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Towards a Dialogue Between Buddhist Social Theory and “Affect Studies” on the Ethico-Political Significance of Mindfulness

Edwin Ng¹

Abstract

This article stages a conversation between an emergent Buddhist social theory and current thinking in the humanities and social sciences on the affective and visceral registers of everyday experience—or what falls under the rubric of “affect studies.” The article takes the premise that prevailing models of Buddhist social theory need updating as they remain largely confined to macropolitical accounts of power, even though they argue for the importance of a mode of sociocultural analysis that would anchor itself on the “self” end of the self-society continuum. The article will thus explore ways to develop a micropolitical account of the ethical and political implications of Buddhist spiritual-social praxis—specifically mindfulness training—by formulating some

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hypotheses for dialogical exchange between Buddhist understandings and the multidisciplinary ideas informing the so-called “affective turn.”

Introduction

The earliest mention of Buddhist social theory can be traced to Ken Jones’s writings on socially-engaged Buddhism, and the idea has also been developed by others (Hattam), most notably David Loy (*Awakening; Money*). Buddhist social theory can be regarded as a sub-genre within contemporary Buddhist scholarship, particularly the emergent discourse called Buddhist critical-constructive reflection (Makransky) which cross-fertilizes Buddhist teachings with the research and pedagogical programs of the secular academy and beyond to develop new interfaces between academia, Buddhism, and society.

Buddhist critical-constructive reflection is an adaptive methodology that can be developed in multiple ways—for example, via dialogical exchanges between psychotherapy and meditative techniques, Christian and Buddhist palliative care, neuroscientific and Buddhist understandings of consciousness, and so forth. In the case of Buddhist social theory, Buddhist doctrinal teachings would enter into conversation with the research of the humanities and social sciences. Simply put, Buddhist social theory attempts to account for the problems facing the human estate from the “self” end of the self-society continuum, whereas conventional approaches to critical social theory have largely focused on social structures.

A principal analytical objective of Buddhist social theory is to investigate how personal adjustments in ethical conduct via spiritual self-cultivation might support and precipitate sociopolitical transformations.

Thus, it plays an important role in Engaged Buddhism, which, following Think Sangha's suggestion, could be conceptualized as a "trialectic" of scholarly inquiry, spiritual practice, and social activism (quoted in Hattam 200). But while various initiatives of Engaged Buddhism have grown in recent times such that discussions about socially-engaged Buddhist activities have become commonplace in both scholarly and popular discourse, "Buddhist social or critical theory" as such has not been widely adopted as a subject of study (if only amongst Buddhist practitioner-scholars) in the way "critical theory" has.²

This article thus formulates some hypotheses to further Buddhist social/critical theory.³ In particular, it identifies ways to update Loy's proposals by staging an encounter between Buddhist understandings and the turn in humanities and social sciences scholarship of the past decade or so towards "affect studies." I first present an overview of Buddhist social theory to identify unexplored pathways of inquiry and show how contestations over the ethico-political significance of mindfulness represent a key area of concern. I then outline the principal objectives of affect studies to elucidate their relevance to Buddhist social theory, before identifying some topics of conversation between Buddhism and affect studies. These topics will be drawn from political theo-

² The term "critical theory" is sometimes used to refer specifically to the set of discourses associated with the Frankfurt School. But I am evoking it more broadly to designate the reflective assessment and critique of culture and society that has been performed by poststructuralist and feminist strands of continental philosophy as well as cultural and literary theory—a constellation of discourses that has informed the diverse fields of studies within the humanities, social sciences and beyond.

³ I will primarily use "Buddhist social theory" in this article to remain consistent with the works cited. However, I think "critical theory" would be a more suitable term to use in the long term, given that it is a more expansive concept and also because, as I will show, the Buddhist approach seeks to avoid the "social fallacy."

rist William Connolly's *A World of Becoming* (2011), which can be read as an indexical discourse of the broader "affective turn."

Given the exploratory nature of this discussion, the arguments raised below will necessarily be suggestive rather than comprehensive. What it performs is an analogous exercise (since it is not strictly speaking "inter-religious") of "cross-reading" as proposed by Richard Kearney in his reflections on the hermeneutics of the religious stranger, where the aim is not some "unitary fusion" of disparate traditions but "mutual disclosure and enhancement" (50).⁴ This dialogical exchange would require Buddhist participants to be receptive to the views of their non-Buddhist counterparts, whose disciplinary-specific terminology may not initially appear familiar or relevant. Such an ethos of intellectual hospitality is in keeping with the inter-religious/traditional friendliness and ecumenical spirit of Engaged Buddhism (King 56-66). Intellectual hospitality is vital if there is to be new discoveries between Engaged Buddhism and the Western social justice tradition, both of which, as Loy underscores, need each other to sustain their vitality into the future ("Buddhism and the West"). My hope is that this preliminary discussion would pique curiosity amongst Buddhist practitioner-scholars and others, and

⁴ Kearney asks, "What happens, for instance, if we read the text about Shiva's pillars of fire alongside passages on the Burning Bush or the Christian account of Pentecostal flame? What new sparks of understanding and compassion fly up if we read Hindu texts on the *guha* alongside Buddhist invocations of the "void" (in the Heart Sutra) or biblical references to Elijah or Muhammed in his cave, Jonah in the whale, Jesus in the tomb? What novel possibilities of semantic resonance are generated by juxtaposing the sacred bird (*hamsa*) of Vedanta alongside the dove of Noah's ark or of Christ's baptism in the Jordan?" (50) Another way of viewing this exercise of cross-reading between disparate traditions is to think of it as a *jeu d'esprit* (Mabbett 22), since it will necessarily involve varying degrees of incommensurability that ought not be effaced, even as we explore possible points of consonance.

open up space for further dialogue on the development of Buddhist social theory as a subject of study in its own right.

Buddhist Social Theory for an Awakening-Struggle

As part of the transnational movement of Engaged Buddhism, Buddhist social theory proceeds from the understanding that the diverse forms of Buddhism must engage with the sociopolitical challenges of the day if they are to sustain their vitality. Jones begins with the premise that what is “strikingly absent in received Buddhism is any social explanation that enlarges the [Buddhist sacred] insight into the predicament of the individual person” (35). Buddhist scholars, he contends, need to pursue a task of “selecting and employing contemporary social theory that is complementary to Buddhist teachings,” so as to inform the Engaged Buddhist goal of spiritual-social transformation (35).

For Jones, a Buddhist approach would avoid the “social fallacy”: “It is a commonplace mentality that has grown up over the past five hundred years with our increasing mastery over the objective world and the decline in religious belief. It is the belief that most afflictions can sooner or later be fixed ‘out there’” (40). This habit of “sociologism,” as Robert Hattam argues, has influenced critical thought in such a way that it thinks only half of the self-society dialectic. Hence, prevailing approaches to social theory have tended to frame decisions about what it means to be an ethico-political actor in terms of the development of socially transformative projects: “At the crucial moment, critical theory abandons the self and only looks at what we could change outside of ourselves” (Hattam 244). For Hattam, Buddhist social theory takes a different perspective by exploring “awakening-struggle,” where “awakening” entails the transformation of personal habits vis-à-vis social forces of oppression, whilst “struggle” entails the interrogation of

existing power relations. Awakening-struggle necessitates a redefinition of:

... the subject of politics and the very notion of politics itself. Awakening-struggle demands that politics be considered not as always “out there, outside of self, exterior”, but that politics be simultaneously about both inner and outer transformation, both about self and society, both mind and social structure. (Hattam 275)

The praxis-ideal of awakening-struggle echoes Loy’s proposals in *The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory* (2003). Drawing on doctrinal accounts of the Three Poisons, Loy reformulates them as *social dukkha* and *institutionalized greed*, *institutionalized ill-will*, and *institutionalized delusion*, so as to explore how “the process of individual transformation [could] be generalized for collective transformation” (35).

The notion of social *dukkha* allows Buddhist social theory to investigate the ways in which the sacred, transformative postulations of Buddhism could be actualized across both the individual and collective registers. If the primary condition for *dukkha* is an unrecognized habit of craving fixity and self-presence (or the refusal to accept the utter contingency of phenomenal reality-selfhood), then social *dukkha* understands this predicament to be conditioned as much by social forces as it is by personal habits. To deal with social *dukkha*, habitual tendencies rooted in the Three Poisons have to be identified and redressed in the constitutive social, cultural, and political environments too. In other words, Buddhist social theory recognizes that the manifestations of the Three Poisons are as much a matter of institutionalized, normative knowledge-practices as they are private, personal tendencies. In their writings, Jones and Loy locate institutionalized greed in the neoliberal culture of corporatism, institutionalized ill-will in military-industrial complexes that profit from the perpetuation of armed conflicts, and

institutionalized delusion in the practices of transnational media conglomerates that “spin” the manufacturing of consent (Loy *Awakening; Money*; Jones 29-67).

Inasmuch as Buddhist social theory takes the understanding that spiritual self-cultivation must anchor the pursuit of sociopolitical change, freedom would be better conceived not as an “endpoint” but a “mode of living” to be cultivated with “ongoing practice,” whereby an Engaged Buddhist strives to attend mindfully to all aspects of everyday life to actualize spiritual-social transformation (Hattam 53). Or to evoke Thich Nhat Hanh’s vision of peace, freedom is to be cultivated with every step. For Loy, the ethical work of spiritual self-cultivation is pivotal, because without transforming personal habits rooted in the Three Poisons, “our efforts to address their institutionalized forms are likely to be useless, or worse” (Loy *Awakening* 35).

Buddhist social theory, I claim, is thus primarily concerned with—or at least it begins from the standpoint of—a micropolitics of the quotidian. In this respect Loy’s account of social theory invites updating, for it tends to be more reliant on macro rather than micro accounts of the dynamics of power shaping everyday experience (see Konik 158-161). For instance, Loy astutely observes that corporations (which derive from the legal process of becoming “incorporated”; from the Latin *corpus*, *corporis*, “body”) are not strictly speaking *things* but processes or “dissipative systems” that need to absorb and expand energy to survive (Loy *Awakening* 97-98). Hence, a parallel can be drawn between corporations and human beings, in that our biological bodies are likewise dissipative systems that absorb and expand energy for physical and mental activities. The Buddhist understanding of *anattā* could thus be transposed onto corporations, which like human beings are constructions that are not separate from the constitutive forces of the world. The question then arises as to whether corporations are subject to the same fundamental

problem that confronts human bodies: namely, *tanha*, or craving (Loy *Awakening* 98).

By mapping Buddhist soteriological concepts onto social formations, Loy signposts a way to investigate how personal work on transforming habits of greed might generate reverberations onto a collective level to transform the institutionalized greed embodied by corporations. However, his analysis does not follow through with a micropolitical account of the forces of change but instead relies on a macropolitical explanation. For instance, he suggests that the institution of the corporation be reformed with new corporate charters or the alternative of smaller, localized economic institutions that are more easily regulated (Loy *Awakening* 101). Loy's account of the problem of institutionalized delusion likewise remains confined to a macropolitical account of power, relying as it does on Noam Chomsky's analysis of the political economy and propaganda functions of the media rather than consider how audiences may actively appropriate or resist the influence of the media in creative ways (Loy *Awakening* 92-95). My point here is not that Loy's analyses are wrong or unhelpful, but rather that they still leave much unexplored about the micro dynamics of power constituting the personal and most immediate dimension of awakening-struggle: namely, mindfulness training.

Ethico-Political Contestations Over Mindfulness

Consider, for instance, the protest that interrupted Google's presentation "3 Steps to Build Corporate Mindfulness the Google Way" at the Wisdom 2.0 conference on February 15, 2014. Activists from Heart of the City (a collective campaigning against the adverse impacts of rapid expansion by technology corporations in the San Francisco Bay Area) jumped onto the stage to chant, "Wisdom means stop displacement!

“Wisdom means stop surveillance!” Heart of the City claims that “Google should not be speaking as experts on mindfulness, when they're playing a role in displacement, privatization of public assets, for-profit surveillance, profiling, policing, and targeting of activist communities.” It also criticizes the way in which Google and other tech corporations market themselves as benign and democratic by using the language of counter-culture and Buddhism as sheepskin for their inequitable and exploitative practices (*Heart of the City*).

These criticisms echo Loy's analysis of corporatism. Specifically, the questioning of Google's corporate mindfulness program recapitulates Loy's concerns about the commodifying trend of “McMindfulness” (Purser and Loy) as well as the questions posed in his open letter to William George, board member of Goldman Sachs (formerly on the board of Exxon Mobil) who is an advocate of bringing mindfulness into corporate activities. Loy asks:

[H]ow has your practice influenced your understanding of the social responsibility of large corporations such as Goldman Sachs and Exxon Mobil? And what effects has your practice had personally on your advisory role within those corporations? (“Can Mindfulness Change a Corporations?”)

Both Loy and Heart of the City articulate their skepticism about the adaptation of mindfulness within corporate culture as part of the broader activism against neoliberal capitalist governmentality. Both call for greater accountability and social responsibility on the part of institutions and those in positions of power. In this respect, Loy's model of Buddhist social theory can help to support such socially-engaged Buddhist activities by encouraging vigilance about the diversionary tactics of corporations, or by envisioning alternative forms of organization. But these protests against corporate mindfulness also

invite “micro” accounts of the ethico-political significance of the practice. For at base, the protest against corporate mindfulness is guided by a belief that mindfulness training ought to be oriented by Buddhist ideals about wisdom and compassion—or at least by a generalizable, non-Buddhist specific set of ethical guidelines such as those that can be extracted from the Five Precepts.

As associate editor of *Tricycle* magazine Alex Caring-Lobel notes in his commentary on the protest, the use of Buddhist meditation techniques in corporate culture may help companies foster greater employee wellbeing, “but it also neutralizes a potentially disruptive adversary” (“Protesters Crash Google Talk”). A more optimistic view is to hope that participants of corporate mindfulness programs would come to an appreciation of Buddhist teachings (or the value of non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion more generally) after they have experienced the personal benefits of mindfulness. But whether spiritual self-cultivation would prompt greater sociopolitical reflexivity/responsibility or not—a conundrum that Loy’s open letter to George also underscores—remains an open question. Indeed, at the heart of socially-engaged Buddhist protests against institutional appropriations of meditation techniques is the concern that the opposite happens—that mindfulness programs function to normalize subjects according to prevailing institutionalized habits of the Three Poisons rather than disrupt these generative conditions of social *dukkha*.

Therefore, a key task for Buddhist social theory is to interrogate how mindfulness training may function as a countervailing force, or as the object and objective of control. Although the work of uncovering the ideological complicity of institutions and the forging of alternative social relations is important, it does not address the phenomenological dynamics of mindfulness training as such. To be sure, if Buddhist advocates were asked to give a phenomenological explanation for their skepticism

about corporate or other institutional use of mindfulness,⁵ they could very well evoke doctrinal teachings about the Three Poisons, the Four Noble Truths, the reality of *dukkha*, *anicca*, *anattā*, the Five Aggregates, and so forth. As committed Buddhists, we may have developed some insights about these teachings and we may place our trust in them. But when it comes down to it, these are articles of faith. Our conviction in the veracity and explanatory strength of these doctrines, in and of themselves, may not be shared (nor should one expect it to be shared) by the growing number of non-Buddhists who are curious about mindfulness. Buddhists or not, sustained collective inquiry about the ethico-political challenges circumscribing mindfulness is vital, if the practice is to maintain its potential as a disruptive adversary of regimes of domination. Buddhist social theory could thus expand its purview by exploring new ways to account for this countervailing potential of mindfulness, or inversely, to investigate the forces that exploit the practice.

It is instructive to recall here Buddhism's commitment to inter-religious/traditional friendliness and ecumenism, and Loy's reminder that the awakening-struggle of Buddhism must enter into alliance with the intellectual and social justice tradition of the West. Amongst other things, this means that Buddhist social theory must bring doctrinal teachings about personal spiritual transformation into dialogue with research in Western scholarly disciplines on collective social transformation. The complementary aspects of the respective traditions have to be explored and made intelligible to each other. This cultivation of reciprocity-in-spite-of-difference must necessarily experiment with new or different uses of terminology, the exercise of inventive cross-reading, as I have suggested. My argument is that current thinking on an affective micropolitics offers complementary understandings that can help Buddhist social theory to better articulate the micro dynamics of spiritual-

⁵ Such as the military use of mindfulness.

social praxis to non-Buddhist counterparts and allies in the awakening-struggle for personal and collective transformation.

An Affective Micropolitics

Affect studies has been pursued in a number of directions.⁶ For our purpose, I will limit the discussion to the Spinozian-Deleuzian approach, a fundamental premise of which is the oft-quoted observation by Spinoza in *Ethics*: “No one has yet determined what the body can do” (*Ethics* 87). This is a claim about the open-endedness of a body, or more precisely, the *capacity* of a body which is not defined by the body alone. A body’s capacity (to labor, to play, to rest, to pay attention, etc.) is always dependent on the field or context it is situated in, abetted or hindered by the relations of forces shaping the context (the weather, the time of the day, the presence of physical or discursive constraints, the movements and moods of other bodies, etc.). Spinoza explains: “By affect I understand affectations of the body by which the body’s power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affectations” (*A Spinoza Reader* 154).

Although Spinoza’s writings use the Latin word *affectus* (which is typically translated as “passion” or “emotion”), what is meant by “affect” here is not reducible to experiences of joy, sorrow, and so forth. A more neutral etymological point of reference for “affect” would be *affectio*, which connotes a disposition to act. Building on this Spinozian understanding of the body not as some fixed, bounded entity but in terms of its *capacity to affect and be affected*, Deleuze conceives of affect as the movements of autonomous, energetic forces that may be registered by a sensing body when confronted with particular perceptions. On his ac-

⁶ See (Thrift) for an overview

count, affect is to be distinguished from sentiment and sensation, and is not understood to be perceivable in and of itself. Others who work with this line of thought have spoken of affect as broad tendencies and lines of force (Bruno), as the “aleatory dynamics of lived experience” (Anderson 28), as the “push” of life (Thrift 64), or as the “in-betweenness” of the movements of everyday experience that “marks a body’s belonging to a world of encounters” (Seigworth and Gregg 2).

In sum, to think affectively is to adopt the understanding that there are visceral forces at work that fall under the radar, as it were, of conscious knowing. The affective power of these forces can serve to drive us towards different patterns of thought, action, and relations, but by the same token they are also the targets of power. Although affect may not be any one determinate or substantial “thing” or “property,” the *effects* of the interplay of affect can be traced in the actions and relations between bodies, human and non-human. In this respect, human geographer and affect theorist, Nigel Thrift, has identified three mutually enabling shifts in the last decades of the Twentieth century toward a micropolitics of affect. By situating Google’s corporate mindfulness program within this milieu, the relevance of affect studies to Buddhist social theory will become clearer.

First, there is the shift in contemporary sociopolitical activity toward what Thrift calls “agencies of choice” and “mixed-action repertoires” (64-65). Simply put, this refers to how “free choice” and the injunction to be self-enterprising has become a governing ideal across all domains of social life, from work to education to social networking. One manifestation of this shift is the proliferation of “spirituality” in the marketplace, which, amongst other things, involves the “rebranding” of the teachings of Buddhism and other wisdom traditions as individualist and capitalist forms of spirituality (Carrette and King).

A second development is the mediatization of politics and life in general. This is manifested most clearly in the ubiquity of the screen; in a media saturated environment, it has become difficult to avoid its seductive glow and unwavering gaze. The mediatization of everyday life has led to the prioritization of the performative principle. This is evinced by celebrity culture, personality-driven politics, and the overwhelming reliance on polling techniques to predict and modulate public mood and sentiment. Arising in this milieu is a “new ‘disaggregated’ mode of discipline and an emergent stratum of power and knowledge” (Thrift 66). That is to say, the normative influence of the state, corporations, or other institutional structures is asserted in a diffused and indirect rather than totalizing manner, to shape the bodily and emotive aspects of experience.

The third development is new ways of acting upon *sensory registers* that were not previously deemed “political.” With advancements in techniques of imaging, measurement and associated “micro” bodily practices, “small spaces and times, upon which affect thrives and out of which it is often constituted, have become visible and are able to be enlarged so that they can be knowingly operated upon” (Thrift 66). A new *structure of attention* emerges as the object and objective of control. The targets of power within this structure of attention are the subtle processes of the body-mind, like “anticipation, improvisation and intuition, all those things which by drawing on the second-to-second resourcefulness of the body, make for *artful conduct*” (Thrift 67).

Google’s corporate mindfulness program (or the trend of “McMindfulness” more generally) gains legitimacy within this milieu. Firstly, it capitalizes on the cultural cachet of “spirituality,” and particularly the aura of authenticity surrounding meditation practice. Secondly, it is developed to “optimize the impacts” of one of the most powerful

media corporations in the contemporary world. Thirdly, it displays a calculative knowingness about the need to influence the subtle processes of the body-mind, in order to secure the normative subjectivity required by the neoliberal capitalist conditions under which it thrives. This is evinced by Google's handling of the protest. After the activists were removed from the stage (the live feed was cut and the interruption deleted from the video archive), rather than acknowledge their allegations the Google spokesperson directed the audience to "check in with your body" to "feel what it's like to be in conflict with people with heartfelt ideas" (quoted in "Protesters Crash Google Talk").

This advice about being attuned to the body is not in itself incompatible with the principles of Buddhist meditation. But as we have seen, it remains an open question as to whether the cultivation of mindfulness in the corporate or institutional context would be accompanied by greater ethico-political reflexivity about the questionable motives or adverse consequences of capitalist expansion. What is clear, however, is that inasmuch as mindfulness impacts on the habitual ways we pay attention (or not) to the subtle processes of the body-mind, it is assuming a crucial role in a micropolitics of affect.

Hypotheses for Dialogue

To begin to delineate some hypotheses for dialogue, I'd like to first suggest that Buddhist social theory and the broader initiative of Engaged Buddhism represent what Thrift describes as "attempts to form new political intensities" that are generating "expressive potential and hope" around the fields of contestation outlined above. These attempts at fostering shared ethical sensibilities are "receptive practices," involving the cultivation of "skilful comportment which allows us to be open to receiving new affectively charged disclosive spaces" (70). Consider, for

example, *Tiếp Hiện* or the Order of Interbeing founded by Thich Nhat Hanh. Members of the organization take the vows of the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings, which “allow us to touch the nature of interbeing in everything that is, and to see that our happiness is not separate from the happiness of others.” Importantly, interbeing is not a theory but “a reality that can be experienced by each of us at any moment in our lives” (Order of Interbeing).

The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings function as a kind of manifesto for Buddhist spiritual-social praxis—or to evoke Thrift—for “receptive practices” which are conducive to the fostering of shared ethico-political sensibilities and the easing of personal and social *dukkha*. That the set of vows (pertaining to openness of thought, compassionate communication, social and environmental responsiveness, and others) are articulated in terms of “mindfulness training.” This is indicative of the role of meditative exercise in nourishing these commitments to be receptive and engaged. The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings underscore the idea that meditation ought not be construed as a means to shut oneself from the vicissitudes of the world under the pretext of “inner peace.”

To be clear, I am not denying that mindfulness could lead to inner peace. Indeed, as King notes, the “signature contribution of Engaged Buddhism to spiritual social activism is the idea that work for world peace should be based upon a platform of inner peace,” not least because inner peace allows one to better “keep one’s wit” when dealing with difficult situations (48). Rather, my concern is that a branding rhetoric of “inner peace” also drives “McMindfulness.” As we have seen, the spokesperson at Google’s presentation deflected Heart of the City’s protest by asking the audience to tune in to their bodies. This is an implicit appeal to the benefit of maintaining “inner peace” when confronted with oppositional views and actions. But in this context, would the maintenance of “inner peace” prompt the practitioner to become more reflexive about the adverse consequences of the

institutional agendas—to “optimize impacts,” as Google puts it—with which they are tasked to perform? Or would it rather allow them to carry on with “business as usual,” serving as a means to deflect attention from the adverse consequences of corporate activities by generating feel-good sentiments about the institution’s “spiritually-engaged” pretensions?

There is no straightforward, decisive way to arbitrate on this matter, not least because the adaptation of mindfulness practice across different contexts is not something to be policed (by Buddhist advocates or otherwise). Hence, the need for sustained, collective interrogation of the issue, as Loy and Heart of the City and other critics/activists are doing. To this end, the inquiries of affect studies could help to expand the conceptual vocabulary of Buddhist social theory and vice versa. I want to extrapolate on Thrift’s suggestion that individuals can “learn to be open through a combination of institutional transformation and body trainings which use the half-second delay to act into a situation with good judgment” (70).

The “half-second delay” Thrift alludes to describes the findings of neuroscientist Benjamin Libet’s experiments. By measuring the minimal perceivable lapse between electrical pulses administered to brain receptors and the skin, Libet showed that sensation involves a backward referral in time. For Brian Massumi, a prominent figure in the Spinozian-Deleuzian strand of affect studies, the half-second delay indicates, “sensation is organized recursively before being linearized, before it is redirected outwardly to take its part in a conscious chain of actions and reactions” (28). Or to put it another way, “the brain makes us ready for action, then we have the experience of acting” (Gray 66). This suggests that our conventional experience of the immediacy of conscious activity is rather a kind of “backdated illusion” (McCrone 131). Libet himself postulates, “we may exert free will not by initiating intentions but by vetoing, acceding or otherwise responding to them after they arise” (quoted in Massumi 29).

The claims about the half-second delay are not uncontroversial. Sociologist Nikolas Rose has questioned Libet's "highly simplistic laboratory set-up" and "bizarre reasoning" for the implications of the half-second delay. In particular, Rose is skeptical about the claims of scholars like Connolly, Massumi, and Thrift and even questions their "intellectual honesty," because they do not appear to have interrogated the premises of Libet's experiment or engaged with the life sciences in a sustained and systematic manner (as Rose himself has), even as they build their arguments on the finding of the half-second delay (8). So with the caveat that the objections raised by Rose and others (Leys) be considered as part of the ongoing clarifications of affect studies, I want to offer some provisional hypotheses about the possible contributions of the Buddhist understandings to what Connolly has described as a micropolitics of perception. By speaking of a micropolitics of perception, Connolly is attempting to specify the implications of the half-second delay for our decisions and actions as ethico-political actors. He argues for the importance of experimental tactics of self or arts of living for an ethos of engagement. The long-term aim is to foster new affective and relational capacities in order to set the conditions for a different sociopolitical reality of "deep pluralism." Connolly's vision for a micropolitics of perception joins Buddhist social theory in recognizing the potentially far-reaching (though not immediately measurable) sociopolitical impacts of the personal, localized work of spiritual self-cultivation.

As Thrift suggests, a micropolitics of perception aims to intervene in the feedback loops animating the "constantly moving preconscious frontier" (Thrift 67) designated by the half-second delay, the surge and flow of which unfold at once as possibilities for social manipulation and self-experimentation. This then raises the question of the possibility of narrowing the gap—or at least the possibility of training awareness to become more attuned to mutualizing relations—

between the non-conscious visceral processes of affect and the conscious activities of the body-mind. To what extent does Buddhist meditation practice allow for this?

Such an inquiry could begin with conversations about the dynamics of perception and sensory processes, and the extent to which the attendant (and often unrecognized) habitual tendencies of the body-mind may be targeted by hegemonic imperatives, or whether they may be deconditioned via the countervailing work of spiritual self-cultivation. The conversations could be organized around the following topics drawn from the multidisciplinary research informing Connolly's thinking: (1) *the intersensory dynamics of perception*; (2) *the anticipatory triggers of perception*; and (3) *the influence of discipline on perceptual processes*.

The intersensory dynamics of perception

A micropolitics of perception recognizes that perception is always *intersensory* rather than self-contained. For Connolly, the perceptual process (the example here is visual perception) involves "a complex mixing—during the half-second delay between the reception of sensory experience and the formation of an image—of language, affect, feeling, touch, and anticipation" (46). Citing Laura Marks's discussion of how a film scene composed of voice and grainy visuals was able to evoke a daughter's tactile memory of her deceased mother's skin, he asserts that the "tactile and the visual are interwoven, in that my history of touching objects similar to the one in question is interwoven into my current vision of it" (47). Reviewing the ideas of Merleau-Ponty in light of recent neuroscientific research, Connolly also says: "Perception could not function without a rich history of inter-involvements among embodiment, movement, body image, touch, sight, smell, language, affect, and color" (49).

This account of the intersensory nature of perception finds a counterpart in the Buddhist teaching of the Five Aggregates, which, amongst other things, articulates a dynamic, open-ended and non-linear account of the relations of forces that influence the perceptual process. The aggregate that is usually translated as “perception” is *sañña*, which identifies and recognizes the distinguishing features of sensory stimuli. In the case of visual perception, the relations of forces that cohere between a visual stimulus and the human sensorium—both of which fall under the aggregate of *rūpa* or form—generates the conditions for the arising of *viññana* or consciousness. In the case of visibility, the relation that arises would be eye-consciousness. However, unlike the conventional understanding of the five senses, Buddhist teachings delineate the human sensorium into six sense spheres. The faculty of the mind is regarded as one of them, and it encompasses not only the intellect, but *all* mental phenomena. Hence, eye-consciousness is not self-contained, but cross-modulated by the relations of forces activating mind-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, etc. Whenever sensory contact activates consciousness, *vedanā* arises, which refers to the affective tone of “bare feelings.” Arising co-dependently with these aggregates would be a complex of habitual conditionings called *saṅkhāra*, usually translated as volitional formation.

There are at least two questions we could pose to kickstart the conversation. Firstly, what new perspective might the Buddhist understanding of the mind as *one of the six sense faculties* bring to conventional understandings that posit only five senses? Secondly, how might the Buddhist concept of *vedanā* be cross-read with the concept of “affect”? A key point to consider is that affect is prepersonal, autonomous, not perceivable or sensible in and of itself, and hence to be distinguished from emotion. As Massumi (35) writes, “Formed, qualified, situated perceptions and cognitions fulfilling functions of actual connection or blockage are the capture and closure of affect. Emotion is the most in-

tense (most contracted) expression of that capture.” If affect is distinct from sensation and emotion, how then might we take into account interpretations of *vedanā* that read it as inclusive of sensation (such as the view taken by the U Ba Khin/Goenka lineage of practice)? Or how might we understand affect in relation to the aggregate of *saṅkhāra* under which emotion is categorized?

It should be evident from these preliminary questions that there is no direct comparability between the terms I am drawing together from the respective sets of discourses; it is important not to efface the levels of incommensurability involved. Yet, that there appears to be points of consonance even whilst the specificities of understanding remain incommensurable is precisely why dialogical exchange is so inviting and could potentially lead to mutual enhancement and reciprocal learning. Affect is conceptualized as an intensity that corresponds with the passage of change from one state of the body to another, implying an augmentation or diminution of the body’s capacity to act. This appears consonant with the logic underpinning the Five Aggregates as an account of the ever-changing processes that generate the experience of an embodied, autonomous self that is imbued with the capacity to act.

The anticipatory triggers of perception

Insofar as mindfulness training offers a means to cultivate a different relation to the processes of the body-mind that one is not typically aware, another hypotheses for dialogue would be the question of whether meditation could allow the practitioner to not only become more attuned to the intersensory dynamics of perception but even to decondition the anticipatory triggers of perception: “Perception not only has multiple layers of intersensory memory folded into it, it is suffused with anticipation” (Connolly 48). “Anticipation” here does not mean the projection of a result that is then tested against the effect of experience.

Rather, what Connolly refers to is how “perception expresses a set of anticipatory expectations that help to constitute what it actually becomes” (48). Merleau-Ponty had already pointed to this in *Phenomenology of Perception*, where in considering how the perception of the word “hard” may be accompanied by a stiffening of the back or neck, he suggested that even “before becoming the indication of a concept the word is first an event which grips my body, and this grip circumscribes the area of significance to which it has reference” (235).

Connolly finds renewed support for Merleau-Ponty’s claims in a recent neuroscientific experiment, which measured the body-brain patterns of participants who were asked to follow a series of images that moved, first from left to right, then from right to left. The images moved in such a way that what initially appears to be the sight of a man’s bare head shifts to that of a woman’s naked body. On the first viewing, the point at which the gestalt switch occurred varied amongst the participants. On the second viewing, almost all the participants identified the shift in perception at a much later point in the trial. What this indicated to the researchers is that the “brain is a self-organizing, pattern-forming system that operates close to instability points, thereby allowing it to switch flexibly and spontaneously from one coherent state to another” (quoted in Connolly 49).

For the purpose of dialogue, might we not locate this finding of the unstable, flexible and spontaneous triggers of perception in the analogous context of mindful observation? Sustained training in mindfulness allows one to become aware of the instability of not the brain as such, but the processes of the Five Aggregates that generate the pattern-forming system of “I,” “me,” or “mine.” For example, the body-mind’s capacity to flip over unexpectedly from one coherent state to another can be observed in formal meditation practice. It would be a common experience, I believe, even for seasoned meditators, to find themselves

spontaneously phasing in and out, as it were, of a state of absorption or composure to distractedness or restlessness and vice versa.

Consider also a common pragmatic strategy for dealing with situations of anger by resting awareness on the breath, or by being attentive to discomfort in the body, or by silently noting the arising of thoughts or emotions. By making the effort to be mindful of the mutualizing force relations between external stimuli (e.g., words and gestures), intersensory perception (e.g., the recognition of words and gestures as “abusive”) and the affective tone/sensation that arises (e.g., “unpleasant” heat suffusing the back of the neck or quickening of the breath)—this could serve to defuse the force of self-organizing habitual conditionings (e.g., that belligerence warrants responses of equal or greater measures of belligerence), liberating conscious awareness in such a way that one feels less encumbered by the flurry of thoughts, emotions, sensations, predispositions and habitual reactions arising in the heat of the moment.

So to paraphrase the researchers of the experiment cited above, perhaps Buddhist social theory could account for the micropolitical, transformative force of mindfulness training in terms of the body-mind’s potential as a self-organizing, pattern-forming system that operates close to instability points, and which may switch flexibly and spontaneously from one coherent state to another? Or to evoke Connolly, perhaps Buddhist social theory could shed new light on the extent to which we could actively modulate the anticipatory triggers that help to constitute what perception actually becomes?

The influence of discipline on the perceptual process

In a micropolitics of perception, habits of in/attention play a crucial role. Consider, for instance, the following reflections by Massumi on the interrelation between attention and the processes of the body-mind:

There is no thought that is not accompanied by a physical sensation of effort or agitation (if only a knitting of the brows, a pursing of the lips, or a quickening of heartbeat). This sensation, which may be muscular (proprioceptive), tactile, or visceral is backgrounded. This does not mean it disappears into the background. It means that it appears as the background against which the conscious thought stands out: its felt environment. The accompanying sensation encompasses the thought that detaches itself from it. Reading, however cerebral it may be, does not entirely think out sensation. It is not purified of it. A knitting of the brows or pursing of the lips is a self-referential action. Its sensation is a turning in on itself of the body's activity, so that the action is not extended toward an object but knots at its point of emergence: rises and subsides into its own incipency, in the same movement. The acts of attention performed during reading are forms of incipient action. (Massumi 139)

How might the diverse teachings and techniques of contemplation in Buddhism enter into dialogue with the consonant account of the interrelation between in/attention and the subtle processes of the body-mind described here? Again, we could ask if the disciplining of in/attention in Buddhist spiritual-social praxis offers a way to train the body-mind to become more sensitive to the muscular/proprioceptive, tactile, or visceral forces that form the background of conscious thought. In Massumi's example of reading, he is drawing on Henri Bergson's thinking to illustrate how perception is an incipient action, and reciprocally, action an incipient perception. From this perspective, incipient perceptions are enfolded in the muscular, tactile, and visceral sensations of attention. The attentional practice of reading entails the turning in on itself of the body, or what Massumi describes as the "self-referential short-circuiting of outward-projected activity." This gives free rein to incipient perceptions: "In the experience of reading, conscious thought,

sensation, and all the modalities of perception fold into and out of each other. Attention most twisted” (Massumi 139). Might we say the same for formal meditation practice—that it suspends outward-projected activity in order to cultivate mindfulness of the breath, posture, affective tone, sensation, mindstates and/or conceptual activity (i.e., the four foundations of mindfulness)? Is meditation a more direct and intense form of the self-referential short-circuiting process that Massumi exemplifies with reading? In any case, whether it be reading or meditation, what is involved is the training of attention, or to put it in the inverse, the disciplining of inattention.

Inquiries in affect studies on the anticipatory triggers of intersensory perception and habits of in/attention join Buddhist social theory in recognizing the need to investigate what Loy calls “collective attention traps”: “How has the development of the modern/postmodern world affected human attention generally? Not only *what* we attend to, but *how* we attend to it” (Money 96). Loy identifies four interrelated challenges: the fragmentation of attention, the commodification of attention, the control of attention, and the liberation of attention. He asks if the so-called “IT revolution” has generated a problem of restless distraction that circumscribes our engagement with such entertainment technologies and practices as portable MP3 players, channel-surfing, “one click” orders on Amazon, video games, and internet surfing (Money 97). Restless distraction, he further claims, is a problem that is exacerbated by the pervasiveness of advertisements that not only grab our attention but exploit it: “By manipulating the gnawing sense of lack that haunts our insecure sense of self, the attention economy insinuates its basic message deep into our awareness: the solution to any discomfort we might have is consumption” (Loy Money 100). Loy further asserts that:

it seems doubtful that any social protest movement could be successful without an alternative understanding of

what our attention is and what alternative practices promote more liberated attention . . . [W]hat does it really mean for awareness to be here-and-now, deconditioned from attention traps both individual and collective? (*Money* 102)

This problematic of attentional discipline/control recalls Thrift's claims above about how a new structure of attention has emerged as an object-target of power in contemporary times. But this has also enabled new openings for the countervailing ethico-political work of artful conduct, which is predicated on the understanding that "[p]ower is coded into perception" (Connolly 55). This is the general view shared by Foucault and Merleau-Ponty. Although their work proceeds on different pathways, they both demonstrated "how perception requires a prior *disciplining* of the senses in which a rich history of sensory inter-involvement sets the stage for later experience" (Connolly 52). However, given that neither Foucault nor Merleau-Ponty were able to anticipate the penetration of tele-technology into all domains of social life, it is necessary to update their ideas by refracting them through contemporary insights on the power of the media in shaping the modalities of perception. Because this "ubiquitous force flows into the circuits of discipline, perception, self-awareness, and conduct," it would not suffice only to track the "pattern of media ownership," but it is just as important "to examine the methods through which it becomes insinuated into the shape and tone of perception" (Connolly 54).

My point here is to underscore a fundamental Foucauldian insight: that every assertion of power generates the condition for its resistance. In order to expose attentional traps, it is important to interrogate the propaganda function and political economic influence of transnational media. But the *liberation* of attention also requires receptivity towards the ways in which the audience may actively resist

or subvert the power asserted by the media or other institutional forces.⁷ In this respect, Massumi's observations about the dynamics of in/attention is instructive as they recognize the problem of distraction circumscribing contemporary media habits, without losing sight of the potential for new opportunities for conscious reflection:

Television assumes and fosters a certain inattention, as the viewing body is invited to zap channels or slip relays to other activities into the commercial slots and slow patches. Watching movies and reading books command considerably more attention, and thus tend toward the other direction. Hypertext surfing combines both modes. Link after link, we click ourselves into a lull. But suddenly something else clicks in, and our attention awakens, perhaps even with a raised eyebrow. Surfing sets up a rhythm of attention and distraction. This means that it can fold into its own process a wider range of envelopments and reciprocities of sensation, incipient perception, and conscious reflection. (139)

⁷ In this respect, Buddhist social theory could engage with research in media and cultural studies on the capacity of media users to channel and redistribute the power circulating through media networks in creative and empowering ways. To cite just one example of the work of media theorist Henry Jenkins, who has cautioned against the sweeping, "pessimistic" criticisms of commentators like Noam Chomsky and Robert McChesney. Describing himself as a "critical utopian," Jenkins recognizes the very real challenges posed by big media corporations, but he is in favor of a more receptive approach that takes into account the complex ways in which people negotiate their engagements with the media, and the emergent possibility that new media technologies allow for a more diverse, participatory culture. He writes, "The politics of critical utopianism is founded on a notion of empowerment; the politics of critical pessimism is founded on a politics of victimization. One focuses on what we are doing with media, and the other on what media are doing to us" (248). Might we not imagine a "middle way" that is more aligned with Buddhist principles?

This brings us back to the central problematic of this article: the ethico-political significance of mindfulness. Amidst all the attempts by dominant structures of power to colonize attention, it seems that mindfulness can function as a countervailing force. To paraphrase Massumi, mindfulness can help us actualize the potential for a wider range of envelopments and reciprocities of sensation, incipient perception, and conscious reflection. To Engaged Buddhists and advocates of a micropolitics of perception, this embodied practice of attuning ourselves to the affective forces of everyday life would serve as the basis for a stronger ethos of engagement and social responsibility. However, as we have seen, there is no guarantee of this outcome. In fact, there is a very real danger that the same appeal to spiritual self-cultivation is being co-opted by capitalist agendas—the ethico-political significance of mindfulness remains open to contestations. Hence, my argument for intellectual, political, and spiritual alliances between Engaged Buddhism and other movements sharing a similar objective of awakening-struggle. To this end, I have endeavored to show, albeit very schematically, the productivity of dialogical exchange between Buddhist social theory and affect studies.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by touching briefly on some possible objections to this article. Firstly, it might be objected to that I am turning Buddhist social theory into an exercise of theorizing for its own sake. Such a criticism may be valid in relation to a form of capitalized “Theory” that emerged out of an encounter between Anglo-American literary theory and continental philosophy. But the theorizing performed here is not theory for theory’s sake. I have situated it at the outset within the “trialectic” model of Engaged Buddhism comprising scholarly inquiry, spiritual practice, and social activism. As evinced by the protest against

Google's corporate mindfulness program (which reflects the broader contested trend of "McMindfulness"), the theoretical experimentations I suggest are pertinent to current contestations over the ethico-political significance of meditation practice and the possible misappropriation of mindfulness by corporate and institutional forces.

I have also positioned the foregoing discussion as a mode of Buddhist critical-constructive reflection, which refers to the myriad ways by which committed, practicing Buddhist scholars may cross-fertilize Buddhist teachings with the research of the secular academy. And this relates to a second possible objection—that my approach to Buddhist social theory does not have any immediate "application." But such a criticism ignores the aims of Buddhist critical-constructive reflection, which amongst other things, is to discover new lines of inquiry for the adaptation of Buddhist teachings to contemporary circumstances. This criticism also presupposes that the scope and reach of Buddhist social theory has already been determined—but this is to impose limitations on an emergent field of study whose rich potential lies in the fact that it may be developed in inventive ways through the meeting of Buddhist understandings and other knowledge-practices. The "application" of this article, therefore, is not so much to prescribe any specific course of action, but more modestly, to set the groundwork for dialogical exchange.

In response to the possible objection that the theoretical exercise performed here is merely "academic," I would cite Sallie B. King, who emphasizes that "Engaged Buddhism is not at war with academia." Rather, its proponents are "quite ready to embrace and put into practice such findings of academia as they find useful" (66). Of course, I am not presuming that readers would embrace the claims of affect studies presented in this article—certainly not without sustained inquiry on the matter. In the spirit of intellectual friendliness and ecumenism that

guides Engaged Buddhism, my hope is simply that readers who are exploring Buddhist social theory would at least begin to consider the productiveness of the conversations proposed above for the ongoing awakening-struggle.

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