Mahayana Buddhist Ritual and Ethical Activity in the World

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Contemporary attempts to derive a contemporary social ethic from traditional Buddhism usually derive from doctrinal understandings and higher practices of meditation, often overlooking Buddhist ritual practice as a source of ethical formation and expression.

Philosophical study of Buddhism alone may leave one's capacity for ethical response untouched. Rigorous contemplative practices of Vipassana, Zen, or higher Tibetan meditation are out of reach of many. Ritual forms have provided ways for Buddhists from all walks of life to become attuned to the same subtle dimensions of body, speech and mind that higher Buddhist philosophy and meditation engage. Ritual also serves as means to empower and deepen philosophical inquiry and meditation. We do well not to forget the unique power of Buddhist ritual to include the many (not only the elite) in the most profound dimensions of Buddhist ethical understanding, formation and expression.

The relative obscurity of ritual practice in contemporary consideration of Buddhist social ethics may also obscure from view some of Buddhism's past social-ethical expressions, which have sometimes taken symbolic ritual forms, rather than organized social outreach of the sort we are accustomed to identify as social-ethical activity. Buddhist ritual-contemplative forms have been viewed as ways to perform social service within and through the mythico-magical cosmoses of Asian traditions: cosmoses of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and myriad powerful, sacred beings. Since Asian Buddhists understand these cosmoses to inter-penetrate our world, many of their ritual-contemplative practices are intended to perform needed social functions, within a broad context of universal salvation: healing, treating pain, treating mental illness, promoting economic wellbeing, preventing and assisting in disasters, protecting the helpless, easing the transition of death......

Contemporary Buddhist ethics tend to de-emphasize the ritualistic and devotional aspects of Buddhism to newly emphasize material resources and strategies for social transformation which can be related to higher Buddhist philosophy. While this is important, there is a danger that contemporary Buddhists, by reinterpreting practice as social service too exclusively in modern,
material terms, may dilute rather than reinforce the ontological and epistemological intuitions of Buddhism, losing touch with time-tested means for persons to actually learn to embody an ultimate source of ethical response that transcends ontological assumptions of modern, secular thought. By experiencing social service as a natural extension of ritual activity, each element of such service symbolically expresses an ultimate source of ethical response within a path of ultimate transformation, re-inforcing rather than diluting the deepest intuitions of Buddhism even as Buddhist practice takes new social-ethical expression in our world.

As example, I will focus on one of the earliest and most popular continually practiced Buddhist rituals of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: the Bhadracaryapranidhana ("resolution of excellent practice") which appears within the Avatamsaka sutra. This practice, further delineated in treatises ascribed to Nagarjuna, Asanga, Vasubandhu, Shantideva and many others consists of seven ritual activities: bowing, offering, confession, ritual rejoicing, requesting teaching, entreating the buddhas to continually manifest, and dedication of karmic merit.

The ritual appears at the end of the Avatamsaka sutra, a scripture thousands of folios long in Tibetan translation. What follows is my own condensed commentary on the first portion of the ritual, which aims to correlate its elements with the fuller context of practice and visionary experience described in the sutra as a whole.

The ritual takes place set within the nirvanic realms of infinite buddhas, bodhisattvas, and holy beings whose salvific power and activity penetrate all realms of living beings who remain caught in the sufferings of samsara. To enter into the ritual is not merely to visualize these intersecting dimensions of nirvanic and samsaric existence, but to have one's body, speech and mind symbolically entered into the stream of practice of all buddhas and bodhisattvas past, present and future, to participate through all senses and movements of thought and body in the eternal work of universal salvation that flows from infinite buddhas and bodhisattvas to infinite living beings.

As framed by the ritual, the practitioner's love for buddhas, bodhisattvas, and the beings they serve becomes so intense, the desire for oneness so profound, and the responsive infusion of transformative power received from the buddhas so powerful, that the seeming wall of separation between self, buddhas and living beings begins to break down, to reveal the shimmering insubstantial ground of voidness in which all buddhas and beings are situated. Each further glimpse of
voidness elicited by the ritual further intensifies the devotion and empathy – the
yearning to more fully realize the ultimate indivisibility of oneself, all buddhas,
and all beings in the universal ground of emptiness: dharmadhatu.

Bowing to buddhas pervading the cosmos subsumes one's body, speech and
mind to that of the buddhas, to be taken under their care, blessed, and transformed
into agents of buddha-activity among beings. Offerings are mentally projected to
fill all space. All objects of the senses are offered -- purified as a shimmering
display of universal voidness: infinite radiant jewels, lamps, incense, and sensual
delights, to be joyously absorbed by all buddhas who return transcendent wisdom
and transformative power as multi-colored light that pervades the bodies and
minds of beings. One's own body is infinitely multiplied, to represent the spatial
infinity of all living beings and temporal infinity of past and future lives. As if
standing in for all living beings through eternity, one makes simultaneous infinite
prostrations and offerings of all dimensions of one's being to the buddhas, so that
all living beings, through all time and space, may receive the buddhas' salvific
power as all-penetrating bliss-inducing light.

Ritually situated in a cosmos void of substantiality, where the all-penetrating
light of the buddhas' makes transparent all boundaries between self and other, one
confesses before the buddhas the faults of thought and action to which all beings
are subject, through beginningless ignorance of the insubstantial nature of all
objects of clinging and aversion. The confession contemplation is at once a
meditation on universal voidness, unconditional compassion for oneself and all
beings who share the same karmic causes and consequences of not having known
the void nature of things, and intense devotion to the sources of transcendent
knowledge and transformative power. The synergy of these three intuitions opens
channels of mind and body to receive the purifying power of buddhahood into
oneself and all beings through all time and space.

The ritual enters the practitioner into "feedback loops" of inter-connected
doctrines, practices, and ecstatic intuitions. The more intense the devotion to the
buddhas and bodhisattvas, the greater one's capacity to sense one's ultimate
indivisibility from them in universal voidness (the dharmadhatu). The more vivid
one's sense of universal voidness, the deeper one's intuition of ultimate identity
with all beings in that insubstantial ground, and the more intense one's intuition of
empathy and compassion for all who have not yet sensed the void nature of reality.
The same synergies work through the four remaining components of the ritual
contemplation: rejoicing in the virtues of all holy and ordinary beings, asking the
buddhas on behalf of all beings never to stop turning the wheel of Dharma and never to stop manifesting, and finally, dedicating the spiritual power (punya) of all such practices to universal awakening.

The synergistic dynamic of the ritual, every facet of spiritual understanding, practice and intuition unlocking further facets in a cosmos of eternal, all-penetrating salvific power, gives rise to the remarkable optimism of Mahayana scriptures, the sense that in spite of the daunting scope of the bodhisattva path to enlightenment, it is most certainly, even inevitably, accomplishable. But what relation do such ritual practices have to ordinary life, or to social service within it?

The sixteenth section of the Avatamsaka sutra collection carries the ritualistic sense of all-pervasive transformative power into daily life, to ritualize each aspect of ordinary experience. 1 (1) The section begins with a bodhisattva asking how bodhisattvas can attain perfection in actions of body, speech and mind; how bodhisattvas can "remain on the path of the buddhas of past, present and future even while living in the midst of living beings." How can the activity of body, speech and mind exemplified by Bhadracaryapranidhana and associated practices throughout the scripture spill over into daily life? Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, answers by symbolically re-interpreting each aspect of the ordinary life of ancient Indian Buddhists (monastic and lay): each daily life activity, understood within a ritual cosmos of salvific activity, is transmuted into a ritual means to enter living beings into universal awakening. Serving one's parents is homologized with all beings serving the buddhas, through which the world is protected and cared for. Festivity of any kind is homologized with spiritual joy in knowledge of truth, which sees through the apparent substantiality of things, releasing oneself and others from the causes of suffering. Any small action of giving becomes the giving by all beings of themselves to the path. Sitting straight is all beings sitting on the seat of enlightenment. Sitting cross-legged is all beings attainment of the gnosis of immovability. Resting is all beings attainment of the great rest. Raising one's legs is all beings emerging from the sea of samsara. Washing is the purifying of all beings. Such practices were taken up in Indian Buddhism (by e.g. Asanga, Vasubandhu, Shantideva) and passed into the Lojong stream of Tibetan Buddhism, the "mind transformation" practice lineages which systematically reinterpret each aspect of daily life as an extension of ritual and contemplative practice within a Mahayana cosmos of universal salvific activity.

Rituals like the Bhadracaryapranidhana became embedded within tantric
sadhanas of late Indian and Tibetan Buddhism, where the power of such rituals is
directed to a wide range of specific purposes, many of which constitute tantric
forms of social service. Sacred biographies of Marpa, Milarepa, Gampopa, Ma
chig lab dron etc. provide examples of the kinds of social needs that Tibetans
expected tantricas to provide: directing the power of tantric ritual contemplation to
prevent or ameliorate floods and other natural disasters, to prevent death in
infants, to ease pregnancy and labor, to treat the mentally ill, to cure disease, to
increase wealth, herds, crops, well being and lifespan, to increase qualities of
wisdom, energy and faith, to remove malevolent spirits, to bind thieves, to protect
from wild animals, enemies, weapons, slander, or poison, to dispel recurrent
nightmares, to facilitate the process of dying and what follows it.² (2)

How might participation in a Buddhist ritual cosmos of salvific activity spill
over into life as we live it in the contemporary world? How might it spill into
contemporary forms of social service? What might social service in our time gain
by this?

In scriptures like the Avata`saka and treatises by figures like Shantideva, the
power of the ritual pours itself into the practice of the bodhisattva who is situated
in the world of daily activity and service to others. Ritual empowers the practice
of each fundamental bodhisattva activity: self-giving, moral discipline, patience,
enthusiastic effort, meditative concentration, and non-dual knowledge of
emptiness, and the practice of each such activity further intensifies the effects of
the ritual. The ritual thus effects individual character, intentions and actions in
service to others. In tantric traditions, the power of ritual is harnessed in social
service to meet specific needs of persons and communities within a context of
universal salvific activity, motivating beneficiaries to provide social and economic
support for centers of tantric training. In our place and time, ritual contemplative
activity can spill just as naturally into daily life and social service, as we live it
and conceive it here. The empathy with other beings enacted in the ritual takes
natural expression in service to the ill, the confused, the oppressed, the hungry, and
the dying. Such service, as a spill-over from ritual experience, carries the ritual's
unique features into one's intentions and actions. One's activities of body, speech
and mind are offered in and through such work to the buddhas, so that such
service itself may become ritual means of ultimate transformation: for one's doors
of action and perception to become agents of the buddhas' activity and blessing.
The intuition of voidness spills from the ritual into such work, thinning and
ultimately breaking the seeming ontological separation between self and other,
between self-concern and other-concern, between devotion to buddhas and devotion to beings in the insubstantial ground of voidness, so that the so-called "beneficiaries" of one's service themselves increasingly manifest as conduits of the buddhas' blessings, agents of the buddhas' activity in and through their interactions with the so-called "provider" of service. Assumptions concerning who is serving, and who is being served, begin to break down. The Prajnaparamita sutras proclaim that transcendent wisdom does not see an inherent giver, receiver or gift, and that it is precisely that awareness which breaks open the floodgates of the buddhas' salvific activity for the world. This ancient insight is realized and enacted here and now through social service inscribed in such a cosmos of ritual-contemplative practice.

Unlike some current understandings of social service, service inscribed in such a ritual cosmos pushes up against our usual boundaries of social concern: the ritual literally includes all beings in the buddhas' activity. Thus, any specific social service functions ritually as a universal paradigm, something significant not only for its own sake, but for its place in an all-encompassing economy of salvation that can excludes no living being. Actions to protect the natural world and all its creatures flow naturally from this, though they too are inscribed in a spatially and temporally infinite cosmos in which it is not presumed the work is ever completed. Some of the social-ethical attitudes natural to such a worldview: patience free of definite expectations around specific outcomes, fortitude that assumes no end to the work, a long view that is not discouraged by momentary obstacles, empathy for others in the depth dimension of their being which is uneffected by conventional aversions or prejudices, a sense of ultimate solidarity with others that is uneffected and unintimidated by their conventional status: as rich or poor, oppressed or oppressor, pleasant or unpleasant, etc.

What do Buddhists gain by engaging in social service inscribed in such a ritual cosmos? There has always been a Buddhist concern to be careful of the worldly life, to avoid it if necessary, so as to develop one's incipient practice of the path free of the world's distractions. It is too easy to be appropriated by the world, to become lost in its prevailing ontological and epistemological assumptions which continually rationalize its clingings, aversions, and conventional prejudices of all kinds. This is just as real an issue for contemporary Buddhists as in the past.

Ritual-contemplative practice as a foundation for social service models a way for universal formulations of doctrine and ritual to be concretized in specific issues of social need and concern, but it does so in such a way as to reinforce one's
deepest intuitions of the path, rather than distracting one from it. It provides a way to concretize and further empower the central doctrines and practice intuitions of Mahayana Buddhism; a way for social service itself to enter one, together with all whom one serves, into the eternal activity of the body, speech and mind of the buddhas.

In this regard, contemporary Buddhists have something to learn from, for example, contemporary Catholic and Orthodox Christian theologians who are acutely aware of the ontological and social-ethical dimensions of their ancient rituals, and their continuing relevance for a modern age that has largely forgotten their power. Christian life, in turn, may be enhanced by a new infusion of Buddhist ritual power into Western culture, raising anew for secularized Westerners the possibility of transformative power in the ritual-contemplative dimensions of their own traditions.

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1 The sixteenth section of the Tibetan translation by Ye shes sde, Jinamitra, Surendrabodhi, et al. that appears in the Peking Kanjur, and which corresponds to the eleventh section of Shikshananada’s Chinese translation (translated by Thomas Cleary, *The Flower Ornament Scripture*, Boston 1993, pp. 312-329).