Changing the Way Society Changes:
Transposing Social Activism into a Dramatic Key

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Abstract: While many Buddhists are rightly committed to working in the public sphere for the resolution of suffering, there are very real incompatibilities between the axiomatic concepts and strategic biases of (the dominant strands of) both current human rights discourse and social activism and such core Buddhist practices as seeing all things as interdependent, impermanent, empty, and karmically configured. Indeed, the almost startling successes of social activism have been ironic, hinging on its strategic and conceptual indebtedness to core values shared with the technological and ideological forces that have sponsored its own necessity. The above–mentioned Buddhist practices provide a way around the critical blind spot instituted by the marriage of Western rationalism, a technological bias toward control, and the axiomatic status of individual human being, displaying the limits of social activism's institutional approach to change and opening concrete possibilities for a dramatically Buddhist approach to changing the way societies change.

Formally established tolerance of dissent and internal critique has become a mark of distinction among contemporary societies. Indeed, with economic globalization and the rhetoric of democracy acting in practically unassailable concert, the imperative to establish and maintain

the conditions under which political protest and social activism are possible has become the keystone challenge to developing nations throughout Africa, Asia, and Central and South America.

It is not my intention here to question the legitimacy of this challenge. The possibility of dissent is crucial to realizing a truly responsive society capable of correcting its own errors of judgement and organizational practice, and institutional changes of the sort brought about by political protest and social activism have undeniably been instrumental in this process. What I want to question are the prevalent strategies for bringing about such corrections and the axiological presuppositions on which they pivot. Although it may be true that "nothing succeeds like success," it is also true that nothing more readily blinds us to inherent flaws in the means and meaning of our successes than 'success' itself. Critical inattention to the strategic axioms underlying the successful engineering of political and social change might, in other words, finally render our best–intended efforts self–defeating.

My thesis, then, is a disquieting one: social activism's successes have hinged on its strategic and conceptual indebtedness to core values shared with the technological and ideological forces that have sponsored its own necessity. That is, the same conditions that have made successful social activism possible have also made it necessary. With potentially tragic irony, social activist practices — and theory — have been effectively reproducing rather than truly reducing the conditions of institutionalized disadvantage and dependence.

In a liberal democratic context, such a thesis verges on political and philosophical heresy, and if we are hard pressed to take it seriously, it is only because the positive and progressive nature of the changes wrought by social activism are so manifestly self–evident. Unfortunately, if our prevailing standards of reason and critical inquiry are not entirely neutral, the manifestly positive and progressive nature of social activism's history might be the result of a critical blind–spot. In that case, the ironic nature of social activist success would be effectively invisible.

As a way around any such critical lacunae, I will be appealing to such core Buddhist practices as seeing all things as impermanent, as karmically configured, and as empty or interdependent. These practices and the theories adduced in their support mark a radical inversion of the critical and logical priorities constitutive of the philosophical, religious, and political traditions that have governed our dominant conceptions of freedom and civil society. By systematically challenging our bias for subordinating values to facts, relationships to the related, uniqueness to universality, and contribution to control, Buddhist practice makes possible a meaningful as-

sessment and revision of social activist strategy. Importantly, it also opens the possibility of critically evaluating the phenomenon of "engaged Buddhism" and its ostensibly corrective relationship with the root conditions of suffering.

Until now, social activists have been able to effectively contest institutionalized disadvantage and dependence at the institutional level, securing basic civil and human rights by using many of the same values and technologies employed in first establishing and then maintaining structural inequity. To the extent that it has been noted, the shared genealogy of social activist solutions and the problems they address has been subsumed under the rubric of a pragmatically justified separation of means and ends. If the present critique has any merit, our thankfulness for the apparent gains made by social activists in promoting basic human dignities must not be allowed to distract us from appreciating the rapidity with which we are approaching a point of no return beyond which fighting fire with fire will no longer be an option.

Caution on the Tracks: Recognizing the Possibility of Technological Barriers to the Meaning of Social Change

Andrew Kimbrell (in Mills, 1997, p. 105) has noted that if technology is "the primary engine of social change…you can't promote social change without changing technology." The corollary of this is that failing to change our technological bias means failing to promote any shift in the *direction* or meaning of social change. Absent such a shift, successful social activism will increasingly mean at once the amplification and deepening subtlety of the problems it has ostensibly addressed and solved.

We can begin sorting out the roots of this apparent paradox by noting some of the common hallmarks of successful social activism. In contrast with most religious eschatologies, the salvific efforts of social activism have been directed toward securing the rights and freedoms, not of unique persons or communities, but of individuals sharing membership in a particular class — be it defined economically, ethnically, racially, religiously, or by age or sexual orientation. While social activists do not deny the importance and even necessity of uniquely personal forms of human development, they typically maintain that these are not sufficient means of rectifying systemic or structural injustice. Thus, while it is all well and good for a particular woman to break through the glass ceiling of corporate management, it is the proper aim of social activism to realize conditions under which *all* women will be guaranteed the possibility of such success. Society, and not just the human beings it comprises, must change.

Presumably, this is not most "efficiently" done by changing individual minds and habits, but by revising the structure of interactions obtaining among classes of people. Changing societies in any usefully short period of time depends on the mass reorganization of their structural features. Granted this, social activist success necessarily pivots on leveraging the powers that organize a society by cultivating and making incisive use of the power to organize. Social activism consists of *consolidating power to redistribute power*, in this way undermining injustice and structural inequity. Of course, relocating any controlling advantage — either within or among societies — requires much more than good intentions. First and foremost it needs a capacity for attracting and directing attention on a massive scale and an insider's understanding of the prevailing culture of power. Without these, social activist efforts are doomed from the point of conception onward to be exercises in mere wishful thinking.

A critical history of social activism is thus inseparable from the history of technologies that make possible the widespread command of attention and the selective biasing of power. Indeed, without the technologies that spawned the printing press, radio, television, and now the Internet, social activism would have been restricted to the charitable dreams of those already in power or both able and willing to violently usurp them.

The inseparability of these histories has for the most part been considered natural and unproblematic. But consider the complex political roles played by various forms of mass media since the turn of the century — from widely distributed print news, to radio, television, and now the Internet. There is no denying that the media have provided an indispensable means of promoting such social activist causes as the women's suffrage movement, trade unionism, and civil rights, but they also served as a forum for the kind of mass advertising essential to the constitution of a distinctively American consumer culture, its expansion into global markets, and the corporate consolidation of economic advantage worldwide.

Thus, although winning women's voting rights can be correlated with high circulation print and photography media, so can the construction of the twentieth century's various "ideal" body images and canons of beauty. These images and standards can be further correlated with epidemic eating disorders, mass consumption of cosmetics and quarterly fashions, the commodification of ethnic features, and the universal standardization of body language. Similarly, although it was possible in 1968 for African–American athletes to use worldwide television coverage of the Olympic track and field events in Mexico City to protest the continued abuse of minority rights in the United States, in 1998 the global cost of televised advertising well exceeded the worldwide total of *all* national expenditures

for primary and secondary education. Television serves as an apparent forum for protest, but also as a means of schooling consumers en masse for optimal market performance.

If the relationship between social activism and such means of influence as printing presses and Internet–linked computers was a purely instrumental one, there might be little cause for concern about these intertwined histories. Indeed, the illusion of such a relationship is beautifully summed up in the image of a generation "turning swords into plowshares" — transforming, for example, the military–built Internet into a tool for free self–expression. Unfortunately, it is only at great risk that technologies can be reduced to the tools they spawn and evaluated on the basis of each tool's individual utility. Doing so commits us to continuously rehearsing the central premise of the widely prevailing myth that technologies as such are value–neutral. They are not. Turning swords into plowshares does not finally mean the peaceful application of war technologies, but the practical declaration of war on the earth and against its varied plant and animal populations.

I have argued at some length (Hershock, 1999) that evaluating technologies on the basis of the tools they generate commits us to taking individual users and not the dramatic patterns of our lived interdependence as the primary locus of evaluation. In doing so, we effectively exclude from consideration precisely that domain in which the values informing our technological bias have the most direct bearing on the quality of our personal and communal conduct — the movement of our shared narration. This has led to a stubborn and at times even righteous blindness regarding our slippage into a new era of colonization — a colonization, not of lands or cultural spheres, but of consciousness as such. Indeed, the disposition to ignore the critical space of interdependence has been so thoroughly prevalent that the conditions of possibility for this new form of colonialism are widely championed — in both the "developed" and the "developing" world — as essential to establishing and safeguarding our individual and collective dignity, a crucial component of our growing equality and autonomy.

By using the same information technologies employed by those individuals and institutions perpetrating and perpetuating the inequitable distribution of power and wealth, social activists may have enjoyed the opportunity to "beat them at their own game." However, they have also insured that everyone remains on the same playing field, playing the same game. Social activist successes have in this way blinded us to our deepening submission to technologies of control and the consequent depletion of precisely those attentive resources needed to meaningfully accord with our changing circumstances and contribute to them as needed.

The costs of such blindness are practically limitless. The more "successful" a technology is, the more indispensable it becomes. That is, all technologies are liable to crossing thresholds beyond which they generate more new problems than they solve. Because technologies arise as patterns of value–driven conduct, they function as ambient amplifiers of our individual and cultural karma — our experience–conditioning, intentional activity. In crossing the threshold of their utility, technologies create the karmic equivalent of a gravitational black hole, funneling all available attention–energy into themselves. For the dominant technological lineage correlated with the rise of liberal democracy and the imperative for social activism, this has meant an intensification of our karma for both controlling and being controlled. The more successfully we extend the limits of control, the more we extend the range of what can and must be controlled. In capsule form: the better we get at getting what we want, the better we get at wanting; but the better we get at wanting, the better we get at getting what we want, though we won't want what we get. This karmic circularity is pernicious, and the attention–energy invested in it to date has already brought about an epidemic depletion of precisely those resources needed for realizing dramatically satisfying — and not merely factually sufficient — solutions to our troubles, both personal and communal.

The methodological irony of social activism is that it does not free us from dependence, but rather sustains its very possibility. This is not as paradoxical as it might sound. Insuring our independence by means of restructuring the institutions that mediate our contact with one another renders us dependent on those institutions — on the structure, and hence the technologies, of our mediation. In consequence, our freedom comes to be increasingly dependent on the rationalization and regulation of our relationships with one another — the realization of secure and yet generic co–existence. Just as the technology–driven transformation of societies in the industrial and post–industrial eras has involved an ever more detailed refinement of class divisions and labor categories, social activism advances through an ever more varied identification of *populations in need* of guaranteed freedoms.

In valorizing both autonomy and equality, social activism denies our dramatic interdependence and tacitly endorses not–seeing (*avidyā*) or not–attending to the full set of conditions sponsoring our present situation. Although unique and deeply local patterns of injustice may be important in building a legal case, the work of social activism is not to encourage our liberating intimacy with such patterns. Rather, it consists of constructing legal mechanisms for exerting reformative control over institutional structures and the processes by means of which (generically) given individuals

play or are forced to play particular roles therein.

Unfortunately, as generic 'women', 'children', 'workers', or 'minorities', the beneficiaries of social activism are effectively cut off from precisely those aspects of their circumstances, relationships, and self–understanding which provide them with the resources necessary for locally realizing meaningful — and not merely factual — alternatives to the patterns of injustice in which they find themselves embedded. Among the products of social activism are thus virtual communities of individuals having no immediate and dramatically responsive relationship with one another — individuals who have relinquished or been deprived of intimate connection with the causes and conditions of both their troubles and those troubles' meaningful resolution.

With no intended disregard of the passion many activists bring to their work, social activism has aimed at globally re–engineering our political, economic and societal environments in much the same way that our dominant technological lineage has been committed to re–making our world — progressively "humanizing" and "rationalizing" the abundantly capricious natural circumstances into which we human beings have found ourselves "thrown." This shared strategic genealogy is particularly disturbing, suggesting that — like all technologies oriented toward control — social activism is liable to rendering itself indispensable. If the history of social activism is inseparable from the rise and spread of influential technologies and subject to similar accelerating and retarding conditions, so is its future.

Social Activist Strategy: Legally Leveraging Institutional Change

While it has become common practice to decry the excessive legalism of contemporary societies, the ramifications of strategic collusion between social activism and the way we have technically and legally tooled our factual co–existence have remained largely unattended. In part, this is because the legal bias of social activism has appeared so incontestably "practical." Legislation allows for directly restructuring power relations and negotiating justice at the "highest" possible levels. The legislative process has also become the dominant technology for mediating divergent claims about the facts of our (often troubled) co–existence and for preserving "fair" definitions of 'being right' and 'being wronged'.

The trouble is that, like other technologies biased toward control, the more successful legislation becomes, the more it renders itself necessary. Because it aims at rigorous definition — at establishing hard boundaries or limits — crossing the threshold of legislative utility means creating conditions under which the definition of freedom becomes so complex as to be

self–defeating. Taken to its logical end, legally–biased social activism is thus liable to effect an infinite density of protocols for maintaining autonomy, generating a matrix of limits on discrimination that would finally be conducive to what might be called "axiological entropy" — a state in which movement in any direction is equally unobstructed *and* empty of dramatic potential. Contrary to expectations, complete "freedom of choice" would not mean the elimination of all impediments to meaningful improvisation, but rather an erasure of the latter's conditions of possibility.

The effectiveness and efficiency of "hard," control–biased technologies depend on our using natural laws — horizons of possibility — as fulcrums for leveraging or dictating changes in the structure of our circumstances. Unlike improvised contributions to changes taking place in our situation, dictating the terms of change effectively silences our situational partners. Technological authority thus renders our circumstances mute and justifies ignoring the contributions that might be made by the seasons or the spiritual force of the mountains to the meaning — the direction of movement — of our ongoing patterns of interdependence. With the "perfection" of technically–mediated control, our wills would know no limit. We would be as gods, existing with no imperatives, no external compulsions, and no priorities. We would have no reason to do one thing first or hold one thing, and not another, as most sacred or dear.

Such "perfection" is, perhaps, as fabulous and unattainable as it is finally depressing. Yet the vast energies of global capital are committed to moving in its direction, for the most part quite uncritically. The consequences — as revealed in the desecration and impoverishing of both 'external' and 'internal' wilderness (for instance, the rainforests and our imaginations) — are every day more evident. The critical question we must answer is whether the "soft" technologies of legally–biased and controlled social change commit us to an equivalent impoverishment and desecration.

The analogy between the dependence of technological progress on natural laws and that of social activism on societal laws is by no means perfect. Except among a scattering of philosophers and historians of science, for example, the laws of nature are not viewed as changeable artifacts of human culture. But for present purposes, the analogy need only focus our attention on the way legal institutions — like natural laws — do not prescriptively determine the shape of all things to come, but rather establish generic limits for what relationships or states of affairs are factually admissible. Laws that guarantee certain "freedoms" necessarily also prohibit others. Without the fulcrums of *unallowable* acts, the work of changing a society would remain as purely idealistic as using wishful thinking to move mountains. Changing legal institutions at once forces and enforces

societal reform.

By affirming and safeguarding those freedoms or modes of autonomy that have come to be seen as generically essential to 'being human', a legally–biased social activism cannot avoid selectively limiting the ways we engage with one another. The absence of coercion may be a basic aim of social activism, but if our autonomy is to be guaranteed both fair and just, its basic strategy must be one of establishing non–negotiable constraints on how we co–exist. Social activism is thus in the business of striking structural compromises between its ends and its means — between particular freedoms and general equality, and between practical autonomy and legal anonymity. By shifting the locus of freedoms from unique persons to generic citizens — and in substantial sympathy with both the Platonic renunciation of particularity and the scientific discounting of the exceptional and extraordinary — social activist methodology promotes dramatic anonymity in order to universally realize the operation of 'blind justice'.

Much as hard technologies of control silence the contributions of wilderness and turn us away from the rewards of a truly joint improvisation of order, the process of social activism reduces the relevance of the always unique and unprecedented terrain of our interdependence. This is no small loss. The institutions that guarantee our generic independence effectively pave over those vernacular relationships through which our own contributory virtuosity might be developed and shared — relationships out of which the exceptional meaning of our immediate situation might be continuously realized. In contrast with Buddhist emptiness — a practice that entails attending to the mutual relevance of all things — both the aims and strategies of social activism are conducive to an evacuation of the conditions of dramatic virtuosity, a societal depletion of our resources for meaningfully improvised and liberating intimacy with all things.

Giving up the Ghost *and* the Machine: A Buddhist Critique of the Technologies of Autonomous Selfhood

For the social activist, independence and freedom are inconceivable without secure boundaries between who we 'are' and who and what we 'are–not'. The rhetoric of Western liberalism is that we must be free to resist subordinating, institutional definition — free, that is, to assert or claim boundaries that are finally self–willed, even idiosyncratic. Freedom, so construed, depends on limited responsibility, limited demands on our time and attention. As the Platonic analogy above suggests, regulation is essential to identity precisely because we are essentially rational beings — beings who measure and who can be measured; who divide the world into

near and far, private and public; who thrive on distinctions of every sort, in fact. Securing the integrity of the individual members of a given class of people in a given society is at bottom a process of legal rationalization — the creation of an anonymously ordered and yet autonomy–supporting domain. The aims of social activism may be ostensibly 'selfless', but in practice social activism directs us toward the increasing regulation and generic preservation of selfishness.

But what if there are no truly individual selves to preserve? What if interdependence and the unprecedented are basic, and not — as presumed by social activism's philosophical and religious parent traditions — the competitive dichotomies of 'self' and 'other', 'independence' and 'dependence', 'free will' and 'determinism', 'order' and 'chaos', 'permanence' and 'change', 'universality' and 'particularity', 'fact' and 'value', 'subject' and 'object', or 'agent' and 'acted–upon'? Quite clearly, it is the tension between the members of these axial pairings that has largely compelled political, social, and spiritual revolution in the Western tradition. If these should turn out to be wholly contingent cultural artifacts and not 'natural features' of our world, can a social activism presuming them ever truly avoid replicating the conditions of their continued possibility?

By linking freedom and equality, and by associating the former with individual autonomy and the latter with legal anonymity, social activism both reflects and works in concert with the conditions sponsoring our intensifying sense of a tension between the personal and communal, between each one of us and our situation. It is this tension — and the threat it poses to our identification of who we 'are' and 'are–not' — that disposes us toward legally, if only generically, securing our boundaries. The logic of social activist freedom — like the logic of classical scientific discourse — is based on the inviolability of the law of the excluded middle, the necessity of instituting a clear space of demarcation between 'is' and 'is–not'. That is, freedom is won by means of a process that closes off attention to the unprecedented and intimate middle ground of our dramatic interdependence and any meaningful contributions we might otherwise have been able to offer or receive from it.

Granted the Buddha's unequivocal injunction to see 'is' and 'is–not' as the "twin barbs" on which all humankind is impaled, the pursuit of freedom so defined cannot but institute the root conditions for conflict and a preoccupation with security. The valorization of anonymity and autonomy institutionalizes ignorance and thus at once shadows and ensures the continued possibility of authoritarianism and coercion. Because the world of autonomy is, at bottom, an Hegelian one in which all masters of their circumstances are the antitheses of 'others' who are thereby enslaved, the

most carefully wrought legal institutions — the products of successful social activism — may effectively soften the modalities of our bondage, but will never entirely dissolve them. Secure borders not only keep threats from coming in, they prohibit free expression or movement outward.

There is no disputing that social activist movements have led to dismantling such degrading and highly partial institutions as slavery, segregated schooling, and sex–specific hiring practices. But because many of the teleological and strategic building blocks — that is, the foundational concepts — of these institutions have been salvaged in the process of legally managing our 'fair' and 'just' co–existence, our progress has been in the direction of more complex, global, and invisible institutions for our regulated mediation. New powers certainly reign, but it is still a reign of power in which every instance of factual independence is purchased at the cost of increasing dependence on those (largely legal, but also technological and cultural) institutions that generically insure our collective right to be left alone and to dictate the tenor of our circumstances. Degradation has not been abolished. Instead, by virtue of our bias for dealing with conflicts or social malaise through control, degradation has been woven ever more finely and essentially into the fabric of our shared narration. The locus of structurally compromised dignity is, however, not primarily 'you' and 'me' as individuals, but our relationships as such — the interpersonal body of our conduct. Thus, although each one of us is on average better off and freer than ever before, *we* — our marriages, our families, our communities — are not.

From a Buddhist perspective, this "unexpected" consequence of social activist success — like the broken promises of technological salvation — pivots on our critical inattention to the karmic nature of the world in which we live. By wrongly assuming that relationships are logically and ontologically posterior to whatever 'is' related, and by asserting the "natural" existence of persons as individuals possessing transcendent rights to autonomy in an essentially impersonal and objective world, we have tacitly granted an invisible and highly valorized status to a critical blind spot. Hence the impossibility of mounting a discussion of freedom without invoking determinism and the perennial divergence of what is good for 'me' and what is good for 'us'.[1] At the same time, since placing too weighty an emphasis on either 'good' necessarily upsets the ground of our co–existence, and since the control of any situation can never be truly shared, such existential upsets are from the outset guaranteed. Blind to our karmic or dramatically interdependent nature and firmly holding to the either/or logic of the excluded middle, we have developed a notion of freedom that is contradictory and self–defeating. The very 'freedom' that legally instituted

human rights are intended to secure and preserve is what makes these rights necessary in the first place.[2]

It was insight into precisely this auto–generative pattern of upset or trouble (*dukkha*) that occasioned the Buddha's injunction to see all things as empty of any essential self–nature — to relinquish not only our individual habits of self–identification, but also the security of our cultural inheritance of axiomatic "facts" about the way things really are and should be. Attending to the emptiness of all things — ourselves included — promises nothing short of a new "Copernican" revolution by means of which the self–other and freedom–determinism dichotomies are effectively undermined and concrete avenues opened for the practice of a truly social activism aimed at dissolving the dramatic conditions of (especially chronic) suffering.

Emptiness as Horizonless Interconnection and Mutual Relevance: Freeing Ourselves from the Ideal of Factual Autonomy and the Costs of Dramatic Anonymity

It is a common misconception that the Buddhist practice of seeing all things as empty involves a nihilistic detachment from our circumstances. In fact, it entails carefully freeing things from the univocal assertion of their existence in keeping with our own, often quite prejudiced, importances. Practicing emptiness makes it possible for the horizonless and always reciprocal relevance of all things to freely manifest.

As an attribute, the emptiness of all things consists of their unique ways of arising *only as* patterns of interdependence or mutual contribution, having neither fixed and defining essences nor hard boundaries segregating them from one another. Because such 'essences' and 'boundaries' arise as functions of projected horizons for relevance, relinquishing these horizons through the *practice* of emptiness is to relinquish our own fixed positions, our own segregated identities and limiting perspectives. The liberation of things from the imposition of identities based on our own fixed categories is thus inseparable from our own liberation from both the arrogant illusion of autonomy and the tragic alienation of anonymity. Finally, Buddhist emptiness does not mean vacuity, but an infinite depth of meaningful interrelationship. Fully practiced, it occasions horizonless, responsive, and dramatic community — the elision of any conceptual, perceptual, or emotional blockages we have to appreciating the uniqueness, value, and contributory depth of all things.

As epitomized in the attainment of *upāya* (unlimited skill–in–means) by those *bodhisattvas* (enlightening beings) who have realized non–reli-

ance and the art of responding without any fixed perspective, fully appreci-
ating the emptiness of all things is associated with horizonless virtuosity in
improvising meaningful resolutions to trouble. Contrary to the biases of
our technological lineage and legalistic activism, this is not accomplished
by controlling circumstances, but through contributory appreciation; not
by means of leveraging power in order to get what is wanted, but by dedi-
cating unlimited attention–energy to realizing dramatic partnership with
all things. The bodhisattva does not heal through accumulating and wield-
ing power, but through *dānapāramitā* or the perfection of offering.

Granted this, the ironic nature of the successes of liberal democratic
social activism can be traced to its legal and generic definition of what
everyone has a right to expect or possess. Protecting the rights of a particu-
lar class of individuals — at least for the purposes of protest and legal
change — depends on first establishing these individuals' essential and
identifying characteristics and what they presently lack or want. But that is
also to ignore their emptiness. It is to exclude the always surprising middle
ground on which we find ourselves most intimately related and thus most
capable of meaningfully contributing to — not getting something from —
our community. Karmically, rights discourse legitimates the atrophy of
those attentive resources needed to revise the dramatic — and not just the
institutional — structure of society.

The now common practice of 'settling' of disputes between neighbors
through the filing of lawsuits is a good example of how our dramatic inter-
dependence in conflict resolution is marginalized. A more structural exam-
ple is the way in which winning workers' rights in developing countries
typically *legitimates* further development along already existing lines, and
reinforces — rather than challenges — the hierarchy of power, skewing
the benefits of commerce toward those controlling capital and not toward
those contributing labor. Far from liberating workers in any meaningful
way, this finally stifles local creativity and eliminates alternatives to a glo-
balization of the economy and the commodification of culture.

"People" may be materially assisted through legally securing their
"universal" rights, but they are not thereby helped to more fully offer them-
selves to realizing meaningful and corrective intimacy with the conditions
that have been subordinating their own unique interests and creativity. In
the absence of such dramatic intimacy, the only recourse is to change the
overt facts of the prevailing situation — a course of action in which progress
is always correlated with the exercise of power. This tends to be shortsighted
and focused on treating common symptoms of oppression rather than the
network of conditions sponsoring the poverty of a community's narration.
Successfully undermining and then rebuilding the factual institutions of a

society can indeed secure generic freedoms for ultimately generic individuals, but it cannot cultivate or conserve locally responsive and dramatic creativity. Universal solutions solve universal problems — never the unique ones in which alone we find ourselves personally implicated.

In keeping with the Buddhist teaching of emptiness, Gustavo Esteva (1987) has argued, for example, that development is not an answer to the needs of "the poor," but rather a substantial threat to their present and future well–being. In fact, development thinking manufactures and "benignly" exports "poverty." It creates classes of sometimes millions of people who must be given assistance "*because*" they are powerless to help themselves. As an alternative, Esteva suggests that strenuous effort must be made to reclaim the commons, displacing the economics of development, and cultivating instead an ethos of hospitality. In the absence of such a turn toward meaningfully intimate relationships and away from generic legalism, the influx of new goods and services will not be conducive to the realization of vibrant and resilient community, but only increasing dependence on these services and slavery to the living standards they implicitly impose.

The criticism here is not, however, only that care must be taken not to help others for the sake of condescension. The teaching of emptiness insists that equal care be exercised in avoiding the temptation to rationalize doing nothing for others or to argue that we all have to "pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps." Such rationales and arguments are possible only on the condition that we ignore the meaningful interdependence of all things. Pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps is impossible for the simple reason that none of us are — or could ever be — fully independent. But neither are we ever fully dependent. From a Buddhist perspective, we are not, have never been, and could never be simply–located, atomic individuals existing or "standing apart" from one another in objective and purely factual time and space. The prejudice for taking ourselves most fundamentally *to be* 'this' and not 'that'— to be privileged or not, to be in control or not — is, at bottom, a culturally sanctioned form of ignorance that induces both our factual segregation and our relational or narrative poverty.

As an antidote for such dramatic prejudice, the Buddhist practice of emptiness is conducive to realizing our horizonless continuity with all things in patterns of meaningful relationship that arise in a cosmos that is irreducibly karmic — a cosmos in which the topography of our individual and shared experience meticulously conforms with our own values, and in which conflicts and their full resolution are always dramatic.

In a karmic world, there are no clear horizons of responsibility, no objective warrants for disengagement, and no possibility of abstaining from involvement. In the absence of any absolute or non–contingent boundaries,

the root, moral question can never be whether we are implicated, but only "in exactly what way, and why?" In the absence of clear and ontologically fundamental boundaries between self and other, or between 'this' situation and 'that' one, any tensions between them must be seen as artifacts — albeit ones with often quite long and convoluted histories. The perennial conflict of freedom and duty — like that between the 'good' of persons and that of communities — is not an absolute given, but our own doing: a construct or product of our karma. Quite fortunately, our karma is always subject to revision.

Activism in Buddhist Perspective: The Disparate Karma of Social and Societal Strategies

Such a "Copernican" revolution in understanding ourselves has profound ramifications for how we understand and evaluate social activism. Because securing the rights of individuals pivots on abstract forms of segregation, it necessarily institutes an exclusionary middle ground that divorces facts from meaning and that occasions practical ignorance of the interdependent origination of all things. In consequence, we fail to see that solving our problems by controlling or managing our situation necessarily means finding ourselves in controlled or managed relationships. To compound matters, if we are originally given *as* relationships, persistently interacting through the veiling medium of legal anonymity and excluding our dramatic interdependence from consideration will invariably mean not only our steady alienation from one another, but our own fragmentation.

Unless corrected, the rationalizing discourse of contemporary life will carry in opposite directions and place in eventual conflict those 'parts' of ourselves we refer to as "self" and "other," as "personal" and "communal," as "emotion" and "reason," as "body" and "mind," as "conscious" and "unconscious," and as "spirit" and "flesh." Such a discourse institutionalizes a lack of compassion and canonizes our critical blind spot as the hallmark of proper reason and objectivity. Only if we reject the axiom that we are given as individuals will we see that our most basic right *cannot* and *should not* be — as one United States Supreme Court justice remarked — to be "left alone" in well–managed co–existence with one another, but rather to develop truly virtuosic and meaningful relationships.[3]

An immediate rejoinder to this is that — aside from being "politically naïve" — such an inversion of the priority of structural facticity over meaning is liable to induce an acceptance of the inequalities of the status quo rather than a strenuous effort to challenge them. But like the specter of (epistemic or cultural) relativism that troubles most theorists of postmodern

liberalism, this worry is a rhetorical consequence of the dialectic of independence and dependence. The Buddhist teachings of the interdependence and impermanence of all things direct us toward seeing any fixed status or view (*dṛṣti*) as evidence of ignorance and error, never as an absolute fact or ideal. Buddhist practice is thus resolutely counter–cultural or critical of the status quo, demonstrating that all things and situations — from our most hallowed institutions to "reality" itself — are always negotiable. Since no situation is or could ever be dramatically intractable, there are no excuses for repeated errors or omissions, no excuses for sitting on our hands waiting for things to get better. The only relevant question is one of strategy.

I have argued elsewhere (1996, chapter three) for the heuristic value of drawing a contrast between sociality (an orientation of conduct toward realizing improvised, increasingly dramatic, and virtuosic interrelationship) and societality (an orientation of conduct toward bringing about our regulated and factual co–existence through predictably role–mediated patterns of interaction). To the extent that our conduct or dramatic "middle ground" is social, it *means* increasing intimacy and creative vulnerability; to the extent that it is societal, we find ourselves disposed in thought, feeling, speech, and action toward developing relatively fixed identities or institutions and promoting factual security. Sociality fosters the conditions of uniquely meaningful contribution to our dramatic interdependence; societality, the conditions of generically controlling the structure of our managed co–existence. All societies, of course, arise through the patterned complexion or interweaving of sociality and societality.

According to this distinction, much of what has been called "social activism" has been correlated with and promoted an increasingly societal movement of our narration — the realization of an increasingly rational life–world, globalizing economic "development," the fragmentation of community and family, and the legal consolidation of individual and class rights. As such, it has ably secured and managed the interests of factually subordinate but ideally autonomous 'individuals' who are themselves the end products of both a technological lineage biased toward control and those political, philosophical, and religions institutions that have systematized this bias. A truly social form of activism would by contrast be oriented toward enhancing our capacity for uniquely responsive contribution, not increasing capacities for living "as we want." It would express an ethics of responsibility, not one of protest or refusal; a bias toward improvisation and the unprecedented, not regulation and predictability; a focus on realizing what it means to have no–self and to refrain from discharging blame. Rather than legally ignoring our uniqueness, by aiming at dramatically satisfying interdependence, truly social activism would facilitate improvising cre-

ative and surprising communities in which our differences always and thankfully make a difference.

The karmic implications of these two forms of activism are profoundly disparate. Like technologies oriented toward control, to the extent that societal activism is successful, it brings about the conditions of its continued necessity and success. In much the same way that our technological tradition has promised, but not delivered, a life of ease and leisure,[4] societal activism promises an end of inequality and imposition while instituting a need for ever finer institutional distinctions, definitions, and constraints. Societal activism produces legal horizons. That is its business. And the more effective it is, the more effective it must be.

Just as getting better at getting what we want invariably means getting better at wanting, getting better at legally insuring rights and freedoms for generic populations will mean developing further legal mechanisms for specifying and enforcing those legally defined rights and freedoms. But if regulated freedom stands in need of "external" enforcement — that is, new patterns of policing and not just new policies — it establishes fertile ground for new hierarchies of control. Those institutions which police the enforcement of legally won rights and freedoms will also need policing. The circle is, again, finally a vicious one. Freedom becomes an end–in–itself — an abstract status — that in an irreducibly dynamic world can only be maintained by dramatic disengagement or the loss of meaning.

Instead of concentrating on patterns of conduct oriented toward the institutional guarantee of generic rights and statuses, the basic strategy of a truly *social* activism is to foster appreciative and contributory virtuosity — primarily through encouraging practices for continuously relinquishing our horizons for relevance, responsibility, and readiness.[5] The karmic ramifications of this shift away from institutional control are both radical and profound.

First, if consciousness is understood as irreducibly relational, appreciation cannot be reduced to an emotionally decorative and dramatically superfluous acceptance of things as they are. To the contrary, appreciation means attending to or relating with things in such a way the value of our situation continuously increases or appreciates. Karmically, this not only develops the conditions for living in circumstances that are increasingly valuable, but being more and more valuably placed within them. Moreover, because our situation is always dramatic, the practice of appreciation is inseparable from discerning and attuning ourselves to our situation's potential for superlative meaning — the realization of dramatic and contributory creativity. That is, in sharp contrast with the karma of control–oriented conduct, the better we get at contributing to our situation in a

dramatically satisfying way, the more opportunity we will have to do so. Truly social activism means realizing our situation as one of horizonless value and opportunity through amplifying the unique capacities each of us has for *sui–shih–ying–yung* or "according with our situation, responding as needed." The result of radically social activism is a dramatic revision of our present circumstances *as* the *bodhimaṇḍala* or "place of enlightenment."

As implied in this four–character narrative of Ch'an Buddhist enlightenment, increasing virtuosity in contribution (*dānapāramitā*, or perfection of offering) is inseparable from increasing virtuosity in appreciation (*prajñāpāramitā*, or the perfection of wisdom). If appreciation is not a subjective decoration of our circumstances, neither is it an attainment that comes — as is sometimes maintained — only after we have established sufficiently comfortable and edifying circumstances for "serious" meditative discipline and the exercise of compassion to be "really" possible. Again, if consciousness consists of patterns of interdependence from which we abstract things such as 'individual beings' and their 'environments', there is no precedent for assuming that the perfection of wisdom depends on the realization of certain material comforts or that factually altering our circumstances is more effective or basic than changing minds. In a thoroughly karmic world, attention and responsive activity are separable — if at all — only on heuristic grounds, not ontological ones. Changing how we place ourselves in attending a situation is already to transform it. Appreciative virtuosity directly alters the complexion of our interdependence with all things — changing at once our 'world' and 'who we are within it'.

Societal activism begins with a recognition of the "poverty" attendant on membership in one or another class of "oppressed" or "structurally subordinated" people. On this basis, it works to secure rights to pursue redress — rights, that is, to command a factual change of status or circumstance. When a society has decayed to the point that adequate food, shelter, education, and medicine are no longer readily available, such factual corrections are *imperative*. That is, they should no longer be considered matters of choice. But for karmic reasons, settling for strictly factual solutions should be seen as a last resort. Consider, for example, the effect of stepping in to correct the systematically unjust treatment of a child by a playground bully or a female worker by her sexually predatory male supervisor. Physically intervening may effectively halt a given instance of bullying or harassment, but it is unlikely to *dramatically* alter the relationship between the persons involved — the actual site of the conflict in its dramatic sense. If anything, outside intervention by an ultimate or transcendent "authority" is likely to drive the "bully" into either greater brutality when unmonitored

or increasingly insidious subtlety. Either way, the unique contributions the bullied child or co–worker might make to the creative life of the situation and the dramatic reform of the "bully" will likely remain marginal.

Structurally, an analogy can be made to all instances where some group of people is subordinated, silenced, or dramatically impoverished by those with greater access to power and control. Karmically, unintended changes in our situation — changes that, like those legislated from "above," do not require us to express our own creativity — *cannot* lead to meaningfully addressing the conflicting values and presuppositions that have sponsored our present trouble. While changing a society's legal institutions to prohibit certain forms of overt oppression may alter the factual complexion of that society, this is no guarantee that the expression of prejudicial discrimination and subordination will be curtailed. Indeed, a more typical outcome is that the bases of oppression will shift and become both more varied and less ostensive.

Truly social activism must be rooted in recognizing the contributory potential, the creativity, of the "oppressed." That is, its first step must be to stop moving in the direction of attending to one or another form of 'poverty' or 'want' and establishing legal precedents for its factual redress. Rather than placing limits on conduct and effectively discouraging horizonless responsibility while leaving the presuppositions of the status quo essentially unquestioned, social activism must refrain from accepting the current definition of the situation, the current "facts" about exactly what is wrong or conflicted.

Karmically, the "facts" of our experience invariably correspond to what we have *meant* in the past — the direction in which we have conducted or guided ourselves together.[6] Like a mango which is both the final product of a tree and the occasion of its generational continuity, meaning in a Buddhist sense is *artha* — at once the *fruit* or result of our value–informed activity and a *precedent* or further condition thereof. That is, meaning expresses the recursive relationship through which our intentional activity feeds back into our 'experience' and conduct as an initial 'environmental' condition. Far from being either a subjective reading of a text or situation, or an objective and essential content thereof, meaning consists of the dramatic furtherance of our narration — the valuing of our interdependence.

Thus, our factual status at any given time should *not* be seen as the primary cause of our suffering or troubles. Rather, it is through our inability to improvise a viable and meaningful path around or through our situation that suffering arises. Suffering is not a fact about the way things are, but the announcement of narrative impasse. It consists of the blockage,

truncation, or repetitive frustration of our dramatic furtherance due to a scarcity of dramatic resources — those attentive capacities required for virtuosically according with our situation and responding as needed. In Buddhist terms, suffering signals our inability to shift the meaning of things away from *saṃsāra* (a world narration characterized by repeated conflict, trouble, and disappointment) toward *nirvāṇa* (a world narration in which the conditions of ignorance, conflict, trouble, and wanting are continuously and thoroughly uprooted).

Seeing meaning as dramatic furtherance challenges both the self–centered bias of consequentialism and our control–biased disposition for seeing causation as a fundamentally linear process of influence. For the realization of a truly social form of activism, this is a crucial move — one that allows us to see beyond the no–win dichotomy of either re–organizing or ordering society person by person or doing so through generically altering the structure of the interpersonal as such. What we begin seeing instead is the possibility of changing society through directly and jointly revising the valence of our dramatic interdependence or karma as such. Although the analogy has limits, just as shifts between the "two women" and "vase" views of the standard gestalt drawing do not require redrawing the picture line by line, dramatic changes in the structure of society need not depend on rebuilding its institutional structures brick by brick or law by law.

Importantly, if changing our patterns of attention necessarily changes the pattern of our interdependence as such, and if all things are dynamic or irreducibly characterized by impermanence, nothing can be more deleterious in our effort to relieve suffering or end conflict than inflexible habits of thought, speech, and action. Meaningful — that is, karmically effective — solutions to our personal and communal troubles can never be imposed or universally legislated. They must be improvised.

If this much can be said about the first step of truly social engagement, about the second it is possible only to affirm that it must be taken locally, and in a direction compatible with eliciting the meaningful participation of all concerned in realizing an increasingly valuable situation — not the institution of a new "state of affairs," but the improvisation of a new direction for our dramatic interdependence. Good examples of the face of truly social activism can be seen in the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement begun by A. T. Ariyaratne in rural Sri Lanka and the work of the Thai activist Sulak Sivaraksa.

Responding to the devastating decay forced upon Sri Lanka's rural communities by centuries of colonialism followed by various "development" schemes designed to forward the ends of global capitalism, Ariyaratne

began working with villagers to help them amplify their own creative resources and through these reverse the conditions of personal and communal decay. Emerging from the crucible of shared physical labor on locally determined public works projects have been a diverse range of truly local and non–sectarian movements toward answering particular village needs by appreciating each village's unique situation and eliciting its indigenous, dramatic resources.[7]

Sivaraksa's approach has been to radically apply the teachings of emptiness and karma in the context of critically evaluating the effects of Western, individual–biased development and political ideals. Sivaraksa has thus insisted (1992) that a first responsibility in any viable form of activism is attending to the quality of our dramatic interdependence and taking full account of our communal karma — the karma being created, for instance, by the unchecked proliferation of technologies which are marketed as value–neutral or morally–transparent and are not.

In different contexts, Ariyaratne and Sivaraksa both exhort the "oppressed" seekers of rights to challenge this "disadvantaged" status and direct their attention to the collusion of values between the rhetoric of development and liberal democracy and the conditions of their present oppression. In neither case does this entail refusing to recognize the value of democracy in its broadest sense or the importance of carefully integrating local, national, and international economies. But as would be expected in the context of (Buddhist) social activism, greatest emphasis is placed on discerning the patterns of attention and value that have been conducive to trouble or conflict and then redirecting these toward liberation — not freedom from some abstract form of poverty or merely material want, but uniquely realized and meaningful virtuosity.

So thoroughly ingrained is our prejudice toward the efficiency of control–biased strategies for change that talk of amplifying dramatic resources can only seem disastrously naïve. From the perspective of scientific and technological realism, we must first and foremost alter the facts of our co–existence. Any changes in the meaning of our present situation and how we are interdependent will — if necessary — follow. The Buddhist rejoinder is that the fact/value distinction — like that between 'reality' and 'appearance', or 'truth' and 'belief' — is an artifact with very particular precedents and uses. For most "oppressed" people, accepting the "facts" of their 'poverty' or 'subordination' is to capitulate to the definitions imposed by those who oppress through an exclusive super–ordination of their own values and interests. Half the battle is then already lost. Given our irreducible interdependence, any truly viable form of liberation must mean dissolving the conditions of oppression and liberating *all* those bound by them

— the 'oppressors' as well as the 'oppressed'. If this is to be possible, there is a strong sense in which the "facts" must be denied.

Opening the Borders: Taking Responsibility for What Society Means

What we call the "facts" of our situation — the way things 'objectively' have been, are now, and are likely to remain or become — are best seen as commitments to particular patterns of intentional activity or dramatic interdependence. That is, they reveal our karma. Facts — and, indeed, what we typically refer to as "matter" — consist of continuously reinforced definitions of a particular point of view. Facts announce the *status* of things, their mode of existing within the hierarchy of our values, but they also announce our own status — the particular way in which we take a stand on things being either 'this' or 'that' *for* us. Granted the Buddha's claim that 'is' and 'is–not' are the twin barbs on which all humankind is impaled, the world of facts is — among other things — the primordial medium of conflict.

But if all things are truly impermanent and empty, no "state of affairs" (even a state of consciousness) is naturally occurring. What we refer to as "states of affairs," "individuals," and the "conflicts" they suffer are not natural events, but rather announcements of horizons peculiar to the point of view we have adopted — horizons or boundaries that, like all artifacts, can only be established and maintained through fixing our own position and thus limiting the free flow of attention and energy. The facts of our situation define the specific — and typically habitual — ways our attention energy is *bound*.[8]

The practice of emptiness — relinquishing those horizons of relevance through which are constituted both our 'selves' and the 'things' we experience — thus occasions the release of previously bound attention–energy. Practicing emptiness means letting go of our karma. It means freeing dramatic resources that would otherwise be devoted to rehearsing the various identities essential to defining the recursive topography of our narration. Doing so is, in the most immediate way possible, to extirpate the conditions for narrative impasse or suffering. From a Buddhist perspective, power is not needed to *induce* change, but only to *stop*, *retard*, or *define* it in the ways needed to set up and maintain some status or form of (self)existence. Power is not needed to erase boundaries or end suffering, but only to render them chronic and apparently intractable.

History would seem to tell us otherwise. Even allowing for the caution that historical narratives are themselves woven in the liminal space of empowerment, the evidence would seem incontrovertible: power may never

have been sufficient for engineering social change, but it has always been necessary. In the present context, for example, how could one possibly deny the crucial reliance of activists on the power of the media in successfully engineering the manifestly positive institutional reforms needed to lobby for and secure basic human rights around the globe? Then again, the deeper the shadows in which we stand, the less visible is the ground between us.

Consider the issue or outcome of rights legislation. Legally instituted rights guarantee everyone a generic share of society's resources and a role in negotiating its structural organization. Property rights, for instance, allow peasants to claim ownership of land. Some human rights guarantee minimum standards for working conditions; others guarantee access to public media for the expression of dissenting views. These are significant gains for all affected individuals. But at the same time, property rights held by *corporate* individuals guarantee the possibility of establishing monopolies on seed production, the patenting of plant and animal species, and the operation of "farms" of titanic scale. The entirely legal exercise of these rights by corporations has been correlated with the demise of the family farm, the eradication of locally managed seed stock, the flight of rural 'poor' into the city, and the apparent irrationality of truly vernacular economies. Similarly, rights of access to media have allowed for both organizing activist movements and organizing "advertising" campaigns of such magnitude that consumption has reached epidemic proportions and now very seriously threatens the planet's ecological health.

The technologies used in gathering and wielding power on a globally significant scale do not create a level playing field. On the contrary, they were developed to realize and maintain extremely steep hierarchies of advantage in an economy of privilege — an economy in which the most powerful will always be able to dispose any prevailing "states of affairs" to their advantage.[9] Like technologies that secure their indispensability by becoming more "user friendly," those in power will insure their advantages by listening to and accommodating activist lobbies as needed. The powerful may even undergo personnel changes from time to time. But the overall *imbalance* of power will remain unchallenged. In spite of any appearances to the contrary, the game of power is thoroughly rigged.

Fortunately, it is not a game we must play. Accumulating and wielding power is not a prerequisite of *meaningful* social change. But we will not quit the contest of power until we place highest priority on attending to the quality of our interdependence as such. We must first see, that is, the fallacy in claiming that "if something is good for each and every one of us, it must be good for all of us." In a dramatic cosmos, placing a priority on

using power to leverage changes in the facts of our circumstances is like trying to write a new song by altering either the fingerings of already–playing guitarists (the dispositions of the powerful) or the structure of their guitar necks (society's institutional structure). It is much better to try improvising along with them in such a way that the music shifts harmonic and melodic focus directly and of its own accord. In the same way that skillful contributions to an ongoing musical event allow its meaning to be revised smoothly and directly, bringing about social change through attending directly to the quality and disposition of our dramatic interdependence is not only more efficient than doing so by exerting control over the factual conditions of our situation, it opens possibilities for contributory and creative parity that would otherwise be quite literally inconceivable.[10]

Like the benefits of extensive, but entirely "passive," martial arts training — made possible, say, by wearing a properly programmed robotic suit — the benefits of societal activism are quantifiably real, but limited. Objectively and individually assessed, such training will undeniably improve our range of motion — our degrees of freedom. But in situational crisis, having repeatedly gone through the motions of either *tai chi ch'uan* or the exercise of a legally–enacted civil society will prove to have been of little if any help. Instead of virtuosically according with the unique character of the present crisis and responding as needed to improvise its meaningful resolution, we will find ourselves just as likely as ever to freeze, not knowing what to do, or reverting to old patterns of victimization. If our practices do not transform how well we *appreciate* our situation, they will never enhance our capacity for *contributing* to the meaningful resolution of our troubles. On the contrary, we will continue repeating and not truly revising our karma.

In shifting our attention from the controlled redress of factual oppression and structural inequity to improvising novel conditions for meaningful contribution, we initiate a decisive return to dramatic immediacy and the disciplines of responsive creativity. Doing so, we are no longer obliged (in tragic imitation of Zeno and his paradoxes of motion) to carry society across the dramatic "dead spot" between disparate states of (political, social, or economic) affairs in an infinite regress that demands all our available attention and energy to no meaningful effect. It also frees us from the contradictory logic of either rebuilding society one person at a time or by way of mass movements organized and granted effective power by control–biased technologies. With the globalization of the economy and the ubiquitous spread of information technologies, finding a middle path between these logical contraries is absolutely crucial. We are now at the point of crossing a critical threshold of utility for using societal strategies to

bring about meaningful changes in the way we structure our narration — a threshold beyond which these structures will become increasingly conducive to the atrophy of our capacities for both appreciation and meaningful contribution. In the "global village," fighting fire with fire is *not* a viable option.

This is not, however, to justify withdrawing into a shell of self–concern and ignoring the extremely disadvantaged factual status of various peoples around the world. It is not to justify the perverse belief that the teaching of karma entails seeing disadvantaged people as simply "deserving" what they've got. Nor is it to justify the claim that since the topography of anyone's experience is a function of *their* past and present values and intentions, there is finally not much we can do for them. The difference between *our* karma and *their* karma depends on establishing fixed horizons of relevance, responsibility, and readiness that do not encourage, but prohibit, the realization of appreciative and contributory virtuosity.

In spite of its apparent successes, what has been called "social activism" has not promoted such virtuosity. The United Nations' Declaration on Human Rights and other institutions like it can be therapeutic in a limited sense, but they will never bring about the kind of dramatic healing needed in order to realize increasingly meaningful lives in truly liberating and harmonious community. To the contrary, it has encouraged a continuing focus on changing the facts of our situation from a *saṃsāric* perspective — a perspective from which the best we can hope to achieve is the enjoyment of relatively equal degrees of anonymity and autonomy within the limits of universally regulated co–existence. The task of any truly social form of activism must be to improvise new and dramatically satisfying paths across the continually renewed borders of *saṃsāra* and beyond the attachments we develop to our varied statuses within them.

It will be objected that there is nothing more liable to contest than the definition of an "increasingly meaningful or dramatically satisfying life." And without a doubt, we cannot say with any precision *what* meaning *is*. We cannot even conclusively *determine* what the meaning of a given situation *is* or *is–not*. Meaning simply does not exist. And yet, in the context of the Buddhist practice of emptiness, that is all well and good. The original nature of all things is to be meaningfully related or relevant to one another. Contrary to popular opinion, the meaning of life is not "something" to be found or discovered — a pre–existing and transcendent order that makes sense out of the vicissitudes of our day–to–day affairs. Rather, the meaning of life is given directly in the movement of our narration, in our unique ways of participating in irreducibly dramatic interdependence with all the specific partners we have in these affairs — our homes,

neighborhoods, and cities; our country–sides and wildernesses and those with whom we share them. We can ignore the meaning of our lives, but only if we are willing to walk backward into our future together.

According to the Mahāyāna teaching of emptiness, there is no way of ultimately separating either our sufferings or our liberation from those of others. Our most basic right is *not* to be left alone or to individually prosper. Rather, it is to contribute ever more fully to our dramatic and liberating interdependence, freeing ourselves from all chronic suffering and wants as they arise. In spite of any apparent naivete involved in doing so, we should neither aim at nor settle for less.

Notes

[1] It is no coincidence that where persons have been understood as patterns of relationship (classical Chinese culture comes to mind as a prime example) and not as simply existing–in or standing–apart within them, the free will/determinism dichotomy has been either entirely absent or of extremely marginal currency. In such cultural contexts, liberal democratic human rights discourse has often been seen as somewhat misplaced. See Ames (1988) and Rosemont (1988) for a discussion, for example, of contemporary Confucian perspectives on human rights discourse.

[2] This is not to suggest, of course, that a cultural bias for seeing persons as relational in nature can be strictly correlated with an absence of structural inequities and abusive denials of dignity. In both traditional China and Buddhist Thailand, for example, personal freedoms have by no means been unlimited. All societies are self–regulating in one degree and fashion or another — whether by law or by ritual. The point is to recognize the regulative fertility of conceiving freedom as located in individual and autonomous existence rather than in meaningful relationship. Freedom associated with individual autonomy tends to be more abstract than not, even when most "real." Thus, while Americans can vacation "wherever they want," they readily allow profit–seeking advertisers to direct their wants.

[3] See Hershock (2000) for a discussion of the distinction between dramatic and factual human rights, and their diverse relationship to the problem of alienation.

[4] For more on the dishonored promises of technology, see Hershock (1999), especially chapters three and four.

[5] For an extended discussion of the practice of relinquishing horizons for relevance, responsibility, and readiness in the context of Ch'an enlightenment, see my *Liberating Intimacy*, chapter six.

[6] It should be noted that if consciousness obtains only as the relationship of an 'organism' and its 'environment', neither intention nor meaning can be

construed as purely subjective or self–centered. Karma cannot be strictly individual. Hence the Buddha's teaching that while all intentional activities will have experienced and meaningfully–related consequences, it cannot be said whether it is "the same individual" or "a different individual" who will be subject to these consequences. If all things arise in conditioned interdependence and not through linear determination, knower and known, self and other, or actor and acted–upon can be separated only through a process of abstraction.

[7] Joanna Macy (1985) has written a concise but very useful and philosophical analysis of the Sarvodaya movement and its novel, Buddhism–informed approach to development.

[8] The relationship between bound forms of energy and identity cannot be limited, of course, to what might be dismissed as the "nature" of subjectivity. It is true, as well, of living organisms that they can only remain relatively "the same" or "self–identical" through consuming environmental energy. Indeed, all things can be seen as constituted through taking energy out of free circulation — energy that is released when the identity of a thing (for example, a plutonium atom, a lump of coal, a mango, or a society) is "broken down."

[9] For a wide variety of perspectives on the ways in which ostensibly "democratic" technological advances — high speed computing, for instance — disadvantage the average person and dispose society toward corporate authoritarianism, see Mander and Goldsmith, 1996.

[10] An important point here is that societal activism's own claims to the contrary, it cannot avoid being energy inefficient. With its bias toward control, it can no more avoid reproducing the conditions of conflict — and so the need for reinforcing or enforcing power — that we could get a guitar trio to happily change songs by physically interrupting and redirecting their fingering patterns. Resistance — violent or otherwise — would only be natural.

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