (since ‘variables’ are isolated and controlled) that removes research participants from their social environment.

The Mind’s True Nature: The Psyche’s Ontological Emptiness

In the previous section, I unpacked how the self is deconstructed from the perspective of Buddhist psychology, and how this deconstruction aligns with the project of critical psychology since one of the central objects in mainstream psychology is the psyche, which is often reified and reduced to the level of behavior, cognition, or brain. Mainstream psychology’s reification of the psyche is not an accident, for the ideological reduction of the psyche to the individual (as opposed to the psychosocial subject) mirrors the machinations of racial capitalism: first, the psyche must be commodified, or rendered as an object or a thing in order to be studied scientifically; second, the psyche must be alienated, or rendered as a separate individual in a laboratory outside social contexts; and, third, the psyche must be exploited, or rendered ‘normal’ through misdiagnosis and overmedication. The racial capitalist system demands ‘normal’ exploitable workers, but never considers itself as the cause of their psychosocial distress, hence, why ‘disorders’ must be reduced to the level of the ‘mental.’ By underlining the psyche’s ontological emptiness (or interbeing), we open up the possibility for complex psychosocial subjectivity.

In this section, I continue the work of deconstructing the self, but I will delve deeper into the psyche’s ontological emptiness through a close reading of a quote by Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche (DKR) as cited in Ray (2004):

> “All phenomena of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa arise like a rainbow, and like a rainbow they are devoid of any tangible existence. Once you have recognized the true nature of reality, which is empty and at the same time appears as the phenomenal world, your mind will cease to be under the power of delusion. If you know how to leave your thoughts free to dissolve by themselves as they arise, they will cross your mind as a bird crosses the sky - without leaving a trace.”
>
> “Maintain that state of simplicity. If you encounter happiness, success, prosperity or other favorable conditions, consider them

> as dreams and illusion, and do not get attached to them. If you are stricken by illness, calumny, deprivation or other physical and mental trials, do not let yourself get discouraged, but rekindle your compassion and generate the wish that through your suffering all beings' sufferings may be exhausted. Whatever circumstances arise, do not plunge into either elation or misery, but stay free and comfortable, in unshakable serenity." (pp. 221-222)

First of all, it is important to learn a little about DKR before analyzing his words, so we can establish a context for the aforementioned passage. In a few words, he was a spiritual teacher from the Nyingma lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. But as is clear from reading his short biography, many things to different people he was; for instance, he is described as a scholar, a sage, and a poet (Shechen, n.d.). Having established some background, we can now begin our examination, which will vary perspectivally depending on which lens we use - the three possible levels of analysis being the major Buddhist traditions of Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna.

"All phenomena of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa arise like a rainbow, and like a rainbow they are devoid of any tangible existence. Once you have recognized the true nature of reality, which is empty and at the same time appears as the phenomenal world, your mind will cease to be under the power of delusion." Trying to understand the simile in the first sentence from the Theravāda perspective can be confusing because, in that tradition, there is a dualistic understanding of the relationship between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, which is cut through in different ways from both the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna perspectives. This is not a sectarian statement, for I have learned equally from the three traditions.

A rainbow, as a psychological phenomenon, is an optical illusion because it does not, physically or objectively, exist in reality separate from subjective observers; in fact, a rainbow only appears to us in our perception when all the conditions necessary for its manifestation are present. DKR radically argues that the workings and nature of all phenomena, pertaining to both relative and absolute truths, are illusory like a rainbow; in other words, he does not privilege *nirvāṇa* over *saṃsāra*, as is done in the Theravāda tradition, at least on a phenomenal level - however, for a nonsectarian survey of *nirvāṇa* from the perspective of Theravāda see Collins (2010). The reasoning behind his nondiscrimination is that the *noumenon* (i.e., primordial awareness), at the foundation of both *nirvāṇic* and *saṃsāric* phenomena, is nondual, nonconceptual, and translinguistic; hence, it is beyond categories, concepts, and labels. This *noumenon* is indescribable, yet it is knowable and can be directly experienced or recognized through meditative practices (Welwood, 2000, p. 63).

In the Theravāda worldview, *nirvāṇa* is equated with the Third Noble Truth, the cessation of *duḥkha* (suffering or unsatisfactoriness), and it is generally expressed in negative terms to avoid any confusion since positive explanations can be totalizing (Rahula, 1959/1974, pp. 35-36). The Theravādan conception of *nirvāṇa* is very much informed by the Fourth Noble Truth of the Noble Eightfold Path, which itself has to do with the teleology of becoming personally enlightened as an *arahant* to escape the

cycle of rebirth (*saṃsāra*). According to this view, there is nothing beyond *nirvāṇa*, or to put it in the Buddha's words (as cited in Rahula, 1959/1974): "One lives the holy life with Nirvāṇa as its final plunge (into the Absolute Truth), as its goal, as its ultimate end" (p. 41). This somewhat linear (or developmental) rendering of *nirvāṇa* seems to contradict the more nonlinear or cyclical logic, which one associates with later Buddhist philosophy (e.g., the Madhyamaka School of Mahāyāna Buddhism). And the cause for this inconsistency is twofold: the Theravādan explication is from a relative level, which results in a dualistic reading of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* as categorically separate realms that do not interact. Also, the Theravādan approach follows a developmental as opposed to a discovery model (Klein, 1995/2008, p. 4), as demonstrated here by Rahula's (1959/1974) words:

> "Nirvāṇa is neither cause nor effect. It is beyond causes and effect. Truth is not a result nor an effect. […] TRUTH IS. Nirvāṇa is. The only thing you can do is to see it, to realize it. There is a path leading to the realization of Nirvāṇa." (p. 40)

The Mahāyāna perspective, particularly Nāgārjuna's Middle Way School, differs considerably from the previous standpoint. To begin with, there is a retreat from the principle of personal enlightenment, as typified by the *arahant*, and a move towards the *bodhisattva* ideal. Whereas, in the Theravāda tradition, the *arahant* escapes the cycle of rebirth and disappears after death; in the Mahāyāna tradition, the *bodhisattva* is awakened, yet, out of compassion, chooses to be endlessly reborn in order to help liberate all sentient beings. For this reason, *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are not considered to be two separate realms since they "inter-are" (Hạnh, 1988/2009, p. 3). *Saṃsāra* would be meaningless without *nirvāṇa* and vice versa, and that is why they are both empty, that is, "empty of a separate, independent existence" (Hạnh, 1988/2009, p. 7). To say that *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* inter-are means they are neither similar nor separate, for both are manifestations of emptiness (*Śūnyatā*) on relative and absolute levels - a teaching embodied in the *Prajñāpāramitā Heart Sūtra*. Interbeing, as a relational ontology, is the groundless ground of critical (discursive) psychology.

Further, in the Mahāyāna tradition there is a move away from the relative ethical guidelines of the Noble Eightfold Path of Right View, Right Thinking, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Diligence, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration (Hạnh, 1998, p. 49) and toward the absolute practices of the Six *Pāramitās* (Perfections) of giving, mindfulness trainings, inclusiveness, diligence, meditation, and understanding (Hạnh, 1998, p. 193) - a move beyond the false dualism of right and wrong, "for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" (Shakespeare, 1603/2006). In this context, the reader is encouraged to fetch my essay on "the moral law of karma" (Beshara, 2017) as a transmodern framework for doing critical psychological research.

From the perspective of the Mahāyāna tradition, we were able to cut through the dualistic/relative reading of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* espoused by Theravādans using a nondual/absolute reading informed by the concepts/practices of emptiness and the bodhisattva ideal. But without considering the Vajrayāna perspective, one can

mistake - and many philosophers have mistaken - *Śūnyatā* to mean nothingness, in the nihilistic sense, when emptiness actually signifies fullness.

With the third turning of the wheel of Dharma, we switch from a developmental model of enlightenment to a discovery model of Buddhahood. The discovery model holds that we do not need to cultivate wholesome qualities to become enlightened because we already are Buddhas, we just do not know it yet because layers of confusion, caused by many years of karmic conditioning, are masking our true nature.

In his teaching on the *Tathāgatagarbha*, Trungpa (1973) alternatively defines this essential quality as "basic intelligence" or "Buddha-nature" (p. 47). Then he later adds, "'Tathagatha' means 'those who have experienced the *tathata*,' which is, 'as it is' [a.k.a. suchness]" (pp. 169-170, emphasis in original). Klein (1995/2009, p. 156) - emphasizing the feminist dimension of this ontological ground - translates *Tathāgatagarbha* as "Buddha-womb" or "Buddha-embryo." De Wit (2001, p. 35) secularizes the term by calling it "fundamental humanity" or "humaneness." Whatever label we use, *Tathāgatagarbha* signifies our true nature, which can be understood as the mind's true nature or the nature of reality, since at this level of analysis we are cutting through the subject-object dualism that has been plaguing European philosophy (and, consequently, psychology) for millennia.

Buddha-nature is the embodiment of "primordial consciousness" (Wallace, 2006, p. 144), and, as a concept, it helps us to see the positive qualities inherent in the emptiness of all things. Welwood (2000) describes Buddha-nature as "the groundless ground of being" (p. 57) and as "an essential clarity, transparency, and warmth intrinsic to human consciousness" (p. 157). He later on equates our essential nature with *bodhicitta* (the heart-mind of enlightenment) and describes it as "unconditionally open, compassionate, and wholesome" (p. 165). Another parallel to draw is between Buddha-nature and *dharmakaya*, which means the "ornamental display of the empty, *luminous* essence of awareness" (Welwood, 2000, p. 123, my emphasis). All of this is meant to show that emptiness is far more than mere nothingness.

But if this is not enough, I must add that *Śūnyatā* refers to "the absence of duality and conceptualization" (Trungpa, 1973, p. 187), which means the absence of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* as signifiers as well as the absence of all associated signifieds since the whole process of *différance* is infinite à la Derridean deconstruction. Trungpa (1973) refutes nihilism using Nāgārjuna's principle of "non-dwelling" (p. 195), which is supposed to help us avoid reifying any concept including emptiness and, even, non-dwelling; after all, we have learned from the *Heart Sūtra*, that "form is emptiness and emptiness is form" (Hạnh, 1988/2009, p. 1). The *Heart Sūtra*'s emphasis on form qua emptiness resonates with critical psychology's discursive, psychoanalytic, and psychosocial approaches to reading the form of subjectivity vis-à-vis the empty Other.

Hạnh (1988/2009) makes a compelling argument by stating, borrowing from Lavoisier, that "Nothing is created, and nothing is destroyed" (p. 20), which is

reminiscent of the first law of thermodynamics regarding the conservation of energy. In Buddhism, the moral law of karma explains the conservation of consciousness when it comes to rebirth. According to this cyclical understanding of reality, there is neither birth nor death, but only constant change: rebirth. Therefore, nihilism falls apart following this logic because something - in this case, karmic seeds - is reborn.

"If you know how to leave your thoughts free to dissolve by themselves as they arise, they will cross your mind as a bird crosses the sky - without leaving a trace." DKR seems to be describing the technique known as *settling the mind in its natural state*, which directly prepares us for *Mahāmudrā* and *Dzogchen* practices (Wallace, 2006, p. 80). Wallace (2006) writes:

> "The practice of *settling the mind in its natural state* is designed to release us from [our] habitual perturbations of consciousness, letting the mind gradually settle in its ground state. The 'natural state' of the mind, according to Buddhist contemplatives, is characterized by the three qualities of bliss, luminosity, and nonconceptuality." (p. 81, emphasis added)

The natural state of the mind is another way of saying Buddha-nature, or our embodiment of primordial awareness. In DKR's analogy, the sky represents the mind in its natural state with its vastness, clarity, stability, and vividness, while the bird crossing the sky represents a thought that arises in consciousness then dissipates. The technique of *settling the mind in its natural state* helps us concentrate on the processes of mind without getting caught up in its content. In Wallace's (2006) words, "The object of mindfulness in the practice of settling the mind in its natural state is no longer the subtle sensations of the breath at the nostrils, but the *space of the mind* and whatever events arise within that space" (p. 83, emphasis in original). To go back to the analogy, the "trace" that DKR is alluding to can be understood as a karmic trace - resulting from our thoughts. In this context, *settling the mind in its natural state* is a powerful technique that puts into motion the mind's innate ability to heal itself - purifying negative karma (Wallace, 2006, p. 91).

"Maintain that state of simplicity. If you encounter happiness, success, prosperity or other favorable conditions, consider them as dreams and illusion, and do not get attached to them." Trungpa (1973) writes the following about our basic simplicity, "The simplicity of meditation means just experiencing the ape instinct of the ego" (p. 15). The "bureaucracy of the ego", according to Trungpa (1973), involves "a very heavy, thick mask, a suit of armor", which he calls *spiritual materialism* (p. 15), and the loss of simplicity - a phenomenon that Welwood (2000) terms "spiritual bypassing" (p. 11). This false spirituality, or spiritual materialism, is contrasted with *the true spiritual path*: "The process of transforming the material of mind from expressions of ego's ambition into expressions of basic sanity and enlightenment through the practice of meditation" (Trungpa, 1973, p. 11). Trungpa (1973) is arguing that because of our spiritual materialism we have lost touch with our basic simplicity, which can be interpreted as being neurotically disconnected from, or guilty about, primordial enjoyment, a theme captured in this line, "Grown-ups always need explanations" from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's (1943/2000, p. 6) *The Little Prince*.

Trungpa (1973) is certainly speaking of child-like - and not childish - simplicity à la Shunryu Suzuki's (1970) *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. The child, a natural beginner, is already a Buddha, but through years and lifetimes - if we are to consider the twelve *nidanas* and karma-producing *kleshas* like ignorance (Ray, 2000, pp. 378-379) - of conditioning, layers of confusion end up solidifying and covering up that "original mind" (Suzuki, 1970, p. 21); a complex process that results in much suffering because of one's attachment - or *shenpa* (Chödrön, as cited in Kaza, 2005, p. 28) - to reified notions, such as the self. These reified notions are a function of psychologization and they are internalized from outside, or from the Other.

DKR is cautioning us from getting attached to favorable conditions, recommending instead that we view happiness, success, and prosperity as dreams or illusions since they are impermanent. The frame of reference for his counterintuitive advice is the twelve *nidanas*, or links in the chain of conditioned coproduction. He is pointing to the fleeting gap between *nidanas* seven and eight, between feeling and thirst; the only open space, where there is freedom of choice - if we choose to rest in this gap in the process of ego (Ray, 2000, p. 385). Ray (2000) writes that the purpose of meditation is "to enable us to take advantage of this openness in our own state of mind, to find it and rest in it" then he boldly concludes that "the entire … Buddhist path … consists of nothing more nor less than learning to rest in the gap between feeling and thirst" (p. 386).

"If you are stricken by illness, calumny, deprivation or other physical and mental trials, do not let yourself get discouraged, but rekindle your compassion and generate the wish that through your suffering all beings' sufferings may be exhausted." Here, DKR is reminding us of the *bodhisattva* ideal, which Trungpa (1973) calls the "open way" (p. 103). To Trungpa (1973), compassion - understood as "clarity which contains fundamental warmth" (p. 97) - is the key to the open way because it automatically invites us to inter-be with others in such a way that we feel recharged as opposed to drained by them (p. 99) à la Sartre's "hell is other people."

Also, DKR is hinting at the emotional equilibrium achieved in the cultivation of the four immeasurables (*brahmavihāras*) through the Mahāyāna practice of *tonglen* - literally, "giving and taking" - , which "integrates loving-kindness and compassion on a foundation of equanimity" (Wallace, 2006, p. 95) because it is a powerful tool that even *bodhisattvas* can benefit a great deal from; according to Thầy, *bodhisattvas* know how to suffer well and this paper invites critical psychologists to aspire becoming *bodhisattvas* through an application of some of the tools of Engaged Buddhism discussed here. The most practical way for us to stay free and comfortable in unshakable serenity is by using the energy of mindfulness to stop our habit energies, so we can calm our feelings - through recognition, acceptance, embracing, looking deeply, and insight - to then rest in the gap and let the mind heal itself (Hạnh, 1998, pp. 24-27). Even though this mindfulness practice involves *śamatha*, it is similar to the technique of *settling the mind in its natural state* because it also results in an experience of freedom or openness.

"Whatever circumstances arise, do not plunge into either elation or misery, but stay free and comfortable, in unshakable serenity." This sentence can be interpreted in

terms of the teachings of the Middle Way and the practice of mindfulness, which both point in the direction of stability and balance. The teachings of the Middle Way from the first turning of the wheel of dharma comes from Siddhartha Gautama's personal history and it is about avoiding the extremes of "austerity" and "indulgence in sense pleasures" (Hạnh, 1998, pp. 7-8). Later on, Hạnh (1998) writes, "It is true that the Buddha taught the truth of suffering, but he also taught the truth of 'dwelling happily in things as they are'" (p. 23), which reminds me of the Second Mindfulness Training in the Plum Village tradition: True Happiness. As a practitioner, I try to always remind myself that I have more than enough (material) conditions to be happy. Also, using the principle of *Śūnyatā*, we can see that happiness (elation) and suffering (misery) are empty because they inter-are. Not mentioning that, to rephrase Fannie Lou Hamer, *nobody is happy unless everybody is happy*, which points to the resonance between social justice and Engaged Buddhism since collective liberation and material happiness inter-are.

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