

Buddhism in the Public Sphere

Reorienting global interdependence

Peter D. Hershock



Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism

BUDDHISM IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The core teachings and practices of Buddhism are systematically directed toward developing keen and caring insight into the relational or interdependent nature of all things. This book applies Buddhist thought to reflect on the challenges to public good created by emerging social, economic, and political realities associated with increasingly complex global interdependence. In eight chapters, key arenas for public policy are addressed: the environment, health, media, trade and development, the interplay of politics and religion, international relations, terror and security, and education. Each chapter explains how a specific issue area has come to be shaped by complex interdependence and offers specific insights into directing the dynamic of this interdependence toward greater equity, sustainability, and freedom. Thereby, a sustained meditation on the meaning and means of realizing public good is put forward, emphasizing the critical role of a Buddhist conception of diversity that is relevant across the full spectrum of policy domains and that becomes increasingly forceful as concerns shift from the local to the global.

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FOR ALL PARENTS, SONS AND DAUGHTERS,
PRESENT AND FUTURE. BUT ESPECIALLY
FOR MY OWN YOUNGEST SON, KA'EO.

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	x
Introduction	1
1 Liberating environments	13
2 Health and healing: relating the personal and the public	39
3 Trade, development, and the possibility of post-market economics	59
4 Technology, media, and the colonization of consciousness	85
5 Governance cultures and countercultures: religion, politics, and public good	102
6 Diversity as commons: international relations beyond competition and cooperation	127
7 From vulnerability to virtuosity: responding to the realities of global terrorism	154
8 Educating for virtuosity	171
<i>Notes</i>	203
<i>Bibliography</i>	221
<i>Index</i>	225

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INTRODUCTION

The public sphere can no longer be understood or responded to skillfully as a domain in which essentially independent actors engage one another in pursuit of their individual and common interests. Neither can the public sphere be understood as a uniform or neutral space of engagement from which we can effectively retreat as needed or desired. If such a public sphere ever actually existed, global historical processes have dissolved its boundaries and, it would seem, irreversibly altered its complexion.

The public sphere is now a realm of complexly dynamic interdependence. It is an uneven space—a space curved in ways that at once shape and are shaped by global currents of every imaginable type of material good, service, information, and knowledge, but also increasingly powerful flows of attention and markedly differing senses of “the good.” In ways celebrated by some and lamented by others, it is a space from which we cannot truly retreat and in which we are made aware that, beyond a certain threshold, our interdependence is also interpenetration. The dynamics of the public sphere have come to compel realizing that relationships are more basic than things related and that, at bottom, we *are* what we *mean* for one another.

This book emerged out of twin concerns. The first is that globally deepening interdependence has been meaning greater inequity and manifestly less-sustainable practices across a wide range of sectors—from the social and economic to the political and cultural—both within and among societies. The second is that our predominant means for critically engaging global interdependence seem not to be up to the task, and are actually at considerable odds with the emerging twenty-first century realities of truly complex relationality and accelerating change. In spite of many manifestly good intentions, our global interdependence has, for a great many people, been going ever more troublingly awry.

In addressing these concerns, my approach has been to clarify the values, intentions, and practices animating prevailing ways of thinking about and responding to these emergent realities, and to reflect on what it would mean to engender a value coordinating redirection of the interdependencies constitutive of both the public sphere and of our lived experiences within it. Two convictions underlie this approach. The first is that complex global interdependence is

radically pluralizing the public sphere, dramatically amplifying the importance of difference, especially differences of position or perspective. The second is that, correlated with this accentuation of difference, an epochal shift is taking place from an era in which troubling situational dynamics could, for strategic purposes, be adequately framed in terms of problem–solution to one in which they must be interpreted and responded to in terms of predicament–resolution. We are entering an era in which diversity assumes critical centrality and in which generating new means or “best practices” for arriving at abiding ends is giving way to open-ended improvisations of shared meaning and resolutely coordinative values and practices.

In approaching the public sphere with these concerns and convictions, I have drawn heavily on Buddhist conceptual resources. Buddhism is perhaps unique among world philosophical and religious traditions in having been devoted for more than 2,500 years to investigating the dynamics of interdependence and how systematically and sustainably to orient those dynamics toward the resolution of trouble or suffering. It is also distinctive in having developed and refined conceptual constellations that anticipate—and, I would argue, are capable of systematically coordinating—much of what now characterizes cutting edge discourses in the natural and human sciences, especially their emphases on indeterminacy, the ontological primacy of relationships, and the inexhaustible co-implication of facts and values. As such, Buddhism can be seen as a tradition of considerable—perhaps even increasing—contemporary relevance. That, certainly, is my own view, the merits of which I hope will become evident over the course of the chapters that follow.

But at the same time, it must be admitted that traditional Buddhist teachings do not engage precisely the kinds of issues and global dynamics that dominate contemporary discussions of the public sphere and threaten public good. There are, for example, no traditional Buddhist discourses on environmental protection, institutionalized health care, technological change, media ethics, global economics, human rights, or the privatization and commodification of education. It is not just that there are no traditional Buddhist equivalents for these terms. The scales and patterns of interdependence which now play out in and through the public sphere did not exist during 99% of Buddhist history, and are only now being critically regarded by Buddhists in both Asia and the West.

This is necessarily, then, a book of improvisations, in a Buddhist key, on issues of immediate and substantial significance. It is a sustained effort to think through a wide range of Buddhist concepts, teachings, and practices with the intent of enhancing clarity-about and commitment-to orienting our deepening interdependence more equitably and sustainably. While an accurate portrayal of the present complexion of various domains of the public sphere is necessary to ground this analytic effort, by no means is there any attempt herein to exhaustively document their dynamics. Neither is there any attempt to document the historical place of Buddhism in those domains as a religious or cultural tradition. Specialist studies of these sorts are widely available, and are important. This, however, is a work of interpretation and advocacy—one that is more intent on opening

opportunities for better appreciating (both valuing and adding value to) our shared situation, than it is on achieving any sort of critical closure.

Engaging Buddhism as countering modernity and its discontents

For the purpose of more positively characterizing the work to be undertaken over the succeeding eight chapters and the kind of openings or opportunities that they aim at improvising, I would like to spend a few moments considering at a quite general level the nature of Buddhist practice and relating it to what I have claimed is the increasing contemporary relevance of Buddhism. More so than a detailed preview of each of the individual chapters that follow, I think this will afford a synoptic view of the (perhaps oddly punctuated and recursive) course we will be taking and why it will not culminate in the delivery of any sort of overarching Buddhist narrative or “master plan” for reconfiguring contemporary public life.

It is a common view that Buddhist practice consists of retreating from the world and our customary experiences of it as dual functions of persistently errant thoughts, speech, and actions; cultivating non-attachment; and achieving inner peace and serenity. There is much in the history and current practice of Buddhism, especially in the Theravada traditions, which confirms this view and which accords well with widespread suppositions about the solitariness of spiritual endeavor and the transcendent nature of its rewards. But Buddhist practice, especially within the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions, with equivalent historical and current precedent can also be seen as endeavoring to opportunely engage our present situation, as it has come to be, relating with wisdom and compassion; skillfully bringing about liberation from the trouble and suffering for all sentient beings; and realizing, eventually, horizonless and exquisitely beautiful buddha-realms in which all things do the work of enlightenment. According to such a view, liberation need not imply a transcendence of the world, but rather an immanent transformation of it.¹

These two versions of Buddhist practice can be maintained as distinct for heuristic purposes, as a way of bringing into focus different currents within the history of Buddhism as a whole. But like in-breath and out-breath, they ultimately must be seen as resting upon, beginning, and completing one another. Playing with the metaphor, too much emphasis on one and too little on the other is liable to bring on spiritual equivalents of either hyperventilation or hyposthenia—either peculiarly inflated states of consciousness and experience or a draining away of interactive strength and resolve. Buddhist practice is, as a whole, critical of dichotomizing the “inner” and the “outer,” the “private” and the “public,” and, indeed, the “spiritual” and the “mundane.” It is an explicitly transformative endeavor that is, at the same time, resolutely non-dualist.

I have found it useful to understand Buddhism’s description of itself as a “middle way” to signify movement “perpendicular” to any spectrum of dichotomous views.² That is, taking up the Middle Way is not a matter of adopting a place

midway along the spectrum of positions that can be interpolated between any pair of dichotomous concepts, including those just mentioned and others like “being” and “non-being,” “reason” and “emotion,” and the “sacred” and the “secular.” The Buddhist Middle Way is not undertaken by identifying (and then identifying with) a purportedly compromising or reconciliatory perspective *within* a given spectrum of views, but rather by seeing the adoption of a position anywhere along the entire spectrum as conducive to continued (and likely intensifying) trouble and suffering. Buddhist practice can, in this sense, be seen as a systematic challenge to our prevailing paradigms for organizing and ordering our world and our experiences of it.

Importantly, however, Buddhist practice also does not proceed by invoking or valorizing particular positions transcendent to our world as presently organized and ordered—identifying, in essence, a goal or ideal toward which we are to work. Instead, Buddhist practice proceeds resolutely from the midst of our situation, precisely as it has come to be. It is not a process of *working toward* a given (effectively, predetermined) *destination*, but rather *working out* in a distinctively different *direction*. Buddhist practice—in any of its versions—begins in the immediate here and now and works at qualitatively transforming and reorienting the change dynamics and relational patterns playing out therein.³

Turning to Buddhism for critical resources and for insights into how best to reorient the dynamics of the public sphere does not entail turning to Buddhist practice as such. But because the concepts to which we will be appealing emerged out of Buddhist practice and came to serve as key supports for it, a similar pattern of engagement will become apparent, especially over the course of the book as a whole. For example, no particular vision of the good or any particular set of corrective societal structures and institutions will be forwarded. Considerable attention will be given to discerning and appraising contemporary patterns of change and global interdependence, and to clarifying what would be involved in transforming what they mean, but not to promoting any specific replacements for them. Engaging Buddhism will involve facing the limits of our dominant paradigms for understanding the means and meaning of change, deepening awareness that these paradigms consolidated historically in a space of opportunity that has since been rendered virtually inaccessible and almost entirely forgotten—a space in which distinctively different kinds of change and movement are possible, and in which what we presently think of as intractable is not.

To suggest a musical analogy: the purpose or function of engaging Buddhism in reflecting on the dynamics of the public sphere is not to propose an alternative repertoire, but to intimate new means and meanings of virtuosity. Our effort is not to bring about some specific turn of event(s), but rather to qualify the process of eventuation itself, changing the very way things are changing. Part of Buddhism’s present potential for enriching our evaluative engagement with the public sphere lies how late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century global realities have been destabilizing our dominant approaches to organizing, ordering, and responding to change. Like a generation of leaders gone well beyond their prime and out of step

with the world around them, the modern values and institutions that substantially determined the topography and large-scale dynamics of the public sphere over the past 500 years have become a source of liabilities and in apparent need of retirement. Particularly over the past 40 years, deep skepticism has emerged in a wide range of fields and from a wide array of perspectives about the foundational project of modernity and its core values of universalism, certainty, autonomy, and control, and its claims of global validity for such central and explicitly hierarchic oppositions as (for instance) the universal and the particular; the exception-less and the exceptional; the timeless and the timely; logic and rhetoric; literacy and orality; reason and emotion; mind and body; and the determinate and the indeterminate.⁴ Mention might be made, for example, of relativistic and quantum physics, general systems theory, ecology, and complexity theory as anti-foundationalist challenges to modernity in the natural sciences; in the human sciences, similar mention might be made of hermeneutics, deconstructionism, feminist theory, and care ethics.

These often sharp contestations of modern values and institutions collectively have come to be regarded as expressing “postmodernism” sensibilities, but the implied singularity of perspective is misleading. There has yet to emerge any globally affirmed common interests, shared methods of inquiry, or a consensually constructed ethical framework that could positively relate these paradigm-challenging perspectives. “Postmodernity” does not refer to a singular phenomenon, but to a pastiche of otherwise disparate phenomena linked by being forms of discontentment with the modern, loosely affiliating elements of the pre-history and excluded margins of modern sensibilities to mount a critique in which those sensibilities remain central. In a sense, the modern and the postmodern constitute a single family tree. Or to refer back to an earlier metaphor, they constitute a polarizing spectrum of contesting values, practices, and perspectives.

Buddhism cannot be fitted neatly onto that spectrum. Its strengths as a source of concepts suited to reorienting our global interdependence, as presently configured, derive precisely from Buddhism never having shared the terms of engagement that obtain along its length and ultimately define or constrain the meaning of criticism. Buddhism is neither a Western nor a modern tradition. Neither did it develop as a response to the West or the modern. This remains true even though both popular and scholarly interests in Buddhism have accelerated quite phenomenally over the past 50 years, and both Asian and Western convert Buddhists have actively sought to develop a teaching vernacular adapted to the complexion of the contemporary world.

Buddhism has, of course, been known in the West over virtually its entire history. One of the earliest (first century CE) traditions of sculpturally depicting the Buddha, for example, clearly incorporate classical Greek and Roman stoneworking techniques and aesthetics. And, since the sixteenth century dawning of the modern era, when Asia and its traditions began figuring centrally in the colonial and imperial imaginations of Europe, Buddhism has been known as one of the major “world religions.” But at no point was Buddhism ever wedded to the

West, tied intimately to its fortunes. Neither was Buddhism ever wedded to the emergence of modernity as a global phenomenon, even in those parts of Asia where Buddhist teachings had long been considered part of “native” tradition. There, with very few exceptions Buddhism did not partner significantly with modernization. Indeed, it largely came to be seen, if not as an impediment to modernization, then as practically irrelevant. Where Buddhism remained crucial for national identity, it did so as a heritage that needed to be conserved—a heritage perceived as at risk.

None of this is to suggest that Buddhism remained essentially unchanged over the last half millennium. On the contrary, Buddhist traditions changed, in some ways quite remarkably and with considerable responsive acuity, over this period in both Asia and in the course of its more recent transmissions into the West. But in very important ways, the genealogies of Buddhism and those of the modern, especially Western, world remained unalloyed. In my own view, this was both natural and fortunate.

Among the most apparent changes within Buddhism, especially over the past half century, have been a concerted challenging of gender biases and stereotypes; experimentation with different models of authority and lineage transmission; the adaptation and editing of ritual dimensions of practice; and a tendency toward more porous boundaries between the monastic and lay communities, with the latter often undertaking meditative discipline in a degree and with a depth of commitment that is in many ways remarkable. But no single change has been as obvious and avidly documented as the increasing stress on Buddhism’s potential for articulating and critically cultivating public good.

As with the other changes just mentioned and the many more that might be added to this short list, the impetus toward an understanding of Buddhism as infused with both resources and imperatives for socially engaged practice is not entirely new. They have not represented radical breaks with Buddhist tradition, but rather the incidence of various degrees of “sympathetic resonance” between Buddhism and its global historical context—changes that have not been from A to B, but from A to A’. In the imaginaries of both early Buddhism and the Mahayana, for instance, there are clear associations of progress on the path of Buddhist practice with manifest public good. Early Buddhist texts are lush with references to past “wheel-turning monarchies”—aesthetically rich and harmoniously flourishing polities free from all conflict and poverty—while texts associated with the later Mahayana Buddhist traditions give cosmic scope to the relational qualities associated with exemplary public good, describing “Buddha-realms” in which all things do the great work of enlightenment. Most powerfully perhaps, the Buddha is said to have described those faring well on the Middle Way as actively suffusing their entire environment with compassion, loving-kindness, equanimity, and joy in the good fortune of others—relational headings that, as in the Asokan empire in third century BCE India or in seventh to tenth century Tang China, often took on decidedly social, economic and political dimensions.

In sum, Buddhism has throughout its history been “socially engaged” and intimately attuned to what we now refer to as issues of public good. Yet, its mode of engagement and its senses of the public and of the good differ quite markedly from those characterizing modernity and its discontents. For our present purposes, this distinctive difference can be illustrated best by considering the meaning of interdependence itself.

Interdependence, karma, and inducing the unprecedented

Of the key concepts informing Buddhist practice, interdependent origination (Pali: *paṭicca-samuppāda*) has perhaps fared most favorably in being “translated” into Western (and now increasingly global) contexts. It is a concept that has significant parallels with descriptions of ecological processes that over the past 50 years have come to enjoy considerable scientific authority. As extended especially through systems and complexity theory, these ecological insights regarding interdependence have come to inform a growing array of contemporary perspectives on issues ranging from the dynamics of political and economic globalization to the means and meaning of psychotherapy. Today, the concept of interdependence informs the work of virtually all knowledge communities—from the sciences to the humanities—and has become a key feature of the global critical commons.

Traditionally, however, Buddhist teachings regarding interdependence have never been presented independently, but only as one—admittedly pivotal—element within an extended constellation of teachings and concepts. For some of these concepts and teachings, there are no close Western analogues. The classic constellation would include: the absence of fixed and essential identities (the teaching that all things are to be seen as having no-self); the dynamic or changing nature of all things (the teaching that all things are to be seen as impermanent); the troubled nature of all relational patterns (the teaching that all things are to be seen as characterized by *dukkha* or trouble or suffering); the ontological ambiguity and mutual relevance of all things (the teaching of emptiness); and karma. In Buddhist contexts, it is understood that all things should be seen as arising interdependently, but also without any fixed nature, in an ongoing fashion, with troubling liabilities in any particular situation, and in consonance with always revisable patterns among the intentions and values of all beings arising therein. Indeed, this understanding could be seen as an operational definition of the root meaning of wisdom (*prajñā*) as one of the three interlocking dimensions of Buddhist practice along with attentive virtuosity (*samādhi*) and moral clarity (*śīla*).

Within this constellation of core concepts and teachings that inform Buddhist practice, perhaps none has proved as difficult to transmit effectively into Western cultural contexts as that of karma. Yet, in terms of specifically Buddhist critical resources for framing and evaluating socially engaged strategies for responding to trouble or suffering in an increasingly complex (and not merely complicated)

world, karma is clearly paramount. At a minimum, Buddhist teachings on karma compel seeing interdependence as irreducibly meaningful. A karmic cosmos is one in which values are finally more basic than facts, and in which reality always implies responsibility. It is thus telling that although all Buddhist teachers and practically all Buddhist texts (ancient or contemporary) make some mention of karma, it has remained in relatively low (if not lowly) profile in Western settings.

This can be attributed in large part to the dynamics of accommodation between Buddhism and contemporary Western societies. There are apparent and significant conflicts between the concept of karma and certain concept constellations and values broadly characteristic of Western societies. For present purposes, the most important of these conflicts can be seen as centering on the concept of autonomous selfhood; a linear understanding of causation; and such values as objectivity, universality, predictability, precision, and control that inform the practice of science and that are more generally and popularly embodied in technological activity and in the modern critical canons by means of which strategies and actions are evaluated.

It is part of a karmic understanding of things that any intentionally undertaken activity will lead to experienced consequences, at some point, at some time. From the perspective of a scientifically realist understanding of the world, however, one can plausibly avoid experienced consequences for intentional actions—for example, the commission of a theft—by simply putting enough objective distance between the time and place of those actions and one's present location. Whereas all events occurring in a karmically configured life are in some degree meaningful, and distance signifies an alteration of relational quality, the life of a fundamentally autonomous individual will necessarily include chance occurrences, accidents, and the like because such individuals are connected to their circumstances through ostensibly only external relations and because distance signifies for them a quantitative measure of separation. In sharp contrast with Buddhist teachings on karma, for those who are committed to the ontological priority of individual existents over relationships among them, reality does not (indeed, cannot) imply responsibility. Hence the sobering claim made in 1928 by US Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis and echoed continuously to the present day, that the most basic, comprehensive and valued human right is the right to leave and be left alone.⁵

Karmically attuned Buddhists (particularly those in Asia) speak constantly and comfortably about merit-making and about the meaningful or non-random nature of all events. They assume that our life stories are significantly related and that, seen clearly, our present encounters with one another yield evidence of intersecting genealogies of values and intentions that are uniquely and importantly our own. Indeed, it is accepted that there is no full understanding of our relationships and ourselves, either as we have come to be or as we are at present becoming, without appeal to karma.

Most Western Buddhists and those others most strongly influenced by modern sensibilities are, by and large, much less comfortable with this.⁶ They might

accept the rhetorical or moral force of the teaching of karma and its associated narratives about different birth realms and life-to-life continuities, but they typically cannot see or feel the connection between offering flowers during a new or full moon ceremony and receiving a promotion at work. While they may be fascinated by coincidences and the felt significance of apparently chance encounters, they shy away from accepting that their present life circumstances are meticulously consonant with previously generated and maintained patterns among their own values and intentions, and that reshaping those circumstances is most surely and sustainably undertaken by revising those patterns rather than trying directly to effect factual change. As a result, most Western or modernized Buddhists have tended to give karma a wide berth. For many, the concept of karma has traction (if at all) only as a kind of explanatory “black box” out of which generically valid responses might be drawn for otherwise unanswerable and utterly specific questions about why things happen as they do.

While this characterization may verge on caricature, I believe that it remains the case that most Western Buddhists (and many contemporary Buddhists outside the West) do not take karma with the seriousness it deserves. This book is an attempt, among other things, to remedy this situation by insisting that we live in a karmic world in which our interdependence is irreducibly meaningful and in which responding effectively to experienced troubles or difficulties—whether in realm of the private or the public—ultimately entails recognizing their roots in competing or conflicting values, intentions and practices. Succinctly stated: seeing our world as karmic is seeing that *all experienced eventualities arise as outcomes/opportunities that are meticulously consonant with patterns of our own values–intentions–actions*. There can be no successful and sustained transformation in how we relate socially, economically, politically or culturally without a critically informed change in the order and complexion of our personal and communal values–intentions–actions. Moreover, in contrast with the world of objective, scientifically verifiable facts and events, wherein it might be intelligibly claimed that certain situations cannot be changed, in a karmically ordered world importantly and fundamentally shaped by values and intentions, no situation—regardless of appearances to the contrary—is finally intractable. A world and a life shaped by karma are continuously open to meaningful revision. Indeed, in such a world, it is the *differences* in our karma that enable us each to *make a difference*.

It is an important part of Buddhist teachings on karma that we cannot fully determine the outcomes of our actions or of successfully induced patterns of change. The meaningful interdependence and interpenetration obtaining among all things itself insures that total control cannot be guaranteed. The outcomes and opportunities arising in our situation are, in some degree, always co-created in ways that are themselves irreducibly open to negotiation. A karmic world is (in Buddhist terms) a world saturated with values and intentions that is always a work-in-progress and playing out “live”—a world in which contribution and the unprecedented are always possible.

The essays that follow are offered in the hope of making an unprecedented difference: a revision of the patterns of outcomes and opportunities that presently characterize our global interdependence. They will not offer *the* Buddhist answer to how we should approach reorienting our interdependence—a Buddhist blueprint for better conserving and equitably enhancing public good. At best, they afford a sense of one Buddhist’s responses to thinking through a representative range of issues bearing on the work involved in making such a difference. These responses are necessarily limited. But since it is these limitations that define precisely how I am different, they are also and inevitably part of the very conditions that make it possible for me to contribute anything at all.

The ninth century Chan Buddhist master, Linji described this difference-enabled contributory effort as the work of “true persons of no fixed position” who are capable of “facing the world and going crosswise.” I find this image arresting and useful. The work of those who would engage a troubling situation with the intent of inducing changes that will sustainably dissolve the conditions of trouble or suffering cannot be undertaken on the basis of any prescriptions or set perspectives. To invoke another musical analogy, those who would undertake this work must be like master improvising musicians who manage to play just those counter-rhythms and counter-melodies needed to bring about a total harmonic shift among all the musicians involved in a given session. Such virtuosos do not impose a new structure on the situation, directly determining the course of the music, effectively prescribing what others can or cannot do. Rather, they elicit new ways of hearing what is already being played, thus opening previously unsuspected opportunities for novel and yet resolutely shared contributions by all. In the words of Mazu—one of the most revered and celebrated of Linji’s predecessors in the Chan lineage—by conducting oneself in this way, is it possible to “benefit what cannot be benefited and do what cannot be done.”

This, it seems to me, is precisely the task of socially engaged Buddhists or anyone similarly intent upon revising how we relate—with one another and with our circumstances more broadly—in order to meaningfully alleviate and eventually eliminate trouble and suffering. Addressing contemporary issues by “facing the world” means fully appreciating the present situation, as it has come to be—a unique complex of outcomes and opportunities occasioned by sustained patterns of values–intentions–actions. It means keen attunement to the dramatic forces shaping both present and historical situational dynamics. “Going crosswise” means breaking sufficiently with the patterns of value–intention–action that have occasioned present realities to improvise relational changes that will resolve the suffering and trouble entailed by these realities. It is going skillfully and deeply enough against the dramatic grain of troubled and troubling situations to effectively consolidate shared commitments for actively revising what they will come to mean.

Fully appreciating our situation entails understanding it sympathetically, as a whole, and yet with a high degree of resolution or detail. At the same time, appreciation is a process of adding value—a process of enrichment by means of which we find ourselves more and more valuably situated. Appreciation, in both its

senses, is indispensable if we are to contribute sustainably to our situation in ways that truly make a difference. Truly “facing the world” implies full awareness of the currents of meaning that inform our present situation. From a Buddhist perspective, this can only be accomplished through the expression of compassion. Skillfully “going crosswise” requires the evaluative resources and creative capacity for expressing an effective counterpoint to such currents of meaning, contributing to their fruitful redirection. This, finally, requires considerable wisdom. “Facing the world, going crosswise” means demonstrating appreciative and contributory virtuosity in the opening of new and ever more liberating paths of shared meaning-making.

Mazu’s claim that our work is ultimately that of benefiting those who cannot be benefited and doing what cannot be done, calls attention to a crucial realization: the work before us cannot effectively be understood or undertaken as an objective solution to an equally objective problem. Accomplishing the “impossible” is only possible if we realize that we are implicated in what we hope to change and our relationships: we *are* what we *mean* for one another. The work before us is one of participating in the consolidation of profound resolution with respect to a shared predicament, where resolution implies both clarity and commitment. As such, it does not perform the “altruistic” function of helping others, but the more sustainable function of allowing all of us to help each other by revising our personal and communal karma. Just as the best hedge against poverty is insuring that everyone has something valuable to contribute to the lives of others, benefiting those who cannot be benefited is only possible if those who cannot be benefited are inspired and empowered to benefit others by attentively and compassionately facing the world and going resolutely crosswise.

An apologetic coda

It is one of the realities of the present infancy of Buddhist advocacy in the West that there has yet to develop generally agreeable vocabulary for carrying out the work of a consistently framed and critical Buddhist counterculture. Over the past decades, some consensus has been formed with respect to translating such key teaching terms as *śūnyatā* and *paṭicca-samuppāda*, respectively, as emptiness and interdependence. But these terms are themselves empty in essence. They are glossed differently and generate contrasting (and not invariably complementary) constellations of meaning depending on who appeals to them, in what context, and why. Moreover, there is no tight and necessary relationship between such terms and the concepts occasioned by them in the course of sustained teaching and practice. Like all other things, concepts arise relationally. They are embedded, without remainder, in histories that are both personally and culturally specific. Far from being ultimate and abiding mental or cognitive entities, concepts consist of focused distillations of sustained patterns of relationship.

When these patterns are just developing—as is presently the case where the practices distinctively associated with Buddhism in the West (and eventually,

perhaps, with fully Western Buddhisms) are only just taking coherent and sustainable shape—unavoidable variations arise in both vocabulary and rhetorical usage. For this reason, it is seemingly safest to simply transliterate relevant Buddhist terms rather than attempting their translation into English or other Western languages and conceptual complexes.⁷

In addition, however, it is a signal task of the initial phases of Buddhist advocacy to develop conceptual bridges between Buddhist source cultures and prevailing indigenous traditions. This process requires sensitively going beyond simple transliteration to find ways of undertaking Buddhist critical reflection in new discourse settings. In the essays compiled here, I work with a vocabulary that resonates with my own practice tradition and that stretches English in ways that hopefully occasion useful insight. In some cases, this involves reading English words like *diversity* in specific and restricted ways that draws out their resonance with Buddhist concepts and practices. In other cases, it involves rehabilitating no longer current meanings for common terms, drawing on their conceptual genealogies in ways that are, admittedly, idiosyncratic. I apologize in advance for any difficulties that these uncommon usages of English cause the reader.

In offering a coordinative approach to evaluating the current dynamics of the public sphere and suggesting opportunities for reorienting global interdependence, I have drawn on a wide (and perhaps eclectic) array of Buddhist teachings. This reflects my own sense of their internal relatedness and of how best to engage contemporary realities. By no means should the Buddhist approach offered here to critically engaging contemporary realities be understood as authoritative in any traditional sense. They are offered simply by one of limited wisdom striving vigilantly, with all possible attentive mastery and moral clarity, to speak not just about the Path but also from it.

LIBERATING ENVIRONMENTS

The environment is the most encompassing of the domains associated with public good, as well as the domain in which critical engagement with processes of interdependence has most explicitly been worked into the making of public policy. Perhaps more importantly, it is also the domain in which the broader public first became aware of the complex interrelatedness characterizing the public sphere as a whole and of how even relatively localized patterns of ill-directed or qualitatively degrading interdependence can have globally adverse effects.

Although awareness of the profound affect of environmental conditions and change on quality of life is as old as human history, a major turning point occurred with the publication in 1962 of Rachel Carson's, *Silent Spring*.¹ Carson brought forcefully to light the linkages between human industrial and economic activity, environmental change, human health and security, and the politics of development, revealing the environment as a public good at risk and in rapidly compounding need of protection. In the half century since her landmark book, environmental concerns—especially the dire prospects of global climate change and instability—have become central to the making of global public policy and have become among the most important and enduring drivers for social activism.

From very early in the environmental movement, activists and theorists have noted apparent resonances between concepts crucial to Buddhist practice and ecological appeals to whole systems and complex webs of interrelationship. Some have more broadly looked into Buddhist metaphysics and ethics for useful and historically deep resources for undertaking environmental advocacy. Likewise, many contemporary Buddhists—particularly in the West, but also in Asia—have, as well, come to see environmental advocacy (if not outright activism) as an important implication of foundational Buddhist teachings and practices.²

Indeed, it is not hard to derive from the recorded teachings of early Buddhism a basic and yet powerful formulation of what might be called liberation ecology. The pivotal moment in the Buddha's awakening was attaining insight into the interdependent origination and relational nature of all things. This attainment and awakening are then given explicit ethical expression in the Buddha's compassionate commitment to lifelong activity in service of liberating all sentient

beings from suffering. Like the very concrete political implications of Christian liberation theology, liberation ecology framed in Buddhist terms would seem to imply not only metaphysical insight and concern but also relentlessly attentive activism.

Because sentient beings arise through and as patterns of relationship, suffering can be understood as relational disruption or distortion—that is, as an ill-directed or errant disposition of relational patterns. And, as suggested by the frequent identification of ignorance as a key factor in the occurrence of suffering, ill-disposed patterns of relationality can invariably be traced to failing to attend fully and carefully to the patterns of interdependence obtaining among all beings. Indeed, the single most virulent cause of suffering consists of conduct undertaken on the basis of presumed independence from other beings—the presumption of an essential identity or self that is not only free *from* constitutive intimacy with all other beings but is also in some degree capable of exercising freedom *over and against* them. As succinctly stated by the Buddha, “is” and “is-not” are the “twin barbs on which all humankind is impaled.” Suffering results from a denial of our irreducibly ecological origins and flourishing, most notably when all concern centers on what “I” want, what should be “mine,” and what is good for “me.” Suffering is resolved by eliminating “I-my-me” and restoring seamless continuity among all beings, directed toward the mutual benefit and welfare of all.

It is important to note, however, that while a Buddhist liberation ecology can be constructed along the lines just sketched, the Buddhist canon does not contain any explicitly environmentalist teachings. This should not be any more surprising than that the canon does not address such crucial contemporary concerns as human rights, the proper roles of science and technology, or the equity and sustainability of global economic institutions. Such concerns could have had no real or even imagined place in the world of the fifth century BCE. Yet, one might go further still to hold that the dissolution of the supposedly independent “self” is also the dissolution of the “environment” that surrounded it. The demise of the ego as privileged subject is also the demise of the environment as alternately resistant and compliant object. From this, it could be surmised that a central aim of early Buddhist teachings and practice was arguably to overcome the very basis of making a self/environment distinction in the first place.

As generally accurate as this characterization of the environmental import of Buddhist teachings and practices might be, it is ultimately an unskillful one. Whether in the earliest strata of Buddhist traditions or in the context of later Mahayana, Theravada, and Vajrayana traditions, critical attention has always been given to carefully attending to and appropriately responding to situations in such a way as to clear them of karma conducive to further suffering or trouble. Currently prevailing conceptions of the environment and the forces assailing it are endemic to our particular place in human history. They are signal expressions of how troublingly things have come to be, precisely *as* they have come to be (*yathabhutam*). That is, these conceptions reflect a karma—a pattern of values–intentions–actions—that is in many ways uniquely symptomatic of our

own times. Addressing this pattern and skillfully orienting it away from trouble and suffering are necessarily a part of contemporary Buddhist practice.

This deceptively simple point is of considerable importance in responsibly framing Buddhist responses to the apparent need for environmental advocacy and activism. Although the Buddha did not deliver any discourses on environmental concerns as such and did not undertake explicitly addressing the issues, for example, of conservation and sustainability that drive much of contemporary environmental discourse, contemporary Buddhists are in a position of having to address precisely such concerns and issues. That is, they must address the karma of contemporary societies and the particular predicaments associated with it. And because these predicaments are not only unique—a function of hitherto unrealized scales of human activity and impact—but also matters of apparently unprecedented urgency, there is no alternative to improvising appropriate responses to them. At the same time, as Buddhist responses, they must not only be practically effective, but they must also accord with prospects for universal awakening. They must solve factual problems associated with environmental degradation; but they must also resolve conflicts about the meaning of our present situation and contribute to directing it, in whole and in part, toward liberation.

As a contribution to improvising appropriate responses to our environmental predicaments, let us look briefly at the scope of the challenge as suggested by different strands of Buddhist tradition and then follow through on their shared implications regarding the roles of creativity and beauty as pivotal values in altering our environmental karma.³

Three strands of Buddhist tradition on matters “environmental”

In the early Buddhist tradition, especially in the discourses and the body of literature known as the *Abhidharma*, there is an emphasis on analyzing customary experience to reveal underlying—as well as overarching—patterns of interdependence. Well-suited to oral recitation, many of the teachings are accordingly structured around numerical lists of elements, factors, domains, or stages. Arguably strategic in nature, they are not the attempts (in the parlance of contemporary philosophy of science) to “cut the world at its joints” but rather to sketch out systematic procedures for breaking down both individual and cultural assumptions about the reality of existence or independent self-identity. Still, there is much to be learned from these analytic formulations about early Buddhist concerns and consensus regarding our nature as embodied and environmentally situated beings.

One such formulation—the schema of the 18 *dhatu*—is of particular relevance in framing a Buddhist conception of the environment. This schema appears in discussions of the complex nature of consciousness and its interdependent origination through contact among sense organs and appropriate sensed objects. The 18 *dhatu* consist of the 6 consciousnesses recognized in early Buddhism, the 6 recognized sense organs, and their related sensory fields. Visual consciousness

arises with the contact or meeting of eye and sight-objects, auditory consciousness arises with the contact or meeting of ear and sound-objects, and so on through olfactory, tactile, gustatory, and mental consciousnesses and their associated sense organs and sensed objects. The crucial point made by this schematic formulation is that consciousness arises as a higher-order system relating sentient organisms and their supporting, sensible environments. That is, consciousness does not occur *inside* the organism and cannot be reduced to an epiphenomenon or function *of* the organism. Rather, consciousness arises *between* and qualitatively integrates organisms and their environments. Consciousness occurs as a higher-order, qualitatively inflected system constituted by complex, sustained, and situationally focused relationships.

It is among the key teachings of early Buddhism, however, that all things arise interdependently. It cannot be, then, that consciousness is conditioned by sense organs and sensed objects without in some degree also conditioning them. And while the Buddhist teaching of interdependence does not insist that this mutual conditioning is always and invariably symmetrical, it does rule out drawing sharp ontological boundaries among the relational foci or *dhatu* that are comprised in the total environmental situation. This means that the more or less extensive and refined system of sensed (or at least sensible) objects that we normally refer to as “the environment” is not something that we live within but rather that which we have *incorporated* as conscious or sentient beings.⁴ It also means that *degraded environments are necessarily correlated with degraded patterns of consciousness*. The ramifications of this, as we will see, later become central to Mahayana narratives about buddha-realms and will also drive an advocacy for the centrality of beauty as an environmental value.

The metaphysical schematic rehearsed in teachings about the 18 *dhatu*—and the associated schematic of the 5 aggregates (*skandhas*)—makes it clear that early Buddhism insistently denied the binary logic of the excluded middle and pressed for increasingly refined appreciation of continuous shadings of relational depth, extent, and intensity. But it must be kept in mind that relational depth, extent, and intensity were themselves understood as dynamic and that the teaching of interdependence is rooted in a denial of the ultimate reality of anything like static identities or fixed states of affairs. Interdependence is, in short, a process. And, in particular, it is a process that is both causal and nonlinear.

This apparently technical or philosophical observation can be given broader relevance by recalling that insight into interdependence was the crucial turning point in the awakening of Siddhartha Gautama as a buddha or enlightened being. The metaphysical schematics of the 18 *dhatu* and the 5 *skandhas*, likewise, were developed in the context of bringing others to similarly pivotal insight and awakening—that is, to support effective Buddhist practice and the resolute disclosure of the origins and end of suffering. And while the teachings and practices are framed in appropriately general (and, at times, even generic) terms, their ultimate context was invariably the lived experience of individual practitioners and the communities of which they were members. In short, the overarching context for these

schematics, and the practices they were intended to support, is the drama of resolving utterly specific patterns of trouble or suffering. More simply, their ultimate context is the operation of karma. Finally, metaphysics and ethics are mutually enfolding: there is no possibility of separating issues of reality and issues of responsibility.

*Human and non-human karma: implications
of the Jataka tales*

The karma, or patterns of values–intentions–actions, that join humans and non-humans—the kind of karma most relevant to environmental advocacy and activism—is discussed in three broad contexts in the early Buddhist canon. First, there are teachings in which the Buddha comments disapprovingly on animal sacrifice, making clear that such practices are not effective in reducing suffering—even human suffering—and are in fact causes of suffering both for those performing and those subjected to them. Second, there are teachings about the cycle of birth-and-death (*samsara*) that discuss the relationships among the five destinies (i.e. as hungry ghost, animal, titan, human, or god) and the possibilities each afford for liberation. Finally, there are the Jataka tales, or prior birth stories, of Buddha Shakyamuni.

In the first two contexts, it is made clear that humans and non-humans are part of a complex moral economy in which all sentient beings participate. No hard ontological boundaries obtain among the five different categories of beings and considerable (two-way) traffic takes place among them. Indeed, as underscored by the teachings of no-self, impermanence, and karma, the nature of all sentient beings, in all categories of destiny, should be seen as ultimately *dispositional*. What matters most, in other words, is not what they seem to *be*, but the *direction* in which they are heading, the *meaning* of their relationships.

Throughout the Buddhist cosmos, in any of its distinct domains of sentience, all beings are constantly and meticulously presented with both the *outcome* of past karma—past values–intentions–actions—and *opportunity* for either further endorsing or changing their dramatic orientation. Fundamentally, this is the opportunity to head either in the direction of *samsara* or *nirvana*. Whether we are living as and among hungry ghosts, animals, titans, humans, or gods, each moment offers both hellish and enlightening possibilities.

Such a directional or dispositional understanding of this basic contrast is implicit in Nagarjuna's⁵ claim that not a single hair can be placed between *samsara* and *nirvana*, in the Huayen conception of an irreducibly relational understanding of all things and in the broadly Chinese Buddhist concept of buddha-nature. This last concept is particularly relevant for framing a consistent, Buddhist environmental ethic or liberation ecology. But before turning more directly to the concept of buddha-nature and how it radically reframes the meaning of Buddhist liberation, it is useful first to get a fuller sense of the erasure of dramatic boundaries between the human and the animal in the early Buddhist *imaginaire* and the

karmic nature of transits between them. For this, let us turn to the third of the canonical contexts mentioned here: the Jataka tales.

Dramatic ensembles in situational transformation

The Jataka tales (547 in all) have received little critical attention from Western scholars who have overwhelmingly favored more straightforward “doctrinal” texts. But the Jatakas are particularly well-suited for shedding light on the place of karma in early Buddhist worldviews. In them are found—in often fully fleshed detail—not only significant bridgings of the normally excluded middle ground between animality and humanity but also powerful evidence of the early centrality of dramatic community in the realization (over many lifetimes) of Buddhist enlightenment. Taken as a whole, the Jatakas reveal the inner dynamics of dramatic ensembles or groups of “karmic cohorts” traveling together through time in the shared realization of truly liberating conduct and relationships.⁶ Most often, the main protagonist is the future Buddha, with other of his close associates in major supporting roles. Significantly—for example, in the *Mahakapi Jataka* (no. 407)—the characters demonstrating the most advancement in understanding and acting in fullest accord with the Dharma are not necessarily the most highly ranked in either the customary social hierarchy of fifth century BCE India or the schema of the five destinies.

The *Mahakapi Jataka* centers on the bodhisattva actions of a monkey-king who clearly demonstrates that one’s “destiny” as human or animal is ultimately less relevant than the quality and direction of one’s relationships. Liberating other beings from suffering is always possible, regardless of one’s position in the cosmos. In a reversal of expected relational hierarchies, this Jataka shows an exemplary animal—the monkey-king—teaching and, indeed, fully humanizing the central human character, the King of Benesari.

Stories like this and others in the Jataka collection can be interpreted as simple allegories for illuminating the lives and circumstances of those engaged with the Buddha in the teaching process. But that would be to miss the crucial point of their inclusion among the birth stories of the Buddha himself. Against this narrative background, such stories also drive home the second-order points that the path of enlightenment is *not* traveled alone and that one can be on the path of Buddhist liberation regardless of one’s karmic endowments and bodily destiny. It is *not* just in the future Buddha’s human or deva (godly) births that profound *bodhicitta* or a “mind set on enlightenment” is manifested but rather in each and every one of his human and non-human births.

This has two relevant implications. First, there is significant liberative continuity implied across the boundaries of the five destinies—a continuity that is reinforced by the narrative device of referring to the Buddha in all his births as “the Bodhisattva” or enlightening being. The quintessential dramatic community of Buddhist enlightenment is not restricted merely to the human. Second, the narrative climax of the Jatakas as a whole in the *Vessantara Jataka* makes it clear that

the “mind set on enlightenment” is nothing other than the mind set on the perfection of offering. The continuity among all sentient beings, including ultimately plants and especially trees, consists of their readiness to benefit others.

Buddha-nature as relational beneficence

In the Mahayana traditions, a broad shift takes place that implies a revised conception of environment. In the early Buddhist Abhidharma, an emphasis is placed on the centrality of perception or awareness. Sensed environments—like sensing organisms—are understood as moments in the perceptual process or the realization of distinct qualities of consciousness. In the Jataka tales and in the early teachings on karma, emphasis is placed on how these qualities of consciousness—and, implicitly, sensed environments and sensing organisms—are directed. That is, emphasis is placed on the intentional focus of specific relationships and on the historical (if not evolutionary) dynamics of particular relational ensembles. In the Mahayana traditions, concern shifts are from specific qualities of consciousness or relational dynamics to situational direction. That is, emphasis comes to be placed on how the presence of buddhas or advanced bodhisattvas inflects their situations as dramatic wholes, transforming them into buddha-realms.

Perhaps the most powerfully sustained expression of the situationally transformative effect of bodhisattvas is given in the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*—a Mahayana text in which the lay practitioner Vimalakīrti demonstrates unparalleled virtuosity in opening up the meaning of non-duality, affirming repeatedly in a range of dialogic encounters that, in the realm of a true bodhisattva or buddha, all things and situations without exception do the great work of enlightenment.⁷ A buddha-realm is one in which all beings are continuously contributing to one another’s welfare in an enlightening fashion, realizing together an ever deepening ecology of liberation. As described in a great many Mahayana texts, buddha-realms are astonishingly, even psychedelically, vibrant. Trees are laden with jewel fruits, mountain streams run with ambrosial liquids, skies are strewn with diamonds, footfalls raise delicately fragrant dust, and the range of plants, animals, and peoples is at once almost infinite in number and infinitely rich and refined. In a buddha-realm, space-time itself sings in a liberating key, an excited crystal resonating with and transmitting the pure Dharma.

Yet, as Vimalakīrti makes clear, these spectacular attributes are not necessary for doing the work of liberation. There are buddha-realms that accomplish the buddha-work of liberation by way of light, others that do so by sound or fragrance or physical beauty; but there are others in which the buddha-work is accomplished by devils and beggars or by poverty or illness. A buddha-realm is not essentially or necessarily “this” way or “that.” It does not have any particular form or tonal quality or fragrance. What is distinctive about buddha-realms as opposed to the realms of sentient beings—which, too, are often quite rich in aesthetic terms—is how they are *directed*. They are places thoroughly and incontrovertibly *disposed* toward liberation. Buddha-realms are nothing other than liberating environments.

It follows from such a conception of buddha-realms that, because all beings arise relationally, and because there are no hard ontological boundaries among them, the presence of even a single enlightened being in a given world-realm means that the ultimate nature of all beings in that realm must be buddha-nature. This conclusion seems to have been drawn most explicitly and powerfully in China, where the indigenous conception of nature was itself dispositional, reflecting a general understanding of all things as fundamentally and irreducibly relational. When Chinese Buddhists coined the term buddha-nature (*fo-xing*) as a logical outgrowth of teachings on the *tathāgata* and claimed that all things have or evidence (*you*) buddha-nature, they were effectively claiming that it is the nature of all beings to realize enlightening relationships.

The concepts of buddha-realm and buddha-nature came to be effectively fused in Chinese Buddhist traditions as a function of a very thorough working out of the relational ontology implied by the teachings of interdependence and emptiness and with significant ramifications for developing a contemporary Buddhist environmental ethic. Fazang (643–712 CE), a lineage holder in the Huayan tradition, argued that all things are not only interdependently arisen but also interpenetrating. Creatively extending Nagarjuna's claim that understanding emptiness (*sūnyatā*) entails insight into the mutual relevance of all things,⁸ Fazang developed what might be termed a metaphysics of meaning in which each thing consists of a nexus of contributions from all other things. That is, each thing situationally and uniquely expresses the contributory force of all things. In one of Fazang's famous examples, pieces of lumber become "rafters" and "ridge beam" only when they are appropriately leaned against and attached to one another. Things *are* what they *mean* for one another. In a buddha-realm, all things *mean* one another's liberation. They thus have the *same*, enlightening nature, precisely because they *differ* and *contribute* to one another in the specific ways they do. The cosmos as described by Fazang is one in which all beings are the same insofar as they all differ in ways that make a liberating difference.

This suggests considerable overlap between Fazang's reading of emptiness as both interdependence and interpenetration and an ecological understanding of interdependence. Ecosystems are complex, porously bounded phenomena for which history makes a difference and which incorporate an array of subsystems—plant, insect, and animal species as well as abiding climatic, geological, and hydrological systems—that subsist in and through mutually supporting relationships. That is, ecosystems consist of sustainable patterns of relationship. Most crucially, an ecosystem emerges when a consistent set of plant, insect, and animal species (and the individuals comprised in them) convert situational resources (animate and inanimate) in ways that promote the welfare of both one another and the entire system of their interactions or relations as well. Ecosystems arise through sustained patterns of mutual contribution among all beings incorporated within them. In ecological terms, diversity is not simply a function of numbers of species but of the density and richness of contributory relationships.

Seeing ecosystems in this way means seeing individual species as situationally defined, arising uniquely through cooperative, rather than competitive, functions

within an ecosystem as a whole. In other words, ecosystems arise as functions of dynamically sustainable patterns of meaningful relationship, while individual species *are* or *come to be* as a complex function of what they *mean* to one another. In this, all species are the same. But what allows them all to be the same in respect of contributing to one another's welfare is their specific ways of differing from one another—in particular, differences in how they are situated and in how they draw out the value (the resources) of their situation.⁹

The parallel to Fazang's claims regarding the nature of all beings as empty of fixed essence or identity, interdependent, and interpenetrating is, I think, both striking and significant. When combined with the teachings on buddha-realms and buddha-nature, it suggests a way beyond the appeals to intrinsic value that undergird so much of environmental ethics as well as a way beyond the sharp demarcation often made between "natural" and "built" environments—a demarcation that can easily lead to disregarding urban environmental ills and the suffering they inflict on both human and non-human populations.

Environmental ethics and activism: going beyond conservation

Much of contemporary environmental ethics is motivated by what can be termed a principle of non-interference.¹⁰ Natural systems are seen as inherently worthy of preservation and freedom from distortion by activities undertaken by humans for human ends. More moderately, and realistically framed, natural systems should be conserved to whatever degree possible, where conservation aims at sustaining the conditions for systemic, adaptive development rather than the "freeze-framing" entailed by a strict commitment to preservation.¹¹

In arguing for the preservation or conservation of natural systems, whether at the species or ecosystem levels, contemporary environmental ethicists and advocates often resort to three broad lines of argument resting on: claims that natural systems have intrinsic value, claims that natural systems are reservoirs of both current and as yet unrealized (and in principle, impossible to anticipate) practical benefits, and claims that interactions with natural systems ultimately ground and necessarily enhance human experience. Not infrequently, resort is also made to two correlated cautions: there is considerable hubris in human intentions to make a "better world" or to "improve on nature," and we do not now (and likely never will) have sufficient understanding of natural systems to alter them without unpredictable and potentially ill consequences.

Each of these claims and cautions can be individually contested on quite reasonable grounds. The epistemological caution applies, in fact, to all intentional activities and there is scant hope of getting beyond the conclusion arrived at in the fourth century BCE Indian text, the *Bhagavad-gītā*: while we are in a position to determine our intentions, we are never in a position to foresee or determine the long-term or systemic consequences of acting upon them. If the arrogance of "improving on nature" is deemed unnatural, so would the building of nests, of

beaver dams, of beehives, and—at sufficient historical scale—the process of evolution itself. The approach of arguing for environmental conservation on the basis of human benefits—practical or otherwise—belies an instrumentalist bias that: contradicts the claim that natural systems are valuable ends in themselves, problematically reinforces the means–ends distinction, and offers scant reason to question either the ultimate status of human ends or the imperfect understandings (and lack of wisdom) on which they are founded.

From a Buddhist perspective, moreover, there can be no tenably strict claims about particular systems or species having “intrinsic value” or an “essential nature” which must be conserved. The teachings of impermanence, emptiness, and no-self all point toward the dangers of establishing fixed identities for things and even indirectly claiming the reality of independent existence. If all things are what they are as a function of how they are related, value must rest on relational depth, extent, and quality rather than on any supposedly inherent characteristics. Any viable case for non-interference must be a highly qualified one, since a strict reading would prohibit even a course of action undertaken with a mind set on enlightenment—a mind intent on directing relationships and the situations they constitute away from their current (samsaric) heading toward liberation (nirvana).¹²

Finally, it is a consequence of the principle of non-interference that environmental ethics tends not to include urban or other environments—like farms, parks, and rural enclaves or villages—that result from human artifice.¹³ These environments can be seen as interrupting the natural, as punctuating them in such a way as to turn nature into a form of human discourse, expressing human meanings. An affront to nature, environments resulting from human artifice might thus be excluded from concern, their degradation seen as reason for elimination, not conservation or creative change. Granted that a majority of the planet’s human population dwells in urban or suburban environments, to exclude such environments is to warrant inattention to the suffering these environments are causing to both human and non-human beings. Eliminating such environments—a kind of radical “earth first” perspective—would “solve” this problem but at the loss of the distinctive human difference as a contribution to the overall diversity of the Earth’s biosphere. Some middle path would seem to be needed.

One of the root insights of Buddhist teachings on karma is that we have no choice but to work with the resources present in our own situation, as it has come to be (*yathabhutam*). In terms of skillful means, this involves developing an acute capacity for perceiving our situation in terms of the values–intentions–actions that inform or structure its constitutive relationships. It involves sensitivity to and abilities for creatively appropriating the karma of our present situation in its historical context. Appeals to ideal states-of-affairs can thus have only the barest strategic worth—the convincing demonstration of the possibility of alternatives. But work can only begin when attention is focused on our situation, in all its complexity and historical specificity. Effective environmental activism is necessarily rooted in altering the disposition or valence of currently prevailing relationships.

From conservation to creativity

In the context of a fully Buddhist environmental ethics, this process of dispositional revision is best understood as one of relational enhancement directed toward liberation. Granted the emptiness or interdependence and interpenetration of all things, liberation is itself best understood as a process directed toward freeing up situational resources so that the ways in which things differ can make more of a difference in respect of their shared welfare. That is, as epitomized in the conduct of consummate bodhisattvas, liberation or freedom is a function of *relating freely* in mutual contribution. It is rooted in appreciative conduct that draws out previously unexpressed value, present in a given situation, in such a way that the situation as a whole is at once enriched and disposed toward still greater relational freedom and clarity. This is what I will refer to as the functioning or enacting of beauty. Buddhist liberation ecology is not grounded in duty but rather in aesthetic commitment and consummation.

This claim will require substantial qualification, particularly with respect to the meaning of beauty as a value with explicitly environmental traction. But, first, it is important to understand the Buddhist precedents for a shift of ethical foundations away from duty.

In a cosmos that is irreducibly karmic, the concept of duty has no ultimate purchase and can function only conventionally. That is, in the context of a fully relational ontology in which values have ontological precedence over facts and which all things are understood as abstractions from ultimately horizonless relational complexes, there are no grounds for asserting that a given state-of-affairs commands a particular course of action or a certain trajectory of correction. There is not ultimately a way that things *should be*. Things are as they have come to be because of the complex and still ongoing interplay of diverse streams of values—intentions—actions (karma). Things are not as they are *necessarily* but rather as a function of patterns of interdependence that are always open to revision. For this reason, there cannot be any way that things—including us as ethical actors—*must be*. Any obligations we incur can have only conventional or highly contextual force because we cannot, finally, be compelled. No situation ultimately can make incontrovertible or irresistible claim on us. “Should” and “ought” finally revert to “may.” Duties give way to vows.

To put this in somewhat different terms, Buddhist ethics are only conventionally grounded on principles or standards of conduct. In the absence of a metaphysics of being, the “good life” which ethics is intended to help realize cannot be understood as something already given—an ideal state-of-affairs to be attained—but only as a quality and direction of relationships. Process, in other words, trumps product. Ethics is not a matter of realizing predetermined ends but rather one of creatively revising the quality and meaning (direction) of our situation as it has come to be. It is not grounded on the exercise of duty or appeals to fixed standards but rather on liberating appreciation.

Buddhist ethics is not, however, consequentialist in the strict sense. In an irreducibly dramatic or karmic cosmos, there is no way to predict the outcome of

any given attempt at revising situational quality or meaning. There is an infinitely deep past that conditionally factors into present situations. When conditions—themselves always changing—are appropriate, different karma from this past appears and affects the complexion of the present. At the same time, these *outcomes* of prior values—intentions—actions are, within the present situation, also *opportunities* for the meaningful revision or reorienting of our situation as a whole. Precisely because outcomes are always also opportunities, consequences are finally less directly relevant than commitments. The priority of moral or ethical destinations is ceded to clarity of direction.

Karmic opportunity is of three broad types. First, there is opportunity to refrain from conduct in accord with the values—intentions—actions that led to the occurrence of the present, as it has come to be. Second, there is opportunity to intensify an existing karma or pattern of value—intention—action. Finally, there is opportunity to develop or improvise karma that will lead to new kinds of relationship. These types of opportunity are not mutually exclusive but also need not take place together. The former can be seen clearly in situations where, for example, the ill-effects of lying are made situationally manifest and one is positioned to vow never again to lie; the second when, for example, parents witness their child growing troubled or distant and intensify their expressions of love, concern, and readiness to help; and the final, for example, when the children of seriously ill parents invert the relational dynamics of their family to take on the role of primary care givers or when lovers find that they must learn to be best friends.

All three types of opportunity are ethically significant and together establish the practical basis of operationalizing a liberation ecology rooted in appreciative conduct oriented toward increasingly free and clear patterns of interdependence and interpenetration. All are based on taking situational resources as currently given and opening up new pathways among them to facilitate liberating change—a process of realizing increased, and increasingly consonant, contributions to shared welfare. Ecological liberation turns on enhancing diversity, where diversity indexes the density and quality of contributions to sustainably shared welfare.

The driving questions of a Buddhist environmental ethics do not pivot on issues of retention or restoration, on how to conserve existing natural systems or protect existing patterns of interdependence. Rather, they pivot on how best to foster diversification as a process of harmonious, relational creativity. For example, how can we contribute to already obtaining environments (both natural and urban) in ways that will enhance their contributory richness? How can we free up situational resources for achieving and sustaining shared welfare to promote deeper and more extensive patterns of interdependence? How do we insure a common direction in addressing environmental degradation at radically different scales?

Unlike some environmental ethics that effectively deny that human difference might make a difference (other than a negative one) for nature, this approach insures both that humanity is seen as part of the natural world and integral to it and that urban and rural environments are seen as continuous with other more apparently natural environments and open to equivalent consideration. To the

extent that diversity is seen as a function, not of mere variety in coexistence but of differences making a meaningful difference, the first imperative of an environmental ethics that eschews a metaphysics of being is to take qualities and intensities of relationship as having prime importance. Thus, any discussion of corrective environmental change must begin with a consideration of the distinctive difference of human capacities for contribution. What is it that humans do differently, in a way that can make a meaningful difference in respect of realizing environments that are liberating for all involved? What do we offer that will make it possible for all the beings gathered in any given environment to find themselves more valuably situated?

As a way of initially sketching this difference, let me invoke a discursive riff used by Roger Ames in characterizing the early Confucian view of the distinctive difference of humanity. According to the *Mencius* (4B.19), the difference between the human and the animal is infinitesimal and pivots on the human capacity for self-cultivation and for enchanting the everyday. Humanity takes the act of eating and transmutes it into cuisine; takes the act of sexual reproduction and transmutes it into lovemaking and romance; takes warning cries and vocalizations of pleasure or pain and turns them into language and literature. In effect, the distinctive difference of humanity is to take everyday occurrences and dramatically augment their value by bringing them into new kinds of relationship with other parts of the human experience and its broad contexts. This process entails making new kinds of difference or distinction that are explicitly qualitative in nature and that generate new kinds of meaning. Humanity is not distinctive on the simple basis of building things or language use or social organization. Beavers, dolphins, and bees are quite adept at these activities. Human beings are unique in the degree to which they continuously appreciate or add value to their situation.

Of course, humans are just as capable of depreciating their situation. In our historically headlong rush into heavily polluting patterns of mass industrialization and consumerism, we have managed to degrade our environments to the point that all who continue dwelling in them are ever more poorly situated, increasingly blocked from either contributing to or enjoying shared and positively directed and sustained welfare. We can direct our own conduct and our situational dynamics toward samsara as well as nirvana. It is, however, precisely this capacity of creating such radically opposed meanings for our own conduct and experience—as well as for our situation as a whole—that underlies our distinctive capacity for awakening or liberation. While sentient beings from all the five destinies can develop *bodhicitta* (a mind set on enlightenment), it is only humans who traditionally have been held able to realize full awakening.

It is not crucial whether enlightenment is literally possible only for humans. This claim may be nothing more than a rhetorical device for stimulating resolute and intense practice. If the primary task of liberation ecology is to deepen and intensify diversity, and if diversity is a function of sustainable contributions to shared welfare, then conserving and further cultivating contributory resources and virtuosity are the primary task of environmental ethics. If human contributory

capacities are distinctively characterized by their potential for situational appreciation and meaning-making, and if any given environment is (for any sentient being) a karmic complex of opportunities and outcomes, then environmental ethics should rest strategically on enriching both the opportunities and outcomes associated with appreciation or sympathetic value-enhancement.

This has three important implications. First, environmental ethics is directed as much at self-cultivation as it is at protecting natural ecosystems. If a degraded environment is inseparable from degraded forms of consciousness, realizing liberating environments is also inseparable from realizing liberating forms of consciousness. The absence of significantly new sensibilities is also the absence of sufficient resources for changing the *direction* of environmental relations. Second, for environmental activism to be effective, these new sensibilities or capacities for meaning-making must have significant, practical traction. That is, they must be capable of exerting sufficient “downward causation” to alter both patterns of human/non-human interdependence, as well as the character of all the systems present in any given environment. That is, they must bring all the relevant systems into new kinds of coordination, eliciting new kinds of contribution throughout the altered environmental system as a whole. Finally, to the degree that environmental ethics centers on enhanced sensibilities promoting appreciative and contributory virtuosity, which develop in turn the resources needed for meaningfully deepened and extended diversity, the primary value of environmental ethics can be seen as aesthetic consummation or the realization of beauty.

Beauty as relational creativity

This last claim requires qualification. In the history of environmental ethics, appeals to the aesthetic richness of nature have fared poorly. Most typically, this has been because a tension is created between the subjective value of untrameled nature for aesthetic experience and the objective, economic value of nature leveraged toward the satisfaction of human ends. That is, assigning aesthetic value to nature has tended to accentuate the opposition of natural environments and those resulting from human artifice. Especially in the global South, where the “benefits” of industrial and commercial development have been disproportionately limited, debate surrounding this tension is especially complex. If the choice is between subjective experiences of natural beauty and adequate food, clothing, and shelter (not to mention health care and education), what right has the so-called developed world to call for a halt to aesthetic trade-offs? What good is beauty if the belly is chronically empty and in pain?

Especially in the West, beauty was long understood as an attribute or ideal that was perhaps hard to define precisely, but nevertheless quite real and objective. According to some interpretations of Platonic thought, beauty could even be considered ultimate reality—the aim and essence of all things. With the rise of modernity, however, and as cultures with very different aesthetic canons interacted, the view of beauty as an objective attribute was called increasingly and

seriously into question. Stripped of its aura of universality, beauty fell from the world of ideal forms to lodge “in the eye of the beholder”—a subjective attribution that varied with personal predilection, history, and culture and that could as often blind as enlighten. More recently still, proponents of social constructivism have insisted on the need to bracket the subjectivity of beauty in recognition of how the conception and experience of beauty is conditioned by public practices associated with, for example, the marketing of art and fashion and the increasingly extensive use of “aesthetic surgery.” Today, beauty has arguably come to signify an elective effect—a moment in the crafting of a specific impact, for particular purposes, at determinate expense.

The concept of beauty, at least in the broad sweep of mainstream Western thinking, has suffered steadily slipping fortunes. But I would argue that the fall of beauty from its status of ultimate origin, aim, and essence to that of a constantly shifting value associated with public artifacts is a function of an overwhelming bias toward existence or being in mainstream Western thought—a bias toward status or fixed and abiding independent identities. To the extent that we eschew the metaphysical presumption of independent existence, beauty can be rehabilitated.

In the context of Buddhist relational ontology, the ambiguities associated with the conception of beauty in the Western tradition are both unavoidable and meaningful. Neither absolute nor relativist (individual or social) constructions of beauty could ever be fully tenable because beauty is not, and could never be, an independently existing thing or essence. It is impossible to state definitively what beauty is or is-not because, like all things (*dharmas*), beauty has no self-nature. If beauty obtains, it is obtained only as a function or quality of relationships as such.

In this sense, beauty is like freedom. Although many of the world’s best minds (again, especially in the West) have exercised themselves over how to define freedom, no final consensus has ever been reached. Freedom resists or eludes strict determination. But from a Buddhist perspective, the epistemological difficulties surrounding freedom are chimerical. Freedom does not exist in the way expected of things designated by nouns because it is not a thing or a state, but a relational quality. Freedom is adverbial. Although no thing is free and there is no state-of-affairs that can be legitimately termed freedom, there is the dynamic of relating freely.

Likewise, beauty is not either an attribute or an attribution. Simply stated: beauty does not exist—at least, not in the literal sense of metaphysically “standing apart from” all other things. There are only things done beautifully, relationships developing in a beautiful manner. As a noun, beauty can strictly speaking only refer to an abstraction from such patterns of activity or relationships. And like the individual self, which can similarly be abstracted from patterns of relationship, it cannot exist on its own. Beauty is a particular quality of ongoing interdependence—a particular, qualitative direction.¹⁴

More specifically, beauty is evident in the appreciative inflection of a relationship or pattern of relationships—that is, when situational dynamics are oriented

toward increasing clarity and enrichment. Beauty arises as relational patterns turn toward evoking new associations enabling all those related through them to be more (and more) valuably situated—that is, in a position to both contribute to their shared situation and be contributed to by it.

Because beauty obtains as a distinctive adverbial quality of the cycle of outcomes and opportunities associated with appreciative and contributory virtuosity, it can also be associated with bodhisattva conduct or relating freely in skillful liberation of all beings.¹⁵ Given these associations, beauty signifies relational creativity directed toward realizing liberating situations or environments. Considering how liberating environments are characterized in the Buddhist *imaginaire* should, then, allow us to more fully characterize this particular directional quality.¹⁶

In both early Buddhist and later Mahayana traditions, ideal realms—whether of the wheel-turning monarch (*cakkavatti*) or a superlative bodhisattva or buddha—are invariably described in terms that connote ultimate sensory richness. Such realms are never represented as austere or categorically simple places. They are lush with different forms of life and terrain, both rural and urban, and always endowed with a capacity for almost psychedelically overwhelming the bodily senses. In light of the Buddhist teachings that insist on seeing consciousness as a higher-order relationship arising between sensing organisms and sensed environments, this makes perfect sense. If the ideal realm is characterized by liberating relationships, this implies unlimited qualities, depths, and ranges of consciousness and, hence, unlimited diversity in terms of sensing organs/organisms and sensed environments. The ideal Buddhist realm is one of aesthetic consummation.

Especially in the Mahayana traditions, such realms are explicitly represented as liberating environments. The most widely celebrated among these, perhaps, is the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha. But there are said to be infinitely many such realms and going to any one of them is to head resolutely in the direction of ultimate, unsurpassed enlightenment or the horizonless expression of buddha-nature. Thus a mind set on enlightenment or directed toward entering into liberating intimacy or relationship with all things is, in practice, also directed toward aesthetic consummation. A buddha-realm is a place in which all things do the great work of enlightenment beautifully, infinitely enhancing the appreciation (heightened value) and contributory capacity of all other things. In such realms, diversity ultimately prevails as aesthetic consummation—limitless differences harmoniously united in the creative intimacy of relating freely.

The conflation of liberation, enlightenment, emptiness and nirvana with aesthetic consummation or beauty in the Mahayana *imaginaire* suggests that beauty—or, better still, relating beautifully—can be seen as being oriented away from samsara. Beauty means turning away from suffering as the experienced reality of appreciative and contributory blockage toward greater diversity, relational enhancement, and freedom. Understood in this way, beauty seems well-suited for a central role in framing a Buddhist liberation ecology.¹⁷

Operationalizing beauty in environmental ethics

It is important to draw out the relevance of a liberating relational orientation toward aesthetic consummation for understanding and responding to environmental problems and predicaments of the sort that we now face with respect to pollution, waste management, natural resource depletion, extinction, and global warming.

The environmental traction of beauty can, I think, be brought out through further considering its conceptual ties to diversity and, particularly, to the realization of appreciative and contributory virtuosity. First, as suggested by the references to the Buddhist imagination of liberating environments, aesthetic consummation involves both refining existing sense realms and opening up new sensory fields. That is, it turns on developing new ways of attending. Second—as anyone knows who has taken tests or performed on an empty stomach and too little sleep—the topographic character of attention-energy is fundamentally cyclic. That is, attention is an outgoing phase of a pattern of resource transformation or energy circulation that necessarily includes an input phase. Attention-energy is greatest when energy circulates most freely through the sensing organism/sensed environment system.

Most fundamentally, then, operationalizing beauty in addressing environmental degradation entails heightening of existing attentive capacities. In Buddhist terms, this means realizing the emptiness (or interdependence and interpenetration) of all things through relinquishing our existing horizons of relevance. That is, it means sufficiently relaxing the presuppositions associated with our present position *in* our situation to effectively dissolve the horizon or limit of what we take to be relevant in understanding and addressing the environmental problem at hand, thus allowing more of the total situation to be taken into account.

This can be done at a “purely” conceptual or theoretical level by, for example, resisting the categories according to which we customarily organize experience or by making use of statistical models that show patterns in data which we could not directly perceive through other means. Or it can be done at a biomechanical level by making use of sensing technologies and associated tools like microscopes, satellite photography systems, and air quality monitors. But in either case, the point is not simply to *add* to the body of existing knowledge or bring about an purportedly value-neutral increase in environmental data. Rather the point is to *augment* the quality of our interaction with and attention to our environment—to open up the extent to which we feel meaningfully related with our environment and all that it comprises. Extending our sensory capabilities is carried out for the purpose, in other words, of realizing a more intimate pattern of relationship—a more profound karma—with the environments in question.

Doing so is already to enhance experienced diversity. It is the karmic groundwork for contributing to our situation or environment in such a way as to create new relational networks that intensify or extend the meaningful interrelatedness and mutual benefit of all the elements comprised in our situation. And yet, it is with

such contributions—or, at least, attempted contributions—that concerns arise regarding the misdirection of situational or environmental dynamics. What keeps intervention from becoming interference? What prevents our environmental karma from resulting in occlusive rather than liberating outcomes?¹⁸

Here, the observation that attention-energy can be seen as part of a relational cycle or circulation becomes crucially relevant. A general rule of thumb is that if an intervention blocks or serves to cache rather than promote the freer circulation of energy, then it will result in highly skewed slopes of advantage and the compromise of situational diversity: the erosion of responsive flexibility on the part of any affected ecosystem as a whole. Conversely, any manifest erosion of ecosystem resilience is an evidence of effectively interrupted or block flows of energy in the system as a whole—evidence of misdirected patterns of relationship. These, in turn, are at a deeper level indicative of errant karma or patterns of value–intention–action.

A few examples may be helpful here. Consider first the dynamics of global warming. Some of the most powerful recent concerns about the effects of global warming have centered on oceanic carbon loading brought about by industrial manufacturing and fossil fuel use. Inappropriately displaced into oceanic waters, carbon significantly disturbs the biotic systems for which these waters serve as proximate environments, eventually leading to the decimation of oceanic flora and fauna, with dire consequences for commercial fisheries and human food security as well as the planetary atmosphere. The crucial link in this effect chain is compromised appreciative and contributory capacity on the part of microorganisms like plankton and corals. Atmospheric carbon dioxide enters ocean water as carbonic acid that weakens the skeletons or shells of such microorganisms and renders them ineffective transformers of oceanic resources into forms useful for animals higher on the food chain, populations of which are weakened in turn and affect still higher parts of the food chain. As such populations are weakened, they are no longer in a position to contribute to the overall health of oceanic ecosystems. The value of these ecosystems for the planetary biosphere as a whole thus undergoes significant depreciation. Continuing present rates of oceanic carbon loading has the potential of triggering a cataclysmic loss of total biosphere diversity.

Similarly, high-consumption economies rely on extracting massive quantities of natural resources, both animate and inanimate—a process that significantly damages a wide range of natural systems. These resources are converted into commodities that, because of the dynamics of continued economic growth, will be filtered through human consumers and quickly converted into waste. It is the nature of high-consumption economies to ingest and excrete natural resources at the highest sustainable rates possible. In the case of forestry products, for example, high rates of extraction lead to a breakdown of inter-species patterns of contribution and the eventual compromise, or demise, of entire ecosystems. Consumer waste represents squandered resources for ecosystem resilience. Even if these wastes are recycled, benefit typically is skewed decisively toward humans (often with considerable inequity).

The case of petroleum-based products like plastics is interestingly different. It can be argued that the natural resource in question is essentially inert as a biological resource and that any ecological impacts of its conversion are merely byproducts of processing and manufacturing. With proper processing and manufacturing techniques, ecological damage can theoretically drop to zero. Given that plastics and fossil fuels originate from unused biological waste products, using them at an appropriate scale and with appropriate techniques can be seen as an environmental good insofar as it reclaims otherwise lost energy. Insofar as the availability of such materials and fuels stimulates human creativity—human contributions toward realizing new kinds of relationships—then this is clearly a benefit as well in overall terms, as long as using these materials and fuels does not lead to scale-related problems like those associated with massive oceanic or atmospheric carbon loading.

From the distinctive position of Buddhist liberation ecology, however, the entire pattern of new relationships brought about by such uses of biologically inert natural resources must itself be addressed in directional terms. For example, while overall human creativity is stimulated, is this true for all populations and for all populations equally? Are economic systems depending on these materials and fuels (and the peculiar efficiencies of scale to which they give rise) conducive to productive diversity and hence widespread increases of appreciative and contributory virtuosity, or are they conducive to production monocultures that inequitably skew creative benefits? If the byproducts of using such materials and fuels are themselves no longer biologically inert—as is true for carcinogens—can the use of these materials and fuels really be seen simply as reclaiming lost energy? Are they not producing substances that powerfully disrupt otherwise healthy patterns of energy flow and exchange?

Buddhist environmental ethics are, of course, not alone or unique in raising such questions or in marshaling similar, cogent responses to environmental degradation. Common to all environmental ethics is a shared recognition of the crucial importance of interdependence in understanding and addressing ecological dynamics. Contemporary environmental science can be traced to new conceptual insights that emerged out of general systems theory and that brought interdependencies into focus as explicit research objects. This research, in keeping with the observations made above, was fostered by the use of sensing technologies that vastly extended the scope of scientific attention to the environment and brought about the possibility of new kinds of (ecological) awareness or consciousness. Plausibly, it is for this reason that while there have been long-standing traditional concerns in virtually all the world's cultures about nature and the non-human world in general, environmental ethics as they are currently configured did not begin being formulated clearly prior to the scientific advancement of understanding natural systems from especially the mid-twentieth century onward. The growth of environmental science was in this way crucial for the growth of environmental ethics, bringing into view new realms for explicit ethical consideration. It was also a condition for the apparent convergence of Buddhist and both modern and postmodern ethical concerns with respect to nature.

The indebtedness of environmental ethics to environmental science has, however, had significant limiting effects on the practical traction of environmental advocacy and activism, as well as on their convergence with Buddhist practice. First, it has restricted the reach of key environmental concepts and hence the effectiveness of environmental arguments. Second, and more specifically, it has compromised the range of these key concepts in such a way as to reinforce distinctions between natural and artificial environments, biasing much of environmental ethics toward ignoring urban or other predominantly human-influenced environments.

Environmental ethicists have not had the easiest time convincing policy makers and the broad public that the environment is deserving of direct moral consideration. It is not difficult to make the case that the state of the natural environment and human impacts upon it are ethically relevant. The close linkage between changes wrought on natural environments and present and future human good is an ample evidence of such relevance. Making the deeper case that natural environments or specific aspects of them should be granted full and direct moral consideration, without appeal to present or future consequences for human experience, has been much more difficult. The tacit metaphysical commitments held by most policy makers and the general public to the primacy of being and the intelligibility of independent existence effectively restrict direct moral consideration to apparent moral agents—that is, beings recognizably endowed with capacities for determining their own futures or fates and manifesting explicit self-interest. While the most radical proponents of, for example, the Gaia hypothesis¹⁹ are willing to grant ecosystems functional self-interests, most policy makers are not convinced that any plants or animals are full moral agents. The case for complex natural ecosystems, of course, is even more tenuous.

By contrast, Buddhist environmental ethics, by way of the teachings of karma, does explicitly consider all sentient beings to have moral agency.²⁰ All sentient beings are capable of developing *bodhicitta* and conducting themselves in accord with the Dharma, thus bringing about an appreciation of their lived circumstances and the opportunities these afford. Moreover, since all sentient beings arise only through complex situationally sustained interdependence, moral considerability cannot reasonably be restricted to sentient beings as independent individuals. The locus of moral consideration must be the patterned and directed relationships that are ultimately constitutive of complexly situated sentient beings. Finally, given the priority granted by Buddhist environmental ethics to diversity—understood as a function of the manifest emptiness or mutual relevance obtaining among all beings—it is part of a Buddhist environmental ethics to promote deepening the moral relevance and agency of all sentient beings. That is, it is an ethics that valorizes extending and refining contributory capacities and in which the “natural”—as that which has not been subjected to intentionally activated values—is understood as chimerical. In a karmic cosmos, at an appropriate scale of consideration, all beings are intentionally situated.

This brings about strikingly different ways of dealing, for example, with the ethicality of commercial livestock and scientific research practices. The most

extreme animal rights activists advocate a completely vegan lifestyle, insisting on the inherent value of all animals in their natural state, and their inviolable right to be free from being used as mere means to human ends. Less extreme activists argue (somewhat ironically) for humane treatment of animals rather than for a complete ban on human industries for making use of animals. Here, the primary concern is, at the very least, to insure a dignified existence for animals being raised for human consumption (directly, as with beef cattle or indirectly as for milk cows) or other human use (as in the production of leather goods).

Buddhist environmental ethics (at least as I am sketching it here) does not appeal to such inherent rights or values, based on the so-called natural state of animals. Instead, it appeals to animals' capacities for achieving moral community or conducting themselves in morally relevant fashions with respect to other organisms with which they are interdependent. For instance, the most extreme proponents of animal rights are logically driven to consider pets as animals that—by virtue of becoming dependent on humans and incapable of surviving if released into their so-called natural state—have had their rights, and perhaps their basic “nature” violated. From a Buddhist perspective, however, the empathetic relationships established among humans and their pets can be seen as new contributory capacities being brought forth from both humans and animals. This does not mean that the interdependence among humans and pets is assumed to be necessarily good. Pets can be, and too often are, abused. But the benefits of pets for children and the elderly are very well-documented as are the potentials for pets to establish profound moral communities with individual humans and human families. The relational repertoire of well-cared for pets is much more extensive and refined than that of either their wild counterparts or industrially farmed animals.

With pets and commercial livestock, in particular, the shortcomings of appeals to inherent nature are especially apparent, because most of the animals in question are products of both natural evolution and human artifice. This can be complicating for the conventional ethicist arguing for animal rights on the basis of inherent nature or intrinsic worth. For Buddhist environmental ethics, however, the issues remain the same whether the animals or other beings in question are naturally occurring or the outcome of human activity. Do the patterns of relationship in question bring about increasingly refined sensibilities and both more extensive and more refined relational capabilities for all involved? Is overall situational diversity enhanced or diminished? Are the contributions being made—for example, to humans—by new breeds of plants and animals different only in degree, or in kind? How do these contributions to human benefit accord with benefits to the situation more generally or to relevant natural ecosystems? Do they increase the liberating potential of these systems?

The advantage of such questions is that they focus on intensities and directions of relational development rather than matters of strict principle or fixed identity. While the latter tend to leave no middle ground (or at least none that is practically fertile), establishing precisely defined rights and wrongs, the former allow for a more nuance-rich appreciation of the complexity of the situation—a middle

ground for exploring how an existing relationship can be effectively redirected rather than simply continued or terminated. Moreover, while moderate animal rights activists are content with insuring that minimum standards of dignified existence are identified and enforced, admitting the infeasibility of ending all use of animals as means to satisfy human interests and concentrating instead on redressing the worst abuses of animals, this approach suffers the same shortcomings as human rights discourse. It establishes an existential situation or status below which no animal will be legally permitted to fall but does nothing at all to insure or even incite ongoing improvement of the quality of relevant human–animal relations. Rights discourse does not aim at realizing truly flourishing relationships but only at placing limits on existential degradation. This may be necessary. But from the standpoint of Buddhist ethics, this necessity is an indictment of current practices and associated patterns of attention and intention that, if not directly challenged and altered, will practically guarantee that rights regimes will *remain* necessary.

Rights regimes are like medical treatments that forestall worst-case outcomes of progressive or chronically afflicted lives but do nothing to promote systematically enhanced ways of life.²¹ Put in Buddhist terms, rights regimes—whether for humans, animals, or environments—do not address the karma that made the institution of rights necessary. They leave out of critical account the values–intentions–actions that brought about the conditions in which abuse is systematically experienced, treating symptoms but not sources. Buddhist environmental ethics insists upon redressing this lack: first, by bringing values and intentions, and not just actions or practices, into full critical account; and second, by working within present situations, as they have come to be, enhancing existing relational patterns to realize their liberating potentials.

This becomes particularly relevant in the case of environments that are predominantly (and perhaps almost exclusively) of human origin. There is a growing movement among both academics and policy makers to reframe environmentalism in terms that are inclusive of urban environments.²² Most of these focus on the importance of building within the specific ecological limits of any given locale and promoting “smart growth” as an answer to urban sprawl. These movements grew out of sustainability-driven development studies and, as endorsed for example by the World Bank, tend to assume the broad principles of utilitarian ethics. That is, they intend to shape the development process by taking as foundational more complex and comprehensive environmental cost–benefit analyses.

The readiness of the “new environmentalism” to recognize the importance of urban environmental realities is undoubtedly a positive trend.²³ But it is also a readiness that does as little to address urban environmental karma as rights regimes do to address issues of relational flourishing. These new trends in environmentalism do little, in other words, to critically assess the totality of existing patterns of values–intentions–actions that resulted in the heavily degraded and ecologically unsustainable urban environments that can be witnessed throughout

the developed and developing world. The new environmentalisms emphasize, for example, generating “smart growth” and not questioning growth as an economic value. They are not focused on questioning consumerism as an economic driver but only on shifting consumption toward the green end of the spectrum. And while shifts like these may be necessary under present circumstances, they are not enough.

The broad commitments of Buddhist environmental ethics suggest possibilities for a deeper shift based on opening up of urban topographies that are conducive to increasing diversity, systematically subverting cost–benefit analyses in favor of aesthetic consummation, and, realizing reiterative and yet liberating patterns of urban–natural interdependence.

Among the most commonly cited problems with contemporary urban environments around the globe are the pronounced tendencies to spatially segregate life functions and to relationally distance urban and suburban spaces from their natural surroundings. The rationalization or compartmentalization of key life functions in urban environments means that education, work, family life, shopping, and entertainment take place in spatially distinct arenas, thus rendering their interdependence practically invisible and serving as a primary condition for rampant urban/suburban sprawl.²⁴ The benefits of practically segregating life functions in this way turn on scale-related efficiencies that reduce the costs of meeting basic subsistence needs of food, clothing, shelter, education, health care, and social interaction. They also, however, tend to obscure systemic effects resulting from crosstalk among lifeworld domains that are no longer in intimate relationship.

Up to a certain threshold, there is clear utility in scaling up the production processes by means of which such needs are met and, by implication, for functionally segregating specific domains within the lifeworld as a whole. Increasing specialization correlates strongly with heightened relational density and with increasing productive quality. Under the correct conditions, it can also be conducive to the cultivation of excellence. But, beyond this threshold, there is a marked tendency for local production ecologies to be converted into global production monocultures and for a corresponding constriction of locally available opportunities for relational enhancement and expansion. As this process has played out historically, in the context of consumption-driven market economics, it has brought increasing variety in terms of life experiences, but dramatically lowered diversity in the full, Buddhist sense of the concept—a severe compromise of appreciative and contributory capacity and virtuosity.²⁵ That is, while post-threshold urbanization continues to increase experiential variety—especially in the form of possibilities for commodity consumption—it decreases both capacities and occasions for perceiving ourselves as meaningfully situated. Experiential variety is institutionalized at the expense of aesthetic consummation.

The collapse of traditional neighborhoods is among the most commonly lamented results of post-threshold urbanization processes. But equally, if not ultimately, more lamentable is the tendency of these processes to delimit urban and non-urban environments in increasingly sharp and stark fashions. Most of the

major cities in the world, until the mid-nineteenth century, had relatively modest ecological “footprints” and were quite porous with respect to the natural environments in which they had developed. That is, their scale and spatial organization were consistent with the carrying capacity of the ecological systems in which they were embedded. Cities were consistent with sustained bioregional integrity and vitality. In the most successful of such alloys, the urban was sufficiently suffused with the natural to bring both kinds of environment into appreciative focus—a contrapuntal dynamic through which each effectively enhanced the aesthetic value of the other.

A notable feature of such urban–natural alloys is that they were highly reiterative or fractal in overall structure. That is, the interplay of the urban and the natural tended toward the repetition, at different scales and with varying detail, of a distinct pattern of relational organization. Instead of the spatial and functional singularities typical of post-threshold cities, in ecologically sound cities there is a marked similarity in the relationship between the urban and the natural at different locations and at different scales. For example, contrary to the stark segregation of industrial, residential, commercial, and natural (or park) spaces in post-threshold urban areas, early urban complexes tended to merge these spaces and to maintain considerable porosity in terms of their borders with their rural environs. From the standpoint of efficiency-biased cost–benefit analysis, this means substantial redundancy among adjacent production ecologies—a redundancy that is particularly costly in terms of both technological and human capital and that can be very profitably redressed by dramatically increasing scales of production and distribution.²⁶ At the same time, however, such redundancies—like those that obtain in the organization of the human brain—are extremely important in maintaining high degrees of meaningful interdependence, creativity, and resilience. They also promote critically attending to the systemic imperatives for reducing inter-domain crosstalk, thus fostering true coordination in the sense of meaningfully realized shared priorities and values.²⁷

The markedly fractal structure of successful early modern alloys of urban and natural environments is significant for the present discussion in several ways. First, it sets a precedent for seeing the tension between the urban and the natural as both sustainable and creative rather than inherently conflicted. Second, it suggests that a key factor in realizing functionally diverse environments is sensitivity to the role of scale thresholds in consolidating patterns of mutual contribution and appreciation or value enhancement. Finally, the reiterative pattern of urban–natural interrelatedness across scales establishes strong precedents for an ethics of interdependence that is meaningfully inclusive of the urban and the natural and would, in fact, promote their enhanced integration.

None of these is to suggest reestablishing the early modern city or foregoing the tremendous health benefits that have accrued through better theoretical and technical grasps of both natural and artificial systems. Instead, it is an argument for substantially revising currently prevailing dynamics associated with meeting basic needs to foster truly viable coordination among the natural and the urban

and to dispel the conceptual and practical myths of their externality to one another.

At present, there is a severe gap between the ideals of environmental ethics based on attributing intrinsic value to species and to ecosystems, and the complex realities associated with the fact that most humans now live in urban environments, many of them undeniably both degraded and degrading. It is estimated that within 15 years 2 billion people will be living in urban slums—that is, in environments that significantly and systematically subvert their capacities for contributing to their own and others' welfare. Roughly one-third of the planet's urban human population will dwell in circumstances of such low diversity that they are effectively cut off from the circulation of energies and possibilities for qualitative enhancement that alone sustain the possibility of truly flourishing rather than merely existing.²⁸

In a worst-case scenario, the public sphere may become so distorted by changes propagating *through* the environment, but originating (as I hope will become apparent over succeeding chapters) from a wide range of other sectors, that participation in it will prove almost unavoidably degrading. A report commissioned by the US Pentagon estimates, for instance, that within the next two decades, global climate change and instability will make it impossible for as many as 4 billion people globally to enjoy sufficient access to such basic resources as potable water to sustain reasonable levels of sanitation and health. The report suggests further that by 2025, ecologically driven military actions (both to secure scarce resources and to stop cross border migration of deprived populations numbering in the billions) will pose the single greatest threat to national and global security.²⁹

I am convinced that it is possible to avert such a scenario. Doing so will require, however, a significant change in how we understand and respond to environmental change. Any viable liberation ecology must consistently and meaningfully address both natural and urban environments, in conjunction with, and in the service of, promoting and refining their sustained and mutually enhancing interdependence. The concepts of beauty and diversity, as understood in a broadly Buddhist context, open up a critical space for weaving together these domains and for significantly revising environmental ethics and activism.

As a specific relational quality and direction, beauty insures that the temporality of environmental ethics is deeply dramatic—that it is karmically apt. The concept of diversity provides critical leverage in realizing the kinds of normative consensus that are needed to negotiate among competing interests in situations characterized by complex interdependence. This is especially important for any global environmental ethic because of the astonishing range of ecological and cultural systems that must be brought into mutually enhancing harmony and because of the full range of forces—especially the socio-economic and the political—that bear on the environment. In sharp distinction from values like justice that are thickest at the local level and thinnest at the global, diversity becomes thicker or more robust as one moves from local toward global contexts.³⁰ As such, it is highly suited to the necessary work of coordinating evaluative engagement with the dynamics of

the public sphere and promising as a core value in a robust ethics of interdependence—an ethics that enjoys critical purchase in the full range of domains in and through which public good is realized.

An environmental ethics robustly devoted to enhancing diversity in both natural and urban settings promises to be capable of enabling differences of norms and values that come into focus with increasing global interdependence to truly make a difference. At the same time it would enable infusing environmental sensitivities and sensibilities throughout the full spectrum of critical responses to our increasingly complex global interdependence, generating perhaps unprecedented potentials for realizing sustained and liberating ecological karma—the orientation of our situation as a whole toward expressing appreciative and contributory virtuosity.

HEALTH AND HEALING

Relating the personal and the public

Along with vitality, longevity and beauty, health is often cited in both early and later Buddhist teachings as a general outcome of good karma and, in its ultimate expression, as a specific outcome of correct and sustained practice and awakening. This suggests seeing health as a relational achievement correlated—either positively or negatively—with sustained patterns of values–intentions–actions. Because such abiding patterns of value–intention–action reflect both personal and communal sensibilities and sensitivities, such a conception of health would seem particularly suited to the task of evaluating and revising healthcare policy and its contributions to realizing public good.

Perhaps inevitably, discussions of health as a public good and as a focus of public policy have overwhelmingly focused on human health. That conventional focus will be initially followed here in developing a fully relational conception of health. But Buddhist teachings on the emptiness or horizonless interdependence and interpenetration of all things ultimately command going beyond this conventional focus on the purely human. To the extent that relationships are ontologically basic, we are compelled to see that healthcare policy cannot be truly effective unless it is rooted in a conception of health that has traction across all relational domains and at all scales. That is, our conception of health must allow us to speak usefully—and not merely metaphorically—about the health of environments, economies, and political institutions. This means as well, however, seeing how the values centrally involved in realizing liberating environments—appreciation, contribution, beauty and diversity—are also relevant in realizing personal and communal health. We should, in short, begin seeing the meaning of a fully coordinated approach to public policy and the realization of public good.

The meaning of health

It was only upon venturing beyond the gardens and walls of his father's exquisitely managed and trouble-free estate that Siddharta Gautama was moved to undertake the six-year journey that culminated in his realization of liberating intimacy with all things. That is, only when his ignorance was dispelled about sickness, old age, and death, along with the myriad indignities these inflict on us, did the young prince first

realize *bodhicitta*—a mind intent on full awakening. Tellingly, as he began teaching others to author their own liberation from trouble and suffering, his primary metaphor for the work to be undertaken was that of “healing the wound of existence.”

Fundamental to the Buddha’s public teaching was enhancing awareness of *dukkha* (“suffering” or, better still, “trouble”) and the conditional pattern of its arising. Throughout his teaching career, the troubling exigencies of physical illness, old age, and death (along with losing what has been cherished and being unable to attain what is desired) served as concrete examples of *dukkha*. This apparent concern with bodily trouble and suffering did not, however, result in treatment regimes that were specifically or even primarily somatic. In spite of the custom of referring to the practices recommended for alleviating and eventually eliminating *dukkha* as medicines, the Buddha’s evident and unwavering strategy was to disclose and provide means of dissolving the general patterns of interdependent conditions through which trouble and suffering arise. As summarized in the teaching of the twelve-fold chain of interdependent origination, this general pattern of conditions centers, not on factual or so-called objective conditions but, on unskillful or unwholesome (*akusala*) patterns of attention and conduct.¹

In the course of offering suitable illustrations of trouble and suffering and the causes of their arising, the Buddha did address why it is that some of us are lame or chronically ill and others are not, or why some members of a family will fall to an epidemic infection while others will not. Such explanations were never medical. Although the Indian Ayurvedic medical tradition was already well-developed and afforded sophisticated diagnostics and treatment regimes, no significant appeal was made to this body of knowledge and technique. Instead, the Buddha’s explanations were consistently and explicitly karmic. That is, they focused on how certain values and intentions—alone or in combination—can troublingly shape the experiential space of sentient being.

Given the generally restricted availability of sophisticated medical knowledge and attention, and the relatively limited control over illness and the effects of aging that medicine afforded at the time, this focus on values and intentions might be seen as simple pragmatism—a “best” response in the context of scarce resources. In light of the power of modern, technologically driven medicine to identify disease causalities and control both physical and psychic states, it might be assumed that karmic explanations can be dismissed as no longer relevant artifacts of a “less advanced” age. For reasons that I hope to make clear, this would be a great mistake.

Prevailing mainstream conceptions of health in health policy

Until quite recently, the most widely prevalent modern conceptions of health have been polarized according to whether they assume that health is most appropriately and primarily defined in terms of disease or of well-being.

Conceptions biased toward the former assumption take health to be the natural equilibrium that is manifest when an organism’s overall mode of functioning is

not disturbed by disease or infirmity. Health, in other words, is simply the absence of disease or abnormality. It is the default mode of organic functioning. This negative approach to defining health has the advantage of allowing for relatively precise quantitative assessments of an organism's health status at any given point of time, as well as for setting broad population baselines for normal functioning. Most present day medical treatment and prevention regimes either tacitly or explicitly invoke such an understanding of health.

Conceptions of health biased toward the centrality of well-being yield more qualitative approaches to assessing health that are rooted in recognition of the normative character of healthy functioning. Here, both individual subjective perspectives and culture are taken to have crucial roles in defining the meaning of health. According to such a view, health is best understood as the optimal state or functioning of an organism rather than a simple baseline status. This conception of health is often found in connection with fitness regimes and in sports medicine where the desired levels of bodily functioning are set well above baseline norms drawn from the general population. Implicit in such a view is recognition that—like gender and ethnicity, for example—health is to a great degree socially constructed and can only be assessed fully in broadly relational terms. This is concisely reflected in the World Health Organization (WHO) definition of health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not simply the absence of disease or infirmity.”

Current medical practice and policy tend to reinforce seeing the former conception of health as ultimately more fundamental. Individual health assessments are primarily based on standard measures of vital signs, the analysis of various body fluids, mapping the bodily interior, its skeletal structure, organs, and electrochemical functioning through one or another scanning technology, and so on. Medically addressing health problems means, first and foremost, restoring normal patterns of functioning and hence the balance and integrity of the individual patient's bodily system. Treatment thus pivots on identifying the proximal causes of functional or structural irregularities and either removing these sources or deflecting their influence through surgical, pharmaceutical, or biomechanical means. Granted secure levels of functioning with respect to population wide standards or norms, concern may then be directed to optimizing well-being, not just in terms of quantifiably measurable physical fitness but also in terms of felt experience and social reintegration.

Increasingly, however, it is being realized that the source causes of disease and infirmity are not entirely or even most fundamentally biological. Thus, in a 1996 Institute of Medicine report—*Global Health in Transition: A Synthesis*—it is noted that many major health sector problems are driven by “commanding realities that lie primarily outside that sector.” In other words, “many major health problems have social origins . . . and the most powerful levers for achieving durable improvements in human health status in any country . . . lie outside the health sector.”² Indeed, one could well map the causality of health problems as a series of concentric environs that include, in order of causal immediacy: the

physical environment; social and cultural context; the sphere of commerce; national, international, and global economics; and political forces from the local to the global.³

The broad point being made in this and similar reports is that health lies at the nexus of significant interdependencies obtaining among diverse physiological, psychological, social, cultural, economic, political, and environmental realities, and there is no sustainable way of promoting health and addressing existing health problems without taking these interdependencies into critical account. The most effective or crucially underdeveloped ways of responding to health problems and promoting healing may not be medical, but cultural, social, economic, and political.

At the same time that global health policy has begun to incorporate recognitions of the relationally complex nature of health and the necessarily extra-medical nature of perhaps the most important levers for bringing about sustained healing and health, medical practitioners and researchers have begun to recognize a parallel dissolution of boundaries between bodily health and mental and social well-being. For example, the concepts of *allostasis* and *allostatic load* have recently been gaining considerable currency as therapeutically useful means of framing the central role played by the mind–body relationship in health and in the treatment of health problems.⁴

Allostasis refers to the process of maintaining stability in the course of responding to challenge and reflects an understanding of health as a *capacity for adaptation*. Allostatic load consists of the cumulative somatic and psychic burden of repeatedly responding to challenge. This includes not only the total effects of chronic stress but also all the genetic, developmental, and environmental factors that condition the effectiveness of adaptive responses to challenge. A rapidly growing body of medical research now confirms the extent to which the capacity for adaptation is conditioned by the interdependence of experience (mediated by the central nervous system), the endocrine system (that chemically governs body functions), and the immune system (which organizes responses to infection and other challenges).

Most medical research focuses on gaining clarity about the process of allostasis, as it plays out in—or throughout—the human body. But such a conception of health as a function of adaptivity is broadly consonant with seeing environmental well-being as a function of robust ecological diversity and begins approaching the generality needed in a conception of health that is relevant—and, indeed, increasingly so—at scales ranging from the microbial to the ecological. At the very least, it urges affirmation that health arises through open and properly aligned and balanced reciprocal interactions among physical, biological, emotional, cognitive, social, and cultural dimensions of human being. Health is not a state to be achieved and maintained—the model of homeostasis; it is a distinctively creative quality of interrelatedness.⁵

In combination, such developments are beginning to elaborate connections between Western medical perceptions of the human body and health, and those

proper to some traditional medical systems—for example, Ayurvedic and traditional Chinese medicine—that have treated the human body as a profoundly open system through which a wide spectrum of forces and environments are brought into qualitatively complex and sustained relationship. Although the psychic, somatic, and social domains can be considered as functionally separate for heuristic purposes, in actuality they are irreducibly interdependent. Truly comprehensive healing must address all three.

With the ongoing dissolution of the kinds of strict, ontological differences that—especially in Western intellectual history—have long been assumed to exist between mind and body, individual and environment, or self and society, it becomes possible to speak in other than purely metaphorical terms about the health of a mind, a society, an economy, a political system, or an environment. Indeed, it becomes possible and apparently imperative to perceive significant continuity among them.

Nevertheless, there remains a tendency—particularly in medical and policy circles—to pair physiological and environmental factors on one hand and psychological and social factors on another. The logic of these pairings, as “natural” as they might seem, reflects persistent modern (Cartesian) biases toward seeing body and mind as intrinsically separate, with the former reflecting the domain of objective facts and the latter the domain of subjective (or intersubjective) meanings. But such pairings also announce the absence of a robust set of concepts linking the practices through which physiological/environmental facts and psychosocial meanings are discerned, attended, and understood. They announce, in short, an epistemological and metaphysical lacuna—a missing “middle ground.”

Thus, while medical research has clearly demonstrated that depression is correlated with neurochemical imbalances, it is not clear if one is cause and the other is effect or if they are in complex causal reciprocity. While it is evident that community’s socioeconomic status independently affects morbidity and mortality, it is far from evident how that could be so. And while it is now widely documented that such psychosocial factors as characteristic thinking styles, relational skills, and religious or cultural beliefs affect both resilience to and recovery from illness or injury, as well as how successfully the effects of surgery or adversity are overcome, it is not evident how this occurs. Resilience ultimately rests on cellular processes that build and protect cells and tissues, and it is unclear, for example, how character disposition (e.g. optimistic or pessimistic) or religious commitments are linked to these processes.⁶

In short, what is lacking is a set conceptual resources for attending to and appreciating patterns of interdependence as such—resources that can only emerge in the context of a worldview and metaphysics taking relationality to be more basic than any individual things being related. More specifically, what is lacking is a set of conceptual resources that is sufficiently robust to render practically evident linkages between values, intentions, emotions, and relational skills on one hand, and the factual realities of the body, the physical environment, and

socioeconomic status on the other. This is precisely what the Buddhist teaching of karma aims at enabling and encouraging us to cultivate.

***Toward a general Buddhist conception of health
as relational virtuosity***

The conceptions of health that are embedded in Buddhist practice contrast sharply with the most prevalent views circulating today both in the general population and among policy makers. Much like the concepts now emerging on at least some stretches of the cutting edge of medical science, Buddhist conceptions of health elide any clear demarcation between the psychic and the somatic, as well as between the cognitive and emotional, and between the personal and social. Cultural, social, economic, and political forces are no less crucial factors in conditioning levels of health and patterns of healing than are beliefs, diet, and heredity. From a Buddhist perspective, however, the degree to which individual organisms or persons remain central to prevailing conceptions of health can be seen as an index of the degree to which these conceptions fail to accept the irreducibility of interdependence. Ultimately, health cannot consist as a quality or condition of any individual body or mind, considered in even relative isolation only. Rather, health consists as a quality of dynamically complex relational wholes. It should not be seen as fundamentally a state-of-affairs, either normal or optimal, but as a situational direction or relational heading.

Such an understanding of health derives from the signal aim of Buddhist practice to resolve suffering or trouble and the centrality of karma in doing so. It is thus an understanding of health in which values, meanings, and intentions are pivotal. According to the core teachings of Buddhism, trouble and suffering originate in relational patterns that are inflected in unwholesome or unskillful (*akusala*) ways, most crucially as a function of ignorance (*avijjā*) and habit formations (*saṃkhāra*). These—along with the craving (*taṇhā*) to which they are conducive—are the primary roots of illness or malaise; healing begins with their situation-specific dissolution.

The term customarily translated as ignorance—*avijjā*—literally means “not seeing” but has the specifically Buddhist connotation of failing to see and to appreciate the interdependence obtaining among all things. Thus, especially in early Buddhist teachings, ignorance is repeatedly associated with the claim, “I am”—the assertion of a self or ego that exists or literally “stands apart from” from its situation as an independent thing or being. More generally, this was understood as the assertion of any fixed identity or essential, abiding nature; any absolute truth or falsehood; or any context-free good or evil. Trouble and suffering derive from excluding the profoundly rich middle ground that obtains among all things, cutting off “self” from “other” and “this” from “that.” The Buddhist practice of seeing all things as troubled or troubling, as impermanent, and as having no-self, empty of fixed essences—the so-called teaching of the three marks that is common to all Buddhist traditions—is the root practice of

restoring that middle ground of interdependence and healing the “wound of existence.”

It is important to understand the subtlety of the critique of self-existence in which Buddhist conceptions of health and healing are rooted. Nagarjuna, the pre-eminent second-century Indian Buddhist philosopher, concludes his major work by claiming that the Buddha’s entire teaching career was an effort to bring about the “relinquishing of all views.”⁷ It is through establishing views—that is, fixed perspectives on what and how things are and are-not—that the “wound of existence” is inflicted and our situation rendered ripe for calamity, contention, and conflict.

As Nagarjuna makes clear, this is in part because no view can afford any more than limited insight into the overall complexion of our situation—a single profile of things and their contexts. Views arise only when the emptiness of all things is no longer fully appreciated—that is, when their interdependence and mutual relevance is in some measure effectively ignored. Indeed, what we refer to as “things”—whether rocks or trees or clouds in the sky, individual persons and the societies of which they are parts, or situations and historical moments—all emerge only as functions of habitually compounding patterns of limited and limiting relationship. Actions undertaken on the basis of such relationships necessarily interrupt or at least deflect the free and horizonless play of relationships that constitutes the emptiness or mutual relevance of all things. Ignorant actions prevent realizing how each thing actually and potentially contributes to all other things and thus what each thing could mean for us. To be ignorant is to be starved of meaning, to be unaware of how to proceed in ways not conducive to trouble or suffering.

When patterns of attention prevail that do not penetrate skillfully to the relational origins of things and that are not open to the emptiness of all things, action is formulaic and reactive rather than flexible and responsive. That is, ignorance is at once fueled by and fuels habit formations or karmic dispositions that are at best only narrowly effective. It is important to stress that such habits and dispositions arise as patterns of value-laden action that were originally undertaken intentionally and effectively. But once these patterns become habitual or sedimented, they are liable to persisting in spite of significant changes of circumstance or context. Should this happen, these patterns of value-laden activity can cross the threshold of their own utility and begin generating problematic and potentially catastrophic, ironic consequences.

Rather than blending and blending-in with the limitless, mutual relevance of all things, attention and action rooted in ignorance impose a single meaning or set of meanings on things—determining what things “are” and “will be.” In a world composed of things with essentially fixed natures, this might not be troubling. Determining what things really are and are-not is to be able to act precisely and certainly in pursuing our own interests. But in a world in which all things are best seen as impermanent or dynamic, in which our own interests are finally inseparable from those of others, and in which the predictable and the unprecedented are

often profoundly intertwined, deeply sedimented habits are ultimately violating liabilities.

Again, this is not to deny that in their most rudimentary forms, habits formations and dispositions can be quite useful. But their advantage is highly context-dependent or conventional. It is, for example, habitual for American city-dwellers to glance first left and then right before crossing a street. While traveling in Japan or Thailand, however, where one drives on the left-hand side of the road, this automatic safety precaution becomes disconcertingly out of place and dangerous. When habits or dispositions are developed with respect to what things mean, untoward consequences can compound with startling rapidity and complexity, and with histories that cannot be as easily undone or reversed as the act of stepping off a sidewalk to find a previously unseen vehicle streaking by within inches. Much humor pivots on two people attributing quite different meanings to an apparently common situation or occurrence, bringing into focus distinct patterns of relevance among the diverse aspects of the situation. As matters unfold, unbeknown to our hapless comic figures, these patterns of both assumed and intended meaning are ballooning and diverging ever more dramatically until something happens that brings about their sudden, explosively comic collapse. Of course, such collapses can be just as well be tragic.

What must be kept in mind is that all such habits and dispositions—whether uniquely personal or culturally common—develop on the basis of consistently maintained patterns of values–intentions–actions. In Buddhist terms, they are karmic formations that will necessarily have experienced consequences. According to the Buddhist teaching of karma, although the critiques of self and existence are pivotal for meaningfully resolving trouble or suffering, just as pivotal is realizing precisely how things have come to be, “as they have come to be” (*yathabhutam*), in meticulous consonance with our own abiding patterns of attention and concern, our patterns of intentional activity and values. What we attend, value, and intend crucially shapes the habits of thought, emotion, communication, and action that substantially make up what each of us refers to as “me” and that fundamentally condition what we experience. In both direct and indirect ways, these patterned and patterning habit formations shape our life stories and who we are within them. And because these habit formations arise in the course of ongoing interactions with others and our environments, informed by our specific cultures and histories, the outcomes and opportunities they occasion are to some degree always *ours* and never simply mine or yours. Karma is invariably shared. To the degree that it is wholesomely virtuous (*kusala*), Buddhist practice enables a healing critique of both self and society.

The teaching of karma can be placed alongside the teachings of no-self and emptiness as among those most crucial to Buddhist practice and, individually, as perhaps the most profoundly challenging. It invites us to realize that we live in a cosmos that is irreducibly dramatic—a cosmos in which all things are meaningfully interdependent, a cosmos in which our own values and intentions are just as powerful as such scientifically documented forces as gravity and electromagnetism in

configuring our bodies, our lives, and our circumstances. Reacting or responding to challenging situations without a clear understanding of their dramatic precedents and consequents—the currents of meaning, outcomes, and opportunities that constitute our karma—is almost invariably a guarantee of continued, if not intensified, trouble or suffering.

In combination, ignorance and habitual karmic dispositions render us deeply susceptible to compromised or eroded capacities for health and healing. On one hand, this is because such dispositions effectively blind us to everything except what we take to be good and relevant, what we want and intend—the meanings we attribute to our situation. This, however, is to be blind to all but a very limited range of the practically infinite resources always and everywhere present for revising the meaning of our situation. It is to be almost exclusively concerned with realizing desired outcomes and not with freely responding to opportunity. On the other hand, such habits are at the same time slowly draining us of those resources that we can claim—with qualified accuracy—as our own.

In early Buddhism, drains of vital—especially attentive—resources for responding skillfully to trouble or suffering are referred to as *āsava* (literally, “infectious outflows”), the waning of which is said to be the advent of wisdom (*paññā*). Such drains mark the misdirection of vital energies and resources—their transformation into waste. At the same time, these wasteful outflows infect or pollute our situation. That is, they degrade the relational processes and capacities characterizing our situation.⁸ Consider, for example, how one person’s habit of automatically declining or qualifying the advice or help of others will, over time, lead them to feeling blocked from offering anything to him; or how a couple slowly comes undone through a silent tyranny of the familiar as one or both members fall into the habit of seeing their partner in essentially fixed and predictable terms and as offering nothing new.

Early Buddhist teachings on the “four nutriments” (*āhāra*)—material nutriments (food, water, air), sensory contacts (through sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell, but also thinking), volitional complexes, and consciousness—suggest that the long-term effects of habit formations can be conceived as analogous to those of malnutrition. Ignorance and habit formations effectively restrict the degree to which we are nourished by our situation. Just as there are material diets that can be physically debilitating, there are patterns of experience—sensory contact, volition, and consciousness—that bring about an analogous compromise of emotional, cognitive, and social functioning, resilience, and coping ability. Health depends upon realizing a proper range, quality, and balance among all four nutriments.

Habit formations bring about restricted patterns of awareness or sensory contact that can be just as corrosive of health as diets severely lacking in particular vitamins or minerals. But they necessarily also restrict our intentional range and thus our capacity for meaning-making commitments—constraining the extent to which we can creatively direct attention and action. They are impediments to realizing the meaning of vows and of honoring them, thus blocking us

from being able to manifest the unlimited skillful means (*upāya*) of the bodhisattva or enlightening being. Finally, granted the Buddhist understanding of consciousness as a quality of relationship—a relationship out of which it is possible to abstract both “sensing organism” and “sensed environment” or “actor” and “acted upon”—it is impossible to disentangle karma (values–intentions–actions) for fouling our environment from karma for fouling our selves; karma for stressing our environment from karma for stressing ourselves. Again, a habitually degraded environment is inseparable from habitually degraded consciousness.

Yet habit formations with respect to sensation and intentional activities aimed at managing the content of experience are basic to the construction of self-identity. They are the foundation on which we are able consistently to claim, “I am.” The Buddhist critique of self and existence aims precisely at dissolving the sets of fixed dispositions by means of which we channel the play of relationships constitutive of our situation and carve out an ostensibly private stream of experience that we then try managing to the best of our ability. This is the root expression of unwholesome (*akusala*) attention and health-compromising conduct. The Buddhist critique of self is aimed at ending our systematic malnutrition. Health is virtuosity directed toward realizing liberating and nourishing intimacy among all things.

Implications of seeing health as situational and relational

To this point, we are carried both by some current cutting edge scientific and medical thinking about health and by traditional Buddhist analyses to an apparently common recognition that healing depends on capacities for innovation, adaptive resilience, and sustained yet flexible coping activity. But the paths taken prior to and after this point of intersection differ in important ways. From a Buddhist perspective, all illnesses and infirmity are to some degree karmic. Fully restoring and sustainably enhancing health depends ultimately on reordering existing values or developing new values to redirect situational meaning.

In a rudimentary way, this can be made concrete by considering what happens when a child plays soccer intensely enough, on a day hot enough, to suffer dehydration. From the prevailing medical perspective, this is a health problem that occurs because the body loses more fluid in the cooling process related to high levels of exertion than it can draw from either internal reserves or through external intake of fluid. Unchecked, dehydration leads to increasingly severe overheating. In extreme cases, this can lead to fainting or even a shutdown of key bodily functions that could potentially result in death. Treating dehydration is a matter of slowly replenishing bodily fluids and depleted electrolytes.

From a Buddhist perspective, this familiar explanation is at best only partial. Dehydration is not simply a problematic body state occurring as part of a purely physical sequence of causes and effects. Rather, dehydration signals a peculiarly compressed or narrowed quality of relationship, comprising both the child and her situation, that results in the absence of thirst-quenching conduct. Dehydration

depends on a contraction of awareness sufficient for the child to become attentively isolated within her environment. In effect, she becomes so absorbed in her play that she simply fails to notice that her body is producing more heat than her immediate environment is able to absorb. She becomes a potentially dangerous interruption in the situational whole—a gap in the “allostatic” dynamic of the playground.

The possible reasons for this contraction and breakdown are virtually limitless. It might be that she knew she was getting hot and thirsty but didn’t want to stop because she was on the verge of beating a long-standing rival. Perhaps she didn’t notice her need for water because she was thinking of an argument with her father and punishing her body as a way of punishing him. Perhaps she was driven beyond her limits by a soccer coach focused on creating a championship team and laboring under the impression that there can be “no gain without pain.”

The current medical view sees these “circumstantial” conditions as incidental to the direct causes of dehydration and treats the child accordingly. A Buddhist perspective insists on taking them fully into account, especially the roles played by both attention and intention. Treatment and healing then necessarily imply learning—not just an extended sequence of situational conditions leading to a normally cooling body, but the incorporation of new insights and resolves into the history of the child, her soccer playing friends, her family, and so on. *Healing does not simply imply a return to previous somatic norms but also meaningfully heightened awareness and increased relational capacity.* It is thus part of a Buddhist conception of health that healing from an injury or illness leaves us healthier—perhaps stronger and more flexible, but always more attentively astute and actively attuned—than we were before the injury or illness.

Such an understanding of health and healing has the important policy implication that healthcare systems can be evaluated, not just in terms of the extent and efficiency of the services they offer, and the proportion of the overall population that they reach, but also in terms of how conducive they are to increased resilience, successful coping, heightened and more flexible patterns of attention and action, and learning. In more common, conventional terms, it suggests evaluating healthcare delivery in terms of how successfully it brings about increased community-based responsibility for both prevention and treatment.⁹ The most effective healthcare systems will result in populations that are increasingly capable of assessing and responding to their own health challenges. They will not result—as do our present, globally standardizing approaches to healthcare—in populations that are increasingly dependent upon being cured through professionally delivered expert services.

The medical erosion of personal and public health resources

Over the past several decades, with only minor exceptions, the global trend in healthcare has been to converge on the model of highly technological medical

practice and healthcare delivery systems that has come to be the norm in most highly developed nations. Historically, these systems are rooted in nineteenth-century advances in scientific medicine that resulted in unprecedented abilities for addressing infectious disease. First through improved sanitation in medical environments and through scientifically designed public water and waste systems, mortality rates dropped dramatically. Through increased understanding of causal relations among various physiological systems, and through technological advances like the X-ray and EKG machines, early diagnosis and improved treatment regimes developed with startling rapidity throughout the twentieth century, as well as improved abilities to treat severe injuries of the sort that would previously have resulted in permanent disability or death. In combination, the systematic improvement of public sanitation and the delivery of modern, scientific medical care has enabled societies throughout the developed world and in much of the developing world to undergo both demographic and epidemiological transitions to secure remarkably increased life expectancies and a shift from communicable to chronic or lifestyle illnesses as the greatest contributors to the overall burdens of disease and disability.¹⁰

We have thus come to live in a world where almost god-like control over our material afflictions is generally available. We can reattach severed limbs. We can remove cataracts. We can transplant organs, replace damaged heart valves, and manufacture arrays of chemicals capable of eliminating the experience of pain, depression, and sleeplessness. We can change our sex and can map our genetically determined health liabilities virtually from the moment of conception. It is not altogether a fantasy to imagine a day in which it might reasonably be considered the right of each and every human being to pass his or her life completely free of experienced disease or decrepitude.

Most of us could not imagine forfeiting the control we have earned over the factual dimensions of health and healing. By all standard measures, current state-of-the-art medical practice and healthcare are good for each and every one of us. But from a Buddhist perspective the further question must be asked whether such technologically driven medicine and healthcare are truly good for all of us. That is, do they bring about increased relational capacities and deepening community resources for responding to challenge and adversity, or do they render us increasingly dependent on expert services that, furthermore, cannot be made equally and sustainably available to all?

As I have argued at length elsewhere,¹¹ when carried out consistently enough, solving problems through exerting control (technological or otherwise) is conducive to a karma or pattern of values–intentions–practices and associated outcomes/opportunities that eventually carries us across a threshold of utility beyond which our problem-solving efforts and techniques begin generating further, slightly different problems of the sort that render precisely these kinds of efforts and techniques indispensable. That is, such efforts and techniques begin reproducing the conditions of their own necessity. Thus, it is in societies with the highest average speed of transportation that the greatest amount of time is spent in traveling; it is in those with the most advanced medical care that the average

person receives the most medical attention. For better or worse, increasing our capacities and willingness to control means that there will never be a dearth of things and conditions to control, and also that control itself will become increasingly ambient as a relationship-biasing value. The “cyclic” nature of karma virtually guarantees that phases of being *in control* will be matched by phases of being *subject to control*. Being able to exert virtually unlimited control over our bodies and our circumstances means living in circumstances and with bodies that are almost always in need thereof.

The implications of this for healthcare policy can be brought into focus by considering the grounds for Ivan Illich’s iconoclastic conclusion, “the medical establishment has become a major threat to health.”¹² Illich begins by admitting that while average life expectancies have risen in all societies that have significantly modernized, there is little evidence suggesting that institutionalized medical diagnosis and treatment have played the dominant causal role in these gains. Instead, the primary cause for decreased mortality rates would seem to be simple sanitation practices, not sophisticated medical treatment. Illich then details the specific counter-productivity of institutionalized healthcare through documenting the epidemic rise of iatrogenic—or “physician originated”—illness. Beyond a certain level of institutionalization and sophistication, medical treatment begins producing illness, not alleviating it.¹³

While initial responses to Illich’s conclusions from within both the medical community and policy circles were cool at best, research into iatrogenic health problems has continued to build over the last quarter century and has become virtually mainstream. For example, in a 2000 report, *To Err Is Human: Building a Safer Healthcare System*,¹⁴ the Institute of Medicine conservatively estimated that the number of annual deaths in the United States attributable to medical errors or the side-effects of treatment exceeded that of the eighth leading cause of death. In a study published the same year in the prestigious *Journal of the American Medical Association*,¹⁵ non-error effects of drug treatments were also included to bring the total of iatrogenic deaths to 250,000 per year—the third leading cause of death behind heart disease and cancer.¹⁶

As made clear in the Institute of Medicine report and in the mission statement of the American Iatrogenic Association, the prevailing understanding is that the threats to health posed by institutionalized medicine are a function of human error. From this, it follows that addressing those threats is primarily a matter of better disciplining hygienic practices in healthcare settings and instituting more effective medical training and accountability regimes. Illich’s most controversial and radical point has largely been overlooked: that the threats to health posed by institutionalized healthcare consist of ironic consequences of medical technology and a restrictive definition of health. Modern medicine has not given rise to miraculously healthy populations but rather to populations that expect, demand, and eventually require ever more miraculous cures.

Anticipating much of contemporary medical science and quite consonant with Buddhist conceptions of health, Illich defined health as “the intensity with which

individuals cope with their internal states and environmental conditions.” “[H]ealth levels,” he insists, “will be at their optimum when the environment brings out autonomous, personal, and responsible coping abilities.”¹⁷ Human health is not just somatic or psychic, but also ethical and political, and rests on a foundation of actively cultivated critical consciousness. For Illich, institutionally provided healthcare is conducive to systematic health denial insofar as it undermines the conservation and development of both personal and public health resources by encouraging dependence on essentially commodified health services. In Illich’s terms, a functional healthcare system should bring about greater self-reliance and increased capacities for coping with both internal and environmental challenges. Institutionalized medicine precipitates, instead, a recession of responsive resources throughout the served population.¹⁸

In spite of recent protocols (motivated in no small part by the high cost of malpractice insurance and litigation) which attempt to make the patient a participant in treatment decisions, institutionalized medicine continues to foster reliance on healthcare professionals. Inviting patients to select among various care options for the purpose of restoring “normal” psychophysical functioning is not the same as fostering increasingly skilled attention to our own, always unique, circumstances in a more virtuosic and responsive manner. Freedoms of choice are not a substitute for capacities of relating freely. A quarter century after Illich’s iconoclastic conclusion that institutionalized healthcare is a form of systematic health denial, we are still being widely trained to ignore our own personal, relational resources for healing in favor of habitually consulting with medical professionals who, we believe, will be able to provide us with a scientifically proven cure.¹⁹

Illich is undeniably correct in countering the fallacy that universal individual benefits entail necessary communal benefits and reasonably sees the counter-productivity of medicine in contemporary society as a special case of the general counter-productivity of technologies (in the broadest sense of the word) that have crossed their threshold of utility. Illich’s own belief was that the key response to medical nemesis should be establishing limits to the growth of institutionalized medicine. But as pointed out by some critics, it is a peculiarity of this response that it could only be carried out by a world-wide authoritarian regime and would for that reason be no less self-defeating in Illich’s terms than the medical and technological practices it would ideally restrain.²⁰ Either way, the value of control would remain central to the healthcare process. In Buddhist terms, the shortcoming of Illich’s analysis is his failure to recognize fully the pivotal role that is played in health and healing by karma: the conditioning of outcomes/opportunities by values–intentions–practices.

Granted the broader conceptions of health that can be variously formulated in terms of contemporary medical thought and research or in terms of Buddhist teachings on interdependence, emptiness, and karma, disease and infirmity cannot be adequately treated as disturbances of our bodies. Indeed, in a truly comprehensive healthcare system, treatment must be directed at the total complex pattern of our interrelatedness. Healing cannot take place fully if restricted to repairing damaged tissues or individual psyches. Damaged, atrophied, and

blocked relationships, too, must be carefully and meaningfully repaired, revitalized, and opened. Indeed, primary healthcare properly consists of enhancing meaningful relational capabilities and commitments.

The total range of relational capabilities that must be considered relevant necessarily spans the entire spectrum running from the biophysical relationships linking organisms and the environmental systems of which they are parts, to perceptually and conceptually mediated relationships, to relationships that are predominantly emotional, familial, social, economic, cultural, political, and spiritual. In every particular instance, of course, the relationships most directly linked to compromised health and the prospects of comprehensive healing will vary. Different weights will be associated, in effect, with each of these centers of relational gravity, suggesting that some be given more urgent attention than others depending on the degree to which they impede responsive flexibility and shared meaning-making activity. Ultimately, however, it is the entire pattern of interdependence comprising all such centers of relational gravity that must be seen as the basic “unit” of diagnosis and treatment.

Thus, while it is certainly appropriate to address matters of diet in treating patient obesity and associated risks of cardio-vascular disease, doing so is not effectively separable from addressing issues related to family history and dynamics, culinary capabilities, and food culture. Neither is it separable from addressing issues related to global patterns of consumption, to the effects of advertising on those patterns, and to the politics of international trade. It is not enough to make a healthier diet known to and practically available, (e.g. in terms of preparation and cost) to populations at health risk due to obesity if, at the same time, there is not a concerted effort to revise food culture or to constrain the production and aggressive marketing of fast food. That would be like building a roof over an individual garden to keep it from flooding when all the surrounding area is subject to an unrelenting downpour of rain and pitched to direct runoff into the garden. Truly comprehensive health responses might well include activating capabilities for critically assessing and altering existing biochemical conditions and personal habits but also a range of relevant social, economic, and political dynamics and institutions.

At the same time, the capabilities for undertaking a healthy transformation of one’s total relational complex are not, by themselves, sufficient to bring about sustained movement in that direction. In the absence of sustained commitments to change across the full range of relevant domains, changes are as likely to cancel as complement one another. Indeed, from a karmic perspective, health responses or treatment strategies that are not framed in accordance with inducing holistic commitments to healing patterns of relationship are, in time, very likely to eventuate in mounting costs to overall health.

Going beyond the medicalization of health

Although health has long been considered a primary public good, and although there is a long global history of publicly supported healthcare and of recognizing

the role of broad environmental factors affecting health quality, our prevailing conceptions of health and our healthcare institutions represent highly refined products of the medicalization of health. They do not encourage *treating* personal health, public health, and overall environmental health as an integral whole. They do not establish practices for progressively enhancing the quality of interrelatedness obtaining among the personal, the public, and the environmental as such. And they do not embody or express a keen and comprehensive sensitivity to the crucial causal role of values in the emergence of both health threats and our prospects for healing them. Especially in the context of twenty-first century realities of complex interdependence and accelerating change, this constitutes an increasingly acute health liability.

One need not look far for concrete examples. Contemporary scales and patterns of globalization have driven and been driven by developments in transportation technology that are actively transforming the spatial and temporal characteristics of communicable disease transmission and creating conditions highly conducive to the mutation and proliferation of disease agents. This was made quite clear by the heavily reported outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003. Globalization processes are not just accelerating the circulation of goods and services but also of bacterial and viral threats to personal and public health. Yet, this specific kind of health threat—its media coverage and very real and tragic human consequences notwithstanding—actually represents a relatively minor challenge to existing healthcare regimes, as evidenced by the fact that responding to SARS did not require any qualitative shift in health treatment practices or strategies.

The extremely rapid accidental spread of a new pathogen presents a certain kind of health *problem*. In the case of SARS, it was possible using current scientific research methods to identify the pathogen and its characteristics with remarkable efficiency, and to relatively quickly develop protocols both for safely caring of those infected and for preventing the unintended transmission of the pathogen through mass transportation systems. Although the global media coverage might have made it seem otherwise, the spread of SARS was halted in a remarkably short period of time, with global fatalities held to under 1,000 (roughly 9% of cases reported worldwide). Problem solved.

The astonishing efficiency of the medical response to SARS contrasts sharply with the ineffectiveness of the same globally standard medical research and healthcare delivery system at coordinating successful responses to other, truly major global health challenges. These include the global scourge of HIV/AIDS with an estimated 40 million cases and 3 million deaths annually, the resurgence of tuberculosis with 2 billion cases and 2 million deaths annually, the persistence of malaria with roughly 500 million clinical cases and 1 million deaths annually, and the lowered vitality associated with chronic under-nourishment. With the exception of HIV/AIDS, these do not signal the advent of new pathogens. What is new is their scale and apparent intractability in spite of the availability of well-understood means of effective treatment. Globally entrenched HIV/AIDS,

tuberculosis, malaria, and malnutrition are not *health problems*; they mark the emergence of much more deeply challenging, globally conditioned *health predicaments*. They make apparent a systematic distortion of global health and healthcare outcomes and opportunities that cannot be traced ultimately to disease agents, to medical/technological inadequacies, or to infrastructure shortfalls, but to conflicts of values and interests. They cannot be solved by medically treating individual patients or aggregated populations thereof but only by resolutely redirecting complex and dramatically charged global interdependencies.

It is important to note that such predicaments are not a phenomenon confined to the developing world as the aforementioned examples might suggest. They are simply the largest-scale examples of a global shift toward predicament-compromised health and healing. Consider the case of Washington, DC. The geography of health in the capital of the world's wealthiest country is so extremely and persistently uneven that life expectancy is 57 years at the beginning of a half hour train ride from the largely African-American and poor urban core and 77 years on arrival in the predominantly white and affluent Maryland suburbs.²¹ This disparity exists in a country with the world's highest per capita spending on healthcare, in a city where national health policy and research agendas are crafted, and within easy commuting distance of the National Institute of Health (located, of course, in the Maryland suburbs).

Contemporary globalization processes have brought about the interpenetration of local and global spaces and are radically and fluidly reshaping the geography of health in ways that apparently parallel the global reshaping of the geographies of wealth, political power, and techno-cultural dominance. The dynamics of increasing inequity that now characterize the global distribution of wealth and access to resources both among and within societies are being meticulously replicated in the health sector. In fact, these reiterative dynamics are most effectively seen as interdependent expressions of a ubiquitous value-driven reconfiguration of the topography of public space—a postmodern legacy of the global dominance of modern values, especially the scientific values of universality and predictability, the technologically embodied value of control, the market values of competition and choice, and the political values of equality and autonomy.

Contrary to the speculations of conspiracy theorists, the inequity amplifying effects of this reconfiguration are not planned consequences. Rather, they are the result of a range of processes—social, economic, and political, but also scientific, technological and cultural—that originally played out at relatively local scales converging on a shared set of values and entering into relationships of mutual reinforcement that eventually enabled them to develop global reach. Contemporary patterns of globalization express the sustained (but perhaps not at all sustainable) interdependence of these processes and the predominance of the values informing them.

Over the past quarter century in particular, these global interdependencies have crossed critical thresholds of scale and intensity to begin exhibiting complex behavior in the technical sense of being both self-organizing and innovation-generating.

That is, they have become systems of interdependence that are responsive to the effects of their own behavior on both their environment and their own constitutions—learning or meaning-making systems that are prone to changing in ways that are consistent with their own interests and histories, but that nevertheless could *not* have been anticipated. In Buddhist terms, they have begun ramifying karmically. They express in consistently configured patterns of outcome and opportunity the meaning of an abiding set of values—intentions—practices that have become globally dominant across virtually every aspect of the public sphere.

A crucially important characteristic of complex systems is that they not only behave in ways that actively shape their environments, they also shape the lower level systems that they comprise. In effect, lower-level systems are pressured to *become* what the complex system comprising them would have their interdependence *mean*. The interdependencies involved in complexity are forms of interpenetration that effectively place system values into common circulation and, when lasting, eventuate in a symbiotic accommodating of interests across system scales.

To use an example that will figure prominently in our further discussions: complex market systems will, over time, engender the kinds of consumers they require to continue developing according to their own values of competition, convenience, choice, and control. As this happens, consumers are of turn enabled to exercise freedoms that ramify in the growth and evolution in markets. Illich's concerns about the commodification and marketing of healthcare emerge out of insight into precisely this accommodation dynamic.²²

The transition from health problems to health predicaments is a concrete manifestation of the complex dynamics of global interdependence and interpenetration. To understand and address such large-scale and apparently systematic compromises of health and healthcare as those resulting from HIV/AIDS or those evidenced in the radically skewed geography of health in Washington, DC, it is not enough to gain a detailed factual knowledge of how a given pathogen or nutritional deficiency or set of lifestyle choices adversely affects the human body and how best to intervene and avert or mitigate those adversities. Individual bodily health is not an appropriate final unit of analysis and response. Neither is an aggregation of individually treatable bodies. Medicine will not do the full spectrum of health work that now needs to be done. Healthcare must cease being defined by medical practice. A shift must be made from healing bodies to healing relationships.

This means, first and foremost, considering directly and systematically how such values of enhanced relational capacity, situational attunement, and responsive virtuosity are faring, at varying levels of enactment (from the personal to the public and environmental), under the downward pressures presently exerted by globally complex social, economic, technological, political, and cultural interdependencies, and how more equitably to reorient the dynamics of their accommodation. In an era of complex global interdependence, and the accelerating displacement of health problems by health predicaments, healthcare measures

that are not capable of and committed to redressing social, economic, political, and techno-cultural inequity cannot effectively conserve or enhance either public or personal health. The dynamics and global distribution of ill-health cannot be changed without changing the processes that also distribute wealth, consolidate power, and compromise diversity throughout the public sphere.

The realities ahead

A comprehensive, relational conception of health and healing like the one sketched here is in many ways appealing. It affords a set of values for coordinating work undertaken across a wide range of scales and sectors to equitably enhance the quality of our interdependence. But such an expansive conception of health and healing is also challenging. As developed here along Buddhist lines, it forces confrontation with our own implication in presently prevailing patterns of globally deepening inequity. If from a Buddhist perspective, experienced realities always imply responsibility, the work ahead of reorienting the inequities now being generated by the dynamics of complex global interdependence is *ours* to undertake.

Fortunately, it is also part of a Buddhist perspective that there is no place from which this work cannot be done. In the parlance of Mahayana Buddhism, all places are the place of enlightenment. Practicing according to the Buddhist teachings of interdependence, impermanence, and emptiness brings about conviction that there is no such thing as an intractable situation. At every scale of relationship throughout a given situation, change is occurring at some rate, with some quality, and in some direction (with some meaning). There are no immovable blocks, no ultimate impediments. Trouble and suffering, inequity and ill-health—these are not independently existing realities that must somehow be removed; they are simply errant patterns of interdependence.

Enhancing personal and public health is a matter of altering rates, qualities, and directions of already ongoing change. In some cases this will result in the eventual curtailing of particular patterns of change, as would be hoped in responding to a deepening addiction or the progression of a cancer. In many cases, accomplishing a sustained turn in a healing direction may also mean altering a quite wide range of collateral or coincident relational dynamics—associated, for example, in the case of a substance abuse addiction with work and family, as well as the socio-economic and political geographies of ethnicity and race. What we can be assured of is that healing opportunities obtain at some level(s), across some relational domain(s), in any given situation.²³

A striking asymmetry obtains in Buddhist teachings on “healing the wound of existence” or reorienting our interdependence to bring about the sustainable resolution of trouble and suffering. They are extremely detailed with respect to analyzing the general conditions that foster errant interdependence; but they are notoriously lacking in similarly detailed instructions for how to resolve or redirect them. The basic strategy is utterly simple: reverse the causal sequences (often

netlike and multiply ramifying) that have brought a troubling situation, as it has come to be. Buddhist practice is enhancing and demonstrating capacities for and commitments to doing so, whenever and wherever possible. The repeated exhortations of the Buddha to his students to vigilantly work out their own liberation drive home the point that this training and redirecting of the dynamics of interdependence are never generic endeavors. Healing involves resolutely facing the total complexion of our errant interdependence, precisely as it has come to be, improvising skillful means of going resolutely crosswise to revise what it means.

TRADE, DEVELOPMENT, AND THE POSSIBILITY OF POST-MARKET ECONOMICS

The global broadening and deepening of social, economic and political interdependence is often celebrated as an unconditional good. To the extent that increasing interdependence marks a decisive turn toward forging new global communities based on relationships of mutual benefit, celebration would seem warranted. Growing interdependence would then imply ever-widening circles of concern. It would also imply at least tacitly questioning the justice of global dynamics that have meant independence for some and dependence for (many) others. Such implications are, I think, entirely laudable and very much in keeping with efforts to skillfully and effectively secure public good.

From a Buddhist perspective, however, it is crucial to ask whether existing and emerging patterns of interdependence are wholesome (*kusala*) and conducive to relating freely, or if they carry us, personally and communally, in a contrary direction. Buddhism affirms, along with much of contemporary science, that interdependence can be seen as the deep nature of all things. But in contrast with science, Buddhism insists on going beyond a purely factual apprehension of inter-relatedness to cultivate dramatic insight into its meaning or direction. Affirming that all things arise interdependently is not to affirm that they do so in a necessarily liberating way. Increasing economic interdependence, for example, can mean increasing wealth, skillful means, and happiness. But it can also mean deepening poverty, trouble, and suffering.

We have seen that the relational dynamics of both environmental quality and health are significantly shaped and directed by sustained patterns of value-intention-action. We have also seen that while changing the overall meaning or orientation of these relational dynamics is always possible, a limiting factor is the presence of sufficient and appropriate appreciative and contributory resources. That is, reorienting situational dynamics pivots on our capacities for actualizing opportunity. In personal terms, this means being capable of initiating and sustaining both discerning and enriching patterns of engagement with our situation—patterns of contributory engagement that appreciate or enhance the value of our situation, and at the same time enhance how valuably we are situated.¹ In the broadest Buddhist sense, this is what is meant by appropriate development.

Yet, like interdependence, development—the actualization of situational opportunity—is not inherently good or positive. On one hand, this realization has spurred increasingly sophisticated global discourse on the merits and, finally, necessity of achieving sustainable development. On the other hand, it has galvanized global sensitivity to patterns of skewed benefit and mounting inequity associated with historically prevalent trade and development regimes.

The broad landscape of trade and development concepts and practices is particularly suitable for assessing the karmic implications of increasing global interdependence and for critically engaging the dynamics of the public sphere. The argument can be made that trade and economic development are the structural basis for meeting the most fundamental or foundational needs for human security. Failing to meet these foundational needs—failing to insure, at a minimum, the availability and accessibility of adequate food, clothing, and shelter—effectively makes it impossible to build the commitments and capacities needed to secure reasonable environmental quality, healthcare, and education, or to go beyond these six subsistence domains, for example, to secure civil and political rights. In Buddhist terms, failing to secure these foundational needs means failing to secure the minimum conditions for liberating practice aimed at the meaningful resolution of trouble or suffering—the orientation of our personal and communal patterns of interdependence away from *samsara* toward *nirvana*.

Central to the karmic assessment of prevailing patterns of global trade and development, however, is *how* or in what way trade and development meet (or at least attempt to meet) our basic subsistence or foundational needs, and what this implies for situational enhancement and capacity building. In short, do contemporary patterns of globalization foster truly liberating relationships? If not, what do the dynamics of these patterns—as expressions of consistently maintained values—intentions—actions and associated outcomes and opportunities—tell us about the trajectories of innovation needed to insure that development processes and greater economic interdependence are reoriented in ways that are indeed liberating?

Bluntly stated, it is possible to see present day patterns and scales of globalization as having both generated and been generated by the extremely rapid and practically irreversible commodification of subsistence needs—a commodification that has had the effect of institutionalizing entirely new and ever more relationally disadvantaged classes of the poor. Beyond a critical threshold, and unless redirected—that is, informed by radically different values—present day patterns of global interdependence threaten to steadily convert communities that have been faring well into aggregates of individuals in need of welfare. In the absence of a sustained shift in values—intentions—actions associated with trade and development, the promise of globally extended, deep community will be broken.

Making the case for why this is so requires fleshing out the insight that present day patterns of economic interdependence and global trade are systematically translating diversity into mere variety. In particular, they are bringing about a stunning collapse of locally sustained ecologies of production and trade. This has the effect of affording remarkable ranges of consumer choice through reliable,

efficient, and institutionally secured market operations. But these market operations also significantly isolate producers and consumers and replace local-to-local *exchanges* with globally mediated *transfers*. In effect, global interdependence is presently inflected in such a way as to erode both personal and communal resources for direct mutual contribution—depleting the very resources needed to differ in ways that meaningfully make a difference. Development of this sort is finally impoverishing.

Gift exchange, contribution, and trade: the roots of economic interdependence

As an initial move toward fleshing out these insights, I want to think through some of the continuities among gift giving, contribution, and trade. Gift giving has had a long and honored place in anthropological studies of social practices, most of which have concentrated on relatively explicit levels of exchange and offering. But there is a sense in which gift giving can be considered the original and abiding nexus of all human sociality. Gift giving can be seen, in other words, as among the first institutions for opening, expanding and qualifying the public sphere. Yet, it is also intimately connected with the historical origins of trade and, by extension, with the possibility of realizing equity-enhancing post-market economics.

Perhaps the most apparent expression of the centrality of gift exchange to human sociality is its persistent association with intimate partnership. Even in today's postmodern societies where brides and grooms are themselves no longer thought of as gifts exchanged between families, and where formal dowries no longer factor into finalizing marital arrangements, marriages remain among the most extravagant occasions for gift giving. More generally, it is customarily assumed that formally initiating a lasting intimate or romantic bond will include some offering or exchange of gifts. Such practices and rituals can, of course, be seen cynically, particularly where gift-giving and gift-receiving practices exhibit gender asymmetry or are apparently and heavily influenced by consumer advertising. What eludes cynical or politically correct bracketing, however, is the fact that the most meaningful of human relationships continue to be ritually acknowledged and sealed through the exchange of gifts.

Of course, human sociality is not limited to intimate unions, and the exchange of gifts is by no means always intensely personal. Traditional hospitality customs worldwide involve hosts and guests in paired offerings. Especially in Asia, initial business meetings are formally structured around gift exchange. Worldwide, heads of state ritually exchange symbolic gifts upon meeting. Neither are human sociality and the giving of gifts restricted to human-to-human encounters. Particularly among indigenous or first peoples, human-to-nature connections are customarily mediated through the offering of gifts. Religious rituals aimed at establishing or qualitatively enhancing human-to-divine connections have, likewise, often centered on making either actual or symbolic offerings. In sum, gift

exchange is associated with establishing and affirming community—the realization of lasting and meaningful relationships that are both rich in content and enriching.

The broader functions of gift exchange as the enriching nexus of human sociality are nicely captured in the etymology of the English word “contribution” and its links to such associated terms as attribute, tributary, tribute, and tribe. The root noun to which all these can be traced is the Latin *tribus*, which literally means a place-centered grouping of people. The verbal root is the Latin *tribuere*, meaning giving or distributing. Keeping both the noun and verb roots in mind, contribution can be understood as a process of bringing together and fusing the horizons of place-centered groups of people through gift giving. As suggested by constellation of terms associated with contribution, although the original function of gift giving might have been social, it very early on became inseparable from establishing and affirming ongoing political and economic arrangements.

Intuitions of this process arguably underlie (and, because of infelicitous metaphysical assumptions, languish within) much of modern Western social theory. For example, in Hobbes’ theory of societal origins, the giving of gifts is read and represented in highly schematized fashion as a contractual relationship rooted in rational self-interest and directed toward establishing regulated or customary institutions for mutual benefit. The different parties entering into a contract effectively “give” one another assurances of future cooperation. In Hobbes’ view—and it is a view that continues to be either tacitly or explicitly assumed in a great deal of theory about and practices within the public sphere—human societies basically consist of aggregates of competing and essentially self-interested individuals who pool their various strengths with the belief that through combined numbers, each one’s own major interests will be met as readily and securely as possible. For Hobbes—and as affirmed in much of contemporary international relations theory—should the returns on cooperation and community diminish sufficiently, a reversion to directly self-interested competition naturally results.

Although partially occluded by his (empirically groundless) presupposition that individuals pre-exist the (social, natural, and cosmic) relationships in which they are embedded from birth, Hobbes correctly saw that social life is founded upon consistently practiced (and often ritually enhanced) give and take. Far from being accidental or forced associations, communities arise as a function of mutually sustained processes of exchange or contribution. This insight occurred, in Hobbes’ case, during a time of a consolidated expansion of modern ideals, ideals and aspirations, in which all aspects of human endeavor were being re-interpreted in terms of the values of universality, certainty, autonomy, choice and control, and in which trade was undergoing a remarkable shift in both scope and scale. The origins of human sociality and community in processes of exchange came to assume a quasi-metaphysical status: human sociality and community arise along with institutions governing or moderating ongoing oscillations between competitive and cooperative trade.²

Unburdened by the assumption that individual existence precedes relationality, or by the distinctive set of values that shaped modernity, traditional Buddhist

social narratives carry us in a rather different direction. These narratives, found throughout the Pali Canon (generally regarded as the earliest strata of Buddhist teachings), allow that while societies may now be accurately described as institution-mediated aggregates of individuals, this is so only because there has been an historically sustained deflection of the dynamics of interdependence according to the prevalence of self-interest and exclusive claims to truth. This is neither natural nor unnatural in any objective sense. Instead, it is a function of karma. When not so deflected—as during the reign of a “wheel turning king”—societies arise and develop as qualitatively distinctive patterns of relationships directed toward mutually enhancing contributions to shared, and ultimately liberating welfare. From a Buddhist perspective, sociality is karmic—a dynamic process yielding distinctive outcomes and opportunities in keeping with sustained values—intentions—actions, and that can be directed well or ill, truly or errantly, toward liberation (*nirvana*) or toward further suffering and trouble (*samsara*). Truly liberating sociality means realizing consciously sustained and enriching interdependence. It is not competition, but contribution that choreographs the emergence of community.

Perhaps the most pointed Buddhist statement of the cardinal role of contribution in liberating sociality is in the Chan affirmation that, “awakening is just the perfection of offering.” In Chan, as in much of (at least pre-modern) Chinese Buddhism, psychological events or experiences associated with awakening or enlightenment were effectively displaced by considerations of the relational meaning of buddha-nature, emptiness, and skillful means. Focusing on the *liberating relationships* realized by the historical Buddha and other bodhisattvas, Chinese Buddhists—and particularly the lineage of Chan Buddhist masters from Huineng through Mazu, Baizhang, Huangbo and Linji—came to understand enlightenment in terms of attentive and relational mastery. Liberation means always and everywhere realizing consummate appreciative and contributory virtuosity.

The Chan traditions, however, are not unique in this regard. There are strong precedents for a relational understanding of awakening to be found in even the earliest strata of the Pali Canon—those texts generally regarded as historically primary. Indeed, for the purposes of shedding light on the linkages among sociality, gift exchanges, trade, and the karma of now predominating patterns of globalization, many of these early texts are especially useful. As a point of departure, let us consider the Buddha’s somewhat lyrical description of his first insight into the interdependence of all things as like coming upon a city long forgotten and overgrown by dense jungle.³

For those familiar with the history of Buddhism and its early valorization of forest dwelling reclusion, there is a certain incongruity in this striking image. The Buddha’s enlightenment occurred in a rural setting as he sat in meditation under a banyan tree. There, he realized the interdependence or irreducibly relational nature of all things. It was this realization that the Buddha later alluded to as a city lost and forgotten. His qualification of the city—that is, the content of his insight—as “lost and forgotten” can reasonably be explained as an expression of

humility. It made clear that the Buddha's enlightening realization was neither original nor independently arisen, but rather a recovered, shared heritage. But why use a city as a metaphor for interdependence?

We have no direct answer to this from the Buddha himself. However, the metaphor is rich with possibilities. To begin with, in a truly vibrant city, no one lives long (if at all) under the illusion of being wholly independent. Urban life is a continuous reminder of the extent to which we are not self-sufficient. We rely constantly on the contributions of others, just as they rely on ours. Moreover, cities both make possible and are made possible by degrees of specialization, education, and cultural refinement far exceeding—especially in sixth century BCE India—anything possible in traditional rural or village life. Cities have from earliest times been attractors and amplifiers of excellence, and have practically commanded reflection on the extent to which our lives emerge out of ongoing patterns of mutual contributions and shared negotiations of meaning. Whether this holds true at all scales of urbanization, under all modes of production, and without severe ironic effects is, of course, open to critical debate.

Significantly, in the *Sutta Nipāta* and other very early collections of the Buddha's teachings, those who have fared long and well on the Middle Way are not described as aloof from community life. On the contrary, they are described as leading lives of public wisdom, enjoying harmonious and calm relationships, joyful, purified of negative qualities of thought, speech and action, and clear of purpose. Equally interesting, early Buddhist teachings and their popular translations did not represent the ideal Buddhist world as an Arcadian paradise or as a sensuously austere domain. It is a world teeming with people, animals, and plants of every sort—a world that is explicitly *worldly*, with all manner of good food, music, architecture, and activity. In later Mahayana traditions, narratives about buddha-realms in which all things do the work of enlightenment feature sensorially and socially lush descriptions of both natural and human environs and often open in public gatherings of many thousands of people and beings sharing food, drink and commitments to liberating practice. It is as if the “lost and forgotten city” representing the culminating insight of the Buddha's six-year quest had been restored to its former vibrancy and brilliance.

Of course, interdependence is not necessarily enlightening or liberating. Cities are not always ideal places. They can and, all too often, do go wrong. In the *Cakkavatti-Sihanāda Sutta*, the Buddha relates a story chronicling how, over eight “generations,” an ideal and highly urbanized society slides into intensifying trouble and suffering and finally dissolves into a social maelstrom in which generational strife is rampant, social customs and rituals are ridiculed, violence has escalated to a point that killing sprees become horrifically common and random, and in which crude addictions and abusive relationships are almost universally celebrated.

The turn toward social collapse takes place when a new ruler of the kingdom elects to exercise his authority based on his own understanding of affairs, neglecting precedents for regularly and thoroughly consulting with his ministers and

advisors. As a consequence, he does not properly respond to mounting evidence of poverty in the capital city and, for the first time in dozens of generations, a theft is committed. In a series of well-intended follies, his attempts to control the behavior of the people only drive matters spiraling ever further out of control. This movement is reversed only when a few people retreat into the countryside, refusing to adopt prevailing behavioral norms, and eventually band together in shared commitments to developing capacities for coursing freely on the four immeasurable relational headings of loving-kindness, compassion, joy in the good fortune of others, and equanimity.

The account given by the Buddha of the conditions leading to poverty is both remarkably simple and profound. Poverty arises when people are not able to work in and contribute to their community in a meaningful way. Far from being a function of few possessions or not having the means to get what is wanted or needed, poverty is a function of having too little to offer that is of value to others. It occurs when either a person or an entire population is effectively blocked from contributing directly to the welfare of others. As expressed in the narrative climax, the ultimate antidote to poverty (and the kinds of social malaise for which it is a crucial condition) cannot consist of either social welfare or legal and technological controls. These eventually only exacerbate the root conditions of poverty. Instead, poverty alleviation entails fostering increased capabilities-for (and commitments-to) giving appropriately to others: development in the broadest sense of capacity building and the restoration or deepening of situational diversity.⁴ Ending poverty, in other words, is a process of realizing appreciative and contributory virtuosity.

Several forceful insights are embedded in this account and its framing narrative. Poverty is a function of contributory impasse and implies a failure to appreciate—that is, to sympathetically understand and add value to—our ongoing patterns of interdependence. Both felt community and its objective expression in abiding social institutions are compromised when interdependence devolves into patterns of dependence and independence, and they disintegrate with the breakdown of robust patterns of mutual contribution or situational diversity. Resisting or reversing such devolution and disintegration cannot hinge on simply meeting individual (or even collective) needs or wants. Emphasis must be placed on relational quality, and success finally hinges on *how* these needs and wants are addressed—that is, on the values underlying our strategies for redressing the erosion of relational capacity and effective offering. Successfully alleviating poverty is a function of realizing and sustaining patterns of interdependence that enhance the capabilities of both individuals and communities for freely contributing to one another's welfare. Poverty is undermined by diversity. Or in more explicitly Buddhist terms: true poverty alleviation at once results from and results in bodhisattva action.

Together, these insights suggest at least superficial compatibility between Buddhist understandings of awakening and social prosperity, and currently predominant growth-oriented, free-market models of development. There is, for

example, substantial resonance between the Buddhist focus on alleviating poverty by enhancing contributory virtuosity and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen's definition of "development as freedom" or increased relational capacity. The basis for this resonance, I would argue, is the crucial role played by trade in poverty alleviation and development. At the same time, however, trade—at least as it has come to be practiced at global scale—works against the expanded and enhanced diversity that is at the root of a fully Buddhist approach to poverty alleviation.

In contemporary, idiomatic English, trade tends to be most strongly associated with exchanges of goods, services, or ideas for the purpose of economic gain. But we also speak of "trading places" (taking each other's positions), "trading security for adventure" (changing the global, narrative character of our situation), and considering "trade-offs" (collateral effects of a present course of action on future possibilities). These broader connotations reflect the origins of the English word "trade" as a derivative of "tread" or "treading," the Middle English and Middle German roots of which referred to the making of a track, path, or course.

Footpaths and tracks are neither natural features nor the results of random wandering. Rather, they develop as a function of steady traffic along preferred routes connecting separate localities that have been drawn into some kind of meaningful relationship. At the basis of this relationship are significant differences—differences of the sort that generate contributory potentials. The localities might be two villages or family compounds, or they might be a human settlement and a particularly productive hunting or foraging ground. Though the furious pace of contemporary construction and real estate speculation tends to obscure the fact, tracks, paths, and roadways at once arise through and facilitate meaningful interchange. Thus, as evidenced in its linguistic roots, trade is inseparable from trade routes and most broadly originates in activities that expand and deepen community—activities that open, deepen and extend relationships and that can be seen as rooted ultimately in the dynamic of gift giving.

To the extent that this is so, there are Buddhist precedents for affirming the positive, even liberating, possibilities of trade. But given the teachings of emptiness and the absence of fixed or essential natures, it would be incorrect—just as it is with regard to interdependence—to affirm that trade is always and inevitably "good." Indeed, these teachings enjoin careful and diligent awareness of the great variability in what trade means. As an outcome of what processes has trade come to be configured and practiced as it is now? What genealogy of intentions and values underlies this configuration and these practices? What opportunities do they open? To what relational heading(s) do they commit us? In a word, what karma is associated with (especially global) trade, as it has come to be?

Commodification and eroded diversity: the current karma of trade

It is part of a Buddhist understanding of trade that it not only promotes more extensive patterns of interdependence, but also directs or orients these patterns in

ways that express and reinforce particular intentions and values. Trade is karmically significant. Because of this, snapshot understandings of trade are potentially (if not necessarily) misleading. Short-term perspectives will almost invariably afford insufficient insight into the axes of intention and value on which trade practices have turned in coming to be, precisely *as* they have come to be, to assess their characteristic structuring of outcomes and opportunities. Reasonably deep historical perspectives are thus indispensable in assessing trade's karmic implications, especially the kinds of trade now taking place at truly global scale.⁵

In keeping with the teaching of karma, we might begin assessing the developmental or enrichment potential of trade—as it is now predominantly carried out especially by developed nations and transnational corporations—through considering the dramatic implications of their root motive: increasing material wealth through expanding market share and accelerating profit. Given relatively free rein, to what kinds of situational dynamics—what patterns of relational tension and release—do market-domination and profit-seeking lead? Patterns of relationship aimed at amassing material wealth—rather than, for instance, generating noble wealth or alleviating poverty⁶—are not likely to be conducive to equitably enhanced relational or contributory capacity. On the contrary, they will tend to create and then institutionalize sharply inclined slopes of competitive advantage that disproportionately privilege large-scale coordinations of interest (national or corporate) at market distributed expense. Simply put, evenly distributing profits is not as profitable as establishing a market topography that permits and promotes inequitable distribution. Moreover, market-domination—a primary means to this end—is similarly likely to streamline and concentrate production practices in ways that are at once efficient and toxic for both natural ecosystems and self-sustaining, local production regimes.

As demonstrated, for example, in the era of European colonial expansion and in the early twentieth century emergence of massive industrial monopolies in the US, the natural outcome of this process of controlling the topography of advantage (and trade) is a remarkable concentration of power in very few hands. And this is by no means a now defunct historical trend. Globally, the kind of economic interdependence that, over the last quarter century, has resulted from intensive waves of market integration is clearly characterized by a widening gap between rich and poor, with roughly 86% of global resources and wealth being controlled by and benefiting less than 20% of the world's population.⁷ At least at the levels of national, regional, and global economies for which there are significant comparative data, currently prevailing patterns of trade promote developmental inequality.

There has been a tendency to view the rise of developmental inequality as a function of already developed nations taking too little responsibility for ratcheting up the developmental cycle elsewhere and, perhaps, even taking severe advantage of less developed economies. In other words, the tendency has been to call into question the intentions of the developed world and of the transnational corporations to whom disproportionate profit flows through rapidly integrated

markets and global patterns of trade. Indeed, there may be cases where major players steering the process of growing global interdependence can rightly be charged with unduly selfish strategies and even morally deficient motives. But because of the wide array of such players and the complex distribution of national or corporate intentionality, this provides very little critical leverage, despite its rhetorical appeal. An intentional analysis also falls short in not being readily conducive to generating deep and critical historical perspective. The intentions of even close associates are difficult to ascertain at times, much less those of actors greatly distant in time or temperament. Moreover, charges of deficient motives can be dismissed as an inversion of the “ad hominem” argument: they indict those presently benefiting most greatly from prevalent patterns of globalization, rather than the system of values informing and orienting such patterns.

To rephrase this in Buddhist conceptual terms, the karma of presently prevailing patterns of global trade may be deflected in accordance with self-centered or equity-denying intentions held by major economic players: the most highly developed nations and increasingly powerful transnational corporations. But karma is—as stated earlier—always a function of both intentions and values. Focusing exclusively on the former can produce a critical blindspot—a range of potentially crucial phenomena left entirely out of consideration, especially when the karma in question is not individual, but collective or systemic.

I have argued with respect to technology that such a critical blindspot arises through a confusion of technologies with the tools to which they give rise, and an inappropriate tendency to evaluate technologies in terms of how well these tools serve us as individuals.⁸ In consequence, technologies are effectively exempted from critical attention—that is, the values that technologies embody and render ambient throughout societies deploying them are critically occluded by the individual uses to which tools are put. And because these tools are designed and redesigned with the overarching mandate of increasing utility and user-friendliness, this leads to blindly endorsing continued technological development and deployment in a particularly vicious form of critical circularity. The effects of technology on the character and direction of relationships (personal, communal, national, international, and global) are functionally ignored.

Similarly, it is particularly dangerous to neglect assessing the values underlying global patterns of trade through assuming their “value-neutrality”—the oft-invoked “invisible (and purportedly, justly blind) hand” of the market—and focusing instead on how trade patterns are used by various actors. Indeed, while many economists ostensibly view trade as a technology, they actually treat it as a tool used by individual entrepreneurs, corporations, countries, or regional associations (e.g. the European Union or Association of Southeast Asian Nations). Trade is thus assumed to be properly and adequately assessed in terms of how well it meets the individual needs and interests of those engaging in trade. Many economists then stress the fact that although global trade does tend to bring about increased inequality, it also makes *both* the rich *and* the poor richer. From this, they conclude that while the benefits may be greater for some than others, current

patterns of global trade are good for each and every one of the world's people. What they cannot conclude, at the risk of committing the fallacy of composition, is that what is good for each and every one of us, must be good for *all* of us. The effects on a whole may be something entirely other than the sum of effects on all its parts.

Like technologies, presently prevailing patterns of global trade are not value neutral and cannot be accurately or adequately assessed by measuring (even in statistical aggregates) their impact on individuals as such. Neither can their ill effect of fostering developmental inequities be traced solely back to unjust motives in how they are used. Rather, contemporary patterns of trade can only be critically evaluated by seeing how the constellation of values structuring global trade affects how we relate, as individuals, as countries, and as members of expanding global communities. At the center of this constellation, I would argue, are the related values of competition, choice and control that structure the operation of markets.

Global trade presently apportions unequal benefits to the already developed and advantaged and disproportionately exports the costs of economic growth to those least able to bear these costs.⁹ On one hand, this means that the present system of trade fosters a growing “capacity gap” that results in the vast majority of the world's population being in a relatively, poorer and poorer position both to contribute to others *and* to be contributed to by them. Although they may be better off over time in absolute terms, in *relative* terms they will always be worse off. On the other hand, by bearing the cost burden—for example, in terms of environmental degradation—of benefits they do not receive, it is practically assured that their capability for responding appreciatively to the challenges of their own situation will prove increasingly inadequate. They will not enjoy the sensitivities and sensibilities needed to skillfully add value to their own situations. As it is currently configured, global trade will never bring about true poverty alleviation because poverty is its primary by-product.¹⁰

This admittedly iconoclastic claim is not in any way a claim about the intentions of those who have initiated and sustained the kinds of global trade in everyday we now experience. Neither is it a claim—like that central to Marxist critiques of global capital—that rests upon an assumed historical necessity or developmental teleology. Rather, it is simply a claim about the history of how things have come to be, as they have come to be. It is a claim about how large-scale patterns of relationship are systematically oriented toward the demise of productive diversity in consonance with values embedded in globally intensifying trade regimes directed toward increasing wealth through market domination and accelerating profit, making maximal use of technologies biased toward the strategic value of control to promote consumer freedoms centered on choice. Like the efforts of the hapless king in the *Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta* who tries to restore social order and prosperity through the increasing exercise of control, the intentions of those promoting more extensive global trade may be quite positive. But contrary to any such explicit intentions, the values embedded in their strategies

for poverty alleviation—control, convenience, competition, and choice being central among them—are sending things spiraling further and further away from their ostensive goal.

*A brief narrative history of global trade and the
demise of productive diversity*

Present global scales of trading activities and the transportation and communication technologies that are associated with them are exerting historically unprecedented influence on the quality and direction of relationships realized through trade. Prior to the emergence of comprehensive monetary economies, trade pivoted on bartering activity. That is, it turned on directly negotiating comparative values for the goods or services being traded. Trades could be completed only if and when all parties involved felt that fair values—often highly contextual rather than standardized or absolute—had been placed upon the goods or services involved. Within and among small-scale, subsistence economies, trade is an activity—heavily conditioned by local circumstances—through which distinct communities meaningfully and with considerable immediacy contribute to one another’s welfare. In such contexts, trade promotes both productive specialization and diversity.

Trade begins undergoing important transformations as technological, bureaucratic, and political institutions make possible and come to depend upon large-scale accumulations and transfers of goods. Relatively amorphous local-to-local patterns of trade linking small-scale subsistence economies give way to geographically extensive patterns of periphery-to-center trade. Here, the economic terrain is more or less steeply sloped from subsistence dominant village economies toward rapidly growing urban centers with large populations engaged in highly specialized activities. Already at this stage, the face-to-face trading of subsistence goods (especially foodstuffs) begins being replaced by something akin to the modern system of commodity marketing. As money enters the trade process, a level of abstraction is added to the process of negotiation. Currency values come to be established for commonly traded goods and services, which then no longer need be directly compared and evaluated. Qualitative modes of evaluation give way to essentially quantitative modes, and vernacular patterns of goods *exchange* begin giving way to serial *transfers*.¹¹

The interdependence of urban and rural communities and of individuals within them begins already at this stage to be markedly occluded. Indeed, the roots of modern economic interdependence can be traced historically to state-building processes emerging out of periphery-to-center trade dating at least into the first millennium BCE. But for the most part, local-to-local exchanges of goods and services based on face-to-face negotiation remain dominant and continue as such well into modern times. As long as the vast majority of the world’s population remained rural—until the late nineteenth or early twentieth century in all but the most highly developed industrial nations—subsistence needs continued to be met almost entirely locally. Production ecologies—porously bounded domains of

interlocked producers contributing to one another's welfare in a sustainable fashion—remained small in scope.

With the increasing sophistication of transportation technologies and infrastructure, lines of transmission for more durable goods quite early became long even by contemporary standards. For example, as early as the second century BCE, the tributary system fueling the imperial Chinese economy covered an area of perhaps 2,000 miles in diameter. By the fourth century CE, well-traveled land and sea trade routes linked African, European, South Asian, Southeast Asian, and East Asian societies. Still, because of the low capacities and speeds at which transportation took place, trade at great distances tended to be in durable material goods of high unit value like salt, spices, cooking oils, gems, precious metals, and silk, but also included what would now be termed intellectual property (e.g. maps, books, musical forms, and religious teachings). Thus, until at least the mid-nineteenth century, most of the meat, dairy products and vegetables required by the population of cities like Paris were produced within surrounding suburban areas, if not within the city itself. The urban “footprint” remained rather small, with specific dimensions effectively set by the quality of a city's local “metabolic” support system—the quality of its nearby environment. In effect, cities were bio-regionally defined.¹²

This changes from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries through the steady convergence, particularly in the European West and the Americas, of cumulative technological innovations enabling much greater speed and control in transportation, industrial and agricultural production, and communication. The nineteenth century invention of the clipper ship can be seen as a key turning point in this process, after which transoceanic trade and the global colonization of subsistence economies and markets shifted into apparently irreversible high gear.¹³

The history of global capitalism and competitive market-driven production is, from the late nineteenth century onward, a history of rapidly growing production monocultures that effectively disrupt local ecologies of production and consumption. Dominance shifts from local-to-local exchanges rooted in meaningful negotiations of value and need to local-global-local transfer currents, the velocity of which come to be subject to relatively overt control through price manipulation rather than as a naturally variable function of subsistence needs and values.

In the present era of global markets, trade is only incidentally a vernacular activity that directly links members of nearby communities through local-to-local exchanges for meeting basic needs. The benefits of this are very well advertised—both literally and figuratively. Especially in the most developed countries, supermarkets carry fresh fruits and vegetables grown all over the planet. In even the least developed countries under WTO governance, readily available grains and other staples are no longer likely to have been locally produced. Agriculture has given way to agri-business. And the same is true for virtually every other consumer need from clothing, shelter, and entertainment to health care and education.¹⁴

The contemporary shopping mall—virtually identical across most of the planet—is at the center of the new “global village.” It is a curiously structured

village in which producers and consumers are not neighbors and never see one another face-to-face. Yet, it is a village in which niche manufacturing and marketing are able to provide a practically flawless semblance of direct and sustained attention to personal needs and desires. It is a village in which markets guarantee that the choices available to consumers are practically unlimited, with a remarkably similar range of goods and services (albeit at remarkably disparate prices and qualities) available both to the very wealthy and the very poor. Although there are clearly many inequalities in the village, the overall degree of security it affords with respect to basic needs is, in absolute terms, quite high. The new global village may not be perfect, but to a degree that is often amazing, it works.

Such are the familiar benefits of global markets and unrestricted trade liberalization. As an economic system, it is remarkably well suited to meeting individual needs and wants, benefiting some more than others, but clearly benefiting all.

*From mutual contribution to consumer choice
under mass-production regimes*

As the idiom goes, however, we don't get anything for nothing. The system has its costs. The technologically triggered efficiencies that made possible the remarkable geographic expansion of markets from especially the eighteenth century onward also had a powerful effect on the content of those markets. Global trade ceased being limited to highly durable goods, typically of high unit cost. Trade in luxuries—for example, in silks, spices, and precious metals and stones—continued to be important. But the overall ambit of global trade spread to include ever-greater kinds and quantities of non-luxury goods. The economic logic is not particularly complicated. Expanding markets require expanding consumer bases—an expansion that can be driven only so far by falling prices associated with efficiencies in production and transportation. Sustained market growth is only possible if the range of goods traded undergoes similar growth. Especially once markets have become global, trade expansion can only be stably realized through increasing trade density.

This account should not be taken as a dismissal of the roles of greed, disregard for the welfare of others, and ruthlessness in the pursuit of self-interest in the global expansion of markets and the consequent disruption of local production ecologies. But these factors—also of great concern for any Buddhist analysis of trade dynamics as a whole—were not novel except perhaps in terms of their systematic extremity. In the absence of the control revolution in technology and its powerful resonance with patterns of modern political and social development and aspiration, market globalization and intensification likely would not have grown substantially beyond their pre-modern scope and scale.

The growth imperative of heightened trade density has resulted practically in the commodification of all subsistence goods and services, effectively displacing local production regimes and vernacular negotiations of value and fair trade.¹⁵ This has, in turn, eroded local contributory resources—the range of capabilities

and knowledge relevant to sustaining local personal and communal welfare. Importantly, as the range of goods transferred into a local economy nears the point of natural saturation, meeting all extant needs, further market growth depends on the creation of new needs and desires, and new problems to be solved. This has been accomplished: through aggressive advertising regimes that have systematically extended the spectrum of goods perceived as necessary and/or desirable; through the increasingly detailed problematizing of daily life; and through the emergence of industries that commodify an increasingly broad array of previously “non-economic” services.¹⁶ Simply put, the continued increase of market density requires the creation of new kinds and numbers of wants.

The global corporate outlay for advertising now exceeds by a considerable margin that expended worldwide on all levels of public education. Tellingly, the greatest increases in advertising expenditures appear in so-called developing markets. In the decade ending in 1996, for example, advertising expenditures in China grew by more than 1,000%; in Indonesia by 600%; in Malaysia and Thailand by 300%; and in India, the Republic of Korea and the Philippines by more than 200%. Such expenditures are not based on wishful thinking, but on results: the realization of maximally broad and dense markets wherever and as profitably as possible. The power of advertising to extend market reach and density is perhaps nowhere so evident as in such poor countries as Ethiopia and Nepal where populations living on less than \$1 per day, over just a 5 year period from 1993–1998, were induced to increase spending on such imported consumer goods as cosmetics, cameras, and soft drinks by 400–500%.¹⁷

The expanded and dense markets that result from intensive commodification and advertising have—for each of us individually—the generally desirable results of greater reliability, standardized products and product compatibility, convenience, and heightened possibilities for exercising freedom of choice. But increasingly dense, globally mediated provision of goods and services can have an effect on local economies that is similar to what happens when virulent alien species are introduced into a sensitive ecosystem: indigenous species—that is, local modes of production and patterns of exchange—are eventually choked out or granted limited continued existence in specialized preserves or cottage industries. Importantly, this does not mean local populations become indigent. The monetary medium of global transfers of goods and services guarantees that wage-earning employment invariably is fostered by expanding markets. In fact, the transition from barter to cash is crucial to marketization processes.¹⁸ Markets are fueled by consumption and consumption is facilitated by the use of cash and credit. In advanced market economies, then, employment tends to be high and relatively inclusive, at first available and then necessary not only for adult men, but also for women and previously marginalized minority populations.

The picture just sketched is often tinted in fairly rosy hues. Greater employment opportunities for all (but especially women and minorities) and greater access to the goods and services offered by the market—these are typically celebrated as signs of successful development. Futures that traditionally have been somewhat

narrow in prospect are manifestly widened. Choices multiply. And there is certainly no reasonable argument against this in principle: a life that includes choices is surely better than one that does not. The professional opportunities now open to women and minorities, for example, mark a real, significant, and entirely welcome enhancement of their possibilities for social contribution. But focusing on the positive effects on individual members of communities or individual classes is, again, to dangerously restrict our ability to evaluate how such changes affect qualities of relationship more broadly. If the poor are invariably worse off in relative terms, it follows that they are in some significant degree *relationally* disadvantaged by present patterns of global trade.

It is worth looking more closely at this result of inequitable trade-mediated interdependence. Under present market-driven trade regimes, the poor have proportionately less and less access to resources for direct use and capacity building, both personally and communally. In part, this means access to a decreasing proportion of the total range of available market goods and services. The poor, for example, will be less and less ready and able to take advantage of new information technologies and the power afforded by the tools associated with them. But additionally and much more importantly, it also means that the poor will be less and less valuably situated with respect to contributing meaningfully to their situation. In other words, in comparison with those benefiting most from present day patterns of global economic interdependence, the poor will suffer a steadily growing gap in relational capacity. They will fall steadily further behind in being poised and able to take advantage of situational opportunities for building more extensive, refined, and enriching relationships.

The range of relationships that might be considered in this regard is practically unlimited. For present purposes, however, consider the relationships centered on employment or labor. Focusing on the upper end of the scale of opportunities opened by global trade tends to gloss over the phenomenological realities of average employment in the service of greatly expanded, efficient, and dense markets. Most jobs in such markets no longer afford workers the opportunity to carry through with a complete production process or service. The rationalization of industries and workplaces to the end of maximum efficiency practically guarantees that workers will not participate in or consider themselves responsible for the full production (or service) cycle. Quite literally, they do piece-work. As anyone who has done it well understands, piece-work does not promote worker pride unless it is related to overall quantity of work accomplished. More work equals more pay. But more is not necessarily better. Indeed, under most circumstances, piece-work is not conducive to workers actively increasing product quality, but at best to maintaining a minimum level of quality while maximizing output quantity.

This is quite different from what prevails in subsistence economies, where one person or family may be involved in and responsible for the entire set of processes required to build a dwelling or provide regular meals and clothing, and where trade involves face-to-face negotiations of the value of goods to be traded. Specialization greatly reduces inefficiencies, especially those that result from

productive redundancy. Indeed, mainstream economists from Adam Smith (eighteenth century) to the present day have been adamant in praising the transition from craft to commodity. But by translating the entire production cycle into discrete units, the synoptic perspective needed to envision paradigmatic revisions of the entire process is typically restricted to just one or a handful of workers who are particularly suited to and hired for such work. This can yield very high quality results. But it does not promote creative development on the part of those workers whose responsibilities and imaginations are confined to the narrowest possible scope compatible with overall production efficiency.

For workers who remain in a given company or industry for an extended period, there is some opportunity for personal growth and contributory maturation. But personal growth and maturation in the work world, as elsewhere, rest on shared commitments. And unfortunately, the market drive toward greater efficiencies and lower costs tends to work against such commitment—a phenomenon now painfully evident in the post-bubble economy of Japan. There is a striking and significant trend in the more advanced economies for workers to undergo several major career changes over the course of their working life, and for the work histories of the majority of workers in lower-wage jobs to reflect an increasingly random approach to employment. Far from supporting a coherent narrative of professional development and personal maturation, scanning average work histories is much like randomly channel surfing a cable-supported television. For most workers, jobs are strictly a means to an end—most often: access to a greater range of choices for personal consumption.

Significantly, this means that there is little or no incentive or impetus for workers to make the transition from doing “good enough” to cultivating the compounding sensibilities and sensitivities that go along with the pursuit of excellence or virtuosity in their employment. In the Buddhist terms introduced earlier, work then fails to be conducive to *kusala* eventualities. It thus fails to meet a basic condition for work to meaningfully and sustainably resolve trouble or suffering. This is true even if work does serve as a means to forestalling or actively countering explicitly *akusala* eventualities. As stressed in the *Sakkapanha Sutta*, it is only when an endeavor both decreases *akusala* eventualities and at the same time fosters *kusala* eventualities that it undercuts the process of *papañca* or the mental proliferation of situational blockages—the root condition for persistent and increasingly acute trouble or suffering.

As market economies have matured, some significant counter trends have emerged from a recognition of the profitable nature of distributed creativity and responsibility, with many leading analysts now touting the importance of “flexible specialization” and “network accountability.” But these efforts to fine-tune the system do not restore the “old growth” or indigenous patterns of production in which work concretely and meaningfully results in goods or services directly exchanged in face-to-face realizations of shared welfare. In spite of the economic imperative for innovation in terms of both product design and marketing and work unit size and organization, global trade remains a composite of what are

individually almost meaningless moments or links in a chain of production and marketing. It is not just that “old growth” production ecologies are replaced by more efficient systems. Their replacement signifies a loss of overall local productive diversity and the depletion of the personal and community resources required for responding to changing circumstances and meaningfully meeting local needs. People lose the positions from which they were able to contribute directly to their own and others’ welfare—a loss of capacities for innovation, for shared improvisation, for on-site learning, and for appreciating their situation.

For many, this statement will seem overstated, if not simply false. Even if it is allowed that most people are employed in jobs that they do not like, performing tasks that have neither intrinsic nor perceived value and meaning, and would avidly look forward to a future that would not include work at all were such a future practically conceivable, many of us will still be inclined to insist on the creative possibilities our lives include that were not open to our parents or grandparents. But such a reading rests, I think, on an insufficiently robust understanding of creativity and on inadequately distinguishing between freedoms of choice and contributing freely. The kind of trade now dominant in the world functionally depends upon continuous on acts of consumption.¹⁹ Although workers engaged at any given point of the production and marketing process can intellectually or in abstract terms see their efforts as important, the signal and culminating event economically is the act of consumption. Inescapably, the most basic, concrete meaning of trade—in spite of its roots in the realization of extended community through gift exchange—now reduces to a transfer of possession.

This is not primarily a function of deficiencies on the part of workers or consumers, but rather a dynamic necessity of present-day markets. Because of the demands for expanded and increasingly dense markets, global scale trade compresses the utility of consumed goods or services to the smallest unit measure possible. Through the advertised inculcation of desire and through the constriction of the popular imagination, conditions are realized such that individual acts of consumption only fleetingly answer needs. The classic example of this is, of course, the institution of fashion (the history of which long predates the contemporary market, but on a much smaller scale). Fashion unabashedly sets strict temporal, spatial, and cultural limits on product usefulness. It marks the justified embrace of product obsolescence. But the phenomenon is quite general, and it is finally such compressions of utility that “open” the space required for multiplying choices. As a consequence of this, most goods, once acquired, are used very briefly, if at all. Even goods used frequently are seldom used to the point of being functionally worn out. Obsolescence—real or perceived—is crucial to growing markets. As markets become increasingly extensive and dense, consumers begin to function as producers of waste. Or, more graphically stated, they begin to serve as organs of elimination by means of which the residue of profit-making—whether material or experiential—is summarily disposed.

As long as there are more (and better) goods on the market, and as long as employment remains sufficiently high to support continued consumption, there is

a general tendency to turn away from the implications of practically collapsing consumption and waste. There are those who would convince the general public that there are, for example, simple environmental limits to growth. Planetary resources will one day run out or become scarce enough to throw a wrench in the works of the market. The cumulative environmental ramifications of waste will render the planet inhospitable if not uninhabitable. But such proclamations are, for most, unpersuasive. The broad public expects technological advances to afford new capacities for exercising control over the production and waste management processes—control intense and extensive enough to insure opportunities for unlimited growth.

But when the exercise of control (technologically mediated or otherwise) crosses the threshold of its own utility, it begins reproducing the conditions of its own necessity. In short, it brings about conditions in which there are not only increasing capacities for exercising control, but increasing need to do so as well. The experienced consequences of this are dire: living in a maximally controlled environment—a euphemism, finally, for prison. Technologies biased toward control and economies biased toward the proliferation of wants go quite well together. But karmically, the continued interdependent growth of control-biased technologies and global markets does not lead, as might be assumed, to finally solving thorny problems of supply and demand, resource allocation, and poverty alleviation. Rather, it rests on the continuous production of new wants and new problems. As made evident in the classic representation of *samsara* as a wheel, karma plays out in a cyclic (or at least spiral) manner.

The intentions and values associated with “getting what we want” are karmically linked to finding ourselves “left wanting.” When trade is predominantly carried out as a local-global-local transfer of goods that undermines local ecologies of production and that compromises both personal and communal resources for contributory virtuosity, trouble and suffering both sustain and are sustained by “good business.” The more we rely upon the market to bring us what we want or lack, the more we will find ourselves wanting or lacking. In other words, the more we will find ourselves incapable of meeting our own needs, of seeing to our own welfare, and acting in our own fullest interests. As local ecologies of production are translated into marketplaces for the practically infinite array of goods and services made available through geographically fluid production monocultures and fully liberalized global trade, capacities for relating freely are converted into ironic compulsions to exercise ever-expanding freedoms of choice.

Such translation and conversion processes are especially powerful in the attention economy that began consolidating over the past quarter century in post-industrial societies and that is now a global phenomenon.²⁰ In this still emergent economy, it is no longer material goods, services, or information/knowledge that are the most basic resource commodities, but attention itself. Lasting goods and services are no longer the focus of production, but rather the production of inherently fleeting meanings. In such an economy, “value-added” signifies attention captured. As attention is systematically exported from local contexts (e.g. family and

community), primarily through intensive mass media consumption, it is no longer available for appreciating and contributing to one's immediate situation. And, in much the same way that the conversion of capital to money makes possible its maximally fluid distribution, the attention economy effectively converts awareness from a qualitatively complex relationship to a minimally structured—that is, minimally committed—energy source. As the attention economy grows, personal and community capabilities for sustained appreciative and contributory virtuosity diminish.²¹ World Health Organization projections of an epidemic increase of depression in developed and developing economies (already rated as the most important factor of morbidity and lowered life quality of women in the developed world) is a particularly chilling commentary on the correlation of prevailing development processes, their social ramifications, and the erosion of meaning-making capability.²²

Again, however, it is important to note that such effects are not a matter of historical necessity. They are the experienced consequences of intentions and (especially) values that have shaped and continue shaping currently prevailing patterns of economic growth and interdependence. Crucially, the key conditions for these karmic consequences coming to fruition as they have can be traced to issues of scale and what has been termed “downward causation”—the tendency of self-organizing and adaptive systems to affect the nature of the lower order sub-systems comprised within them.²³ These conditions are, in short, both karmic outcomes and opportunities. And as I will try to show in the following two sections, they constitute the signal factors by means of which the liberating promise of the Buddhist teaching of impermanence might be operationalized: no situation, no matter how complex or conflicted, is intractable.

Some general implications

The Buddha's metaphorical representation of insight into the interdependence of all things as a “lost and forgotten city” suggests that urbanization, specialization, institutional growth and development can be seen as processes capable of dissolving commitments to narrow self-sufficiency and independent existence. Indeed they can be seen as conducive to establishing patterns of mutually enriching relationships, infusing daily life with ready opportunities for increasingly refined practices of (what would ideally be mindfully) shared welfare. Yet this is not a necessary result of urbanization and development, or of the transformation of practices for meeting subsistence needs that they entail and institutionalize. As evidenced in the cautionary tale embedded in the *Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta*, these processes can be inflected in profoundly troubling ways, with socially disastrous results. In the simplest Buddhist terms, whether these processes prove to be constraining and coercive or expansive and liberating depends on whether they are directed in alignment with ignorance, habit formations, and craving desires, or else with wisdom, attentive mastery, and moral clarity. Development, in the broadest, Buddhist sense, consists of movement toward realizing patterns of

relationship that serve to bring increased productive diversity—that is, patterns of mutual contribution that appreciate or add value to an irreducibly shared situation. Trade is then consonant with and is deepened through cultivating wisdom, attentive mastery, and moral clarity.

Present-day patterns of trade and development do not meet this requirement. On the contrary, they work against the constellation of conditions that might sponsor a concerted turn in that direction, systematically converting local resources for contributory virtuosity and relating freely into increasingly dense arrays of consumption-fueled freedoms of choice. Beyond a certain threshold, markets can only grow by problematizing present circumstances and delivering appropriate consumer product solutions. Granted the scale of contemporary trade and development regimes, but also the unprecedented rapidity with which these regimes and their technological infrastructures undergo significant change, it is hard to imagine what it would mean to turn the prevailing tide and begin restoring local ecologies of production. At the very least, the global institutions that now mediate the meeting of basic subsistence needs cannot be changed fundamentally overnight. Indeed, we cannot reasonably hope that they would: any cataclysmic changes in these institutions could occur only at the cost of tremendous suffering to the billions now dependent upon them.

Yet, as we have previously noted, a key entailment of seeing all things as impermanent, troubled, and without any abiding, essential self is that no situation can be seen as intractable. There is always opportunity for meaningful response and—in keeping with the teaching of karma—a change in the direction of our situation and the relationships constituting it. What can and should be done, then, to alter our karma with respect to trade and development to realize their liberating potential? Is it possible to direct trade and development toward the realization of viable and robust post-market economies?

Three initial observations can be made. First, there is no generic, one-size-fits-all solution, no universal way of equitably redirecting our global economic situation. Efforts to this end must be improvised, in context, in real-time. Secondly, the scale and complexity of our situation make evident the need for a paradigm shift from focusing on factual *problems* that can be solved within objectively determinate parameters, to realizing our immersion in *predicaments* that can only be resolved by grappling with contending goods, norms, and meanings, through establishing harmonizing and yet open-ended commitments to appropriate values and associated courses of action. Finally, resolving key trade and development predicaments—key conflicts with respect to both ordinal and strategic values—cannot be carried out unilaterally. Both the aim and measure of this work lie in relational quality—in enhanced and mutually enriching diversity.

These observations can be seen as consonant with the traditional Buddhist attribution of limitless resources for relational attunement (*upāya*) to fully realized bodhisattvas. As such, they suggest that the path of liberating trade and development is a particular manifestation of the path of realizing the emptiness of all things—that is, realizing the potential of all beings for mutual relevance or

meaningful difference. It is a path that can be taken up anywhere and traveled without end. Truly liberating trade and development will promote opening ourselves *to* one another in that utterly proximate way needed to truly make a difference *for* one another. It means committing to extending/enhancing community rather than expanding/deepening markets. It means achieving high contributory and productive diversity, not high commodity variety and consumption density. Only in this way is it possible for each and every one of us to realize that the very place in which we find ourselves is a place of immeasurable meanings and value—the ultimate alleviation of poverty.

***The case of Bhutan and the development measure
of gross national happiness***

What might this analysis of the systemic implications of currently prevailing trade and development karma look like if translated into concrete policies? As a way of answering this question, I'd like to consider the implications of the analysis for the small, Buddhist kingdom of Bhutan and its efforts to operationalize the development measure and goal of heightened Gross National Happiness (GNH).

GNH has been described as built on four interlinked processes: the preservation and promotion of culture; environmental conservation; good governance; and socio-economic development. These very processes, however, have been claimed (or could easily be claimed) as foundational by many developed and developing countries, as well as by many transnational corporations and such intergovernmental organizations as the World Trade Organization (WTO) or World Bank—for all of which the ultimate (and purely quantitative) measures of development remain rooted in rising GDP, per capita income, and levels of consumption. And although appeals are increasingly made to such “alternatives” as the Human Development Index, these alternative measures generally only supplement rather than supplant, or even set proper limits to, traditional quantitative models for assessing economic development.

If measuring national development in terms of GNH is to be truly distinctive, happiness must factor significantly—and not merely incidentally *or* consequentially—into the development equation. That is, happiness cannot be simply an unplanned collateral benefit or even a focal outcome of economic processes—a pleasant, but entirely contingent by-product of existing economic imperatives, values, and practices. Instead, happiness must factor crucially and critically into resolving the sorts of predicaments and suffering sponsored by prevailing scales and directions of global interdependence. It must, that is, have sufficient traction to uniquely effect and orient development, exerting appropriate “downward causation” on relevant economic and social processes.

The early Buddhist tradition is unparalleled for the thoroughness and clarity with which it lays bare the constellation of conditions sponsoring unhappiness, trouble, and suffering (*dukkha*), as well as the means of dissolving that constellation to realize liberation (*nirvana*). The tradition is, however, notably muted when

it comes to discussing happiness. When happiness (*sukkhā*) is explicitly invoked, it is almost invariably in the context of rehearsing what might be termed a conceptual genealogy of awakening or liberation. It is said, for instance, that, “with mindfulness comes wisdom; with wisdom comes tireless energy; with tireless energy comes joy; with joy comes a tranquil body; with a tranquil body comes happiness (*sukkhā*); with happiness comes attentive mastery (*samādhi*); with attentive mastery comes equanimity,” as well as the other immeasurable relational headings of compassion, appreciative joy, and loving-kindness (*Majjhima Nikāya* 118.29ff). These interactive meaning vectors are not considered to be subjective feelings—emotions as now commonly understood—but rather as relational qualities that “suffuse” the entire world. Happiness marks a phase or modality of relational enhancement and refinement that is inseparable from public, social transformation oriented toward enlightened and enlightening liberation. In particular, it emerges in the context of sustaining bodily tranquility and establishing attentive mastery.

Granted this characterization, happiness will have demonstrated effective economic traction when trade and development reduce overall stress and bring about enhanced capacities for concentrated and yet flexible awareness, in the context of realizing the kinds of mature emotional capabilities associated with sustaining meaningfully enriched and liberating relationships. In terms of the analysis given earlier, such trade and development practices and institutions would serve to counter the commodification of attention and the contraction of awareness that lie at the roots of the global colonization of consciousness. And, very probably, they would serve as a brake on the further commodification of the very basic necessities of life. They would challenge the predominance of choice and control as values structuring the operation of markets and practically mitigate both the erosion of productive diversity and the inequitable patterns of economic growth to which they lead. Finally, they would conserve and enhance local resources for meaning-making, working against the consumption of commodified meaning, particularly as institutionalized in global mass media news and entertainment. If appropriately sustained, they would lead to the emergence of post-market economies rooted in a paradigmatic value shift from individual freedoms of choice to relating freely, and from consumption-driven to contribution-enhancing patterns of growth.²⁴

What might this mean concretely for Bhutan? Let me briefly address just three, representative and interconnected issue areas that may have some general applicability: meeting subsistence needs; technology transfer; and cultural conservation.

No economy can be considered healthy if it fails to provide basic subsistence needs in an equitable and diversity-enhancing manner. These needs include, at the very least, food, clothing, shelter, health care, education, sensory stimulation and a sense of belonging.²⁵ As Bhutan opens itself to global economic forces, it may not remain feasible to address all of these needs through traditional local-to-local patterns of trade, or in ways that conserve and promote robust, associated local production ecologies. For example, it may not prove feasible to significantly

improve health care provision without importing medicines and treatment techniques and technologies. A reasonable aim, however, is to target key subsistence needs as foci for strenuously conserving and developing local resources and production ecologies. Education is arguably the central candidate for such treatment. For instance, education practices in Bhutan might be revised in such a way as to foster improvisational ability, emotional maturity and refinement, stress reduction, and attentive mastery—all necessary to offset the predominant effects of prevailing patterns of global interdependence and interpenetration. These might be more or less explicitly Buddhist in nature, but should clearly reflect indigenous, Bhutanese values and practices. Improvisational ability, in particular, will be crucial in the adaptive work needed to truly conserve—and not merely preserve—Bhutanese culture and Bhutan's overall capability for contributing effectively to global social, economic, and political processes.

As a very small country, with a comparably small national economy, it is sheer folly to believe that Bhutan could ever develop or sustain competitive advantage in manufacturing or other industrial modes of production. If, indeed, there is a commitment to conserving local production ecologies, technology transfer must be carefully orchestrated to insure that imported technologies (and the strategic values they embody) are appropriate complements to existing Bhutanese production practices and values. For instance, there is a wealth of new building materials and technologies flooding onto the global market. In most cases, the transfer of these materials and technologies has been accompanied by practically wholesale conversion to imported building design protocols—often with both aesthetically, socially and practically disastrous results. Care should be taken to introduce only those materials and technologies that can contribute to the evolution of already existing Bhutanese design sensibilities—that is, to extend the values and practices that already obtain in Bhutan and have historically proven their appropriateness to the Bhutanese setting.²⁶ Moreover, the pace of technology transfer should, to whatever degree possible, be indexed to the availability of relevant Bhutanese expertise. Excessive reliance on foreign experts practically guarantees eventual dissonance between imported means and indigenous aims.

Of particular importance will be policies related to communications and information technologies, and their role in effecting the export of attention from local concerns. The recent, official introduction of television to Bhutan marks a decisive move—understandable, and yet not without marked risks for the erosion of Bhutanese cultural and contributory resources. The case for developing Bhutanese competitive advantage in media production is no better than that in relation to manufacturing and industrial production. Neither can it be assumed possible to stem what is likely to be a flood of global media products into Bhutan. It is, however, possible to establish policies restricting direct advertising—a key component in the generation of desires for consumer choice in market-oriented economies. It is also possible, with broadcast media, to establish policies requiring, for instance, that a certain percentage of daily airtime be devoted to locally relevant program content. As a counterbalance to the potentially overwhelming

extent and density of cultural products arriving through global media, policies might be established to fund the creative advancement of Bhutanese artists, performers, writers, and commentators, making use of taxes pegged to audience size for imported program content. Unavoidably, many new artists will engage in creative hybridization. What is crucial is that this process enhances and extends Bhutanese culture. The aim is not to *preserve* Bhutanese culture (in effect rendering it incapable of natural reproduction), but rather to *conserve* it—a process that implies creative adaptation as well as sustained continuities.

Related to these three issue areas is a broader policy implication regarding the institutional structure of integrating global and Bhutanese economies. Although large nation states can reasonably anticipate some advantages, for example, to membership in the WTO, Bhutan would appear to have much more to lose than to gain in such arrangements. Much more is promised by Bhutan remaining in a position to levy appropriate tariffs and import taxes than by adopting an “open-market” approach to development. “Free trade” is by no means equivalent to fair trade. Indeed, the flood of consumer products and its attendant ideology of freedom through choice would very quickly erode what real possibilities remain for Bhutan to leapfrog the phase of postmodern market economics in achieving truly equitable and just post-market trade and development.²⁷

Post-market possibilities and present-day realities: a wary coda

In the frame narrative of the *Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta*, the Buddha instructs a gathering of students to practice mindfulness in all aspects of the present as it has come to be, keeping close to their own preserves, to the ranges of their ancestors. In this way, he affirms, illusory thoughts and desires will find no foothold. He then adds that it is only by cultivating wholesome or *kusala* eventualities that this virtue will deepen and develop. Most generally, this would seem to mean skillfully discerning the realities of our present global situation, as it has come to be, and responding to these realities through/in endless cultivation of wisdom, attentive mastery, and moral clarity. There is no promise in counterfactuals—utopian or otherwise—for faring well in the Buddhist sense of meaningfully and sustainably resolving trouble and suffering.

Directly operationalizing happiness as a key value for effecting and orienting socio-economic development may reflect an appropriate working out of the meaning of this kind of mindfulness in Bhutan. The grip there of contemporary global realities may still be weak enough, and the claims of indigenous cultural sensibilities strong enough, for a decisive paradigm shift from GNP to GNH to be seen there as both desirable and feasible. Bhutan may—and it is only *may*—be able to conserve and further develop its distinctive difference as it carefully works out the meaning of its own, fuller integration into global realities. But for the vast majority of the remaining 6 billion human beings on Earth, such a decisive preempting of the powerfully constellated values driving global market economics is

no longer possible. We live in communities that are already so thoroughly penetrated by and dependent on global scale interdependencies, so firmly embedded in inequitably biased structures of empowerment, and so deeply imbued with the ironic liberties of the market that any such sudden shift of paradigms for trade and development will seem for most of us both patently impractical and (if we are brutally honest) perhaps even beyond our ability to wholly desire.

In our complexly interdependent world, changing our situation is ultimately impossible without changing ourselves. Of course, it is also just as impossible to change ourselves without changing our situation. Far from signaling our entrapment in a “catch-22” dilemma, these apparently contrary conditions of possibility assert the primacy of bringing about new ways of relating. From a Buddhist perspective, this means at a minimum practicing mindfulness in all aspects of our present situation, as it has come to be. Put somewhat differently, new ways of relating arise with new ways of attending our situation, with new sensibilities and sensitivities. This is ultimately what it means to activate the emptiness of our situation, restoring and even further enhancing its diversity. Without this, there is no opportunity for changing the way things are changing and orienting our deepening interdependence toward relating freely and equitably.

The first real step toward realizing post-market economic and developmental realities, then, is to become mindful of the forces that presently define—literally shape and set limits to—how we are attentive. In the present historical moment, nothing so powerfully and widely affects the content and quality of our attention than mass media. If a paradigm shift from market to post-market realities pivots on skillfully revising our patterns of value-intention-action to activate situational opportunity in ways that are diversely liberating, our first order of business is to become mindful of the pivotal role played by mass media in eroding personal and communal attentive resources.

TECHNOLOGY, MEDIA, AND THE COLONIZATION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Every age has its central myths. In ours, one might cite the myth of universal equality or that of realizing unlimited growth—the economic equivalent of perpetual motion. But none has inspired as much determination and hope, or demonstrated as much resilience as the myth of technotopia.

The myth asks us to see technological progress as a steady and often heroic march out of fear and uncertainty into freer, easier, and more satisfying lives. Morally transparent and culturally neutral, technology imposes no particular values. It is not only a primary driver of globalization, but one that can be promoted both comfortably and universally, as useful to those in the third world as the first, irrespective of political or religious affiliations. Although problems have resulted in association with the rapid deployment of various technologies, these are simply “revenge” effects generated by their inappropriate or improper use. With more complete knowledge of relevant environmental, biological, and social systems, it will be possible to engineer safer and fully sustainable technological solutions and development regimes. Eventually, conflict will disappear. Each and every one of us will enjoy real autonomy—the freedom to get what we want, when, and as, we want it. In technotopia, all good things will be available in abundance.

No single phenomenon is as emblematic of the power of this myth and its practical effects on the character of contemporary life and the dynamics of the public sphere as that of mass media. At the same time, no other single phenomenon affords as much opportunity for catching sight of the myriad contradictions hidden in the shadows of the myth and the ramifications of failing to challenge its root values. Critically examining the media and our persistent difficulties in subjecting them to robust ethical consideration opens a particularly succinct way of locating and exploring the systemic effects of the karma—the values—intentions—actions—associated with what is arguably the basic engine of market-driven globalization and its utopian pretensions.

The design logic of this engine and the specific role of the media can be relatively simply stated. Through the consumption of mass media (as well as other commodities), attention is systematically exported out of our immediate situation. This compromises relational depth and quality, effectively eroding presently obtaining patterns of mutual support and contribution, and triggers further and

still more extensive commodity consumption. As this recursive process intensifies beyond the point at which all major subsistence needs have been commodified, consciousness itself is effectively colonized. The relational capabilities of both persons and communities atrophy, situational diversity is converted into circumstantial variety, and the very resources needed to meaningfully respond to and resolve our suffering or troubles are systematically depleted. As they have come to be, mass media help institutionalize value-driven patterns of action and relationship that are conducive both to increasing autonomy *and* to decreasing personal and communal capacities for relating freely. They are a primary factor in the undermining of possibilities for realizing truly liberating environments, fostering instead our deepening embeddedness within environments both open to and in need of management or control. Mass media produce and market commodified contents and qualities of consciousness, effectively (even if unintentionally) compromising personal and communal capacities for deepening and expressing appreciative and contributory virtuosity.

These are very strong claims, and they almost universally meet with vehement objections. Mass media embody many of the values central not only to our currently prevailing trade and development karma and the political dispositions most compatible with them, but also to our most basic habits and ideals of self-construction.¹ Criticizing the media is criticizing our selves and our own personal and communal karma—never an easy or entirely natural endeavor. Nowhere are these difficulties, their precedents, and the stakes involved in failing to overcome them more evident than in the critical fence-walk of media ethics.

The disjunction of form and content in media ethics

In 1964, Marshall McLuhan, writing about the nature of mass media, made the provocative claim that the “medium is the message.”² Media ethics, however, has focused overwhelmingly on programming content, tacitly assuming the media themselves to be inherently value-neutral tools or opportunity spaces that have a moral valence only in respect of how they are used. Whether a particular use is benign or malicious depends on *who* is using the media and *why*.

The logic underlying this position parallels that operating in the cliché that “guns don’t kill, people do.” Guns can be used to commit crimes and acts of terror or to prevent them. The media can be used to foster distrust and hatred, as they were in Hitler’s Germany; but they can also be used to promote mutual understanding and tolerance. As “natural” as this logic seems, from a Buddhist perspective it is also evidently freighted with problematic assumptions about the nature of causality, the separation of facts and values or means and ends, and the ontological priority of individual existents rather than relationships. Together, these assumptions severely constrain our ethical assessments of the media and the political, economic, social and techno-cultural systems with which they form an integrated whole.

The most heated ongoing debate over the past fifty years of media ethics has undoubtedly been the extent, if any, to which programming content affects moral

development. In the half-century since the US Congress first convened hearings on the psychological and social effects of televised violence in 1954, the debate has broadened and become increasingly complicated. But it has not been resolved. Evidence that powerfully correlates media content and long-term patterns of behavior has been compounding, often quite strikingly, and yet the controversy remains because the relevant studies fail to establish direct, causal links between program content and behavior. For a significant camp of media ethicists, this means that there are no clear grounds for determining, for example, if violence in the media gives rise to or simply reflects increasing violence in society. Thus, it remains unclear if the patterns of delinquency and crime found among young males who have consumed the heaviest diet of violent programming point toward the influence of the media on their behavior, or if they simply provide evidence of pre-existing (perhaps genetically encoded) dispositions toward violence and crime.³

From a Buddhist perspective informed by the teachings of interdependence and emptiness, indeterminacies surrounding whether the media *cause* or simply *reflect* behavioral changes can be traced to the blind spot resulting from an ontological exclusion of the middle ground between “is” and “is-not”. Indeed, this blind spot is the root form of ignorance—the most basic and finally debilitating denial of meaningful interdependence among all things. It is also a blind spot that makes plausible the disjunction of media form and content, as well as the assertion that the moral valence of the media has to do with the specific content that the media—as tools of communication—are used to convey.

Restoring the critical middle ground

A great deal of Buddhist practice is aimed at seeing that nothing literally exists or “stands apart from” all other things. There are no independently originated and sustained entities and no fixed and essential natures. Indeed, the teachings of no-self, interdependence and emptiness insist that so-called autonomous subjects and objects are actually abstractions compounded or put-together out of *habitual or conventional patterns of relationship*. Only through imposing consistent horizons of relevance on the originally open and responsive nature of all things are we able to clearly and categorically separate “this” thing or being from “that”. For those who have realized emptiness, all things are mutually relevant, obtaining only through their unique and continuous contributions to the meaning of all other things.

Given this, controversies pivoting on the distinction between the “media-as-cause” and the “media-as-mirror” are like those revolving around the question of which came first, the chicken or the egg. They cannot be settled because they express a category mistake—forcibly mapping recursive processes characterized by complex feedback and feedforward onto the simple temporal structure entailed by strict linear causation. The critical impasse endemic to prevailing approaches to media ethics results from failing to take interdependence or relationality as

ontologically basic, and says less about nature of the media than about our own abiding patterns of ignorance.

Buddhism is not alone in focusing on the ontological priority of relationships. One can find similar—though perhaps not as radical—moves being made in especially quantum physics, systems theory, biology, and the environmental or ecological sciences. As we have seen, however, Buddhism is distinctive in addressing the emptiness and interdependence of all things as irreducibly karmic in nature—that is, as dynamically meaningful and not a simple matter of fact. There is a meticulous consonance between the quality and patterning of our life experiences, the kinds of situations in which we find ourselves, and the complexion of our own values and intentions.

Buddhist teachings make clear that karma is made or incurred on the basis of actions undertaken to bring about an experienced result. Karma does not arise in association with all actions, but only with actions originating in *cetanā*, which can be translated as “intention,” but which is perhaps more accurately rendered as “motivation” or “heartfelt purpose.” It involves the experiencing of the results of prior purposeful acts, but also the active inflection or orienting of things as-they-are-coming-to be. Karma implies live interests as well as intentions—the prevalence of particular values and sentiment-charged commitments.

The insistence that both values and intentions play a role in generating and incurring karma has important ramifications for understanding the nature of the media and for assessing them critically. Intentions consist of explicit and specifically situated directives for action. Although we can speak of the intentions of a community, this is a metaphorical use of the word. Intentions manifestly arise in and through individuals. By contrast, values obtain generally as relational dispositions or qualitative orientations. Rather than being tied to explicitly held preferences regarding outcomes, values mark preferences regarding opportunities. They occur as abiding currents in the meaning of historically continuous situations that shape the dynamics of interdependence and are, by nature, both temporally and spatially ambient rather than specifically located. As a function of value-laden intentionality, karma is thus always both individual and situational—a dynamic nexus of the personal and the public, what is fundamentally “mine” and what is undeniably “ours.”

Both of these dimensions of karma are crucial in considering the ethical implications of the media. This has not been explicitly acknowledged in the usual approaches to media ethics—a fact that underlies their overwhelming focus on the moral valence of media content. Because the main focus is on the intentions according to which the content of the media is developed and the intentions according to which the media (and their content) are consumed, the middle ground for critically assessing the media as such is functionally excluded. The media are viewed as tools, used independently by a wide range of individuals for purposes that can be separately and effectively evaluated in standard moral terms. From a karmic perspective, doing this brings into ethical consideration an important part of the total situation pivoting on the media. But focusing exclusively

on intentionality—and not on both intentions *and* values—effectively exempts the media themselves from direct ethical consideration.

Tools and technologies

The ethical blindspot that results from seeing the media as tools that—apart from the intentions associated with their use—are morally transparent or ethically neutral, is symptomatic of a broad category mistake that elides the significant difference between tools and the technologies that generate them. In effect, it is a mistake that blocks critical and comprehensive evaluations of the complex nexus of political, economic, social, and cultural forces through which technologies are developed and deployed. As such, given the role of technological change as a driver of expanded market reach and density, it is a mistake that has worked against the consolidation of resources needed to comprehensively evaluate market operations and their affect on our personal and communal possibilities for building relational virtuosity.

Tools quantitatively extend our abilities, helping us precisely and powerfully promote our own interests. They are used by individual persons, corporations, or nations, and are properly evaluated individually, on the basis of their *task-specific utility*. If tools don't work, we change them, put them in the closet, or commit them to the dump. In ethical terms, tools allow us to exercise “exit rights”—we can use or not use them as we wish. At least in theory, this allows us to avoid personally any undesirable consequences associated with specific tool uses at the manifest cost of not being able to benefit from their specific utilities.

Technologies are very different. Unlike tools, technologies do not take up measurable amounts of space. We cannot point to a technology or walk around it. We cannot dispose of a technology. Indeed, even though I have decided to not own a television, I am nevertheless affected by the technologies associated with cable and broadcast media. They influence the culture in which I live, the way people speak and relate, the shared ground of public experience. With respect to technology, there are no complete exit rights. Technologies are not built and do not exist as identifiable entities. Instead, they arise in an ambient fashion, consisting of widespread, quite literally horizonless patterns of relationship embodying systems of strategic and ordinal values.

The technology of telecommunications, for instance, includes everything from the extraction of raw materials to their manufacture into tools like phones, faxes, and satellites. It includes marketing these tools, the services associated with them, and the “worlds” to which they give us access. It includes changing patterns of communication practices, the emergence of a range of industry-regulating legal institutions, new modalities and domains of stock market investment, and alterations in the politics of development.

As this example makes clear, we do not actually *use* technologies. We literally *invest* ourselves in them. Technologies don't help us carry out specific tasks. Instead, they coalesce as complex patterns of conduct oriented toward responding

to particular classes or types of problems. Technologies bring about a certain kind of world or lived experience, qualitatively transforming *how* we are interdependent. They systematize how we have *conceived* and *promoted our ends*, conditioning the *meaning* of things, and embedding us in particular patterns of moral valence. Technologies cannot be value neutral. And they cannot be effectively evaluated on the basis of how well the tools they provide serve our individual interests. The circularity of doing so only perpetuates the fallacy that “if something is good for each and every one of us, it must be good for all of us.” Instead, technologies can only be evaluated in terms of how their core values affect the *quality* of our conduct or relationships and the kinds of predicaments into which they usher us. In short, they can only be evaluated in fully karmic terms.

The technological bias toward control

The key strategic value informing the explosion of technological development that began in the European West and that has spread globally from roughly the sixteenth century onward has been control. Indeed, what we now refer to generically as “technology” is actually a particular family or lineage of technologies that has arisen and been sustained through a complex of political, social, economic, and cultural forces focused on the value of exerting *control over our circumstances to enhance felt independence*.⁴

Seen from the standpoint of individually assessed utility, this lineage has been remarkably successful. It has yielded—albeit with some serious “revenge” or side-effects like global warming and entirely new kinds of pathogens—nearly miraculous capacities for managing the nature and circumstances of our experience. Technologies biased toward control have made possible and practical the institutionalization of previously unimaginable freedoms of choice.

From a Buddhist perspective, however, intentions to control our circumstances and enhance felt independence can be seen as a crucial nexus of conditions for suffering that the Buddha gathered under the so-called conceit that “I am.” To the extent that I insist upon *being independent*—or, for that matter, *being dependent* (on a god, a random series of chemical reactions, or the inexorable operation of natural laws)—I forcibly ignore my interdependent origin among all things. In effect, I establish a horizon of relevance inside of which is “me” and beyond which everything else is explicitly “not-me”.

Enhancing felt independence requires, then, some form of intermediation—the introduction of means for securing a distinct difference *from* all other things and beings, and at least tacitly denying any significant need to differ *for* them. As we have been using the term, a strategic bias for control enables the assertion and enhancement of independence through a sacrifice of diversity.

Although we remain related to others and our environment, the prevalence of control fosters a dichotomous perspective on that relationship—a splitting into the objective and subjective—that then facilitates treating our relations with others as either actually or potentially instrumental. No longer intimately continuous

with all things—that is, related internally—gaps open in what I can attend or hold in careful awareness. By ignoring what intimately connects who “I am” with what “I am not”, I render myself liable to being blindsided—subject to accidental or fateful events of the sort that cause the experience of trouble or suffering. Asserting independence through exercising technologically mediated control almost paradoxically renders us subject to new vulnerabilities.

Seen karmically, it is clear that a sustained bias toward control does not just commit us to getting what we want or lack; it commits us to the entire cycle of wanting and getting what we want. This means that the better we get at getting what we want, the better we will/must get at wanting; but the better we get at wanting, the better we get at getting what we want, although we won’t want what we get. A life centered on achieving autonomy through the exertion of control commits us to an intensifying cycle of apparent poverty and fleeting satisfaction.

This might not be seen as such a bad thing as long as there are sufficient goods and services to provide whatever we want. It is, in fact, what most of us mean by “progress.” As long as there are enough goods and resources to carry us through the next loop in the cycle, so what? Life will just get better and better. But from a karmic perspective in which values always have precedence over so-called facts things look rather different.

Consider once again Ivan Illich’s classic study of transportation technologies. Against our tool-biased intuitions, Illich has convincingly demonstrated that beyond locally specifiable levels of development, technologies become self-promoting, generating precisely the kinds of problems they are suited to solving. Generally stated, technologies have *thresholds of utility* beyond which they begin producing the conditions of their own necessity, transforming relational patterns in such a way that they generate problems of a sort that apparently can be “effectively” and “efficiently” addressed only through more technology. This means that the core values of these technologies become ever more deeply embedded in the fabric of our lives and that our continued independence becomes increasingly dependent on having access to the tools and techniques these technologies are generating. Our question must be, then, what happens when a technological lineage—a whole family of technologies—that is biased toward control crosses the threshold of its utility? In particular, what happens when we become dependent on technologically-generated mediation to meet our basic subsistence needs, especially the needs for sensory enrichment and a sense of meaning or belonging?

Generally stated, as more and more of our relationships are inflected with the value of control, we find that our situation is not only increasingly *open* to control, but in clear *need* of it. As we vest increasing energy in making control karma, not only will we find ourselves living in increasingly controlled environments, but in situations that are continuously going out-of-control, requiring ever higher investments of energy and attention: more technology, more legislation, more schooling, more government intervention, and so on. As our control-biased technological lineage crosses the threshold of its utility, we find ourselves with

ever more autonomy or freedoms of choice, but also an ever-deepening sense of constraint or lack.

Moreover, because technological values shape the world of our experience itself, *unlimited skill in controlling will mean being subject to unlimited control*. This irony might be comical if control did not imply unequal access to power and thus hierarchies of status. The correlation of increasing technological globalization with scandalously widening income gaps is no accident and no passing phase. As the nations of the global South are fully aware, technologies biased toward control are *not* compatible with level playing fields. This is because while control can be alternated, it cannot be shared—not, at least, unless there is absolutely universal agreement about what we want and how we are going to get it. Such universal agreement, though a persistent and even noble dream, has never been anything but a dream. And indeed, to the extent that our independence or autonomy is asserted through control over our circumstances and the management of our experience, it must be in tension with equality.⁵ Autonomy and equality can co-exist comfortably as social and political values only if my exercise of control and the meaning I give to our shared situation do not affect you and the meaning you attribute to it. We must exist, in other words, in essentially separate dramatic spaces—spaces, as we will see, that have been opened and secured by globally marketed and now practically universal mass media. Finally, it is only when any *differences* between us *make no difference* at all that we can avoid conflict in exercising control.

This point is important enough to restate. Unless technologies strategically rooted in control bring about conditions that are compatible with mutual ignorance, they will not only produce the kinds of problems that will drive their own continued development, but also create fertile conditions for the emergence of predicaments expressing real and quite consequential conflicts of interest. This effect may be trivial in the case of technologies narrowly deployed in situations characterized by relatively low level and/or small scale interdependencies. But in a world of deep, global interdependencies this effect assumes critical centrality.⁶

It is significant, then, that the technological history so carefully documented by James Beniger⁷ is paralleled by political, economic, and social histories in which there has emerged an ideal of undermining or at least greatly limiting the strength of differences in service to equality. Politically, this ideal spawned widespread conversions of autocratic or monarchic states into republics and democracies. Economically, it has been associated with a breaking up of colonial empires and hereditary wealth, the freeing of both material and human capital, market variation, and an explosion of goods and services. Socially, it has brought about increasingly porous and fluid societal boundaries and the erosion of long standing class, gender, racial, and ethnic fault-lines.

All of this is, without any doubt, movement in the right direction—a corrective for long-sedimented patterns of advantage for only a very few. For any individual, choosing between continued oppression and increasing freedom of choice is no choice at all. But, if we are not to commit ourselves once again to the fallacy of

something being good for all of us (e.g. as communities) if it is good for each and every one of us—or the related fallacy that if something is good for me to do in any individual case, it will be good for me to do in all cases—we must pay particular critical attention to how disarming meaningful differences might adversely affect relational quality.

To repeat the point made earlier, the increasing ambience of control as a technological value leads to situations in which conflicts of interest can be deflected from escalating only at the cost of rendering difference impotent in respect of truly making a difference. Put another way, at least when deployed at sufficient scale, technological lineages biased toward control will tend to orchestrate possibilities for their further deployment by systematically translating *diversity* into *variety*. Patterns of relationship that are characterized by mutual contributions to shared welfare based on differential approaches to appreciating situational resources will be translated into patterns of relationship that eventuate only in simple co-existence.

The sublimation of diversity into mere variety that is a crucial effect of the contemporary patterns of technologically driven globalization will never bring about a homogenizing totalism. We need not worry about all dressing, eating, and speaking the same way. But as we have seen, globalization of this sort *is* likely to break down the local-to-local contributory networks by means of which subsistence needs have traditionally been met—the local ecologies of production that have sustained and enhanced both personal and communal capacities-for and contributions-to shared meaning-making. The saturation of our ways of relating by technologically mediated control over the contents of our experience will generate seemingly endless potential for exercising freedoms of choice. But this will also empty the public sphere of the resources needed to experience a creative and immediate sense of belonging meaningfully and intimately together.

Control karma, media, and the colonization of consciousness

In examining the karma of contemporary trade and global market economics, critical emphasis was given to the shift from locally produced means of subsistence to a system of meeting subsistence needs through globally mediating commodity markets. In broad outline, this process eventuated in a series of global transitions from material colonization (sixteenth to nineteenth centuries) to development economics (nineteenth through mid-twentieth century), the postindustrial information age (over the last quarter of the twentieth century), and now to what I have termed the attention economy.

The earliest phase of this transition was marked by the commodification of natural resources and the extension of power over the distribution of material goods. The classic era of material colonization gave way for a complex set of reasons, technological as well as social and political, to a pattern of development economics centered on the commodification of labor and exerting overt control

over consumption practices. Revolutionary advances in information technology served over the second half of the twentieth century as a compounding catalyst for a global shift away from industries focused on producing material goods to knowledge and service oriented industries. This transition marked the commodification of information flows and the consolidation of power over the distribution of conceptual capital.

We are in the midst of a poorly recognized transition from industries focused on knowledge production and information service solutions to an era in which consciousness itself is colonized through the emergence of complex markets that depend for their growth on the global extraction and redistribution of attention energy—that most basic of resources needed to make differences of the sort that make a meaningful difference. In short, we are entering an era in which attention itself is becoming commodified, and in which power is now being exerted, for profit, over the production of meaning and a sense of global belonging. This can be seen as both a cause and a consequence of the epochal shift from an era dominated by problem-solution to one dominated by predicament-resolution—a shift in which global mass media play an indispensable and pivotal role.

As noted in our earlier discussion of trade and development, a primary effect and enabler of the growth in scope and density of global markets has been the successful displacement of locally produced goods and services by globally circulated commodities, especially the goods and services needed for basic subsistence. The culturally disruptive impacts of the global commodification of food (cuisine), clothing (fashion), shelter (domestic space) and education (knowledge generation, storage and transmission) cannot be overestimated. Marx was particularly prescient in envisioning the coming role of mass consumption in the continued growth and consolidation of global capital—this already by the mid-nineteenth century. And Veblen, writing at the dawn of the twentieth century, clearly identified the key role of mass advertising in the sustained growth of perceived material needs or wants required by the expansion of market scope and the complementary (and eventually even more important) intensification of market density. Yet, as crucial as this role of mass media continues to be in generating consumer preferences and desires regarding material goods and services, its overall historical significance may prove to be—in relative terms, at least—rather modest.

With the advent of widespread popular access to radio and film in the early twentieth century, mass media began to play a new kind of economic role. Instead of serving solely as an organ for advertising locally, nationally and globally circulating commodities, it also began serving as a key producer of such commodities in the form of entertainment products. From this point forward, the media began shaping not only consumer sensibilities, but also consumer sentiment, creating new, technologically intermediated and increasingly non-local communities of anticipation and pathos, with shared excitements, expectations and feelings of belonging.

In ways unforeseen by visionaries like Marx, Ruskin and Veblen, mass media rapidly came to play an absolutely central role in defining the meaning of the

times. Indeed, with the accelerating global penetration of the public sphere by television and film from the 1960s, the productive capacity of mass media reached such an extent that Noam Chomsky could, in the mid-1980s write about the power of mass media to manufacture consent.⁸ The confluence of lowering costs for producing, distributing and marketing consumer electronics (radios, stereos, televisions and, later, home computers with internet access), emerging long-term effects of the commodification of subsistence, and the erosion of local cultural sensibilities and familial structures resulted finally in the mass mediated commodification of experienced belonging and participatory community.

But, contrary to the concerns of many media critics who, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, worried about the globalization of (Western or American) culture as an inevitable outcome of unhindered mass media expansions of the entertainment and information industries, market imperatives for maximally dense and continuous regimes of consumption have led in an almost opposite direction. While the media served to break down locally diverse ecologies for producing sensation enriching experiences, shared sentiment and meaning, they did not result in a unified global audience, but in the proliferation of ever-variegating arrays of global audiences with distinctly ill- or un-coordinated patterns of preference and interest. Instead of global media monopolies as purveyors of global monoculture—manufacturing globally monolithic consent—we have witnessed the rise of transnational mass media corporations intent on creating/serving as great a variety of audience niches as possible, thus exercising as great a control as possible over global flows of attention-energy. Instead of a global “Big Three” of media networks, there are hundreds of cable channels, thousands of online magazines and blogs, and a myriad of internet sites catering to an almost bottomless range of tastes and desires—all made available with maximal user friendliness, invisibly connected perhaps through transnational flows of industry profit, but manifestly differentiated and ostensibly oriented to the individual management of the contents of experience.

With these changes has come a paradigm shift in the meaning of being in community: it has become a mass mediated matter of choice. As enabled by technological advances that now globally allow almost instantaneous access to virtually any media content, the requirements for entering a community of interests and participating in the shared consumption of entertainment, information and interpretations or meaning have been reduced down to a single, explicitly reversible digital event. One need only electronically assert, by the click of a computer mouse or a voice command, that “I want to experience this” or “I do not want to experience this” for it to be so. Choice has been effectively disengaged from commitment.

This severing of capabilities-for choice and commitments-to sustained patterns of qualitatively charged relationality and community will undoubtedly have very real consequences for how the public comes to be conceived. It may well be that the public sphere, as digitally mediated, will come to be seen as a sub-domain of the private—a likely plural set of spaces for affiliation within the overarching

space of individually exercised choices. But the more immediate and globally significant consequence of the present scale of mass media consumption is the commodification and systematic export of attention itself.⁹

Attention export and the erosion of relational quality

The good or *kusala* eventualities associated with the prevailing scope and intensity with which the public is penetrated by global commodities (particularly media) are almost universally—albeit inequitably—familiar. Meeting our basic human needs through the consumption of globally circulating goods and services is not only convenient, the goods and services themselves are expertly designed and delivered, with the result that our individual capacities for managing the content and context of our experiences are arguably at a global, historical high. Although there is considerable variability depending on one's position in terms of global slopes of economic advantage, even for the relatively disadvantaged global majority there is now an unprecedented and daily expanding array of goods and services that can be enjoyed in almost immediate exchange for cash or credit representing some specific amount of our time and attention. In the case of the entertainment, information and meaning commodities produced and purveyed by global mass media, the unit costs to the consumer may seem so small as to seem negligible. But they are not.

The single most important long-term cost of this convenience and control can be stated quite straightforwardly: an overall erosion of relational quality resulting in a mounting incapacity for appreciation and contribution. We have already laid the basic foundation for unpacking this claim in earlier discussions of the compression of the production-marketing-consumption-waste cycle. To the degree that acts of media consumption become increasingly narrow in temporal scope, they will tend to retard sustained focusing of attention and critical evaluation. Among the most remarkable changes in mass media—especially television and film—over the past quarter century, has been an exponential shrinking of the average scene or shot length. Attention is literally not allowed to rest in place for longer than a second or two and in most cases for quite small fractions of a second. In practice, mass market media consumption consists of the iconic experience of having one's attention captured and redirected, with evaluation inhibiting speed and force.¹⁰

In the consumption of mass media commodities, the act of consuming is in effect digitalized virtually moment-by-moment. As such, it represents a limit case in the new economy. But the overwhelming trend in contemporary commodity consumption practices, regardless of the consumed good or service (whether a food item or a healthcare intervention) has been to compress sufficiently the spatial and temporal scope of consumption that it mimics a digital transition from *not-having* to *having*—a transition that disallows any complex, improvised relational ground being navigated or any qualitative shift in relationality being initiated and sustained. The new economy effectively mandates the ideal of acts

of consumption that can—and, eventually, can only—be consummated without building relational capacity.

This ideally minimal transit from not-having to having is ultimately what we mean by convenience—the practically frictionless movement from one status to another. With considerable implications for the nature and dynamics of the public sphere, the market valorization of convenience and choice—now manifestly being normalized across a wide range of sectors, including healthcare and political participation—signals both a general narrowing of our horizons of personal responsibility and, over time, a severe compromise of relational capability and attunement. Each act of commodity consumption marks the smooth and efficient paving over of opportunities for developing the complex attentive and relational skills associated with contributory virtuosity. The karma of reliance on “expertly” designed and manufactured goods, services, knowledge products, and meaning (especially in the form of mass media news) renders us increasingly in need of expert—even if globally mediated—care. Because they so profoundly effect changes in attentive quality, and because they meet basic needs for a sense of belonging and meaning, mass media are at the vanguard of the colonization of consciousness.¹¹

This is not due to any corporate or state conspiracy, or to any specific media content. Simply stated, attention-energy that is not directed (ideally in a *kusala* fashion) into our families, neighborhoods, and local communities is no longer available to them. Neither are the ostensible recipients of attention captured and spent on mass mediated program—for example, a family beset by political conflicts and ecological collapse in sub-Saharan Africa—able to benefit from this export of our most basic human resource. It is, indeed, true that the media and global economics practically deliver the great factual *variety* of the world into our homes. With cable station access, we have virtually unlimited, globally informed experiential options. But the media bring the world into our homes by means of procedures that are, in terms of intimate patterns of interdependence, finally “surgical”—procedures that dramatically dissociate the ostensive subjects (human or otherwise) of mass media programming from their native relational contexts, their natural patterns of becoming and unfolding toward excellence, and so also their emptiness and capacity to meaningfully enhance our lives as our teachers and intimate partners.

Calculated by sheer quantities of time involved, the greatest consumption of commodities in the new economy takes place through the media. Just to cite a few statistics, the average American watches just over 35 hours of television per week and, in the course of a year, is exposed to approximately 22,000 commercials. Children, it should be noted, now average a full “work week” in front of the television: five hours per day, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty five days a year. Sixty percent of all American children can be found at 10 am Saturday in front of a television set. Listening to radio occupies approximately 20 hours per week. Internet use, averaged for all Americans, is estimated at an average of 15 hours per week on the web. Altogether, Americans will soon spend an *average*

of 66% of their waking hours in direct media use.¹² This does not include any media use required in the workplace or at school. Nor does it include the time spent reading magazines or books dedicated to media stars, or the hours we devote to conversations about favorite actors, movies, or sports teams and personalities, many of which are carried out while consuming other media products. By tragic contrast, the average American parents spend less than 40 minutes a week in meaningful conversation with their children; meantime, the children are being exposed to 16,000 murders and over 200,000 acts of violence on television prior to turning eighteen. The time given to direct community service is, of course, even lower than that devoted to meaningful family conversation.

What are we *not* doing with this time and attention? The deep penetration of the media into our day-to-day lives marks a catastrophic export of attention from our families and local communities. *This is true regardless of program content.* Each hour spent consuming mass media commodities is an hour *not* spent attending our own immediate situation or actively and jointly improvising changes in its meaning. Like gardens, families and communities left untended will eventually go to ruin. As attention is systematically exported from unique and local patterns of relationship, largely through the consumption of both subsistence and media commodities, there occurs a depletion of precisely the resources needed locally if a population is to meaningfully resolve its own problems.¹³ Beyond a certain threshold of utility, the consumption of commodified goods and services ceases to be merely convenient and becomes compulsory.

The global export of attention, primarily through mass media—but also in the form of other acts of direct commodity consumption—is bringing about massive relational degradation. As would be expected from the insight that degraded environments are inseparable from degraded consciousness, this is a dual pattern of degradation that at once devalues what is experienced and lowers experiential quality. The systematic result of massively eroded attentive resources is ongoing failure in appreciating and contributing skillfully to our immediate situation: we find ourselves increasingly *poorly situated*, subject to an epidemic of boredom, restlessness, and dissatisfaction.

None of this is to deny that there is much that is agreeable in a life of apparently open-ended and convenient consumption. Even now, at this early phase in the colonization of consciousness, we enjoy an astounding rate and variety of experiences—a range of experiential possibilities unknown even to the royalty of previous ages. But the karma of compulsory consumption is such that these experiences must be forgotten or found wanting. The tangible goods we consume must be consigned to closets, basements, second-hand shops or the dump. So, too, must the intangible goods of information and knowledge, sensory enrichment and stimulation, and senses of belonging and meaning be as rapidly as possible rendered obsolete or otherwise undesirable or irrelevant. Again, in the body of the global economy, the function of consumers is the production and elimination of waste—employment that ultimately is neither dignified nor edifying.

The colonization of consciousness is in many ways a more critical threat to our possibilities for realizing truly liberating environments than is the depletion of soil, the fouling of our rivers, lakes, seas, and skies, or the massive extinction of plant and animal species. Because of it, we unwittingly forfeit the basic resource needed to enhance our capacities for relating freely and fully with our environments and those with whom we share them. Because of it, we are hastening (sometimes quite happily) into dependence on expert systems of communal welfare. Because of it, we condition ourselves to pervasively fail at appreciating our immediate situation, as a result of which we find ourselves ever more *poorly situated*.¹⁴ And because of it, we find it progressively easier and more comfortable to enjoy a sense of belonging together with people we have never met face-to-face and with whom we may never even have communicated, than with our own family members and neighbors.

There is considerable and entirely deniable irony in this. Making control karma has brought us rich varieties of experience. But it has also cost us critical capacities for evaluating our own conduct, for skillfully contributing to one another, and for enhancing the value of our situation. In our world of securely managed co-existence in which patterns of diversity are being systematically translated into mere variety, it is becoming “natural” to feel bored or distracted, to feel compelled to do something “more” or “different”, and to have our attention freed from the here and now to travel decidedly elsewhere. The mass media are rivaled perhaps only by pharmaceuticals, designer drugs, and legal substances of abuse in serving this need to be able to exert control over the type, nature, and duration of our chosen experiences, *and* to do so in what amounts to dramatic isolation from others exercising similar degrees of control.

Indeed, it is hard to imagine any institutionalized arrangement that would more effectively make this possible than the management of experience itself through the consumption of mass media commodities. Although the media ostensibly open up public spaces in which it is possible to get virtually whatever information we want, and to which equal access is at least theoretically possible, the media also quite dramatically export attention from locally available spaces in which contributory and appreciative virtuosity might be cultivated. In effect, they make irrelevant the ready availability of alternative perspectives and prospects. In general, as individuals and as populations, we typically will not seek out and make ourselves vulnerable to the full force of others’ differences from us. Media consumption conditions us to make the kinds of choices that enable us to keep choosing the content of our experience with as much autonomy as possible.

In the context of global patterns of interdependence conducive to the colonization of consciousness, mass media institutionalize the possibility of experiencing pretty much what we want, when we want, without any apparent conflict with others exercising even glaringly opposite choices. As such, mass media are the primary system through which the attention economy manages to be a net producer of dramatic entropy or situations in which no matter what choices we make, they will not ultimately make much of a difference. This has among its

salient effects the conservation of an uncontested space for the perseverance of liberal individualism and an ontological bias toward existents rather than relationships. Unfortunately, as suggested by laboratory studies of animals rendered incapable of meaningfully affecting their environment, the end result of dwelling too continuously in this space will be mounting depression—an epidemic of narcissism tragically alloyed with nihilism.

Has the case been overstated?

This may seem like an overstated case. Today, we enjoy a degree of autonomy and equality—especially politically—that is without historical precedent. Some commentators like Francis Fukuyama¹⁵ have celebrated this as the “end of history”—our arrival at the endpoint of political and economic evolution. Such pronouncements are, I think, very insightful, but also thankfully mistaken.

As I have repeatedly stressed, among the collateral costs of the colonization of consciousness are decreasing capacities-for and commitments-to contributing meaningfully to our situation—to literally engage in the making of *meaning*. This *is* a kind of end to history, but a very threatening one. And it is inevitable that the dramatic distance that makes it possible to simultaneously entertain autonomy and equality as social and political values *also* makes it increasingly easy for us to believe that, “if I’m okay; you *must* be okay” or, if you are not, then it is surely no fault of mine.

The attention economy brings widely available “wealth” and constantly experienced “want” into an increasingly tight feedback loop. With the unrelenting, media-enabled export of attention out of our immediate situation and the consequent atrophy of our capacity for appreciative and contributory virtuosity, we no longer feel that there is very much that we—uniquely—*must* do because *only* we can. The great irony of the colonization of consciousness is that we experience this as a kind of deliverance or liberation. Technologically trained to get what we want, we become expert at controlling the results or outcomes of our choices. But in exchange for the power to determine exactly *what will happen*, we are forfeiting our ability to cultivate improvisational skill and virtuosity in regard to *how well things are done*. Strangely, against all of our commonplace intuitions, *freedom of choice* can easily work against our potential for *relating freely*.

Nevertheless, the Buddhist teaching of impermanence implies that no situation, no matter how deeply conflicted, is finally intractable. In spite of the immense, factual scale of the processes associated with the colonization of consciousness, it *is* possible to resist being exclusively biased—technologically and otherwise—toward the value of control. This means realizing that the spectrum running from outright oppression to ideally universal autonomy is *not* exhaustive of our possibilities. Indeed, the Buddhist challenge is to see that this entire spectrum is biased toward control, and that while freedom as autonomy is surely better than oppression, it is *not* the final word on freedom. The opportunity is always present to move “perpendicular” to the practices and values arrayed along this spectrum.

We can commit ourselves to counteracting our dramatic impoverishment and attentive atrophy through directly cultivating appreciative and contributory virtuosity. In Buddhist terms, this means realizing: wisdom or insight into the interdependence and emptiness of all things (*prajñā*); attentive mastery (*samādhi*); and moral clarity (*śīla*). As our karma for appreciative and contributory virtuosity matures, we will find ourselves with increasing responsibilities and opportunities for contributing to our situation. But, necessarily, we will also find ourselves more and more richly endowed, more and more valuably situated. As the *Vimalakīrti Sutra* insists, when such a path is cultivated with horizonless commitment, it finally means the realization of buddha-lands in which all things do the work of enlightenment.

GOVERNANCE CULTURES AND COUNTERCULTURES

Religion, politics, and public good

Broadly construed, governance centers on consolidating authoritative oversight with respect to the depth, dynamics, and direction of change. By nature, then, governance is highly context dependent. It expresses a working coherence of concretely arrayed legitimacies, powers, and patterns of responsible supervision. But precisely because governance centers on managing or orienting change, it is also necessarily vested in the processes of creativity and conservation that result in the transformation of context. Governance, in short, is necessarily reflexive.

Where change is both rapid and complex—as is globally the case at present—achieving and securing good governance becomes a pivotal and critically recursive concern cutting across all aspects of contemporary society. At the core of this concern are questions not only about political institutions and formal decision-making procedures, but also about the nature and meaning of freedom, the prioritization of values and practices, and about how best to understand and advance public good.

Global interdependence has contributed greatly to intensifying the need for both asking and responsibly answering these questions. Just as it has become apparent, for example, that many of the primary drivers of problems in the environmental, health, and trade sectors lie outside these specific sectors, it has become clear that many key drivers of political problems are not explicitly political or ideological. Rather, the most trenchantly confounding challenges to good governance in the political realm center on aptly and sustainably reconciling differences in aims, norms, customary practices and values in such contested arenas as those of culture, ethnicity, gender and religion, and in both coherently and comprehensively orchestrating the full range of social and economic dynamics that structure contemporary societies.

Here, I would like to address the interplay of politics and religion as a way of cogently exploring the interplay of good governance, diversity, and public policy. The interplay of religion and politics brings into particularly clear focus the normative and practical stakes involved in arriving at significantly shared answers to questions about the nature of freedom and public good in a world of increasingly extensive and profound interdependence. While the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 can be seen as a major factor in the resurgence of religion as

an explicit focus of both national and global political discourse, the full network of conditions involved in the foregrounding of religion extends well beyond the causes and motivations for overt militancy and militarism. The accelerating and complex dynamics of contemporary globalization have brought about patterns of economic, social, political and techno-cultural interdependence that have at once pointedly raised issues of public good (e.g. in the discourses on human rights and environmental protection) and rendered palpable the inequities being generated by these very patterns of market-driven interdependence. The specter of global homogenization turns out to have been a reasonable, but entirely imaginary, source of fear.

Religion has reemerged—along with ethnicity, culture, and the nation, for example—as a crucial shaper of political discourse in answer to complexly conditioned needs for at once conserving and creating identity. That is, the renewed prominence of religion is in large part a response to identity crises triggered by global dynamics that at once highlight and threaten differences that make a difference. Distinctively, religion is centrally concerned with issues of belonging and ultimate meaning, in ways that practically force it to play either a complicit or critical role vis-à-vis these dynamics and crises of identity correlated with them. Because of this, religion—as that sphere, irreducibly both public and private, in which the ultimate reconciliation or reordering of goods and interests occupies center stage—has come to assume surprisingly pivotal contemporary relevance.¹

There is a certain historical irony in this. The contemporary global norm has come to be one of seeing the separation of politics and religion as a necessary and positive result of modernity—an ideal which, although it is not always completely realized, can no longer be fully and responsibly contested. This is particularly true among the putatively democratic nation-states in which the liberal humanist legacy of the European Enlightenment is most well established. But it has also become increasingly characteristic of nation-states in Asia and the global South where this legacy has taken historically more recent and often more tentative root. Apart from certain Islamic states and a small handful of Buddhist nations—for example, Bhutan, Thailand, and Myanmar (Burma)—politics and religion are denied truly significant common ground. It may be part of the business of politics to establish the parameters for and rights to religious practice, but religion is for the most part denied reciprocal authority with respect to politics.²

The customary arguments given for carefully segregating the sphere of the state and that of the sacred are, I believe, both valid and sensible. Millennia-long processes of globalization—understood in the broadest sense of the term—have brought about a nearly total dissolution of culturally, ethnically, linguistically, or religiously homogenous polities. As a result, at virtually all scales, the contemporary body politic is ever more pluralistic, even where pluralism as an explicit social and political ideal has not been seriously or deeply embraced. Consensus and consent have thus come to enjoy globally unprecedented privilege in the political process, at the very least rhetorically, and often quite practically. But to an equally

unprecedented extent, the sustained and significant development of pluralistic societies requires the creation and conservation of public and politically potent spaces for the expression and reconciliation of differences—including, but by no means restricted to religious differences. The separation of religion and politics is warranted, if for no other reason, by the indispensability of possibilities for expressing meaningful dissent of the greatest imaginable scope in heterogeneous societies where governing according to simple majority would effectively close the space of fruitful difference.

My purpose here is not, therefore, to contest the functional separation of politics and religion. Rather, I want to interpret their separation in such a way as to foreground the possibilities for political redirection that are implied by the unique resources of religion for bringing about meaningful, felt community. I will be doing so by appeal to specifically Buddhist resources, and in ways that will shed light on the place of religion in policy-making aimed at articulating and securing public good. But I trust that other traditions could well be mobilized to undertake parallel projects aimed at revitalizing religion's capacity for engendering critical countercultures with respect to prevailing political norms and strategies of governance.

Buddhism and politics: possibilities for critical revision

It is often supposed that Buddhism began, at least, as an apolitical religious or spiritual movement, and that its early teachings were focused on individual enlightenment and release from *samsara* or the unending cycle of troubled existence. Much of the early canon—in particular, the *Sutta Piṭaka* or collections of discourses by the historical Buddha—would seem to bear out this supposition. The *sutta* literature consists almost entirely of the presentation of audience-specific strategies for authoring liberation from suffering or trouble (*dukkha*). Most often, these strategies emerge in the course of conversations between the Buddha and individual monastic and lay students. Less often, but with equivalent dramatic force, they arise on occasions in which the Buddha has been invited to make strategic recommendations to political and social leaders who are faced with an array of threats ranging from natural calamities to civil unrest and war.

On these occasions—and against the intuitions of many contemporary (especially Western) Buddhist practitioners—the Buddha did not argue for or against any particular form of government. At no point did he recommend rebellion or regime change. Neither did he recommend the building of any particular political institutions. Indeed, he did not seem to make any summary value judgment at all among competing forms of political organization as such. Instead, he provided situation-specific guidance and resources for entering into governing relationships skillfully and consistently with the overall Buddhist aim of ending the suffering of all sentient beings. This has led many critics to the conclusion that early Buddhism was determinedly apolitical in orientation, carefully eschewing any taking of political sides. Given the Buddha's contrasting readiness to transgress

the broad social norms related, for example, to caste and gender by taking students from all levels of society, both male and female, other critics have been led to presume a de facto agenda of seeking elite sponsorship in the context of a conservative, political realism.³

Both approaches, however, evince what I take to be relatively shallow readings of the Buddha's pattern of response, taking it to be one of either blanket disengagement or selective engagement with finally secular motivations. To begin with, the absence of direct criticisms of governmental structures as such directly parallels the pattern, for example, of the Buddha's responses to matters of caste, ritual propriety, and gender. Rather than essentially denouncing, for instance, caste institutions—claiming, in effect, that they are inherently “bad” or “harmful”—he focused on drawing out the true meaning of the distinctions institutionalized therein. Thus, he would offer insight into the true character of being *ksatriya* or *brahmin*, stressing its relational (rather than essential and inherited) nature. Likewise, he did not directly forbid the performance of caste-specific rituals like that of the “horse sacrifice”—rituals crucial to the expression and consolidation of social and cultural authority—but instead guided his audience toward understanding, in Buddhist terms, the truer meanings of sacrifice.

The same pattern of response is evident in the Buddha's refusal to directly contest prevailing forms of political practice and concentrating, instead, on skillfully redirecting their force and *meaning*. In doing so, his emphasis was invariably on illustrating liberating patterns of relationship and leadership as distinct from those that maintained or further concentrated the conditions binding us to unresolved suffering or trouble. Thus, the Buddha commented extensively on the nature of good governance, and particularly on the conduct characteristic of the dharmic leader or “wheel-turning monarch” (*cakkavatti*). And while it is true that he did not try to convince leaders of the need for destroying or reforming existing social and political institutions, he consistently and powerfully advocated committed revision of the meaning of political and social relationships, focusing in particular on the dramatically significant interplay of values and intention.

This pattern of response repeats, as well, the pattern established in the Buddha's more widely celebrated expositions of a Middle Way eschewing the opposing positions of the eternalist and the annihilationist, the ascetic and the hedonist, or the spiritualist and the materialist. Perhaps because of the spatial metaphor invoked, the Buddhist path has often been understood as coursing “halfway between” all such opposites and extremes. But in actuality, the Buddhist Middle Way was not articulated (and certainly not traveled) as a kind of Aristotelian “mean” between opposing beliefs and practices. Instead, it consisted of calling to critical account the *entire spectrum* of beliefs and practices arrayed between any such opposed positions.

During the Buddha's lifetime, many well-defined and subtle philosophical and religious positions were arrayed between, for example, those who claimed the existence of an eternal soul and those who claimed the complete absence of any soul whatsoever, insisting instead on the reduction of all existence to functions of

matter. The Buddhist Middle Way was not an arithmetic average among all such views or a composite of their best features, but a means of exiting “perpendicular” to the conditioned axis of contestation established among them. To press the metaphor, Buddhist teachings aimed at opening up an entirely new kind of space—a new dimension. Taking up the Middle Way was not aimed at coming to rest at a point of perfect balance among competing and thus mutually limiting viewpoints, but at abandoning the very terms and conditional circumstances of the competition itself.⁴

By refraining from any explicit ranking of political institutions as “bad,” “better,” and “best,” the Buddha conscientiously avoided having the Middle Way assume a rank among them. By concentrating on the values and intentions deployed in leadership rather than the specific ritual and institutional forms supporting it, the Buddha’s advice neither advocated nor met with direct resistance. Understanding why such an apparently indirect approach was taken does not involve unmasking “hidden agendas” or compiling lists of appropriate “realist considerations.” It involves an appreciation of the Buddhist teaching of karma.

Karma and the politics of meaning

As we have seen in earlier chapters, a specifically Buddhist teaching of karma can be derived through both the teaching discourses (*suttas*) and the previous life narratives of the Buddha and his key disciples (primarily in the *Jataka* tales). It alerts us to the meticulous consonance between our values and intentions and the circumstances and dramatic movement of our life stories. That is, the Buddhist teaching of karma invites us to attend to the ways in which our patterns of priorities, preferences, and purposes actively condition the topography of present and future experience.

An important implication of this teaching is that we always have a significant share of responsibility in being present where, when, and as we have come to be. If we had not made karma for being born into a world characterized by personal and institutional violence, by gender inequities, or by ethnic strife, we would have been born elsewhere. This should not be understood as an invitation to fatalism. Other teachings—most succinctly, that of the three marks—enjoin us, for the purposes of realizing liberation from suffering, to see all things as characterized by impermanence, trouble, and the absence of any fixed and essential identity. If all things—and hence, all situations—are seen as absent any fixed identity and as in constant processes of change, no situation can be understood as inevitable.

By seeing all things as impermanent, we become aware that transformative energy is invariably present. By seeing our situation as irreducibly karmic, we become aware that what is in question is never whether things can change, but only the *direction* in which they will do so. That is, even if the *facts* of our present situation are relatively resistant to immediate alteration, the *meaning* of this situation is always open to negotiation. In karmic terms, responsibility always entails the possibility of meaningful response. While the particular situations in

which we find ourselves are invariably the conditioned *outcome* of prior intentions and continuing values, these same situations are also sites of *opportunity* for revising presently obtaining patterns of value and intention.

This general description, and its implications for interpreting the Buddha's distinctively non-confrontational political counsel, can be fleshed out by more fully rehearsing a story mentioned earlier in connection with a Buddhist understanding of poverty and its alleviation: the *Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta*.⁵ In this discourse, the Buddha begins by enjoining a gathering of his students to practice mindfulness with respect to all aspects of their experience. While doing so, he advises "keeping to your own preserves, to the range of your forebears" so that the temptation toward unskilled and unwholesome actions will find no foothold, no lodging. Immediately after uttering this apparently (and even oddly) conservative message, the Buddha launches into the story of Dalhanemi, a wheel-turning king, and his descendants.

Governed in accordance with Dharma, King Dalhanemi's realm is a densely populated one in which all beings live cooperatively, attractive in appearance, long in life, and refined in customs and tastes. Nearing the end of his life, the king wishes to dedicate himself to the holy life, but is concerned that his son has not demonstrated the capacity for serving as a dharmic leader. He is assured by his assembled ministers and sagely advisors that the capacity for serving as a wheel-turning king is not inherent, and that all such kings must learn to govern in accordance with the Dharma. As long as the inheritor of the throne acts with good intent and consults with his ministers and the sages of the realm—all of whom understand some part of the whole pattern of conduct required of a wheel-turning monarch—then all will be well.

The story then chronicles what happens when the eighth in the line of Dalhanemi's royal heirs fails to conduct himself in this manner. Although he consults with his ministers and advisors, he often is simply going through prescribed motions. Acting according to his own ideas, it happens that he fails to properly respond to evidence that a class of needy is growing in the realm. Neediness turns into outright poverty and, for the first time in anyone's memory, someone commits a theft. In a series of well-intended follies, he tries to control the behavior of the people, but everything he does only sends things spiraling further and further out of control. First, having allowed poverty to rise to the point that theft occurs, he decides to give money to the thief so that he might support his family without crime. But when people hear of this, they understand that theft is rewarded with money from the king! As a result, thievery spreads. The king then decides to behead a thief as a warning to all who would steal. But seeing for the first time what use can be made of well-honed metal hammered in the shape of a sword, people get the idea of making their own swords and killing the people from whom they steal so that no one will be able to report their crime!

Things spiral from bad to worse with each attempt to fix what has gone wrong. And over several generations, traditions of lived community many thousands of millennia old literally disintegrate into a roiling mass of free-floating individuals

given to mad paroxysms of destructiveness—a vertiginous, free-falling society in which children curse their parents, respect is ridiculed, family members murder one another as readily as they do strangers, and in which addictions to crude sensations and abusive relationships become celebrated as norms. With each new collapse downward into moral and social abyss, the vitality and beauty of the people decreases, and the average lifetime shrinks from 80,000 years to a mere seven years. A turn around only comes when a scattering of people retreat from society, refusing to participate in its degeneration, and eventually form a community of their own based on cultivating mindfulness and the shared practice of good deeds for the sake of other beings.

Three crucial themes are at play in this apparently simple moral tale. First is the pivotal role of poverty in the erosion of community: the dissolution of consciously lived interdependence is forewarned by the appearance of experienced lack or want—the experience of not being contributed to as needed. Importantly, however, this occurs when people are not able to work in and for their community. That is, poverty arises when people are blocked from contributing directly to the welfare of others. Trouble takes on a life of its own, spreading almost virus-like, when diversity begins to be eroded and when unwholesome change in the meaning or direction of interdependence is not skillfully reversed.

The second theme is the correlation among decreasing vitality and lifespan, increasing ignorance about our interdependence, and the disintegration of community life. In remarkably simple language, the narrative discloses the interrelationships among the loss of personal and cultural memory and history, the loss of a capacity for concerted attention and long-term commitments, and the rise of dramatic or moral distraction. Healing the “wound of existence” depends on carefully and caringly sustained sensibilities and sensitivities. Without qualitatively appropriate, sustained attention, the *asravas* or rents in the fabric of our interdependence deepen: the wound of existence becomes infected.

Finally, the story makes it very clear that the strategy of securing ourselves against trouble and crisis through various kinds of control is eventually self-defeating, committing us to courses of action that institutionalize conditions under which more widespread and deep controls seem increasingly necessary. In a thoroughly interdependent world, controlling the outcome of a situation is to exert control over all those present—an act of coercion that draws objections and stages further need for control in an escalating series that all too often culminates in violence.

When this fall is finally halted and reversed in the story, it is correlated with enhanced consciousness (meaning, in a Buddhist context, qualities of relationship) and an increasing force of endeavor that together culminate in the realization of dramatic clarity and exemplary demonstration of the four immeasurables: loving-kindness, compassion, joy in the good fortune of others, and equanimity. These are not fixed emotional states understood as subjective destinations, but rather as situational directions—meanings that can only be maintained through the systematic expression of wisdom (*prajña*), attentive mastery (*samādhi*), and

moral clarity (*śīla*). The restoration of society depends, not on increasing capacities for control and autonomy, but on the realization of appreciative and contributory virtuosity.

Rehearsing this story has particular salience for our present purposes because it clarifies that karma—especially the karma made in the course of political activity—comes to dramatic or meaningfully experienced fruition with the confluence of conditions that resonate with both the intentions *and* values informing consciously engaged conduct. Thus, in the story of Dalhanemi's hapless descendant, while his intention to stop theft is apparently good, the values embedded in his strategy for realizing this end are liable to profound, ironic consequences. Means and ends are not finally separable. Karma is as much a function of the *way* we do things as *why* and *what* we do.

Karma is often referred to as a teaching about causation. But it is causation as it occurs in an irreducibly dramatic cosmos—one in which space and time, in important ways, are not structured linearly and mechanically, but recursively and narratively. Buddhist discussions of causation are invariably in the context of stressing the interdependent arising of all things, and the terms used for causes (*hetu*) and effects (*phala*) metaphorically invoke a biotic understanding of their relationship, with the later literally designating “fruits ripe to the point of bursting.” Causes and effects, like seeds and fruit, are moments in an ongoing and evolving pattern of relationships—a sort of open spiral—through which experience is literally incorporated and communicated from generation to generation.

A major implication of the *Cakkavatti Sīhanāda Sutta* is that the pattern of relationships that results from institutionalizing the value of control can become deeply troubling, in spite of the presence of positive intentions. As the narrative makes clear, this is because control is exerted in order to determine or fix the results of actions, to bring about a particular state-of-affairs, literally defining or setting limits to what will be. In effect, control restricts situational possibilities. For some kinds of crisis intervention, this is entirely appropriate—for example, when treating traumatic injury. But for addressing other kinds of trouble, such as poverty—which the *Sutta* characterizes as caused by the breakdown of contributory reciprocity—the ironic liabilities of control are especially acute. Moreover, because control is irreducibly asymmetrical and never truly shared, the restriction or constraint of situational possibilities is inevitably asymmetrical as well, fostering inequity in the consolidation and exercise of power. The fruit (*phala*) of control incorporates seeds (*hetu*) of conflict.

Politically, this has far-reaching and potentially iconoclastic implications.

From autocracy to autonomy: limits to the political imaignaire

The relationship between politics and power can fairly be claimed self-evident. Politics is, of course, most explicitly concerned with issues of authority and legitimacy in articulating and institutionally crafting public good. But just beneath these explicit concerns revolve complex negotiations regarding who has

power, how it is distributed and exercised, and to what ends. Politics is tied intimately to issues of managing asymmetries in power. Indeed, the character of any given political system or process can be seen as expressing an ethos of power management.

A remarkable range of more or less well-formalized approaches to managing power has evolved in the course of global history, ranging from unabashed elitism to retributive egalitarianism, from liberal democratic principles to those drawn from the neo-Marxist oeuvre. But although ideologies factor into these negotiations, it is not debate among contending political philosophies that is at the heart of politics as a transactional process, but the practical discourse of power. Politics may invite gazing forward with an idealizing vision of things to come, but its actual work revolves around sorting out the responsibilities and realities of determining the immediate outcomes of the present.

There are, of course, many kinds of power and thus many kinds of politics. There is power in and over sex and hence sexual politics; there is power in art and thus a politics of art. Uses of power can be differentiated according to subtle distinctions like that between imposition and persuasion. Politics can center on amassing and exercising power, or on redistributing and censoring it. This can involve coalition building or deadly earnest competition. In all cases, however, the interplay of politics and power is centered on arrangements for framing how things will be. Power indexes capacities for determining situational meaning. This, indeed, is why politics is so often and so intensely emotional: it involves arriving at substantially and effectively shared public sentiments regarding what things will mean. To be empowered is to be freed toward what is desired and the opportunity of making it one's own. Power implies choice, and politics reveal the imaginings and re-imagining of the chosen.

Politics is for all of the aforementioned reasons, profoundly and irreducibly karmic. It is a continuous process of implicating intentions and values, folding them into our lives both individually and collectively. In less explicitly Buddhist terms, politics and history are intimately and recursively related. What is remarkable, given the tremendous variety of the human experience in both personal and cultural terms, is that this mutually constructive relationship between politics and history has followed a globally consistent trajectory, along the central axis of which are the value of control, the identification of freedom with autonomously exercising choice, the emergence of the human out of nature, and an intensely self-conscious diffraction of the political and the religious.

The specifics of these developmental dynamics must remain beyond the scope of the present discussion, but it is useful to sketch them in broad outline. It is virtually certain that there have always been struggles within sustained human groupings or communities regarding how things are going to be. But as a distinctive sphere of endeavor centered on the managing of power relations, politics arguably emerged as a distinctive dimension of the human experience when the consolidation of power by elite individuals and groups reached a scale compatible with large public works—for example, the building of roads, bridges, irrigation

systems, and protected harbors. Such works served to frame political identities in terms of geographically extensive states, and to institutionalize lasting structures for the display and transfer of power. The construction of such works at once required and demonstrated what can be conceived as literally awesome or awe-inspiring capacities for controlling labor flows, population sizes and distributions, and the dynamics of the natural environment.

In effect, this amounted to the demonstration of powers that previously would have been attributed solely to the spirit forces animating the world at large. The twin birth of politics and history involved a novel partitioning of what we now refer to as the “natural” and the “supernatural”—the realm of earthly, temporal affairs and that of the heavenly and eternal. Not surprisingly, early conceptions of those with political power and hence empowered to determine history tended to stress their halfling status—living mergers of the terrestrial and celestial, the human and the divine.⁶

Such massive public works could not have been undertaken, of course, in the absence of advances in a range of technological and knowledge domains, including, for example, metallurgy, transportation, and engineering mathematics and geometry. This linkage remains crucial through to the present: global political power is very closely aligned with distributions of technological prowess and knowledge generation. Projects of monumental and often inter-generational scale also could not have been carried out efficiently without the institutionalizing of work potential in standard currencies and the eventual displacement of barter systems at all levels of society. The coalescence of monetary economies made possible new scales of amassed fortune as well as new powers for exerting control over economic activity. Finally, such works made necessary vastly expanded management practices along both vertical and horizontal scales. In combination with the specializations of labor that also emerged in the interest of greater skills and efficiency, social stratification underwent marked changes, opening routes for mobility with respect to status, but also a tendency toward status segregations.

While the birth of politics and history took place at various points in time and space as civilizational complexes developed in regions particularly suited to intensified patterns of exchange and power consolidation, in each case, this process of development was conditioned by a range of factors from climate to geography to indigenous cultural traditions. But in spite of the many manifest differences between state organizations and political processes, a globally prevalent pattern has been the emergence and long-standing dominance of elite or royalty-centered patterns of state governance in which power is literally personified. This changes markedly, first in the European West, from about the seventeenth century onward. Monarchial and elitist forms of government in which power was vested in a sovereign individual or hereditary elite began giving way to national forms in which power was vested in increasingly democratic institutions and the sovereignty of entire peoples. By the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with demise of material colonization, this transition

took on truly global proportions as decolonization initiatives helped destabilize power structures throughout South and Central America, Africa, and Asia.

This modern development was not, of course, a purely political transition. Stephen Toulmin has persuasively laid to rest the belief that the dawn of the modern era marked an autonomous ideological or conceptual revolution; it resulted from a complexly conditioned convergence on a distinctive set of shared values across the social, economic, political, technological, scientific, and cultural domains. For our present discussion, the implications of this convergence for the role of religion in the public sphere are of particular importance. The modern era brought about a radical reframing of the relationship between the natural and the supernatural and the politics of how they are humanly bridged. Among the most significant aspects of this reframing was the explicit bifurcation of the authority of church and state—that is, of religion and politics. Practically, this bifurcation enabled expanding the scope of secular power—eventually to the point that humanity could assume entirely the responsibility for making history. Meanwhile the distinctive powers of the sacred were relegated to the margins of the public sphere, where it shaded off (as then imagined) into the private.

Granted the tight linkages just alluded to among the political, economic, social, and technological domains, it is not surprising that this should have been the direction taken in the evolution of political forms and discourse. Neither should it be surprising that the separation of church and state failed to effect a complete severing of their developmental kinship. The political emergence of democratic ideologies and the religious emergence of Protestant theologies were, from the outset, commonly inspired and mutually reinforcing. Animating them, and indeed all of the complexly interdependent changes taking place in the public sphere from, was the “control revolution” in technology—a revolution that effectively brought about means for empowering vast numbers of individuals to choose how things will be, at least in the context of meeting their own basic needs. The technological revolution in control not only opened up the possibility of realizing truly global markets and commodifying the basic means (and meaning) of subsistence. It also made possible previously unprecedented freedoms across a wide range of scales—not only for corporations and states, and for certain elite classes, but for virtually every individual member of society. The issue of freedom, or at least the possibility of it, became for the first time an almost universal and immediate reality.

The finality of this transition has become part of the ideological cant of contemporary market liberals who, like Francis Fukuyama, proclaim an end of history—our arrival at the end point of political and economic evolution.⁷ Sustained long and well enough, development economically and politically eventually means institutionalizing global free trade and universalizing democratic governance. The merits of the “end of history” thesis are, of course, highly debatable. What is not open to significant debate is whether there has been a progression from the global dominance of a politics of elitist autocracy to one of democratic autonomy. Perhaps the highest profile manifestation of this progress

has been in the area of human rights, with key advancements in the estates of minorities, women, children, and workers who had traditionally been excluded from political participation and almost entirely barred from gaining and exercising powers for determining the nature, quality and meaning of their own lives and circumstances.

There is no doubt that this overall transition has been positive. There is little to contest in the transition from what was often (if not typically) a politics of widespread oppression to a politics of widespread liberality—that is, from absolute freedom for one to shared (if limited) freedoms for all. Yet, granted the karma of control as a strategic value, and granted the directional dynamics characterizing the patterning of political, social, economic, and technological interdependence in recent global history, we should perhaps exercise caution in wholly celebrating the triumph of liberal democracy and the possibility of arriving at the end of (at least, significant) political history. The cautions embedded in the main narrative of the *Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta* are of particular relevance here. Valuing control and autonomy can orient our interdependence in very troubling and yet ironically appealing ways.

Liberty as political ideal: freedoms of choice or relating freely?

One of the major legacies of the modern era for politics has been the institutionalization of freedom as a key ordinal value. Today, it would simply be impossible to conduct a comprehensive discussion of politics or apt governance without invoking or confronting issues of “freedom” or the range of concepts taken to be cognate with it: “liberty,” “choice,” “autonomy,” “independence,” and “sovereignty.” It is, in fact, quite remarkable that concerns about freedom run through every level of political discourse, from discussions of individual rights to the conduct of nation states, and that there obtains a fundamentally shared conception of what freedom entails.

Across the entire spectrum of political forms from the autocratic to the democratic, appeal is made, whether explicitly or implicitly, to a conception of freedom that centers on choice and autonomy—that is, the presence of options and the power to select among them without being significantly pressured by outside interests or acts of coercion. Freedom, conceived in this way, consists of being positioned to independently determine the nature and course of one’s experience. At the autocratic end of the political spectrum, very little space exists for being free. Autocracies are notoriously liable to despotic manifestations of freedoms to exercise control within and over one’s circumstances. History is sadly not lacking in examples of the tragically broad range of abuses that are possible given practically absolute powers of choice being wielded by a small minority or by a single individual. At the democratic end of the spectrum, the spaces for perceiving options regarding how things will be and selecting autonomously among them are greatly expanded: virtually every member of society is guaranteed the possibility of regularly making real choices of one sort or another, especially choices about leadership.

The modern trend toward democratic patterns of governance has involved not only the expansion of spaces for choice both within and among societies, it has also entailed activating sensitivities to and sensibilities for balancing the often contrary needs and goods of various individuals, of individuals with respect to the communities of which they are a part, and of communities of various scales. Movement in the direction of democratic governance has meant grappling with contrary imperatives for unity and commonality of interests and for a deepening valorization of plurality—a tension that eventually frames the issue of limits to empowerment.

If it is accepted that the historical movement away from autocracy toward democracy expresses in the dynamics of power management the modern bias toward universality, autonomy, equality, choice and control that we have seen also underlies global market economics, and if biases toward the value of control are liable to generating ironic consequence (especially when deployed at sufficient scale and intensity), then we are compelled to question whether or in what specific sense(s) this political trend promises to be globally liberating and equity enhancing. That is, we are compelled to look beyond the evident *kusala* outcomes associated with democratization and to ask whether democratization in its present form (particularly as wedded to market liberalism) is also systematically undermining the conditions of both actually and potentially *akusala* eventualities. We must, in short, evaluate whether or not the process of accentuating freedoms of choice and securing spaces for the maximal expression of autonomy is politically enriching or impoverishing.

The point in such an inquiry is not to contest the valorization of government by and for the people, to cast doubt on the desirability of freedom for all, or to suggest that freedom should be subordinated to other political values like stability or security. It is instead to question the *kind* of freedom that is now almost universally assumed to be desirable, and whether it is compatible with enhancing diversity throughout the public sphere—that is, compatible with ever-appreciating capacities for and commitments to sustained contribution to meaningfully shared welfare, and with resolving the kinds of predicaments that are being amplified and multiplied by our expanding and increasingly complex global interdependence.

After roughly four centuries of the control revolution in technology and steady progress from autocratic or elitist modes of governance to those that are democratic and (at least ostensibly) populist, we dwell in a world that permits witnessing both the greatest number of real choices being made by the greatest number of people ever *and* the greatest and most deeply entrenched patterns of inequity that have ever occurred within and among societies. This apparently schizophrenic combination of heightened freedoms of choice and intensified inequity is not accidental. It is a consequence of predicament-spawning conflicts among the core values of modernity, and that postmodern critics have carefully acknowledged but failed to address in any coordinated and effective manner—a function, finally, of globally shared karma.

In the domain of politics, the pivotal conflict is that between autonomy and equality—a conflict that, within the complex of modern values, directly raises

issues of limits to plurality and tolerance. The internal structure of autonomy, conceived as the freedom to act independently of others in pursuit of one's own interests, guarantees that it will grow asymptotically. Complete autonomy can be approached, but never fully attained. Put somewhat differently, absolute autonomy is inconceivable except in the complete absence of contrasting (if not contrary) others. Yet the complete absence of contrasting (and, indeed, contending) others empties independence of any practical content. Autonomy is always exercised in spite of, and ultimately only by virtue of, the presence of others. It is, at bottom, a relative state of freedom, one in which relationships with others matter most crucially as that which we must be able to treat as not really mattering at all. It is only by ignoring or denying the claims of internal relatedness made upon us by our concrete relationships with others, and by disregarding the effects of our choices on them, that we exercise autonomy.

There is, then, a logical conflict between committing to the value of autonomy and to that of equality in any situation that must be shared by those who differ significantly. While we can dream of all members of a society having equal, unlimited freedom to determine the outcome of situations they share, this dream could be made real if everyone involved were in fundamental and lasting agreement about what things should be and mean, or if any differences in how individuals choose to act and experience themselves make no real difference to anyone else. In fact—rather than in dream—as real capacities for acting autonomously and exercising choice have become more widely distributed, evident tensions among various members of a society with respect to both means and ends have made increasingly apparent the necessity of confronting an ironically discomfiting truth: insuring maximal autonomy for each member of society requires imposing limits to autonomy on all.

Addressing the tension between autonomy and equality has been an abiding preoccupation of liberal democratic political discourse since its very beginnings. Historically, the development of robust legal institutions and so-called rule of law have emerged as the most widespread strategy for reducing and managing this tension. In the United States, for example, major debates regarding abortion rights, same-sex marriage, and the widely criticized Patriot Act, all pivot on the apparent necessity and great difficulty of realizing robust consensus about the positioning of legal thresholds for individual freedoms of choice. In essence, such debates seek clarity regarding which choices should be held inviolable for any individual, what limits need to be invoked with respect to who or what can count as an individual, and the best means of reconciling commitments to the value of plurality with the manifest need for political unity.

It is important to see that the liberal values of autonomy and equality are, together, what drives the emergence of pluralism and tolerance as values structuring the public dynamics of transiting from autocratic to democratic institutions of power and authority. Yet, it is equally important to see that relieving the tension between autonomy and equality through legal institutions and rule of law has also driven the development of the peculiarly forceful modern distinction between the

public and the private. This distinction has been instrumental in realizing the rule of law precisely by establishing the need for limits to law.⁸ In practice, then, the legal institutionalization of the public and private as distinctive realms—with the latter strictly defined as exempted from the reach of the law—has served to merge privacy and autonomy and to alloy the public value of pluralism with tolerance. Freedom becomes constituted as something that can be exercised most fully by individuals in private, or as the state-of-affairs that must obtain for individuals to manifest their autonomy or apparent disregard for the effects of their choices on others. Equality becomes constituted as a public phenomenon tied to the legal definition of tolerable differences.

The legal segregation of the public and private in effect separates each individual in society from every other, as well as from society as a collective whole, interposing the public sphere between them as an insulating medium capable of absorbing the permissible range of individually exercised freedoms of choice. This conserves the possibility of enjoying the degree of differences needed for significant pluralism. But it does so by establishing legal boundaries within which one is assured of the right to be left alone.

The tension between autonomy and equality is thus not released by leveling out all differences—the realization of absolute and universal agreement. That would amount to a logical affront to pluralism (and, it might be added, the dissolution of the basic conditions needed for continued market growth). Rather, the tension is released by institutionalizing conditions that enable formulating and honoring rights to ignore and be ignored. As we have been using the terms, this approach normalizes converting the potentials for increasing diversity that attend the pluralizing effects of complex globalization to imperatives for mere variation. Tolerance comes to mean in political terms precisely what it means in engineering: the precise degree of difference that will not make any difference.⁹ Tolerance, in this context, becomes an affront to and, in extreme cases, even an assault on diversity.

This is a particularly unpalatable conclusion. Autonomy, equality, pluralism, and tolerance can each function as highly positive values. It would seem safe to say that none of us would want to live in a world shaped by their inversion as ordinal values—a world, that is, shaped by lack of autonomy, inequality, unilateralism, and intolerance. Taken together, however, as a constellation of key political and social values, autonomy, equality, pluralism, and tolerance bring about conditions in which freedom is secured by institutionalizing ignorance and delimiting difference in ways that are deeply troubling—especially from a Buddhist perspective. The process of negotiating thresholds for the individual expression of autonomy is *not* a process of revising the root *meaning* of freedom, but only of establishing its allowable *scope*. At the same time, however, establishing the allowable scope of freedom is to establish limits for actualizing the emptiness or mutual relevance of all things. In other words, it is to set horizons for how much we can mean (and expect to mean) both to and for one another.

As important and individually beneficial as the modern, liberal project of moving from autocratic to democratic exercises of freedom has been, in a

Buddhist sense of the term, it has not and cannot be ultimately liberating. The liberties we have come to enjoy as part of the liberal project are liberating only in conventional (*paramartha*) terms. They represent quite real and welcome responses to problems in the distribution of power and claims of authority. And, in a world less complex than ours has come to be, we might have little reason to question their origins and ultimate meaning. But as we have seen, the complexity of contemporary patterns of interdependence and change is bringing about an epochal shift from a world in which problems could be sustainably solved in relative isolation to a world in which this is no longer the case. On the contrary, problem solutions in one sector or community or state now almost invariably serve as causes for problems in others. In global terms, we have filled the empty environmental, economic, social, political and cultural spaces that once served as insulation between our independently formulated and executed solutions and their disparate strategies, benefits, and costs. As a consequence of the disappearance of this absorbent commons, we are experiencing globally a mushrooming of predicaments that force confronting disparities in the meaning of a “good solution” or an “appropriate resolve.”

As a result of complex globalization, we no longer have the relative luxury of simply bringing the facts of a situation back into line with our own, individual needs and desires. Instead, we must carefully align significantly plural needs and desires, going beyond simple cooperation—that is, operating in relatively problem free or frictionless co-existence—to true coordination, taking skillful responsibility for the overall direction of our shared situation. Otherwise, and in spite of the continued conventional value of the liberties insured by the rule of law and the clear demarcation of public and private domains, our problem solutions will only result in ever more complex troubles and suffering.

Ultimately, the strategic values and the practices being deployed to alleviate the tensions between autonomy and equality—tensions that have been compounding over the past three centuries—only have significant traction with respect to their symptoms, not their ultimate causes. They will allow us to salve the “wound of existence,” and perhaps keep it from entirely immobilizing us, but cannot promote complete healing. They will work well in *alleviating* our day-to-day suffering, but they will not help *eliminate* it.

The reasons for this are not merely complicated. They are truly complex, arising out of patterns of relationship that are irreducibly historical, systematically value-laden, and persistently self-organizing. As stressed above, the broad political transition away from autocratic to democratic expressions of autonomy have not been taking place in isolation from parallel social, economic, and techno-cultural transitions, but rather in intimate and recursive relationship with them. To reiterate a point made earlier, with the transition from material colonization, to development economics, to the postindustrial information age, and now into the first decades of the attention economy, a growing capacity for individual rights to control or manage the content of experience has been realized *along with* a pattern of institutional development that has made possible a colonization of

consciousness itself. Addressing the politically ramifying tension between autonomy and equality can only be undertaken in keen awareness of how it is embedded in the much wider set of tensions and transformations that have emerged as a result of modern and postmodern patterns of value–intention–action—patterns that are resulting in the realization of conditions conducive to the commodification of attention.

As argued in the previous two chapters, the commodification of attention systematically erodes personal and communal capacities for relating freely. Over time, personal and communal contributory opportunities and resources—and the complex relational possibilities that they imply—are converted into compellingly choice-mediated consumption processes. Globally, these processes constitute an engine for waste and deepening poverty in both the material and more comprehensive Buddhist sense, systematically translating diversity into mere variety. Yet, these very same processes are also conducive to deepening consolidation of both dispositions and socio-economic and political spaces for autonomous decision-making. While this can lead to conflict in the short run, to the precise extent that freedoms of choice displace capacities for relating freely, power will tend to coalesce around agreed-upon compromises with respect to controlling situational outcomes where individual streams of experience cannot be neatly disentangled. Compromise, like cooperation, alleviates tensions between the values of autonomy and equality by establishing clear horizons of relevance and ranges of tolerance—effectively restricting possibilities for both conflict *and* contribution.

Insofar as it is dependent upon institutions for dramatic mediation and an erosion of the relational capabilities needed for meaningfully shared and improvisation-rich interdependence, there is substantial irony in the increasing independence that characterizes political progress toward democratic autonomy. In an increasingly complex world of both convergent and emergent change dynamics, the most effective means of enhancing felt independence in ways that do not result in conflict is to bring about conditions that systematically lessen depth of commitment. Lowered levels of commitment mean a greater likelihood that agreeable compromises can be reached in any given situation where outcomes must finally be collectively experienced. Differences are not eliminated. They are simply emptied of the distinctive kinds of relational quality and depth that would allow them to make forceful differences. The combined valorization of expanded freedoms of choice, autonomy and equality is thus correlated with a steady evacuation of reasons for choosing any one thing or eventuality over any other. Eventually, “I want to” becomes virtually indistinguishable from “why not?”

A summary of main points is perhaps useful here. Although there are clear and wholesomely beneficial (*kusala*) eventualities associated with the steady migration of political systems from autocratic to democratic expressions of power and authority, this historically progressive movement does not sufficiently counter the unwholesome (*akusla*) outcomes of autonomy as an ordinal value. The karma of widely deploying control as a strategic or technologically embodied value in the context of expanding and deepening market operations—which are themselves

biased toward key values of control, convenience, and choice—produces and sustains conditions that are particularly conducive to the emergence of equality as a central political value, even as they foster broadband relational inequity.¹⁰ With the structural transition from autocratic to democratic governance, equality and autonomy combine to generate the paired second order values of pluralism and tolerance. Ironically, once constellated and institutionally expressed in control-biased patterns of development, these values spawn systems of social, economic, and political interdependence that strongly favor the erosion of diversity and the increase of what can be termed dramatic entropy—that is, the elimination of the kinds and degrees of difference needed to make a meaningful difference.¹¹

At the same time, the alliance of autonomy and control within an encompassing conception of freedom in terms of choice generates a particularly ironic pattern of outcomes and opportunities—a complex karma for experiencing our situation as increasingly in need of control, and as making available a steadily expanding array of options or choices for doing so. Having made a choice regarding which among the available (and often mutually exclusive) means of control to employ, we discover that doing so eventuates in realities that make further choices not only possible, but also necessary. Headway proves elusive. Beyond a certain threshold, progress toward enriched and expanded public good made by exercising freedoms of choice becomes asymptotic. That is, choice becomes manifestly impotent as means for realizing sustainably and substantially shared ends and welfare. The karma of expanding freedoms of choice, especially by means of control-biased technologies that allow experiential outcomes to be precisely managed, commits us to a Zeno-like labor of proliferating choices—an infinity of them, finally—between any present moment and a targeted future for it.¹²

There is thus a dark side to the entire spectrum of autonomy-biased politics. Even in its most benign form, a politics of autonomy does not both undermine the conditions for *akusala* eventualities and foster *kusala* eventualities or truly virtuosic relationality. To the extent that we are committed to the constellation of autonomy, equality, plurality, and tolerance, even as our choice-eventuated proliferation of situational blockages continues unabated, resulting in yet more and more varied forms of ever-pregnant conflicts or predicaments, we will have the impression of making “progress”—of zeroing in on truly *being* free. Unfortunately, like poor Zeno, we end up paradoxically having to choose (whether sadly or cynically) between making continuous headway yet never arriving, and admitting that there is no such thing as movement that is truly liberating.

Toward a counter-politics of valuing quality of commitment over quantities of choice

The complex liabilities associated with construing freedom—primarily or exclusively—in terms of freedoms of choice can, from a Buddhist perspective, be seen as rooted in the valuing of individual determinations of experiential outcomes over relational quality. Granted the interdependence of all things, and

hence the irreducibly relational nature of consciousness and experience, fully determining what *I* experience in any given situation is in some degree to determine what *you* will or can experience. Construing freedom as a function of independently determining situational outcomes practically guarantees that exercising freedom eventually becomes paradoxical in that it forces confrontation with the need for limiting freedom (e.g. by means of legal institutions) in order to avoid or collectively manage conflicts of interest with respect to desired situational outcomes.

Whether freedoms of choice are limited by means of legal institutions that establish and enforce the scope of individual choice or disarmed by means of privatizing the management of experience via mass media, designer drugs, or some yet-to-be developed technology for individually and independently controlling the experience of even ostensibly shared situations, *akusala* eventualities obtain. Instead of orienting situational dynamics toward increasing diversity and the realization of relational virtuosity, such institutional or technological measures effectively interpolate relational faults or lines of stress that, when differences of interest are great enough, will result in a fracturing of the situation as a functionally and richly interdependent whole. Instead of the meaningful incorporation of differences and the enhancement of situational diversity, there occurs a proliferation of competing or instrumentally cooperating sovereignties.

The logic of this situational breakup can be seen quite clearly expressed in the basic premises and operation of rational choice liberalism. Rational choice theory was developed to understand and assess collective decision-making and to shed light on the meaning of decision-making efficacy. At the basis of the theory is the premise that choices are made by self-interested, rational actors equipped with consistent sets of interests and acting with the intent of maximally realizing their own chosen ends. In short, rational choice theory presumes the independently existing individual as both ontologically and axiologically basic. Rational choice liberalism combines the basics of rational choice theory with the conviction that market economics are rational in the sense of placing all self-interested economic actors into fair and open competition.¹³ For most proponents of continued large-scale, market-driven, and market-directed interdependence, rational choice liberalism has become a favored culture (or, less charitably, cult) of global governance.

The root structure of rational choice governance and a politics of autonomy is neatly illustrated in one of the classic heuristics of rational choice theory: the prisoner's dilemma. On the assumption that all rational actors are ultimately self-interested, the prisoner's dilemma purportedly reveals the dynamics by means of which thresholds of cooperation are reached and a decisive shift occurs in the direction of competing sovereigns. In a nutshell, the dilemma aims to reveal the inescapability of transactional cleavages in a world of rationally self-interested actors: a time will come, in any collective endeavor, when the joint benefits of continued cooperation will fall to a level that stimulates a calculation of risks and benefits pursuant to breaking off cooperation and entering into direct and explicit competition with former partners. Breaking too soon can be disastrous, resulting

in a forfeit of existing advantages and a failure to consolidate superior alternatives; breaking too late can mean losing the competitive edge needed to insure that, once a cooperatively biased relational whole has reverted to a varied array of competitive individuals and alliances, one's own interests are most fully served and promoted.

The prisoner's dilemma effectively argues that imperatives for competition will eventually slice through cooperative relationships whenever maximum self-interest is resolutely and rationally pursued. In other words, relationships in which individual fortunes and opportunities are seen as explicitly interdependent *and equitable* are essentially contingent; eventually, they evolve to a bifurcation point at which commitments to equitably shared benefits and felt interdependence must rationally be broken to pitch the slope of situational advantage decidedly in one's own favor, securing one's own, individual ends at whatever tolerable expense to others. For any rationally choosing actor, self-interested coexistence will finally trump equity-oriented interdependence.

Market liberalism translates the premises and arguments of rational choice theory into a system for rational global governance.¹⁴ Whether the actors involved in a situation are individual persons, corporations, states or other complex entities, the dynamics of pursuing self-interest will eventually dictate seeing that more is to be gained by competing than by cooperating. That is, there will come a point at which meshing different interests will be less rational (and profitable) than securing one's own interests, ideally by means whereby the costs of security are borne disproportionately by others. The logic of governance invoked by rational choice does not and (by its own lights) cannot depend upon or ultimately result in bodhisattva action. At least in a Buddhist sense, securing sovereignty in the strict sense of a right and an ability to act vigorously in pursuit of our own, individual interests cannot—in spite of any appearances to the contrary—be ultimately liberating.

As the etymology of security—from the Latin *securus* or “without care”—makes clear, securing our own interests is always a matter of breaking away from all overriding concerns with relational quality and patterns of contribution to fully shared welfare. It means falling into the conceit of existence—the conceit of ontological independence—that the Buddha identified as the pivotal condition for the arising of trouble or suffering. In the end, being secure or left “without care” is also to be left uncaring and uncared for—it is to become at once care-free and care-less in both the sense of inattentive and unattended.

Arguably, this is pushing too hard in the direction of a functionally impoverished reading of security. “Security forces” may, across large parts of the globe, evoke images of night-time raids by dragoons enlisted to uphold state order and maintain the political status quo, as violently as deemed necessary. But security can also be prefixed with “human” to point toward the need for guarantees of basic subsistence and dignity for all—a call for social and economic rights and freedom from fear. Still, it is hard to get away from the rudimentary association of security with protection. The liability of security as a core value is that it is

inseparable from a karmic cycle that mandates living in a world in which protecting one's interests is, and remains, necessary—that is, a world in which one's interests are always under threat. There is an irony embedded in the quest for security that no amount of prefixing can resolve.¹⁵

Here, then, are the roots of the Buddha's consistent pattern of refraining both from direct criticisms of political states and institutions and from recommendations for their wholesale overhaul. Figures of authority in the Buddha's India were—much as they are today—much preoccupied with issues of security and sovereignty. Depending on whether the relevant authority was primarily social, economic, political or cultural, or some complex interfusion of them, concern might be somewhat precisely focused on a particular set of rituals, or on issues of communal governance or inter-communal conflict resolution. Competing interests and conflicts resulting from unilateral claims to truth and from relentlessly competitive approaches to promoting one's own (or one's own states' or community's) interests were everyday realities, even if competition, sovereignty and security were not widely or explicitly valorized. With respect to the full range of concerns centered on authority and apt governance, the Buddha's evident strategy was not to adjudicate among competing forms of state organization or governance. Rather, as an alternative to security and sovereignty biased discourse—a discourse that in statist terms received early and incisive formulation in Kautilya's (fourth century BCE) realist tract, the *Arthashastra*—the Buddha focused on making evident the conditions of leadership-biased concourse or “flowing together.”

As the story of King Dalhanemi and many others in the Canon make evident, while issues of state security and sovereignty are not ignored altogether in the Buddha's discussions of the responsibilities of wheel-turning kings, they are clearly subordinated to the need for demonstrating dramatic clarity about what is conducive to movement in a nirvanic direction and what is conducive to ever more convoluted movement in directions that are samsaric. Thus, although the Buddha is apparently aware of the distinctive governance practices associated with clan-based chiefdoms, monarchies, and small-scale republics, he is explicitly concerned only with directing leadership attention to the central importance of establishing societal conditions conducive to the practice of the Dharma. That is, rather than debating the relative merits of different forms of statecraft and calling for specific regime changes, he invites a break from the entire spectrum of existing political conventions—from wherever on that spectrum his audience happens to stand—focusing on the crucial importance of revising the meaning of leadership as a catalyst for realizing a qualitative shift in the full range of relationships constitutive of society.

At the roots of such a counter-politics is a recognition that truly meaningful and sustainable change can only emerge from keen attention to our situation as it has come to be (*yathabhutam*). That is, such a shift does not come about by identifying an ideal state of political, social, or economic affairs, contrasting it with our own, and then using these two points of reference to establish a vector of reform or revolution. It is, of course, possible to engineer state transitions in precisely this way, establishing a definitive destination for the process of political change and

working to bring about compatible and often profound factual changes in our material circumstances, our ability to exercise various kinds of choice, and our capacity for crafting institutions suited to conserving these achievements. But these achievements are not by themselves sufficient conditions for dramatically reorienting our entire situation as a whole. Rather, a nirvanic shift in relational quality can only be realized by taking into karmic account the complex interweaving of diverse values and intentions that are presently constitutive of our situation and appropriately contributing to them. We must, in terms often used in Chinese Buddhism, realize our own “good roots” and grow out of our present patterns of interdependence into qualitatively new ways of relating.

When, in the frame narrative surrounding the story of King Dalhanemi, the Buddha advises his monastic audience to keep to their own preserves and the range of their ancestors, as a condition for successfully and sustainably cultivating the four immeasurable relational qualities of compassion, loving-kindness, equanimity, and joy in the good fortune of others, he is advising them to attend to their own karma—a karma they share with their families, friends, neighbors, professional associates, and so on—and to work through its informing values and intentions. No meaningful change in relational quality is possible in ignorance of the karma of presently obtaining patterns of interdependence as well as the patterns of denying this interdependence in the assertion of either independence or dependence. The past can be discarded, but only by force of will, in an act of ignorance, and with a corresponding decrease of responsive capability.

The movement from state security to directional or relational clarity suggests a departure from the logic of autonomously exercised freedom of choice and its liability of collapsing interdependent relationships into mere coexistence. It opens, instead, possibilities for focusing on building situational diversity through deepening responsive capability or the capacity for relating freely. Built into the bias toward states—whether political or personal in nature, as in desired states-of-affairs or fixed personal identities—as well as into the political narrative of progress, is a tacit disposition toward linear or convergent models of history and thus a bias toward universalizing (and often explicitly teleological) discourse. In the absence of an ideal of full consensus and practical commitment to leveling down differences that make a difference, state security and the logic of progress tend to institutionalize the possibility of cooperative compromise and conflict—the prisoner’s dilemma in extremis. Buddhism opens possibilities for a counter-political narrative of realizing recursive and harmoniously improvised patterns of meaningful difference. Such patterns are not disposed toward a universal convergence on a single ideal, but rather toward qualities of interdependence conducive to equitably and sustainably resolving the predicaments characteristic of suffering or trouble in the broad community of sentient beings.

Political cultures—especially in the contemporary world—are overwhelmingly oriented toward defining the scope and distribution of power, authorizing desired states-of-affairs across a broad range from the personal to the international, securing the material conditions needed to maintain these states, and, in this

context, balancing individual and communal welfare. Political cultures, except when circumstantially forced well beyond equilibrium, are not given to critically evaluating presently desired states-of-affairs.¹⁶ Instead, in an ideally seamless fashion, they coordinate responses to problems that arise in achieving or securing such states. All political cultures—even when ostensibly “revolutionary”—are, in this sense, conservative. It is thus not in the least surprising that while significant numbers of international relations theorists have for decades been insisting on the need for a concerted “normative turn”—a turn, that is, toward shared negotiations of the meaning of a “good life” and the values associated with it—there has been little actual movement in this direction.

It is true, of course, that globalization has brought with it an increasing array of (especially economic and technological) institutions that have woven together the interests of even very politically disparate states. Human rights conventions have invited and then confirmed widespread agreement about the minimum estate to which each and every human being is entitled—an increasingly well defined, basic state-of-affairs about which it can be affirmed: “things will *not* get worse than that.” But the “good life” cannot be reduced to any such institutionally mediated forms of cooperation or agreed upon minimal conditions for human dignity. These may be necessary and perhaps even sufficient solutions to specific problems in realizing a world in which all people are guaranteed a desirable life. But they cannot answer to the need for considering what kind of life is worth desiring.

The separation of religion and politics is a relatively recent historical phenomenon that not only allowed pluralism to emerge as a viable political value, but that also made it possible for changes in the structure of both explicit and implicit political values and practices to occur without immediate and isomorphic changes in the much more expansive reach of patterns among religious values and practice. That is, this separation conserved the possibility of religious values serving as dramatic headings for broadly realized political, economic, social, and technological movements. The separation of politics and religion allows, in other words, religion to function critically as political counterculture.

The de-linking of politics and religion did not, of course, eliminate “gravitational” effects between them. Influences continue to be bi-directional. But the separation allows a clear demarcation of the distinctive resources that each gathers for responding to the personal and communal experience of trouble or suffering. Even in the most explicitly historical and ideologically driven political narratives (e.g. Marxism or Maoism) these resources are deployed in service of solving concrete problems. Necessarily, this entails setting clear boundary conditions. Problem solutions are never total, but rather explicitly strategic and expedient, implying clearly defined limits to what will be considered relevant. It is not an accident of speech that political rhetoric is heavily laden with engineering metaphors—for example, the laying of foundations, the building of bridges, the tearing down of walls, the construction of safe harbors, and appeals to the merits of zero tolerance.

Religious resources are, by contrast, most often and consistently deployed in addressing predicaments that are both perennial and profound. Unlike problems,

predicaments cannot be framed in terms of a simple contrast between what is “unworkable” and what “works,” a contrast between a state-of-affairs gone wrong or awry and a state-of-affairs that is as it should be. Predicaments arise in situations characterized by the confluence of contrasting and, at times, explicitly contrary or conflicting values. There is a parallel, then, between the deployment of religious resources in responding to trouble or suffering and the practice of ethics. In both endeavors, the hard work is never defining and choosing between the “good” and the “bad,” but rather committing to a choice among multiple and apparently contrary “goods.”

The depth and scale of interdependencies characteristic of the early twenty-first century express a complex pattern of values–intentions–actions that are especially conducive to the generation of predicaments—confrontations with meaningful differences that can be viewed as outcomes we would just as soon have avoided, or as opportunities without which our futures could not be as richly promising as they now appear to be. Yet, if the preceding reflections on the liabilities of autonomy-biased politics are granted credence, there is little to encourage thinking that explicitly and exclusively political action and interaction would suffice to bring about a global shift from conflict-laden outcomes occasioning ever more incisive competition to equitably-enriching opportunities firmly rooted in robustly realized diversity—a full coordination of globally differentiated norms, interests, and values. In short, political solutions are perhaps sufficient where the issues at hand can be defined as political problems. But in a century of truly complex interdependence, there is eventually no circumventing the realization of a need for globally shared and equitably sustained resolve. It is hard to see how the politics of autonomy and rational choice could ever meet this need.

This need not be cause for despair. The scope of efficacy for political systems and institutions may be limited, but this should be no surprise. To the degree that politics combines autonomy with equality and orients governance away from the autocratic to the democratic, it must make provisions for recognizing its own proper limits. Yet, as we have seen, it is also the very nature of such a politics to enter into currency pivotal concerns for pluralism and tolerance that are institutionally expressed as rights to ignore and be ignored. The admission of limits to efficacy is finally grounded, in political terms, on identifying—with a measure of strategic certitude—the degree of differences that can be allowed to make no difference. Politics will not promote truly robust social, economic, political, and cultural diversity. For that, we must look elsewhere.

The centrality of faith in religious discourse can be seen as a direct counter to the bias toward calculated certainties that drives political expedience. Although open to significantly disparate construal, faith can be seen as broadly reflecting the orientation of religious practices toward dramatic resolution—that is, a concerted and clear ordering of values and desires in the service of affirming a shared meaning for our situation.¹⁷ Thus, the deepening of religious practice leads to increasing resolution in the sense of an increasingly clear and detailed appreciation of our situation as it has come to be, but also in the sense of ever deepening commitment or resolve.

Religious preoccupations with the eternal, infinite, and ultimate are, at bottom, an expression of the dramatic impulse to go clearly and meaningfully beyond our own present and foreseeable future. As such, they promise much in the way of locally relevant resources for contributing to enhanced global diversity.

In contrast to the point of rights discourse—agreement that “things will not get worse than *that*”—faithful religious practice rests on jointly resolving that “things will get better than *this*.” Religion is thus positioned to provide substantial resources for assessing the ordering of our political, economic, social, and technological practices and the qualities of interdependence toward which they direct us. There are, of course, great differences in the particular resources afforded by different religious traditions. And there are also assessments of politics—like those, for example, mounted by ethicists and social activists—that are undertaken through appeal to pointedly non-religious resources and practices. What is crucial from the Buddhist perspective taken here is the extent to which a particular religion or non-religious socio-ethical movement is able to function insightfully and skillfully as a political counterculture.

Whether a given religion or ethicist/activist movement is able to function as a political counterculture is finally an empirical question that cannot be answered prescriptively. One need only consider the example of contemporary Myanmar—where both the ruling authoritarian military government and the democratic opposition appeal to Buddhist principles and practices to warrant their deeply disparate approaches for realizing a well-ordered state—to be confronted with the layers of irony that can occur when the critical resources of a religion are used to promote a particular political culture rather than to perform the very different function of a political counterculture. The same, needless to say, is true in the case of politically coopted non-religious ethical and social activist movements.

Finally, any viable political counterculture should serve to question the impetus for replacing one state-of-affairs with another when the problem-solving strategies of the dominant political culture can be shown to be having severe, ironic consequences. The countercultural move is not toward revolution—whether non-violent or violent—but revision. In the Buddhist case, this must be a move toward deepening the potential of our situation for truly meaningful and liberating interdependence. Indeed, the signal event in the religious life of a Buddhist is the arising of *bodhicitta* or a mind profoundly resolved on awakening to the interdependence or relationality of all things and resolving the trouble or suffering that is presently characteristic of it. Particularly in the Mahayana traditions, this is explicitly understood as a commitment to the awakening of all sentient beings through the cultivation of appreciative and contributory virtuosity. As a political counterculture, Buddhist practice thus involves revising the meaning of our situation, as it has come to be, to foster the systematic enhancement of shared commitments to realizing horizonless capacities for relating freely. As such Buddhist practice can be seen as affording distinctive resources for carrying out a paradigm shift from a state-centered politics of autonomy to a globally expansive politics of diversity.¹⁸

DIVERSITY AS COMMONS

International relations beyond competition and cooperation

International relations discourse maps an uncomfortable domain. Evident on the one hand is the rock-hard necessity of managing the global commons upon which any healthy present and future ultimately depends. Equally apparent on the other hand is a striking absence of the kinds of universally shared values, theories, and practices that would allow this managerial work to take place as a matter of course. And so, while cooperation seems necessary, competition, conflict, and failures of consensus seem inevitable.

Until relatively recently, international relations theories—like most contemporary attempts at collaborative ethics—have attempted to make navigational sense of this domain by weighing common causes against sums of individual interests. These broadly utilitarian calculations have focused on how to maximize the shared benefits of cooperation while minimizing especially disparate costs to competing interest groups. Arguably, they have been less successful practically than in demonstrating the importance of establishing shared values for each variable in any relational calculus. Unfortunately, the ontological commitments presupposed by utilitarian calculations of the common good also lead to “naturalizing” a language of entitlements, rights, power, and proprietary and legislative regimes that perpetuates an understanding of freedom standing in such dark tension with equality that the common grounds for arriving at truly shared values would seem either pitifully thin or simply chimerical.

Continued appeals to tacitly realist notions of utility will do nothing to actually (and not just ideally) foster jointly improvising and evaluating the kinds of shared norms required if managing the commons is going to go beyond describing and legally enforcing adherence to a lowest global denominator. Establishing such denominators may be quite useful in mapping supposedly “universal” grounds for secure co-existence. But this will provide only the most minimal resources for making the transition from mere co-existence to the sustained enhancement of personal, communal, and national capacities for relating freely in global context. For that—a transition that implies eliding the metaphor of management in favor of one centered on improvisation—some other approach is in order.

Since the publication of Hedley Bull’s landmark book, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*,¹ there has been growing agreement that

(especially economic) globalization fosters the recognition that there are values we *already* hold in common, and that these values are catalysts for the consolidation of various types of international societies. In turn, this ongoing consolidation of interests feeds back into the processes by means of which the various actors comprised in international society constitute their own identities. Granted this, it is not surprising that as globalization processes have become both wider and deeper there has arisen increasingly sophisticated skepticism about whether rational calculations of self-interest are able to facilitate building the kinds of international systems needed to address the management of the commons, much less its conversion into an intimately shared and liberating resource ecology. If nothing else, late twentieth-century patterns of globalization have forced recognition that intersubjective meanings are just as important in managing or cultivating the commons as formal constitutions and rights conventions. The most crucial task of international relations is not to facilitate purely factual cooperation, but to harmonize or systematically coordinate originally disparate spheres of meaning.

In the absence of a sufficiently subtle concept of harmony, of any widely accepted set of critical resources for assessing competing goods, and of any substantially practical means for promoting greater and more consistent improvisation and deployment of truly common values, this work has remained a poorly expressed fiction. Thus, while the spectrum of mainstream international relations theories from realism to neo-liberal institutionalism and constructivism have been useful in articulating the need for a normative turn in international relations, and in raising important questions about how to articulate common values, this spectrum has not yielded the resources needed for answering such questions. In making a turn toward the normative, international relations comes face to face with its own incompleteness.

Here, I want to explore why this is the case—why the cogent, eminently rational directives of realism, neo-liberal institutionalism and constructivism lead us, along disparate courses, around the same increasingly vicious circle. Doing so will involve “scaling up” insights and conclusions drawn over preceding chapters, sketching an alternative (or countercultural) Buddhist path “between” the horns of the international relations dilemma and establishing some cardinal points useful in orienting movement in a direction “perpendicular” to the prevailing spectrum of beliefs about achieving lasting international accord. Pivoting as they now do on key values of sovereignty and security, international relations are not committed first and foremost to conserving and cultivating the global commons, much less developing, sustaining, and enhancing truly global public good. In the absence of such a paradigmatic reorientation of international relations, global peace will remain content-less—an ideal state-of-affairs imagined by simply negating the blunt realities and tragic arc of conflict, lacking any uniquely positive characteristics of its own.

In brief, thinking through Buddhist critical resources enables seeing the apt reorientation of international relations as a three-dimensional process of: first, of

subverting the ontological commitments presently endemic to international relations discourse; second, of de-centering the role of security/stability as a goal for international relations practice; and third, of shifting away from the polar tension between competition and cooperation (and its associated ethics of calculations for secured co-existence) toward an emphasis on coordinated contribution and an ethics of virtuosity. Together, these open possibilities for seeing diversity as the most basic global commons and the key to shifting the karmic axis of international relations from consolidating power to cultivating strength.

Realism as a treasonous metaphysics of competing interests

Until quite recently, international relations were assumed to be stretched tensely between the demands of a fundamentally competitive reality and the idealistic promises of universal cooperation. According to such a view, the space of international relations is Darwinian. In it, individual persons, nations, and states are assumed to be actively competing for limited resources, cooperating only when circumstantially or directly coerced, and otherwise pursuing their own self-interest. Any sustained evolution of political regimes takes place strictly as a function of successful adaptations to changes in the objective contexts of competition.

This realistic view is no longer widely accepted, at least in its bluntest formulations.² The historically unprecedented consolidation of global interdependencies over the last decades of the twentieth century led to widespread disenchantment with radically realist politics, but also to equally widespread convictions about the necessity of a decisively normative turn in international relations. Among the signal effects of deepening and broadening global interdependence has been mounting evidence of the porosity of all political identities and the contingency of all claims to independent or sovereign status. Along with this evidence has come growing clarity with respect to the severe costs exacted upon the common good whenever significant resources are committed to securing such identities and statuses. Whether conceived in economic, social, cultural, or environmental terms, refusals to appreciate and contribute to our growing interdependence are, in the end, debilitating.³

To date, however, interdependence has been understood in relatively shallow practical terms as profitably mutual dependence. This is in part because the competitive advantages of (at least limited) cooperation can be accounted for through the same kinds of utilitarian calculation that undergird realistic approaches to international relations. Although the collective gains realized through cooperation can substantially outweigh the solitary benefits of conflict, these gains can effectively be seen as forwarding rather than undermining individual self-interest. That is, these gains do not command a critical reappraisal of the ontological commitments informing the tension between dependence and independence. Thus, political alliances like NATO, economic alliances like the IMF, monopolistic business mergers, and the trading of known talents for future draft choices in professional sports can all be seen as essentially self-interested forms of cooperation.

Such forms of cooperation may make more and more sense as the stakes of competition escalate. But they do not counter the fundamentally competitive practice of finely calculating how most efficiently to realize desired hierarchies of control over the slope of advantages in any given situation. Alliances that are entered in pursuit of self-interest are, ultimately self-interested alliances.

That there might be limits to this calculus only began to become apparent when it was realized that the space of international relations included actors of entirely different scales, competing for entirely different kinds of goods, within circumstances that were becoming so fundamentally shared that separating their independent interests was no longer practically possible. By the mid-1970s, for example, the interests of corporate capital were found to have already begun building up substantial bridges between the economies of states separated by major ideological rifts and engaged in very open political competition. Likewise, human rights focused NGOs came to be seen as conduits for information exchanges crucial to coalition building across national and regional boundaries. Because each of these bridges depended upon establishing and maintaining shared norms and institutions in globally shared spaces, it became difficult to insist that there were no such things as international societies and not merely simple alliances of individual nations.

Among the central and, indeed, prescient insights of Bull's (1977) characterization of world political order, however, was that the principle of sovereignty and its central importance in international relations can be seen as a function of recognizing the normative pluralism that characterizes the contemporary world scene—a recognition that fostered perceived needs to define both scopes of influence and the limits of justifiably instituted slopes of advantage and disadvantage. With the formal ending of the Cold War, some might have anticipated that nationalist and unilateralist currents in international relations would fully dissipate. But this has not happened. Instead, there has been a marked resurgence of radical individualism in international relations over the past decade. This has resulted from the multiplication of viably staked positions of self-interest, and thus stands as evidence of the degree to which the ontological bias toward independent existence has not been dissolved by expanding and intensifying patterns of global interdependence. Far from yielding homogeneously unified patterns of international relations, globalization processes have also served to promote fragmentary dynamics, perhaps nowhere more starkly apparent than in the post-September 11 surge of American unilateralism.

Still, there is general agreement that the question is not *whether* to cooperate or not—that being a foregone conclusion—but *how*. According to proponents of neo-liberal institutionalism, answering this question involves gaining clarity about the fact that what actually limits cooperation is not lack of good intentions, but good information. The key to cooperation is the development of institutions that foster exchanges of information about the strategies and concrete methods of each of the involved actors. As succinctly summarized by Robert Keohane, one of the major architects of this view,⁴ the limits of cooperation are simply the limits of possible coordination.

Opponents have argued that the neo-liberal approach to fostering sustainable international societies, without recourse to coercive intervention, pivots on the untenable supposition that human needs and values are, at bottom, universally shared. The constructivist response to neo-liberal institutionalism is that the latter does not sufficiently stress how the intensification of normative or value pluralism that attends globalization brings with it the need—at some concrete point in each set of circumstances—to assess competing, equally resident values. It is precisely because of such situational divergences that constructivists announce the inadequacy of state consensus and the importance of citizen consent. Because international cooperation can serve state or corporate interests while subverting those of citizens and workers who are *not* partners in these forms of cooperation, the horizons of relevance applied in evaluating the merits of cooperation must be expanded well beyond, for example, the customary corridors of political and economic power. Respect must be given to alternative constructions of the meaning of a shared situation that might be undertaken by disparately powerful and extensive actors, working at markedly different scales of consideration.

This insight involves seeing that the task of international relations is not to compile and to organize a globally comprehensive set of presumably objective benefits or threats, but rather to understand and enhance the process of arriving at a shared understanding of what is *meant* by a benefit or threat. Responsibly managing the commons or global public sphere includes, that is, making sense of the disparate meanings given to “environmental health” by multi-national oil companies and activist NGOs, or the contrary meanings given to such first generation human rights as the right to employment or education by the World Bank or the IMF and by anti-globalization organizations like the International Forum on Globalization or the Sustainable Living Network.

Constructivists cannot avoid coming up against the realization that investigating the norms of the international system in terms of their constitutive roles and in ways that acknowledge their moral (and not merely instrumental) nature will eventually pose questions of authority and legitimacy. Asking how norms have come to play the role they have and why—questions answerable in factual historical terms from either institutionalist or constructivist perspectives—is not enough. Instead, it is imperative to ask pointedly ethical questions about the meaning of a better, good, just or diversity-enriching world. But, as many international relations theorists have stressed, neither institutionalists nor constructivists have managed to seriously address questions of this type.⁵ In spite of continuous appeal to a discourse about norms and values as key concepts, international relations has continued failing to articulate anything like a consistent philosophy of the good life or the traits of suitably evolving and mutually enhancing political orders.

As it is currently configured, even at present levels of economic, political, and technological globalization, the practice of international relations cannot avoid being confronted (ala Gödel’s Theorem) with its own incompleteness. On the basis of its prevailing, axiomatic values, international relations is forced into

posing quite intelligible directives that it cannot carry out. The paradoxical space within which international relations is practiced can thus be adequately described, but not traversed in its own terms. If we are not to remain transfixed by the purported absence between what “is” and what “is-not,” and hence committed to ironically *mis*-managing the global commons, we must develop a set of practices—a way—to make precisely such a journey possible.

Political realism finally rests on a treasonous metaphysics of competing interests. It is a metaphysics that denies ultimate reality to shared meanings of the commons which international relations is in part intended to conserve and one that strenuously maintains options for disloyalty to the commons. In spite of efforts to move beyond a theoretical construction of the commons or the global public sphere as a Darwinian space of competitive agents, the central presuppositions of realism (and the rituals of rationality through which they are most substantially embodied) continue to persist in international relations discourse. That is, the assumptions undergirding international relations belie conceptual treason to the commons and serve as institutions for resisting the kind of paradigmatic shift needed if the tyranny of a realist past is not going to force us into believing, as Christopher Lasch has written, that “our future is predetermined by the continuing development of large-scale production, colossal technologies and political centralization . . .”—a belief structure that “inhibits creative thought and makes it [very] difficult to avoid the choice between fatuous optimism and debilitating nostalgia.”⁶

We can begin making sense of what sort of practices must be developed to address the incompleteness of the current lineage of international relations and the dramatically vacuous choices it affords us by examining precedents for moving beyond the realist conception of competing interests to a conception of international relations in which competition is supplanted, not merely by cooperation and consensus—the values urged upon us by institutionalist and constructivist revisions—but by appreciative commitment and contributory virtuosity. Posed as questions, what kinds of paradigmatic conceptual and practical shifts are needed in order to bring about a “Copernican” revolution in metaphysics by means of which relationships and the values comprised in them—not individually existing things and facts true about them—will be taken as most basic? What equivalent revolution in ethics must be undertaken by means of which enhancing intimacy, and not sustaining integrity, will come to be taken as the paramount aim of international relations? In short, what would international relations look like, if undertaken in terms consistent with Buddhist practice and conducive to enhanced global diversity?

International relations as evolving systems

Some initial (and not entirely metaphorical) guidance in revising the conception and practice of international relations can be derived by seeing them as evolving systems. Just as contemporary theories of biological evolution have had to

grapple with macro-level changes taking place beyond the “event horizon” describable within a strictly Darwinian framework, currently contending theories of international relations have had to chart similar courses in seeking to account for the large-scale changes in social, economic, and political organization that have been especially characteristic of late twentieth-century patterns of globalization. Indeed, the parallels are salient enough to warrant, at least briefly, our direct attention.

Contemporary theories of evolution have been largely intent on explaining the kinds of major changes in morphology evidenced by fossil records, but which cannot plausibly be explained on the basis of small, incremental and adaptive changes undertaken by purely self-interested species. The evolution, for example, of new sense organs cannot plausibly be accounted for by appeal to small changes of existing morphology. Since none of the “half-way” steps toward new sense organs would function in especially useful ways, they would provide no competitive advantage and no grounds for continuing genetic selection. Neither can new sensory capacities be seen as consistent with efforts to “selfishly” maintain species identity since their realization must invariably mean an entirely unprecedented transformation of existing patterns of species–environment interaction—the realization, in effect, of a new species.

Evolutionary biologists are now in broad consensus in appealing to the concept of “punctuated equilibrium” in accounting for major paradigm shifts in biological organization. While gradual evolution does take place during long, near-equilibrium phases of ecological history, when an ecological system drifts far away from equilibrium, the “rules of the game” change. There, evolution takes place through the “sudden” embodiment of strikingly new biological values correlated with major, creative leaps in species identity. Granted this, the kinds of structural reorganization associated with evolution can no longer be adequately explained by reference to the “interests” of individual species, but only by appeal to “allostatic” shifts taking place at the level of regional or global ecologies. Evolution is always, irreducibly, *co-evolution*.

Such an understanding of evolutionary processes requires a severe bracketing of reductionist, building-block models of change that are committed to the adequacy of linear causation and the sufficiency of a metaphysics of competition. Evolution is not most fundamentally the evolution of ontologically distinct individuals, but rather of *patterns of relationship*. Especially in complex systems for which histories and meaning-making are central, the importance of scale heterogeneity and downward causation must be taken fully into account and with this a recognition of the dramatic—and not merely factual—nature of the evolutionary process.⁷

The development of evolution theory in the broadest sense can thus be characterized as a conceptual movement away from a bias toward independently existing entities interacting by way of linear causal processes, and in the direction of seeing evolution as taking place through non-linear patterns of dynamic interdependence. Rather than evolution pivoting on a steady accumulation of new traits

gradually consolidated according to a *logic of consequences*, it is seen as crucially reliant upon large-scale shifts in relational constellations followed by interpolative processes through which the meanings of new patterns of relationship are further diversified and extended. Rather than evolution being driven by individual species competing over environmental resources, it is seen as correlated with the increasing competence with which species contribute to consolidating new, fuller, and more complex patterns of interrelatedness as such.

There has been a commensurate movement among international relations theorists who have become aware of the need to address the “irrational” realities of non-incremental change and to reckon consistently with the role of norms and values in shaping new social, economic, and political identities. In general, this movement has polarized along either neo-liberal institutionalist or constructivist lines. In both cases, however, while ostensive appeals to the language of evolutionary discourse is often explicit, there has, to date, not been a marked, commensurate transition from realism’s underlying ontology of factual existence to one of irreducibly meaningful interdependence. It is this failure to question the ontological commitments of the realist worldview that has restricted both institutionalist and constructivist revisions to the necessary, but insufficient, tasks of describing and interpreting change in the structure of international relations. Persistent failure in this regard can only insure continued blindness concerning the possibilities of contributing to and carefully orienting the kinds of paradigmatic changes needed if meaningfully free passage is going to be articulated between the necessary and the inevitable in managing the global commons.

For example, in the context of discussing political institutions as a “complicated ecology” of interconnected rules, routines, norms of appropriateness, and the elaboration of meaning, James March and Johan Olsen assert that, “[u]nless we assume that a political environment is stable, it is likely that the rate of change in the environment will exceed the rate of adjustment to it . . . [and that] the disparity between the rate of environmental change and the rate of adjustment is itself self-sustaining.”⁸ In their view, although crucial to any viable form of international relations, political institutions must be seen as a “shifting residue of history” that necessarily fall out of step with the times and leave themselves vulnerable to paradigmatic overhaul. Indeed, institutional efficiency with respect to near-neighborhood changes—that is, adaptive success—tends to precipitate overall obsolescence because these competences come at the cost of narrow focusing. Thus, political institutions are subject to a paradoxical “competency trap” wherein adaptive adjustments, *particularly* if successful, serve eventually to render the political regime as a whole increasingly susceptible to radical change.⁹ “By constraining political change, institutional stability contributes to regime instability.”¹⁰

March and Olsen see this as a general feature of adaptive systems, not as a peculiarity of political systems. And in this, they are arguably correct. If evolution occurs as a pattern of relational elaborations among overlapping rhythmic (rather than static or structural) orders, changes articulated on strictly consequentialist grounds must eventually run aground since they cannot be undertaken except

from the perspective of a particular point of view on “what matters.” That is, carrying out paradigm change according to a pure logic of consequences could only make sense from the perspective of a “god’s eye” view from which all rhythmic orders are equally present. Barring that, the cost of consequentially ordered change will be increasing dis-coordination (or the prevalence of coercion) and vulnerability to unanticipated shifts in situational gestalt. Thus, like the consequentialist history of biological evolution, the evolutionary history of political institutions will be characterized by long periods of great stability, separated by periods of significant instability and sudden change.

As long as evolution is understood as the consequence of adaptive changes undertaken from the perspective of particular individuals—and *not* an elaboration of order taking place in and among relationships as such—it cannot avoid being holistically blind. In other words, if individually existing entities are indeed basic, evolution can only mean long stretches of slowly building ignorance punctuated by brief moments of uncommon and effectively accidental insight. The evolution of international relations—to the extent that it is “naturalized” or “left to nature” in keeping with a realist metaphysics of individual existents—must, in an important sense, be seen as a phenomenon about which can only “wait and see.” Yet in light of such crises as global warming and the rampant extinction of local or vernacular economies in the face of global capital, this is clearly not good enough.

If it is true that institutional and political changes customarily take place by means of relatively mundane sets of procedures rooted in patterns of experience and worldviews that develop only very gradually and in a necessarily composite, not systemic, fashion, then such changes will be characterized by considerable indeterminacy of *direction*. In effect, the logic of consequences underlying our interpretations of experience, the choices that these occasion, and the institutions derived from them are bound to enmesh us in a competency trap and cannot be the ultimate precedents for *meaningful* escape from it.

This is especially true in the case of twenty-first century realities. Initiating change to bring about specific consequences can prove reliably successful in the context of slowly and regularly altering circumstances. The evolutionary model of small, incremental changes or reforms is adequate in conditions of relative equilibrium. But in the context of complex and accelerating change—the situation globally today—there are serious liabilities in remaining wedded to a strategy of inducing change with the aim of bringing about specific and predetermined outcomes. Interactions between complex systems and their environments are prone to high degrees of non-linearity. Because complex systems are not only self-organizing, but also novelty-generating, they are subject to changing in ways that, in principle, could not have been anticipated, and yet that will, after the fact, be manifest in alignment with their own guiding values. In the context of complex global interdependencies like those informing twenty-first century realities, acting or inducing change to bring about specific outcomes cannot be relied upon to produce the effects desired, regardless of how precisely undertaken or with what level of relevant knowledge. In a complex world, freedoms to choose

among outcome options can be exercised reliably only in the context of highly controlled—effectively closed—circumstances.

To the extent that the logic of consequences underlying institutional adjustment in the face of context variability continues pivoting on the value of control—most fundamentally, control over experience and its meaning—its successful application will bring about situations in which further and ever more complicated (though not necessarily complex) institutions of control are needed. In terms of managing a truly global commons, and facing the realities of complex change, commitment to such a path is commitment to fighting a losing battle.

The complex realities that are emerging as a result of contemporary patterns of expanding and intensifying global interdependence can be seen as commanding a shift of emphasis from consequentialist determinations of outcome to resolutely responsive opening of lines of opportunity. They are realities within which freedom is not indexed by quantities of available choices, but rather by qualities and depths of commitment. Every effort to induce change means incurring new responsibilities, new kinds of intimacy or internal relatedness, and hence new vulnerabilities.

It is upon the refusal to accept this in earnest that both the treasonous nature of realist metaphysics and the shortcomings of institutionalist and constructivist revisions of international relations pivot. To be sure, these revisions insist that we go beyond realist assumptions of solipsistic actors in “accidental” interaction to explain the shifting terrain of international relations. But they do not far enough in challenging the ontological intelligibility of individually existing actors, the ultimate objectivity of their situations, and the strategic dialectic of independence and dependence. In result, while convinced of the need to go beyond the logic of consequences endemic to political realism, neo-liberal institutionalists and constructivists alike have remained at least tacitly wedded to political realism’s underlying values of control and security. Most crucially, they are impotent to address the karma of these values—that is, the particular patterns of outcome and opportunity to which they give rise.

Thus, while appeals are now often made to an alternative “logic of appropriateness,”¹¹ it continues to be assumed within this logic that international relations actors are essentially independent and choose what roles to play based on their interpretations of prevailing behavioral norms. But regardless of what canons of conformity or appropriateness to which actors turn in making such decisions, they cannot be a source of paradigmatic innovations in the meaning of their shared situation. If managing the commons is not a matter of factual adjustments in how we interact, but a revision of our dramatic or meaningful interdependence as such, secure co-existence cannot be an adequate goal of international relations and control cannot be a viable strategy for negotiating the dramatic impasse between the necessity of cooperation and the inevitability of conflict. For that to occur, it is not only necessary to change some of the individual rules of the international relations “game,” but to undertake an entirely different kind of play.

International relations as an infinite game

Although the Buddha did have occasion to counsel leaders over the course of his teaching career, and although his teachings focused on the meaningful resolution of conflict and suffering, he did not develop anything remotely resembling a theory of international relations or a strategy for directly managing the global commons. For these teachings and the practices out of which they emerged to prove relevant to international relations, at least a temporary, metaphorical bridge must be built between the personal and the political—a bridge that also joins the very different worlds that result from conduct primarily biased toward appreciative and contributory virtuosity and conduct biased toward competitively exercised control. To this end, I would like to introduce an apt extension of “game theory” suggested by James Carse in his book, *Finite and Infinite Games*.¹²

As defined by Carse, finite games—including everything from board games like chess to world wars—take place among competitors who have agreed upon rules that will allow them to determine who has won. In spite of the importance of “spectators” and “referees” or “judges” in finite games, such games end only when the “players” agree that play has ended, meaning one of them has emerged as the winner and is thus granted an appropriate title. For this to be possible, finite games must have initially agreed upon spatial and temporal boundaries. They must also have a predetermined and agreed upon type of outcome.

Up until very recently, international politics was quite plausibly played as a fully competitive finite game. But the kind of globalization that has taken place over the past century has gradually eroded the possibilities of politics being played sustainably in this way in the international arena. As evidenced by the very early and wide distribution of common artifacts and narratives, globalization is by no means a new phenomenon, but the scale and depth of globalization that has been taking place over the past hundred years are historically unprecedented. Simply stated, in contrast with previous eras, we are confronted with imperatives for managing processes of interaction with one another and our environments that extend indefinitely in time and space. It is no longer the managing of power distributions and change dynamics in a single valley, on a single plain, or along a given stretch of coastline that is at stake, but rather the distribution of power and authority over change across the entire planet. It is no longer just the lifetime of a despot or a beneficent ruler or even a dynasty that defines the scope of global temporality, but “any foreseeable future.” Moreover, the relational dynamics of globalization itself are no longer merely simple or complicated, they are truly complex with histories of their own that are in the continual process of being recursively revised from without and from within. The playing field of international relations has undergone apparently irreversible changes. The metaphysics of the game have changed.

If Carse is right in claiming that competition is a kind of play that implies cooperative rules of engagement and conditions for victory and defeat, the field of international relations has undergone an ontological/topological mutation that

renders—at best—any attempt at finite play ironic. At the dawn of the “third millennium,” international relations discourse maps the contours of a *conceptual* paradox. That we are at a crisis point in assuming responsibility for the global commons has become painfully apparent. Cooperation is not an option, but a necessity. Only as Carse points out, we cannot truly play if we *must* play or if the results of the game are given in advance. International relations discourse situates us in a game that *should* end, but *cannot*, precisely because playing it has become imperative and because there can be no clear winners. In managing the global commons, if there are *any* losers, we are *all* losers.

It is not that the rules of a still-familiar game have substantially changed with globalization; we have made the transition into an entirely new kind of game. In this era of the “colonization of consciousness,” in which attention is being commodified and put up for grabs on the world market, and in which our personal and cultural resources for concertedly meaningful change are being depleted with alarming regularity and rapidity, there are no justifications for further maintaining the horizons of relevance, responsibility, and readiness that are key conditions for the possibility of finite gaming.

Borders demarcating spheres of interest and influence have evaporated. And along with them have disappeared the kinds of fixed and unambiguous spatial and temporal horizons that are necessary for claiming any kind of substantial victories, or for seriously debating whether or not to cooperate. The question now is not *whether* to cooperate, or even *how* to cooperate, but *how well*. This signals a truly paradigmatic shift, and one that permits no turning back or reversal. Contrary to the proclamations of global advocates for market liberalism, we have not arrived at an end to political history or a culmination of the evolution of systems for trade, development and international relations. Rather, we have come to the point of needing to acknowledge that the complex processes global interdependence have irreparably eroded the foundations of independence- and sovereignty-biased international relations and brought to an unanticipated close the season of comfortably finite games of global power and control.

We have entered an era of infinite games. In the context of finite gaming, political problems are open to final *solutions*. This is not so in context of infinite play wherein the future is purposefully held open on jointly improvised headings, in conscious avoidance of any form of final outcome, in the absence of any desired destination. In infinite play, solutions—political, economic, environmental, etc.—give way to *resolutions* or abiding commitments rooted in shared and sustained patterns of values—intentions—actions. Destinations give way to directions. In infinite games—like those into which we are thrust by the necessity of managing the planetary commons, by the imperative to take account of and conserve cultural differences that continue to make a difference, or by intimate partnership—scripts are not only useless, they are ultimately distractive and destructive.

Whereas finite play and power politics are theatrical in the sense that they depend on roles that are scripted and performed for an audience and courses of

action that are destined for conclusion, infinite play and the kinds of politics proper to it can be termed dramatic or social. That is, they evidence commitments to the shared improvisation of *meanings* for our situation, in the absence of any anticipated or desired conclusion. In this type of play—which Carse illustrates by contrasting the dramatic nature of committing to be a parent with the theatrical nature of choosing to take on the role of parent—there can be no final results and thus no power. What matters most is not arriving at a particular envisioned destination or outcome, but the way in which ongoing play opens opportunities. Visions of manifest destiny give way to clarity about what constitutes improved quality.

With trenchant simplicity, Carse argues that power only factors into finite games because power cannot be accurately measured until a particular game—political, social, economic, or sexual—is completed. Effectively, “one does not win *by being powerful*; one wins *to be powerful*.”¹³ Indeed, being sufficiently powerful to win before a game has begun insures that whatever follows is not a competition after all, but simply a ritual of capitulation, the specific terms of which may be negotiable, but nothing more. According to such a view, then, it is possible to be powerful only “through the possession of an acknowledged title—that is, only by the ceremonial deference of others.”¹⁴ This, however, means that power is never one’s own, but always conferred by others, when all other players have conceded that, “you have won”—perhaps even before play has begun. The politics of power is thus always ironic, and always theatrically or societally and not socially choreographed.¹⁵

It follows from this that power will always be possessed and exercised by a small minority of selected players. As noted in earlier discussions of the karma of control as a technological value, power is inevitably asymmetrical and never shared. By contrast, in infinite games, there is and can be no real power, but anyone can be strong. In Carse’s terms, “[s]trength is paradoxical. I am not strong because I can force others to do what I wish *as a result of my play with them*, but because I can allow them to do what they wish *in the course of my play with them*.”¹⁶ Strength, unlike power, connotes a capacity to improvise new orders—new patterns of value–intention–action—with others, not an ability to secure a certain type of order in the face of potential challenges. Whereas power can be consolidated and reinforces the boundaries without which independence and dependence are finally unintelligible, strength obtains only in the relational expression of virtuosic interdependence.

Globally, we have reached a crucial juncture: our shared history and the space of international relations can no longer be effectively construed as theatre in which wins and loses are played out. Rather, they must be construed as boundary-less fields for infinite gaming on which the logic of existence has yielded to that of dramatic interdependence. In bringing about such a paradigm shift in the exercise of international relations, it is not the politics of power that is most crucial, but the politics of strength. A distinctive characteristic of Buddhist traditions of thought and practice is that they offer a diverse array of systems for

seeing the world in fully dramatic terms and for cultivating precisely the attentive and responsive skills needed to realize increasingly intimate forms of mutually beneficial strength.

Toward a Buddhist revision of international relations

A metaphysical iconoclast, the Buddha claimed that “is” and “is-not” are the twin barbs on which all humankind is impaled. At the root of all conflicts lie claims of independence and imputations of dependence. Contrary to rationalist intuitions, resolving conflicts and ending suffering cannot be accomplished by way of achieving absolute certainty about how things really are and are-not—or, for that matter, how things should or should-not be. Indeed, that kind of certainty—whether our own, that of others, or provisionally shared—makes continued conflict and suffering unavoidable.

To conclusively exit the path of continued discord, the Buddha enjoined seeing all things as marked by impermanence, trouble (*dukkha*), and the absence of any essential nature. This last practice is of particular importance in the present context since it entails actively undermining the ontological foundations of essentially competitive international relations. Seeing all things as having no essential nature or self involves cultivating awareness of their emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and interdependence, and occasions an ongoing realization that nothing literally exists or “stands apart” (*existere*) from all others. Autonomous subjects and objects are, finally, only artifacts of abstraction.

In the formula rehearsed repeatedly in the (Mahayana) *Diamond Sutra*, seeing all things as empty and interdependent is to actively realize that: [things] are not really “things,” we only refer to them as “things.” What we refer to as “things”—whether mountains, human beings, or complex phenomena like histories—are simply the experienced results of having established relatively constant horizons of value or relevance (“things”). They are not, as common sense insists, naturally occurring realities or [things]. Indeed, what we take to be *objects* existing independently of ourselves are, in actuality, simply a function of habitual patterns of relationship.

In metaphysical terms, these teachings compose a system for challenging the twin myths of “the given” and of “existence”—a concert of strategies for dissolving the conditions of continued conflict and suffering. Buddhist metaphysics—if that is not an oxymoron—is a metaphysics of ambiguity in which things are not originally “this” or “that” but become such only by way of jointly undertaken (often ritually constituted) acts of disambiguation. The particulars of our experience do not arise on the basis of objective processes in which our values and intentions play no crucial role. Rather, they arise in the course of our projecting well-maintained horizons for relevance. “This” becomes fully distinct from “that” only through the process of excluding from attention their shared middle ground—that is, through ignorance of their emptiness or irreducible interdependence. This amounts, of course, to a selective silencing of our partners

in interdependence, a refusal to admit the full range of their contribution to the changes presently taking place. And it is precisely by thus submitting things to the hierarchy of our own determinations of what is important that we open ourselves to conflict with them as well as with one another.

Because we are born into families and communities and cultures, the patterned ignorance through which our experienced world comes into being is not something instituted alone, randomly, *or* according to inherently fixed principles. Rather, it takes shape in compliance with *our* likes and dislikes, according to *our* motivating values, *our* needs and desires, and our strategies for fulfilling them. In a word, we project horizons for relevance—ignoring the interdependence of all things—in an expression of our *karma*. Others—and here is the central dilemma of taking the normative turn in international relations—do so from different points of view from which different things do or do-not matter.

At a minimum, the Buddhist teaching of karma alerts us as to how the topographies of our life histories correspond meticulously with the complexion of our own values and intentions. The conflicts that we encounter in the course of our lives are not rooted in objective operations of so-called “natural law” or in the capriciousness of chance, but in tensions among our own values and aspirations, our likes and dislikes, our desires and dreams. Indeed, if our aim is to resolve all troubles or suffering as they occur, our world cannot effectively be seen as fundamentally factual or objectively given. Instead, it should be seen as irreducibly dramatic—a world of unlimited, meaningful interdependence.

According to the teaching of emptiness, bringing conflict to an end is not a matter of engineering universal agreement about how things are or should be. Indeed, that can only be achieved by way of so thoroughly abstracting our concerns from our immediate situations that none of the differences among us can continue to make any difference. The realization of such a state of affairs in which each thing fails to *mean* anything to any others does not mark a Buddhist “perfection of wisdom,” but perfect ignorance—the denial of emptiness and a collapse of all opportunity into increasing dramatic entropy. But neither do we fare any better by having recourse to postmodern embraces of the relative truth of all perspectives. Again, this is simply a way of asserting and making room for our differences to *not matter* by excluding the middle ground of our interdependence as such. Between the all-frozen sameness of universal agreement and the madly swirling variety of relativist agreements to disagree, there is little to choose.

In contrast with such dispositions and their liabilities for increasing dramatic entropy, Buddhist enlightenment can be understood as horizonless readiness to turn our situation toward increasing dramatic intimacy. By eschewing exclusive claims about what “is” or “is-not” and directing our attention instead to the primacy of relationality as such, we open ourselves to the full range of meaningful contributions being made by each thing to our shared situation. Because such a turn takes place in a world in which nothing has any essential nature—in which relationships are more basic than “things related”—and which is also characterized by trouble *and* impermanence, these contributions and the partnerships they craft

are necessarily improvised and dramatic. Minimally conceived, Buddhist practice involves unrelenting commitment to improvising situational pathways through dramatic impasse. It is a way, in other words, of continuously negotiating shifts in the meaning of our situation away from *samsara* (the world of supposed autonomy and continued suffering and conflict) toward *nirvana* (the world of dramatic freedom and intimacy). Buddhist practice is not, then, a means to a final end or destination, but rather the meaning of expressing and refining appreciative and contributory virtuosity.

As we relinquish those habits of attention and conception that have brought our experienced world of discrete “subjects” and “objects” into being, we begin understanding that the cost of habitually ignored dramatic interdependence is an inability of our situation to truly take care of itself. Seeing all things as empty is to open ourselves onto the typically excluded “middle ground” where all things subsist in relationships of mutual support and enjoy the meaningful liberty of contributing as needed to the improvised, situational translation of *samsara* into *nirvana*. This, in a Buddhist context, is what we have referred to as the activation of emptiness—a disclosure of the profound *diversity* of our situation, as it has come to be. It is also, I would argue, the meaning of international relations committed to globally realizing sustained and equitable public good.

We have already seen that global interdependence, as currently directed, is bringing about and further consolidating both *kusala* and *akusala* eventualities—situational dynamics that are wholesome and good, as well as dynamics that are deeply troubling. As the *Sakkapanha Sutta* makes clear, this effectively means the continued proliferation of situational blockages and conflict. Global economics in particular have become a primary engine of compounding inequities. The translation of local production ecologies to global production monocultures, the commodification of virtually all subsistence needs, and the powerfully compelled expansion and increasing density of market operations are central features of economic activity oriented according to the values of control, convenience, and choice—values that ramify karmically in ways that work against both equity and virtuosity. This economic karma, we have seen, reiterates in the political sphere as well. There, the bias toward understanding freedom in terms of autonomy has led to the consolidation of powerful compulsions toward sovereignty and security—values that dispose political processes toward generating insulating media that effectively institutionalize differences as what separate us as individuals rather than what allow us to contribute to one another. So, while it is true that clearly demarcated political boundaries, the rule of law, and human rights conventions, enable us to enjoy steadily increasing autonomy and equality, they do so at the incalculable cost of mutually enriching patterns of felt community.

In sum, the general pattern is this: the globally dominant constellations of values being deployed to offset apparent troubles and address proximate conditions of conflict and suffering in our shared situation, as it has come to be, have crossed scale thresholds to begin ramifying ironically. We are discovering that our present approaches to making things better are also, somehow, making

them worse. From a karmic perspective, this is tantamount to admitting that there obtain persistent dissonances among our favored patterns of values–intentions–actions. Conventionally, it can be claimed that the work of international relations is to solve concrete problems arising with respect to failed cooperation or unduly aggressive competition among members of the world community. But if international relations is to have any functional connection with the realization of global public good, then its ultimate work must be predicament resolution. This work is ultimately one of developing globally the strengths needed skillfully to resolve dissonant patterns of value–intention–action, disclosing differences as opportunities for mutual contribution: the realization of robustly shared commitments to appreciating (or adding value to) our broadening and deepening interdependence.

The need for such a normative turn in international relations—that is, a turn toward the task of negotiating significantly shared senses of what we mean, for example, by “good environments” or “healthy economies” or “free trade and development”—is immediate. It is also a need that can only be met by fundamentally challenging the logic of existence, the polarization of presence into dependence and independence, and the discourses of power to which these inevitably lead.

In traditional Buddhist terms, mounting these challenges is a matter of practicing sustained insight into the interdependence and emptiness of all things: the realization of wisdom. This is not a purely (or even primarily) cognitive matter. In Buddhism, wisdom is understood as coeval with compassion, which in turn is understood as arising along with three other immeasurable headings for enhanced relational quality: equanimity, loving-kindness, and joy in the good fortune of others. Wisdom and compassion can be seen, then, as interdependent and interpenetrating qualities of relationships that are oriented toward the meaningful and sustainable resolution of suffering and trouble. Especially in Mahayana Buddhist traditions, the realization or activation of emptiness is thus seen as inseparable from alloying enlightening patterns of sentience and sentiment in unswerving commitment to bodhisattva action—that is, in the compassionate demonstration of limitless relational virtuosity or skillful means (*upāya*).

International relations oriented toward sustainably enhancing global common good must, first and foremost, engage in *countering* the economic, political, social, and cultural karma that have come to mean the systematic conversion of diversity to mere variety. Its primary work, then, is to bring about conditions in which differences are increasingly realized as opportunities for virtuosic mutual contribution, harmonizing values–intentions–actions in ways conducive to the emergence of resolutely appreciative and appreciating relational orders. From a Buddhist perspective, however, the improvised negotiation of shared situational meaning—that is, of the intensity and direction of our karma or dramatic interdependence—is precisely what is connoted by emotion. This leads to the controversial, and yet ultimately liberating, insight that the function of international relations is emotional refinement.

From a Buddhist perspective, just as we do not “have” thoughts, precisely because there is no self that stands apart from thinking as its source and owner,

we do not “have” emotions. Emotions, like all things, are situationally focused relational processes. In particular, they arise as situation-specific negotiations of the intensity and direction of the interdependence among all things, as they have come to be, in this specific situation. Emotions appear when and where currents of meaning converge, representing regions or spaces of dramatic confluence. Emotions are expressions playing across the face of emptiness, disambiguating the interdependence of all things. Given such a definition,¹⁷ it is clear that all negotiations of shared meaning are not merely laden with personal or subjective feelings and sensations (emotions in the more common sense of the word), they are irreducibly emotional in nature. This is as true at the national and international levels of negotiating shared meaning as it is at the personal.

Yet, in a karmic cosmos shaped and oriented as a function of the interplay of sustained patterns of values–intentions–actions, it can equivalently be said that all situations—as complexes of shifting outcomes and opportunities—are in some degree emotional. Negotiating shifts in the tenor or direction of our situation can take place as the committed expression of familial and romantic love, under the dark compulsions of vengeance, through the cool exercise of existence-biased rationality—itsself a particular emotion—or as the evolution of complex ecologies (whether natural, economic, political, or cultural).

This means that diversity, as a measure of situationally realized capacities for contributing to improvised and yet resolutely shared welfare, can usefully be seen as a measure of emotional maturity. Conversely, translating situational diversity into mere variety can be seen as conducive to dramatic immaturity—a way of directing interdependence that practically insures the necessity of competition, if not conflict, and the erosion of contributory resources. In Buddhist terms, emotional immaturity most commonly manifests as habitual recourse to anger, hatred and greed—emotions that dramatically split our shared situation as a result of refusals to share fully in negotiating its meaning and value. These emotions—and their countless permutations—play out in both the personal and the international sphere. Courses of action informed by convictions that “our way” is “the only way,” that ruthless competition is the globally most favorable way of determining slopes of advantage, or that war or more structural forms of violence are simply effective means to good ends justifiably imposed on others are all common expressions of emotional immaturity in this sense.

There is, then, considerable emotional immaturity in the perceived necessity of choosing between either adopting universal, but thin principles of global prosperity and fairness, or insisting upon the relativity of all norms in a capitulation to thick, but strictly local values for “the good life.” Either way, the vulnerability of engaging in truly shared negotiations of the meaning of our situation as a whole is effectively refused. Although these alternatives express insight into the ill-consequences of persisting in finite quests for power—for the ability to determine what things will mean—they are not yet commitments to the infinite path of resolving all conflicts and differences by way of contributory and appreciative virtuosity. A normative turn in international relations may be considered, but not actually taken.¹⁸

Beyond competition and cooperation: converting power to strength

International relations oriented toward enhancing diversity in pursuit of global common good necessarily involve turning away from playing finite games (whether informed by theories of rational choice, by heroic simplicity, or by autocratic arrogance). They require resolutely embarking on a path—like that taken by the bodhisattva vowing to save all sentient beings—that is infinite in length and from which all things can be seen as opportunities or resources for awakening. On such a path, and in the playing of international relations as an infinite game, advance is always qualitative—a function of enriching relationships that are, necessarily, irreducibly shared. While finite games progress by way of a dialectic of empowerment and disempowerment, infinite games carry on by means of strengths begotten by and begetting other strengths in extending the meaning of relating freely.

During the era of cold-war realism, relatively solipsistic actors on both sides of the iron curtain assumed that they alone stood on firm moral ground, with good on their own side and something approaching (or even expressing) evil on the other. With the breakup of the Soviet Union, market-reform in China, and the continued acceleration of global interdependence, things became significantly more complicated and complex. The myth of separate existences seems to have dissolved irreversibly and the perniciously digital moralism of good versus evil has faded considerably—at least in the space of international relations. The recent invocation of an “axis of evil” by the second Bush administration in the United States, unfortunate though it is in virtually every respect, can serve positively as a ironic reminder that any appearances to contrary notwithstanding, the global situation is now such that international relations must be seen as taking place in deeply shared ethical space.

To a historically unprecedented extent, we are being forced to confront and accommodate our differences. At least for now, there is simply nowhere to turn that allows us to fully turn away from others who differ from us.¹⁹ We are faced—in virtually every domain of human endeavor—with needing to take into account undeniable trade-offs as we meet ever shifting needs to accommodate and not simply adjudicate among contrasting goods. Conserving and (perhaps, even enhancing) the global commons—the primary responsibility of international relations discourse—is now manifestly a process that cannot help veering into ethical or karmic straits that have the very unusual feature of being impossible to navigate independently.

These straits represent sticking points where differing sets of values—intentions—actions have come to converge, entangling one another in ways that block being freely interdependent. The unique topography of these karmic straits has not been widely or deeply enough appreciated: while any independent actor presents a much smaller axiological profile than do any collaborative actors, it is the latter and not the former who are able to negotiate clear passage through these bottlenecks in things, as they have come to be. The counter-intuitive topography of these key

features in the space of international relations requires us to take interdependence as basic if we are to succeed in traversing them.

An important ramification of this topographic peculiarity—again, very much counter to rationalist and realist intuitions—is that navigating through or around apparent conflicts is not most effectively or surely undertaken on the basis of either instrumental reasoning and/or ideally “thin” moral concepts. At least since Rawls’ classic book, *A Theory of Justice*,²⁰ there has been considerable and favorable recognition of the pertinence of “thin” conceptions of core concepts in ethics, especially when ethics seeks to claim relevance across cultural or political boundaries that are understood as having become irreversibly porous. The general assumption has been that any concepts or values suited to brokering truly global agreement about the good life are likely to be minimalist in nature. Hence, the widespread call for minimum standards in respect of working conditions, dietary regimes, or health care, and the negotiation of such minimalist frames of reference as the United Nations’ universal declaration of human rights.

But if the shared ground of international relations has the peculiar topographic features just claimed, axiological minimalism is likely to be counterproductive in alloying the kinds of common norms and values needed to resolve international conflicts and crises. In a space of irreducible interdependence, the *thicker* the network of explicitly shared resources and felt relations maintained by collaborations of actors, the more likely it is that their negotiations will be successful. Thus, rather than effectively *minimizing* the contributions of individual collaborators in crafting commonly held values, these contributions must be vigorously cultivated if we are to realize the kind of ethical consonance needed to successfully manage the commons. Moreover, because the negotiations of meaning that take place through such patterns of mutual contribution are—as suggested earlier—inescapably emotional in nature, their success depends on cultivating ever deepening capacities for emotional sensitivity and maturity. Bringing rationality to the negotiating table—no matter how important an emotion it has come to be—is simply not enough. At the very least, practices like those associated in Buddhism with realizing the four immeasurables are needed to provide basic training for the kind of emotional refinement needed if international relations is to be played as a truly infinite game. Barring such refinement, we will simply be in no position to respond as needed within troubled situations—be these personal or political. Deeply shared meaning will remain elusive.

It is instructive, then, that Rawls and other advocates of universal liberalism have been criticized as implicitly overwriting uniqueness in the service of overarching principles that fail to democratically order the international sphere. As an alternative, many critics have insisted on maintaining locally thick concepts as the *sine qua non* of any viable approach to international relations. For them, global order consists, both necessarily and ideally, of a quilting of persistently distinct value systems.²¹ Value pluralism is not simply an undeniable twenty-first century reality, it should be conserved as an ideal at all scales of interrelatedness. Critical commitments of this sort are, I think, an important corrective to conducting

international relations as a universalist discourse based on thin and practically traction-less conceptions of the good. But they are not enough.

In addition to recognizing and conserving alternative value systems as inherently valuable products of human history, it is necessary to engage in their sustained *appreciation*. For those faring on the infinite path of bodhisattva action, the virtuosic qualities of attention and commitment that are needed to truly appreciate—or enhance the value—of all things are most fundamentally (and continuously) cultivated through mindfulness and insight meditation. In sharp contrast with a relativist acceptance or tolerance of alternative value systems—systems that thereby remain steadfastly other, if not alien—these rudimentary Buddhist practices aim at attending to the ways in which each thing is relevant to all other things, contributing uniquely to their meaning. This is basis of the bodhisattva's limitless capacity to accord with any situation, responding as needed to direct it, as a relational whole, toward consummation as a maximally diverse and truly liberating environment in which all things are *strong*: that is, capable of relating freely.

It can reasonably be objected, of course, that this realization of the relevance of all things is in itself of scant relevance for real-world international relations. It may be that mindfulness and insight meditation yield personal benefits: increasingly refined capacities for attending to and attuning with situational dynamics. Undoubtedly, these capacities have a direct bearing on our readiness for innovation and improvisation—skills that are very much needed in a complex world requiring us to face and respond to changes that we literally could not have anticipated. But apart from this generic relevance at the level of personal self-cultivation, what possible bearing might they have on how we conduct and orient international relations?

Mindfulness and insight, from a Buddhist perspective, develop sensitivities and sensibilities relevant to reorienting processes of change and interdependence. They engender conditions under which the conceit of existence unravels and with it the fixed positions and identities that are a primary cause of conflict and suffering. Although international relations ostensibly focuses on relationality and change, it has done so in keeping with the same metaphysical assumptions—or ontological convictions—that undergird prevailing patterns of economic and political activity. International relations are thus considered external relations between sovereign states that exist first and foremost as autonomous and self-interested individuals.

Mindfulness and insight in international relations mean seeing through the conceit that relations are second-order realities contingent upon pre-existing actors. They involve realizing that we—for example, as nations, ethnic groups, religious communities, or non-governmental organizations—*are* only what we *mean* for other and what we allow others to mean for us. This amounts to an ontological gestalt shift from taking independent and dependent actors to be first order realities and relations among them as second order, to seeing relationality as first order (or ultimate) reality and all individual actors as (conventionally) abstracted or derived from them.

An immediate result of such a shift is seeing that power is not something differentially possessed and wielded by individual actors. Rather, power consists of a polarizing relationship; empowering on one hand, disempowering on the other. Exercising power cannot, in short, be a sustained approach to doing good in the sense of realizing truly common good. Eventually, power means power-over others who will only accept their disempowerment if their contributory capacity has dropped to such a low level that they can no longer protest their powerlessness and dependency. This, however, is a status that renders them less and less valuable to those with power who stand to gain little if anything from the relationship. The disempowered become a burden; the relationship weakens.

The polarizations of power—the empowering of some and disempowering of (many) others—undermine strength. That is, they undermine capacities for relating freely. Over especially the past half century, empowering the previously powerless has come to be celebrated as a course for redressing histories of excessively consolidated and unfairly exercised power. The aim generally is, through empowering marginalized groups and individuals, to achieve an abiding balance of powers and to redistribute more fairly the benefits of power. Unfortunately, while this may work to assuage recently wakened consciences, it does little to build strength. In an important causal asymmetry, the ravaging of strength by power cannot be healed by more, or better distributed, power. Strength is a relational quality, the loss of which amounts to a situational degradation. Whether granted by those in power or wrested violently away from them, new or renewed abilities to act autonomously in pursuit of one's own self-interest does not, and cannot, signal an abandoning of the metaphysics of individual existence. Strength can only be regained when the conceits of existence—tragic or ironic, competitive or cooperative—can be fully relinquished.

In traditional Buddhist practice regimes it is acknowledged that while mindfulness and insight together are all that is required to launch this process, not everyone in every situation can sustain restorative commitments to building the liberating strengths needed to revise the meaning of change and interdependence from samsara to nirvana. Two provisions are made: practicing under the guidance of a skilled master, and retreat from the full range of relational dynamics constitutive of daily social life. In the *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta*, for instance, when society has reached something very close to a moral nadir, no skilled masters remain extant and there are no communities of people devoted to practicing the Dharma. Those few people unwilling to be drawn into the collapse of society have no alternative but to withdraw, doing so individually at first and then banding together as they recognize their shared commitments. Over time, they form a counter-community based on their distinctively shared values—intentions—actions. Historically, Buddhist monastic institutions functioned as places of retreat in which practicing mindfulness and insight could be carried on continuously and with as few distractions and obstructions as possible.

By analogy, it can be argued that while restoring strengths in the context of international relations may in theory be globally possible, this may not be actually

the case. Indeed, there would seem to be many actors for whom developing sustained, mindful insight into the outcomes and opportunities associated with prevailing patterns of global interdependence is not practically possible—not, at least, as long as they are fully embedded in those patterns of interdependence. Ironically, some *independence* from those patterns may be required if the discourse of power is to be ultimately subordinated. In terms of the Mahayana teaching of the two truths, the ultimate reality of strength may need to be at first provisionally expressed through the conventional reality of power.

There is a superficial similarity between the discourse of empowering the powerless and the course of building strengths or capacities for relating freely by first retreating into practical independence from the relational polarizations of power. But closer examination makes evident that a crucial difference obtains between the characteristic patterns of value–intention–action associated with each strategy. The former aims at the balancing of powers, and is therefore committed to continuing to have resort to them. A world of balanced powers among resolutely self-interested actors is a world of managed competition or cooperation in the strict sense of “operating together” in secure co-existence. The strategy of provisional retreat, however, aims at overturning biases toward autonomy, control, and secured sovereignty to subordinate power to strength. Only on the basis of this subordination is it possible to commit to a course of relating freely—a course that goes beyond competition and cooperation to robust coordination.

In practical terms, this might mean, for instance, that countries being pressured to open up to the regime of “free trade”—a regime that has been steadily skewing global interdependence toward increasingly inequitable distributions of income and access to resources—may wish to remain un-integrated into global markets. They may wish instead to develop counter-communities with like-minded actors dedicated to sustaining local economic strengths by resisting the commodification and aggressive marketing of subsistence goods and services by global production monocultures.²²

A turn in international relations away from the conflict-prone dynamics of competition and cooperation to robust contribution requires those related within a given situation to arrive at common karma—a common pattern of values–intentions–actions—oriented away from control grounded freedoms of choice toward relating freely in mutual contribution and appreciation. Yet, as we have seen, good intentions must be paired with appropriate values and actions to sustain *kusala* or wholesomely virtuosic eventualities and at the same time reduce those that are *akusala*.

Rawls’ appeals to justice and fairness as key values for reorienting governance practices so as to effect positive social change can be seen as rooted in keen intuitions about the central importance of values in shaping how, and how well, we live. Justice and fairness are offered as values suited to reducing conflict and trouble—the sum total of human and planetary suffering—and steadily building better lives toward the end of realizing good lives for all. As we have seen,

however, Rawls' good intentions have run up against substantial real-world resistance—resistance that, from a Buddhist perspective, can be traced to the indebtedness of his (arguably *a priori*) construction of justice and fairness as universal values grounded metaphysically on generically conceived autonomy and individual existence.

While it is possible to derive from Buddhist teachings and practices values that play out relationally in ways not dissimilar to those accorded justice and fairness by Rawls, they would be rooted in the metaphysical irreducibility of dramatic interdependence. Ultimately, they would consist of values distilled “after the fact” from things as they have come to be and would thus represent embodied resources for shared meaning-making. That is, they would be values engendered relationally, not theoretically, in active improvisation of shared commitments to common goods. Autonomy and existence-derived concepts like justice and fairness have the advantage of being “thin” enough to pass through the permeable boundaries of virtually all the actors engaged in international relations—values that can comfortably be affirmed by all. By contrast, values derived through mindfulness and insight in accord with Buddhist commitments to realizing liberating intimacy among all beings would be globally thick and locally thin. As such, they offer a middle path between “universal-but-thin” and “thick-but-local” approaches to achieving viable international community.

Throughout our conversation, I have been forwarding diversity as a primary value for realizing strong coordination in public policy. Unlike ideally thin concepts distilled through universally enjoined experiments in rationality, Buddhist diversity is thinnest at the local level and thickest at the global. Unlike the quilted order envisioned by opponents to moral universalism, however, the order expressed by the Buddhist concept of diversity does not assume the ultimate independence of contributors, but rather their ongoing, meaningful interdependence. Instead of an unmitigated pluralism of quilted orders—a regime of variety in which persistently autonomous, neighboring value systems are effectively stitched together by focusing only upon selectively salient aspects—Buddhist diversity invites ever fuller participation of whole communities in relationships of mutually articulating support and dramatic furtherance.

In specifically international relations terms, diversity means opening viable courses around both the apparent necessity of cooperation (as managed competition) and the inevitability of conflict, turning decisively away from an exclusive focus on the external relations between essentially autonomous actors and shaking fully free of realist contentment with articulating lowest global denominators for secure co-existence. As a passage between claims of absolutely universal goods and claims of irresolvable moral and cultural relativism, the path of increasing diversity challenges the logic of the excluded middle, the priority of facts over values, the metaphysical centrality of existence rather than creative ambiguity, and the supposition that meaning is essentially a function of subjective interpretation and not of improvisationally shared offering.

International relations based on the values of control, stability, security, and institutionally mediated co-existence can reproduce the conditions of their own necessity, but cannot give rise to an alternative world in which the ideal of virtuosic, mutual contribution and the primacy of constitutive, felt relationships is no longer taken to be fundamentally “unrealistic.” In such a world of continuously negotiated diversity, agreements about universal norms give way to interweaving improvisations of surprisingly shared meanings. This clearly requires attentive and responsive skills that far exceed those of populations that have been dramatically impoverished by subjection to ways of life in which opportunities for appreciatively and directly contributing to one another’s welfare have been all but submerged in market-delivered floods of occasions for commodity consumption; in which political participation has been reduced to instantiating the myth that democracy is simply “one person, one vote”; and in which the unrestricted exercise of freedom can only take place in a state of utter privacy and privation, or infinite want and desire.

Building various kinds of civil society may suffice to provide at least temporary stepping stones across the widening dramatic gulf that results when autonomy and equality are heralded as irreducible communal values, when differences are institutionally prohibited from truly making a difference, and when control prevails as the central technological value. Civil society, at least as customarily conceived, arises at the interface of society and the state as a concrete medium for consolidating and exercising power for political (but also economic and social) change. Civil society, in this sense at least, is not contrary to the polarizing discourse of power, but emerges as a force for balancing or redirecting that discourse. As such, it cannot ultimately reverse the dramatic impoverishment that power and the valuing of autonomy and control occasion, whatever its conventional benefits.

Similarly, building institutional bridges of the sort that link various players of different scales and perspectives on the field of international relations will *not* provide the resources for breaking free of the karma of control and its underlying logic of consequences—a karma according to which the better we get at getting what we want, the better we get at wanting, only to be left wanting by what we finally get. The bridges and the societies thus realized may well revise the terms of competition and cooperation, but they will not eventuate in robust coordination. In Buddhist terms, they may soften the *akusala* eventualities brought about by existence-biased international relations and power. But they do not take the further step of building strengths, *so long as* their very possibility is dependent on technologies through which control is most efficiently exercised, and through which the colonization of consciousness is most systematically deepened.²³ The karma of control is such that commitment to it as a value—even for the purpose of positive social change—eventually helps bring about situations that will be perceived as increasingly in need of control. Civil societies can, indeed, mediate the articulation of appropriate kinds of control. They will not, thereby, eliminate the need for more of the same.

The dramatic gulf opening up between individual persons, ethnic groups, religious traditions, nations, and regions through late twentieth- and early twenty-first century patterns of inequitable globalization cannot be addressed by appeal to the same values that have made this type and degree of globalization possible and then inevitable. Fighting fire with fire is possible—but only if the fire to be extinguished can be isolated within an encircling band of controlled burning. This is not possible when the fire to be extinguished is global in extent. If diversity is, indeed, a counter-value capable of stimulating a gestalt shift in the meaning of change, it is so only to the extent that it means developing the kinds of attentive and responsive skills needed if international relations is to be played as an infinite game in which strength—and not power—prevails. Unless built by actors who are capable of horizonless *civil virtuosity*, civil society is a useful, but finally self-defeating response to the crisis of community now taking place worldwide.

It is becoming painfully apparent in this first decade of the “century of interdependence” that the major issues in international relations cannot be resolved by appeal to balancing or adjudicating among separate interests and identities as ontologically basic building blocks. Neither can these issues be solved by simple factual measures: they have the nature of predicaments than can only be resolved on the basis of first allowing that they arise as impasses in situations that are shared but poorly recognized as such, pointing to conflicts among our values, many of which are absolutely crucial to who we take ourselves to be. Committing to the resolution of predicaments in the public sphere means placing our “selves” at risk. Whether aiming to resolve conflicts between Myanmar’s SLORC and NLD, or between the PRC and Tibet or Taiwan, or between the “developed” North and the “developing” South, success and failure swing on how well we improvise (or prove incapable of improvising) shared meanings for our increasingly undeniable interdependence, and how consistently and creatively we are able to appreciate and contribute to our diversity as our most precious global commons.

As a global commons or public good, diversity denotes the totality of relational resources for making meaningful differences in realizing sustainable patterns of intimately shared welfare. The primary function of diversity-oriented international relations is not hammering out agreements that level down differences in pursuit of a universal ethic. Neither is it institutionalizing tolerance, preserving difference by insuring that it no longer makes a difference—a relativist version of universalism. Rather, the primary function of international relations becomes strengthening differences in the sense of appreciating how they can be related in order to foster relating freely. As diversity is globally enhanced across all domains of endeavor bearing on public good, international relations will—in terms of present ideals—work paradoxically against increasing security and for deepening vulnerability shared among all relevant actors. There is, ultimately, no other route to truly liberating intimacy.

Yet, because diversity consists, in Buddhist terms, of the activation of emptiness or the mutual relevance among all beings, the increasing vulnerability that comes with increasing intimacy is always also an enriching opening-up of what we mean for one another. There are risks in resolutely orienting international relations toward diversification. But they are the kinds of risk that must be taken if the interdependence and emptiness of all things is to manifest as our shared realization of unlimited skill in means: horizonless capacities for contributory and appreciative virtuosity. Failing to commit to reorienting international relations in this way, the very conditions that might otherwise have been turned to creative consummation will draw us inexorably into continued conflict and suffering.

FROM VULNERABILITY TO VIRTUOSITY

Responding to the realities of global terrorism

There is much to recommend an approach to international relations that aims at inflecting our growing global interdependence toward enhancing diversity and bringing about environments in which relating freely is possible for all. At least in theory, it offers a way of conceiving alternatives both to the choice between competition and cooperation, and the moral default of mere tolerance. But in practice, such an approach can be charged with being insufficiently grounded in the realities of early twenty-first century geopolitics. It is one thing to theoretically espouse opening ourselves to the contributions of all beings in the achievement of meaningfully shared and ultimately liberating environments. It is another thing to open ourselves to the kinds of threat to both national and basic human security that have become so tragically widespread over especially the past quarter century.¹

Of all the threats to our overall sense of security and the promise of diversity-driven international relations, perhaps none is so challenging as that of terrorist violence. No single threat has so effectively brought into focus how deeply shared personal and public fortunes can be. None, certainly, has so pointedly and viscerally driven home the basic truth that we are all vulnerable.

Although acts of terror are not a new development in global history, global terrorism can be seen as among the emergent (and very much unintended) consequences of contemporary patterns of technology-driven globalization and interdependence. In the absence of international air travel, electronic transfers of capital, trans-continental arms trading and satellite mediated communication networks, terrorism would have remained a relatively local phenomenon. But, as the rhetoric of many terrorist groups make clear, global terrorism is not just made possible by the interdependencies and technological systems that have developed as a function of contemporary scales and rates of globalization, it is also a response to them—one that seeks to disrupt present patterns in the distribution and management of power through the calculated and yet apparently indiscriminate infusion of fear into the global public sphere.

Here, I want to critically engage our present ways of understanding and responding to global terrorism. The declared “war on terrorism”—a central part of our public response—shows no signs of coming to an end and has if anything

spread and intensified over the past 5 years. As parents, sons, and daughters continue to be killed—by terrorist insurgents and by both military and mercenary counter-insurgency campaigns—the ineffectiveness our present approaches to understanding and responding to terror is becoming evident. The elusiveness of peace is being transmuted into tragic impossibility.

It is not my intention to analyze the complex geopolitics of the “war on terror,” the regime changing wars that are—in all but name—still being waged in Afghanistan and Iraq, or the ethnically and religiously charged battles for sovereignty that continue to afflict much of Middle East, Central Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. Neither is it to critically assess either specific policy decisions or their effects on the quality of daily life and civil liberties. Instead, I want to use Buddhist conceptual resources to make clear that our prevailing strategies for responding to global terror remain wedded to the politics of power and will therefore remain ineffective.

Terrorists do not agree to internationally established rules of engagement; by that, they demonstrate their refusal to play the finite game of power change, regardless of how interested they may be in exercising powers of their own. Although our prevailing strategies might afford short-term solutions for some aspects of the overall problem *of* terrorism, they will not develop the strengths needed to sustainably resolve the predicaments brought to light *by* terrorism. Those strengths will come only through playing the infinite game of peace by globally coordinating the enhancement of commitments-to and capacities-for appreciative and contributory virtuosity.

The meaning of terrorism and tragedy

In today’s media and in both popular and political discourse, “terrorism” is most often used to denote something like “irrational acts of calculated violence, consciously and callously perpetrated on innocent people.” In addition to being quite common, such a description of terrorism is also oddly inconsistent (asserting terrorism to be both “irrational” and “calculated”) and prone to concentrating attention on the horrific actions undertaken by terrorists rather than the conditions under which terrorism recommends itself as a strategy for initiating or directing change.

Both etymologically and literally, terrorism is rooted in terror. Terrorism is carried out through acts that evidence a brutal adherence to the dictates of rational choice, and that will have the desired outcome of injecting the target group or society with debilitating fear. Such acts are not undertaken in a vacuum. Terrorism marks an extreme manifestation of conflict between actors of very different scale—actors who have failed to establish any usefully shared sense of a common ground for addressing chronically troubling differences in norms and values. It is never the first response to normative tensions. Terrorism arises through the experience of utter frustration with respect to even the *possibility* of negotiating a mutually satisfying direction or meaning for situational transformation.

Where the actors involved are of similar scales—for example, if both are well-established nation-states with clearly defined institutional structures and histories—such normative impasse has tended to result in war of either the cold or hot variety. It is only when the scale of the actors is sufficiently different for direct confrontation not to be a viable option that terrorism arises. In this case, the actor least likely to survive direct confrontation and most likely bearing galling witness to the overwriting of its own norms and values by the actor of greater scale finally feels compelled to drop the pretence of cooperation. In a rational and yet shamelessly violent attempt to further its own ends, this actor tries to produce conditions ripe for meaningful and desirable change. This is not done by directly dismantling the other's institutions, but by inoculating the other with fear.²

There is thus some truth in the corollary popular association of terrorism with threats to democracy. Terrorism marks a refusal to respect widely accepted norms for inter-communal relations, and thus a refusal to participate in the consensual ordering of the relational commons. Indeed, terrorist acts explicitly aim at bringing about disorder. Because of the relatively small scale of actions undertaken, however, terrorism is generally *not* able to effect any direct and broad destabilization in the targeted community. In spite of their grievous consequences for those directly victimized, the direct factual effects of acts of terrorism are relatively modest. The crashing of a plane, the sinking of a ship, the explosion of a car bomb, the destruction of an embassy building, and the loss of life associated with them—these cannot bring an entire people or society to its knees. Neither will they significantly destabilize a targeted nation or global system of order.

Without pushing the analogy too far, terrorist acts can be seen as successfully destabilizing in much the same way that viral infections are. The tiny beings communicated into a human body by a mosquito bite or by eating spoiled food, in and of themselves, could not cause a single hair to move on that body. Once inside the body, however, and given certain conditions, they are able to so profoundly disturb the body's organic order that it collapses in malignant exhaustion lasting days or even weeks. If the infection is severe enough, the body cannot carry out any of its normal activities, take in nourishment, or effectively rest. In the worst case, destabilized and debilitated beyond the point of recovery, it succumbs and dies.

Fear violates the naturally open process of being human that is seen with such endearing evidence in babies and small children—an utter readiness to explore and literally incorporate things, to make them a part of ourselves. Fear brings about defensive recoil from our situation—a movement of simultaneous closing-off and closing-out.³ Though it is often associated with the realization of vulnerability, fear is actually a quite distinct phenomenon. As nicely captured in the classic identification of fear with “fight or flight” responses, fear is the embodiment of a profound need to change the meaning or likely development and outcome of a situation. By contrast, vulnerability signals awareness of potentials for interdependence and interpenetration. Vulnerability can be discomforting; but it can also be exciting and positively charged as when we realize suddenly that we are falling

head-over-heels in love. Vulnerability marks awareness of a qualitatively distinct sense of being exposed, of being internally related in ways that both can surprise and satisfy.

Of course, if fear is confronted and the relational complexion of a frightening situation is appropriately enhanced, it can be converted to vulnerability. Conversely, the excitement of being vulnerable can be turned to fear if openness to others becomes intense enough to seem explosive—often when the relational demands of a situation begin outstripping one's experienced relational capabilities. Vulnerability gives way to fear when relational limits are transgressed; fear is dispelled with mounting relational virtuosity.⁴

At the public level, the experience of fear is most commonly caused by a threat to national integrity or a community's overall way of life—an event that signals relational inadequacy. Much as a terror-stricken person will often close-off from the source of their fear, attempting to close it out, a nation or community will often react to terror—perceived as an “external” threat—by closing in on itself and by closing off its borders. Just as it does with terror-stricken individual, this means a collapse of horizons of relevance, a desperate inattention to nuance and detail, a potential for lashing out at suspected or real “enemies,” and a refusal to acknowledge any still present common good with them. As witnessed in the exercise of extreme political unilateralism, fear is capable of systematically undermining the basis of truly open societies and relations among them. As so poignantly stated by the Burmese democracy advocate, Aung San Suu Kyi, there is no democracy where there is not “freedom from fear.”⁵ A terrorized population—regardless of whether the terror is induced randomly or systematically—is incapable of undertaking and sustaining democratic processes. It is a morally paralyzed body politic in frightful danger of dissolving into autonomous and narrowly self-serving constituent parts.

The effects of terrorism on those victimized by it are almost invariably deemed tragic. The paralysis of the body politic that occurs when whole populations are effectively terrorized is no less so. But to deem events and their consequences “tragic” is not simply to add an emotional intensifier to their brute factuality. It is to say of them: “they should never have happened, and yet could not have happened otherwise.” Tragedy takes place in the peculiar world region lying at the intersection of the positive moral space of *what ought to happen* and the negative factual space of *what could not happen*—a place where the moral and the ontological come into explicit conflict. In tragedy, ought no longer implies can.

In classical Greek drama, tragedies were narrative-driven performances centered on the fateful interactions of human beings and the Olympian gods—interactions that were depicted as the means for putting right either a human-divine relationship that had gone profoundly astray or the order of the cosmos itself. The central characters in a tragic drama are, of course, essentially innocent of wrongdoing. Like the victims of terrorism, their fault or flaw is not a result of their own doing, but something inherited or imposed on them—perhaps for no other reason than they happen to have ended up in precisely the wrong place at just the right time

for being drafted into service as a means to the end of a reestablished cosmic harmony. Tragic heroes have the (ill) fortune of being *subject* to dramatically unanticipated fates and forces utterly beyond their control.

Together, terror and tragedy seem almost to force us into shrinking away from freely engaging our situation and being responsible to and for it. This seems understandable, even quite reasonable. It is not uncommon for the terrified and tragically afflicted to simply “shut down” in a state of shock—a state that is usually, but unfortunately not always, temporary. Often, such traumatic withdrawal is taken to be a “natural” and even “necessary” part of the healing process—a way of consolidating our resources, regrouping, finding within ourselves the means of becoming again wholly present.

The idea that personal wholeness and a sense of sound identity might result from withdrawal and what often amounts to a refusal of intimacy is very much culturally freighted. It reveals a bias for constructing personhood in terms that are predominantly individualistic and essentialist rather than thoroughly relational.⁶ Still, even in cultures where persons are understood as complex patterns of relationship, traumatic withdrawal does occur. In such contexts, the healing process is perhaps more often understood as taking place with re-integration into the situation as a whole, rather than as something that took place “inside” the afflicted person during their *de facto* absence. Either way, however, it remains true that pulling back from full intimacy with our situation involves closing ourselves off in some degree from our environment and those with whom we share it. In effect, this is dramatically impoverishing. It is to cut our selves off from others’ contributions to the meaning—and not just the bare facts—of who we are and might become. Closing ourselves to the experienced outcome of things, as they have come to be, is also to close off to all that is (or might be) opportune in them.

This is especially apparent in the worst cases of traumatic withdrawal, where the interruption of normal relations is nearly total. But all instances of terror and tragic withdrawal bring about an impoverishing break in our normal pattern of sustaining relationships. When our fear is of sufficiently low intensity and where our sense of tragedy is less severe, we may simply gather our wits and run out on what we perceive to be a troubling and potentially avoidable situation. Whether our escape is “internal” or “external,” however, it constitutes an assertion of manifest objection—a blocking out of both what is threatening *and* what is potentially a crucial contribution to our own welfare. Anyone who has had the experience of approaching a terrified infant or someone in shock with every intention of helping only to be pushed aside as irrelevant or threatening knows quite well the degree to which fear can block situational contribution to one’s welfare. When communities or nations close their borders in “self-protective” withdrawal, they become no less blinded.

Moreover, in pulling away from our situation, contracting in upon ourselves, there typically occurs a condensation of present qualities of attention and relationship. That is, among the terror and tragedy stricken, characteristic qualities of attention and patterns of relationship tend to become both smaller in scope and

more concentrated. Especially as fear, suspicion, and anger intensify, the potential for explosive reactions increases—the potential for incandescently lashing out in objection to how things have come to be. But because these objection-driven emotions also consist of admissions of ignorance regarding what we might do to favorably dispose our situation, a concentration of attentive and relational qualities associated with them means ever greater tendencies toward ignoring our immediate situation, thus reproducing and intensifying the conditions of further conflict and objection.

Together, terror and tragedy bring about an implosive collapse of our customary horizons for relevance, responsibility, and readiness—a profound shrinking of the horizons within which we are willing and able to admit things as relevant, as our responsibility, and as rightly evocative of our readiness for fully engaged action. Ironically, such a “protective” contraction of horizons does not finally lead toward invulnerability, but its opposite.⁷

The trouble with terror and tragedy: a Buddhist perspective

These general points can be sharpened by appealing to a broadly Buddhist interpretation of terror and tragedy as particular expressions of trouble or suffering (*dukkha*).

The Buddha often described his way of practice and teaching as comprising only four basic insights or truths: all this—our present situation—is troubled; trouble arises because of particular patterns of relationship; these patterns can be dissolved; and, there is a way or practice for doing so. The first of these Four Noble Truths does not seem, at first glance, to be true at all—not at least as a statement of literal fact. Every one of us can name many, many situations in which we have been quite happy and untroubled. But on closer examination, the specific phrasing used by the Buddha—“all *this* is troubled/troubling (*dukkha*)”—resists being understood in either purely subjective or purely objective terms. By including the indexical term “this” in framing the first noble truth, the Buddha invites resisting our natural tendency to believe that, “if I’m okay, you must be okay.” The first truth is an injunction to discern the troubling currents present in our situation, as it has come to be, and to do so regardless of the apparent factual nature of our circumstances and no matter how pleasantly we may be disposed within them.⁸

Stressing that “all this” is characterized by trouble or suffering is also to insist that trouble or suffering is always unique. It may arise through a general, interlocking set of conditions, similar for all sentient beings. But, like fingerprints arising through analogously general sets of causal conditions, each actual instance of suffering or trouble is finally unlike any other. The importance of this realization is that while it is possible—and often very instructive—to craft universal solutions for human suffering and conflict, they can only solve equally universal problems. Our own sufferings and troubles, unfortunately, are always particular. We never suffer from the “untimely loss of a family member,” but—to

take a particularly tragic example—from the utterly senseless shooting of a fifteen year old daughter by pathologically confused classmates as she went from math class to history. Because no two instances of human suffering or trouble are precisely identical, truly workable problem solutions—as well as predicament resolutions—must be improvised.

The Buddha's key insight, the one that enabled him to see how the tendencies within our experienced situations toward trouble and suffering might be entirely resolved, was that all things arise interdependently. Relationships are more basic, finally, than things related. Failing to realize and respond in accord with the dynamics of interdependence obtaining among things in any given situation, as it has come to be, is the root condition for all trouble, suffering and conflict. The second, third, and fourth truths provide general guidance in deepening our capacity to skillfully redress this failing. The primary teaching device for deepening insight into interdependence is the twelve-fold chain of interdependent origination, of which three links are traditionally regarded as crucial: ignorance, habit formations, and craving desires. In keeping with the Buddha's description of his transforming insight into interdependence as like coming across a "long lost city, overgrown by dense jungle," ignorance, habit formations, and craving desires can be seen as the root, trunk, and fruit of *dukkha*.

In a Buddhist sense, ignorance is paradigmatically associated with the conceit of independent existence. The English word "existence" derives from Latin roots meaning to "stand apart from" and neatly captures the arrogance inherent to claims of independence. Consistently imagining our selves as autonomously existing individuals is possible only on the basis of successfully ignoring our common ground—the relational field out of which each one of us emerges. But, because trouble/suffering arises through particular patterns of interdependent relationships, ignoring our relational common ground is also to ignore the sources or origin of trouble/suffering. Simply stated: it is to endanger our selves. To the degree that we take ourselves to be independently existing beings, trouble will always seem to take us by surprise or unaware—a product of chance or fate in which we had no hand of our own.

Especially in Mahayana Buddhist traditions, insight into the interdependence among all things entails insight into their emptiness—a realization of the interpenetration and mutual relevance of all things, and thus of the constitutive or creative nature of differences.⁹ Experiencing our independence or our co-existence, regardless of how secure it may be, effectively involves a denial of emptiness. It means ignoring the ongoing and dynamic presence of differences that truly make a difference—a collapse of the shared space within which each thing actively contributes to the welfare of all others. At the same time, it involves entry into an "inherently" tragic domain in which there is no clear correlation between our efforts and actions and their ultimately experienced consequences, a domain in which the operation of karma is not evident. Ironically, we find it increasingly easy therein to believe that "nothing really makes a difference"—in particular, that *we* do not and perhaps cannot really make a difference.

Few beliefs or experiences are more likely to generate depression, frustration, and anger. Such emotions have been the object of consistent and careful critical regard in Buddhist traditions. As situational energies—that is, as expressions of both force and direction—they reflect a breakdown of consensual meaning. They evidence basic normative conflict or a failure to realize patterns of relationship that are experienced by all involved as mutually beneficial and conducive to meaningful and sustainable situational (and not just merely individual) welfare. As they play out, whatever rationales we attach to them, they will mean an intensification of qualities of relationship or interdependence that are attentively impoverished, profoundly divisive, and conducive to suffering.

The practices summarized in the fourth noble truth—the Eight-fold Path—provide a systematic method for actively breaking down the conceit of existence and for both developing capabilities-for and refining commitments-to liberating engagement with the interdependence of all things. This is not a path aimed at a specific destination or experienced outcome, but rather at opening opportunities for improvising shifts in the *direction* of our situation away from trouble, conflict, and suffering toward their sustained and meaningful resolution. Traditionally, this path has been represented as a three-dimensional system of contraries or antidotes to the three crucial links in the pattern of conditions giving rise to trouble or suffering. These are cultivating wisdom, attentive virtuosity, and moral clarity.¹⁰

While it can be seen as a troubling eventuality that is in many ways unique, global terrorism and its tragic consequences can be traced back—as can all forms of *dukkha*—to relationships gone awry. More specifically, terrorism arises as an outcome of conflicts among patterns of values—intentions—actions that are severe enough to result in violent objections of a sort that signal a glaring absence of normative consensus and a rejection of the possibility of moving toward it. Terrorist acts are an attempt to bring about a severing of relationships that are perceived as crucial to things having come to be as troubling as they have come to be.

Three primary, sponsoring conditions of conflict and violence were frequently identified in the Buddha's discourses. The first is claiming that “this is true, all else is false”—asserting, in effect, that reality does not admit of second (or third) opinions and that the admission of multiple meanings or diverse perspectives on a given matter is an admission of ignorance if it is not an expression of evil in the broad sense of the term.¹¹ The world is not ambiguous. It is not an ongoing, shared improvisation. Things are truly either “this” or “that”. In between, and in any act of combination, there is only falsehood. Views like these are at the heart of conflict and violence.

The second key condition has to do with strategies for resolving the kinds of difference that arise when two or more parties take opposing stands on matters of fact and meaning. Conflict and violence ensue whenever such differences are resolved in ways that lead to some winning while others lose.¹² Victory confirms the existence of disparate selves—those vindicated by the conflict and those vanquished. It refracts patterns of interdependence into apparent patterns of independence and dependence. Victory is thus conducive to anger, hatred, jealousy,

and dejection. The defeated live in pain, in fear, and all too often in hope of revenge.

Finally, the Buddha identified disparaging and extolling individuals as conducive to conflict and as blocking access to and movement on the Middle Path. In the *Araṇavibhaṅga Sutta*, for example, he instructs a group of students to avoid making such claims as “all those who practice in such and such a way have entered onto a wrongful path” and “all those who practice in such and such a way have entered onto a rightful path.”¹³ Both claims, apparently offering concrete examples of wrong and right conduct, implicitly establish sets of practices and practitioners as pairs of opposites. This seems simply to be a clear way of making a useful distinction. But in actuality, “anger, confusion and dishonesty arise when things are set in pairs as opposites.”¹⁴ The Buddha recommends instead talking about practices in terms of patterns of relationship, identifying which patterns are conducive to suffering, vexation, despair, and feverishness, and which are conducive to their dissolution. This not only undercuts the tendency to talk about individual people as “good” and “right” or “evil” and “wrong,” it also undercuts the association of good and ill consequences with such individuals. Instead, the stress is placed on how qualities of relationship vary according to different practices.

If ignorant misdirection of the interdependence among all things is the root of suffering or trouble, then relational rejection or contraction—the “natural” outcome of fear and of tragically unanticipated and uncontrollable turn of events for the worse—is a particularly egregious mistake. It amounts to a hardening of the trunk and branches of suffering—the consolidation of rigid and habitual patterns of attention and relationship. Securing our own existence, to the extent that it succeeds, blocks skillfully activating the emptiness or mutual relevance of all things to redirect situational meaning in a more liberating way.

Closing borders—personal or national—fosters conditions for continued and intensifying trouble/suffering. Importantly, this is true even if it leads to apparent victory. Mounting a “war on terrorism” that aims to destroy the individual people, groups, and national bodies constituting a global “axis of evil” is eventually counterproductive. Setting up stark oppositions between “enemy” practices and peoples and our own may be appealing in many ways; it may help galvanize support for particular political and military agendas. But such oppositions finally generate only more anger, confusion, and despair. Their ultimate fruit is not truly sustainable peace, but rather still more intense and extensive conflict.

A Buddhist alternative

The general outlines of a Buddhist alternative can be sketched by looking at the core Buddhist practices associated with cultivating wisdom, attentive virtuosity, and moral clarity.

Broadly speaking, Buddhist wisdom consists of skillful insight into *how* things have come to be *as* they have, and implies a keenly attuned capacity for revising

the meaning of situations that have gone astray. Among the teachings most closely associated with cultivating wisdom in virtually all Buddhist traditions is the teaching of the three marks: for the purpose of dissolving the conditions of suffering, one should see all things *as* troubled, impermanent, and without any abiding self or essence.

Although it is often represented as “deconstructive” in nature, the teaching of the three marks is carefully phrased as an injunction to practices that bring about profoundly constructive insights, especially when undertaken systematically. For our present purposes, perhaps the most crucial is the realization that no situation—regardless of how hopelessly conflicted it appears to be—is finally intractable. Indeed, seeing all things as impermanent is to see that change is always, already taking place. The question is not whether change is possible, but in what *direction* should it proceed? Because there are no such things as permanent selves or essences, all situations are open to meaningful revision or redirection. Finally, seeing all things as troubled is to resist the tendency to believe that if things are okay for me or for us, then they must be okay for everyone. It is also an exercise in refusing to see the end of conflict as a state of affairs arrived at once-and-for-all. Dissolving the conditions of suffering or conflict is not a one-time affair, but an ongoing, always improvised activity. Thus, especially in the Mahayana Buddhist traditions in which a strongly social sensibility is expressed, wisdom is associated with the development of unlimited *upaya* or skillful means.

From the foregoing, it should be clear that Buddhist wisdom rests on a capacity for increasingly flexible and subtly attuned responsiveness. Training for insight into the interdependence of all things has thus always been strongly associated with meditative discipline or attention training. At times—as in the Chan Buddhist tradition—they have even been claimed inseparable. In much the same way that stretching and yoga are most effective in developing a supple body when practiced intensely and with unwavering commitment, Buddhist meditation and attention training are said to build a capacity for clearly focused and concentrated awareness that results in supple and finely attuned qualities of relationship. That is, meditative discipline and attention training undermine the habit formations that constrain our capacity for situational response, while at the same time building a capacity for situational attunement.

Attention implies attending or a capacity for caring response to the needs of the situation. Indeed, because consciousness is understood in Buddhist terms as a quality of relationship between a sensing being and a sensed environment—and not, that is, as a property of an individual organism—meditative discipline and attention training are best understood as directed toward the realization of relational virtuosity. Thus, truly enlightening beings are said to demonstrate unlimited skill-in-means in responding to the needs of the situations in which they find themselves. To return to the metaphor of the neglected city of interdependence overgrown by dense forest, attentive virtuosity clears the great highways connecting the city with all other parts of the realm: the four “immeasurables” of compassion, loving kindness, equanimity, and joy in the good fortune of others.¹⁵

A capacity for flexible and profoundly attuned attention is, of course, no guarantee of being able to respond to a given situation in such a way that the conflicts and suffering that trouble it are fully resolved. Even with a detailed understanding of how things have come to be as they have, it is often not clear in which direction things must move in order to meaningfully resolve the trouble or suffering they evidence. This is especially true when the “problem” is not choosing between something “good” and something “bad,” but rather among a complex array of functionally competing “goods.” In the absence of moral clarity, even the most keenly attuned person may fail to respond when and as needed.

This is true because the world in which we find ourselves as sentient beings is shaped by karma. Moral clarity arises with skillful appreciation of the meticulous consonance between our values—intentions—actions and the topography of our lived experience. According to the Buddhist teaching of karma, every event is at once an *outcome* and an *opportunity*—both a specific consequence of prior value-laden, intentional activity and an occasion for creatively revising the meaning of the situation in which we find ourselves. Although the signal practice associated with moral clarity is the making and keeping of vows, it is clear—particularly in Mahayana Buddhist sutras—that, far from constraining relational capacity, vows serve to consolidate our potential for relational virtuosity. Vows mark the realization of unwavering dramatic commitment—an unshakeable sense of *direction* without which dramatic or moral innovation is effectively blind. Moral clarity is the basis of any fully sustained revision of the meaning of our situation, especially those that would redirect it from further experiences of crisis and conflict toward their continuous and creative resolution.

The general Buddhist pattern of skillfully responding to trouble—be it an unanticipated crisis or an all-too-familiar chronic difficulty—can be seen as a systematic relinquishing of our present horizons for relevance, responsibility, and readiness, whatever these may be. More positively phrased, it consists of developing the kind of appreciative and contributory virtuosity needed in order to fully accord with our situation, and respond to it as needed to orient its further dynamics away from *samsara* to *nirvana*: from trouble and suffering toward their ongoing and meaningful resolution. This is not a transition from a deplorable or troubling state of affairs to one that is desirable and free of trouble—a transition from a hell to a heaven. Rather, it is an active and necessarily improvised process of continuously and skillfully reorienting the pattern of relationships in which we find ourselves. Buddhist liberation does not mean *being free*, but *relating freely*.

Some specific implications

This suggests a major difference between Buddhist responses to terrorism and those that recently have dominated especially American public discourse. Made tragically aware of its vulnerability, the dominant public response by the United States has been increasing security measures and turning to preemptive violence as a means of averting future acts of terrorist violence. The karma of this response

centers on control as a primary value, improved security as a root intention, and assertions of power as an overarching mode of action. It is a karma that involves denying truth to any view that does not coincide with America's own; adopting a basically oppositional stance toward others ("you are either with us or against us"); and identifying evil and ill with particular people or peoples and their beliefs and practices rather than with qualities and directions of interdependence. According to the Buddha's analysis of the causes and conditions of conflict and violence, it is a karma that will have conflicted and violent outcomes and that will prove most opportune, not for initiating the infinite play of peace-making, but for carrying on an interminable series of finite campaigns to establish ever greater control and security—campaigns that will prove America's power while sapping it of the strengths needed for relating freely with others.

Responding to violence with violence—like fighting fire with fire—a strategy that will work (if at all) only so long as the sources or causes of violence can be identified clearly, isolated, and contained by executing a controlled "burn" that makes it impossible for the sources of violence to draw in new "fuel"—new arms, new recruits, and new rationales for infecting the world with terror. Unfortunately, in the case of combating global terrorism, these "burns" take place in the midst of the general public, starkly dividing the public sphere into those who are "with us" and those who are "against us" by sacrificing whoever or whatever might lie in-between. Although the US government has not tracked civilian casualties of its "war on terror," a reasonable estimate is that in Iraq alone, somewhere around 100,000 non-combatant men, women, and children have been sacrificed in the name of bringing peace and democracy to their country and destroying its capacity for sponsoring global terrorism.¹⁶ The numbers of Iraqis who have been maimed and left homeless are, of course, much higher. The parents, sons and daughters of these "uncounted" casualties, if they are not already inflamed, can be counted with a high degree of certainty to be easily ignited. America's control, security and preemptive violence based strategy for winning the "war on terror" is generating the conditions of its own necessity.

In a world in which change and novelty are ineradicable, the increasing exercise of control must, at some scale, correspond with increasing ignorance of our situation and its meaning, as a whole. Control promotes experiential solipsism, a self-justifying closed-mindedness without which it would become quite apparent that controlling our experiential circumstances not only subjects others to control, but ourselves as well. Since control cannot truly be shared, its successful exercise depends on being able to keep the playing field as much out of level as possible and sloped to our own advantage. Alas, the steeper the slope of the playing field, the harder it is to negotiate or exit. Control becomes not just increasingly possible, but necessary, just to keep from falling.

Against the immediate "goods" offered by a strategy of control, Buddhism recommends the karmically sustainable strategy of developing appreciative and contributory virtuosity. If appreciation is taken to mean both sympathetic understanding and a process of increasing value, the better we get at appreciating

our situation, the more fully we will find ourselves attuned with it *and* the more valuably we will find ourselves situated. The better we get at contributing to our situation, the more we will find ourselves in a position to contribute to it. This, however, can only be possible if we effectively have more and more to contribute. Contribution is, in this sense, self-enriching or strengthening. And since contribution pivots on making a meaningful difference—not simply doing anything at all under the circumstances—as contributory karma matures, we find ourselves increasingly in a position to make a meaningful difference.

The challenge of the Buddhist alternative is that it requires exercising the sort of courage needed to more fully understand and value the perspective of the terrorist—at least to the point of being able to contribute to *their* circumstances in ways that they themselves appreciate and value. This is not a matter of giving “the enemy” what they want. It is a matter of cutting through the pattern among our horizons of relevance, responsibility, and readiness that opposes them to us and leads both sides of the opposition to identify the other as “the enemy.” It is the challenge of finding truly shared common ground.

There is no simple prescription for how to do this. It is a process that must be improvised, on the spot, in full awareness of all the unique specificities of the moment. At the same time, the general principle holds that any sustainable approach to establishing truly common ground will, at least from a Buddhist perspective, involve shared insight into our shared realities and, because of this, our shared responsibilities. This insight is inseparable from a recognition and acceptance of intimacy. Sharing responsibility is to share in shaping what things are and will mean. But granted the interdependent origins and sustenance of all things, engaging in the shared shaping of what things will be and mean is to commit to our own shared becoming.

This should not, however, be imagined as taking the form of an assimilation of one party to the other. A major shortcoming of the softer side of the public response to terrorism has been to offer, for example, aid and assistance that is not desired, that leaves “us” unchanged, and that expressly disregards differences that truly make a difference. Such so-called contributions aim to promote others’ welfare by eliminating their differences from us. But “helping” others to become “like us” blatantly and shamelessly ignores the reality that our mutual opposition is rooted in the fact that they neither like us nor want to be changed so that they can be liked by us. No truly meaningful and sustainable solution can be based on insisting that we are all the same or all equal. The first is a patent falsehood and the second an appealing fiction, but only that.

Any viable solution must, in short, not only respect diversity, but further enhance it. Enhancing diversity is not compatible with efforts to promote tolerance or to establish the grounds of secure co-existence. Diversity can only be enhanced by realizing patterns of complexly meaningful interdependence oriented so that each member of a situation is not only capable-of, but also committed-to contributing to the welfare of all others. A basic condition of enhancing diversity, then, is exercising the kind of creativity needed to insure that no

member of a situation is seen as being without anything valuable to offer. Yet, even creative support must be mutual if it is not to be ultimately impoverishing. Taking the attitude of the “teacher culture” or the “global peacekeeper” is to arrogantly refuse participation in the realization of diversity, and that is to impoverish who we are and what we are capable of meaning to and for others.

A further challenge of the Buddhist perspective is that the teaching of karma enjoins realizing that the realities of global terror and the tragedies resulting from it cannot be dissociated from our own values—intentions—actions. The Buddhist teaching of karma does not insist that those victimized by terrorism or impoverished by global markets deserve this as their payback for ills previously committed. Karma is not a function or expression of moral bookkeeping. Neither does the Buddhist teaching of karma suggest seeing that all that happens to and around us is predetermined—a function of destiny or fate. Even less so, of course, does it legitimize appealing to chance in explaining how things have come to be *as* they have come to be. We are not determined by our karma. On the contrary, the operation of karma insures that we are given opportunity—again and again, without fail—to alter how and why we do things as we do, and thus how and what we experience together. Karma insures that we are always in a position to revise the meaning of the situations and events into which we find ourselves drawn. In a literal sense, there are no such things as tragedies because there is no entirely objective set of causes or any transcendently scripted fate to which we are hopelessly subject. The Buddhist cosmos is not one created at some distant moment in the past and playing out inexorably ever since; it is being continuously co-created, moment by dramatic moment.

For those who have experienced tragedy in association acts of terrorism, entertaining the truth of such co-creativity is likely to afford very little in the way of solace. It will not return the dead among the living. Yet, it is basic to healing—and not merely salving—the wound of existence. Whether it is by terrorists, counter-insurgency forces, global markets, autocratic leaders or social institutions that privilege according to gender or skin tone or religious affiliations, being victimized is wrong. It is evidence of interdependence having gone seriously awry. Barring a deep appreciation of and insight into karma, it is easy to think that the wrong we have suffered should be righted. It is easy to believe that it is both right and our right to seek and perhaps even celebrate retribution. In a world of distinct causes and effects, where events are determined by clearly defined “inputs” or “influences,” the mechanics of blame would mirror the structure of responsibility already present and given in the world. But, in a world that arises through horizonless patterns of mutual conditioning or interdependence, identifying who or what is to blame or who deserves what payment for either suffering ills perpetrated or for perpetrating them is to fall into the kind of oppositional thinking that perpetuates rather than mitigates trouble and suffering. Retribution is not a viable Buddhist option.

Retributive justice reflects the general strategy of exercising control over our circumstances and over the possibility of particular experiences within them to

determine a final outcome. For all its appeal, it cannot open significant new opportunities for reframing the meaning of our shared situation. If time and attention lost in compelled consumption of global market commodities can never be regained, how much less can the loss of loved ones to violence be repaid? Vengeance alleviates neither tragedy nor vulnerability. There is no compensation for a life sacrificed. Imagining that there is constitutes a self-inflicted form of defeat which is itself liable to initiating yet another turning of the wheel of conflict and violence. Retribution is a strategy that in karmic terms can only result in moral devolution—a strategy that, in actuality, blocks possibilities for engaging tragedy with real strength. Seeking retribution—either in lives or means of livelihood—for the hundreds of thousands of parents, sons and daughters already sacrificed in these first years of the twenty-first century to either creating or combating terror is to turn aside from the much more difficult and yet infinitely more promising work of insuring that each of these lost lives becomes a turning point in our global patterns of interdependence.

It is one of the peculiarities of a karmic cosmos that there is not ultimately any chance of “getting even.” Doing unto others as they have done unto us or extracting payment from them after the fact can only lead to escalating a pattern of interaction that we already know to be troubling and conducive to suffering. To be sure, protecting ourselves, our families and our communities is necessary. The karmic issue is not whether one does so, but how and why, with what values—intentions—actions. The very difficult task facing us is to commit to a strategy of mutual protection in which we go more deeply into the tragedies already inflicted by global terrorism and our responses to it, and discover ways through them to insuring that no further “sacrifices” will be necessary, that no more beloved innocents will need to be laid out to build the bridges needed for meaningfully revising our relationships with those who have become our “opponents.” The classical tragic hero was represented as being sacrificed to the end of restoring cosmic balance. Present day tragic heroes—hundreds of thousands of them around the world—are perhaps better seen as having been offered up to the end of revising our situation in such a way as to realize truly liberating environments in which each and all are enabled to relate freely.

These environments will not and, indeed, could never be characterized by lasting equilibrium. Liberation is not a destination; it is a direction. There is no once-and-for-all solution to the problem of global terrorism. Indeed, global terrorism is, at bottom, not a problem at all; it is a predicament. The persistence of global terror signals our failure, thus far, to develop appropriate kinds and qualities of coordinative and liberating resolve. Addressing this failure requires deepening intimacy with our situations and with one another. It means increasing our capabilities for appreciating differences—a process that is inseparable from developing and demonstrating contributory commitment. Resolving the predicaments driving global terrorism requires working through our vulnerability to a resolute virtuosity born of wisdom, attentive mastery, and moral clarity, in ways that open up further opportunity for still greater virtuosity.

Concluding remarks

At the most general level, Buddhist responses to terror and tragedy proceed from the realization that all states-of-affairs and fixed identities are either convenient fictions or functions of thoughtless ignorance. Any sustainable corrective to the arising of terror and tragedy must grow out of a commitment to revising the quality and meaning of relationships—our individual and communal patterns of interdependence.

But what *specifically* does this mean? What would a Buddhist answer have been to the presumed threat of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction? What is a Buddhist response to a continued nuclear program in North Korea or Iran, or the rise of anti-American sentiment in the Muslim world and the widely professed sympathy there for acts of terror against the US? Admissions of co-responsibility for the conditions that have precipitated such sentiments are, perhaps, all well and good. But what concrete steps can be taken to safeguard our way of life and the lives of our children? Yes, we *should not* respond to terrorism and tragedy out of ignorance, habit formations, and craving desires. Yes, we *should* cultivate wisdom, attentive mastery, and moral clarity to insure that we respond with virtuosity in whatever situations we find ourselves. But what use are such ethical generalities when confronted with defiance and belligerence, or with values so far from and contrary to our own that reconciliation seems flatly impossible?

There can be no prescriptive answers to such questions. Or rather, prescriptive answers are possible, but they will not prove to be both skillful and sustainable. In a world characterized by impermanence, emptiness, and interdependence, any skillful and sustainable responses to conflict, violence and terror must emerge from within our present situation, as it has come to be, in real time and with currently available resources. Abstractly derived solutions or responses will only solve or address abstract problems and eventualities—not those directly confronting us. In a world of irreducibly dynamic and dramatic interdependence, it *is* possible to prescriptively recommend the avoidance of particular strategies, on the basis of the karma informing them. It is possible to identify, in advance, what *will not* work. But there is no similar possibility of asserting—with certainty and concrete specificity—what *will* work.

It is often believed that in spite of such uncertainties, we must nevertheless do something. We must act, one way or another, and the more decisively the better. There is some truth to this. We actually do not have the option of not acting at all. Even refraining from overt response is a response, an action undertaken on the basis of some values and intentions. Inaction, too, is the making of karma. And it is surely better to respond with immediacy rather than after the interruption of drawn out deliberations that allow the situation we hope to address to change in ways that our deliberations keep us from attending. But interventions undertaken on doubtful bases cannot be expected result in resolutely focused opportunity or deepening virtuosity.

Buddhist practice entails working through doubt, not around or in spite of it. Acknowledging our present lack of clarity about what will redirect our global

interdependence to dissolve the conditions of persistent and expanding global terrorism is crucial in freeing us, in our present situations, to do those things about which we have no doubt. In practicing Buddhism, the default position when we are confronted with a predicament—when we do not know what is best, under the circumstances, as a response to a troubling situation where competing goods are in play—is not to wait, or to deliberate further, but to undertake more intensive training for virtuosity. Much as the basic training for different sports or arts often bears little direct resemblance to the final expression of athletic or aesthetic virtuosity, training for appreciative and contributory virtuosity may seem strangely distant from the relational dynamics of situations to which we must eventually respond. But this does not diminish the effectiveness of such training and its practical necessity.

From a more specifically Buddhist perspective, it is also the case that the more insight we have into the karma of our situation—that is, how it has come to be, precisely *as* it has come to be—then the better prepared we are to respond skillfully, when and as opportunity arises. This requires a deepened and broadened historical perspective and growing dramatic acuity—greater sensitivity to the dispositional or directive play of values, meanings, and intentions in the complex course of events. In combination, then, what we can begin immediately to cultivate are more fully and finely attuned attentive and responsive capabilities in combination with expanded dramatic horizons and historical sensibilities. In a word, we can deepen and extend our education to the end of realizing appreciative and contributory virtuosity. Indeed, for the purpose of reorienting global interdependence, nothing is perhaps so vitally important.

EDUCATING FOR VIRTUOSITY

Education plays a crucial role in conserving and enhancing the public good. From all available historical evidence, it would seem that this is a perennial and virtually universal conviction. The precise nature of education's role in the realization of public good, however, has been—and continues to be—subject to considerable controversy.

At present, a wide range of views on the meaning and function of education are being actively translated into concrete educational practices and institutions, both formally and informally. Some of these views are grounded on the most up-to-date research in learning and social theory; others are rooted in millennia old cultural traditions; still others are almost brazenly aligned with contemporary political, religious, or ethnic ideologies. Given the intimate linkage between the meaning of education and the meaning of becoming whole and fully functioning persons-in-community, this wide—and often quite deep—variation is perhaps to be expected and even cautiously applauded.

Education is not only crucial, however, in shaping relationships *within* communities, but also in shaping the complex interrelationships *among* them. In the present era of profound and rapidly changing patterns of globalization, this has important implications. If the twenty-first century can rightly be called the “century of interdependence,” it is a century almost surely destined to continuously challenge educational aims and assumptions. At the very least, progressive global interdependence accentuates the precedents for consolidating tolerance and mutual respect among both individuals and communities with disparate social, political, economic, cultural, and spiritual heritages. Global interdependence practically commands, for example, that teaching “our history” be construed in increasingly broad and accommodating ways. But, as has been argued with respect to a range of issues bearing on public good from the environment to international relations, complex global interdependence is also generating deepening imperatives to move beyond tolerance or the accommodation of plural perspectives to the realization of robust and abiding diversity. Education, in other words, is poised to become key in fostering the conditions under which increasing inter-relatedness builds contributory capacity for all in service of realizing sustainable, free, and equitable mutuality.

Ironically, just as education is being globally pressed toward center stage, it is also being pressed into wide-ranging crises of competence. Never before has education seemed to be so poorly equipped for living up to its promises with respect to public good. Differences in the assumed meaning and function of education insure that the perceived crisis differs from locale to locale. The issues of equity and exclusion that dominate discussions of educational malaise in many developing countries appear marginally, if at all, as critical concerns in the most highly developed societies. There, attention may center on a crippling mismatch among teaching methods, school curricula, and the shifting needs of the employment marketplace. In some locales, building the necessary material and professional infrastructure to make universal access to secondary school education a functional reality is a major challenge. In other locales, retaining students through high school graduation is proving remarkably difficult, with some cities in the United States for example, experiencing dropout rates of up to 40%.

What is most remarkable is not the sheer range of crises that presently or will soon afflict education worldwide, but the fact that a sense of crisis characterizes the full spectrum of educational systems and scales. While the specific difficulties vary, there is a common experience of education having come to a point that the limitations of existing models can no longer be denied or discounted. Although incremental changes in educational methods and aims continue to be implemented, in some cases successfully, there is a growing recognition that such changes will not be enough.

Over the past century, a groundswell of paradigmatic shifts has taken place, especially and most obviously in technology and science, but also in politics, economics, social institutions, and the expression of cultural values. And there is every indication that conditions continue to be ripe for further, quite fundamental and inherently indeterminate or unpredictable shifts across the full range of human endeavor. Yet, to date, education has escaped such radical, paradigmatic transformation. Educational change has been both piecemeal and incremental—reforms aimed at correcting for failures in delivering long-standing educational goods rather than systematic departures from prevailing presuppositions about the meaning and function of education.

The past century has also been characterized by powerful tendencies toward global institutional convergence—in banking and financial management, for instance—as well as toward the tacit consensus on basic norms that is needed to realize such convergence across national, ethnic, and cultural boundaries. These tendencies have, in many ways, been hallmarks of the distinctive postmodern realities broadly captured by the term “globalization.” As a premier institution in all societies, education has not been exempt from these tendencies. In spite of tremendous historical and global variation in educational aims and practices, there is now a remarkably consistent grounding of education in three interrelated foci of norms and practices. These are: the effective dissemination of information or knowledge; the transmission of specific, circumstantially useful skills; and, principle-structured character development and socialization.¹ In Buddhist terms,

these foci and the patterns of values–intentions–actions underlying them can be seen as expressing a broad karmic paradigm, in accordance with which educational systems are disposed toward generating similar patterns of outcomes and opportunities. It is this paradigm that is in deepening crisis.

In very broad terms, it is a paradigm that orients education toward engendering individual and collective competencies that embody highly context-dependent abilities to take part in reproducing (and incrementally extending) contemporary norms and practices. It is not, in other words, a paradigm oriented toward engendering virtuosity with respect to improvising context-revising, anticipatory norms and practices. Yet, it would seem that it is precisely the latter paradigm that would best answer emerging social, political, economic, and cultural realities—a paradigm that does not center on conserving and modestly extending abilities to fit into anticipated social, political, economic and cultural conditions, but rather on cultivating the complex virtuosity required to skillfully accommodate conditions that could not have been anticipated. Education in this sense would serve to innovatively enhance personal and communal capacities for innovation. It would serve, that is, as a creatively evolving driver for changing the means and meaning of change.

Here, I will be considering what distinctive light Buddhism can shed on the prospects for changing our dominant educational karma along these lines to better respond to the complex range of crises besetting education worldwide. Buddhist teachings and practices afford systematic resources for re-conceiving the meaning and function of education, coordinating a shift from the centrality of competence to that of virtuosity, in ways that would contribute to enhancing diversity globally.

The imperative: global interdependence, as it has come to be

Education serves both conservative and creative ends. On one hand, education serves to transmit historically embedded patterns of understanding and practice. Or, put somewhat differently, it conserves the particular traditions through which peoples shape their often complex and distinctive identities. On the other hand, education provides resources and insights relevant to adaptively responding to changing circumstances.² In practice, education both transmits and transforms understanding and practice.

This suggests that educational depth and development will be greatest at the margins of cultural and social equilibrium—that is, at their growing or leading edge. Where social, political, and economic conditions remain relatively stable, the imperatives and opportunities for developing new approaches to meeting both conservative and creative educational ends will be correspondingly minimal. Conversely, however, where such conditions are undergoing rapid alteration—as they are today—maintaining or only slightly modifying existing educational institutions can, with equivalent rapidity, become dysfunctional in both creative *and* conservative terms.

The rate and scales of changes currently taking place across the full spectrum of lifeworld domains are at an historical peak and still accelerating. And, because change is taking place in such a way as to deepen links across a wide range of domains and scales, it is increasingly complex.³ That is, present day rates, patterns, and scales of change are bringing about systems of relational transformation that are distinctive in two important ways. First, they are systems that do not simply aggregate the characteristics of previously existing relational systems. Indeed, they are systems marking the appearance of novel characteristics or behaviors—systems that are greater (or, at least, significantly other) than the sum of their component parts. Secondly, they are systems for which history makes a difference. Rather than behaving in identical fashions over time, they are systems that evolve new characteristics and behaviors, incorporating the effects of past behaviors into their own futures in terms consistent with sustained systemic values.

Taken together, these attributes of contemporary change insure that there is—and will continue to be—considerable indeterminacy and non-linearity in the nature and direction of change. That is, we will continue finding ourselves faced with situations that, in very significant ways, could not have been anticipated.⁴ In spite of increasingly detailed modeling of present conditions and the most likely trajectories of their further development, the meaning of change is, and will remain, open to continuous revision. In part due to their greater interdependence, systems of interaction that previously were not conditioned directly or intensively by values and intentions are now subject to increasing influence by them. In Buddhist terms, these systems are ramifying karmically.

In the context of such rapid and value-inflected change, there can be no possibility of effectively addressing the crises confronting education through either piecemeal or strategically fixed reforms. Neither can there be any reasonable hope of discovering any one-size-fits-all or once-and-for-all approaches to educational change. Needed instead, are diverse and responsive trajectories of innovation that go beyond summarily reconsidering and revising what is taught and how—educational content and methodology—to continuously and harmoniously extending and deepening the overall purposes or meanings of education.

This imperative follows from the fact that keeping apace with the rates and depths of changes taking place outside the education sector in political, economic, social, and cultural systems entails continuous attunement to paradigmatic, meaning-generated and meaning-generating transformations of those systems. In such a context of transformation, education increasingly becomes both situationally reflexive and ethically charged. That is, it assumes rapidly compounding, directional salience. In effect, education is being poised to serve as an amplifying nexus of both feedback and feedforward processes by means of which communities (at scales from the local to the global) actively sustain and revise the patterns of values and intentions shaping their own development. While it has long been recognized that there are significant social, economic, political and cultural drivers for educational change, it must now be recognized that growing interdependence

consolidates potentials for education itself to serve as a driver of social, economic, political and cultural transformation.

Looking more closely at these processes and their structural dynamics will help to refine our intuitions regarding the kind of paradigm shift needed if education is to assume a vibrant role in sustainably directing global interdependence toward greater equity and diversity.

Changes in development dynamics

In a world where basic economic, political, and social infrastructure changes at a pace slower than the rate of generational transition, it is possible—and arguably sensible—to educate local and national populations to participate effectively in the workplace by providing them with basic information and skills. But when important changes in infrastructure are already taking place several times in any given generation and still accelerating, this is no longer feasible or acceptable even as an ideal. Bluntly stated, school curricula and resources (textbooks, lesson plans, etc.) cannot change fast enough to keep up with the complexion of the end “market” for an educated public. It is impossible to train a population to enter the workplace when the needs of the workplace and competence within it alter fundamentally, perhaps several times, over the course of such training.

For nations well advanced in terms of educational infrastructure, a typical response has been to hold onto workforce preparation as a primary aim of education and, by way of concession to current rates of change, to accept the need for “lifelong instruction.” For such nations, it is believed necessary to first and foremost grapple with the economic implications of this need. The recent General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS) implicitly offers one strategy for doing so, institutionally opening a space to experiment globally with educational privatization as a potential answer to the demands of lifelong instruction. There are, however, very real and concrete worries about for-profit education and its impulse toward increasing market density—in particular, worries about creating educational stratifications and niches that work *against* building skills relevant to highly complex and newly interdependent industries and service sectors. A population of lifelong consumers of ever-changing educational commodities is not the same as a community of lifelong learners capable-of and committed-to adaptive inquiry and creativity of response.

Moreover, granted the necessary institutional periphery that must be maintained for the privatization of education to be successful in its own (essentially) economic terms, serious questions arise as to its sustainability as a strategy for achieving truly equitable interdependence. After all, global competition for educational contracts implies the presence of globally institutionalized standards that must—for obvious reasons—be legally fixed, and thus unresponsive to both local conditions and rates of change. For nations still lacking universal primary and secondary education and thus suffering from the developmental sluggishness typically occasioned by this lack, the situation is even more complex and dire. For

them, global privatization of education threatens to further institutionalize already galling inequity.

So-called developing nations are not alone in confronting the gap between educational aims and realities. The Japanese educational system, once praised for its ability to deliver the intangible, systemic goods needed for a population to excel in the late-industrial world economy, has over the past two decades come under mounting criticism for its inability to foster profitable levels and types of creativity. In the post-industrial world—centered economically on the commodification of information and the consolidation and control of conceptual capital—knowledge implementation (a forte of the Japanese education system) becomes increasingly subordinate to knowledge generation. Engineering solutions ironically yield to innovative problem formulations as the vanguard of forces *accelerating* economic growth. In the context of a fully post-industrial economy, without a continuous generation of new problems, growth is functionally arrested. With the consolidation of truly complex and recursively structured markets, this means that economically viable solutions to existing problems will at the same time occasion the emergence of new kinds of problems—ultimately, problem complexes characterized by contrary patterns of valuation. As we will see, this has crucial importance for the function and meaning of education.

Until fairly recently, American education programs—especially at the tertiary and post-tertiary levels—have been seen as particularly well adapted to the dynamics of post-industrial development. Values central to the complexion of American national identity, including a stress on autonomous decision-making, critical thinking, competitive genius, and individualism accorded well with key developmental imperatives to maximize market density, to commodify basic subsistence goods and services, and to systematically translate diversity into variety. In short, American education functioned well in promoting precisely the intellectual freedoms and social dynamics associated with problematizing the familiar and accepted order of things. Not surprisingly, just as the American economy boomed and became a benchmark for global developmental health and vitality, American education came to set a *de facto* global standard for education, especially at the tertiary level. To date, with few exceptions, doctorates earned at American institutions continue to be considered unsurpassed marks of creative promise.

Yet, the ironic nature of this excellence is making itself increasingly manifest and it is perhaps in America that the karmic liabilities of the dominant paradigm of education are most readily recognized. With the transition from an internationally quilted, post-industrial economy into a virtually seamless global system based on the commodification of attention and the exertion of control over the production of meaning, American “cutting edge” education has started to show signs of dulling. As preparation for full and creative participation in today’s highly complex and interdependent world, American education is increasingly both inefficient and ineffective or incomplete. This is now manifestly so in the primary and secondary sectors, but is also becoming evident at tertiary and post-tertiary levels as well.⁵

The consolidation and carefully channeled acceleration of information flows were basic to organizing and driving economic activity of varied scales and orientations in the discretely knitted domains of post-industrial economics. To a considerable extent, control over information, its contextual transmutation into efficacious knowledge, and its technological deployment in both production and service industries were definitive and determinative of post-industrial patterns of developmental excellence. But in the emerging, complexly relativistic space of the new “attention economy,” this is no longer the case. While control over the conditions of knowledge generation and dissemination are still important, it is now skill in creating and sustaining the conditions for shared meaning-making that has ultimate precedence. Increasingly, ethical issues and value judgments are coming to the fore as key factors in sustainable patterns of development—issues and judgments of the sort that are crucial in negotiating through differences to secure meaningfully shared common ground and the possibility of equitably harmonized growth trajectories.

In the context of a maturing attention economy, it is possible to state as a general rule that: whenever the economic viability of problem solutions becomes tied to the generation of new problem complexes that are characterized by contrary patterns of valuation, economic growth will come to be tied to the emergence of increasingly broad and profound predicaments. In post-industrial economic language, this phenomenon is simplified as the tendency for problem solutions to become increasingly colored by apparently ineradicable trade-offs. But this language obscures the complex dynamics of contemporary patterns of economic development and social change by tacitly denying any difference in kind between a given solution and the “trade-offs” it triggers. Beyond a certain threshold of interdependence—especially interdependence among sectors and normative systems that previously enjoyed relatively high degrees of autonomy—this is no longer tenable. Instead, the “trade-offs” associated with any given solution express complex conflicts among significantly differing goods and interests, across a range of types and scales.

Thus, as attention and meaning supplant information and knowledge as the key resources of the global economy, fundamentally quantitative approaches to sustainably linking economic and political activities give way to necessarily qualitative approaches suited to grappling with irreducibly normative issues. It is no longer simply questions of *how much* production and consumption are feasible that must be effectively and fairly answered, but questions about the sustainability of a complex range of social, political, and economic ecologies in the face of emerging production and consumption regimes. At bottom, and for reasons that we will explore in the next section, answering such questions finally depends on seeing how the problem complexes and predicaments generated by the new conditions for economic growth—including the mass production and consumption of meaning commodities—actually affect our shared lifeworld and, in particular, the depth and diversity of our attentive resources. It is in the context of these specific changes that the full meaning of bringing about paradigmatic educational change can begin to be articulated.

***Turning point: from problem solving to
predicament resolution***

In the Buddhist canon, the single most widely noted condition leading to suffering or trouble is ignorance—in particular, ignorance of the interdependence and emptiness of all things. On the basis of ignorance arise dramatically ramifying habit formations and clinging desires, and from these follow specific situational blockages or relational impasses—experiences of being incapable of relating freely.

This generic account of the origins of trouble or suffering is presented, especially in the earliest strata of Buddhist teachings, as an account that is plausible, but one that must be verified personally—most commonly through the practice of mindfulness and insight meditation. These practices make evident the dynamically relational nature of all things, including trouble and suffering and their root conditions of ignorance, habit formations, and clinging desires. A crucial realization following from this is that ignorance is itself never generic. Ignorance is always mine, or yours, or ours. It is arising here and now, as a function of how things have come to be, as they have come to be, in reflection of consistently maintained patterns of value–intention–action (karma) that inform what we take things to be and how we relate to and with them, powerfully limiting our resources and readiness for appreciating and skillfully participating in the interdependence of all things. Sustainably resolving suffering and trouble is inseparable from revising karma—mine, yours, and ours.⁶

Put somewhat differently, trouble and suffering are ultimately the fruit of unresolved predicaments—that is, conflicts among competing goods and interests; the coming together of contrary (and often contradictory) patterns of values, intentions, and practices. This is perhaps easiest to see in the context of intimate relationships—in romantic liaisons, in the life of the family, in close friendships, and in our career endeavors. But as a function of the scale and depth of global social, economic, and political interdependence, forceful expressions of this truth are making themselves felt in the conventional realities of contemporary life.

To take a single example, despite rising global wealth, global hunger is at an historical peak and rising. The UN food and agriculture agency reports that in 2002, the most recent year for which data is available, some 852 million people were chronically hungry.⁷ The combination of increasing global wealth and global hunger points, at the very least, to the inequity of prevailing patterns in the distribution of new wealth. But as the UN report also makes clear, inequities in the distribution of wealth reflect patterns of values that ramify in complexly interdependent ways politically, socially and culturally, and not just economically. It is to these values that we must look in explaining the fact that global hunger is growing even as there is a rise in global food surpluses. There is no food shortage. People who go hungry do so because their suffering is considered a lesser “cost” than that of rethinking the values and intentions presently structuring the production and distribution of food. Global hunger is not a problem; it is a predicament.

Advances in science and technology have yielded such extensive and precise control over our circumstances that the key limitations on problem-solving are no longer objective. At least with respect to the range of factual problems associated with basic life needs, there is very little that we cannot take care of, given sufficient time, money, and commitment. We can supply adequate food, clothing, shelter, health care, and basic education to each and every person and community on Earth. We can reconfigure atoms and genes, examine the soil of other planets, and tune into galactic events that took place 13 billion years ago. We cannot keep natural disasters from striking (indeed, we may even be contributing to their rising incidence), but we possess almost angelic capacities for minimizing resulting death and disruption. We can speak, neither madly nor altogether dreamily, even about putting an end to aging.

Yet there is a sobering corollary to realizing that our capacity for intervening in natural processes in pursuit of our own interests has reached such a level of sophistication that only time, money, and commitment apparently block us from solving whatever factual problems lie between us and the living of decent lives by all: the persistent elusiveness of a decent life for all must be seen as rooted ultimately in the complexion of our abiding values and priorities. We have crossed a threshold beyond which it is no longer possible, with respect to the vast majority of conditions leading to human suffering and trouble, to claim that there is nothing we can do about them. The question is no longer whether we *can* address these conditions, but whether we will affirm that it is *worth* doing so.

In Buddhist terms, we have arrived at a point in human history where we are forced to see that limits to relevance, responsibility, and readiness are nothing but horizons that appear as a function of own fixed self-interests and ignorance. They mark the scope of our attentions and commitments, not any inherent features in the interdependence of all things. Between us and the living of decent lives by all there lies only our own doing, our karma.

In more conventional terms: it is no longer generally the case that the most taxing troubles or difficulties we face are fundamentally factual in nature—matters that can be satisfactorily addressed through technical and institutional means, within the horizons of currently prevailing norms and values. On the contrary, our troubles and difficulties increasingly express tensions and cleavages among incompatible sets of norms and values: a disharmony with respect to what our shared situation should mean. In short, we find ourselves embedded in situations ineluctably shaped by competing and often contrary goods and interests and undeniably divergent futures. Solutions that are viable for some aspect of the situation as a whole—or for some group or groups of stakeholders in it—intensify and/or produce problems elsewhere. In studies of technological development, this phenomenon has been referred to as the emergence of ironic consequences or revenge effects. But more generally, it can be stated that beyond a certain threshold of situational complexity, solving a particular problem within some agreed upon parameters for what must be deemed relevant will entail incurring costs, manifesting beyond those parameters, which could not have been anticipated. Under such circumstances, solutions become

increasingly risky—matters of last resort when the costs of not responding to particular troubles are themselves manifestly unacceptable.

As we transition out of an era when most of the troubles and difficulties facing us could be successfully treated as problems soluble in strictly factual terms, with little or no debate about values and meaning, the distinction between so-called means and ends collapses. Along with this collapse come imperatives to systematically invert the long-standing assumption that facts can rightly be given priority over values in establishing the parameters of situationally apt response. In Buddhist terms, the irreducibly karmic nature of our situation is making itself unmistakable. As meaningfully emergent systems of outcomes and opportunities, each moment, each situation, is open to revision in terms of its *meaning* or *direction*. As problems give way to predicaments, solutions give way to resolution.

The distinction between problems/solutions and predicaments/resolutions is crucial to critical engagement with processes of truly complex interdependence, and has been invoked repeatedly over the course of our examination of the change dynamics now characteristic of different public domains. Let us examine the distinction in somewhat more detail, with a focus on how discerning how the transition from problems to predicaments must factor into considerations of revising the basic meaning and aims of education.

Problems arise when, for a variety of circumstantial reasons, existing approaches to meeting certain needs or interests stop being effective, often because they cannot be appropriately scaled up or scaled down. Problems center on the failure of specific means for arriving at ends we intend to keep pursuing. Solutions can be seen as effectively removing factual blockages in a given pattern of situational development or meaning. They consist of either improved or entirely new means to abiding ends. Predicaments, however, consist of situations that are blocked or troubled by the co-presence of contrary patterns of development or meaning. That is, predicaments announce the incompatibility of situationally relevant ends and interests. They express dramatic impasses—conflicts about the direction of interdependence in a given situation—and are therefore not open to solution.⁸ Predicaments must be openly negotiated and resolved.

As a mode of response, resolution has two distinct dimensions. It implies detailed insight with respect relevant patterns of interdependence and their complex dynamics, but also clarity of purpose or meaning. In the first sense, resolution is a function of scale and focus. This sense of the term is familiar to anyone who has worked in photography. The degree of resolution possible in a given photo is a function of the densities of both the recording and print media (whether film and paper, or silicon chip and computer screen). Differences between high and low quality media may be marginal when the photographic print is quite small. But when printed large enough or when viewed under sufficient magnification, the differences can be astonishing, with the higher resolution photo yielding remarkably greater clarity and detail.

The second sense of resolution is most familiarly invoked in the popular practice of making “New Year’s resolutions.” Clarity is implied in this sense of the term as

well, but here it connotes directedness rather than detail. A New Year's resolution, at least ideally, consists of a solemn commitment to realize a particular course of action, on the basis of clearly understood values and interests. In Buddhist terms, this sense of resolution is most fully expressed in the taking and honoring of vows. As such, it implies an unwavering orientation, a capacity for engaging each and every situation in such a way that its change dynamics are directed as entailed by one's vow. And, because of the changing nature of all situations and thus their dynamic unpredictability, resolution necessarily implies both dramatic clarity and responsive flexibility.

In the context of a world where problems are displaced by predicaments, heightened resolution—in both of its senses—assumes paramount importance across the full spectrum of social, economic and political realities. These realities and the changes taking place continuously in them, command both ever deeper and more detailed insight into the interdependence among all things, and ever more clarity about how to harmonize situationally complex flows of meaning. This mandates, in turn, a concerted revision of educational aims and practices—a paradigm shift from competency-focused forms of instruction and inquiry to a focus on complexly realized virtuosity.

The competence trap and recessive change in education

The now dominant orientation of schools and schooling is toward fostering broadly standardized sets of competencies in both individuals and communities, for the purpose of furthering both private and public good. This orientation expresses commitment to an educational paradigm suited to enabling problem-solution in a world characterized by high normative consensus and dramatic or moral homogeneity.⁹ For reasons of both effectiveness and efficiency, this has cashed out as an approach to education systematically focused on: the dissemination/acquisition of knowledge; the transmission of specific skills, useful in present-day and anticipated lifeworld conditions; and, principle-structured character development or socialization.

As we have already noted, contemporary patterns of change and globalization are rapidly pluralizing societies world-wide, eroding the dramatic and moral homogeneities within which a competence-biased educational paradigm can be argued to have served well both private and public good. These patterns of change and globalization have also entailed significant convergence, especially at the institutional level, but have not tended to result in truly robust normative consensus. Indeed, it is defensible to say that the apparently successful movement in this direction evidenced by the emergence of such institutions as internationally ratified human rights conventions and environmental protocols has masked until quite recently the reality that globalization processes have more generally been intensifying rather than eliminating both actually and potentially divisive patterns of association. Universalist sensibilities certainly remain important in the discourse on globalization, but global actualities have been characterized by the

consolidation of normative enclaves centered on the conservation (and in some cases, defensive creation) of particularist (religious, national, ethnic, and local) identities. As it has been coming to be, global interdependence brings with it profound imperatives and opportunities for confronting the need to take difference seriously, and eventually for sustainably enhancing global diversity.

Educational systems that aim at fostering the acquisition of presently relevant skills and knowledge are ill suited to meeting the imperatives and opportunities associated with critically engaging difference and enriching global diversity. Especially in the context of rapid and deep social, economic, political and cultural change, the presently dominant educational paradigm is highly susceptible to institutionalizing competency traps that will serve to erode situationally relevant improvisational resources and compromise responsive virtuosity, effectively intensifying frictions between available attentive and responsive resources and actual needs.

As long as situational needs are well established and reflect continuously abiding values and norms, an educational bias toward standard competencies is, in fact, entirely sensible. But when situational needs are rapidly shifting and reflect often quite complex confluences among distinct and often contrary sets of values and norms, a focus on standard competencies can be quite counterproductive. Under such circumstances, present needs are moving targets. Because competence is developed over time, this leads to a lack of immediacy in patterns of response at both individual and communal levels. Indeed, merely “competent” responses will tend to introduce drag in the overall pattern of situational development. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, present needs are not moving targets with smooth and predictable trajectories. On the contrary, they are liable to unprecedented changes of direction. In part, this is due to the complex (and not just complicated) nature of the systems by which we now meet our needs. But, it is also due the fact that as previously disparate individuals and communities are brought into intimate and transformative interdependence our needs are continually being shaped and reshaped by newly interacting currents of value and meaning.

When contemporary realities compel innovating innovatively, a focus on building specific competencies not only fails to be a sufficient educational aim, it becomes counterproductive. Mounting dissonance between continuously changing needs and relatively fixed educational aims and practices compromises both the conservative and creative functions of education. Unless resolved, this dissonance results in conditions unfavorable to realizing truly robust diversity. The inefficiencies and frictions that manifest when existing competencies prove inadequate for responding to the realities of accelerating, non-linear change work decisively against the sustained appreciation of situationally revealed differences as opportunities for relational improvisation. Especially where control and autonomy remain dominant values, experienced friction and emergence of conflict-prone differences will tend to encourage further and ever more calculated resort to the exercise of power as a means to better competing for what will appear to

be increasingly scarce resources for meeting present needs. This will in turn tend to block realizing precisely the kind of relational dynamics needed to foster the emergence of new self-sustaining systems of meaningful and mutual contribution to resolutely shared welfare. Competence-biased education is poorly suited to eliciting and refining the relational capabilities required to sustain and enhance social, economic, political, and cultural diversity. Continued commitment to it can only result in the intensification of global educational crises.¹⁰

To the extent that education remains focused on developing specific competencies based on determinations of present needs, educational change will not break out of a broad pattern centered on institutional and curricular reform. Given the accelerating and complex nature of global change, this means that educational change will become increasingly recessive. Whatever its merits with respect to the retention (and perhaps even accentuation) of power, it will tend to weaken capacities for relating freely. Finally, it will fail even at sustaining current levels of performance in terms of its primary functions: conserving traditions of understanding and practice through which shared identities have been historically articulated and evolved, and providing resources and insights relevant to adaptive innovation.

Undoing the educational segregation of knowledge and wisdom

The relational capabilities and commitments required to sustain and enhance social, economic, political and cultural diversity in an era of complex global interdependence are not a focus of the dominant educational paradigm. Their absence can be traced back to a constellation of conditions that, for a number of reasons, is most clearly and ironically evident in the history of change in American education.¹¹ There are considerable ironies in this. American society is often imagined as one of (if not the) most diverse on the planet. Indeed, American society has imagined itself as founded on the principle of creating space for difference, and while its iconic metaphor of being a “melting pot” nation suggests that the space made for difference may not be a space of lasting difference, it is true that in terms of ethnic, racial, and religious mix, the US population may well be among the most varied in the world. But variety is not the same as diversity. While American society has high potential for diversity in the robust sense we have been stressing throughout our examination of the dynamics of the public sphere, it is a potential that has been relatively poorly realized. At the roots of this shortcoming are values central to the American national imaginaire as well as to the project of modernity—values that found educational expression in a system of mass education remarkably well-suited to fostering instrumental creativity, but at the substantial exclusion of relational refinement and maturity as educational aims.

The biasing of mass education toward knowledge transmission, market-relevant skill acquisition, and problem-solving was not without precedent. It reflected a distinction made very early in Western thought and maintained throughout most of its history between knowledge and wisdom. As filtered through modern lenses

and in a context of public education aimed at furthering national competitiveness, the American model was: to treat knowledge as objective and as laying well within the delivery capabilities of institutional, public instruction; and, contrastingly, to treat wisdom as personal (if not entirely subjective) and as to be cultivated privately, if at all, as part of intimate self-realization. This division of educational labor fared particularly well in the environment being shaped in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by key American values of freedom-of-choice, autonomy, equality, tolerance and control. The result was an explosive growth of knowledge generation capability; the emergence of the United States as a leading player in global economics and politics; and a gradual atrophy of the relational strengths and moral genius that, in an era of predicament-rich complex change, assumes crucial importance throughout the public sphere.

The educational segregation of knowledge and wisdom effectively classified moral development and personal self-cultivation—as well as the skills in shared meaning-making that they entail—as private matters best relegated to either home or church. In principle, this allowed pluralism and tolerance to be institutionally acknowledged as key values while insuring that the primary venue for cultivating and expressing (potentially divisive) value difference would take place in the realm of the private. By centering educational aims and practices on consolidating the competencies needed to secure national interests and prepare citizens for participation in the experiment of democratically exercised freedoms of choice, education of the public could be conducted fully in public, for the public good.

The exclusion of moral development and the cultivation of wisdom from the American public classroom continues to be celebrated as a logical extension of the clear separation of church and state—one of the cornerstones of constitutionally establishing and maintaining full, “democratic” freedom to decide what kind of life each of us (as ideally autonomous individuals) most actively values.¹² And in contrast with the ways in which, for example, Soviet and Maoist regimes tasked education with inculcating public moralities, there is much to recommend the American approach to public education. Nevertheless, it is a solution that has begun generating unintended negative consequences.

Until the second half of the twentieth century, the educational segregation of knowledge and wisdom arguably solved a range of problems associated with meeting nation-building needs, recognizing the reality of value pluralism, and formulating a strategy for successfully serving both public and private interests through social institutions aimed at what can be broadly referred to as human capacity building. Schools became key institutions for generating capital in intellectual and work skills; families, neighborhoods, churches, social groups, and common interest societies took on roles for building social capital—the relational skills and bodies of insight needed to function wisely in society. This institutionalized “division of labor” functionally rationalized the “production” of knowledge and wisdom in a way that can be seen as having afforded greater efficiency and freedom in the pursuit of both public and private goods.

This success, however, can in retrospect be seen as also having been dependent upon material conditions—widespread in the US until the second half of the twentieth century—that were still favorable to maintaining ways of life profoundly informed by cultural and religious affiliation. That is, conditions obtained in which it was both possible and natural to maintain largely traditional ways of life expressing distinctive approaches to meeting the full range of subsistence needs from food, clothing, shelter, health care, and aesthetic enrichment to a sense of belonging. The social networks and relational complexes through which these ways of life were maintained and kept viable were prime conduits for individuals and communities—both rural and urban—to engage in directly contributing to shared welfare. Heavily informed by history, culture, and shared aesthetics of discernment and commitment, these daily patterns of mutual contribution served as primary enactments of culturally, ethnically and religiously distinct practices for cultivating the relational virtuosity that is fundamental to wisdom.¹³

Along with the ways of life in which they were embedded, these patterns of direct, mutual contribution atrophied, slowly at first, and then with increasing rapidity as the commodification of goods and services progressed in parallel with the consolidation of increasingly extensive and dense market economics.¹⁴ In effect, the daily life practices through which communities conserved the resources for expressing and enhancing diversity were gradually converted to forms of practice focused more on convenience than commitment, more on meeting momentary demands rather than refining discernment. Very quickly undermined were the merits associated with segregating knowledge/public education and wisdom/private self-cultivation. While knowledge generation and transmission can be sustained in the public sphere, wisdom cannot be sustainably cultivated in private, in isolation from daily life.¹⁵

In sum, among the crucial legacies of the historical progression from premodern-agrarian to modern-industrial and then postmodern-postindustrial orders have been: an almost total compression of the practical (as opposed to spiritual) authority of religious and cultural institutions; the emerging “normalcy” of highly rationalized or instrumentally compartmentalized patterns of identity and affiliation; and a profound reconfiguring of family dynamics.¹⁶ All three have important implications for any attempt to rethink or redress the educational exclusion of wisdom and its impact on both personal and communal capabilities for shared meaning-making. Here, however, let us consider in some detail the transformation of the family that this progression has involved, how it reflects larger changes taking place in a range of social sectors, and how these have come together—over the past quarter century—to render the globally dominant educational paradigm increasingly ill-equipped to meet the educational imperatives emerging with truly complex global interdependence.

Since the early twentieth century in so-called developed societies, the extended, multi-generational family has undergone a series of fragmentations that have been accepted and even embraced as effects of increasing affluence and social mobility. In the United States, for example, the multi-generation extended

family had all but broken down into the nuclear family by mid-century. Since then, an array of steadily intensifying forces have continuously enough stressed the nuclear family that it has now all but given way to the single-parent family as a national norm. Like the splitting of the atom, the breakdown of the extended and nuclear family structures occasioned the release of tremendous amounts of economically significant energy.

First, and perhaps foremost, this breakdown led to the practical necessity of duplicating such high-ticket commodities as living space, household goods and appliances, tools, entertainment equipment, and automobiles. A second phase is associated with the conditions required to sustain the growth of post-Second World War economies: the steady accession of women to the wage-earning workforce, initially with markedly lower wages than men, and their contemporaneous acquisition of growing independence as consumers. Over this period, an intensifying need arose for an extended and explicitly gender-neutral definition of basic education (in the United States, nominally the completion of high school, but in actuality now carrying over into post-secondary education or training of some sort). This then led, relatively rapidly, to massively expanding educational infrastructure from primary through tertiary levels and the eventual duplication—within the family unit—of job-training certificates and advanced academic and professional degrees. All of these interconnected effects—especially the duplication of households and requisite major investments of both financial and human capital—were of immeasurable utility in spurring and maintaining economic growth.

As the extended family dissolved, as mobility within society accelerated, as opportunities for both parents in the nuclear family to work became a *de facto* necessity, and as dual-parent families eventually began giving way to single-parent families, very powerful needs arose for earlier and earlier placement of children in professional care, and for greatly extended school schedules. But this was not all. The range of responsibilities assumed by and for schools with respect to child development were also greatly extended and amplified. This range has come to include (but is by no means limited to) the socialization of infants and toddlers, instruction in basic life skills, sex education, personal and career counseling, conflict mediation, and citizenship training.

While the multi-generation, extended family provided a powerful context for refining relational capabilities-for and commitments-to caring, contribution, and moral development, this is true of neither the single-parent or nominally nuclear family in which both parents work and in which care is often professionally mediated (e.g. by doctors, nurses, babysitters, and preschool workers); in which contributions to family welfare are increasingly commodity-mediated; and in which moral oversight is either delegated to institutional surrogates (e.g. religious specialists, classroom teachers, and sports coaches) or compressed into the few minutes per day that in most households are all that is *not* absorbed by school, formal after-school programs, employment, household chores, shopping, and media consumption. Yet, the default mediators or motivators of increasingly refined

relational capabilities and commitments are, for a host of reasons, not adequate substitutes.

Basic relational norms and awareness of the course of emotional and social maturation are, in most societies communicated in the context of early life experiences taking place in the home and neighborhood. With both parents working, much of this communication is—to state the matter bluntly—being outsourced to early learning centers or schools. These, however, are typically organized around segregated age/maturity groups supervised by adults with limited time and authority and are manifestly unsuited to naturally nurtured moral development. To be sure, the demise of extended families and true neighborhoods has practically institutionalized a need for secure environments in which children can be placed for safe play and learning activities, and daycare centers and schools provide such havens. But their organization and dynamics are such that they also have the untoward consequence of effectively closing precisely the kinds of spaces within which children are both free and situationally compelled to resolve their own disputes and moral dilemmas, creatively improvising their own rules, rights, and obligations. With the closure of these kinds of spaces, children are not only barred from contexts in which they might learn (from one another) to meaningfully contribute to one another's welfare, they are increasingly being trained simply to consume externally (adult/corporately) produced and regulated meanings and to seek ready-to-hand solutions to problems which, given sufficient examination, might well turn out to be predicaments.

If moral development depends on growing relational awareness and maturing sensitivity to both the contexts of and customs for meaning-making in community with others, then simple exposure to ethically charged issues—for example, through mass media or the internet—does little to compensate for the loss of these spaces. Buddhist moral development involves in addition, deepening awareness and wholesomely skilled or *kusala* appreciation of karma—the irreversible and dramatic shaping of outcomes and opportunities by consistently held values—intentions—actions. Moral development implies cultivating the relational maturity needed in any given situation to contribute as needed for directing the dynamics of interdependence away from trouble or suffering, toward their meaningful resolution. The more secure/predictable an environment is and the less consequential actions are in terms of shaping concrete outcomes and opportunities, the harder it will be to witness and attend the operation of karma and to develop morally.¹⁷ The safety-focused, objectively organized, highly disciplined and constrained environment of the school is not an ideal space within which to develop and nurture insight into moral virtuosity.

Following out the logic of the educational segregation of knowledge and wisdom, the American response to perceptions of worsening moral atrophy throughout society, but particularly among the younger generations, has been to increase the responsibilities borne by schools. Citizenship courses, the advocacy of emotional intelligence and character development as parts of school culture, and the encouragement of service learning are all attempts to address and bridge

the gap between what students are relationally equipped to do and what a changing society asks of them. An additional alternative strategy has been to acknowledge the tensions among the ideal of standardized public schooling for all, increasing pluralism, and the customary nature of traditional moralities, and to encourage greater private response to the public atrophy of moral sensibilities. This has taken the institutional form of legally insuring and—through, for example, a voucher system allowing public funds to be diverted into private schools—encouraging parental use of the right to provide children with a morally-inflected education of their own choosing. But given present day realities, neither of these approaches will have more than a minimal effect. Indeed, given that we now live in a truly complex world in which there are both no possibilities for excluding the unanticipated and mounting imperatives to conserve and promote robust diversity (politically, economically, socially, and culturally), privatizing moral instruction is likely to be counterproductive while publicly conducted moral training is likely to be so safely de-contextualized and generic as to be ineffective in any real world application.

Atrophy of the moral sensitivities and ethical strengths needed to responsibly negotiate differences of core values and meaning will not be reversed by privatized moral instruction—whether in faith-based schools or the home. These forms of instruction—whether conducted, for example, in the United States along Christian lines or in Afghanistan or the Philippines along Islamic lines—are conducive to conserving particular traditions of value and meaning-making. Although they may be effective in their customary settings, in the context of a rapidly pluralizing world of complex global interdependencies, they are counterproductively liable to result in what amount to moral ghettos, with each distinctly instructed community separated from the others, not by physical boundaries of distinct neighborhoods, but by the intangible and equivalently unassailable redoubts of moral absolutism or moral relativism. As a response to the growing moral vacuum in post-industrial societies, moral segregation is insufficient and potentially damaging.

Still, if there are now important risks associated with relegating responsibility for normative engagement and development to private discourse and instruction, there are comparable and parallel risks in requiring that these be unilaterally undertaken. History urges profound caution in any course of action that might open possibilities for institutionally fixing “right thinking.” On one hand, there is the authoritarian specter of state engineered moral absolutism. On the other, there is the worry—succinctly stated by Ivan Illich in his classic work, *Deschooling Society*—that the commodification of any need eventually institutionalizes a new form of poverty and a new class of poor. Standardized and commodified moral instruction, whether delivered by education systems competing for market shares—either for profit or for evaluations that translate into higher public funding—is likely to create and segregate classes of the morally rich and the morally poor: those well equipped to engage in live negotiations of meaning and those cripplingly ill-equipped to do so.

Against these very real concerns, however, it should be kept in mind that moral unilateralism is finally sustainable only in a highly homogeneous world in which the pace of change is modest and the dominant power structures are relatively impervious to challenge. We do not live in such a world. The very realities that command reinstating the marriage of knowledge and wisdom in public education also make it impossible to sustain an absolute approach to doing so. What the world demands is not just moral engagement and commitment, but moral genius and diversity—capacities for improvising meaningfully shared, difference-conserving, complexity-sensitive, and coordination-enriching responses to fundamentally changing circumstances. Indeed, the public, educational promotion of moral genius and diversity affords the only clear middle way between moral absolutism and moral relativism—between the narcissism of “one way (that is, ‘my way’) for all” and the nihilism of “one way for each.”

Moral absolutism and moral relativism are in underlying agreement that it is possible to determine what is right or wrong in a given situation, what conduct is or is not appropriate, and what values best order the public sphere. The absolutist and relativist disagree about the possible scope of determining what is right, apt and of ordinal value. The absolutist considers the scope of moral determination to be unlimited: claims of moral truth can be, and ideally are, universal. The relativist considers the scope of moral truth to be unfixed, but denies the possibility of any truths that are not tied to a specific perspective: there is no god’s-eye view from which particularities of situations and positions in them can be wholly discounted. In a world of complex interdependence and interpenetration, where change is non-linear and yet recursively structured, neither moral absolutism nor moral relativism are adequate as approaches for critically promoting public good.

As we have seen, the public sphere of the twenty-first century is characterized by emergent patterns of relationship and by the generation of new kinds and depths of predicament. No stable set of values, norms or moral truths—whether universalist or particularist in nature—can be assumed sufficient in the context of such dynamics. Instead, there is a need for responsively improvising new sets of values, norms and approaches to shared meaning-making. Ours is a time in which established moral truths are of lessening effectiveness and must as at some point give way to continuously evolving practices for collaboratively truing situations that are prone to going awry at times and in ways that could not have been anticipated. Ours is a time, in other words, in which moral genius and ethical creativity become crucial to the pursuit of public good. These terms are jarring to ears conditioned by paradigms of moral and ethical theory and practice that presuppose the validity of moral and ethical constants. To be morally innovative or ethically creative is, from the perspective of such paradigms, tantamount to being immoral. Yet, the need for coordination across sectors and societies under conditions of accelerating changes that in principle cannot be anticipated makes it imperative to cultivate precisely these convention-challenging attributes.

Appreciating the complex interdependence characteristic of the world of the twenty-first century makes evident that the continued segregation of knowledge

and wisdom and the public divorce of the intellectual and moral spheres is not a sustainable strategy for balancing personal and community interests. Yet, the commanding realities of this increasingly interdependent world make equally evident that redressing the segregation of knowledge and wisdom cannot be carried out unilaterally through promoting a universal ethic or a singular vision of global moral agreement. Rather, the complex dynamics of these realities mandate an approach to restoring intimacy between knowledge and wisdom that centers cultivating virtuosic capabilities-for and commitments-to endlessly opening opportunities for all to relate freely in distinctively contributing to equitably and sustainably shared welfare.

*Conserving differences in addressing issues of
exclusion and equity*

The global realities of accelerating, complex change and interdependence can be seen as threatening or as opportune. They clearly threaten the idealization of self-interested action, disclosing its manifest liabilities in a world where predicaments displace problems as primary structures of trouble and suffering. But they are also realities that very clearly pose the question of how best to differ. That is, they can be seen as fostering concern about qualities of relationship and generating opportunities for greater diversity, opening prospects for both equitably and sustainably differing in ways that are mutually beneficial.

Insight into the importance of difference, and the need to conserve it as the basis of opportune contribution, is now perhaps most commonly expressed as a conviction about the importance of eliminating social, economic, and political exclusion. In keeping with the metaphysical presuppositions of liberal democratic thinking, this conviction has most often been practically interpreted as a call for increasing pluralism and active tolerance. That is, it has been interpreted restrictively as a process requiring no intimate changes in the “pre-existing” identities of actors newly recognizing their interdependence. In effect, this involves constructing interdependence as a fundamentally external (not internal) relationship—a denial of the ontological force of mutual relevance or emptiness (*sūnyatā*) and the merits of subordinating power to strength. Cooperative competition continues to trump coordination as a principal strategy for differing well.

Reflecting this bias, much of the talk in education circles about overcoming social, economic, and political exclusion has tended to confuse mere co-existence with meaningful interdependence. Calls for “multicultural” curricula have accordingly most often resulted in programs that merely juxtapose various cultural, ethnic, or religious traditions rather than placing them in intimate normative interaction. This has led to more varied student bodies and curricular offerings. But it has not fostered the realization of new qualities of interdependence based on deepening mutual relevance. Increased variety is not the same as enhanced diversity; increasing tolerance is not necessarily a prelude to relating freely in vitally sustained coordination.¹⁸

To the extent that equity is included among our core values, growing interdependence eventually forces critical appraising whether valorizing plurality and tolerance constitutes a sufficient strategy for responding to the predicaments now being brought about by patterns emerging in the meaning of social, economic, political, and cultural difference. Equity, as opposed to equality, turns on the virtuosity with which we succeed in placing such differences in creative interaction. In Buddhist terms, difference must not only be reconciled in ways that decrease the *akusala* or unwholesome eventualities that are associated with exclusion. In addition, difference must be directed toward meaning the rise of *kusala* patterns of relationship eventuating in skillful and wholesome excellence: the enhancing of truly diverse capacities for appreciation and contribution.

Revising educational aims and practices: a Buddhist approach

At present, the globally prevalent educational paradigm is oriented toward empowering knowledge, cooperative autonomy, and identity consolidation. By excluding the cultivation of wisdom from its own direct purview, public education has taken on a form that only poorly serves to strengthen persons and communities in the ways needed for them to play valued roles in negotiating meaningfully shared resolutions, critically evaluating and skillfully engaging the dynamics of predicament-rich and truly complex realities. Education is not now serving to conserve and creatively enhance differences in ways that might make a real difference in achieving and sustaining public good under presently prevailing conditions. And, yet the globally dominant educational paradigm—in virtually every one of its local manifestations—is not even doing the job that it does set out to do. Education is in crisis.

To be sure, the dominant paradigm has attempted to initiate and sustain useful innovation and the development of better (if not “best”) educational practices. This has typically meant reforming education in ways that enable educators to do better what, in a sense, they have already been trained to do well. Reforms can make education more efficient. But educational systems constitute some of the world’s largest public institutions, and institutions are by their nature not geared toward rapid change and redirection. When subjected to internal critique—that is, when placed in the position of questioning its own assumptions and practices—the globally dominant educational paradigm has tended to spawn a host of inversions broadly expressive of “postmodern” sensibilities centered on radical pluralism, interpretative multiplicity, and adaptive relativism. The resulting practices and aims are, in effect, shadows of those found in the dominant paradigm and are no better suited than it to enhancing capabilities-for and commitments-to diversity in the ways mandated by contemporary realities and the promises of truly robust interdependence and interpenetration. Initiating truly paradigmatic change in education is very unlikely to come about from within the dominant paradigm itself.

Our critical engagements with the dynamics of the public sphere suggest the merits of a paradigm shift toward educating for the primary purposes of

strengthening: insight into interdependence (wisdom); relational maturity; improvisational excellence; and, coordinative virtuosity. For a wide range of reasons, Buddhism recommends itself as an important source of insight for accomplishing such a paradigm shift.

Buddhist training as educational paradigm

As instantiated in the training of exemplary practitioners, Buddhist education culminates in an embodied realization of how to author liberation from trouble and suffering. Especially in Mahayana Buddhist traditions, this realization is often referred to as fully attained skill in liberative techniques—the realization of one’s “buddha nature” or capacity for entering into liberating relationships with all beings. The central aim of Buddhist education is thus the expression of relational virtuosity: a limitless capacity for relating freely.

Because trouble and suffering are understood as irreducibly karmic—that is, as deriving from a samsaric inflection of sustained patterns of values–intentions–actions—liberative virtuosity implies freedom in both responsively and responsibly revising situational meaning. Importantly, this is not understood as an exercise of power resulting in the imposition of an alternative meaning on a given situation, but rather the expression of strengths needed to elicit such a change from within situational dynamics as they have come to be. Moreover, because the conditions that together bring about experienced trouble or suffering are both complex and dynamic, freely negotiating or bringing about changes of situational meaning cannot rely on following set patterns of response. As repeatedly stressed throughout the Mahayana canon, bodhisattva action requires dwelling on nothing and responding from no fixed perspective. Liberative virtuosity is an emergent of *kusala* patterns of unhesitating, live engagement.

In the teachings of early Buddhism, considerable emphasis was placed on the importance of being able to teach across cultural and linguistic horizons or boundary-enforcing patterns of self-identification. This could be as relatively simple a task as developing vocabularies suitable to different audiences. But at times it also quite clearly entailed domain-crossing communication—metaphorical improvisation of sufficient depth and skill that insights beyond the purview of everyday experience were afforded by means of everyday experience. Philosophically, this domain-crossing aspect of Buddhist teaching (and thus, Buddhist learning) resulted in such assertions as the functional coincidence of conventional and ultimate truth (the so-called two truths) and claims that the interdependence among all things consists of their infinitely dense and meaningful interpenetration (e.g. in Fazang’s Huayen Buddhism).

In addition to these explicitly communicative dimensions of early Buddhist teaching, there was also a traditional focus on the centrality of personally mediated learning or person-to-person transmissions of the meaning of Buddhist practice. Novices (both lay and ordained) were expected to draw guidance from relationships with elder practitioners and to seek out “good friends” with whom to resolutely

take up the path of Buddhist practice. Buddhist teachings were not, in essence, fixed and textual in nature. Rather, they were actively relational. The early Sangha can, with justification, be referred to as a learning community in which tremendous emphasis was placed on qualities of engagement. Those most skilled in the Dharma or Teachings were not those with the most detailed and voluminous command of the Buddha's discourses, but rather those most virtuosic in engendering resolute or committed understanding in others.

In sum, the embodied realization of liberative technique or skillful means (*upaya*) can be seen as consisting in the demonstration of appreciative and contributory mastery—limitless capabilities for sympathetic enhancement and meaningful offering. Thus, while Buddhist education has always formally pivoted on a conservatively transmitted axis of teachings (*sutta-piṭaka*) and behavioral norms (*vinaya-piṭaka*) traced back to the historical Buddha, Buddhist education in the fuller sense has never rested on the inculcation of predetermined competencies.¹⁹ Rather, it has centered on engendering, in both individuals and communities, the virtuosity needed for attuning themselves to dramatically dynamic situations and bringing about a sustained orientation of each situation toward the meaningful resolution of trouble or suffering. Buddhist education—or more properly, Buddhist training—did not function as preparation for problem-solving, but rather for predicament-resolution. As such, it commends itself as source of insights relevant to aptly revising the globally dominant educational paradigm, and effectively alloying knowledge and wisdom.

Virtuosity as educational orientation

Here I would like to focus on how a Buddhist concept of virtuosity might be useful in coordinating the alliance of knowledge and wisdom and educationally enhancing diversity. As demonstrated by the best musicians and artists (but also, for example, by extraordinary researchers, organizers, care-givers, and conflict resolution specialists), virtuosity is an expression of situationally specific contributory genius—an utterly fluid and productive power of live engagement. Virtuosity connotes superlative skill. But more than that, it connotes a stunningly graceful capacity for dramatic immediacy and innovation. Virtuosity does not express itself as a decisive freedom *from* limits, but as passionately coordinating strengths for relating freely *within* situationally focused limitations and opening concrete opportunities for moving in new and enriching directions. As such, it is subversive with respect to the conflicted mythology of free will and determinism, as well as to ontological commitments to the tension between independence and dependence. Virtuosity elevates and harmonizes, literally inspiring an appreciation of all that is gathered immediately at hand in a present at once unprecedented and aesthetically consummate. In Buddhist terms, it might be said that virtuosity expresses consummate interdependence: emptiness activated as liberative interpenetration.

For the vast majority of us, virtuosity is something we hope to witness. It is not something to which we believe we can realistically aspire. Virtuosity is assumed rare. But this is preemptively to hold virtuosity at a distance as some kind of

yet-to-be (and, perhaps never-to-be) achieved state of affairs—an extraordinary order of being. The tendency for some Buddhists to see the aim of practice—enlightenment, for example—in a similar fashion led the Chan master Linji to exclaim that “if you should ever see the Buddha on the road, kill him!” Our buddha-nature or innate enlightenment is not something “out there.” It is, instead, precisely that which cannot be objectified or pointed out. Buddha-nature cannot be made to exist or to not-exist. As boldly stated in the Chan and Zen traditions, Buddhist training is not a *means* to enlightenment, but the *expression* or *demonstrated meaning* of enlightenment. Virtuosity is not a rare state beyond the reach of most. It is movement in the *direction* of ultimate meaning and value—a direction that is open, always and everywhere.²⁰

Buddhist virtuosity is inseparable, ultimately, from lifelong training. In sharp contrast with our existing educational prejudices, Buddhist training or education is not something that one might hurry up and finish. Neither is it amenable to analysis into basic competencies that can be acquired in a standard sequence.²¹ Instead, as a virtuosity-oriented form of education, to the extent that Buddhist training can be measured, it is in degrees or depths of commitment and overall relational quality.

Thus, a common description of those who have fared well in their training, is that they are capable of facing each of the four quarters (i.e. in all directions) and suffusing all that they encounter with compassion, loving-kindness, appreciative joy and equanimity. Faring well in Buddhist training means of eliciting and sustaining these relational headings in all situations, qualitatively transforming all that is present in terms of them. In Mahayana terms, this signals movement in the direction of realizing that this very situation we share is itself a buddha-realm in which all things are capable of doing the great work of enlightenment, contributing to the meaningful and enriching resolution of trouble and suffering.

There are two important educational implications in this description. First, granted that all things arise as karmic outcomes/opportunities that are best seen as marked by trouble or suffering, the absence of any fixed identity or essence, and impermanence, sustaining these relational headings cannot consist of adopting fixed perspectives. Indeed, fixed perspectives (*ditṭhi*) are explicitly identified as primary conditions of conflict and suffering. Sustaining compassion, loving-kindness, appreciative joy and equanimity depends on continuous attunement to shifts in the currents of meaning in any given situation and responding as needed. Because of the irreducibly karmic nature of how things have come to be *as* they have come to be (*yathabhutam*), there can be nothing formulaic about achieving this. Moment by moment, the values–intentions–actions that have informed the coming-to-be of a given situation are themselves open to change. It is, indeed, only because of this possibility for the meaning of things to change that the Buddhist path can be traveled at all. The very conditions that make it possible for a situation to be characterized by trouble and suffering also make possible the liberating intimacy of relating freely with all things as they have come to be. In Buddhist terms, liberative education is necessarily training to excel in wholly skilled (*kusala*) improvisation.

Secondly, educational achievement is not primarily a function of commanding more extensive knowledge or developing specific pre-established competencies. Rather, educational achievement correlates with contributory skill and the confidence that emerges with dramatic maturity. The concept of dramatic maturity can perhaps best be explained through analogy with the more familiar maturation process that takes place as we go from infancy to childhood, adolescence, and full adulthood. While infants are sometimes lauded as having pure and clear minds, they are in relational terms almost entirely self-centered. Their range of responses to both internal and external stimuli is so limited that, were it not normal for humans at this early stage, we would most likely consider it pathological. As infants' perceptual and motor skills develop, they are able to explore and engage their situation ever more fully. Along with this come ever more complexly emotional, intellectual, and physical relationships, but also more complex responsibilities. Maturation means an increasing capacity for taking in the diverse currents of significance gathered within a situation and responding both freely and accordingly, especially in the context of interpersonal relationships. It is not a simple function of aging or adding experience and knowledge, but of qualitative transformations in how we are present.

The dramatic maturity correlated with Buddhist educational achievement—that is, with liberative virtuosity similarly expresses a qualitative transformation of presence. But it is not simply an index of the degree to which we have become socialized. Because of the karmic roots of trouble and suffering, because karma reflects both individual values—intentions—actions and those embedded in shared communal and cultural practices, and because the liberating resolution of trouble and suffering consists of revising hitherto prevailing patterns of value—intention—action, dramatic maturity necessarily entails well-developed capacities for constructively critical, and at times countercultural, conduct.²² Virtuosity—at least in the sense appealed to here as the aim of Buddhist training—does not culminate in getting things right, but in improvising situationally apt ways of coordinating shared movement in the direction of continuing enhancement or excellence. Education means cultivating and coordinating creativity and responsibility.

Training for dramatic maturity

Traditionally, Buddhist training or education has been seen as a three-part system comprising wisdom (*prajñā*), attentive mastery (*samādhi*), and moral clarity (*śīla*). All three dimensions or elements of training are considered necessary, and, ideally, all three are undertaken at once. Through their systematic cultivation practitioners clear situationally relevant ways of realizing truly liberating relationships.

This system of training is, however, also suited to the more general aim of cultivating personal and communal capacities for mature improvisation. Taken apart from the specifically Buddhist commitment or vow to resolve the troubles and suffering of all sentient beings, it is a system for engendering diversity-enhancing virtuosity. Put somewhat differently, it is a system that both enables and encourages building sustainable patterns of mutual contribution to profoundly shared meaning.

As it is used in Buddhist contexts, wisdom connotes effective and caring insight into the interdependence among all things. Capacities for *knowing that* (and even *knowing how*) all things are interdependent can be developed relatively easily. Indeed, many people today find nothing in the least difficult or objectionable about intellectually allowing that everything arises interdependently. But the same cannot be said of developing the kind of insight into interdependence that triggers *knowing to* act in certain ways, in certain circumstances, so that the relationships constituting the situation as a whole are aptly and appropriately revised to bring about environments that are liberating for all. Realizing this kind of effectively careful insight or wisdom rests on deepening the other two central aspects of Buddhist training: attentive mastery and moral clarity.

The concept here translated as attentive mastery—*samādhi*—is more commonly rendered as concentration. It refers, however, to a cultivated capacity for sustained awareness that is both precisely directly and highly flexible. By rendering *samādhi* as attentive mastery, both of these aspects are invoked, and stress is placed on the way *samādhi* alloys responsive skill and responsibility. Attentive mastery means being able to attend freely and carefully to one's situation, without compulsion or habit. Much as the English word "attend" at once connotes "being aware" and "tending" (or "taking care"), *samādhi* alloys concentration and concern.

Both informed by and informing attentive mastery, then, is moral clarity. Again, the customary translation for *śīla*—"discipline" or "morality"—is misleadingly restrictive. To be sure, among the original connotations of *śīla* as a key element of practice, there was included attention to and compliance with the codes of conduct for monks, nuns, and lay practitioners that developed along with the emergence of institutionally distinctive Buddhist communities. But as made clear in the *vinaya-piṭaka*—the body of texts relating the origins of (in particular) monastic rules and regulations—these codes of conduct emerged in the dramatic context of daily lives brought into heightened resolution by Buddhist training and the vows associated with ordination. *Śīla* thus refers to training directed to the maintenance of specific dramatic headings in the changing contexts of complex social life. As most powerfully illustrated by thinking through the meaning of honoring bodhisattva vows in the dramatically complex contexts of daily life, *śīla* is not a function of simply obeying fixed rules and regulations. Daily life is shaped by karmic currents or meaning-laden flows of both outcomes and opportunities. Because of this, maintaining a given heading requires a clear perception of these currents and how to work with them, as they have come to be. For this reason, it seems apt to translate *śīla* as moral clarity—training aimed at critically engaging the complex flows of values, intentions, and actions that shape the problems and (especially) the predicaments encountered in daily life.

Caring and effective insight into interdependence, focused and yet flexible awareness, and clarity of response in dramatically or morally complex situations—these constitute the central axis of a paradigmatic shift in educational methods and curriculum. Although the particulars of this shift must vary from situation to situation, a common characteristic will be an emphatic turn toward taking

relationships—not individually existing things or people—as primary. Measuring educational progress and success necessarily means measuring the extent to which education fosters individual and communal capabilities for relating freely and meaningfully in complexly interdependent situations. What matters most is not what we know, but how we are present—bodily, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. According to such a paradigm shift, the more highly educated individuals and communities become, the more readily, relevantly, and responsibly they will be able and inclined to demonstrate truly appreciative and contributory virtuosity.

Peoples and communities educated along such lines, in whatever situationally appropriate ways, will be capable and concerned to orient their growing interdependence in sustainable and equitable directions, fostering deepening and ever more extensive diversity. They will have the resources needed to note the ironic consequences of a bias toward exclusively self-interested problem-solving and the growing imperatives for engaging instead in innovatively resolving the predicaments that twenty-first century patterns and scales of global interdependence make both manifest and unavoidable.

Educational means and ends committed to enhancing global diversity must subordinate the competencies associated with competitive success to the capacities for innovation needed to enrich differences in ways that are situationally appropriate and conducive to meaningfully coordinated mutual contribution. Alloying knowledge and wisdom makes evident the crucial importance of emotional refinement as a marker of educational achievement measured in terms of enhanced diversity. But it also makes evident the importance of systematically linking advances in empirical studies and research with deepening ethical sensitivities and sensibilities. As the counterpart of wisdom, knowledge can no longer consist of an outcome of investigative closure. Instead, knowing consists first and foremost of disclosing new opportunities for deepening and extending relationships. Knowledge—even scientific knowledge—ceases being identifiable with power and becomes instead a reflection of strength: the capacity for unimpeded, creative commitment to relating as fully and as well as possible.

Policy prospects and improvising public good

As a primary resource or element in promoting and consolidating public good, education should not simply reflect existing norms and values. In addition to this conservative function, education should also engender both commitments-to and capabilities-for for evaluating and revising currently prevailing norms and values. Only in this way will education live up to its own creative possibilities as a force for directing our growing interdependence toward increasing equity and diversity.

Granted the complex (and not simply complicated) nature of global change now taking place, education will be incapable of living up to either its conservative or creative functions if it remains centered on standardized competencies rather than embodied virtuosity. Having crossed certain global thresholds with respect to rates, scales, and depths of interdependence, the promotion and

consolidation of public good increasingly rests on sustainably coordinating what are often contrary (if not conflicting) values—intentions—actions. Capacities for shared meaning-making come to the fore; generically pragmatic aims of knowing-that and knowing-how yield to the dramatically particular aim of knowing-to; accumulating knowledge gives way to engendering wisdom.

Among the major policy implications of these transitions are that the familiar distinction between educational means and ends must be collapsed. Education that promotes flexibility and commitment in the shared making of meaning must itself be flexible and committed to harmonizing values, intentions, and actions in the shared realization of meaningful change. Education directed toward greater equity and diversity through cultivating appreciative and contributory virtuosity must be equitably and diversely practiced, innovating continuously in ways that are surprisingly and gracefully apt. Educating for virtuosity cannot be undertaken generically or with standardized and standardizing methodologies. It must be custom made and *kusala* in its orientation—excelling recursively so that it capable of innovating innovatively.

The oneness of the practice and the purpose of education—like the oneness invoked when it is said that Chan (Zen) training is itself demonstrating enlightenment—is oneness rooted in horizonless, live engagement. It is oneness forged through relentlessly flexible attunement and utterly resolute care. Ultimately, it is not possible to heighten responsivity without also heightening responsibility; developing the concentration needed for innovating innovatively is inseparable from ever expanding and refining concern. Education that expresses this oneness of practice and purpose places extraordinary demands on all—especially students and teachers, but also families, communities, administrators, and policy makers. Singly and together, all must embody this oneness that is both flexible and resolute, both tirelessly attentive and compassionately liberating. This is education with infinite ambition.

A question of applicability insists on being asked at this point. What are the chances of such a vision of extraordinary education being translated into educational realities? Limitless ambition may be suitable in the context of educating toward the virtuosic resolution of all trouble and suffering. Indeed, this characterizes the practice and purpose of Buddhist training. Extraordinary efforts are directed to so utterly realizing the truth of the ordinary that even the most mundane and conventional of its expressions are enchanted with the ultimate. This, according to the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*, is the meaning of successful Buddhist training: realizing that all things are doing the great buddha-work of initiating and sustaining truly liberating relationships.

But what relevance do such ambitions have in establishing practically effective education policies? What do they have to do with making basic education—the opportunity to develop, at a bare minimum, literacy and numeracy—available to all? Even if public policy could be informed by such ambitious aims, could such aims ever be given sufficient traction in the complex, day-to-day workings of our contemporary lifeworlds to actually accomplish the transformation of educational practices, much less the practices appropriate to other sectors in which education seems

poised to serve as a driver of change? Is it possible, for example, even to imagine (much less practically realize) a fully coordinated and diversity-enhancing curriculum—one sensitive to personal and communal differences with respect to age, gender, culture and politics, and capable of systematically engendering and nurturing wisdom, attentive mastery and moral clarity? If imagined, what would the chances be of actualizing such a curriculum in a world wherein contesting the meaning of age, gender, culture, politics and education is a growth industry of unprecedented virility? What is the merit of infinite ambition in a world wherein upwards of one out of every five people live in what is termed “absolute poverty”—poverty so deep and so powerfully encompassing that they cannot even hope to escape it? Are the absolute poor realistic candidates for wisdom, attentive mastery and moral clarity when eating daily would be extraordinary and eating well miraculous?

To be sure, there is no shortage of ambitious and even unabashedly idealistic proposals for educational reform. To take a single explicitly global example, the UNESCO-sponsored International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century envisions the possibility of a transformative educational paradigm, suited to the complexion of the new millennium, that rests on four pillars of learning: learning to know (content instruction), learning to do (skills training, including group work skills), learning to live together (through intercultural understanding and appreciating interdependence), and learning to be (through the development of personality and a capacity to act with greater autonomy, judgment, and responsibility). Open-ended in terms of its aims, rooted in commitments to realizing dignified co-presence for all, the UNESCO vision is, if not spiritual, then profoundly and hopefully spirited.

Yet, even with the kind of international respect and backing that UNESCO commands, questions of relevance and real-world traction persist, and this is quite revealing. In any attempt to translate the spirit of such visions into concrete educational realities, there is a temptation—one that I believe is ultimately fatal—to take as given the ontological characteristics of our present world situation. Policies must finally do their work in the “real world” where vision matters less than seeing what can be done, here and now, to make things even just a little better. In the patently realistic interest of being practical, policies aim to work within (or at least, with) existing structures to bring about meaningful and apt reforms. The very real worry, however, is that these existing structures do not just frame our lived realities and give concrete shape to our efforts toward meaningful reform. They also serve to institutionally reproduce the very conditions that consistently render such reform either ineffective or deeply ironic. Granted the exception-less interdependence and relationality of all things, working within (or with) existing structures cannot be ultimately effective as a *means* to a paradigmatic shift in education (or any other policy domain) except on the basis of a resolute revision of the *ends* or meaning of those very structures.

It is an implication of a karmically-informed, Buddhist understanding of interdependence that facts and values are always mutually shaping and that our conduct should be guided by insight into things as they have come to be

(*yathabhutam*), in all of their dramatic complexity. It is also an implication of this understanding that innovative values and intentions make up the leading edge of *transformative* changes in how things come to be, *as they are coming to be*. That is, changing values and intentions constitute the leading edge of changes in situational direction or meaning. At best, by too quickly passing over the relevance of new values and intentions to concentrate on taking thorough account of the “facts on the ground,” strictly realist approaches to educational reform run substantial risks of failing to dig deeply enough to establish the kind of paradigmatically new foundations that might conceivably support and extend what has worked within existing educational structures, while at the same time sustainably changing the way those structures face and effect change. More typically, realist reforms only sharpen already painful intimations of what global dynamics suggest will continue to be a rapidly compounding policy paradox. In the language introduced here, such reforms may be effective in responding to immediate, history-informed problems, but not the predicaments that drive our continuing encounters with them.

By effectively furthering movement in the present direction of global interdependence, realist reforms—whether in the public domains of the environment, health, trade and development, the media, politics, international relations or education—will eventually begin yielding ironic consequences. They will not just result in patterns of diminishing returns, but returns that are constantly and ever more rapidly eroding the strengths of attention and commitment needed to go beyond reforming to truly revising the means and meaning of our deepening interdependence.

It is perhaps especially obvious in education, however, that refraining from making any effort at all to redirect existing change dynamics and patterns of interdependence—leaving things to continue coming to be more or less as they are at present—will only lead to greater inequities and lowering prospects of sustainability. The predicaments already embroiling education will intensify while momentum alone carries us toward a future wherein opportunities for coordinated movement in the direction of relating freely will be paved over with increasingly familiar (and, alas, apparently intractable) problems. And, if this were not enough, the option of suddenly and thoroughly dismantling existing educational structures in the hope of something better rising phoenix-like out of the ashes is at best naïve. As would be true of an analogous strategy for curtailing the ills associated with our global technological juggernaut, derailing the present educational paradigm and its practices would never result in a miraculously clean slate, but only in worldwide wreckage—personal, social, economic, and political.

What, then, can actually be done? Embedded as we are in the very systems that must undergo paradigmatic change, what leverage do we have—in policy and in practice—for directing our growing interdependence toward equitably sustained and enhanced diversity? If the leading edge of transformative change—a change in the very meaning or direction of our situations as wholes—consists of a novel configuration of values and intentions, and yet we are ourselves products of values–intentions–actions that are not at all novel, what can *we* possibly do to transform education? And if the complexity of changes taking place all around us

insure the ultimate and mutual collapse of means into ends, any policies for paradigmatic change in education practices must themselves emerge as expressions of consonant paradigmatic shifts in the aims and making of public policy. Isn't the policy paradox confronting us a paradox of infinite regression?

In spite of their presentation here as a kind of catch-22 burlesque, these are actually very real questions. They are questions that express the frustration of seeking creativity, or planning spontaneity, or trying to pick ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Fittingly, I think, they are questions that bear a striking resemblance to the kinds of questions asked by Buddhist practitioners at crucial points in their training. They are questions about faring well in changing our own karma. Perhaps the most pointed grappling with this in Buddhism arises in working through what might be called the paradox of practice. How could the self that claims "I am" even while forming intentions to "attain enlightenment" bring about the realization of no-self? As a primary function of ignorance and a pivotal condition for suffering, how can the self—all that I claim "I am"—take up and course well on the path of enlightenment and the resolution of all suffering?

As raised by the Buddhist practitioner, there is really only one traditional answer to such questions and the paradox they beg us confront: find and enter into horizonless, trusting relationship with an enlightened master. Over time, through witnessing the meaning of the enlightening non-duality of means and ends in action, there dawns an ever keener and fully fleshed *appreciation* of our own non-duality. Seeing the buddha-nature of the master *as* buddha-nature finally means recognizing—and with sufficient commitment, activating—our own buddha-nature. To have entered a relationship with an enlightened master is already to have activated our own potential for engaging in enlightening relationships—that is, for expressing the emptiness of our present situation, as it has come to be: the absence of obstructions and a limitless capacity for embodying ultimate truth.

Asked by policy-makers, questions about faring well in changing our shared karma translate into questions about revising our existing patterns of values—intentions—actions so that our situation will be better and more surely directed toward virtuosic and diverse public good. If the analogy holds, policy-makers intent on realizing an educational paradigm shift are in need of witnessing the non-duality of practice and purpose in active transformation of the meaning of our educational realities, as they have come to be. Is the answer to their paradox about how to proceed kin, then, to that given above? Seek out and enter trusting relationship with a truly liberating policy-maker? At this point in global history, I think that is not yet an option.

We are in many ways, positioned very much like those unnamed few people in the central narrative of the *Cakkavati Sihanāda Sutta* who left the highly degraded and degrading environment that had come to be after the dissolution of King Dalhanemi's wheel-turning kingdom, retreating into the hills to train themselves—singly at first and then together—in the ever-deepening expression of compassion, loving-kindness, equanimity and sympathetic joy. This retreat represents an engendering of heart-felt commitment to enlightenment (*bodhicitta*) and

the vigilant cultivation of wisdom, attentive mastery and moral clarity. By retreating to the social periphery, space opened for redirecting their energies, developing their own unique resources, and eventually occasioning a turning about in the very society from which they had retreated. Changing the dynamics of the public sphere is a process that culminates in virtuosic action, but that begins with the intimate and resolute consolidation of new values and intentions.

This suggests that resolving the policy paradox requires policy-makers to realize sufficient insight into interdependence, attentive mastery and moral clarity to bring their own ends and means into working harmony. They must cultivate their own virtuosity, in ways that are virtuosic, building their own virtue and strengths for live engagement. This is the root of contributing effectively to revising the dynamics of the public sphere. Given the global nature of the predicaments into which we are being drawn by complex globalization processes, prior to actively enhancing public good through public policy, policy-makers must also share a robust understanding of the desired fruit of reorienting our global interdependence. Although the conservation and enhancing of differences is crucial to enriching contributory capacity, there must be shared commitments to values capable of coordinating change across sectors and societies. Especially in the context of complex, non-linear change, focusing on specific goals or destinations is liable to prove unproductive. But arriving at a robustly shared sense of the appropriate direction for change is indispensable. Once these conditions obtain, appropriate outcomes and opportunities for transformative change will naturally follow.

This can easily be dismissed as a glibly simple-minded response: the key to social change is personal change; to change the world, first change your self. But the simple-mindedness is only apparent—a function of misreading the linkage between social change and personal change as an external relationship. Matters appear quite differently with sincere appreciation of the interdependence and irreducible relationality of all things. There is ultimately no cleavage between world and self. Changing one is changing both. Realizing this frees us to engage the issue of reorienting the dynamics of the public sphere by asking a very practical question: in light of presently available appreciative and contributory resources, which can be redirected most readily and responsively—the values and intentions embodied in existing educational, social, economic and political institutions or those embodied in our own conduct? Personal change and social change are not linked logically (“if this, then that”), but dramatically (“first this, then that”).

This freedom acknowledged, we are nevertheless faced with the discomfiting realization that we cannot detail in advance the meaning of faring well on the path toward enhancing diversity throughout the public sphere to allow all to enjoy the conditions needed for relating freely. The admonition of Chan master Huairang to his student Mazu remains valid: one cannot see the path of ultimate liberation, one can only see *from* it. It is only upon embarking with confidence and courage on that infinite path that we find ourselves wholly capable of critically facing the conditions giving rise to trouble and suffering and going resolutely crosswise to do what cannot be done, benefiting those who cannot be benefited.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

- 1 Readers unfamiliar with these Buddhist traditions and the substantial differences among them might consult: Richard Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*, Routledge, London: 1995; and, Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, Routledge, London: 1989. For a much briefer account of Buddhist practice and its differentiations, readers might also want to consult the first chapter of my own *Chan Buddhism*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, HI: 2005.
- 2 The classic dichotomies noted in the literature of early Buddhism are those between asceticism and hedonism, and between the (eternalist or spiritualist) view that the soul survives the death of the body and the (annihilationist or materialist) view that nothing survives the death of the body.
- 3 There is, of course, a sense in which Buddhist practice can be seen as oriented toward the attainment of *nirvana* or enlightenment. Yet, *nirvana* literally means a “cooling down” of something on fire or the “blowing out” of a flame. Metaphorically, *nirvana* serves the purpose of diverting attention away from seeking to specify the “result” of successfully coursing on the Middle Way. Thus, when asked about the status of the enlightened being or one who had attained *nirvana*, the Buddha typically remained silent and, when pressed, effectively indicated that the question itself is based on a category mistake. What can be said about *nirvana* is that it is *not* a specifiable place or state at which one arrives.
- 4 For an astute and quite accessible history of the consolidation of modern sensibilities, as the meaning of “postmodern” disenchantments with them, I would recommend Stephen Toulmin’s book, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1990.
- 5 This view was forcefully expressed by Brandeis in his dissent in the case of *Olmstead v. U.S.* 277 U.S. 438 (1928).
- 6 In Thailand, for example, King Mongkut initiated in the mid-nineteenth century a series of reforms of Thai Buddhism that aimed to render its basic teachings as compatible as possible with scientific empiricism, doing so with the intention of better aligning Thai Buddhism with the task of crafting the kingdom into a modern nation-state.
- 7 It should be noted here that transliterations of terms from Indian Buddhist traditions are complicated by the fact that two related, but quite distinct languages were employed in recollecting and eventually writing down Buddhist teachings: Pali and Sanskrit. Here, I have decided to use the earlier Pali terms and their transliterations except where the usage is quite specifically derived from Mahayana traditions.

1 LIBERATING ENVIRONMENTS

- 1 Readers might wish to consult the new 40th anniversary edition with a new introduction and an afterword by E.O. Wilson. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, Houghton-Mifflin, Boston, MA: 2002.
- 2 Joanna Macy, in particular, has written extensively along these lines.
- 3 Readers who would like a short but reliable overview of Buddhism may wish to consult: Richard H. Robinson and Willard L. Johnson. *The Buddhist Religion: A Historical Introduction*, Wadsworth Publishing Company, Belmont, CA: 1997.
- 4 It should be noted that, because the Buddhist schema of the eighteen *dhatu* recognizes mentality as a sense correlated with a mental faculty and mental objects, we also incorporate ideas, values, experiences, memories, and so on that are no more or less literally our own than the animals, plants, buildings, and climate-sensitive ecosystems that we normally think of as being parts of our overall environment.
- 5 Nagarjuna (c.150–250 CE) was a key proponent of the *Śūnyavāda* or emptiness-teaching of early Mahayana Buddhism. His classic work, the *Mūlamadhhyamaka-kārikā*, is available in a number of English translations, including: David Kalupahana, *Nagarjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY: 1986; and, Kenneth Inada, *Nagarjuna: A Translation of his Mūlamadhhyamaka-kārikā*, Hokuseido Press, Tokyo: 1970.
- 6 For more on dramatic ensembles or karmic cohorts, see: John S. Strong, “A Family Quest: The Buddha, Yasodhara, and Rahula in the Mulasarvastivada Vinaya,” in *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia*, edited by Juliane Schober, University of Hawai’i Press, Honolulu: 1997; and, Peter D. Hershock, “Family Matters: Dramatic Interdependence and the Intimate Realization of Buddhist Liberation.” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, vol. 7, 2000.
- 7 A very well-crafted translation of the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra* is Burton Watson. *The Vimalakīrti Sutra*, Columbia University Press, New York: 1996.
- 8 See, for example, the Nagarjuna, *Mūlamadhhyamaka-kārikā* 24.14.
- 9 One might balk at the idea that predators contribute to their prey. This is, indeed, hard to swallow so long as both predators and prey are seen as individual animals rather than as expressions of species-in-environments. For any individual moose preyed on by a wolf pack, the predator–prey relationship is hardly something to celebrate. But as ecologists who study the interactions of these two species have determined, the overall strengths and resilience of the moose herd—as a herd—is directly correlated with being preyed upon by wolf packs that cull weaker and older individuals. More generally, as species express unique, niche-constructing, and niche-conserving patterns of resource/energy use and storage, species survival means sustaining relational patterns that make resources/energy available to other species throughout their shared ecosystem as a whole.
- 10 A very thorough but brief introduction to the literature of environmental ethics can be found online at the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy site: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-environmental/>
- 11 The best of contemporary ecological science recognizes, in fact, the unnatural ideal of preservation. Natural systems are, at all levels, dynamic. Whether at the scale of individual microbes or even molecules to that of ecological systems or the planetary biosphere as whole, directed change is the norm and static persistence is the aberration.
- 12 One question that can be raised is whether such an approach to environmental ethics might give away the leverage necessary to deal, for example, with the intrusion of highly invasive nonnative species. Especially in highly sensitive ecosystems like those obtaining on islands, nonnative species can often wreak systemic havoc in very short periods of time. Given that change is natural for all natural systems, and that no species

- (for instance) has intrinsic value, what traction would the Buddhist environmental ethics outlined here have for dealing with such problems? I would argue that the concept of diversity forwarded here would have sufficient traction since the nonnative species' ill-effects on native species would amount to a loss of overall contributory resources—that is, there would be a loss of some degree of relational flexibility and depth with respect to making use of all available natural resources in an eco-system heavily troubled by nonnative species. Inherent value, in the strict sense, need not enter the equation.
- 13 There is a growing movement of urban environmentalism that seeks to address urban environments in their total public setting and in relation to wider ecological issues. One such work is: Peter Brand and Michael Thomas. *Urban Environmentalism: Global Change and the Mediation of Local Conflict*, Routledge, London: 2005.
 - 14 In art theory, beauty is often associated with aesthetic experience and at times even described as the distinctive aesthetic emotion. There is some merit in associating beauty with emotion, but not insofar as emotions are understood as either subjective events (feelings) or objective social constructions. I have argued that emotions can be seen as inflections of relational patterns as such—that is, as relational headings that emerge when the meaning of a situation is being actively negotiated. In this sense, beauty could very effectively be understood in emotional terms. See: Peter D. Herschok. "Renegade Emotion: Buddhist Precedents for Returning Rationality to the Heart," *Philosophy East and West*, 53(2), April, 251–270, 2003c.
 - 15 The topography of this cycle is perhaps best described as like that of a mobius strip on one "side" of which is appreciation, on the other contribution. Although they seem separate "sides," they actually are entirely continuous with one another and separate only as a function of limited perspective. Thus, the better one gets at contributing, the more opportunity there is to contribute; but this is possible only if one also has more to contribute. The more one appreciates a given situation, the more highly valued it becomes; but the more highly valued one's situation, the more valuably situated one is and thus the more one finds to appreciate. The direction in which this karmic cycle expands can be contrasted with the inverse direction taken when karma for wanting or control is intensified: the better one gets at getting what one wants, the better one gets at wanting; but the better one gets at wanting, the better one gets at getting what one wants, only one would not want what one gets; and, the better one gets at controlling circumstances, the more controlled those circumstances become, but also the more open to (if not in need of) control they will end up becoming.
 - 16 It is also possible to discuss, in contexts without explicit Buddhist inflection, how beauty plays out adverbially. Music performances are realized beautifully, for example, when those involved—including the audience—experience significantly appreciated or enhanced emotional and aesthetic sensibilities. This may manifest as extended insight into the nature of musicality, as a deepened sense of lived community, or as a specific emotional catharsis. Beautifully realized performances can thus be intellectually rich, poignantly sad, or joyously exalted but in every case bring about a sense of liberating value added—the positive exceeding of prior limits.
 - 17 This understanding of beauty also requires us to see the value of aesthetic surgery, for instance, as pivoting on the motives and values of those undertaking it. Beauty is not skin deep. Beauty also, in the fullest Buddhist sense, can be neither the source nor culmination of craving types of desire (*tanha*). If any relationship exists between beauty and desire, it is only desire oriented toward the realization of truly liberating relationships (*canha*). In this sense, it can be stated that the fashion industry does not promote beauty in most cases but rather further entanglement in errant sensuous karma.
 - 18 Concretely, how can we evaluate the purported contribution made to a marine/nearshore ecology by the construction of a major tourist resort complex? Is a

- golf course built on native scrubland or pine forest an enhancement of that environment, a move in the direction of aesthetic consummation?
- 19 See, J.E. Lovelock. *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*, Oxford University Press, New York: 1979.
 - 20 It should be noted that questions can be raised about the moral status of beings like bacteria or viruses that it would be difficult to argue (especially in the case of viruses) demonstrate significant sentience. It is, of course, clear that such microorganisms have profound effects on the quality of life of humans and other beings that can be deemed unquestionably sentient and often live in considerably rich interdependence with them (think here of the bacteria that inhabit the human digestive system with considerable positive effect). Yet, whether this warrants giving them moral consideration can, I think, be sensibly debated. What is clear to me as well, however, is that the Buddhist approach to granting moral considerability is not based on either/or determinations of status but rather on the degree/quality of interrelatedness and contributory potential relevant in a given case. In other words, while Buddhist environmental ethics might be inclined to grant bacteria an equitable moral status, this would not be one equal to that of their human hosts.
 - 21 It is true that rights regimes can be useful in leveraging the end of severely abusive relationships and thus as instruments for improving lives. But in practice, rights regimes also tend to instantiate a cap on improvement. At the very least, they provide no rationale for ongoing effort to realize ever more flourishing relationships.
 - 22 An incisive rationale for doing so is provided in: David Harvey. *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford: 1996.
 - 23 A recent and practically oriented book on smart growth is: F. Kaid Benfield, Jutka Terris, and Nancy Vorsanger. *Solving Sprawl: Models of Smart Growth in Communities across America*, Island Press, Washington, DC: 2001.
 - 24 It should be noted that the spatial segregation of life functions also amounts to a compartmentalization of whole persons and fosters the impression that one's self exists independently among the various aspects of lived experience and is able to transit among them. In short, it reinforces belief in self and establishes conditions that make realizing the emptiness of all things particularly difficult.
 - 25 This analysis is more fully developed in the chapter on Trade, Development, and the Broken Promise of Interdependence: Buddhist Reflections on Post-Market Economics.
 - 26 An argument can be made, however, that post-threshold urbanization and the eventual realization of global subsistence markets did not do away with such redundancy but merely sent it into the analytic shadows. The demise of the extended family and more recently the nuclear family has been a primary driver of economic growth because the splintering of domestic units makes necessary massively reiterated consumption of household goods, appliances, transportation, education, and so on. Likewise, an argument can be made that a reversion to greater redundancy among local production ecologies is key to bringing about a viable post-market economics.
 - 27 When inter-domain crosstalk is not systematically addressed, it is highly likely that the strategies employed in responding to problems in one domain will generate unanticipated and troubling externalities. For example, the imperatives of the fast-food market are such that profitability is strongly correlated with menus, advertising, and lifestyle transformations that have significant ill-effects in the health sphere; extending and deepening mass media markets depends on altering patterns of audience attention in ways that are good for corporate growth but not for critical maturity and creativity; addressing hunger through promoting industrial-scale agriculture and centralized distribution networks create massive rural unemployment or underemployment and, with subsequent population movements, taxes urban infrastructure and educational support systems.
 - 28 UN-Habitat Report, *The Challenge of Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements 2003*. It should perhaps be noted that the United Nations Development Program

(UNDP) estimated in its 2000 *Global Development Report* that 2.8 billion people now live on less than \$2 per day—a level of income that is marginally adequate for meeting basic subsistence levels of nutrition, clothing, shelter, medical care, and education. Roughly 1.2 billion live at less than the benchmark of “absolute poverty”—income a less than \$1 per day. The total population, urban and rural, living on less than \$2 a day in 2020 could easily exceed 4 billion.

- 29 Peter Schwartz and Doug Randall, “An Abrupt Climate Change Scenario and its Implications for United States National Security,” a public report written commissioned by the US Pentagon. Available online at <http://www.gbn.com/ArticleDisplayServlet.srv?aid=26231>, October 2003: http://www.ems.org/climate/pentagon_climatechange.pdf
- 30 For more on this aspect of diversity as a value, see Chapter 6, especially p. 150.

2 HEALTH AND HEALING: RELATING THE PERSONAL AND THE PUBLIC

- 1 The classic formulation is that on the basis of ignorance, karmic formations come into being; on the basis of karmic formations, there arises discursive awareness; on the basis of discursive awareness there arises name-and-form; on the basis of name-and-form there arise the six sense organs; on their basis, there arises contact between sense organs and sense objects, then likes and dislikes, wanton craving, clinging, coming into existence, birth, and old age and death.
- 2 John H. Bryant and Polly F. Harrison, *Global Health in Transition: A Synthesis: Perspectives from International Organizations*, Institute of Medicine National Academy Press, Washington, DC: 1996, pp. 78–79.
- 3 This mapping was, in fact, central to a report presented to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), “Global Health: A New Paradigm for a New Era.”
- 4 See, for example, *Allostasis, Homeostasis, and the Costs of Physiological Adaptation*, edited by Jay Schulkin, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 2005.
- 5 I am appealing here to a notion of creativity forwarded by John Hope Mason: creativity consists of significant or meaningful change/innovation. See: John Hope Mason, *The Value of Creativity: The Origins of a Modern Belief*, Ashgate, Burlington, VT: 2003.
- 6 For more on such findings and their implications for health policy, see *Health and Behavior: The Interplay of Biological, Behavioral, and Societal Influences* (Committee on Health and Behavior: Research, Practice and Policy, Board on Neuroscience and Behavioral Health, National Academy of Sciences: 2001).
- 7 Nagarjuna, *Mūlamadhhyamaka-kārikā*, 13.8 and 27.30.
- 8 The mutual degradation of self and environment brought about by the *asravas* has significant implications outside the health sector. For example, it suggests that an unhealthy environment consists of one that exports or erodes attentive or responsive resources. As we will see in Chapters 3 and 4, compulsive commodity consumption—especially in the form of mass media—functions as a communal *asrava*, rendering communities in need of increasingly wide and deep “expert” care and control.
- 9 This should be carefully distinguished from healthcare reforms that aim to simply transfer responsibility for standard forms of treatment (and especially treatment costs) from the public to the private sector. Such privatization has not been proven effective in extending equitable healthcare universally, nor has it demonstrated effectiveness in enhancing healthcare client capability.
- 10 This shift from strictly bodily health problems to cross-sector health predicaments caused by conflicts among simultaneously held and competing (or poorly coordinated) values/interests is emblematic of a wider epochal shift from problems to predicaments that will more directly concern us in Chapters 3 and 8.

- 11 Hershock, Peter. *Reinventing the Wheel: A Buddhist Response to the Information Age*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY: 1999. See also Chapter 4 in the present volume.
- 12 Illich, Ivan. *Limits to Medicine: Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health*, Penguin, New York: 1976.
- 13 Interested readers may also consult Virginia Ashby Sharpe and Alan I. Faden, *Medical Harm: Historical, Conceptual and Ethical Dimensions of Iatrogenic Illness*, Cambridge University Press, New York: 1998b.
- 14 *To Err Is Human: Building a Safer Healthcare System*, edited by Linda T. Kohn, Janet M. Corrigan, and Molla S. Donaldson, the Committee on Quality of Healthcare in America, Institute of Medicine National Academy Press, Washington, DC: 2000.
- 15 Barbara Starfield, "Is U.S. Health Really the Best in the World?," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 284(4), 483–485, 2000.
- 16 The alarming nature of such statistics can be mitigated somewhat by allowing that hospitals admit only seriously ill patients whose immune systems are often taxed by already existing conditions and who are thus particularly susceptible to infection. Likewise, in the aftermath of the demographic transition in most developed countries, healthcare services are being regularly extended to increasingly aged populations subject to chronic ailments associated with aging, including reduced resistance to infection and the effects of relative social isolation in the hospital setting. Such allowances do not, however, counter the claim that presently prevailing healthcare systems promote reliance on expert cures and are conducive to the erosion of responsive resources and health capacity in treated populations.
- 17 Illich. *Limits of Medicine*, pp. 14–15, 1976.
- 18 For those wealthy or powerful enough to be well-served by the healthcare delivery system, institutionalized medicine may occasion little more in the way of predicaments than which among and array of elective treatments one should make use of to enjoy one's preferred lifestyle. But for the poor and powerless global majority, institutionalized medicine promises lifelong servitude, not lifestyle options.
- 19 To suggest a particularly gruesome analogy, institutionalized medicine temporarily removes us from our life circumstances and treats our bodies and minds with consequences not unlike those that ensue when a tanner removes an animal's skin and turns it into leather—a material that, unlike skin, is practically impervious to parasitic, bacterial, or viral infection, but can no longer repair itself; a material that can be used to cushion physical blows or stresses but is no longer capable of helping avoid them.
- 20 See, for example, David Horrobin. *Medical Hubris: A Reply to Ivan Illich*, Eden Press, Montreal: 1977.
- 21 *World Health Organization, Interview with Professor Sir Michael Marmot*. Commission on Social Determinants of Health, available at http://www.who.int/social_determinants/advocacy/interview_marmot
- 22 The phenomenon has been generalized as the operation of downward causation and has begun to inform a range of different natural and social scientific research programs. For a comprehensive introduction, see: P.B. Andersen *et al.* (eds) *Downward Causation: Minds, Bodies, and Matter*, Aarhus University Press, Århus: 2000.
- 23 It is undeniable, of course, that some well-progressed bodily disease patterns simply cannot be reversed in the degree or time frame needed. Given a well-advanced cancer in an elderly patient, there may be little that can be done forestall a relatively imminent death. But even in such cases, psychological, social, and emotional aspects of the situation remain open to change and redirection, as do—especially in the case of elderly or indigent patients dependent upon public support—the medical, legal, and political institutions that bear on caring for the terminally ill. In short, there is always some aspect of the total situational dynamics that can be turned effectively in the direction of healing.

3 TRADE, DEVELOPMENT, AND THE POSSIBILITY OF POST-MARKET ECONOMICS

- 1 Looking more deeply at this pattern of values-intentions-actions—the karma of bodhisattva action—will occupy us later in this chapter, especially in discussing poverty and the means of its alleviation. More broadly, it constitutes a central concern of Chapter 8, which examines the degree to which contemporary realities command a paradigmatic shift of educational aims and practices.
- 2 This idea is far from outdated. Evolutionary economist Jason Shogren argues in a paper forthcoming in the *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, that *homo sapiens* displaced *homo neanderthalensis*, not because of a larger brain or better tools, but because of extended trade networks. Report in *The Economist* online September 30, 2005: http://www.economist.com/science/displayStory.cfm?story_id=3839749
- 3 See, for example, the *Samyutta Nikāya* II-1–65(5).
- 4 The distinction I am drawing between capability and capacity is, perhaps, worth making explicit. Capability refers to a consolidated body of specific resources for concretely sustained action. Capacity refers to the overall extent of one’s ability to take on concretely sustained action.
- 5 There are parallels—and not at all insignificant ones—between Buddhist and other critical historical analyses of trade and economic activity, those offered by Marx being, perhaps, the most sweeping in historical and critical terms. But the Buddhist approach to history differs markedly from Marxist or Hegelian models in being neither teleological nor dialectical. There is not a “point” to history in Buddhist terms; history, it might be said, is just point-making and re-making.
- 6 For a traditional account of the meaning of noble wealth and poverty, see the *Rattaphala Sutta* and *Ina Sutta*.
- 7 *1998 Human Development Report*, United Nations Development Programme, available online at: <http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/1998/en/>
- 8 Peter D. Hershock. *Reinventing the Wheel: A Buddhist Response to the Information Age*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY: 1999b.
- 9 See, for example: *Alternatives to Economic Globalization*, A Report of the International Forum on Globalization, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco, CA: 2002; and David C. Korten. *When Corporations Rule the World*, Kumarian Press, Bloomfield, CT: 2002.
- 10 It is on this dual disadvantaging in terms of contributory capacity that state welfare approaches to alleviating poverty founder. The poor are caught in a systemic cycle of depreciation. Critics of welfare who pin total responsibility on the poor for their own poverty, alleging that their poverty is a result of laziness or a desire to take advantage of government support are simply ignoring the profound downward causal influences exerted by the systematic need of markets for a growing class of the those able only to consume.
- 11 The distinction between exchange and transfer is intended to highlight differences between the explicit reciprocity of vernacular trade practices, rooted in more general practices of mutual gift-giving, and the lineal transmission of goods and services through global markets.
- 12 An interesting discussion of the relationship between bioregional urbanization processes and capital flows can be found in David Harvey. *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, Blackwell, Oxford: 1996 (pp. 410ff.).
- 13 For an extended discussion of this process, see: James Beniger. *The Control Revolution, Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Age*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge: 1986.
- 14 It should be kept in mind that the “benefits” thus enumerated can be substantially (and perhaps entirely) offset if goods were marketed at prices reflecting true costs. True cost accounting on most agricultural products, for example, would include the environmental

- costs of pollution related to mass transport (especially air transport) of such products. For more on true cost pricing, especially in relation to tax issues, see Ernest U. von Weizsacker and Jochen Jesinghaus. *Ecological Tax Reform: A Policy Proposal for Sustainable Development*, Zed Books, London, UK: 1992.
- 15 Subsistence needs are understood here in a quite broad sense, based on Buddhist teachings of the four nutriments (see Chapter 2, p. 47) and the material bases for practice. Included are food, clothing, shelter, medical care, education, aesthetic enrichment or sensory stimulation and a sense of belonging.
 - 16 Extending the spectrum of goods offered by the market to foster continued growth is nicely illustrated by the historical turning point in automobile sales that occurred when, in 1923, General Motors addressed moribund sales growth and an inability to steal away market share from Ford Motors by introducing annual model changes and a range of colors. The resulting boom in sales was phenomenal.
 - 17 *1998 Human Development Report*.
 - 18 A wonderfully concise and powerful fictional account of this process and its motivations are given in the early chapters of John Nichols' novel. *The Magic Journey*, Ballantine Books, New York: 1983.
 - 19 This is, admittedly not new as a phenomenon. Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*, a classic of economic history, made this point already in 1899. What is different now is that this is not a phenomenon any longer restricted to a rarefied elite, but the norm worldwide.
 - 20 See Chapter 4 for a more detailed consideration of the attention economy and its dynamics.
 - 21 See Part Three of *Reinventing the Wheel* for a sustained discussion of the transformations of awareness that attend the conversion to an attention economy through the global, technology mediated colonization of consciousness. For a concise treatment of the role of media, see Peter D. Hershock. "Media, Attention, and the Colonization of Consciousness: A Buddhist Perspective," in *Reason and Insight*, edited by Robin Wang and Timothy Shanahan, Wadsworth/Thomson Publishing: Belmont, CA, 2003b.
 - 22 See, for example, the WHO's *World Health Report for 2001*, accessed 11/15/2004 at: <http://www.who.int/whr/2001/chapter2/en/index4.html>
 - 23 For a wide range of papers exploring the concept of downward causation, see *Downward Causation: Minds, Bodies, and Matter*, edited by P.B. Andersen *et al.*, Aarhus University Press, Århus: 2000.
 - 24 There is a significant body of Buddhist literature that addresses the problematic ontological commitments underlying the act of choosing, and notably the Chan works associated with the lineage from Huineng through Mazu, Baizhang, Huangbo, and Linji. Here, the tendency toward "picking and choosing" is forcefully depicted as rooted in a denial of the emptiness of all things and a failure to practically realize the meaning of non-duality. To be bereft of possibilities for enhancing our way of life is, indeed, a horrific prospect. But being in a position to choose is not equivalent to being positioned to contribute to and enrich our irreducibly shared situation.
 - 25 Education, sensory stimulation and a sense of belonging have not typically been considered primary necessities of life. Yet the more typical list restricted to adequate food, clothing, and shelter reflects a material bias that is substantially at odds with seeing all things and all beings as interdependent. If subsistence needs refer to the basic conditions for living whole lives as whole persons—and not just existing—then opportunities for sustained learning, sensory stimulation and a sense of community and intimate interconnectedness would seem to be required.
 - 26 The work of Susan Murcott and her Institute for Sustainable Living can be referenced as exemplars in technological transfers and innovations oriented toward enhancing local contributory resources.

- 27 These last remarks suggest an important role for governance in both orienting and driving the operationalization of GNH. Much of the development literature in the West—particularly that originating in the US—asserts a strong correlation between development and democratization. And, as customarily defined, both processes indeed embody shared and strong commitments to the preeminence of choice as both an ordinal and strategic value. Some commentators, however, have identified reasons to qualify the implied causal relationship. Amy Chua, for example, in her book, *World On Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability* (Doubleday, New York: 2002) has discussed the ironic consequences of importing democratic patterns of governance into countries with market-favored minorities. Others have noted that authoritarian states have been successful in generating rapid development—Singapore, for instance—and that many democratic states have undergone developmental regression. Yet others have claimed that the only clear correlation is between overall development and the degree to which leadership and governance practices are committed to securing basic human welfare. In short, the meaning of any substantial correlation between democratization and development is open to contest.

4 TECHNOLOGY, MEDIA, AND THE COLONIZATION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

- 1 Here, I want to set quite wide horizons for what fits into the category of the media and mass media. Included are the standard print (newspaper, book, magazine) and broadcast (television, radio, cinema) media, but also electronic (especially internet-mediated, but also video-game) media.
- 2 McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McGraw-Hill, New York: 1964.
- 3 The literature on media and violence and media and aggression is large and varied. An interesting summary of scientific findings and media misinformation about those findings can be found in Brad J. Bushman and Craig A. Anderson. “Media Violence and the American Public: Scientific Facts Versus Media Misinformation,” in the *American Psychologist*, 56(6/7), 477–489, June/July 2001. Another good overview study is: Centerwall, B.S., “Exposure to television as a cause of violence,” in Comstock G. (ed) *Public Communications as Behavior*, Academic Press, Inc., Orlando, FL: 1989. Another piece on violence and media that focuses on the role of unconscious imitation and threats to the consolidation of liberal democratic citizenry is Susan Hurley’s “Bypassing Conscious Control: Media Violence, Unconscious Imitation, and Freedom of Speech,” in *Does Consciousness Cause Behaviour? An Investigation of the Nature of Volition*, edited by S. Pockett, W. Banks, and S. Gallagher, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, February 2006.
- 4 Hershock, Peter. *Reinventing the Wheel: A Buddhist Response to the Information Age*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY: 1999b.
- 5 This will be more fully examined in Chapters 5 and 6.
- 6 Although Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis can be discredited on many different kinds of grounds, there is a sense in which the rise of terrorist activity, the fragmenting of states along ethnic and religious lines, and the emergence of increasingly acute failures to negotiate robust and global normative consensus can be seen as a predictable effect of global technological change. The complexity of the relationship between conflict and technological change, however, is such that it draws attention not only to the inevitability of conflict as an outcome of technological dominance, but also to the signal opportunities for reordering or revising our norms and values in ways conducive to global resolve on the promise of conceiving of freedom as a relational quality rather than as a matter of exercising individual choice or autonomy.

- 7 See his book, *The Control Revolution, Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Age*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge: 1986.
- 8 See Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman. *Manufacturing Consent*, Pantheon Books, New York: 1988.
- 9 A study conducted by MediaWeek in 1995, "Media Consumption in America," found that the average American consumed media products for a total of 636 minutes per day out of a total of 1,000 waking minutes. The totals were: 287 minutes consuming TV and video media, 116 minutes reading print media, 53 minutes using interactive media, and 161 minutes listening to audio media.
- 10 For an extended examination of these phenomena, and of iconic patterns of attention, see *Reinventing the Wheel* chapters 9 and 10.
- 11 An interesting, cross-cultural and historical examination of the media colonization of domestic space and its impact on the construction of meaning is: Ingrid Volkmer, "Dialectical Spaces in the Global Public Sphere: Media Memories across Generations," a working paper of the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, 2003. Accessed 10/02/05 at: http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/presspol/Research_Publications/Papers/Working_Papers/2003_5.pdf
- 12 There are many sources of data on media consumption. These figures represent averages of reputable studies. For a listing of media consumption habits and effects, with references to sources and studies, see: <http://www.tvturnoff.org/images/facts&figs/factsheets/FactsFigs.pdf>.
- 13 To put this in economic terms, Americans watch a total of 250 billion hours of television per year, which at \$5 per hour, translates into \$1.25 trillion dollars of lost productivity. While such a translation raises issues of its own, the point should be clear: the American public sphere would be quite different if even half of the time currently spent in television consumption were spent instead on promoting public good.
- 14 The general relationship among colonization, consumerism, and poverty is poignantly laid out in Helena Norberg-Hodge's "The Pressure to Modernize and Globalize," in *The Case Against the Global Economy: and For a Turn Toward the Local*, edited by Jerry Mander and Edward Goldsmith, Sierra Club Books, San Francisco: 1996.
- 15 Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*, The Free Press, New York: 1992.

5 GOVERNANCE CULTURES AND COUNTERCULTURES: RELIGION, POLITICS, AND PUBLIC GOOD

- 1 This way of characterizing religion begs the question of how religion differs from non-religious approaches to issues of ultimate import. Science and secularism each also define positions with respect to ultimate meaning, albeit by bracketing "ultimate meaning" as having at most a subjective or private reality. But, I would argue that while science, secularism, and traditions like Confucianism and Buddhism are decidedly non-theistic—and for this reason often denied the full status of being religions—they nevertheless do the religious work of discerning how things can be tied meaningfully together. That is, standard definitions of religion are, perhaps, too narrow in scope to reflect the full range of possibilities for framing globally responsible answers to deeply searching questions about belonging and meaning.
- 2 Setting the parameters of religious observance takes different forms in different states. In China, religions are registered with the state and subjected to considerable oversight with respect to beliefs and practices—at least where these might be politically charged. In the United States and many European countries, the state ostensibly exerts such explicit oversight only in respect of religious groups ("cults") engaged in potentially or actually criminal activities or activities that seriously affect the public good. What does not vary is the legal restriction of the flow of authority to one direction in the relationship between politics (or government) and religion.

- 3 The more cynical among these critics have seen this as evidence that the Buddha and/or his successors entered into “expedient”—perhaps even self-serving—relationships, currying favor with those in power to insure possibilities for continued growth of an eremitic tradition that might well be seen as contrary to social or state interests.
- 4 This is, of course, another way of stating that the Buddhist path emerges in the course of carefully and caringly “facing the world, going crosswise.”
- 5 No. 26 in the *Dīgha Nikāya* or Collection of Long Teachings of the Buddha.
- 6 The birth of politics and history can be seen as the birth also of a new kind of religious sensibility—one that tended globally to result in envisioning the divine in terms of a single, supreme being or spirit who is at once creator, ruler and judge of all things and beings. The similarity of the roles of terrestrial and celestial powers became almost comically precise in medieval Chinese conceptions of the supernatural or ancestral realms, but even in that case should likely not be read as an indication of a forcing of terrestrial categories onto the imaginary of the divine. Rather, it would seem that the terrestrial/historical and celestial/eternal have from the very outset been co-implicating.
- 7 Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*, The Free Press, New York: 1992.
- 8 Speculatively, it would seem that the relative cultural weakness of the public-private distinction in, for example, China can be seen as a limiting factor in the appeal and/or purchase there of rule of law. Rule of law at once drives and is driven by the clear marking off of the spaces for state and personal sovereignty.
- 9 In engineering parts for a high performance automobile engine, for example, the machining tolerance may be set at 1/1,000th of an inch. Any imperfections less than this will make no difference in performance of the engine; any imperfections greater than this are defined as unacceptably compromising engine function.
- 10 Arguably, Marxist universalism depends on a phase of market capitalism, but teamed with an autocratic rather than fully democratic approach to power and a teleological understanding of history. The result is no more liberating in Buddhist terms than that produced by unconstrained market liberalism.
- 11 Physical entropy refers to the disappearance of sufficient differences in energy for the emergence of ordered rather than random patterns of change. Dramatic entropy brings about an analogously random distribution of intentions and values—a distribution of meaning-energy that is incompatible with the emergence of new patterns of shared and sustainable dramatic order.
- 12 We have already seen that in economic terms, this translates into compulsory consumption—the necessity of constantly choosing what to buy, to eat, to wear, to do, to feel, and to think. In the realm of politics, perhaps its most apparent result is the need for continuously refining and adding to the body of laws that define the proper limits of free choice. That is, the space between what can be freely chosen and what cannot turns out, over time to be infinitely wide; or at least infinitely convoluted, which amounts to the same thing.
- 13 For a sterling treatment of the origins of rational choice liberalism, see: Sonja Amadae. *Rationalizing Capitalist Democracy: The Cold War Origins of Rational Choice Liberalism*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL: 2003.
- 14 It is important to stress, perhaps, that my use of “rational” in this context is purely a matter of contemporary convention. In fact, the kind of rationality appealed to by rational choice theory is but one type of rationality and by no means the most likely to discern paths to the sustainable and equitable resolution of trouble and suffering in dramatically complex or karmically interdependent world.
- 15 Considerable delicacy must be exercised in making this point. It parallels making the point that while affirming the present necessity of human rights conventions, we must also admit that this necessity is conditionally arisen and by no means either natural or inevitable. The need for human rights and human security is, as mentioned earlier, an

- indictment of our way of life, as it has come to be—a way of life in which minimum levels for human dignity must be set legally and forcibly because of the sad and tragic fact that, were no such threshold of impermissible indignity strictly enforced, there would be nothing to stop the fathomless deepening of human misery. Human rights are like emergency surgery for the body politic—necessary for its overall survival, but a procedure that we should admit wishing our history would have allowed us to avoid.
- 16 This is true, of course, of all cultures. To my knowledge, there are no cultures that in the normal course of things question their own premises in a deep or ongoing way. This occurs, if at all, only in severe crisis, when a culture's own explanatory and strategic resources have been manifestly exhausted.
- 17 Such an understanding of faith is manifestly pertinent across the full range of Buddhist traditions. Faith is not first and foremost a “belief in” some transcendent other, but rather an allying of commitment and confidence—a manifest readiness to do what is conducive to turning our situation away from samsara toward nirvana. This is true even in Mahayana traditions, like that of Pure Land Buddhism, in which faith in a particular cosmic Buddha is a core practice. It is only confidence in one's own capacity for making a meaningful difference that allows this practice to function in Buddhist terms. This said, it may be that other religious traditions—especially those that are monotheistic—might be conducive to expressions of faith that do not fit as well into this general reading. In a divinely created universe—especially where creation is the act of a single deity maintaining continuous oversight on the workings of the universe—the issue of making a meaningful difference, and of the meaning of freedom, becomes fundamentally metaphysical, and faith an expression of allegiance or submission to divine will. Even in such traditions, however, there are usually readings of faith that resist the dialectic of freedom and determinism and the conundrums associated with making room for both human and divine will—the Sufi tradition within Islam is a good example of such a reading.
- 18 In this, Buddhist commitments have much in common with existing global movements dedicated to mobilizing religious resources in the construction of a universal or global ethic. UNESCO initiated in the mid-1990s, for example, a Universal Ethics Project to identify key ideas, values, and norms to help humanity meet the challenges of global interdependence and achieve lasting peace. This project aimed to articulate an array of trans-cultural, “overlapping” values capable of providing guidance in working toward equitable and sustainable social, economic, and political relationships. A marked liability of virtually all such calls for a universal or global ethic, however, is the tendency for such arrays of overlapping, trans-cultural values to be conceptually “thin.” That is, these values tend to consist of what remains when people from widely varying cultures and societies embark on a path of discovering lowest common ethical denominators—those values or norms that can, at some level of understanding, be affirmed by all. The problem with such “thin” values, of course, is that they have very little traction when it comes to critically revising or reshaping real-world practices. They sound good, but do little good. The Buddhist emphasis on building diversity as a key value calls attention to the necessary precursor work to be done if a global ethic is to have sufficient traction to make possible a real paradigm shift from competition and cooperation to robust coordination.

6 DIVERSITY AS COMMONS: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS BEYOND COMPETITION AND COOPERATION

- 1 Hedley Bull. *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, Columbia University Press, New York: 1977.
- 2 Realism survives most evidently in the underpinnings of market liberalism, where a Darwinian model of competition is jettisoned in favor of a model centered on the

- rationality of market operations: images of fighting “tooth and claw” for scarce resources have given way to a vision of the positively summed effects of individual choices made in the pursuit of self-interest.
- 3 So compelling has the evidence become that the space of international relations has shifted from favoring independence to favoring interdependence, that even such staunchly solipsistic actors as Libya have recently pressed forward in dialogues intended to restore authentic participation in the international community. Declining such participation on moral grounds so narrow that they afford reliable purchase only for solitary actors amounts to a commitment that blocks the circulation of resources and energies (again, economic, social, cultural, and spiritual) without which societies are incapable of flourishing. Taken to an extreme, such commitments so profoundly deplete the internal resources of a society that it ceases being to fully care for and reproduce itself, much less compete effectively with others.
 - 4 See, for example: Robert Keohane. *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ: 1984; or Keohane, Robert and Nye, Joseph. *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition*, Little and Brown, Boston: 1977.
 - 5 See, for example, Mervyn Frost. “A Turn Not Taken: Ethics in IR at the Millennium,” *The Review of International Studies*, 24(5), 119–132, December 1998.
 - 6 Christopher Lasch. *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics*, W.W. Norton, New York: 1991, p. 170.
 - 7 For more on downward causation, see P.B. Andersen *et al.* (eds) *Downward Causation: Minds, Bodies, and Matter*, Aarhus University Press, Århus: 2000.
 - 8 James March and Johan Olsen. *Rediscovering Institutions: The Organizational Basis of Politics*, Free Press, New York: 1989, p. 168.
 - 9 The notion of competency traps will factor substantially into our discussion of education in Chapter 8.
 - 10 March and Olson, *Rediscovering Institutions*.
 - 11 On the notion of a “logic of appropriateness,” readers may wish to consult March and Olsen, 1989; Boekle, H., Rittberger, V., and Wagner, W. “Norms and Foreign Policy: Constructivist Foreign Policy,” Center for International Relations/Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Tübingen, 1999 at <http://www/uni-tuebingen.de/uni/spi/taps/tap34a.htm>; or Martha Finnemore. *National Interests in International Society*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca: 1996.
 - 12 James Carse. *Finite and Infinite Games*, The Free Press, New York: 1986.
 - 13 *Ibid.*, p. 29.
 - 14 *Ibid.*
 - 15 For a discussion of the distinction between the social and the societal, see Peter D. Hershock. *Liberating Intimacy: Enlightenment and Social Virtuosity in Chan Buddhism*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY: 1996, especially p. 58ff.
 - 16 Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games*, p. 31.
 - 17 The interested reader is directed to my paper, “Renegade Emotion: Buddhist Precedents for Returning Rationality to the Heart,” *Philosophy East and West*, 53(2), Spring 2003. A concise definition of emotion and its relation to reason appears on pp. 354ff.
 - 18 It should perhaps be noted that this way of seeing emotions in resolutely relational terms makes it impossible to pin untoward courses of events on the emotional immaturity of specific individuals involved—for example, the president of a country willing to use pre-emptive military strikes against a problematic state to turn it decisively toward “democratic freedoms.” Given the interdependence of all things, there is no avoiding the admission that in all cases, responsibility is always shared. Additionally, the emotional immaturity playing out in international relations, for example, does not allow drawing any conclusions about the emotional immaturity of specific individuals, even if they are centrally involved. After all, enlightening beings—*bodhisattvas*—must

- continuously appear in situations of conflict and emotional malaise in order to contribute to the resolution of suffering for all sentient beings.
- 19 The temporal qualification here has everything to do with the ongoing “colonization of consciousness” and what it means for our individual and collective capacities for negotiating shared meaning.
 - 20 John Rawls. *A Theory of Justice*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge: 1971.
 - 21 The later Rawls, too, seems sensitive to the liabilities of universalizing the meaning of, for example, justice, and has critically revised his own thinking to make greater room for value pluralism. See his *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, Belnap Press, Cambridge: 2001.
 - 22 The strategy of retreat should not be confused with isolationism which continues to replicate the pattern of values–intentions–actions associated with a bias toward sovereign security and continued commitment to the metaphysics of existence. Retreating in the sense discussed here marks a “turning point” process—a process undertaken in the interest of a paradigmatic shift of situational direction and relational quality. Similarly, refusals to participate in global movements to secure public good—for example, the US refusal to sign and honor the Kyoto Protocol on greenhouse gas emissions—are exercises of power rather than redirections of effort toward strength training. In such cases, freedoms of choice continue to trump relating freely.
 - 23 I have considered role of technology in shaping the way society changes, with special reference to social activism in Peter D. Hershock, “Changing the Way Society Changes: Transposing Social Activism into a Dramatic Key,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 4(3), July 1999.

7 FROM VULNERABILITY TO VIRTUOSITY: RESPONDING TO THE REALITIES OF GLOBAL TERRORISM

- 1 This overall structure of this chapter and some parts of its content are derived from my paper, “From Vulnerability to Virtuosity: Buddhist Reflections on Responding to Terrorism and Tragedy,” published online by the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, Vol. 10, 2003.
- 2 The explicit aim of the massive and pre-emptive American strike against Iraq was to “shock and awe” the Iraqi government and people, with the hope (apparently futile) that this would cause them to summarily capitulate to regime change in keeping with American aims and interests. The suggestion that this strike was an act of international terror—not war—would seem to lent considerable credence by the Bush administration’s own characterization of the action.
- 3 This process can be observed in infants left alone by their parents in a room full of strangers. As soon as parental absence is noted, infants will often stop exploring and playing. If their cries for parental return and attention go unanswered, many infants become frantic with the sense of abandonment, lapsing into inconsolable sobbing. Should a nearby adult attempt to assuage the pain of separation, he or she is often rejected or tolerated with the pained indifference that comes when one thing—and one thing only—will make a difference: the restoration of parental attention. The infant’s normally open consciousness has collapsed into a desolate singularity of lost presence.
- 4 A simple example of this cycle is the transition that takes place in newcomers to a physically endangering sport like surfing. Initial excitement in small wave conditions gives way to quite real fear as one ventures into larger surf, which gives way yet again to a sense of confident pleasure as the needed perceptual and athletic skills to surf big waves develop. Similar dynamics play out in more purely cognitive or emotional settings as well. The common thread is that fear signals a breakdown of relational possibilities that are truly responsive and a transition to reactive presence—the classic physical alternatives of fight or flight taking the form of intellectual and emotional battles and desertion.

- 5 Aung San Suu Kyi. *Freedom from Fear: and other writings*, edited by Michael Aris, New York: Penguin, 1991.
- 6 It is important to see the relational difference between shock and the strategy of retreat discussed in Chapter 6. Retreat is a withdrawal for the purpose of consciously cultivating relational resources, building the attentive virtuosity and dramatic insight needed to freely engage in the resolution of all trouble and suffering, however they might arise. Shock is withdrawal for the purpose of conserving individual integrity—most fundamentally that of the body, but also the self. Shock may have the beneficial result of allowing already developed relational capacities to be restored and safeguarded—at least as long as the person in shock is suitably cared for by others. But shock itself includes no commitment to building relational virtuosity as such.
- 7 This is true regardless of the amount of power—political, economic, or military—that we bring to the task of shrinking, rather than relinquishing, our horizons of relevance, responsibility and readiness. It is quite literally, a shrinking of who we are, both in the more typical terms of what we can claim as “our own,” and in the Buddhist sense of what we mean for others.
- 8 While eating a fast-food burger will, for example, put an end to the minor suffering of hunger pains, the situation looks rather different from the perspective of the cow slaughtered to make the beef patty or of the subsistence farmers in Central America whose lands have been converted to cattle grazing to meet the needs of the global economy. Trouble/suffering or its absence, the first noble truth insists we admit, is relative to situational position.
- 9 See, for example, Nagarjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā* 24.14.
- 10 See, for example, *Dīgha Nikāya* 16.2.5.
- 11 See, for example, *Sutta Nipāta* IV.8, IV.11, and IV.13.
- 12 *Dhammapada* 201.
- 13 *Majjhima Nikāya* 139.6ff.
- 14 *Sutta Nipāta*, IV.11.7.
- 15 See, for example, *Majjhima Nikāya* 7 and 40.
- 16 See: Les Roberts, Riyadahl Afta, Richard Garfield, Jamal Khurdhari and Gilbert M. Burnham, “Mortality before and after the invasion of Iraq: cluster sample survey,” originally published in the *Lancet* online, October 29, 2004 and available at: <http://www.zmag.org/lancet.pdf>

8 EDUCATING FOR VIRTUOSITY

- 1 Especially at the tertiary (college and university) level, there is a striking uniformity in the content that is delivered, with virtually identical ranges of subjects taught worldwide. Math, science, and engineering courses are, in particular, taught in almost identical fashions globally. For reasons related to knowledge generation and circulation in research and business, there is a growing emphasis on English as a language of instruction—again, especially in math, science, and engineering. Just as importantly in terms of establishing conditions that support or resist educational change, there is also remarkable global uniformity in how schools are institutionally structured.
- 2 These two functions of education are embedded in the traditional instruction of Buddhist monks and nuns—the conservative function most evident in the study of *sutta* (doctrinal texts) and *vinaya* (narrative presentations of communal behavioral norms); the creative function most evident in sustained *bhāvanā* (or personal training, especially meditative).
- 3 It is perhaps useful to stress that there are many complicated systems or situations that are not complex. A complicated system resists predictive analysis because of the sheer number of variables that would need to be taken into account. In principle, however,

- given time and sufficient resources, a merely complicated system's behavior could be accurately anticipated—at least within reasonable statistical parameters. By contrast, complex systems are liable to exhibiting behavior that is in principle impossible to anticipate.
- 4 Indeed, it is part of the complexity of contemporary patterns of change that our efforts at anticipating the direction of change are increasingly factored into the dynamics of situational transformation. For example, predictions of stock market behavior factor into—and thus alter—the processes driving the behavior of the market. Stated over simply, perhaps, we can no longer expect to happen anything that we have expected happening.
 - 5 Empirical evidence for the crisis in American education is widespread. But a particularly pointed look at the performance shortfall of American students with respect to twenty-first century workplace skills (especially mathematics) can be found in the Organization of Economic Development (OECD) report on Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) at: http://www.pisa.oecd.org/document/55/0,2340,en_32252351_32236173_33917303_1_1_1_1,00.html (accessed 12/12/04). The report documents that United States students now perform below average compared to students from the forty countries studied, ranking number 26 of the 30 OECD countries involved in the study.
 - 6 Teachings aimed at disclosing the pervasive role of karma in shaping our individual and collective experience have been among the most difficult to understand of the core teachings informing and supporting Buddhist practice. Part of their difficulty can be traced to the fact that the interdependence of all things and the operation of karma are not at all apparent at typical intensities and scales of awareness or attention. Like the curvature of space-time and the particle-wave ambiguity of light that are entailed by relativistic physics, the irreducibility of interdependence and the experiential ramifications of values and intentions become evident only with a certain amount of training and through skillfully practiced techniques. Hence, the crucial roles of mindfulness and insight meditation for those intent on liberation in a Buddhist sense.
 - 7 Reported in the New York Times, 12/8/04, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/08/international/08hunger.html>
 - 8 More precisely, predicaments are not open to solution, except at the cost of silencing one or another of the diverse stakeholders in the situation—that is, through precluding the possibility of dissent with respect to meaning. This is by no means uncommon. Unilateralism is, in spite of the evidence of global interdependence, at least still alive if not entirely well. But silencing opposition, in the larger scheme of things is to limit situational resources. It is, in Buddhist terms, to deny the emptiness of the situation or its capacity for supporting infinitely complex, mutual contributions to shared meaning. Unilateralism is, then, a strategy for solving problems that will be liable to severe ironic consequences.
 - 9 The combined use of dramatic and moral here is intended to highlight a pattern of mutual reinforcement between meaning making and socio-cultural identity. Morality arises in the context of sustained community, most traditionally in the context of a given cultural, ethnic, or religious community. While the morality of a given situation or action can be debated within a given community, it is profoundly difficult to hold moral debate across cultural or communal boundaries. By alluding to both dramatic and moral homogeneity, I am invoking a consonance between individual meaning-making patterns of conduct that are consciously elected and patterns of evaluating conduct that are largely inherited. It is such a consonance that establishes a community's shared karma.
 - 10 It bears remarking, here, that the currently prevailing model for global development is itself oriented toward the systematic translation of diversity into mere variety (see, for

example, Chapter 3). Ironically, it is the close linkage between education and development (noted, for example, by Amartya Sen) that drives education inexorably toward crisis. In a sense, the particular orientation of the postmodern model of development commands—for its own success—“counterculturally” or contrarily oriented forms of education.

- 11 It is worth noting that this constellation of conditions can also be correlated with the conditions that launched the American economy in the position of world leader in the second half of the twentieth century. That is, the conditions that thrust America onto the center of the global stage will also, unless a decisive change of direction occurs in the quite near future, be at the root of its humbling exit to the chorus of former global leaders on—let us say—stage right.
- 12 As will become evident, the kind of instruction undertaken in civics courses—the traditional locus for formally mediated instruction in shared norms and values—is not an adequate substitute for institutionally secured educational space for cultivating wisdom. On the contrary, and at its worst, it tends to be a forum for moral indoctrination.
- 13 It has been said, by Ivan Illich, that there is no such thing as a universal conception of peace except in the utterly emaciated, negative form of a simple lack of conflict. Once peace is qualified, it is in highly particular and context-dependent ways. Similarly, wisdom is not a universal characteristic, identically expressed by all who attain some measure of it. Rather, wisdom is all about qualitative differences in appreciative and contributory acts making appropriate difference in specific contexts. The loss of cultural traditions and ways of life marks a loss of resources for achieving wisdom.
- 14 Here it should be stressed that this shift was both simple outcome and opportunity—neither good nor bad in and of itself. The demise of strong differences in how daily needs are met led also to the decreasing role of ethnic ghettos in structuring city life, to more open policies regarding property ownership, school attendance and so on—a shift very much in keeping with a stress on greater equality with respect to freedoms-of-choice. Yet, at the same time, a certain sense of belonging is lost along with the transition from distinctive neighborhoods to highly rationalized suburbs. There is nothing simple about this transition. The point here is to keep in mind the degree to which values are relational phenomena and have traction proportional to the range and depth of relationships in which they are actively embodied.
- 15 It should be added that knowledge generation and transmission are also ill-affected by the segregation of knowledge and wisdom, though in a less debilitating fashion in the short and medium term. All good teachers know that giving knowledge to students who are not passionate about learning can quickly become an exercise akin to pushing a string. As the metaphor suggests, knowledge is not most effectively given, but elicited. In the absence of a desire to learn—a passion for widening our horizons of relevance, responsibility, and readiness—knowledge is stripped of intimate connections with virtuosity. Knowing comes to be good in the narrow sense of being “good enough,” but not an ultimate or virtuosic good (*kusala*) in the Buddhist sense.
- 16 Islamic critiques of the contemporary West and globalization have much to do with these effects. Islamic traditions embody a strong commitment to expressing a single set of values from the domain of the spiritual to that of economic activity—from the mosque to the marketplace. The compartmentalizing of values/practices—a moral division of the public sphere—is not easily accepted and almost impossible to fully endorse in this context. The tensions resulting from the modernization (and post-modernization) of Islamic communities and countries is perhaps strongest in the Middle East rather than in Asia, but is quite real in all cases.
- 17 Excessive media consumption is in this way morally compromising—not because of the media’s explicit contents (though that, too, can be a factor), but because the space of mass media consumption is not both interactive and consequentially rich.

- 18 The contrasting and often competing needs for change and continuity in any community or society bring into focus the particular boundary conditions involved in expressing therein the meaning of interdependence and its qualitative enhancement. In particularly heterogeneous societies, and in any intercultural or international community, such boundaries inevitably come into conflicting patterns of overlap. Often this becomes an occasion for promoting the value of tolerance—a capacity for allowing differences to obtain, uncontested. Such apparent conflicts, however, are also opportunities for transcending the identity-conserving logic of tolerance by concretely realizing that differences open up concrete possibilities for mutual contribution. It is only in this way that the overall diversity of our shared situation can be increased—meaning, finally, an increase of the overall resources for dramatic improvisation or meaningful predicament resolution. The conservation of “differences that make a difference” is thus centrally important to directly and creatively appreciating and contributing to one another’s welfare.
- 19 It should perhaps be noted that there is a voluminous body of literature (the *abhidharma* and associated commentaries) in which there is much discussion of the stages of training toward becoming an arhant (realized being) or bodhisattva. But these stages are, I would argue, are not understood as necessary competencies involved in the attainment or expression of full Buddhist realization, but rather as common benchmarks of development. The distinction has to do with the difference between capacities for responding to anticipated exigencies and typical landmarks of movement in the direction of nirvana or relational virtuosity. In Chinese Buddhism, for instance, such stages are critically abandoned to forestall any self-conserving tendencies to place full realization at the kind of distance that might be infinitely divisible and hence preclusive of being fully traversed.
- 20 The distinction is perhaps clearer in the analogous relationship between excellence and excelling. It may be that few of us will ever be able to claim achieved excellence. But all of us—regardless of the conditions under which we labor and the resources given to us by birth and circumstance—can excel in what we do. That is, we can “raise up” what we are doing to new levels. Excellence, too, is not an ontologically distinct state of affairs. It is a direction in which movement can be slow or rapid, but one that is always open.
- 21 This is not, of course, to deny that in any given training regimen, one will need to learn particular techniques, vocabularies, and rituals. These, however, are prerequisites for full and effective training, not results thereof—useful means for sustained training, but not its ultimate meaning.
- 22 It should be noted that in the sense that I am using the word virtuosity, it entails movement in the direction of heightened virtue. But this need not mean the inculcation of specific, traditional virtues like loyalty, patience, kindness, and honesty. Such virtues, while very widely accepted, are nevertheless still subject to great historical and cultural variation in the degree to which they are considered centrally important and the manner in which they are socially and culturally constructed. Instead, taking interdependence as basic, virtue arises and is built through offering or contributing what is needed in any given situation to dissolve the conditions and causes of trouble and suffering, and to compassionately direct the situation as a whole toward dramatically liberating intimacy. Virtue is, in this sense, a capacity for and expression of creativity—in particular, a creativity that joins and harmonizes.

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INDEX

- Abhidharma 15, 19
āhāra (four nutriments) 47
Ames, Roger 25
appreciation: as adding value 10; as
 bodhisattva action 147; and health 39;
 karma of 205 n.15; liberating and
 ethics 23; of non-duality 201
Araṇavibhanga Sutta 162
āsava (infectious outflows) 47;
 see also asravas
asravas 108, 207 n.8
attention: commodification of 77, 96–98,
 138, 176; economy 78, 93, 100, 117,
 177; exporting of 82, 85, 96–98;
 heightening and beauty 29; *kusala* and
 akusala 49; patterns of 40; in relation
 to ignorance and habit formations 45;
 training 163
attentive mastery (*samādhi*) 7, 63, 78, 83,
 101, 162, 196–197; and happiness 81
Aung San Suu Kyi 157
autonomy 109, 151, 182; as political
 value 55; politics of 126; and
 technology 85, 91; in tension with
 equality 92, 100, 115–116;
 unwholesome outcomes of 118
- Baizhang 63
beauty 15; as aesthetic consummation 26;
 and creativity 26–28; as emotion
 205 n.14; in relation to *samsara* 28
Beniger, James 92
Bhagavad-gītā 21
Bhutan 80–83
bodhicitta 18, 25, 32, 40, 126, 201
buddha-nature (*fō-xing*) 17, 28, 63, 192,
 201; as propensity for liberating
 relationships 20
- buddha-realms: as liberating
 environments 19
Buddhism: key concepts and core
 teachings of 7–8, 44; Mahayana 28,
 57; and moral development 187; as
 neither Western nor modern tradition 5;
 and politics 104–106; as socially
 engaged 6–7; and twelve-fold chain of
 interdependent origination 40
Buddhist practice: and appreciative and
 contributory virtuosity 142, 163; as
 attuned to public good 7; as challenge
 to dominant paradigms for ordering
 world 4; and contemporary relevance of
 Buddhism 3; and diversity 12; and
 doubt 169; as *kusala* and healing self
 and society 46; as political
 counterculture 126; as *working out*
 rather than *working toward* 4
Bull, Hedley 127, 130
- Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta* 64, 69, 78, 83,
 107, 109, 113, 148, 201
Carse, James 137–139
cetanā (intention) 88
Chan Buddhism 63, 198
choice: and disengagement from
 commitment 95; as market value 55,
 69; and meaning of community 95; and
 power 110
Chomsky, Noam 95
civil society 151
civil virtuosity 152
commitment: and choice 95; and karma 88
commodification: of attention 77, 81, 94,
 96–98, 118, 176; of healthcare 56; and
 power 93–94; of subsistence needs 60,
 72–73

- community: enhancing 80; global crisis of 152; and media in relation to meaning of community 95; and mutual contribution 62–63; and religion 104
 compassion 11, 81, 108, 163, 194, 201; coeval with wisdom 143
 competency: trap and education 181–183; trap and institutional evolution 134; and virtuosity in relation to education 173
 competition: and finite games 137–138; as market value 69; and rational choice 120
 complexity: and change 135, 174; and problems and predicaments 79; theory of 7
 complex systems 56, 133, 135
 conflict: Buddhist analysis of 161–162; dissolving conditions of 163
 consciousness: colonization of 81, 86, 97, 99–100, 117–118, 138; degradation of 16, 49, 98; and liberating environments 26; relational nature of 16, 19, 28, 49, 163
 consumption 73, 76; and consumerism 35; and karma 98; and waste 30, 98
 contribution 9, 149, 205 n.15; and community 62–63; and difference 143; and health 39; karma of 166; mutual and diversity 20, 25; mutual and relating freely 23; and poverty 65
 control 9, 69, 136, 165, 182; and civil society 151; and health 50–52; karma of 205 n.15; and media 86; and poverty 65, 109; as technological value 90–91; threshold of utility for 77
 coordination: as alternative to cooperation and competition 117, 149, 190; and relating freely 190; as value 26, 36
 creativity 15, 76; cultivating 195; and diversity 166; and education 176, 183; human and liberation 31; and market economics 75; moral or ethical 189; relational and beauty 26–28
 development: as actualizing situational opportunity 60; in Buddhist terms 59, 78; as freedom 66; free market model of 65; and happiness 80–83; and inequity 60; and urbanization 78
dhatu (relational foci) 15–16
Diamond Sutra 140
 difference(s): appreciating in response to global terror 168; confronting and accommodating 145; and contribution 143, 190; and diversity and variety 22, 25; expression of 104, 184; and global interdependence 60; and improvisation 182; and innovation 197; and karma 9; and pluralizing of the public sphere 2; and realizing emptiness 160; and relational quality 93; strengthening 152; within ecosystems 21
 diversity 22, 24, 37, 144; Buddhist conception of 12, 24, 32; contra variety 25, 35, 118, 143; and contributory relationships 20, 79; and creativity 166; and economic interdependence and trade 60, 66, 70; and education 197; and emptiness 84, 142, 153; enhancing 24–25, 120; and equity 197; and health 39; politics of 126; and poverty alleviation 65, 108; and power and strength 129; productive 69–72, 81; and urban environments 35; and value coordination 125, 150
 downward causation 78, 80, 133
 dramatic entropy 119, 141; and media 99
dukkha *see* suffering
 education: Buddhist approaches to 191–196; and competency and virtuosity 173, 181; and contributory capacity 171; and creativity 176; dominant paradigm of 181; and emotion 187; and enhancing diversity 197; and innovation 173; and knowledge and wisdom 183–184, 185; and markets and privatization 175–176; and problem-solution and predicament-resolution 180; as subsistence need 82
 Eight-fold Path 161
 emotion(s) 81–82, 144, 159, 161, 205 n.14; and education 187; and international relations 143
 emptiness (*śūnyatā*) 7, 11, 57, 63, 66, 87, 140; activating as diversity enhancing 84, 142, 153; and difference 160; and health 45; as mutual relevance 20, 79; and subordinating power to strength 190
 environment(s): and buddha-realms 19; Buddhist concept of 15–16; and consciousness 16, 19; current conceptions of 14; degradation of 16,

- 69, 98; liberating 19, 26, 99, 147, 168; in Mahayana Buddhist traditions 19; as object 14; urban and diversity 35
- environmental ethics: Buddhist 23, 32; contemporary 21, 32
- equality 55, 119, 191; in tension with autonomy 92, 100, 115–116, 151
- equity: and diversity 197; and equality 191
- Fazang 20, 21, 192
- Four Noble Truths 159
- freedom 112–114; as autonomy 100; Buddhist concept of 27; of choice 52, 69, 73, 76–77, 81, 100, 118; and commitment 136; as relating freely 52, 192; relational quality 27; and virtuosity 192
- Fukuyama, Francis 100, 112
- globalization: and commodification of subsistence needs 60; and common values 128; and health 54–55; and human rights 124; and value pluralism 131
- habit formations (*saṃkhāra*) 47, 78; and health 45; and karma 46; as malnutrition 47; and meaning-making 47
- happiness (*sukkhā*): and Buddhist practice 81; and development 80, 83
- healing: and adaptive resilience 48; bodies and relationships 56; and innovation 48; and learning 49; and revising the meaning of interdependence 58; the wound of existence 57
- health: and *āhāra* (four nutriments) 47; and *allostasis* and *allostatic* load 42; Buddhist conception of 44–48; as capacity for adaptation 42; and control 50; geography of and inequity 55; and globalization 54–55; and karma 44, 52; medicalization of 50–52; and mind–body relationship 42; modern conceptions of 40–41; problems and predicaments 55–56; as relational quality 39, 42; and reordering of values 48
- healthcare: commodification of 56; as defined by medical practice 56; as enhancing meaningful relational capabilities and commitments 53; policy 51–52
- hetu* (cause) 109
- Hobbes, Thomas 62
- Huairang 202
- Huayen Buddhism 17, 20, 192
- Huineng 63
- ignorance (*avijjā*): Buddhist conception of 44, 169; and habit formations 45
- Illich, Ivan 51, 56, 91, 188
- impermanence 57, 78
- inequity: and development 60; and freedoms of choice 114; and geography of health 55; and global interdependence 1, 178; and health 57; and power 109; relational 119; and trade 60, 67
- innovation: and complex change 174; and education 173; and enriching differences 197; and healing 48; and market economics 75–76
- intention: and karma 88, 109
- interdependence: Buddhist concept of (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) 11, 16, 64, 87, 160; ethics of 36, 38; global 1, 61, 171; *kusala* pattern of 59; orienting equitably and sustainably 2; and suffering 57
- Jataka tales 17–18, 107
- justice 149, 167; and global dynamics 59; thinness of as value 37
- karma 7, 9, 18, 24, 167; and appreciative and contributory virtuosity 101, 149; and *cetanā* 88; and compulsory consumption 98; and conflict 141, 165; of contemporary societies 15; of contribution 166; and difference 9; environmental and ecological 15, 38; and habit formations 46; and health 44, 52; and human rights 34; and inaction 169; of modernity 114; and moral development 187; personal and communal 11; and politics of meaning 106–107; and reality and responsibility 17; situational 88; and skillful means 22; and sociality 63; and trade 66, 79; and Western Buddhists 8–9
- Keohane, Robert 130

- kusala/akusala*: and Buddhist practice 46; eventualities 44, 75, 83, 118, 120, 142, 149, 191; patterns of attention 40, 48; patterns of interdependence 59
- Lasch, Christopher 132
- learning: complex systems 56; and healing 49
- liberation: Buddhism meaning of 17, 23
- liberation ecology: and appreciative conduct 24; and beauty 28; and buddha-nature 17; Buddhist 13–14, 19, 23; and diversity 25; and natural and urban environments 37; and sociality 63; and virtuosity 63
- Linji 10, 63, 194
- McLuhan, Marshall 86
- Mahakapi Jataka* 18
- Majjhima Nikāya* 81
- March, James 134
- market(s): and consumption 73; and creativity 75; and development 65; and economics 35; and education 175; expansion and density of 72–73, 94; and values 55, 69
- Marx, Karl 94
- Mazu 10, 11, 63, 202
- meaning 150; and habit formations 47; and improvisation 139; politics of 106–107; and power 110; production of 77, 176;
- meaning-making 11, 81, 94–95, 100; as skill fostered by education 177
- media: and attention 82, 84; and control 86; and dramatic entropy 99; and manufacturing consent 94; and meaning-making 94–95; and violence 87
- Mencius* 25
- mindfulness 83–84, 107, 147, 178
- modernity 26, 112, 114; and mass education 183; and separation of religion and politics 103; values of 5, 55, 62
- moral absolutism 188–189
- moral clarity (*śīla*) 7, 78, 83, 101, 162, 196–197; and vows and relational virtuosity 164
- moral development 187
- moral genius 189
- moral relativism 188–189
- Nagarjuna 17, 20, 45
- nature: as dispositional 17, 20
- nirvana* 80, 203 n.3; as relational or situational direction 17, 25, 60, 63
- Olsen, Johan 134
- papañca* (proliferating situational blockages) 75
- peace 155, 162, 219 n.13
- phala* (effect) 109
- pluralism 103, 114, 116, 124, 130; and tolerance 115, 119, 125, 184; of values 131
- poverty 11; alleviation of 65, 77, 80; and commodification of subsistence needs 188; conditions for 65, 107–108; and global trade 69
- power 67, 109–110, 118, 123, 139, 148, 182; and choice 110; and civil society 151; and commodification 93–94; contra strength 129, 148–149; and determining situational meaning 110; and emptiness 190; and knowledge 197; secular and sacred 112
- prajñā* see wisdom
- predicament(s) (defined) 180; and complexity 79; and contrary values 125; and global terror 168; and religion 124; unresolved and suffering 178
- predicament-resolution 2, 11, 94, 117, 138, 143, 152; and educational change 177; and health 55
- problem(s) (defined) 180; and complexity 79
- problem-solution 2, 94, 117, 138; and politics 124
- production: ecologies of 31, 35, 60, 70–71, 76; monocultures 31, 35, 71
- rational choice theory 120–121
- Rawls, John 146
- relating freely: and Buddhist concept of freedom 27, 164; contra freedom of choice 52, 77, 81, 100, 118; and coordination 190; as educational aim 192; and media 86; and mutual contribution 23; and strength 147
- relational ontology 23, 27
- religion: and felt community 104; and modernity 103; and predicament resolution 124

- rights: animal 33; civil and political 60;
 exit and technology 89; human 34,
 113, 124, 146, 213 n.15
 Ruskin, John 94
- Sakkapanha Sutta* 75, 142
samādhī see attentive mastery
samsara 104; and beauty 28; as cycle of
 birth-and-death 17; as direction 17, 25,
 60, 63; as wheel 77
 security 121–122, 128, 136, 142, 152;
 human 60, 154, 213 n.15
 Sen, Amartya 66
śīla see moral clarity
 situational blockages (*papañca*), as root of
 suffering 75
skandhas (5 aggregates) 16
 skillful means (*upāya*) 48, 63, 79; and
 karma 22; and relational virtuosity
 143; and wisdom 163
 Smith, Adam 75
 sovereignty 121–122, 128, 142
 strength: contra power 129, 139, 148–149,
 190, 192; and knowledge 197;
 and relating freely 147;
 and virtuosity 139
 suffering (*dukkha*) 7, 14, 40, 80, 104, 159;
 as errant interdependence 57; and
 situational blockage (*papañca*) 75; and
 terrorism 159; and unresolved
 predicaments 178
śūnyatā see emptiness
Sutta Nipāta 64
Sutta Piṭaka 104, 193
- taṇhā* (craving desire) 44, 205 n.17
tathāgatagarbha 20
 technology 68, 85; contra tools 89–90;
 control revolution in 72, 112, 114–115;
 and exit rights 89; and thresholds of
 utility 52
 threshold(s) of utility 45, 50; for control
 77; and technology 52, 91
 tolerance 115, 119, 125, 147, 152, 184;
 and diversity 166, 190
 Toulmin, Stephen 112
 trade: Buddhist understanding of 66–67;
 and diversity 66; expansion and
 density of 72; and inequity 60,
 67–68; karma of 67, 79; and
 poverty 69; and productive
 specialization 70
 urbanization 64, 78
- value(s) 22, 68, 69, 88, 178; coordination
 of 36, 125; and diversity 37, 125;
 economic and growth 35; and fact 2, 8;
 and health 44, 48; intrinsic 21; of
 justice 37, 146; and karma 88; modern
 5, 55; and relational quality 22; and
 technology 68, 89–91
 value pluralism 131, 146, 184
 Veblen, Thorstein 94
Vessantara Jataka 18
Vimalakīrti Sutra 19, 101, 198
Vinaya-piṭaka 193, 196
 virtuosity 4, 75, 185, 220 n.22;
 appreciative and contributory 11, 31,
 35, 63, 101, 109, 132, 165; Buddhist
 concept of 193–194; civil 152; as
 direction 194; and education 173; and
 equity 191; and fear 157; and freedom
 193; and media 86; and poverty
 alleviation 65; responsive 56; and
 skillful means 143; and strength 139;
 training for 170
 vulnerability: and fear 156, and
 intimacy 152
- waste 30, 76, 98
 wisdom (*prajñā*) 7, 11, 47, 78, 83, 101,
 162, 196–197; coeval with compassion
 143; cultivation of 185; and knowledge
 in education 183–184; and skillful
 means 163

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