

The Buddha Was Not on the Left

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Natural systems thinking has something to offer the assimilation of Vipassan? into the West, which in its pure form should decrease the social polarity we currently suffer.

In my estimation, a pro-borders/tradition/hierarchy/stability, i.e. "conservative" view and a pro-openness/revolution/equality/creativity, i.e. "progressive" view are two sides of the same coin. In fact, I am convinced that they represent natural forces represented in all living things. This is a very strong, and maybe even unpopular claim in some contexts.

I would say that "Buddhism" is overrepresented and over identified with "progressives" and "the left." I would also say that this produces an inaccurate and dangerously limited representation of vipassan? meditation, which is the practical system that the historical Buddh? taught. I believe that this limited representation over-emphasizes one part of a highly complex, total system while destabilizing another part. However, if there is any validity to this claim, then it should be no surprise when the natural forces that represent "the other side" react in kind to such a unidimensional, polar-progressive view with its own unidimensional, polar-conservative opposite.

It is important to note that this claim is based on the assumption that reactions on one side of a political polarity occur in response to reactions in another side of a political polarity. Not everyone will agree with this assumption, particularly people who are angry at democrats or angry at republicans, or just angry at President Trump. But this is a heuristic which provides a new and productive way to look at a very complex problem. It suggests that the functioning of "the left" and "the right," to grossly oversimplify that dialectic, are intrinsically interdependent and comprise a whole in which each cannot exist without the other. As reactivity and anxiety increases, some indications for this relationship might include; 1) that each side is equally hyper-focused on their own strengths and hyper-focused on their opponent's weaknesses, and 2) that each side uses the same *class* of argument against the other to push their own particular message, such as "they are irrational, they don't care about the facts," "they are ignoring the research," "get out and vote to save our democracy!" etc. When I see political arguments on the air, in the streets, and on the net today, I see the same class of combative message on both sides no matter the content of that class of message.

If, in fact, reactions on one side occur regardless of the intentions on the other side and visa-versa, then you might say the behavioral system is a "natural" one, i.e. it is not "constructed" by humans because it occurs regardless of their constructions. Murray Bowen suggested that the family is a "system" in that a change in functioning in one part automatically necessitates a change in another. I am extending this idea to the collective political level, saying that a change in one area automatically necessitates a change in another area. And so as the Buddha said, the wheel of dukkah (suffering) spins faster and faster, fueled by mutual avijj? (ignorance) of the reciprocal

actuality of the total amalgam. Just like an escalating argument with a loved one, all it takes is one person to stop spinning to end the argument.

What the Buddha Did

Now let's be clear about the achievement of the historical "Buddha." Like the Dali Lama, he was first a bodhisattva: an ordinary, unenlightened living thing who was a small step away from reaching enlightenment himself. But he set that opportunity aside to perfect his enlightenment which would allow him to perfectly teach others as a sam[?]sambuddha, or "perfect Buddha." This decision immeasurably increased the effort required to reach his final goal. He then went out on his own without a teacher and (re-)discovered Vipassan[?], also known as Satipathann[?], or the "path leading to the way out of suffering." This singular achievement is illustrated as the *enactment* of a perfect synthesis of counterbalancing forces. He literally sat down with absolute determination to withstand his endless reactions to his own sensations in order to scientifically examine the entirety of his own physical and mental structure. That is the practice vipassan[?]. He then described, and acted in line with, the compensatory forces that govern all living things as highly complex, integrated, and interdependent systems. A hallmark of his "perfect" enlightenment was the ability to teach that total complex view in singular form to all kinds of students with all kinds of learning styles. His ability to enact the total view allowed him to maintain a singular following that did not divide into factions. However, his students who became enlightened by merely following his instructions could only teach a partial view. This is why his once-united followers split into ideological factions shortly after his death. There was not one of them that could singularly represent all perspectives of the total view on the nature of suffering and the way out of suffering simultaneously.

This "total view" is called the Middle Path. Enacting the Middle Path did not make the Buddha a "Centrist," or a "Moderate." If the left/right, progressive conservative dichotomies have any basis in nature, then **he was simultaneously progressive, centrist, moderate, and conservative**. This is what "Middle" means in the Middle Path. He often said something like "work ardently for the benefit of all by practicing compassion." He also said "only you can liberate yourself by your own efforts," and "only a country that maintains its original principles and traditions will endure." Of course, he also said many other things. The former statement represents principles of openness, progress, and creativity, like those traditionally found on "the left." The latter statements represent principles of reducing, defining, and stabilizing, like those traditionally found on "the right." Together they do not represent a contradictory view. Both are true, and fundamental. He exemplified all of them when appropriate.

Endless volumes have been written in attempt to articulate the simultaneous synthesis of all aspects of a Middle Path in singular form, but it is not possible. The only singular articulation of the Middle Path is a person who develops and *enacts* it. There are no words for that.

This is not a complete technical description of the historical Buddha's attainment, but it is one

important aspect of his attainment that "progressives" on "the left" have to contend with so long as this so-called "Buddhism" remains their brainchild. Actually, everyone has to contend with this, not just the left. But I believe it is self-evident that "Buddhism" currently belongs to "the left." I am arguing that this "left" has appropriated this so-called "Buddhism" from the practical tradition of vipassanā, and often uses it as an axiomatic justification for a new atheist-sectarian fight against the right. "Compassion," indeed. I certainly limited my thinking to this partial construct. What about pañña, or "wisdom," as the essential product of vipassanā?? This is "Right View," the final product of the Eightfold-Noble Path. The perfection of the total complex in its entirety; moving beyond all polarities.

This is a difficult thesis for me to support, of course, because I am suggesting that the implicit assumptions used to support a particularly left-leaning hyper-moral position are rooted in this so-called "Buddhism" thing. Implicit assumptions are invisible by definition, and so you can't prove or disprove their existence or influence. But this is a blog, and I continue.

What Vipassana Is

So why am I making these strong claims? Because vipassanā is something you *do*, not something you *think*. A "Buddhism" which does not practice vipassanā is as real as a birthday sentiment manufactured by Hallmark Cards, Inc. Actual, serious, diligent, twice daily practice has a way of balancing the mind that reading, chatting, and FaceBooking cannot provide. Vipassanā is a dynamic, systems practice which must be taught over a long period of time by experienced teachers. It must be taught in ideal conditions which support each of its many integral features simultaneously. It can only be practiced after making a commitment to a certain degree of morality, which is only possible when taught in ideal, prepared conditions over an extended period of time. It cannot be reduced to a symptom-focused therapy which excludes that base of morality, and must be given away for free as an act of friendship.

Vipassanā without all features of the practice can only create another sectarian ideology to be exploited by the idle, reactive interests of one tribe against another. Vipassanā is an equalizer, not a divider. It is the unbelievably difficult act of confronting our basic, reactive processes by learning to sit still, systematically training unbroken attention on our own concrete, physical and mental structure. It is giving up the search for something special in favor of a total understanding of the ordinary, mundane aspects of nature. This can often be really boring. Like science, it requires hours upon hours of objective observation to discover the basic, natural laws which govern our bodies and minds; not just on the cushion but in every moment of our lives. It just so happens to be the most difficult thing we can do, especially within the context of our most intimate relationships, and it never gets any easier. Vipassanā doesn't generate "equality" through ideas, it equalizes through the direct, hard-won experience that all things that live face the same challenge that we face when we try to meditate: a living mind's intrinsic, unending, automatic reactivity to our own sensations at every level of analysis. It perfectly demonstrates to us that absolutely zero of our suffering comes from others, it comes from the universal reactivity to our own material and mental

selves as we co-exist with others. This suffering is generated by a partial, inaccurate view of our own total amalgam. We literally generate ignorance by ignore-ing what is not represented in this partial view of ourselves. We then call this inaccurate view "I," and it becomes the primary heuristic through which we organize our lives. Vipassan? is taught as the tool to complete this partial, inaccurate view. But it takes hard work to experience this directly and not just talk, think, or argue about it either directly or indirectly.

Vipassan? is the humble act of discovering the reciprocal reality of our own functioning through ardent, systematic, continuous observation. Among other things, it helps us discover that blaming others for our discomforts is as illogical as blaming the painful sensations in our back for the painful sensations in our leg, and visa versa. Conversely, "Buddhism" is a partial view appropriated by the West to fit one value system of many which does not represent vipassan? in its entirety. If "Buddhism" were actually balanced in this regard, then the most conservative Christians and Muslims lining up to learn how to better observe themselves along side all the rest of the "progressives." I am not promoting the progressive "equality" of representation here, but implying that vipassan? is inherently attractive to all when it is transmitted accurately.

There is nothing that is simply "progressive" or "conservative" about Vipassan?. It is simultaneously both, and everything in between.

Implicit Values

Just as Nietzsche predicted, scientism and atheism have torn our old religious/axiomatic roots from under us, and for good reason. Just look what wonderful good those European Enlightenment values have done for everyone on the planet. The sovereignty of the individual, bend over backwards to prove yourself wrong, and so on. The human world has since achieved an increase in global wellbeing that accelerates exponentially on so many dimensions that any rudimentary glance through our ancient and classical histories alike reveals this as *an absolute miracle*. But the universal, non-sectarian practice of vipassan? **must not** be as become a weapon of the sectarian, atheistic left against the sectarian, theistic right. If it remains appropriated as "Buddhism" by the fleeting shelf-lives of the Barnes and Nobles and Amazons to promote a tribal left that fights the tribal right, we will all suffer even more in the long run as we move further away from the universal, uniting aims of vipassan?.

Vipassan? is only vipassan? when it is non-sectarian. It is as far away from "Buddhism" or any other "ism" as you can get. It has to be universal. It is a practice which enables a person to better see the total integrated view, not an ideology to embolden one part of a social system over another. I am arguing that Western popular literature has created a "Buddhism" which over-emphasizes the "left" and "progressive" side of the coin; One that is partially a make-believe ideology exclusively organized around equality, welcoming, caring, forgiving, providing, and selflessness.

Yet this is entirely as it should be, at least for a time. Progressives who are interested in

radical new ideas obviously possess the temperament necessary to seek out and assimilate such radical novelty. I myself am the temperamental equivalent of a radical progressive so far as the [Big 5 personality traits](#) are concerned; high in trait "agreeableness" and very high in trait "openness," sometimes to a fault. This objective assessment matches my own subjective opinion. For the record, I am not a registered democrat or republican, and make every effort to move between all sides of the political spectrum. I still enjoy a strong position on one or another issue, and I retain many biases. But let it be known that I am not suggesting yet another layer of blame, this time aimed at progressives. This is not an indictment from outside the circle, but a momentary call for more coordinated progress from within.

Further, the ideas of equality, welcoming, caring, forgiving, providing, and selflessness are essential ideas in vipassan?. But they are not the *only* essential ideas in vipassan?. All of these ideas have their respective counterparts which are required to form a balanced, integrated system. We also have to promote inequality, denial, dissociation, selfishness, not just sometimes, but just as often as their seemingly more desirable counterparts.

"Sacrilege!" any self-respecting progressive might say.

But no! We all appreciate the advantages of not equalizing across *every* social dimension, denying a stranger at the gate when there truly is no room within, ignoring another's suffering when our own is simply too much to bare, and so on. I am arguing that so long as a person's implicit atheistic or progressive assumptions are pulled from a partial view of this so-called "Buddhism" in a "fight" against a theistic or traditional right, our problems will only increase. No matter how hard any one person "fights" another without developing the total view then the system will always find a way to balance itself out, but no one will like how it manages to do that. We will only drive its polarization, its regression, the intensity of our remarkably functional society's auto-immune response that will eventually devour us all. If we are all standing on a circular table balanced on a single point in the middle, you have to take a step to the edge for every step I take to the edge, lest we both fall off. If I want you to step toward the center, I must step toward the center. We can't both stand on the center, and so we assume our positions respective to our temperaments.

But my thesis relies on the assumption that we are balancing on the same table to begin with. If we don't share that assumption, then we will always miss each other like ships in the night.

But if we do, then both sides of that coin are not merely important opinions owned by some people or others, something to be considered, and then rejected as accurate or inaccurate. They represent natural and fundamentally counterbalancing forces that hold societies together. The literally positive terms "equality, diversity, and inclusion" may sound great for a time, but that mantra destabilizes societies when left unconstrained by their natural, compensatory opposites. Equality of opportunity becomes equality of outcome and people die in scores by the socialist systems required to enforce it. Diversity of competence becomes diversity of representation, and we are unable to make use of our precious few experts for the benefit of everyone. Inclusion across

boundaries becomes dilution of the central organizing structures required to organize a society, or simply exhausts the basic resources we all need to survive. Progressives can't simply vote for gun control and against the prohibition of abortion or react in outrage at every hint to someone denied at the border, as if these axioms represent self-evident truths that are being ignored and violated. And so also for conservatives. The answers to these problems are not self-evident. If they were, there would not be an equally potent conservative outrage which immediately automatically rises in opposition to the progressive outrage *every single time*. Though apparently polarized, the voting distribution in the US has proved to be an incredibly stable system over the last decades as presidential elections remain perfectly divided among democratic and republican candidates. One can easily make the case that the idea that one side represents "the end of our democracy" is delusional at best. Everyone has something to offer the discussion, but almost none of us appears to actually be very good at representing our contribution in a way that isn't either a reaction to an opposing view or one that enflames another faction.

Redefine each term however you like, but "equality, diversity, and inclusion" do not provide a stable collective ethos. They represent only one side of the total view. We need openness and progress, but without borders and stability we will be consumed by chaos.

Forward

I would say that it doesn't matter if one practices "vipassan?," *per se*. But I am certain that the less each of us utilizes ways to balance our minds as individuals, the less we are able to see more than one side of things. Our biases will consume and destroy us just as we purport to confront them. Rowing on one side of the boat just sends us in circles. Get the total view and row forward. ***The only way is to stop blaming republicans, or democrats, or men, or women, or any other group, or president, or family member, or mental or medical disease, and start developing the individual capacity to function up on as many sides of the total view as possible simultaneously.*** That is, to see each challenge for what it is: a single symptom of a greater collective process in which we all participate. To be a solid self within a fluid yet coordinated group, to learn exactly what it means to function simultaneously "100% for self and 100% for others."

The Buddha taught vipassan?. "Buddhism," so it is called, is not Vipassan?. If the Buddha taught the vipassan? that we know today, then the Buddha was *simultaneously progressive and conservative, left, center, and right, creative and stable.*

I'll end with a passage from [Our Best and Most Tasing Gift: The Universal Features of Meditation](#) by Vipassana teacher Paul Fleischman (2016):

We have all come to wish that meditation ef?oresces into both personal equanimity, and also into harmony, that is, interpersonal and social good will. Today, meditation is promoted as part of wistful attitudes, like "Peace Now," "War is Not the Answer," or "Coexist."

Meditation has become blurred with the cultural matrix of the sixties, within which it emerged into the Western World. Anecdotes from the hazy mountains of the past circulate as if they were historical documentation about the peaceful accomplishment of mythical meditators, once upon a time, long ago. Almost everyone confuses Gandhi and the Buddha and imagines that meditation made the Buddha into a pacifist, which he wasn't. Even the Buddha did not claim to have solutions to the widespread violence and war that were present in his own time and that press onward into ours.

We all want to believe that the good feelings we can locate in ourselves during meditation will suffuse around us with social blessings. You can count me in as one among the hopeful. But I am a meditator who questions the objectivity of my own beliefs, so I want to ask whether meditation really has a significant benign social impact.

Certainly, in our minds as we meditate, or as we get up from meditation, we feel the great embrace. We feel not only greater self integration, and self acceptance, but greater appreciation and empathy for others. The relatively enhanced homeostatic regulation of our thoughts, feelings, nervous system, blood flow and other psychosomatic processes has optimized our sense of peace and wellbeing. We feel more understanding and forgiving. And we feel surges of gratitude for our opportunities, primarily, meditation itself. We feel pervasive love. Many of us will at that moment practice "Metta," as we believe that the Buddha taught it, radiating all beings and all directions of the cosmos with our grandparental hearts, (whatever our age), with our feelings of love, joy, peace and compassion. This is meditation's glow, our harvest moon, our own light in the dark.

But is that feeling durable and socially significant?