Reconceptualizing Liberatory Education Through a Buddhist Lens: Thinking Beyond Freire

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Over the past twenty-five years, education in North America has taken a "contemplative turn," incorporating numerous initiatives based in eastern traditions like Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism. One manifestation is the widespread use of mindfulness practices in classrooms, through which teachers and students learn self-awareness techniques that elicit calm and self-regulation.[1] Mindfulness exercises without the philosophical tradition behind them, however, risk being instrumentalized as a way to secure compliance within schooling environments that demand regulation even in the face of dehumanizing experiences.[2] That can happen with any piecemeal adoption of another culture, and one antidote is to invite the full philosophical insight of the tradition along with the technique or skill from which it comes.[3]

According to Heesoon Bai and colleagues, incorporating eastern traditions into western education is best achieved through an *intercultural philosophy* of education, an approach that makes philosophers "cultural and intercultural workers" who engage with diverse cultural resources.[4] The authors argue that this offers a rich philosophical perspective, with several benefits beyond encouraging a more holistic engagement with eastern-inspired initiatives like mindfulness. An intercultural philosophy challenges the ontological and epistemological perspectives that drive educational agendas focused on efficiency and measurement, which cause schools to narrow their focus to only what can be most easily measured, creating educational environments that fail to support the whole of human experience.

In this article, we show how intercultural philosophy can be applied to the concept of liberatory education by bringing Buddhist philosophy into conversation with Paulo Freire. Central to both Freire and Buddhism is liberation, and while the concept is distinctly defined, liberation in both challenges the notion that education's primary goal is the success of systems by focusing

on the holistic growth of humans within those systems. Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was born out of his experiences organizing adult learners in Brazil and Chile. Despite these unique and specific contextual origins, his ideas have inspired generations of educators around the world. Like Freire, whose work interrogated the epistemologies of the colonial west, Buddhist philosophy offers a perspective that connects to and builds on western paradigms while also being a distinctly autonomous, post-colonial framework.[5] Buddhist philosophy is rooted in empiricism, making it compatible with educational inquiry of all stripes. Buddhism also views truth as progressive, cause and effect as non-linear, and the ultimate aim of inquiry to be personal liberation. Its philosophical perspective thus offers a challenge to the dualistic, linear worldview of the west while still able to be in conversation with it.

We start with a brief discussion of liberatory education from the perspective of Paulo Freire, for whom liberation is a process of humanization. Buddhism's liberatory experience is grounded in the ontology, epistemology, and ethics of that tradition, so we start by describing the foundations of Buddhist philosophy. In Buddhism, the path toward liberation is a deeply personal process of coming to see reality for what it is, which can lead to wisdom and social harmony. Buddhism's perspective has implications for educator preparation and classroom learning, illustrated by one author's experience with how a Buddhist liberatory framework helped educators and students accept and work across differences. We conclude by bringing Buddhism in dialogue with Freire, showing how a consideration of their perspectives side-by-side complements and extends what liberatory education can mean.

ORIENTATION

Buddhism provides a set of techniques that develop awareness while also being a philosophy and religion. Just as Freire's deeply contextualized experience has inspired countless educators outside of Latin America, we believe that one need not be a practicing Buddhist to be inspired by the perspective it offers. Our presentation of Buddhist philosophy is grounded in the Theravada tradition, from which many secular mindfulness practices stem.

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In line with an intercultural philosophy, the authors of this paper bring different philosophical orientations and perspectives. One of the authors of this paper, Georgia Heyward, has practiced Buddhism for twenty years. The second author, David R. M. Saavedra, does not practice Buddhism and is only beginning to learn about the tenets of this tradition through his interactions and discussions with Georgia. In his own teaching and scholarship, he has been inspired by the writings of Freire, particularly by his pedagogies of liberation and love.

A FREIREAN VIEW OF LIBERATORY EDUCATION

When thinking about the concept of liberatory education in a western context, no one looms larger than Paulo Freire. Most are introduced to this concept through *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, his most influential work. For Freire, liberatory education is ultimately about humanization. An oppressive society is one in which ownership, control, and domination are the modi operandi. In such a society, Freire argues that oppressed and oppressor are both dehumanized. The oppressed are dehumanized through a denial of autonomy; the oppressors are dehumanized because an authentic way of being becomes subordinated to a desire for ownership and control. The struggle for liberation is, thus, the struggle for humanization. In resisting and overcoming oppression, we reclaim our humanity.[6]

Freire understands education to be crucial to the struggle for liberation. He states that "…through education, we can first understand power in society. We can throw light on the power relations made opaque by the dominant class."[7] Education makes oppressive forces the object of reflection in order to reveal their true nature and spur a desire to work towards freedom. This reflection occurs through dialogue, which, over time, leads to an awakening of a humanizing and liberatory consciousness. Liberatory education is, thus, collective. It is work undertaken together in striving towards the possibility of a more just, humane future. Through the cyclical nature of reflection and action, through praxis, "Liberation is a possibility…. In this context, one can realize the importance of education for decision, for rupture, for choice, for ethics at last."[8]

BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY

We orient toward Buddhism's approach to liberation within the philosophical framework of Theravada Buddhism. This framing aligns with Eppert and colleagues, who challenge educators and philosophers of education to consider Buddhist-inspired approaches within their philosophical context.[9]

BUDDHIST ONTOLOGY, EPISTEMOLOGY, AND ETHICS

Buddhist ontology is based on what Buddhism calls the three marks of existence: impermanence, non-self, and suffering.[10] All phenomena in the universe, including ourselves, are made up of interdependent causes and conditions, which means they lack an essential identity. Take a bicycle as an example. You see a form that you call a bicycle, but it is in fact made up of many interdependent parts: wheels, handle bar, seat, and so on. If you were to take a bicycle apart and lay all its pieces out on the ground, it would no longer be a bicycle. Instead, it would be just wheels, handle bar, and seat. Even the bicycle wheel only exists because of materials and activities that converged in just the right way. This means the bicycle has no stable self (*anatta*). Humans and all other living beings are likewise made up of interdependent causes and conditions and thus have no stable self or soul.

The bicycle is also marked by impermanence (*anicca*). As soon as it is made, it starts interacting with the environment—the air, moisture, and road—and begins the process of falling apart. This is true of all beings. As soon as anything arises, it begins its demise. The fact that phenomena lack self and are impermanent inherently leads to suffering (*dukkha*), the third characteristic of reality in a Buddhist worldview. Humans do not stay the same over the course of their lives, and this causes suffering. People get old and sick, or they lose something they fought hard to acquire. The notion of suffering is critical in Buddhism and was the subject of the Buddha's first teaching: There is suffering; the cause of suffering is greed; it is possible to end suffering; and there is a path we can follow to end suffering.[11] What is a Buddhist's response to the reality that there is no self, nothing is permanent, and all beings are suffering? It is to face this truth head-on. When a person can truly understand the nature

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of the reality they live in, they are capable of understanding ultimate reality, or the world beyond our conditioned state of interconnected, fleeting moments. This understanding leads to personal liberation from suffering.

The Buddha exhorted his followers to not believe based on faith alone, but to use their own experiences to test the truth of what he taught: "O monks, just as a goldsmith tests gold by rubbing, burning, and cutting before buying it, so too, you should examine my words before accepting them."[12] Buddhist philosophy teaches that truth must be verified through personal experience. Dignaga, who founded Buddhist epistemology 1,500 years ago, says that the only kind of knowledge that a person can definitely trust is what can be acquired through the six senses: seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching, and thinking.[13] Inference arises immediately following perception and can be true or false - it is not inherently valid like direct perception. For example, if I hear my cat meow plaintively, I may infer that he is hungry. Or, if I see a scowl on my husband's face when he looks at me, I may infer that he is mad at me. But instead of being hungry, my cat may be injured. My husband may be reflecting on an argument at work. Our ability to remain in the realm of perception alone is important for seeing the world as it is, simply as a meowing cat or a scowling husband.

Mindfulness is one tool that Buddhists use to notice the sounds, smells, touches, sights, tastes, or thoughts that arise in every moment. Through the process of mindfulness, which can be practiced during meditation and in everyday life, a person learns to see reality as it truly unfolds moment-to-moment. This helps a person dispassionately see their own and others' suffering, notice the impermanence of phenomena, and recognize that nothing has an enduring self. In Buddhism, mindfulness helps people see perceptual reality more clearly, but wisdom only emerges when they can connect the observance of phenomena to the three marks of existence. A person could sit quietly noticing body sensations for years without having a deeper understanding into the nature of reality.

In Buddhist philosophy, human beings gather the knowledge they need to understand the true nature of reality, develop wisdom, and gain liberation. A person can increase their likelihood of gathering valid information by living an ethical life, focused on non-harm, non-ill will, and non-greed. Such a life reduces

the experience of stress, guilt, and chaos. With a calm mental state, a person can more accurately perceive phenomena as they truly are. Buddhist ethics also has a second purpose: to promote harmony among human beings. Principles guide a person in considering how their speech, actions, and even profession may be causing harm. By recognizing and diminishing harm toward others, communities can live in greater peace. The American monk Bikkhu Bodhi explains the social function of ethics, from a Buddhist perspective, by highlighting how ethical discipline can reduce social conflict: "At the social level the principles of *sila* (moral discipline) help to establish harmonious interpersonal relations, welding the mass of differently constituted members of society with their own private interests and goals into a cohesive social order in which conflict, if not utterly eliminated, is at least reduced."

Ethics in Buddhism is not just about what a person should not do. Buddhism also encourages people to practice the four divine abodes (*Brahmaviharas*), qualities a person can cultivate in support of an ethical life. These are loving kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekkha*). Practicing the *Brahmaviharas* helps a person reduce feelings of anger, greed, and delusion, the three primary defilements that lead to suffering and incite people to cause harm to both themselves and others. People practice *metta*, for example, by imagining waves of kindness emanating out in all directions, reducing a person's tendency toward anger. Reflecting on the joy of another's success (*mudita*) is an antidote to jealousy. Meditating on the *Brahmaviharas* has other benefits as well, such as helping to increase one's capacity for mindfulness and concentration.

BUDDHIST LIBERATION

When a person engages in a systematic process of inquiry, grounded in ethics and guided by mindfulness and concentration, then anger, greed, and delusion start to fade. Anger, greed, and delusion are the defilements at the root of all suffering, and as they pass away, a person experiences peace and wisdom. In Buddhist philosophy, liberation is the point at which a person is completely free from delusion, greed, and anger and has the wisdom to fully understand reality as it is. This path takes more than mindfulness. A person must live an

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ethical life and attempt to understand the three characteristics marking reality: All phenomena are impermanent and lack an essential self, thus creating the conditions for suffering. As Buddhists understand it, complete enlightenment is greatly facilitated by being a Buddhist. We argue, however, that anyone can walk on the path *toward* liberation. A person can accept principles of Buddhist philosophy and even practice mindfulness without adopting the full range of practices that constitute the religion. A person walks the path through the practices of self-inquiry, mindful awareness, and non-harm. Although one benefits from a supportive community, only the person themself can engage in the process of inquiry that leads to liberation.

WALKING A PATH TO LIBERATION: EXAMPLES FROM EDUCATION PRACTICE

Buddhism's perspective of liberation has practical implications for education practice. We offer what that might look like by using two examples from the life of one of the author's (Georgia), first as a new teacher and then as a researcher working in classrooms.

Educator preparation programs often guide teachers-in-training through practices of reflexivity, or developing the ability to reflect on one's teaching practice and form plans for overcoming difficulties.[14] Christopher McCaw has studied the application of contemplative practices like mindfulness in new teachers' reflexivity. In his work with seven teachers, he found that mindful awareness helped them access information about their own emotional states, thinking patterns, and biases. McCaw incorporated elements of Buddhist philosophy that went beyond just mindfulness, which helped teachers approach the thoughts and feelings they encountered with non-judgement. Removing judgement gave teachers a sense of freedom to respond to the information they uncovered.McCaw suggests, as we have here, that a person need not be a meditator or Buddhist to benefit from a Buddhist philosophical framework.[15] Building on McCaw's experience, it is conceivable that pre-service and in-service teacher training programs can apply the liberatory framework we have outlined, one that incorporates *Brahmavijaras* practices like compassion and loving kindness along with reflections on notions of harm, self, and change.

I (Georgia) will offer a personal antidote of how I used a Buddhist liberatory framework in my first year of teaching. I started my teaching practice in New York City as part of an emergency certification program, so I had little preparation before I took over a classroom of 1st graders in a transitional bilingual program. My classroom was out of control, and I received numerous complaints from parents. My principal assigned a mentor who often resorted to teaching in my place. To help manage the stress, I joined a group that regularly met to meditate and talk about readings from their Buddhist school. Through the winter of my first year as a teacher, I started to apply mindfulness alongside the tenets of non-harm and non-self. My thoughts began to slow down enough that I could see the moments between the arising of anger and my response. By combining the skill of awareness with a determination to respond with non-harm and non-ill will, I was able to not just notice but begin to stop expressions of anger and overwhelm. For all the times I still experienced and expressed frustration, I applied kindness and compassion toward myself. Reflections on non-self transformed my teaching practice the most, which I experienced as letting go of exerting a sense of self on the teaching experience. By letting go of the image of a teacher that I clung to as myself, I was able to consider my own potential for anger (expressing frustration about my ineptitude) and greed (wanting the peaceful classroom I did not have). Once I started this path, I was finally able to cultivate the calm necessary to create a supportive, structured learning environment for my students. By the spring, I had order in my classroom, and my students and I were happy to come to school. I looped up to second grade and went on to teach for nine more years.

A liberatory framework also has the potential to transform the student experience. In an attempt to place mindfulness within a liberatory framework, I created short lessons that combined awareness practices with dialogue prompts inspired by Buddhist philosophy. In the spring of 2024, two fifth grade classrooms piloted the program over several months. Students noticed body sensations, imagined loving kindness for their classmates, and talked with peers about times when they had been generous or experienced compassion for themselves. The 5th grade students who completed the curriculum were diverse: ethnically, racially,

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economically, and politically. A survey I gave students before and after had two items that demonstrated statistically significant improvements, but they weren't the ones I expected. I had imagined students would believe they were better at regulating their feelings or communicating with one another. Instead, it was their perception of social harmony that changed most significantly: Students were more likely to perceive their school to be a place where students got along with each other and to see themselves as people who got along with those who were different. These findings were reinforced by descriptive changes in survey results and student comments. More students agreed that everyone was treated the same at their school, no matter their economic background, and that they themselves felt more accepted by their peers.[16]

The students' experience aligns with my own as a first year teacher. My engagement with a Buddhist liberatory framework was most profoundly felt as the ability to see across the difference between myself and my students. Cultural competence was not an explicit barrier; although white and a native English speaker, I had lived and worked for a year in Central America and Mexico, where my students' families were from, and I collaborated closely with the transitional bilingual team. But there was still a vast difference in lived experience, and this showed up most prominently in our expectations of what school should look and feel like. I came into teaching with personal and cultural experiences that prompted me to believe my students needed only care and autonomy, at the expense of structure. My families, however, expected me to flex my authority so their children received the education they would need to thrive as adults. My students wouldn't call me by name, only "professora," as if trying to conjure an archetypal figure who could guide them through the confusing chaos of school. The most important thing I learned as a first year teacher was to see these differences in expectation clearly and to bridge them by reminding myself that there was no self at the heart of any identity or experience, thus freeing me from clinging to notions that only caused harm.

These brief examples are a far cry from liberation, but I believe they aptly demonstrate what it is like to be on the path toward it, both as individuals and as communities. The anecdotes illustrate how a Buddhist liberatory per-

spective can build bridges across human experience or, as Bai and colleagues articulate, can help one "to acquire concrete skill in being and working with one another in and across difference."[17] Buddhism suggests that we do this through a process of liberatory self-awareness that unfolds as an awareness and acceptance of others.

CONCLUSION: FREIRE AND BUDDHISM IN DIALOGUE

Applying the perspective of intercultural philosophy, we can bring a Buddhist liberatory framework into conversation with Freire's liberatory education. In both, self-liberation comes first. Only with a solid foundation will a person be able to create the conditions to support another in their quest for liberation. Both propose a tool that helps a person as they begin the path toward liberation. For Freire, it is praxis– the ability to act upon the world, reflect, and then act again. In Buddhism, this is mindfulness, the practice of noticing phenomena, which leads to insight about ourselves and the world around us. Foundational in both Freire's project and Buddhist thought is love. Love is the fuel that motivates liberation for Freire.[18] Freire aims to awaken both our consciousness and our conscience in ways that center the love we should have for one another as fellow human beings.[19] In Buddhist thought, love is encapsulated in the *Brahmaviharas* of loving kindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy. Through these practices, a person deepens their ethical orientation, wisdom, and ability to be in community with others. Mind and heart are entwined within liberatory education in both Freirean and Buddhist perspectives.

There are complementary differences too that are especially informative when considering the systems that education operates within. Buddhism views greed as being at the heart of suffering, but for Freire suffering is caused by the dehumanization of both the oppressed and oppressor in an amoral system. Buddhism's emphasis on awareness and non-harm can help the oppressor and oppressed alike recognize the nature of the amoral system they are within and the harm that it causes. The unflinching gaze of mindfulness is not directed at the self, which is impermanent and thus the cause of greater suffering. Instead, mindfulness is directed at thoughts, feelings, body sensations, and external phenomena that arise and pass away. This makes it a powerful tool for non-judgemental reflection

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of personal biases and external harm because mindfulness softens the tendency to get lost in eddies of self- and other-recrimination. From the perspective of Buddhist philosophy, all forms of harm should be recognized, harm that occurs to ourselves and others, and it is appropriate to speak out about harm that is occurring. However, there are subtleties in Buddhist philosophy that could be overlooked when it is applied to people living within complex social systems like schools. There could be a tendency to narrow the focus to self-awareness and self-realization, meaning that the oppressive system, and how it affects others, is overlooked. Freire helps to counteract the potential tendency to simply overcome the emotions, like shame and anger, that arise within the experience of a system of oppression. Freire offers both a mandate and clear path forward for individuals operating within schools: We dialogue together, learning from one another how to see the oppressive systems in which we exist for what they are.[20]

There very well may be a way to consider a Buddhist liberatory framework within the philosophy and practice of education. A Buddhist perspective of liberation can help to expand the canon of philosophical perspectives in education while also offering potentially new and transformative approaches toward achieving care and wellbeing in schools, for both teachers and students. An intercultural philosophy cautions against synthesizing philosophical traditions, as that may dilute important ontological and epistemological characteristics of each.[21] Bringing Buddhism in conversation with Freire, however, shows how rich the discussion of liberatory pedagogy can be when the two are considered together.

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