

6 Towards Enlightenment

Buddhism's Contribution to Common Good Through Establishing Contemplative Culture

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1. Preamble

Buddhism, says Professor Robert Thurman, is a system of education (Public Talk, Vancouver BC, University of British Columbia, April 27, 2008). In this paper, I would like to make the case that this statement by Professor Thurman is significant for us who are interested in promoting beyond-ego (post-egoic) consciousness and pursuit of the common good, with some potential for increasing world cooperation and peace. My main reason for this case-making is that Buddhism as a system of education, with its rich teaching resources, promotes a post-egoic consciousness necessary for people who seek common good through working with each other across the differences in worldviews, values, meaning, and end-goals, including the difference between religion and spirituality.

A point of clarification is due from the outset. Working with difference through the cultivation of post-egoic consciousness is not about lessening or even removing difference. Having differences in worldviews, values, and so on is integral to the phenomenology of diversity, and diversity, whether in biological ecology or social ecology, is a sign of health. Hence, working with difference in the present context is about cultivation of a certain kind of consciousness that is able to not only tolerate differences but also value and work with them respectfully and constructively. As well, I will show that it is through cultivating contemplative mental culture that we can access the post-egoic consciousness.

Buddhism is a curriculum and pedagogy that is designed to transform our consciousness at its roots, moving us from dualistic egoic consciousness to nondual, post-egoic consciousness, traditionally known as *Eastern Enlightenment*. Dualistic consciousness sees the world in terms of such categorical dichotomies as self–other binary, as well as a host of other oppositional binaries: mind–body, good–evil/bad, right–wrong, moral–immoral, and so on. To note, the self–other dichotomy applies to individual persons as well as to groups and nations. Dualistic, dichotomous consciousness, I propose, is the basis for self–other conflict, competition, and survival battles on both large (genocide, ethnic war, countries

fighting) and also smaller scales (marital combat, sibling rivalry, and so on). Dichotomous positioning invariably brings about the attitude of active hostility and violence on the one hand, and indifference, avoidance, and exclusion, on the other hand, towards otherness.

2. Egoic and Post-Egoic Consciousness

In this paper, I am using the term ‘egoic consciousness’ to connote ~~‘dualistic consciousness’~~. Different theorists, coming out of different intellectual and practice traditions, have different understandings and meanings for ‘ego’, and so it is important for me to specify my own usage of this word. Ego is the self that sees itself as categorically separate from the non-self: that is, whatever is not seen as the self or belonging to the self, which seems to be just about the rest of the cosmos. The ego self thus faces vast otherness! No wonder, then, that the ego feels overwhelmed and threatened. It is terrified about its survival. Egoic consciousness therefore constantly separates out what is self and what is not self, that is, Otherness is always on the lookout for fight or ~~escape (known as flight)~~, or, if neither is an option, a collapse and passing out ~~(also known as freeze)~~.

Egoic consciousness, however, is not all there is to human consciousness.¹ This statement is borne out experientially, as in meditation and in other consciousness-altering experiences. Nonetheless, ~~of course~~, a statement like that is a tricky point to establish, akin to explaining to a frog that there are other ponds than the one that it inhabits. The only way one can ascertain such a statement is by undertaking the consciousness-altering experiments oneself and experience the result firsthand. With that proviso, then, I shall proceed to talk about post-egoic consciousness.

There are other modes or states of consciousness that we can loosely and generally term as ‘post-egoic consciousness’. I am not, however, making a categorical division here between these two kinds of consciousness. Rather, I see these different states or modes of consciousness to be both contiguous and even continuous, and across their boundaries, they are inclusive, dynamic, and transformative. It seems to be the case that most of us most of the time more or less inhabit egoic states of consciousness, with self–other exclusive divisions, linear sense of time, and locality. Yet, post-egoic consciousness experiences are not as rare as we usually assume. I have been informally conducting anecdotal surveys in my classes (for the past decade or more), asking students about their experiences of non-ordinary (that is, post-egoic) consciousness, and the results are quite astonishing: such experiences are not rare, and align with many accounts I have read about people having such experiences. Basically, in post-egoic consciousness, the self–other boundary is softened and ~~made porous~~, which can precipitate non-conventional, that is, non-ordinary,

experiencing of everyday events. I have some of my own experiences to relate here as a way of illustrating what such experiences are like.

~~Twenty-nine~~ years ago, I had a post-egoic consciousness experience: I was holding my newborn (my younger daughter) on my lap, and I was suddenly flooded with a felt sense of what I can only describe as timelessness. The ordinary sense of time that marches "~~forward~~" inexorably suddenly vanished, and I was left with a sense of "~~forever-ness~~". At the same time, I was completely relaxed in a way that was not all that familiar to me. I didn't think I was afflicted with anxiety till that moment when I experienced complete freedom from anxiety. I was quite astonished by the experience, which seemed to be coming from my other, egoic-thinking mind that was somehow simultaneously present with my post-egoic mind/consciousness experiencing timelessness. The former was commenting that this experience of timelessness was unreal, or at least completely foreign to the egoic consciousness. Yet, the experience of timelessness was no less real than the reality of the ego-mind that was making the comment, and in some ways, it was more real than the latter in that it was more dominant in that moment. And then I was just as suddenly and fully back to my ordinary egoic consciousness of marching time and subtle but persistent existential anxiety, and so on. To be liberated from the existential anxiety and released into the vastness of timelessness and boundlessness of loving feelings was an incredible experience of liberation. An experience whose significance and value does not diminish at all even by a possible explanation that massive postpartum release of oxytocin into my bloodstream was a co-arising and necessary aspect of my post-egoic experience.

I have had many more experiences, unaided by any chemical ingestion, which can be characterized as non-ordinary, post-egoic consciousness. In fact, I would claim that such experiences are quite normal for me, if I counted in less dramatic ones, like seeing what's around me in greater animation and vividness, often during and after meditation. I have had brief interludes of experience, such as moments of bliss; abiding in calmness and expansiveness; exquisite moments of seeing everything around me in radiance, clarity, and beauty; experience of my whole being flooded with boundless love; and so on. All of these have given me fleeting glimpses of the outer (or shall I say, "~~inner~~") reaches of post-egoic consciousness. For sure, I don't claim that I am "~~enlightened~~", perhaps reserving that word for those who are more stably and sustainably established in post-egoic states of consciousness. I know where I am in my own growth and development. I still have a long way to go, but I'm on the path. In terms of my achievement to date towards maturation, I am getting a better handle on my own emotional reactivity that is part and parcel of dualistic egoic consciousness. I don't react as often or as intensely as before, and I consider this an important indication of progress in *Bhavana*, meaning in the Buddhist literature, mental *cultivation* (Goldstein, 2013).

3. Learning to Sit With and Chew Our Own Dark Matter

Emotional reactivity, as programmed into our nervous system, is of three basic modes, as mentioned previously: fight, flight, or freeze. The egoic self reacts to threatening stimuli in one of these modes, with associated emotions such as anger, disgust, fear, terror, horror, guilt, shame, frustration, and so on. These reactions arise when the self is not able to integrate the difficult experience it is having. In other words, the self is not able to take in the challenging experience and “digest” it in such a way that it adds to the self’s nourishment and growth. The physical analogy to digestion is most apt here. When a body is unable to digest certain foods and reacts, which we call an allergic reaction, the body goes into a survival struggle and fights against the foreign invasion. Death occurs when the body is unable to win this fight. Digestion is the process of the body engaging in a complex process of working with the foreign matter (food), rather than rejecting it or being stuck with it, and in either way, suffers the ill consequences of indigestion. Digestion is a mechanical and chemical process that enables the body to allow the crossing of the self–other boundaries between itself and the foreign elements (food). Exchange and interchange, immersion and emergence, all take place, resulting in new growth.

Building on Professor Thurman’s statement, with which I started this essay, I would characterize Buddhism as a system of education that is designed to increase our capacity to “digest” the world we encounter. Its contemplative technologies, such as mindfulness (vipassana) and loving-kindness (metta) meditations, are ways of teaching the self-limiting ego consciousness to “sit with” and “sit in” challenging experiences, without going into reaction and rejection, and “chew” and soften what we experience, mixing with digestive saliva, and so on. (I will focus on what in Buddhism acts as digestive saliva in the next section.) This capacity and ability to sit and be with, slowly digesting what may be uncomfortable and threatening, without imploding or lashing out, is the fruit of contemplative learning and practice.

In Buddhist meditation, we befriend our own experience, which by extension means befriending the self, validating it and giving it space and encouragement to reveal itself. Befriending leads to engagement, and “play” ensues. Good feelings of conviviality, generosity, and empathic care may arise and proliferate. The more we are able to show up this way as the self, the more we will be able to befriend the world, giving it loving attention and caring. Imagine what the world would be like if ordinary citizens all learned to sit with their challenging and difficult emotions, not reacting, not rushing to get rid of unbearable feelings of anxiety, guilt, fear, anger, and the like, but to sit and re-digest this “dark food”. The world would be a very different place, indeed. We wouldn’t have nations fighting, religions fighting, political ideologies fighting, brothers

and sisters fighting, spouses fighting, all trying to kill, literally and symbolically, and put each other out of business.

Otherness will always exist as long as differences based on diversity exist. Diversity, as has been noted by ecological thinkers, is at the core of the biosphere's health and survival (Davis, 2009). Hence, difference and otherness are to be welcomed and protected, and we need to learn to work with them, not against them. To egoic consciousness, however, diversity and difference are threatening as the ego-self experiences difference within the paradigm of self-other dichotomy. In other words, difference is interpreted as "not I" and as "my enemy", according to the nature of the self-other dichotomy pertaining to the egoic consciousness. To the post-egoic consciousness, difference does exist but since this consciousness does not experience self-other as dichotomy but more as partnership or collaborative unit, difference is, while still calling our alert attention, not threatening. Difference could be a source of amazement and appreciation, of novelty and creativity, if we could approach it with open-mindedness and open-heartedness, fueled by respectful curiosity and empathic "listening". It is the fear latent in egoic consciousness of self-other dichotomy that shuts down our mind and heart, disposing us to experience difference and otherness as a threat to our survival.

4. Seeing Through the Hearts and Minds of Enlightenment

Cognitively speaking, enlightenment in the Buddhist tradition is about shifting out of the egoic consciousness that sees the world in self-other, friend-foe, good-bad, moral-immoral, animate-inanimate, and a thousand other binaries or dichotomies into seeing the world in complex and dynamic interconnection and interpenetration. What does this mean? How do the world and our egoic selves appear to the gaze of the nondual, post-egoic consciousness? As preeminent Zen master, poet, writer, and peace activist Thich Nhat Hahn would put it, to an enlightened Buddha eye, a sheet of paper would show up as an entire ecosystem: trees, forests, clouds, rain, mountains, streams, humans involved in the production of the paper, and so on (Hahn, 1991). In short, an entire cosmos is implicated in a sheet of paper. In the West, another poet beheld a similar vision:

To see a world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wild flower
 Hold infinity in the palms of your hand and eternity in an hour.
 (William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*)

The more we can see out of nondual, post-egoic consciousness, the more and the further we can see. More and more, further and further, until we "see" the whole cosmos implicated in dewdrops and in our dewdrop-like

lives. This is what holism is about. Being is interbeing (Hahn, 1991). We “see” interconnection and interpenetration of all beings, not just isolated things and events. We are inherently relationships. *Relationships are us.*

Now, affectively speaking, enlightenment in the Buddhist tradition has us feel love and kindness towards all beings, compassion for the afflicted, and joy with happy others, all the while feeling securely nested in the cosmos. What I’m describing here is traditionally known as the Four Immeasurables in the Buddhist literature (Goldstein, 2013): *metta* (loving-kindness), *karuna* (compassion), *mudita* (empathic joy), and *upekkha* (equanimity). To be enlightened is to be stably and sustainably established in these feeling states.

As I understand the concept of the Four Immeasurables and my own experience of them in my practice, they are immeasurable in the sense that in order for us to experience them and understand them we would have to come out of the usual channel or register of consciousness that likes to take linear measurements of things: to separate out things, put categorical boundaries between things, define, predict, and control. This latter kind of consciousness is typically egoic in that its comfort zone is not radical interdependence and interpenetration wherein self and other continually bleed into each other, forming new selves and new worlds. To note, I am not maligning the linear, analytic, and measurement-oriented functions. They are very useful, and we can’t really function and live without them. However, we get into deep trouble, individually and collectively, when we forget to also inhabit the consciousness of the Four Immeasurables.

To the ego, anything different from itself has the potential to provoke fear and hostility. Even in love, the ego operates with that potential in mind. If I say to you, I love you so long as you do things for me and make me happy, then my love is not immeasurable. My love for you is measurable in that it is conditional. I might as well say that I don’t *really* love you since what I love is what I get out of you, which is my own gain and satisfaction. You are the object that can supply me with what I want. This is greed and exploitation. This is instrumentalism, which does not lead us to enlightenment but to perpetual fear and greed: hence, dissatisfaction and suffering.²

5. Contemplative Methodology of Transcendence

Our egoic consciousness was a “gift” from evolution. If I gave an impression throughout this paper that ego is ‘bad’ and is a problem, I wish to correct that here. It was for survival that we have this ego-self that’s designed to look out for its own (and its intimates’) survival and safety. At the least, one needs to survive and reproduce for human life to go on. And in the context of the jungle and other prehistoric environments, the ego-self had to be extremely swift in responding to dangers: no time to

pause, reflect, evaluate, and figure things out at the sight of a tiger leaping at you. If this were happening to you, you would have to instantly leap up and climb the tree or swing a club and deal a deadly blow. You rely entirely on your autonomic nervous system whose neurons have been well trained over a few decades of practice to fire, at a moment's notice, in sequences that will get you out of your life-threatening spot. High-speed automaticity is key to this process, and its learning success depends on repetition.

The very neural circuitry that saved our ancestors' lives is still within us and seems to be getting us into trouble in the way we try to live a life that requires us not to leap up and react, but be more conscious about what we are doing, reflect, check our perceptions for cognitive biases, and in asking questions like whether what we see is really a leaping tiger or just a stripped telephone pole. The latter function is the newest gift from much later evolution that neuroscience has identified: the human prefrontal cortex (Hanson, 2009). Making use of this evolutionary development, we can do intricate thinking, critical reflection, hermeneutic interpretations, and so on, that may help us change our perceptions, views, and values. This is a slower process that can't compete with the older autonomic nervous system for speed. However, with a dedicated training and practice effort, we can lessen reactivity and give the newer brains (the limbic system and the neocortex) a chance to work their special gifts.

Neuroscientifically speaking, what is known as Buddhist meditations of various kinds all are designed to deliberately slow down reactivity by activating the parasympathetic nervous system (that acts as a decelerator) and deactivating the sympathetic nervous system (that acts as an accelerator). Physiologically this can be accomplished by breath control, which is further aided by mobilizing attention and awareness (Levine & Macnaughton, 2004). Attention and awareness can be trained, as Olympic athletes are trained, to not react, to calmly focus, to notice what really happens in one's consciousness, and to support reflection and contemplation.

Mindfulness (*sati* in Sanskrit) refers to a certain quality of attention and awareness, of which humans are capable of, and I would characterize it as non-reactive but not indifferent, relaxed but alert, expansive but not dispersed, focused but not tense, clear but not cold, penetrating but not harsh, calm but intent, gentle but firm, and so on. As such, mindfulness is extremely functional and can be very useful in all sorts of contexts and ways, as indicated above. However, singling out mindfulness as an independent practice, and even a panacea at that, is problematic. Mindfulness is one component, albeit integral, to a whole ecosystem of cultivation (*Bhavana*) in Buddhism. This ecosystem or ecology of supportive learning processes is known as the Eightfold Path in Buddhism (Goldstein, 2013). In addition to mindfulness, there are seven other integrated aspects of

the path, and together with mindfulness, they form what is known as the ~~Eight-fold~~ Path. These are: *Wholesome View*, *Wholesome Emotion*, *Wholesome Speech*, *Wholesome Action*, *Wholesome Livelihood*, *Wholesome Effort*, and *Wholesome Concentration*. Mindfulness supports every one of these seven factors. It is the ~~Eight-fold~~ Path as a whole, not just mindfulness, that constitutes the core curriculum of enlightenment. Engaging with this curriculum, and diligently and wholeheartedly working on the self in accordance with the curriculum, cultivates the right soil and environment for strong germination and nourishment of the enlightenment seeds.

Now, I wish to return to the Four Immeasurables discussion started in the previous section. Amongst the ~~above-mentioned~~ ~~Eight-fold~~ Path is Wholesome Emotions. The Four Immeasurables belong here. While the Four Immeasurables can be looked at as the psychic environment that an enlightened consciousness comes to inhabit as the result of his/her self-cultivation, another way of understanding is that it provides methodology for developing post-egoic consciousness. In other words, the Four Immeasurables are both the outcome and the method. To those of us educators who are interested in teaching *how to* cultivate ourselves so that we can make a shift from the egoic to the post-egoic, the method or means talk is supremely important. In that vein, I wish to offer my interpretation of the Four Immeasurables in the same way that I was setting up an analogy between the process of digestion and the process of moving from egoic to post-egoic consciousness.

The Four Immeasurables practiced as meditation are like digestive enzymes in our saliva and other gastric juices. Their function is to open and soften our hardened hearts, to open and air out our heavily fortified mental cells, and to mend and heal broken and crushed spirits. This heavy-duty work is accomplished by repeatedly circulating through our whole being and its parts with the powerful “~~alchemical~~” solutions like loving-kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), empathic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekkha*). These powerful solutions do the work of transforming broken and blocked hearts, spirits, and minds. However powerful they are, still the process may take years and decades, if not a lifetime (or many lifetimes as we say in Asian cultures). The egoic conditioning that we received from our civilizational, societal, and familial matrices is extremely deep, and hence overcoming it is a long-term project that takes committed practice and skillfulness.

6. Enlightenment for World Peace

Enlightenment consciousness has been characterized in this paper as post-egoic and, I would add, dialogic. It is dialogic in the etymological sense of the Greek words *dia* (through) and *logos* (reality, being, suchness, dao, etc.). Dialogue is thus a process in which logos comes through

and into your heart-mind, and you are moved to joy, kindness, generosity, compassion, and so on, as you gaze into the particular being who stands before you, for example, your suffering neighbour or rejoicing colleague. You stretch out your hand to help, you smile with kindness, and laugh and rejoice with others. You are like a prism into which light comes in and refracts into a rainbow of colours. Your full loving and kind, empathic and steady presence radiates warmth and goodness, and whoever is with you may bathe in this healing and nourishing field of energy and feel secure, understood, and comforted. They may naturally open their hearts and minds in your presence, and communication soon becomes communion. This is dialogue at its best.

When our heart is blocked and our mind closed off, there is no dialogue—reality does not come through to us, and does not move our heart to compassionate action. We are trapped inside the encapsulated ego, and we do not see reality but only our own projections of the closed mind and its shadows (as in Plato's cave allegory). There is no dialogue for the egoic minds, even while they are busy talking to each other, only endless monologues. When people debate, which most often turns into a shouting match, they are not engaged in a dialogue, despite the appearance of two (or more) people talking to each other. They are *talking at* each other, hurtling words that then bounce off the opponent's armour-plated chests. Words do not go through each other's heart-minds. Dialogue is what happens when people attune to each other, to each other's feelings, thoughts, and energies; then resonance between people results. Hence dialogue occurs only when hearts open and are touched and moved. To emphasize, if we stayed in ego-encapsulated states of consciousness, dialogue does not occur, no matter how long and politely we may speak to each other.

Basically, the egoic view is what most of us mostly entertain every day, and perhaps it is rightly characterized as fundamentalist and dogmatic. From this stance, we insist that what we see '~~out there~~', what we call *objective* reality, is *really out there*, and whoever disagrees with us is wrong or misled. Since the other person may have exactly the same belief and hold it equally strongly, then conflict sets in and battle begins. When subtle persuasion of having the other see reality 'my way' doesn't work, then we resort to exerting power over the other. This is coercion. When the other still does not submit to our will, then we may resort to aggression that could end up in physical violence. That is, in brief, the bloody history of humanity so far. Incredibly, such battle is fought over the question of whether there is God or there are gods, whose God is really real or better or more powerful.

There will be no sustainable peace unless humanity matures beyond the egoic consciousness and moves into post-egoic, dialogic consciousness. Buddhism's substantive contribution to world peace is showing us how to make the shift from the egoic to the post-egoic. For example,

one of the rigorous and vigorous methods it has developed is known as Insight meditation (*vipassana*). It is a process of analytic investigation of one's consciousness in which we repeatedly look for the presence of ego self, that is, the self that is independent and self-same, and enduring or permanent. Again and again, we fail to find one, only finding a self that is constantly in flux, interfusing with everything else. In fact, if we can 'catch' this happening in the moment, we see the self co-arising with everything else, with the whole cosmos, just as Thich Nhat Hahn explained. In our meditation, we witness that there is just this moment-by-moment co-arising of perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and sensations, and their dissolution. This experience, repeated over time, gradually weakens the egoic ~~consciousness's~~ notion that the way it sees the world is how things are 'out there', and that it 'knows' the Truth.

As ~~my final offering here,~~ I would like to invite my readers to pause, take a few deep breaths, open their heart-minds, and look around as if this is the first time we are beholding the world. What do we see?

~~Where there is neither "self" nor "other,"
awareness simply is.~~

~~All is empty,
all is clear,
no effort is made for none is needed.~~

~

~~Rather than focus on knowing the truth,
simply cease to be seduced by your opinions.
If there is even an inkling of right or wrong
the enlightened mind ceases to be.~~

~

~~True reality is hidden by the practice of thought
but also in the denial.~~

~~Accept the reality of not naming things
and rest in the silence of being.~~

~~The need to name, the need to distinguish
are born of a clinging fear.~~

~~Remain unattached to every thought
and know the true nature of being.~~

~~(HSIN MING 信心銘 by Sosan, Seng-ts'an,
3rd Patriarch of Chan in 6th century)~~

Notes

- 1 Psychodevelopmentally speaking, egoic consciousness is an achievement. In the beginning of our fetal life and for some time even after we are born, humans do not seem to have a sense, at least not a clear sense, of being separate entities. We are typically fused with our mothers physiologically and emotionally. Thus, becoming egoic selves is a milestone event in our developmental continuum.

- The issue here is whether we stay being egoic selves, not developing further. Understood this way, being egoic selves is a situation of developmental arrest.
- 2 It has been said that the historical Buddha, by his own words, taught one thing and only one thing: existence and nature of suffering and how to work with it so as to be liberated from it. I refer interested readers to read about the Buddha's teachings on Four Noble Truths (Goldstein, 2013).

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