

## Indra's Postmodern Net

What we mean by the sutras is the entire universe itself ... mountains,  
rivers and the great earth, plants and trees ...

--Dogen

Until recently, Western philosophy was largely a search for the one within the many, the Same that grounds Difference. The twentieth century saw the end of this project: not its realization but its abandonment. Perhaps the most dramatic refutation has come from psychology, in Freud's demonstration that our ego-consciousness is not Cartesian and autonomous but irretrievably split, buffeted by psychic forces it cannot control because it is a function of them. Others have questioned our supposedly self-sufficient self-consciousness by emphasizing the differences inherent within language. The Swiss linguist Saussure taught that meaning is a function not of any straightforward correspondence between signifier and signified, but of a complex set of phonetic and conceptual differences. Later the French critic Roland Barthes pointed out that each text is a tissue of quotations: not a line of words releasing the single "theological" meaning of an author-god but a multidimensional space where a variety of writings blend and/or clash. More recently Jacques Derrida argued that the meaning of such a multidimensional space can never be completely fulfilled, for the continual circulation of signifiers denies meaning any fixed foundation or conclusion. Hence texts never attain self-presence, and that includes the text that constitutes *me*.

*What would happen if these claims about textuality were extrapolated into claims about the whole universe?* A metaphor for such cosmic interpenetration and lack of self-presence is found in the *Avatamsaka Sutra* of Mahayana Buddhism: Indra's Net.

Far away in the heavenly abode of the great god Indra, there is a wonderful net that has been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretches out infinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant tastes of

deities, the artificer has hung a single glittering jewel in each “eye” of the net, and since the net itself is infinite in all dimensions, the jewels are infinite in number. There hang the jewels, glittering like stars of the first magnitude, a wonderful sight to behold. If we now arbitrarily select one of these jewels for inspection and look closely at it, we will discover that in its polished surface there are reflected all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that there is an infinite reflecting process occurring. (Cook 2)

Indra's Net “symbolizes a cosmos in which there is an infinitely repeated interrelationship among all the members of the cosmos,” according to Francis Cook. Because the totality is a vast body of members each sustaining and defining all the others, “the cosmos is, in short, a self-creating, self-maintaining, and self-defining organism.” It is also non-teleological: “There is no theory of a beginning time, no concept of a creator, no question of the purpose of it all. The universe is taken as a given.” Such a universe has no hierarchy: “There is no center, or, perhaps if there is one, it is everywhere” (Cook 2).

That this textuality (literally, “that which is woven, web”) extends beyond language means that right now you are reading more than the insights of Mahayana Buddhism, as interpreted by me: for in this page is nothing less than the entire universe. The Vietnamese Zen teacher (and poet) Thich Nhat Hanh makes this point well:

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow, and without trees we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either....

If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the tree cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow. Even we cannot grow without sunshine. And so, we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine inter-are. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became

his bread is also in this sheet of paper. And the logger's father and mother are in it too.

You cannot point out one thing that is not here--time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything co-exists with this sheet of paper... As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe in it. (3-5)

The implications of such interpenetration and "mutual identity" were developed in the Hua-yen tradition of Chinese Buddhism, most notably by its third patriarch and true founder Fa-tsang (A.D. 643-712). Indra's Net was only one, and evidently not the most important, of a number of similes used to demonstrate these difficult concepts. Within the *Avatamsaka Sutra* itself, Indra's jewels, although glittering like first-magnitude stars, are eclipsed by dust particles (Buddhas "perceive that the fields full of assemblies, the beings and aeons which are as many as all the dust particles, are all present in every particle of dust" [Williams 124]) and Sudhana's climactic vision of Vairocana's Tower ("within the tower there are hundreds of thousands of towers, each one as exquisitely adorned... and each one, while preserving its individual existence, at the same time offering no obstruction to all the rest" [Williams 125]). Hua-yen treatises employ several other images, including water and waves ("the entire ocean is in one wave, yet the ocean does not shrink; a small wave includes the great ocean, and yet the wave does not expand" [Fa-tsang, in Chang 146]) and the ocean-mirror samadhi (each thing in the universe is both a mirror, reflecting all, and an image, reflected by all). Fa-tsang taught Empress Wu using a hall of mirrors and a golden lion ("in each of the lion's eyes, in its ears, limbs, and so forth, down to each and every single hair, there is a golden lion.... Furthermore, each and every hair containing infinite lions returns again to a single hair" [Chang 229]). These and other similes are used in Hua-yen to illustrate the central teachings of Mahayana.

D. T. Suzuki called Hua-yen the philosophy of Zen and Zen the practice of Hua-yen (Suzuki 12). Wing-tsit Chan has praised Hua-yen as the highest development of Chinese Buddhist thought (Chan 406). Yet, until recently, such claims made little sense to the more essentialist West. Today, however, field theories have made the implications of Indra's Net more plausible and perhaps irresistible. For example,

physics teaches that each electrically charged particle exerts its charge everywhere in the universe and is affected by every other charged particle. In Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality*, the mutual determination of part and whole is used to understand the relationship between individuals and society. They summarize that interpenetration as follows: "Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product" (79). Many scholars have noticed the similarities between Hua-yen and Whitehead's process philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

Today the relevance of Hua-yen claims about such "cosmic ecology" (Cook 2) seems greater than ever. The environmental catastrophes that no longer merely threaten but are now happening reveal, more clearly than any postmodern arguments can, the bankruptcy of essentialist thinking, both individual (the Cartesian myth of autonomous self-consciousness) and species (the anthropocentric bias that privileges *Homo sapiens* over all other life-forms). It is becoming obvious that we cannot discriminate ourselves from the interdependent web of life without damaging (and perhaps destroying) both it and ourselves. Awareness of mutual identity and interpenetration is rapidly developing into the only doctrine that makes sense anymore, perhaps the only one that can save us from ourselves.

Like Hua-yen philosophy, this essay will explicate the implications of Indra's Net, but a different historical context means that we ponder different problems than the ones that engaged Fa-tsang's school well over a millennium ago. Nor do the ecological ramifications of Indra's Net need further attention here.<sup>2</sup> What have not been noticed, as far as I know, are what might be called its "postmodern" implications because they parallel many of the major concerns of contemporary poststructuralist philosophy. These include similar critiques of self-existence/self-presence; a shared suspicion about the ontotheological quest for Being, and a corresponding emphasis on groundlessness; the deconstruction of such "transcendental signifieds" into ungraspable traces of traces; a rejection of Truth (with a capital T) as the intellectual attempt to fixate ourselves; and the questioning of both objectivist and subjectivist values. A particularly striking example of this parallelism is the reappearance of Fa-tsang's hall of mirrors in Derrida's critique of Plato's myth of the cave:

Imagine that mirrors would not be *in* the world, simply, included in the totality of all *onta* and their images, but that things “present,” on the contrary, would be *in them*. Imagine that mirrors (shadows, reflections, phantasms, etc.) would no longer be *comprehended* within the structure of the ontology and myth of the cave... but would rather envelop it in its entirety, producing here or there a particular, extremely determinate effect. (*Dissemination* 324)

It is not only the metaphor that recurs, for Derrida draws the same conclusions as Hua-yen:

In this play of representation, the point of origin becomes ungraspable. There are things like reflecting pools, and images, an infinite reference from one to the other, but no longer a source, a spring. There is no longer simple origin.

(*Grammatology* 36)

Only mirrors reflecting mirrors: traces of traces.

In this essay, a contemporary reference point for Hua-yen will be provided by citing other relevant passages from Derrida and reflecting on the juxtaposition. This will not provide a detailed evaluation of any particular issue, but it will demonstrate the relevance of Hua-yen, and Mahayana philosophy generally, to a cluster of themes that has recently become central in Western philosophy. My hope is that this essay will encourage more dialogue between the two parties.

The following discussion will first place Indra’s Net within its context in the Buddhist tradition, which emphasizes *causality* in order to deconstruct self-existence. This deconstruction reveals our lack of ground and transforms our frustrated symbolic quest for such a ground into *non-abiding*. That in turn raises questions about our philosophical and religious search for *truth*, insofar as that search is an intellectual attempt to ground ourselves by grasping the concepts that grasp reality. The resulting “positionless position” seems vulnerable to accusations of relativism, but the nonduality of self and other escapes many of the problems usually associated with relativism. Although Indra’s Net is non-teleological, that implies not the meaninglessness of life but its *meaningfreeness*. Meaning may not be fixed, but it is not lacking. Life becomes *play*; yet it has always been play: the issue is whether we

suffer our games because they are the means whereby we hope to ground ourselves somewhere in Indra's Net, or whether we dance freely within the Net because we *are* it. The dangers of relativism in *ethics* are vitiated to the extent I realize my interdependence with other beings: I shall indeed love my neighbor as myself when I experience that I *am* my neighbor.

In discussing the issues above, we shall see how much Mahayana and postmodernism are mirrors facing each other; but we will also notice where they do not reflect. This summary already indicates how much the Buddhist perspective emphasizes the realization that self and world are nondual. This is an experience not to be gained from the study of texts alone, for it usually requires religious practice: that is, *meditation*, the "other" of philosophy, the repressed shadow of our rationality, dismissed and ignored because it challenges the only ground philosophy has. Derrida says that he has been trying to find a nonsite, or a nonphilosophical site, from which to question philosophy (in Kearney 98)--precisely what meditative practice provides. The postmodern realization that no resting-place can be found within language/ thought is an important step toward the experience that there is no abiding-place for the mind anywhere within the Indra's Net of reflecting mirrors which constitutes our world. However, for Buddhism this further realization requires a "leap" that cannot be *thought*.

*Causality.* In order to appreciate the implications of Indra's Net, we must understand its role within the Buddhist tradition. *Indra's Net, in which everything functions as a cause for everything else, is a more "positive" and metaphysical way to restate Naagaarjuna's denial that anything has self-existence.* The Indian emphasis on logic and epistemology is often contrasted with the Chinese lack of interest in those areas, but Hua-yen continues the primary concern of the Indian (not only Buddhist) tradition with causality. This is apparent in the alternative name that Hua-yen gave itself: *dharmadhaatu pratiitya-samutpaada*, "the dependent co-arising dharmarealm." Maadhyamika conclusions about nonsubstantiality and nonorigination are translated into the Hua-yen teachings of nonobstruction and nonimpededness. The other crucial Hua-yen doctrine, the mutual identity of all phenomena (which Fa-tsang

explained using water/ waves and Empress Wu's golden lion) repeats *praj~naapaaramitaa* claims about the identity of form (*ruupa*) and emptiness (*suunyataa*).

Naagaarjuna's deconstruction of self-existence in the *Muulamadhyamikakaarika* can be summarized into three stages. We begin with a naive understanding of the world as a collection of objectively existing things (including *me*) causally interacting *in* objective space and time. We think as much as we see these objects, for we project our notions of substantiality to objectify things. In the second stage, Naagaarjuna uses the causal interdependence of these objects to deconstruct their supposed self-existence; saying that everything is *suunya*, "empty," is a shorthand way to express this absence of being. Yet this analysis of discrete objects into their interdependent relations is incomplete. Naagaarjuna emphasizes that the notion of dependence is also incoherent if there is no other self-existing thing to depend *upon*. The irony of his approach is that its use of causation also refutes causation: it is only because we superimpose our

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notions of substantiality to perceive the world as a collection of separate things that we must also superimpose causal relations to "glue" these things together. If things originate (change, cease, and so forth), there are no self-existing things; but if there are no things, then there is nothing to originate and therefore no origination. This is the way to approach perhaps the most important verse in the *Muulamadhyamikakaarika*: "That which, taken as causal or dependent, is the process of being born and passing on, is, taken non-causally and beyond all dependence, declared to be *nirvaa.na*" [\[15\]](#) Can Indra's Net help us understand this third stage?

There is a practical problem with Hua-yen: it casts its net too wide. To say that something is caused by everything else in the universe is so general that it is also

useless; in daily life we need a more efficient causality which correlates one cause with one effect. Once that is granted, however, we should not overlook the corresponding difficulty with efficient causality: the infinite regress of a life that relates to everything as a means to something else. In Japan (where I write this) children take entrance exams for kindergarten, because the right kindergarten will help them get into the right primary school, which will help them get into the right middle school, which will help them get into the right high school, which will help them get into the right university, which will help them get hired by the right corporation. So much for childhood! This may be an extreme example but it is not unusual. In his old age, W. B. Yeats reflected: "When I think of all the books I have read, wise words heard, anxieties given to parents,... of hopes I have had, all life weighed in the balance of my own life seems to me *a preparation for something that never happens.*" [16] As the world becomes more organized and "rationalized" (in Weber's sense) that becomes ever more true. The romantic yearning for a "return to nature" gains much of its attraction from the fact that in modern bureaucratized society less and less is done for its own sake.

These reflections help us appreciate the third stage of the Maadhyamika and Hua-yen deconstruction of self-existence. To say that an event (for example, `Saakyamuni Buddha's twirling a flower) is caused by everything in the universe *is finally equivalent to saying that the event is caused by nothing.* It is not self-caused; rather, the category of causality is eliminated altogether. This is *tathataa*; the "thusness" or "just *this!*"-ness which describes the way an enlightened being lives. So the Buddha is the *Tathaagata*, the one who "thus comes" and "thus goes." The *Diamond Sutra* concludes that "all phenomena are like a dream, an illusion, a bubble and a shadow, like dew and lightning"; and the *Gandavyuha Sutra* (the last part of the *Avata.msaka Sutra*) relates this to what became Hua-yen's doctrine of nonobstruction: "Having realized that this world is like a dream, and that all Buddhas are like mere reflections, that all things are like an echo, you move unimpeded in the world." [17]

Nevertheless, if in this dreamlike world my unimpeded body steps in front of a nonobstructed truck, a painful reminder of *pratiitya-samutpaada* is predictable. Therefore the third stage of Maadhyamika deconstruction does not supersede the second stage but supplements it. We cannot ignore causality, yet neither should we overlook its limitations.

*Nonabiding.* Why do we experience life as *du.hkha*, frustrating? Can our problem be described in terms of Indra's Net? Buddhism relates our disease to the delusive nature of the ego-self, which, like everything else, is a manifestation of Indra's Net *yet feels separate from it*. The basic difficulty is that insofar as I feel separate (that is, an autonomous, self-existing consciousness) I also feel uncomfortable, because an illusory sense of separateness is inevitably insecure. The ineluctable trace of nothingness in my fictitious (because not really self-existing) sense-of-self is experienced as a sense-of-*lack*; in reaction, the sense-of-self becomes preoccupied with trying to make itself self-existing, in one or another symbolic fashion. The tragic irony is that the ways we attempt to do this cannot succeed, for a sense-of-self can never expel the trace of *lack* that "shadows" it insofar as it is illusory, while in the most important sense we are already self-existing, since *the infinite set of differential traces that constitutes each of us is the whole Net*. "The self-existence of a Buddha is the self-existence of this very cosmos. The Buddha is without a self-existent nature; the cosmos too is without a self-existent nature" (MMK XXII:16). What Naagaarjuna says here about the Buddha is equally true for each jewel in Indra's Net; the difference is that a Buddha knows it. I think this touches on the enduring attraction of what Heidegger calls ontotheology and Derrida calls logocentrism, not just in the West but everywhere: Being/being means security to us because it means a ground for the self, whether that is understood as experiencing something Transcendent or intellectually sublimated into a metaphysical principle underlying everything. We want to meet God

face-to-face, or gain enlightenment, but the fact that everything is `suunya means we can never attain them.

The self-existence (Sanskrit, *svabhaava*) that Mahaayaana refutes corresponds to the "self-presence" which Derrida criticizes in textual terms, by showing that every process of signification, including self-consciousness, is an economy of differences: The play of differences supposes, in effect, syntheses and referrals, which forbid at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be present in and of itself, referring only to itself.... There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces. [18]

Self-presence "has never been given but only dreamed of and always already split, incapable of appearing to itself except in its own disappearance." Discussions of this argument tend to focus on the *-presence*

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of self-presence, but the *self-* needs to be emphasized as much. It is "the hunger for/of self" that seeks fulfillment in "the absolute phantasm" of "absolute self-having." [19]

As long as am motivated by sense-of-*lack*, I will seek to realize myself by fixating on something that dissolves in my grasp, for not only texts but everything is an elusive trace of traces. Then the solution must have to do with not-catching, with no longer needing to bring these fleeting traces to self-presence. The *A.s.tasaahasrikaa*, perhaps the most important *praj~naapaaramitaa* sutra, begins by describing this:

No wisdom can we get hold of, no highest perfection,

No Bodhisattva, no thought of enlightenment either.

When told of this, if not bewildered and in no way anxious,

A Bodhisattva courses in the Tathaagata's wisdom.

In form, in feeling, will, perception and awareness [20]

Nowhere in them they find a place to rest on.

Without a home they wander, *dharmas* never hold them,  
Nor do they grasp at them...  
But when he does not course in form, in feeling, or perception,  
In will or consciousness, but wanders without home,  
Remaining unaware of coursing firm in wisdom,  
His thoughts on non-production -- then the best of all the calming  
trances cleaves to him.

The Leader himself was not stationed in the realm which is free from  
conditions,  
Nor in the things which are under conditions, but freely he wandered  
without a home:

Just so, without a support or a basis a Bodhisattva is standing. [\[21\]](#)

"How is *praj~naapaaramitaa* [the highest wisdom] characterized?" Subhuuti asks  
later in the same sutra. "It is characterized by non-attachment," replies the Buddha,  
who explains how defilement and purification are possible when there are no things to  
be defiled or purified:

To the extent that beings take hold of things and settle down in them, to that extent  
there is defilement. But no one is thereby defiled. And to the extent that one does not  
take hold of things and does not settle down in them, to that extent can one conceive  
of the absence of I-making and mine-making. In that sense can one form the concept  
of the purification of beings, i.e., to the extent that they do not take hold of things and  
do not settle down in them, to that extent there is purification. But no one is therein  
purified. When a Bodhisattva courses thus, he courses in *praj~naapaaramitaa*. [\[22\]](#)

Naagaarjuna sees the implications of this for our concepts of being and nonbeing:

"When there is clinging-perception (*upaadaane*), the perceiver generates being. When  
there is no clinging-perception, he will be freed and there will be no being" (MMK  
XXVI: 7). The most quoted line from the *Diamond Sutra* encapsulates all this in one  
phrase: "Let your mind

come forth without fixing it anywhere." This is believed to have precipitated the enlightenment of the sixth and greatest Ch'an patriarch Hui-neng, whose own *Platform Sutra* emphasizes the same thing: "When our mind works freely without any hindrance, and is at liberty to come or to go, then it is in a state of *praj~naa*." [23]

It seems to me that this solution to the problem of self-existence is one that postmodern deconstruction has not yet realized, for the kind of liberation that Derrida achieves is textual -- "the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation" [24] -- and therefore still logocentric from a Buddhist point of view. The danger is not only that we try to find a "fully meaningful" symbol to settle down with (the problem Derrida addresses), but that we will remain inscribed within an endless recirculation of concepts even if we do not grasp at the ones which are supposed to bring Being into our grasp (the situation Derrida ends up with). As long as we identify with language at all, even with language as a whole, we are still trying to retain a self-existing ground which reveals that we are still anxious about our feared lack-of-ground. Later we shall see how meditation -- letting-go of all thought/language -- is necessary if we are to resolve the problematical dualism between language and the objectified world we live "in." The nonabiding that Buddhism recommends applies as much to the way we live (in) that world as to the symbols we use to understand and organize it.

Is the Buddhist experience that of some spiritual ground (for example, "Buddhanature"), or of groundlessness? If each jewel in Indra's Net mutually conditions and is conditioned by all the others, then to become completely groundless is to become completely grounded, not in some particular, but in the whole web of interdependent relations. The supreme irony of my struggle to ground myself is that it cannot succeed because I am already grounded -- in the totality. I am groundless and ungroundable insofar as delusively feeling myself to be separate from the world; I have always been fully grounded insofar as I am the world.

This solves the problem of desire (the cause of our dis-ease) because, without the craving-for-being that compels me to take hold of something and try to fixate on it, I am free to *become* it. The Buddhist solution to the problem of life is thus very simple: the "bong!" of a temple bell, the "tock!" of pebble against bamboo, the flowers on a tree in springtime, to cite some Zen examples. Of course, becoming an object is precisely what we have been trying to do all along, yet in a self-defeating way, compulsively seizing on our objectifications in order to stabilize ourselves. But I cannot become something by grasping at it. That merely reinforces a delusive sense of separation between that-which-is-grasped and that-which-grasps-at-it. The only way I can become a phenomenon is to realize I have always been it. When nothing is needed from it to

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make me real, the reverberating temple bell can be just what it is: the cause and effect of everything, therefore just as much the cause and effect of nothing -- neither real nor unreal -- and no longer frustrating because there is no longer anything lacking in me that I experience as something lacking in my world.

Such nondual experiences are serene, says Naagaarjuna, for "anything which exists by virtue of interdependent origination is quiescence in itself" (MMK VII.16) . Why? "When neither existence nor non-existence is presented to the mind, then, through the lack of any other possibility, that which is without support becomes tranquil" ('Saantideva). [25] Without any self-being to protect, and without the impending threat of nonbeing to evade, *no jewel in Indra's Net has anything to gain or lose*. Such serenity is not a result of faith or the conviction of salvation, for that would make it contingent on the *being* of something else, and liberation in Buddhism is not dependent on the self-existence of anything.

*Truth.* Dr. Johnson's definition of remarriage, "the triumph of hope over experience," also describes our truths: we soon find others to replace those we have become disillusioned with. If our final delusion is the belief that we have lost all delusions, and if there is no greater delusion than the one that eliminates all others, mustn't that delusion be... *the truth*? What does nonabiding imply about truth?

The *praj~naapaaramitaa* verses quoted above began: "No wisdom can we get hold of," yet precisely that condition is recommended as leading to the highest wisdom. A nondwelling mind is "free from delusion and reality alike" (Hui-hai) [26] because discriminating between them -- rejecting the one, grasping the other -- is one of the ways our mind seeks a secure dwelling-place.

Nietzsche also suspected how the search for truth is *an intellectual attempt to fixate ourselves by grasping the concepts that grasp reality*:

Look, isn't our need for knowledge precisely this need for the familiar, the will to uncover under everything strange, unusual, and questionable, something that no longer disturbs us? Is it not the instinct of fear that bids us to know? And is the jubilation of those who attain knowledge not the jubilation over the restoration of a sense of security? [27]

The Buddha compared his teachings to a raft that we may use to ferry ourselves across the river of birth-and-death (*sa^msaara*) to the "other shore" of *nirvaa.na*, but then to be abandoned, not carried around on one's back. He was also careful not to set up his teachings as the only truth. "it is not proper for a wise man... to come to the conclusion: 'This alone is Truth, and everything else is false.'" [28] Naagaarjuna carried this to an extreme by declining to present any view of his own: "If I had a position, no doubt fault could be found with it. Since I have no position, that problem does not arise." [29] How could he avoid taking a position?

"Ultimate serenity is the coming to rest of all ways of taking things, the repose of named things; *no Truth has been taught by a Buddha for anyone, anywhere*" (MMK XXV: 24). If *nirvaa.na* is the end of all ways of "taking" things, the game of truth-and-delusion is turned upside down. There is no truth to be taught because nothing needs to be attained; instead, delusion is something to be *unlearned*. So Buddhism does not offer a metaphysical system to account for reality but shows how to deconstruct the socially conditioned metaphysical system we know as everyday reality. It does not give us truths but shows how to become aware of and let go of the automatized truths we are normally not aware of holding. Buddhism agrees with Nietzsche's insight that our truth consists of illusions which we have forgotten are illusions, but it encourages us to face the ones that cause us to suffer.

Naagaarjuna's thunderbolt reverberates through subsequent Buddhism. The Hsin Hsin Mei of Seng-ts'an, the third Ch'an patriarch, begins by pointing the way beyond truth:

The Perfect Way is only difficult for those who pick and choose;

Do not like, do not dislike; all will then be clear.

Make a hairbreadth difference, and Heaven and Earth are set apart;

If you want the truth to stand clear before you, never be for or against

The struggle between for and against is the mind's worst disease....

There is no need to seek Truth; only stop having views. [\[30\]](#)

In place of *tertium non datur*, the logic of excluded middle, this celebrates the freedom of a mind that is not afraid of contradiction and so is able to dance in a coincidence-of-opposites which is the way our minds naturally work when they do not "stick." According to the *Cheng-tao Ke* of Ta-shih, a successor of the sixth Ch'an patriarch, a man of the Way "neither avoids fantasy nor seeks truth"; to reject delusion and grasp the truth "mistakes a thief for one's own son." [\[31\]](#) But this advice will not help as long as my quest for enlightenment remains a sublimated attempt to ground my groundless sense-of-self. We seek some thing to fixate on, but the Buddhist solution is to take away: to keep pulling the rug out from beneath us until we let go of that need for solid ground and discover that groundlessness is not so bad, after all. "If I tell you that I have a system of law [*dharma*, teaching] to transmit to others, I am

cheating you," declared Hui-neng. "What I do to my disciples is to liberate them from their own bondage with such devices as the case may need."

Only those who do not inherit or possess a single system of law can formulate all systems of law, and only those who can understand the meaning [of this paradox] may use such terms. It makes no difference to those who have realized the essence of mind whether they formulate all systems of law or dispense with all of them. They are at liberty to come or go. They are free from obstacles or impediments. They take appropriate actions as circum-

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stances require. They give suitable answers according to the temperament of the inquirer. [\[32\]](#)

If truth is a matter of grasping the symbols that grasp reality, all truth is error on the Buddhist path. But notice the difference between this and Naagaarjuna's "the coming-to-rest of all ways of taking things." Naagaarjuna's recommendation may reinforce the deluded dualism we already make between words and things, thought and world. The danger is that we will "take" language/thought as a filter that should be eliminated in order to experience things/the world more immediately -- an approach which reconstitutes the problem of dualism in the means chosen to overcome it. Here Doogen is insightful: the point is not to avoid language but to liberate it. "Metaphor in Doogen's sense is not that which points to something other than itself, but that in which something realizes itself." For Doogen symbols (and language generally) are not merely means of edification, for each can be experienced as an end in itself, like everything else. If a concept or symbol is somewhere the intellectual mind tries to ground itself, why blame the victim? If the symbol is not used to compensate for my lack of self-existence -- which makes me try to get something from it -- it can be a way my mind consummates itself. Then there is free interplay between mind and symbol: although symbols can be redeemed only by mind, the mind does not function

in a vacuum but is activated by symbols. [33] Derrida makes a very similar point by distinguishing between "two interpretations of interpretation":

The one ... dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who... throughout his entire history... has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play. [34]

When we no longer need a truth that restores self-presence, we can celebrate the interpretation that "disseminates."

The crucial issue is whether our search for truth is an attempt to fixate ourselves by fixating on certain concepts. When there is this compulsion, certain ideas can become seductive: that is, *ideologies*. The difference between *sa<sup>^</sup>msaara* and *nirvaa.na* is that *sa<sup>^</sup>msaara* is Indra's Net experienced as a sticky web of attachments which attract us because they seem to offer something we feel the lack of: a grounding for the groundless sense-of-self. Intellectually, that seductive quality manifests as a battleground of conflicting ideologies competing for our allegiance. Ideologies provide the mind with a sure grasp on the world: now we know how the world is meaningful and what our role in that meaning is. "Ideology is... the assumption that since the beginning and end of history are known there is nothing more to say. History is therefore to be

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obediently lived out according to the ideology." [35] If "there is no specifiable difference whatever between *nirvaa.na* and the everyday world" (MMK XXV.19), then very different ideologies such as religions, philosophies, nationalisms, racisms, and so forth are in the same dimension insofar as they serve the same function: trying to resolve the sense-of-self's sense-of-lack by identifying with a belief system. The

problem is that they tend to become computer viruses of the mind; when we assent to them -- let them in -- they take it over and fill it up. [36]

One of the more important issues in contemporary philosophy and critical theory is to what extent *rationality* itself may be such an ideology. Rather than myth being primitive reasoning, is our understanding of logic a literalized, one-dimensional myth? "Has reason constituted itself to be the ruler of philosophy?" asks Heidegger. "If so, by what right?" [37] From our usual perspective these questions may seem ridiculous, because self-refuting; but they also challenge that perspective. What has come to be known as postmodernism may be viewed as subverting this socially constructed myth of rationality, and, just as in Naagarjuna's painstaking refutation of all philosophical positions, it is reason that is deconstructing itself.

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms -- in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are: metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins. (Nietzsche) [38]

As metaphors lose their sensuous power they gain another role, as emblems. The freshness of the original meaning decays into tokens. Once objectified and socially validated, a truth enters the exchange market: it can be gained, possessed, and lost. Explanations succeed only by convincing resistant hearers of their error. If you will not hear my explanations until you are suspicious of your own truths, you will not accept my explanations until you are convinced of your error. Explanation is an antagonistic encounter that succeeds by defeating an opponent. It possesses the same dynamic of resentment found in other finite play. I will press my explanations on you because I need to show that I do not live in the error that I think others think that I do.

Whoever wins this struggle is privileged with the claim to true knowledge. Knowledge has been arrived at, it is the outcome of this engagement. Its winners have the uncontested power to make certain statements of fact. They are to be listened to.

In those areas appropriate to the contests now concluded, winners possess a knowledge that can no longer be challenged. (Carse) [\[39\]](#)

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When sense of *lack* evaporates because sense-of-self evaporates, the seductive web of *sa^msaara* transforms into the polyvalence of Indra's net, where each point of view is able to appreciate others because it no longer identifies with a Truth project that is threatened by those others. This is not Nietzsche's perspectivism, each perspective trying to impress its own will-to-truth upon the world, but the nonabiding wisdom of a bodhisattva who can wander freely among truths without needing to fixate on any of them, for (as Hui-neng put it) nondwelling mind does not stick on any of the six sense objects, and that includes mind objects.

Isn't this relativism, the bugaboo of all value theory? If so, this approach to relativism defangs it of its poison in two ways. First, one of the main difficulties with relativism is the danger of destructive ideologies such as racism, sexism, and so forth. We want to be able to say that they are false. Buddhism meets this concern in a different way: when such ideologies lose their seductive quality they are exposed as collective examples of ignorance and stupidity to be *unlearned*. They are attractive only because they offer an easy way to fill up our sense-of-*lack*.

Second, even if all ideologies are competing in the same intellectual arena, there are some important internal differences. Many ideologies are difficult to escape once you are committed. An old-style Marxist who began criticizing Marxism would be told to purge himself of his bourgeois tendencies; a psychoanalyst will tell the analysand that she is resisting. On the other side are what might be called *meta-ideologies* because they are designed to self-negate: to free us from all ideologies including themselves. Derrida speaks of the necessity to lodge oneself within traditional conceptuality in order to destroy it, [\[40\]](#) which expresses nicely why Naagaarjuna insists on two truths: the everyday transactional realm must be accepted

in order to point to the higher truth that negates it. [41] According to Maadhyamika, *suunyataa* is like a poison antidote that expels the poison from our bodies and then expels itself, for if the antidote stays inside to poison us we are no better off than before. The difference between ideologies and meta-ideologies rests on whether the sense-of-self's anxious groundlessness is to be resolved by providing something to identify with or by the sense-of-self letting go of itself. Then the important issue is the liberating function of any truth or practice. The same thought that is liberating in one situation may be binding in another. Even the most valuable insights can lose their freshness and become "sticky" because they are now understood as something to cling to rather than a pointer to freedom; or, rather, clinging to them is now misunderstood as the path to freedom. This suggests that we should distinguish between Buddhism as a path of liberation -- a difficult path of dying to ourselves by letting go of ourselves -- and Buddhism as an institution providing cultural and psychological security, reassuring us of the meaningfulness of the Buddhist worldview and our place within it.

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The particular danger with Buddhist meta-ideology is the version of dualistic thinking that motivates it: the distinction between *nirvaa.na* and *sa^msaara*, enlightenment and delusion. Enlightenment includes (although is not limited to) realizing how the distinction we come to make between enlightenment and delusion is itself delusive, that enlightenment does not liberate us in the fashion in which we look to be saved. What makes the game of enlightenment-versus-delusion a meta-ideology is that this realization is essential to the game:

Those who delight in maintaining "without the grasping I will realize *nirvaa.na*; *nirvaa.na* is in me" are the ones with the greatest grasping.

When *nirvaa.na* is not [subject to] establishment and *sa^msaara* not [subject to]

disengagement, how will there be any concept of *nirvaa.na* and *sa^msaara*? (MMK XVI.9-10)

*Meaningfreeness*. Nietzsche predicted that the twentieth century would be an age of nihilism and it is difficult to argue with him. Its multiple horrors have exposed many of us to the psychological and spiritual *du.hkha* of meaninglessness. It was bad enough to lose faith in God, but now that we have lost faith in the future ("progress"), life seems to lose its meaning as well. To the self that seeks to fill up its sense of *lack*, history is what Derrida calls "a detour between two presences," an attempt to recover the lost self-presence of the past sometime in the future. [42] In contrast, Indra's Net is nonteleological: there is "no question of the purpose of it all." [43] Then what, if anything, does Indra's Net imply about this problem and its solution?

For Buddhism, the meaning of life cannot be considered apart from the role that meaning plays in my attempt to ground myself. The meanings which preoccupy us are often ways to evade a sense of meaninglessness we dread. We can usually cope with anxiety and guilt as long as we know what the meaning of life is, for there is security in that, even if we don't always do what that meaning implies we should do. But such meaning systems corrupt what Nietzsche calls "the innocence of becoming" because in projecting and understanding them as objective we repress the fact that these meanings are our own creations, socially constructed and validated. Yet, as Sartre experienced, the alternative of absolute freedom is enough to arouse anguish in the hearts of the bravest.

If the autonomy of ego-self is a delusion, we can see what the problem is. "Commonsense" subject-object dualism presumes the sense-of-self to be the locus of awareness; subjectivism radicalizes that by making the subject the only source of value and meaning, which devalues the world into a field-of-activity wherein the self labors to fulfill itself. But in order for that illusory self to feel secure, its meanings must be unconsciously projected and apparently objective. The sun that motivates me must not be realized to be my own creation if I am to be inspired by it.

When I am aware of constructing my own meaning, the absence of any external grounding for that meaning means I have nothing to lean on. The natural response is a deepened sense of anguish: by what right do I create such meanings? Who am I to decide that this is the way to live?

Juxtaposing these two alternatives makes the Buddhist solution evident. If the collapse of objective meaning exposes my groundlessness, that will certainly be painful, yet it is nonetheless a difficulty much to be desired, since becoming aware of it is necessary in order eventually to solve it. Then realizing the subjectivity of meaning does not by itself resolve the matter, for it becomes a stage that must be endured in order to realize something else.

If despair is a stage, however, one must despair in the right way. Odd as it sounds, the danger with despair is that I will cling to it. In Kierkegaard's school of anxiety (recommended in *The Concept of Anxiety*), despair is the final exam: it dredges up our most cherished meanings and devours them, leaving us disconsolate. But we do not become completely empty unless despair devours us wholly *and also itself*. Despair (literally "no hope") is the shadow of hope, and both are relative to the sense-of-self, for the ego-self alternates between the hope that it will finally fixate itself and the fear that it never will. Then despair evaporates with the self; like the matter and antimatter of particle physics, they disappear by collapsing back into each other. Yet often this does not happen, because when despair finally occurs, after a lifetime of avoiding it, it appears with a force that makes it seem *more real* than the meanings it roots out, which had been used to avoid it. From the Buddhist standpoint, the recurring thoughts and feelings that constitute despair are no more real and no less impermanent than any other thoughts and feelings. But when we despair our usual psychological defenses tend to fail, and we identify with *self*-pitying thoughts and *self*-destructive inclinations. Then, instead of despair consuming the self, it reinforces the worthlessness of that self. One ends up not by becoming nothing but with a sense-of-self nourishing itself

on self-disgust. This is the "reactive" tendency that so disgusted Nietzsche, and he saw what the problem is: man would rather will nothingness than not will. Unfortunately, the `suunyataa "emptiness" that Buddhism recommends is not something that can be willed.

If we despair in the right way, what happens? Abandoning the hope that we will eventually become something, we yield to our nothingness and discover how we have always been everything: in terms of our vantage point in Indra's Net. Particularly in answer to the cosmic or "galactic" perspective, which seems to trivialize all our efforts, [44] the important point is that the interpenetration of everything in that Net is not *sub specie aeternitas*. *Every jewel in Indra's Net is the whole net, but only by means of its own position within that net. There is no vantage point*

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*apart from the Net*. This implies a third alternative to objective-or-subjective meaning: life is neither meaningful nor meaningless but "meaningfree." For a nonabiding mind, meaning, like truth, is not fixed. To seek *the* meaning of life is like asking a chess champion: "Tell me, maestro, what is the best move in chess?" [45] To forget oneself is to wake up and find oneself in or, more precisely, *as* a situation -- not confronted by it but one with it -- and if one is not self-preoccupied, meaning arises naturally within that context. This is implied by the Mahaayaana claim that `suunyataa is form: `suunyataa is not the experience of something apart from the world, because `suunyataa is always contextual; to draw back from involvement in forms is criticized as "clinging to `suunyata." As Buber put it, all real living is meeting. I start with myself in order to forget myself and immerse myself in the world; I understand myself in order not to be preoccupied with myself. [46]

*Play*. For Derrida, the death of God unleashes limitless play; he goes so far as to call play "the absence of the transcendental signified." [47] But whether our God has died

or not, we are already playing. The question is not whether we play but how. Do we suffer our games as if they were life-death struggles, because they are the means whereby we hope to ground ourselves, or do we dance with the light feet that Nietzsche called the first attribute of divinity? James Carse makes what amounts to the same distinction in his insightful *Finite and infinite Games*:

There are at least two kinds of games. One could be called finite, the other infinite. A finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play.

The rules of a finite game may not change; the rules of an infinite game must change.

Finite players play within boundaries; infinite players play with boundaries.

Finite players are serious; infinite players are playful.

Finite players win titles; infinite players have nothing but their names.

A finite player plays to be powerful; an infinite player plays with strength.

A finite player consumes time; an infinite player generates time.

The finite player aims to win eternal life; the infinite player aims for eternal birth. [\[48\]](#)

In terms of Indra's Net, the difference is between a player struggling to ground himself in the Net and a player who plays with the Net because she has realized that she *is* the Net. In Derrida's terms, it is the difference between dreaming of deciphering a truth which will end play by restoring self-presence, and affirming the play which no longer seeks to ground itself.

"So the grand destiny of humanity is... to *play*?" Does our incredulity reflect the absurdity of the proposal, or how far we have fallen from

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the Garden of Eden? Perhaps the predominantly negative connotations of the word reveal less about play than about us: our self-importance, our need to stand out from the rest of creation (and from the rest of our fellows) by accomplishing great things.

We are to play not because there is nothing else to do, not because the lack of some higher meaning means we just while away our time, but because play is implied by the nature of meaning and time. This is not inconsistent with the selflessness of the Bodhisattva, for loss of self-preoccupation is what makes infinite play possible:

To be playful is not to be trivial or frivolous, or to act as though nothing of consequence will happen. On the contrary, when we are playful with each other we relate as free persons, and the relationship is open to surprise; everything that happens is of consequence. It is, in fact, seriousness that closes itself to consequence, for seriousness is a dread of the unpredictable outcome of open possibility. To be serious is to press for a specified conclusion. To be playful is to allow for possibility whatever the cost to oneself. [\[49\]](#)

Adam should have been content to play with nature in paradise, says the Silesian mystic Jakob Boehme, but he fell when life became serious business, which turned nature from an ends into a means. The Fall and all subsequent evil are due to self-will and desire; we become children of God again through an inward grace that regenerates us into childlikeness.

This entire manifested or out-breathed universe is, he [Boehme] says, the expression of the divine desire for holy sport and play. The Heart of God enjoys this myriad play of created beings, all tuned as the infinite strings of a harp for contributing to one mighty harmony, and all together uttering and voicing the infinite variety of the divine purpose. Each differentiated spirit or light or property or atom of creation has a part to play in the infinite sport or game or harmony, "so that in God there might be a holy play through the universe as a child plays with his mother, and that so the joy in the Heart of God might be increased," or again "so that each being may be a true sounding string in God's harmonious concert." [\[50\]](#)

Boehme describes this divine melody as "the joyful play of eternal generation." The extended musical metaphor is so apt because music has no ulterior motives and no goal. It *istathataa*: when it goes somewhere (for example, in sonata-form development) it is not for the sake of getting there but for the sake of the going there.

I can think of no better temporal analogy to complement the spatial metaphor of Indra's net: the musical interpenetration in the harmonic play of a concert orchestra.

Johan Huizinga's classic study *Homo Ludens* shows how many aspects of human culture originate in play and how they have lost that quality over time. A good example is mythopoesis, where Huizinga applies the allegorical nature of personification to religion. "It is impossible,

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in my view, to make any sharp distinction between poetic personification in allegory and the conception of celestial -- or infernal -- beings in theology." This suggests that our conceptions of deity, ritual, and dogma were originally more spontaneous experiences and expressions which were later taken dogmatically as they became understood as the means to attain salvation from this vale of tears. That would be consistent with the general tendency whereby playful, unselfconscious elements tend over time to become formalized and then petrified, until their crust is broken through by the irruption of something new. For Derrida as well, "the divine has been ruined by God," and "the death of God will ensure our salvation because the death of God alone can reawaken the divine." [\[51\]](#)

Although Huizinga describes play as "purposeless yet in some sense meaningful," I think he never quite puts his finger on what most characterizes play: *its meaning is self-contained; something is playful insofar as nothing needs to be gained from it*. This distinguishes true play from conscious or unconscious compulsions which make the game a symbol (and often a symptom) of something else. Psychoanalysis understands compulsiveness as due to the repression of freedom: we choose not to be aware that we have constructed the rules which now constrict us, because of our felt need to win something *from* that game. Then we find ourselves bound by chains of our own making, Blake's "mind-forg'd manacles." In that fashion we finitize the infinite game; but, as Carse emphasizes, anyone who *must* play cannot really *play*.

Yet the Buddhist path of ego-death is not all fun-and-games. The very notion of a path to liberation seems to require distinguishing between means and ends and between different stages. Ironies abound as soon as we try to express this in terms of Indra's Net, which has no teleology and no hierarchy: "There is no center, or, perhaps if there is one, it is everywhere." [52] No jewel is apart from the Net; each is cause of the whole and effect of the whole; therefore each is the focus of the whole Net. But obviously some jewels realize and manifest this more than others. That is, a hierarchy is implied by the fact that some realize better than others that there is no hierarchy. The path is necessary in order to realize we are not going anywhere. We see again why Mahaayaana insists there are two truths. There is spiritual progress only from a phenomenal point of view, since progress involves realizing what has always been the case; therefore "on each stage, one is thus both a Bodhisattva and a Buddha," as Fa-tsang says. [53] But this phenomenal point of view is necessary, for without a spiritual practice jewels do not realize their nonduality with the whole Net.

The inevitable clash between these absolute and phenomenal perspectives led to protracted debates in China about "intrinsic enlightenment" versus "acquired enlightenment," especially in the Tathaagatagarbha tradition, which posited an intrinsically pure matrix or embryo capable

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of developing into Buddhahood. If (as Hua-yen understood) Indra's Net extends temporally as well as spatially -- that is, is intrinsically dynamic -- a philosophical synthesis between its nonteleology and the Tathaagatagarbha teleology of future Buddhahood may be possible. But that argument would take us beyond the scope of this essay.

*Ethics.* Derrida, like Heidegger (who has been a major influence on him) does not offer an ethics; commentators have developed in different directions the hints in his

texts regarding the moral implications of deconstruction. However, another major influence on his thinking, and on the development of poststructuralism generally, has been the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who contrasts the demand for an ethical system with our face-to-face ethical relation to the Other. [54] The Buddhist approach also emphasizes how the desire for a totalizing conceptual scheme interferes with our experience of the existential situation, but draws opposite conclusions about that existential situation: to experience the Other without such a conceptual scheme (*prapa~nca* in Sanskrit) is to realize that he/she is *not* an other.

As long as we experience ourselves as alienated from the world and understand society as a collection of separate selves, the world is devalued into a field of play wherein we compete to full-fill ourselves. That is the origin of the ethical problem we struggle with today without some transcendent ground such as God or Buddhanature, what will bind our atomized selves together? Again, there is an answer in Indra's Net. When my sense-of-self lets go and disappears, I realize my interdependence with all other phenomena in that all-encompassing net. It is more than being dependent on them: when I discover that I *am* you, the trace of your traces, the ethical problem of how to relate to you is transformed. We don't need a moral code to tie us together if we are not separate from each other.

Just as Hua-yen causality is too general to be efficient, so this provides no simple yardstick to resolve knotty ethical dilemmas. Even as nonabiding implies that there is no one Truth to Grasp, there is also no single Right Way to Act. But more important is that this absolves the sense of separation between us which usually makes those dilemmas so difficult to resolve, including the belief that "I" have privileged access to the correct moral principles. Loss of self-preoccupation entails the ability to respond to others without an ulterior motive that needs to gain something, material or symbolic, from that encounter. The recent history of American Buddhism reminds us that the danger of abuse remains if my nondual experience is not deep enough to root out those dualistic tendencies which incline me to manipulate others. As long as there is a sense-of-self, therefore, there will be a need to inculcate morality -- just as young children need training wheels on their bicycles. In Buddhism,

ethical principles approximate the way of relating to others that nondual experience reveals; as in Christianity, I should love my neighbor as myself -- because he/she is myself. But in contrast to the "Thou shalt not -- or else!" of Mosaic law, the Buddhist precepts are not vows to anyone else but *undertakings*: "I undertake the course of training to perfect myself in the area of non-killing," and so forth. Even these precepts are eventually realized not to rest on any objectively binding moral principle. In the Zen school of *koan* practice that I am familiar with, the last ten *koan* examine the ten Mahayana precepts from the enlightened point of view, to clarify what has by then become apparent: the precepts, too, are heuristic guidelines, spiritual training wheels. There are no limitations on my freedom -- except the dualistic delusions which incline me to abuse that freedom in the first place.

Yet such freedom comes from realizing my place in Indra's Net, which also entails my dependence upon all things. Goethe saw the paradox: you have only to consider yourself free to feel yourself bound; you have only to consider yourself bound to feel free. We understand freedom as self-determination, that is, determination by one's *self*. But if there is no self, freedom needs to be understood differently. Why have questions of free will and liberty been so central in the Western tradition, to the extent that the pursuit of freedom might be considered the dominant myth of modernity? Freedom is the crucial issue for a sense-of-self *because it understands its basic problem as lack of autonomy*. So we trace the origins of Western civilization back to the Greek "emancipation" of reason from myth. Since the Renaissance, there has been a progressive emphasis, first on religious freedom (the Reformation), then political freedom (the English, American, French revolutions), followed by economic freedom (the class struggle), racial and colonial freedom, and most recently sexual and psychological freedom (psychotherapy, feminism, gay rights, deconstruction as textual liberation, and so forth). Each of these struggles has dovetailed into its

successors and each has been pursued with a religious fervor, for what is ultimately at stake in all of them is the right of the self to determine itself.

The unfortunate fact is that it is much easier to fight for freedom than to live freely. Absolute freedom for an ego-self is impossible, for our lack of self-existence ensures that we never experience ourselves as free enough: *something* is always felt to constrain us. As important as it is, the myth of freedom has been correlative to the project of the self-grounding ego-self, which seeks to eliminate all the ties that limit it so it can be truly self-determined. Then what does the search for freedom mean if self-groundedness is not possible? When even the most absolute freedom does not end *du.hkha* but usually aggravates it (for example, the last years of Howard Hughes), our struggle for freedom can be fulfilled only by transforming it into a different quest. Then the ambiguity of the

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word "enlightenment" is fortuitous. The legacy of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment project -- in social and scientific terms, that which liberates us from absolutism, dogmatism, and superstition -- must dovetail into the enlightenment that frees me from *me*. Goethe's statement implies that the greatest freedom comes from losing self-preoccupation and assuming responsibility for all things: not just for our family or our nation, but for the whole of Indra's Net. Present social and environmental conditions increasingly make such a commitment necessary.

For Buddhism such response-ability is neither the means to salvation nor the effect of liberation but natural to the expression of genuine enlightenment. Hee-Jin Kim explains Doogen's view of the Buddhist precepts as nothing other than *tathataa*, "thusness":

*[N]ot-to-commit-any-evil* is neither the heteronomous "Thou shalt not" nor the autonomous "I will not," but is *non-contrivance*... When morality becomes effortless, purposeless, and playful, it becomes a non-moral morality which is the culmination of

Zen practice of the Way in which morality, art, and play merge together. When ought becomes is in the transparency of thusness, only then do we come to the highest morality. Moral excellence as such does not constitute absolute freedom and purity from the religious and metaphysical standpoint. Only when an ought becomes an expression of thusness, does it reach the highest morality. [\[55\]](#)

This is the non-moral morality of the bodhisattva, who, having nothing to gain or lose, is devoted to the welfare of others. Contrary to popular belief, this is not a sacrifice. Indra's Net implies that, insofar as I am caused by the whole universe, it exists for my benefit; but insofar as I am the cause of the whole universe, I exist for it. This dilemma is resolved by realizing that there is no real distinction between the terms: when I am the universe, to help others is to help myself. The bodhisattva knows that no one is saved until we're all saved.

But then isn't the logical opposite (to help myself is to help others) also true? According to Buddhism, to become enlightened is to forget one's own suffering only to wake up in or rather *one with* a world of suffering. This experience is not sympathy or empathy but *compassion*, literally "suffering with." What will the meaning of life become for such a person, freed from the delusions of objective meaning and narcissistic self-preoccupation? What will that nondual freedom, which has nothing to gain or to lose, choose to do? The career of the bodhisattva is helping others: not because one ought to, for the bodhisattva is not bound by dogma or morality, but because one *is* the situation, and through oneself that situation draws forth a response to meet its needs. Where does that response come from? Insofar as a bodhisattva is an effect of the whole universe -- an effect no longer limited by the self-reflexive, mind-forg'd manacles of self-consciousness, because no ulterior motive is

interfering -- it can only be the whole universe that acts. As noticed earlier, however, such causation is so general that it ceases to have any meaning and becomes equivalent to no cause at all. Therefore the bodhisattva experiences his/her nondual deed as arising uncaused: one simply wants to act in a certain way. There is, finally, a mystery that cannot be explained but perhaps does not need to be.

*Meditation.* In one way or another, all the previous sections have emphasized the nonduality of self and other. This claim, which is essential to the Mahaayaana understanding of enlightenment, distinguishes Buddhism from postmodern thought. Derrida's critique of "transcendental signifieds" includes doubts about the possibility of such "mystical" experiences. His skepticism is healthy insofar as the quest for such experiences is another version of our desire for self-presence. But there is another way to understand the nondual experience that Buddhism recommends. If the sense-of-self is shadowed by a sense-of-lack that continually motivates me to try to ground myself, the sense-of-self should be understood dynamically, as not a thing but a process: *the process that seeks self-presence*. If this is the source of our *du.hkha*, the ego-death that Buddhism encourages might lead not to the attainment of self-presence but to the opposite: the end of that usually unconscious and automatized quest, an end which reveals something hitherto unnoticed about the world "I" am "in."

In his first book, Derrida argues that "the establishment of a pure presence, without loss, is one with the occurrence of absolute loss, with death." [56] But can such absolute loss occur without physical death? If death is what the sense-of-self fears, the Buddhist solution is for the sense-of-self to die. If it is my no-thing-ness I am afraid of, the best way to resolve that fear is to become nothing. A famous passage in the Genjoo-koan fascicle of Doogen's Shooboogenzoo sums up this process:

To study the buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things. When actualized by myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away. No trace of realization remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly. [57]

*"Forgetting" itself is how a jewel in Indra's Net loses its sense of separation and realizes that it is the Net.* Meditation is learning how to die by learning to "forget" the sense-of-self, which happens by becoming absorbed into one's meditation exercise. Since the sense-of-self is a result of consciousness attempting to reflect back upon itself in order to grasp itself, such meditation practice is an exercise in *de-reflection*. Consciousness *un*learns trying to grasp itself, real-ize itself, objectify itself. Enlightenment occurs when the usually automatized reflexivity of consciousness

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ceases -- experienced as a letting go and falling into the void and being wiped out of existence. "Men are afraid to forget their minds, fearing to fall through the Void with nothing to stay their fall. They do not know that the Void is not really void, but the realm of the real Dharma" (Huang-po). [\[58\]](#) Then, when I no longer strive to make myself real through things, I find myself "actualized" by them, says Doogen. What we fear as nothingness is not really nothingness, for that is the perspective of a sense-of-self anxious about losing its grip on itself. Letting go of myself and merging with that nothingness leads to something else: when consciousness stops trying to catch its own tail, I become nothing, and discover that I am everything -- or, more precisely, that I can be anything.

An example of Zen meditation (the practice of Hua-yen, according to D. T. Suzuki) may be helpful here. In the Zen lineage that I am familiar with, a first *koan* such as Joshu's *Mu* is treated more or less like a *mantram*. Putting all one's attention and mental energy into "muuu ..." (repeated mentally during breath exhalations) undermines the sense-of-self by letting go of the mental processes that sustain it. At the beginning of such practice, one attempts to concentrate on "muuu ..." but is distracted by other thoughts, feelings, and so forth that arise. A later, more focused stage is when one can concentrate on "muuu ..." without losing it: "muuu ..."

effectively keeps other thoughts and so forth away. The stage when "both inside and outside naturally fuse" occurs when there is no longer the sense of an "I" that is repeating an objective sound; there is only "muuu...." This stage is sometimes described by saying that now "muuu ..." is doing "muuu ...": it is "muuu ..." that sits, walks, eats, and so forth.

Sometimes this practice leads to a sensation which has been described as hanging over a precipice. "Except for occasional feelings of uneasiness and despair, it is like death itself" (Hakuin). The solution is to throw oneself completely into "muuu ...":

Bravely let go on the edge of the cliff

Throw yourself into the abyss with decision and courage

You only revive after death! (Po-shan)

At this point the teacher may help by cutting the last thread: an unexpected action, such as a blow or shout or even a few quiet words, may startle the student into letting go. "All of a sudden he finds his mind and body wiped out of existence, together with the *koan*. This is what is known as 'letting go your hold'" (Hakuin). [\[59\]](#) One classical Zen story tells how a student was enlightened by the sound of a pebble striking bamboo. When the practice is ripe, the shock of an unexpected sensation allows it to penetrate to the very core of consciousness -- that is, it is experienced nondually.

If I let go and become a nondual sound, what happens to "my" mind?

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Indra's Net implies that when a jewel has no inside, the outside is not outside. Doogen described his own experience by saying that he realized that mind is nothing other than rivers, mountains, and trees, the sun and the moon and the stars.

All the Buddhas and all sentient beings are nothing but the one mind, beside which nothing exists. This mind, which is without beginning, is unborn and indestructible. It is not green nor yellow, and has neither form nor appearance. It does not belong to the

categories of things which exist or do not exist, nor can it be thought about in terms of new or old. It is neither long nor short, big nor small, for it transcends all limits, measures, names, traces and comparisons. It is that which you see before you -- begin to reason about it and you at once fall into error. (Huang-po) [\[60\]](#)

The mind that Doogen and Huang-po refer to is not some transcendent Absolute. It is nothing other than your mind and my mind, which is not green or yellow or big or small because it is not bound to any particular form, which is why it can become green or yellow or big or small or... Our minds need to realize that they are *absolute* in the original sense: "unconditioned." Meditative techniques decondition the mind from its tendency to secure itself by circling in familiar ruts, thereby freeing it to become anything.

Yung-ming, a Sung dynasty Ch'an and Pure Land master, summarizes this process: "The One Mind can take in all minds and return them to the One Mind, this is the meaning of Indra's Net." [\[61\]](#) Garma C. C. Chang has argued that the Mind-only teaching of Yogacara is not as important to Hua-yen as Maadhyamika nonsubstantiality, [\[62\]](#) but the account above shows the integral relationship between them. Rather than being a metaphysical idealism, the Mind-only doctrine attempts to describe meditative experience. It is rather our "commonsense" subject-object dualism which is metaphysical, for it presupposes both idealism (that there are subjective minds) and materialism (that there is objective matter).

*Conclusion.* This essay originated in my wonder at these parallels between an ancient Asian philosophical system/religious way and one of the most provocative developments in contemporary Western thought. That there are also major differences is not an impasse but an opportunity: the place where fruitful dialogue can occur. I think such a conversation has much to offer both parties. Historically, Buddhism has been a flexible religion, adapting its own message and practices to different cultural contexts; but dogmatism and institutionalization overtake all such movements. Today it faces its greatest challenge, as we ask what Buddhism has to offer a rationalized, technological world which is rapidly devouring what remains of its own spiritual roots.

From a Buddhist perspective, the poststructural realization that the

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meaning of a text cannot be totalized -- that language/thought never attains a self-presence which escapes differences -- is an important step toward the realization that there is no abiding place for the mind anywhere within Indra's Net. But the textual dissemination liberated by Derrida's deconstruction will not be satisfactory unless the dualistic sense-of-self -- not just its discourse -- has been deconstructed. Without dying to itself and experiencing that it *is* Indra's Net, even a postmodern, disseminating self will continue to be haunted by a sense of *lack* which seeks to ground itself in one or another symbolic fashion. This "bad infinity" is only a parody of true liberation, rather than the "good infinity" that can become anything because it needs to become nothing.

## NOTES

[1.](#) Francis H. Cook, *Hua-yen Buddhism: The Jewel Net of Indra* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977), p. 2. Hua-yen is the Chinese translation of *Avata.msaka*. "Flower Garland."

[2.](#) Ibid.

[3.](#) Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1988), pp. 3-5.

- [4.](#) In Paul Williams, *Mahaayaana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 124, 125.
- [5.](#) Fa-tsang, quoted in Garma C. C. Chang, *The Buddhist Teaching of Totality: The Philosophy of Hua-yen Buddhism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1972), p. 146.
- [6.](#) In Chang, *The Buddhist Teaching of Totality*, p. 229.
- [7.](#) D. T. Suzuki, introduction to Beatrice L. Suzuki, *Mahayana Buddhism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981), p. 12; and Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 406.
- [8.](#) Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 79.
- [9.](#) For example, Steve Odin's *Process Metaphysics and Hua-yen Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982) uses Whitehead's "cumulative penetration" to criticize temporal aspects of the Hua-yen conception of interpenetration.
- [10.](#) Cook's phrase, in *Hua-yen Buddhism*, p. 2.

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- [11.](#) See, for example, a special issue of *Philosophy East and West* devoted to environmental ethics (vol. 37, no. 2 [April 1987]), especially the articles by Inada and Rolston.
- [12.](#) Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 1981), p. 324.
- [13.](#) Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 36.
- [14.](#) Interview with Richard Kearney in *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, ed. Richard Kearney (Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 98.

- [15.](#) *Muulamadhyamikakaarika* XXV.9, Mervyn Sprung's translation in his edition of *Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way* (Boulder: Praj~na Press, 1979), p. 255. Hereafter cited as "MMK." Sprung translates `suunyataa as "the absence of being in things." These three stages also correspond to the *trivabhaava*, "three natures," of Yogaacara.
- [16.](#) Quoted in Irvin D. Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), p. 469. Perhaps John Lennon put it better: life is what happens while we're making other plans.
- [17.](#) In Williams' *Mahaayaana Buddhism*, p. 121. See also MMK VII.34.
- [18.](#) Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 26. The Buddhist doctrine of *pratiityasamutpada* makes the same point about consciousness.
- [19.](#) Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 112; "An Apocalyptic Tone," pp. 90, 91. For more on the sense-of-lack as "shadow" of the sense-of-self, see David Loy, "The Nonduality of Life and Death: A Buddhist View of Repression," *Philosophy East And West* 40 no. 2 (April 1990).
- [20.](#) These are the five *skandha* "heaps" whose interaction constitutes the sense-of-self.
- [21.](#) *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines and Its Verse Summary*, trans. and ed. Edward Conze (Bollingen, California: Four Seasons Foundation, 1973), 1: 5-7, 10; pp. 9-10.
- [22.](#) *Ibid.*, 22: 399-400, pp. 237-238.
- [23.](#) *The Sutra of Hui-Neng* [the "Platform Sutra"] trans. Wong Mou-lam (Boston: Shambhala, 1990), pp. 80-81.
- [24.](#) Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 292.
- [25.](#) `Saantideva, *Bodhicaryaavataara* IX. 35, in *Entering the Path of Enlightenment*, trans. Marion L. Matics (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 214.

- [26.](#) Hui Hai, *The Zen Teaching of Hui Hai*, trans. and ed. John Blofeld (London: Rider, 1969), p. 56.
- [27.](#) Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), pp. 300-301, no. 355.
- [28.](#) Canki-sutta, *Majjhima Nikaaya* no. 95.
- [29.](#) *Vigraha-vyaavartanii*, 29.
- [30.](#) Seng-ts'an, *Hsin Hsin Mei*, trans. Arthur Waley, in *The Rider Book of Mystical Verse*, ed. J. M. Cohen (London: Rider, 1983), p. 160.
- [31.](#) From an unpublished translation by Robert Aitken.
- [32.](#) *The Sutra of Hui-Neng*, pp. 131, 132.
- [33.](#) Hee-Jin Kim, *Doogen Kigen -- Mystical Realist* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1975), p. 259. "Words are no longer just something that the intellect manipulates abstractly and impersonally but something that works intimately in the existential metabolism of one who uses them philosophically and religiously in a special manner and with a special attitude. They are no longer mere means or symbols that point to realities other than themselves but are themselves the realities of original enlightenment and the Buddha-nature" (p. 110).
- [34.](#) Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 292.
- [35.](#) James P. Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games* (New York: Free Press, 1986), pp. 72-73.
- [36.](#) If philosophy, too, can be a way not to grasp reality but to deconstruct it, we may rethink a philosophical commonplace. The truth or falsity of a philosophical position cannot be determined by evaluating the person who claims it; *ad hominem* appeals to authority and prejudice are not acceptable reasoning. Yet can't that truth be carried too far, if there is an organic relationship between the quality of a person's life and the quality of his thought? Insofar as philosophy can be a path of liberation, one of the things we want to know is how liberating thoughts were for their thinker. What kind

of life did he/she lead? What values did that life embody? What kinds of freedom? These biographical factors are not the last word, but they are a consideration. I think our interest in "great lives," including philosophers', points to an intuition of this fact. From this perspective, it is important to inquire into the relation between, e.g., Heidegger's philosophical thought and his politics.

[37.](#) Martin Heidegger, *What is Philosophy?* trans. W. Kuback and J. T. Wilde (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1958), p. 25.

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[38.](#) "On Truth and Lie in the Extramoral Sense," in *The Viking Portable Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1964), pp. 46 ff.

[39.](#) Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games*, p. 106.

[40.](#) Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 111. Derrida declares a double strategy: on the one hand, "to attempt an exit and a deconstruction without changing terrain... by using against the edifice the instruments or stones available in the house," at the risk of thereby reconfirming what one allegedly deconstructs; on the other hand, "to decide to change ground in a discontinuous and irruptive fashion... by affirming an absolute break and difference," with the risk of reinstating that new terrain on the old ground. The way to reduce these risks is "to speak several languages and produce several texts at once" (*Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982], p. 135).

[41.](#) MMK XXIV.8-10.

[42.](#) Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 291.

[43.](#) See note 2, above.

[44.](#) "There is something inherently noxious in the process of stepping back too far from life. When we take ourselves out of life and become distant spectators, things cease to matter. From this vantage point... we and our fellow creatures seem trivial

and foolish. We become only one of countless life forms. Life's activities seem absurd. The rich, experienced moments are lost in the great expanse of time. We sense that we are microscopic specks, and that all life consumes but a flick of cosmic time. [This] galactic view presents a formidable problem for therapists" (Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy*, p. 478).

[45.](#) This example is used by Viktor Frankl in *The Doctor and the Soul* (Penguin, 1973), p. 72.

[46.](#) "Meeting is to be experienced in living action and suffering itself, in the unreduced immediacy of the moment" (Martin Buber, *The Eclipse of God*, trans. Maurice S. Friedman [New York: Harper Torchbook, 1957], p. 35).

[47.](#) Jacques Derrida, *The Archaeology of the Frivolous*, trans. J. P. Leavey (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1980), p. 118.

[48.](#) From Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games*, pt. 1.

[49.](#) Ibid., p. 15.

[50.](#) Rufus M. Jones, *Spiritual Reformers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (New York: Macmillan, 1914), p. 177. See, for example, Boehme's Aurora xiii 48-57.

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[51.](#) Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, pp. 243, 184.

[52.](#) See note 2.

[53.](#) Quoted in Cook, *Hua-yen Buddhism*, p. 112.

[54.](#) Levinas' major work is *Totality and infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1979). Derrida's appreciative essay on Levinas is "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference*, pp. 79-153.

[55.](#) Kim, *Doogen Kigen -- Mystical Realist*, p. 294; Kim's italics.

[56.](#) Jacques Derrida, *"Speech and Phenomena" and other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 151.

[57.](#) *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Doogen*, ed. Kazuaki Tanahashi (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985), p. 70.

[58.](#) *The Zen Teaching of Huang Po*, trans. John Blofeld (London: Buddhist Society, 1958), p. 41.

[59.](#) Ch'an master Po Shan, in "Discourses of Master Po Shan," in *The Practice of Zen*, trans. and ed. Garma C. C. Chang (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), pp. 94-102. Hakuin quotes in D. T. Suzuki's *Zen Buddhism* (New York: Anchor, 1956), p. 148.

[60.](#) *The Zen Teaching of Huang Po*, p. 29.

[61.](#) In Yung-ming's *On the Zen Mirror*, quoted in Chang, *Buddhist Teaching of Totality*, p. 157.

[62.](#) Chang, *Buddhist Teaching of Totality*, p. 172.