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**A View from America:
Buddhist Paradigms for the New Millennium**

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The birth of Dolly in 2003, the first successfully cloned mammal from a single somatic cell and the destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 are just two recent events that challenge Buddhists to reexamine their doctrines, sharpen their interpretative insights, and expand their moral imaginations. During the next few minutes, I want to briefly reflect on the Chinese Huayen (*Avatamsaka*) articulation of *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent co-arising; interdependence) as a paradigm for thinking about the advances of biomedicine and how different faith traditions should relate to each other. This insight holds creative possibilities for scientific and “ethical” thinking. Specifically, I focus on 1) shifting centers and 2) ambiguity illuminated by *dharmakāya pratītyasamutpāda* (法界緣起說 Ch. *fajieyuanqi*; Jpn. *hokkai engi setsu*).

According to the *Avatamsakasūtra* Siddhartha Gautama realized in deep meditation *pratītyasamutpāda*, the truth that all things and all beings arise concomitantly and are thus mutually related and dependent, and became the Buddha, the Enlightened One. Since its initial articulation, Buddhist thinkers explored in great detail the every changing temporal, spatial, and relationships of *dharmas* (things, beings, and events). Fazang (643-712), for one, investigated the identity and interfusion of concomitant *dharmas* that constitute the *dharmakāya* (the realm of *dharmas* in their totality). He reasoned that in a mutually supportive and dependent world, when a single *dharma* is arbitrarily singled out for special consideration it becomes the principal *dharma* and the remaining *dharmas* assume secondary roles. Yet at the next instant when another *dharma* assumes the central role, the once principal *dharma* is relegated to a supporting role. This is true for every other *dharma*. These shifts can be seen in our conversation with friends. When one friend is speaking, our attention is focused on that person; but the moment a second friend enters the conversation with a rejoinder or objection, our attention is redirected. A conversation among friends almost never remains focused on a single person, nor focused on a single topic.

Shifting Centers (perspectives)

Like a conversation among friends, the Buddhist vision of a concomitant and interdependent world consists of multiple and shifting centers, and by ambiguity, which characterizes our collective impressions of the world and events. Multiple centers affirm the validity of varying viewpoints and allows for openness to other perspectives and new insights. The most obvious value of varying viewpoints is evident in the investigation of physical phenomenon. Just to cite one example, the chemist and the physicist looking at a helium atom from their respective disciplines are interested in and see different aspects of the same phenomena. To the chemist the helium is a molecule because it behaves as a gas; to the physicist, on the other hand, it is not a molecule, because it does not display a molecular spectrum (Kuhn, 50-51). The chemist’s view does not discount the physicist’s

understanding; both contribute to our knowledge of this simple atom. The atomic scientist, on the other hand, is interested in harnessing the energy that is produced when hydrogen atoms fuse to produce helium. A specific discipline, in short, illuminates a limited aspect of physical reality. In the search for a more comprehensive understanding, scientists search for alternative perspectives to examine the world. It is unlikely that we will exhaust our understanding of even a single phenomenon or event; and our knowledge will always remain incomplete and ambiguous.

While I believe there is universal assent to investigating the physical world from multiple disciplines, spiritual traditions have exhibited great reluctance to consider ideas that deviate from their respective “truths.” Such traditions as Christianity, Islam or other ideologies that posit a single center or perspective in the form of an Origin, a Truth, an Essence, an Ideal Form, an Immovable Mover, a God or a Creator that guarantees all meaning and values by which all actions and beliefs should be judged are reluctant to acknowledge the validity of other insights. Single centered traditions ignore, repress, and marginalize ideas that are inconsistent with their respective worldviews. In cultures where Christ is the central icon, Christianity is central, and Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, shamanic devotees—anyone different—are on the margins. Patriarchal societies, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan, males are central and females the marginalized other. Buddhist ideology makes no absolute claims. In the *Kalamas-sutta* Kalamas is cautioned by the Buddha to judge for himself the validity of the Buddhadharma. There after all other spiritual paths that may be more suit for his temperament and needs. The vision of an interdependent and multi-centered world allows for openness to alternative avenues of thinking and other visions of reality.

Ambiguity

Multiple and shifting centers eschews a single absolute center and tends to epistemological ambiguity. In addition to differing from person to person, our respective perceptions are conditioned moment by moment by our moods and temperament, and our physical environment. Werner Heisenberg (1901-1976) through his uncertainty principle concluded that our knowledge of the world is fluid. We are unable to know simultaneously and with precision the velocity and position of a sub atomic entity. Moreover according to the uncertainty principle the observer changes the very nature of the “reality” that is being observed and quantified. Heisenberg’s “discovery” challenges the scientific method, a paradigm, which presumes an unchanging observer and unchanging phenomenal reality. In a world of constant flux, not only does an observer continually change; in world of multiple and shifting centers different observers will observe the same phenomena differently. Our perceptions determine the way objects and events exist and relate to each other. Taking their cue from such documents as the *Avatamsakasūtra* and *Prajñāsāmadhiśūtra*, Maitreya (ca. 270-350), Asanga (ca. 310-390) and Vasubandhu (ca. 350-400) and other Yogācārins have long argued that the reality we perceive and know are simply transformations of different phases of the cognitive process.

Moral Imagination

Anomalies, that is ideas and events that we cannot explain with our current conceptual paradigms, are often the catalyst for reevaluating and thus revolutionizing our

thinking. Thomas S. Kuhn's influential *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* explains that a change in the perception and evaluation of familiar data lead to new ways of thinking about physical phenomena. Similarly, doctrinal developments that have expanded the Buddha's original insight of *pratīyasamutpāda*¹ emerged from the need to respond to critique from other faith traditions and from unprecedented challenges. Dolly's birth in 1996 immediately give rise to speculation that, in due time, a human child could be created; and human clones would be created for spare body organs; and that an individual may be able to extend his or her existence beyond a single lifetime. Such questions urge Buddhists to reassess the *Buddhadharma*, whose continued viability will depend on what new historical lessons can be recovered and/or what new doctrinal insights can be extrapolated that will respond to current and future challenges to its notions of humanity, the natural world, and other critical issues.

Since change is the nature of reality, the questions are: how to accommodate change and expand our moral imaginations. Change pushes the boundaries of what we once considered to be the norm. We no longer think, for example, it strange or unusual for a child to be conceived through artificial insemination or in vitro fertilization. We no longer think a child conceived in a Petri dish to be less than human, even though in vitro fertilization bypasses the usual method of human reproduction. Medical technology has expanded our moral horizons. The birth of Dolly and the possibility of cloning of human beings, like the use of artificial insemination and in vitro fertilization, offer the opportunity for expanding our notions of humanity and our moral reasoning.

Perhaps more than any recent single event, 9/11 highlights the danger of ideological centers. Since the seventh century Islam and Christianity have competed with each other across the Mediterranean and elsewhere. While both Islam and Christianity share a common origin and parallel aspirations, both traditions insist that each alone is the custodian of God's final revelation and accuse each other of being infidels (Lewis 2002, 410-420). Monotheistic apologists may be unwilling to give up the centrality of their truth and acknowledge the validity of other faith traditions, but the plurality of spiritual traditions is an ever-present reality in modern societies. Spiritual traditions can claim to be absolute and perfect within the confines of their own systems, but they cannot ignore other systems. One task, it seems, is to explain how absolute ideologies relate to each other and recognize the equal validity of other traditions. Another task is to examine cultural diffusion occurring at the peripheries of communities for clues as to how closed systems can be persuaded to let in some confusion.

The Buddhist vision of an interdependent world wherein we are irrevocably intertwined with the destinies of the world and all beings provides a conceptual paradigm for understanding how competing ideologies relate to each other. In an interdependent world no one person or community or viewpoint commands absolute truth or value. An

¹ For example in addition to *fajieyuanqi* (hokkai engi, i.e., *dharmadh-tu- pratīyasamutpāda*), Buddhist thinkers have formulated *dvādaśāṅga- pratīyasamutpāda* (juni engi), *~layavijñ-~na- pratīyasamutpāda* (alayashiki engi), *tathata-pratīyasamutpāda* (shinnyo engi), *rokudai-engi*, and *hongan engi*.

interdependent world honors competing points of view, respects shifting centers, and acknowledges all elements of suffering. By affirming the faith our neighbors, we give credence to the Buddhism's insight of an interdependent world. By looking through and turning the kaleidoscope of diverse perspectives, we can seek to meet the mind of the most adamant exclusivist, the open-minded believer, as well as the person independent of any specific tradition.

Concluding Remarks

Thank you for your patience. My remarks have been highly abstract; I have not touched on the practical implications of shifting centers and ambiguity. Cloning, genetic engineering, and any number of new discoveries and technological advances and their attendant problems have thrust us into intellectual and moral borderlands, where we struggle to accommodate unprecedented events and new discoveries. In this ambiguous borderland we must be open to alternative ways of thinking. Those ideas that can successfully respond to the new challenges will flourish; those that cannot will be bypassed and forgotten. The urgent task for Buddhists in these early years of this new millennium is to seek new insights and formulate new applications of *pratītyasamutpāda* and other insights. While this intent is obvious and admirable, it is far from easy. Our thinking is often trapped in old paradigms.

When faced with a totally new situation, we tend always to attach ourselves to the objects, to the flavor of the most recent past. We look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future (McLuhan, 74-75).

Shifting moral and intellectual perspectives introduce us to differing and often conflicting visions of reality, and a rich and diverse repertoire for alternative possibilities. In an interdependent world we must continually find creative ways to accommodate differing worldviews. The Buddhist vision of reality crystallized in the notion of *pratītyasamutpāda* provides conceptual pathways along which our thinking can proceed.

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