

The Role of Mindfulness Meditation and Aesthetic Virtue in the Transition from the Emptiness of Self to Social Engagement: Buddhādāsa's Appropriation of D. T. Suzuki's Theory of Buddhist Enlightenment¹

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Abstract

At the heart of Buddhism is the social-moral imperative to alleviate the suffering of all beings. But the notion of a socially engaged Buddhist rests on precarious grounds. Buddhist philosophy contends that human individuals do not really exist – the human person is just a fabrication of the mind. Buddhist spiritual practices, meanwhile, convey direct experience of the illusoriness of individual persons (including oneself) and emphasize detachment from worldly involvements. How, then, can a Buddhist ease the suffering of other persons if he has renounced ownership of his own self – either through withdrawal into monastic life or blind allegiance to an external agency (e.g., a political institution)?

This article responds to this puzzle by first examining how Buddhist selflessness is not just a theoretical problem,

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but a practical one as well: the article considers the social-moral and political problems associated with the Buddhist philosophy of activism of D. T. Suzuki, one of the leading voices of socially engaged Buddhism who used Buddhism in order to rally support for the purposes of a morally corrupt Japanese Empire. The article then analyses the influence of Suzuki upon the 20th century Thai Buddhist philosopher, Buddhadāsa, and poses the question: is Buddhadāsa's version of socially engaged Buddhism subject to the same criticisms as Suzuki's call to action? Finally, the article examines key differences between the meditation practices of Suzuki and Buddhadāsa, and argues that *ānāpānasati* (the form of mental cultivation taught by Buddhadāsa) develops certain aesthetic virtues (e.g., loving kindness or *mettā*) that (a) get over-looked in *zazen* (emphasized by Suzuki) and (b) enable the practitioner to become an agent of social change who positively, yet selflessly, attends to the needs of others.

Introduction: The Conceptual and Practical Problem of a Socially Engaged Buddhist Agent

Like many other Indian religio-philosophical traditions, Buddhism begins with an insight into the nature of “what is”: “All this is suffering,” declares the Buddha during his first sermon at the deer park in Sarnath.³ But the Four Noble Truths quickly move us from the metaphysics of suffering to the ethical dimension of suffering. Buddhism assumes that suffering is a morally engaged problem (i.e., we ought to do something about “all this suffering”) and concludes with a

³ Treating suffering as a metaphysical problem was common amongst Indian religio-philosophical traditions, including the orthodox Hindu schools (e.g., *Vedānta*, *Sāṃkhya*) and heterodox schools such as the *Cārvākā*.

plan for how to understand and address this problem: the Fourth Noble Truth introduces an eightfold path by means of which the cause of suffering can be uprooted. Meditation upon these truths is central to this progression and constitutes a key component of the eightfold path. The efficacy of Buddhist mental culture rests upon its (a) enabling one to realize the emptiness of the self (thereby addressing the metaphysical problem of suffering) and (b) cultivating compassion for all beings (which underlies the Buddhist response to suffering as an ethical problem). But how can the achieved Buddhist become a creative agent in the world if her self-awareness as a “self” that acts of her own volition, thinks her own thoughts, etc., has melted away? It would appear that the Buddhist response to the metaphysical problem of suffering undermines the Buddhist’s capacity to address suffering as a practical ethical problem.

This is not simply a conceptual problem for Buddhists; it is also a practical one. Consider the example of Zen Buddhism in early- to mid-20th century Japan. The Japanese Empire of the first half of the 20th century committed horrible atrocities throughout the Pacific Islands and Southeast, East, and Northeast Asia. At least some leaders of the Japanese Zen Buddhist community not only overlooked the moral depravity of these tragedies, they celebrated violence as having positively religious significance.⁴ This is in part due to the self-understanding of Japanese Zen Buddhists: in contrast with the more contemplative Buddhist traditions of South and Southeast Asia, Japanese Zen emphasizes worldly engagement as an integral part of Buddhist religiosity. Furthermore, proponents of Zen have frequently used its spiritual technologies (e.g., *zazen*, martial arts training, etc.) as instruments for subordinating the will of “empty persons” to that of an imperial, militant-minded agenda. As an example of this, consider that throughout much of the history of Japan the *bushido* code has linked Zen enlightenment (with its emphasis upon extinction of the ego), the

⁴ As Brian Victoria argues in “The ‘Negative Side’ of D. T. Suzuki’s Relationship to War,” the close ties between Japanese Zen Buddhism and Japanese imperialism of the first half of the 1900s challenges the common misconception that no war has ever been fought on behalf of Buddhist ideals. See Victoria, “The ‘Negative Side’”, 97-138.

sword (fearlessness in the face of death), and unqualified loyalty to structures of authority.⁵ In brief, the liberating realization of the emptiness of the self (or “egolessness”) advocated by Zen – whereby the person achieves a kind of “value-neutral,” antinomian transcendence of moral categories – was seen to be fully compatible with unquestioning service to the state.

The writings of D.T. Suzuki, the charismatic Zen intellectual and the face of Japanese Zen in the West, are consistent with the *bushido*-promoting “spiritual education” (*seishin kyoiku*) of Zen militarism and even valorize the selflessness displayed by Zen-trained soldiers who were willing to die on the battlefield for the emperor.⁶ In *Zen and Japanese Culture*, the work that made him famous in the West, Suzuki implicitly relieves the Zen-trained soldier of moral responsibility for the violent acts that he commits, and even celebrates the swordsman as a kind of artist: “[the sword] is no more a weapon of self-defense or an instrument of killing, and the swordsman turns into an artist of the first grade, engaged in producing a work of genuine originality.”⁷ Elsewhere,

⁵ One expression of this is given in the 1938 book titled *Taigi* (“Great Duty”), by the long-time Zen practitioner, Lt. Col. Sugimoto Goro: “[A]ll Japanese, especially soldiers, must live in the spirit of the unity of sovereign and subjects, eliminating their ego and getting rid of their self. It is exactly the awakening to the nothingness (*mū*) of Zen that is the fundamental spirit of the unity of sovereign and subjects. Through my practice of Zen I am able to get rid of my ego. In facilitating the accomplishment of this, Zen becomes, as it is, the true spirit of the imperial military”. Quoted in Victoria, “The ‘Negative Side’”, 115.

⁶ Although not as fervent as other Japanese in his enthusiasm for Japanese imperialism or staunch in his xenophobic nationalism, Suzuki never publicly disapproved of rhetoric commonly voiced during this time regarding the connection between Zen enlightenment and the taking of human life. My assessment of Suzuki and his implication of Zen in Japanese militarism has been largely influenced by Victoria’s work.

⁷ Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 145. Elsewhere Suzuki draws a clear connection between Zen enlightenment, militarism, and loyalty to the state. In *A New Theory of Religion* (1896), a book written shortly after his initial enlightenment experience, Suzuki describes the attitude that soldiers are to take up on the battlefield: “[they] regard their own lives ‘as light as goose feathers and their duty as heavy as Mount Taishan.’ Should they fall on the battlefield they have no regrets. This is what is called ‘religion during the time of [national] emergency’”. Quoted in Victoria, “The

Suzuki's exposition of the *Buddha-dharma* not only displays cold indifference to the unnecessary loss of life, it appeals to Buddhist religious sentiments in order to motivate his audience to take up arms in service of the Japanese war machine. He writes: "Let us then shuffle off this mortal coil [i.e., regarding the loss of Japanese lives] whenever it becomes necessary, and not raise a grunting voice against the fates... Resting in this conviction, Buddhists carry the banner of *Dharma* over the dead and dying until they gain final victory."⁸ In short, Suzuki tells us that to be a man of Zen is to be a man of action, not one of discursive thinking and armchair deliberations. Furthermore, to practice the *Buddha-dharma* is to submit blindly to the will of the state, regardless of its pernicious consequences (e.g., the denigration of human life). Finally, the deeper one's realization of Buddhist metaphysical truths (e.g., the emptiness of self), the more unaccountable one (ought to and actually) becomes in carrying out the possibly unethical imperatives of one's authority figures. In short, Buddhist selflessness, the metaphysical dimension of which gets realized through *zazen* meditation practice, would appear to undermine the individual agent's capacity and willingness to creatively intervene in social and political affairs.

In spite of (a) the above-mentioned conceptual deterrent to the practice of a legitimate Buddhist ethics and (b) historical cause for concern that Buddhism opens the door to unethical practices at both the individual and institutional levels, recent academic interest in Buddhist ethics has been growing. But the question, "What is Buddhist ethics?" must involve a response to the more self-reflective question, "By what means are we to understand Buddhist ethics?" There exist a variety of Western approaches to Buddhist ethics, including virtue ethics, natural law ethics, deontology, utilitarianism, and moral sentiment theory, to name just a few. Nearly all of these interpretive approaches have been successful to varying degrees largely because there are many

'Negative Side"', 100. Interestingly, the reference embedded within this quotation is to Emperor Meiji's 1882 "Imperial Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors," which every Japanese military man up through the end of World War II was required to accept without qualification.

⁸ Suzuki wrote this soon after learning of Japan's successful defeat of Russian naval forces in 1904. Quoted in Victoria, "The 'Negative Side'", 104.

Buddhisms, and elements of each of these Western moral theories can be found in at least one of the many Buddhist ethical orientations. But at least one aspect that each Buddhist ethics shares and which distinguishes them from Western ethical approaches is their foundation in the Four Noble Truths. Accordingly, interpretive paradigms of Buddhist morality must account for not just *what* action a Buddhist is to take up in situations, but *why* it is important for a Buddhist to embody the Noble Truths – namely, the metaphysics and ethics of selflessness. Moreover, given the peculiar nature of these insights – i.e., there is no self to perform ethical actions – approaches to Buddhist ethics must also examine the means to its hidden practical wisdom, i.e., Buddhist meditation, in order to account for *how* this transitioning (between the metaphysical realization of the emptiness of self and its ethical manifestation) gets accomplished.

The form of Buddhist ethics with which I am principally concerned in this article is that of the movement known as Socially Engaged Buddhism. I focus upon this movement for two reasons. For one, its attentiveness to suffering as a social phenomenon emphasizes active involvement in the world, which spotlights both the conceptual and practical problems with which I opened this article. Secondly, philosophical developments within the Socially Engaged movement can provide clues to a compelling theory of Buddhist ethics that eludes Western ethical frameworks. In order to draw out these clues, I look to the theory of ethics and meditation put forth by Buddhādāsa, the 20th century Thai Buddhist philosopher who influenced the Socially Engaged Buddhism movement. This investigation occurs through the lens of the following two questions: (1) “How does meditation facilitate the transition between metaphysics (i.e., the realization of the emptiness of the self) and ethics (i.e., performing selflessness)?”, and (2) “What implications does this have for the conceptual problem of Buddhist ethical agency?” I focus upon Buddhādāsa’s response to these questions not only because it is persuasive, but because its persuasiveness rests upon his having absorbed important dimensions of D.T. Suzuki’s theory into what he believes to be a revived interpretation of Theravāda Buddhism. From this, I conclude that Buddhādāsa’s theorization of core Buddhist concepts has in view a uniquely Buddhist form of social

engagement that takes seriously the suffering of others as others. Moreover, in order to demonstrate how Buddhādāsa maintains the integrity of the Buddhist realization of no-self while responding to suffering as a social-moral problem, I argue that one must postpone the task of fitting Buddhist ethics into any particular Western school of thought and attend to the aesthetic virtues (*mettā*) to be gained through the form of mindfulness meditation emphasized by Buddhādāsa.

The Fruits of Mindfulness Meditation and Buddhādāsa's Appropriation of D.T. Suzuki's Theory of Buddhist Enlightenment

For Buddhādāsa, we discern principles for ethical behavior through observation of basic features of the natural world. This is indicated by Buddhādāsa's frequent usage of the term “*kot thammachat* [กฎธรรมชาตี่]” which can be translated as “natural law.” Buddhādāsa explains how he understands the relationship between the two terms, “*kot* [กฎ] (law)” and “*thammachat* [ธรรมชาตี่] (nature, natural, or naturally arising)”:

In the original Pali language the word *Dhamma* was used to refer to all the intricate and involved things that go to make up what we call nature (*dhammajati* [Thai: “*thammachat*”). In the main, *Dhamma* embraces: 1. Nature itself, 2. The laws of nature, 3. A person's duty to act in accordance with the laws of nature, 4. The benefits to be derived from acting in accordance with the laws of nature.⁹

According to Western-based Natural Law theory, ethics is neither a human invention (i.e., morality is not conventional, arbitrary, or culturally relative), nor does it derive from a supernatural source (e.g., with the exception of Aquinas's version of Natural Law ethics). Rather, ethics derives from the natural world; there exists a moral law inherent in the very structure of the universe. The term “*dhamma*” similarly straddles the two domains of metaphysics and ethics. On the one hand,

⁹ Buddhādāsa, “Everyday Language and *Dhamma* Language”, 128.

it means “truth,” “reality,” or “nature,” while on the other hand, it refers to the natural laws or patterns that structure human society and organize human behavior. Institutions that enable us to live well with and for others – farming, for example – require both attentiveness to the regular phenomena that characterize each season and appropriate conduct from the people involved in those institutions. More broadly (and specific to the natural law ethics of Buddhādāsa), the Buddhist concept of *paṭicca-samuppāda* (“causality,” “conditionality,” or “dependent co-origination”) accounts for how all events come into being based upon certain conditions and in dependence upon other beings. Ethically speaking, we are not responsible for the way things are. But we do have the potential to perceive the natural law at work both within us and without, and we also have the capacity to interpret its meaning for the living of human life. In this way, knowledge of the way things are can lead to understanding of what one should do in given situations.

But what distinguishes what one should do? Buddhādāsa responds to this question with his explanation of *sīla*. “*Sīla* means “normalcy” or “at equilibrium” (*pakati*). If anything conduces to normalcy and not to confusion it is called *sīla*, and the *dhamma* (truth, reality) that brings about that state is called *sīladhamma*.”¹⁰ At the human level, *dhamma* enjoins personal and social equilibrium, or human normalcy: “the normalcy of being balanced and harmonious in thought, word and deed. *Pakati*... means not colliding with anyone, even oneself, not disturbing one’s state of calm; not clashing with others and disturbing their state of equanimity.”¹¹ Self-centered, other-disregarding behavior violates the harmony of the natural law (*Dhamma*) largely on account of its ignoring our interpenetrateness with others (*paṭicca-samuppāda*). *Dhammic* conduct, in contrast, has us comport ourselves in a way that is fitting with how things really are so that both internal and societal harmony can result.¹² Buddhādāsa explains: “nature (*dhammajāti*) follows its

¹⁰ Buddhādāsa, “The Value of Morality”, 159.

¹¹ Buddhādāsa, “The Value of Morality”, 159.

¹² Elsewhere, Buddhādāsa writes: “Morality should aim at enabling individuals to bring their minds to equilibrium (*pakati*), and to enable societies to be *pakati*, to live together in peace and harmony. This is morality.” Buddhādāsa, “The Value of Morality”, 164. Also, it is worthwhile to note that, contrary to Kant, who sees the

own particular way. If we transgress fundamental laws we are, in effect, transgressing natural morality; that is, we lack morality according to the dictates of nature.”¹³ Being moral, in short, amounts to being normal, that is, being like the rest of nature, “consum[-ing] only as much as nature has given [us] the means to take in, a level of consumption perfectly adequate for [our] needs.”¹⁴

Given that human normalcy (i.e., the mea of human morality) is rooted in attentiveness to the manifest laws of nature, the question, “what should one do?,” thus gives way to an inquiry into “what is” itself. But how are we to conduct this inquiry so that our knowledge of the way things are leads to practical wisdom? In keeping with many other socially engaged Buddhists, Buddhādāsa believes that meditation holds the key to obtaining that special form of knowledge.¹⁵ Through meditative activity, one directly realizes that nothing (including oneself) exists as self-contained, not even for a single moment; all things come

orders of “what is” and “what ought to be” as divorced and counter-posed (i.e., as the domains of causality and freedom, respectively), for Buddhists these two realms are continuous and interconnected. Interestingly, however, both parties recognize that the aesthetic plays a key role in linking these domains. Kant notes that the *Critique of Judgment* completes his system of thought, for it is aesthetic judgment that facilitates the transition from “what is” to “what ought to be.”

¹³ Buddhādāsa, “The Value of Morality”, 161. The law of *karma*, meanwhile, gets theorized as nature’s justice-enforcing mechanism. Ethically “good” behavior leads to a normal disposition and a higher standing in the next life, while those who perform “bad,” i.e., balance-disturbing, behavior suffer abnormalities and *karmic* retribution in the life to come. Elucidating a statement made by P.A. Payutto, whose views on this point are not inconsistent with those of Buddhādāsa, Sally King writes, “behavior that is out of harmony with the interdependent, co-operative and interconstructive nature of the cosmos... naturally causes pain for oneself and those around one... ‘be it in this life or the next.’ Harmonious, cooperative behavior simply participates in the natural flourishing of life.” King, *Being Benevolence*, 48.

¹⁴ Buddhādāsa, “Dictatorial *Dhammic* Socialism”, 187.

¹⁵ In many ways Buddhādāsa broke with or went beyond the Buddhist institutional system in Thailand at his time. This system was highly scholastic and critical of the wandering forest monk traditions of Thailand and Southeast Asia, largely on account of the latter’s emphasis upon meditation and involvement with the lay people at the expense of sustained scholastic training and strict observance of the rules of the *sangha* – or at least, the *sangha* rules established by the ruling Buddhist elite in Bangkok. For more on this, see Kamala, *Forest Recollections*.

into existence through dependence upon external conditions, and meditation sharpens our attention to our first-hand experience of this. From this realization, the meditator spontaneously acts with appropriate selflessness and cooperative-ness; he acts in accordance with the *dhamma*. Buddhadāsa explains: “If we are observant, we will notice what nature’s secret plan has been from the very beginning: the entire natural world should exist in harmonious balance for it to survive, develop and thrive. We may call this interdependence and equilibrium the plan or direction of nature.”¹⁶ It is not theoretical analysis, but sustained meditative practice that yields proper understanding of “the plan or direction of nature” and enables the transition from contemplative realization of no-self and active, selfless involvement in the world.

In elaborating upon this, Buddhadāsa presents an interesting integration of Zen and Theravāda Buddhist insights into the epistemological, moral, and aesthetic dimensions of culminating meditative practice. As is well known, Buddhadāsa’s interpretation of the Pali canon and practice of meditation were influenced by Zen teachings from China, Japan, and Vietnam. This is particularly evident in his idea of “*chit wang* [จิตว่าง]” or “void mind,” which stands as one of the cornerstones of his thought. Buddhadāsa argues that the doctrine of voidness (or *suññatā*) is central to not only Māhāyana Buddhism, but Theravāda as well. But since this concept had received limited attention in the traditional Thai reading of the Pali canon, Buddhadāsa turned to Zen teachings in order to articulate and justify his interpretation of Theravāda doctrines in terms of *suññatā*.¹⁷ *Chit wang* refers to the mind of one who has been liberated from her egoism; it denotes a psychological void wherein all entities, in particular the individual person herself, are recognized as empty of essential form or “self.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Buddhadāsa, “Dictatorial *Dhammic* Socialism”, 186.

¹⁷ Peter Jackson explains that *suññatā* was taken as “a secondary concept used to explain more central notions such as *anatta*, no-self, and *anicca*, impermanence.” Jackson, *Buddhadāsa*, 69.

¹⁸ In this respect, Buddhadāsa easily resists interpreting the Buddha’s notion of *suñña* (“void” or “empty”) as eternalism or substantialism. However, his reading of “void mind” as a deontological theory actually misrepresents the Zen Buddhist view.

But “*chit wang*” is not a nihilistic doctrine; it does not signify a mind characterized by a blank mental vacuum devoid of all content, as is suggested by the standard Thai translation of *suññatā* as “*sun plao* [สุญญเปล่า] (vacancy, zeroness, or nothingness)”. Rather, *chit wang* refers to a mind that has been emptied of any specifiable content, that is, any objects that can be claimed as “mine” or “I.” Buddhādāsa explains how void mind denotes a mind empty of ego or self: “This *chit wang* is not a vacuous mental state. It is not ‘void’ of content. All objects are there as usual and the thinking processes are going on as usual, but they are not going the way of grasping and clinging with the idea of ‘I’ and ‘mine.’”¹⁹ Free of ego, one can now encounter the world as free of craving and suffering, which are caused by the ego that interprets the world in terms of “I” and “mine.”

It is important to emphasize that while Buddhādāsa’s doctrine of void mind frees us from attachment to the world, it denies neither the world itself nor our involvement in it. Epistemically, one who has achieved *chit wang* presences objects in the world as having the character of *pabhassāra*, or a radiant, luminous shining brightly.²⁰ Buddhādāsa alludes to this in his analysis of the Buddha’s own teaching: “*Bhikkhus*, this mind is luminous and is freed from adventitious defilements.”²¹ How the world presents itself to us is largely a result of our state of mind. Through *nibbāna*, or the realization of the mind’s basic, originally pure (with respect to defilements and disturbances) condition (*chit wang*), the world itself presents itself simply as it is, namely, as a bright, shining, clear luminosity. The implications of this theoretical insight (which is realized through meditation practice) for Buddhist social engagement are not trivial. By instigating a shift from an other-worldly to a this-worldly paradigm as the basis for participation in the world, Buddhādāsa re-envisioned the social world as a domain with religious importance and confers religious value on social activity.

¹⁹ Buddhādāsa, *Another Kind of Birth*, 6.

²⁰ This Pali term “*pabhassāra*” is derived from the Sanskrit root verb “/bhas,” which itself is etymologically linked to the Greek term “*phas*,” which is the root of the term “*phainomenon*” (English: “phenomenon”), which means “shining forth.”

²¹ Quoted in Jackson, *Buddhādāsa*, 187.

Among the Zen traditions influencing this paradigm shift in Buddhādāsa's thinking – e.g., Chinese Zen (Huang-po, Hui-neng) and Vietnamese Zen (Thich Naht Hanh) – Japanese Zen was most significant. Buddhādāsa was particularly drawn to the writings of Suzuki. Throughout his works, including *Zen and Japanese Culture*, Suzuki showed Zen to be integral to the development of Japanese culture. A great admirer of Japanese culture, Buddhādāsa seized upon Suzuki's version of Zen as a model for Thailand's own modernization, political reform, and socioeconomic development. As Buddhādāsa argues, Zen Buddhist meditation has motivated the development of Japan not simply by bringing about an epistemological shift concerning the way things really are (i.e., from perceiving social life as inducing suffering to perceiving social life as luminous radiance before the void mind). It also cultivates a dynamic power that culminates in engaged social activity. As Peter Jackson explains, “Buddhādāsa offers Japan, home of Zen, as evidence for the productive power of social activity informed by the spiritual condition of ‘freed-mind’ or *chit wāng* to provide a basis for all-round welfare.”²² Buddhādāsa himself writes:

Japan took the path of mental instead of material development[,] and now Japanese material development has progressed to the point that foreigners are afraid of the birthplace of this mental development. Japan has a high level of mental development... [I]t is in everyday life in the very culture, that is, the kind of Buddhism we call Zen.²³

Qualities that Buddhādāsa recognizes to be of great social-moral importance – e.g., “resoluteness, industriousness, vigor in work and forbearance as well as politeness and gentleness”²⁴ – are obtained through the “mental development” that attends the realization of void mind in the Zen tradition. For this reason, Buddhādāsa sees Japanese culture as a model for modernization, political reform, and socioeconomic development in Thailand, with Zen as its fountainhead.

²² Jackson, *Buddhadāsa*, 203.

²³ Buddhādāsa, *Barom Tham*, 74.

²⁴ Jackson, *Buddhadāsa*, 203-204.

Jackson further explains: “Buddhadāsa would like to see a Zen-styled mental culture promoted in Thailand in order to promote the kinds of qualities which would lead to Thai workers becoming more efficient agents of material development.”²⁵ Under this model, *nibbāna* now becomes available to all, not just those living in a monastic setting. Furthermore, Buddhadāsa suggests that the development of Thailand requires it. The secular, he tells us, demands religiosity, specifically, the religiosity of Japanese Zen. Conversely, religious life entails worldly involvement. The perfection of the Buddhist path includes turning to social engagement in both our thoughts and our actions. Ordinary laypersons, then, should practice a form of meditation not unlike that of Zen not just in order to obtain the metaphysical realization of emptiness (*dhamma* as “nature” or “what is”); they should do so in order to become more productive in daily life and secure social equilibrium (*dhamma* as human normalcy).

Turning to Japanese Zen, then, helps Buddhadāsa to clarify both the soteriological importance of social action and the role of meditation in developing a power that is both moral and productive. Furthermore, this reformulation of what it means to be a Buddhist implicitly criticizes the path made available by traditional Theravāda and mere mindfulness practice, namely, that it leads to a separation of monastic and secular life and renders one a passive, albeit selfless, “person” in the face of the world. But does Buddhadāsa’s appeal to Japanese Zen render him susceptible to the same problematic moral implications that characterize the writings of Suzuki? There is much to suggest that Buddhadāsa commits the error of idealizing Japanese Buddhism and culture. In the midst of a heated public debate, former Thai Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj expressed common sentiments in the political and religious institutions of the time when he said to Buddhadāsa, “You should go and teach the Japanese, you speak like a Zen Buddhist.”²⁶ Even Jackson makes the claim that “Buddhadāsa finds a soulmate in such Zen authors as [D.T.] Suzuki.”²⁷ Does Buddhadāsa’s turn to Zen and Suzuki represent a betrayal of his Theravāda roots or, worse yet, a betrayal of

²⁵ Jackson, *Buddhadāsa*, 203-204.

²⁶ Quoted in Jackson, *Buddhadāsa*, 96.

²⁷ Jackson, *Buddhadāsa*, 182.

Buddhism itself (as Victoria argues occurred in the case of Suzuki)? I am not sure how completely we can save Buddhādāsa from the charge of interpreting Zen in too favorably a light. Buddhādāsa says the following in regards to the attitude of Japanese Zen towards political affairs: “Zen disregards conventionalism, ritualism, institutionalism, in fact anything that is binding or restricting.”²⁸ Zen may ignore convention, etc., in theory, but history clearly indicates that in practice Zen has been consistently guilty of deferring to the authority of Confucian ritualism and the leading institutions, whether they are medieval shoguns or 20th century imperialism. Furthermore, morally justified resistance to the social or political status quo of Japan was a live option for Japanese Buddhists: the Pure Land school (Jōdo Shinshū) actively resisted Japanese militarism during the early and mid-20th century, while Zen supported Japanese imperialism.

But while Buddhādāsa may be guilty of idealizing Zen and Japanese culture generally – although I do not take a strong stance on this issue – we can rescue him from the charge that his form of Buddhism and Buddhist meditation cultivate the same kind of moral negligence (to put it mildly) as did Japanese Zen in the early 20th century. For one, rather than trying to become a Zen Buddhist or transform Theravāda Buddhism into Japanese Zen, he sought to recover the essence of Buddhism and re-invigorate the Theravāda tradition by creatively adopting aspects from a wide variety of intellectual and religious traditions, not just Zen. Indeed, Zen had an especially profound impact upon this project, but he nonetheless was concerned to clarify teachings, concepts, and practices already available within the Theravāda tradition, but which had simply been under-valued (e.g., the concept of *chit wang*).

Secondly, Buddhādāsa did what Suzuki did not have the moral courage to do: he explicitly proclaimed his support for socialism and linked it to the Buddhist *dhamma*. In private letters to friends and his wife, Suzuki consistently advocated socialism as the political system of a Japan that was re-inventing itself in the first half of the 20th century. Moreover, he related this political system to Buddhist thought, holding

²⁸ Quoted in Jackson, *Buddhadāsa*, 182.

that he was obliged as a Buddhist to work towards saving society, even if it meant arguing against the prevailing notion that the doctrine of *karma* justified the strongly Confucian social hierarchy of Japan, i.e., that our current status in the world has been determined by acts in past lives.²⁹ But Suzuki never brought these views into the public arena, and he even supported the imperial government in spite of his private misgivings against it – largely out of concern for being accused of being a traitor and being punished accordingly. Buddhādāsa, in contrast, explicitly advocated what he termed “*Dhammic Socialism*” in his political writings. Rejecting both capitalism and Marxist communism, he held that *Dhammic Socialism* was the political form most likely to lead to the realization of *nibbāna* for all. Buddhādāsa argued that this political orientation would enable the egalitarian spirit of Buddhism, conjoined with emphasis upon the *bodhisattva* ideal, to reform the religious, social, and political institutions already in place – institutions that had made *arahant*-ship into an individual pursuit and were excessively concerned with maintaining the continuity of the status quo. Through *Dhammic Socialism*, a spiritual society conducive to achieving salvation could arise. All persons could now cultivate the inner cultivation of mental voidness and outwardly express this through productive work that increased material prosperity.

This leads to a third argument demonstrating Buddhādāsa’s avoidance of the morally dangerous implications of Zen Buddhism. Recall that it is through meditation that a Buddhist achieves void mind (*chit wang*) and comes to realize the true nature of reality (*dhamma*). With this knowledge of “what is” and deepened understanding of the human condition (qua the ideal of normalcy), the individual gains not only insight into what he should do, but the power to override possible sources of confusion and weakness of will. But it is important to note that the form of meditation that Buddhādāsa advocated is not *zazen* – that form of seated meditation practiced by Zen practitioners. Rather, Buddhādāsa taught *vipassanā*, or “insight meditation,” central to which is the method of *ānāpānasati*, or “mindfulness of breathing.” Jackson explains:

²⁹ For more on this, see Victoria, “The ‘Negative Side’”, 106-108.

He [Buddhadāsa] maintains that the most appropriate practice is the practice of *chit wāng* or *sati*, mindfulness of breathing. Buddhadāsa proposes that in practicing the most basic form of Buddhist meditation, mindfulness of breathing or *ānāpānasati*, sufficient concentration or *samādhi* is developed to permit insight into reality.³⁰

Through this method, the meditator gains insight into the true nature of things, i.e., voidness (*suññatā*), as well as the fruits associated with it, namely, subsequent relinquishing of egoistic clinging to the world as “I” and “mine,” a radiant opening up of phenomena, and that dynamic power that underlies the industriousness of Japanese culture.

But *vipassanā* meditation also develops the individual in another way. When attended by mindfulness-training, insight meditation facilitates an emotional maturation that is indispensable to embodying uniquely Buddhist compassion. The embodiment of such compassion involves realizing one’s ontic identity with the other, not just an ontological identification with Being through the other. That is, Buddhist selflessness (i.e., void mind) entails not just an emptying out of the idiosyncrasies of self and other with a view to perceiving the transient, co-dependent nature of things, it involves an empathic attending to others (and oneself) in their unique particularity. The individuality of self and other is not overcome, per se, but presented and cared for with a view to gently alleviating the suffering of self and other through the realization of void mind. Indeed, cleansing oneself of impurities (e.g., egoistic craving, attachment) is a necessary condition for Buddhist enlightenment. But it is not a sufficient condition; one must address suffering as a social-moral phenomenon, and this requires actively attending to self and others through altruistic, nonviolent social activism. Buddhadāsa’s harmonization of the meditative goals and techniques of Japanese Zen and traditional Theravāda helps to bring this about. In contrast with *zazen*, *vipassanā* meditation develops the heart, while its emphasis upon the realization of *chit wāng* and the harnessing of productive power sets it apart from traditional Theravāda. The

³⁰ Jackson, *Buddhadāsa*, 161.

coordination of these approaches enacts a more complete Buddhist vision of social engagement, one that enables the agent to encounter others in both their voidness and their alterity.

Conclusion: Aesthetic Virtue and the Transition from No-Self to the Ethics of Social Engagement

Having examined how Buddhādāsa's model of Buddhist social engagement and its grounding in *vipassanā* meditation reconciles certain problems within Japanese Zen and traditional Theravāda, how does he move beyond the problem of ethical agency noted at the start of this article? By what means are we to understand this vision of Buddhist ethics, if it fits within any Western ethical framework at all? In this final section, I consider Humean moral sentiment theory and Western virtue ethics as possible explanatory models for the ethics theorized by Buddhādāsa. I conclude that Buddhādāsa's ethics shares important features of both ethical orientations. However, in order to preserve the important Buddhist insight into the emptiness of the ethical agent, we must ground Buddhist ethics in what I call the "aesthetic virtues" of loving kindness (*mettā*) and selfless compassion, not the sentiments of Hume's theory or the ethical virtues of Western virtue ethics.

In making this final argument, it bears noting that Buddhādāsa's approach draws our attention away from the problem of the moral self (or any self at all) and toward that of the emotions. By educating the life of feeling through the cultivation of loving kindness, selfless compassion, etc. – in contrast with mere *samādhi*-training through *zazen*, with its supposed culmination in a "value-neutral" power of concentration – the meditator effects a progress of sentiments not unlike that of Humean moral sentiment theory. The central ethical question now shifts from "what should I do?" to "what should I care about?" This enables us to address the problem of ethical agency while side-stepping the question of the ethical self, for when the emotions are properly harmonized with each other and attuned to one's context, the individual "agent" naturally acts with moral sensitivity and intelligence – e.g., one who has cultivated the appropriate moral sentiments would feel a certain revulsion, not a sense of pride, when he imagines others suffering through acts of violence, and would take action accordingly.

However, the development of moral feeling effected by Buddhist meditations on compassion (*mettā*) moves the individual beyond Humean sentimentality in two important ways. For one, note that Hume considers “negative” emotions (e.g., jealousy, avarice, etc., which involve a certain measure of antipathy towards the other) to have a positively moral dimension insofar as they motivate individuals to snuff out that which is either harmful or distasteful to a socially polite audience. The Buddha, however, emphasizes the dangers of ill-will of any kind.³¹ Meanwhile, Buddhist mindfulness training develops not only our capacity to summon appropriate sentiments in given circumstances, it cultivates feelings that are genuinely selfless and loving with respect to others – even one’s enemies – while still maintaining for the individual the capacity to identify and prevent harmful actions and attitudes.

This leads to the second way in which Buddhist loving kindness and selfless compassion are qualitatively distinct from Humean sentiments: Buddhist compassion is not only selfless, it connotes power (Latin “*virtu*” as “power”) over the life of feeling. In this respect, Buddhist loving kindness and compassion are better understood as “aesthetic virtues” than Humean sentiments. I use the term “aesthetic” to signify that Buddhist loving kindness and compassion have to do with the domain of feeling generally as well as critical reflection upon the nature of sensori-emotional values. But the mindfulness meditation advocated by Buddhādāsa does not involve merely being aware of presented sensations, feelings, thoughts, etc.; one does not become an utterly passive witness to mental and sensorial phenomena. Mindfulness training generates power (“*virtu*”) with respect to the influence of instincts, dispositions, and emotions that ordinarily (and often unbeknownst to individuals) dictate the patterns of inner life and outward actions. This does not mean that an emotionally mature Buddhist is entirely free from the sentiments – a goal that is not only impossible, but undesirable: for how else would one be able to intelligently identify social-moral phenomena and responsibly engage

³¹ See the Gopaka *Moggallāna-sutta* (“Moggallāna the Guardsman”), referenced in Walshe, *Thus Have I Heard*.

these situations? But aesthetic virtues do enable one to avoid two undesirable alternatives noted above: (1) becoming a “‘selfless’ servant of the state and its leaders” – as Suzuki and other Japanese Zen leaders advocated with their “*violence-enabling, Zen meditation*” – and (2) reducing the life of feeling to the economy of Humean moral sentiments, which are grounded in instinctual drives to self-preservation.³² Thus, rather than being compelled to feel sympathy or disgust for others, one who is skilled in *ānāpānasati* meditation experiences ordinary sentiments, but is not owned by them. He rather sees through them because he has developed aesthetic virtues such as loving kindness and selfless compassion.

My characterization of Buddhist ethics as grounded in what I call “virtue aesthetics” might suggest that the form of Buddhist ethics put forth by Buddhadāsa is best characterized as virtue ethics. Many contemporary ethicists and Buddhologists have argued this position, and there is good reason for this. For one, even though Buddhists argue that the self is empty, they neither deny its importance for the everyday nor dispense with the notion of character. Rather, meditative practice indirectly develops the person’s character (e.g., through the acquisition of ethically useful habits of thinking, feeling, and outwardly acting), and it takes the Buddha as its prototype. Furthermore, consider that for Buddhadāsa, *samsāra* (rebirth) and *dukkha* (suffering) are problems having to do with the individual’s attitude and behavior; at issue is a problem of the human condition, not the world itself. Overcoming suffering, then, involves not a rejection or renunciation of the world, but a personal transformation. Further, this transformation entails developing virtues that are open-ended and have in view a practical wisdom that (in the case of a possible Buddhist virtue ethics) is constituted by the metaphysical realization of emptiness, on the one hand, and exercising selfless compassion, on the other. But above all, Buddhist ethical virtues, according to Buddhadāsa, presuppose power

³² David Loy continues this statement as follows: “As in the personal ego, the ‘inside’ is opposed to the other ‘outside,’ and this makes conflict inevitable, not just because of competition with other groups, but because the socially constructed nature of group identity means that one’s own group can never feel secure enough.” Loy, *The Suffering System*.

over habits of thinking and feeling, such as the capability of forgetting oneself in order to concern oneself positively with others' welfare, even if it requires one to intervene disruptively in the status quo.³³ In contrast with Western virtue ethics, then, Buddhādāsa's ethical philosophy – which is fundamentally concerned with responsibly effecting the transition from the metaphysical realization of selflessness to its ethical manifestation – is grounded in the aesthetic virtues of loving kindness and selfless compassion. Exemplary moral conduct for socially engaged Buddhists derives from the development of not just ethical virtues, but power over the life of feeling in a way that is uniquely Buddhist by virtue of its foundation in the realization of voidness. Thus, while there are striking parallels between the ethics of Buddhādāsa and Western virtue ethics, I withhold taking a firm stance on this issue and focus the attention of the reader to Buddhādāsa's insight into the primacy of aesthetic virtue for moral life.

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³³ Sallie King alludes to an important recognition made by socially engaged Buddhists such as Buddhādāsa: creative intervention in the world has ethical importance. See King, *Being Benevolence*.

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