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Buddhism and Disability: Toward a Socially Engaged Buddhist ‘Theology’ of Bodily Inclusiveness¹

Prof. Dr. Bee Scherer
Director, International Centre for Inclusion and Social Justice
Canterbury Christ Church University, United Kingdom

Introduction:

Following on from current discourses within critical disability studies, I investigate the parameters, opportunities and challenges of some Buddhist responses to variable bodies. Negotiating the different Buddhist modes between ‘karmatic’ sociology and ‘nirvāṇic’ soteriology, I develop outlines of Socially Engaged Buddhist ‘theology’ of bodily inclusiveness, arguing for a person-centered, non-judgmental approach to bodily variability and neuro-diversity. I conclude with critical ruminations about oppressive normalcy and by pointing out some pathways to navigating variability-affirming ‘anthroposcapes’ - landscapes of embodied human experiences.

Recently, Chris Mounsey has proposed a shift in critical disability studies, away from the Foucauldian emphasis on the notion of compulsory ableism - as e.g. in McRuer’s *Crip Theory*² - toward a fuller emphasis on and an appreciation of the individual embodied experience.³ Mounsey theorises this approach under the concept of *variability*, “same only different”⁴ as a discursive replacement to ‘disability’. Consciously or not, Mounsey’s radical reconceptualization and celebration of sameness in difference contrast-imitates Homi Bhabha’s observations on the oppressive fixation as “a ‘partial’ presence” of the colonial subject through “the ambivalence of mimicry (almost the same, *but not quite*).”⁵ The postcolonial critique of oppressive identity construction through mimicry is transformed for critical disability theory into the variability approach: Mounsey’s *same only different* affords, without center and margin, any variable body the complete autonomy of an embodied presence while leaving empathic, unoppressive recognizability in sameness intact.

This article testifies to the fact that focusing on the body can facilitate history, speaking to the presence - without the necessity of anachronistic categorizations and retro-diagnoses. This does not preclude - or devalue the usefulness of - diachronic phenomenological and philosophical meanderings, in particular when the focus, limitations and parameters of such enquiries are clearly defined. With these caveats, I would like to open up a dialogue between contemporary critical disability theory with Buddhist thought, moving in this chapter from investigating selected variable bodies within the circumscribed yet still somewhat fluid, fuzzy and messy discursive context of Buddhist practices, narratives and philosophies⁶ to infusing ‘variability’ as a critical angle with Buddhist

¹ This article is slightly adapted from Scherer, Bee. 2016: “*Variable Bodies, Buddhism and (No-)Selfhood: Towards Dehegemonized Embodiment*.” In *The Variable Body in History* (QP in Focus 1), edited by Chris Mounsey and Stan Booth, 247-263, Oxford: Peter Lang.

² Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (NYU Press: New York, 2006).

³ Chris Mounsey, “Introduction: Variability – Beyond Sameness and Difference,” in *The Idea of Disability in the Eighteenth Century*, edited by Chris Mounsey (Bucknell University Press: Lewisburg, 2014), 1-27.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, [1994] 2012), 123; emphasis in the original.

⁶ In this article, I do not attempt to provide a survey of the vast streams of Buddhist traditions in their relationship to ‘disability’. A useful - yet by its lack of direct access to primary texts quite limited - compilation of literature on Buddhism and disability in Asia is M. Mills, ‘Buddhism and Responses to Disability, Mental Disorders and Deafness in Asia. A bibliography of historical and modern texts with introduction and partial annotation, and some echoes in Western countries’ (West Midlands, 2013), <http://cirrie.buffalo.edu/bibliography/buddhism/>, (accessed 12 April 2016).

‘theology’ (i.e. Buddhist constructive-critical thought). I aim to demonstrate how embodied and body-oppressive normativities - and the margins they produce - can successfully be challenged through the lens of the conjunct Buddhist principles of interdependency, cause & effect; and no self. In conclusion I dare to finish this non-Foucauldian article with a (post-)Foucauldian critique of oppressive normalcy and I will attempt to point out some pathways to navigating variability-affirming ‘anthroposcapes’⁷ - landscapes of embodied human experiences.

Buddhist Variable Bodies

Buddhist approaches to the body flow from two pivotal angles: soteriology and sociology, i.e. aspiration and (conditioned) socio-cultural reality. On the level of aspiration and soteriology the Buddhist traditions approach bodies as fields of transformative virtue while, on the level of socio-cultural realities, bodies are seen as limiting or expedient expressions of past actions and ripened conditions. Both approaches are based on the key Buddhist tenets of *karma* as the law of cause and effect; and of the *pratītyasamutpāda* - ‘dependent arising’. Buddhist bodies are constructed within the parameter of Buddhist (virtue) Ethics or virtuosity.⁸ However, variant embodied abilities, while linked to past actions, are not attributable to individualized (non-)virtue, since the Buddhist key tenet of ‘no-self’ (*anātman*) precludes the judgmental attribution of causal agency to an individual core, self or soul: instead, phenomena and empiric persons manifest as karmic continuities without essential identities attached. The ensuing conundrum of cause & effect and rebirth without a Self is itself the subject of intensive philosophical and doctrinal debate⁹; however, Buddhist Modernisms¹⁰ have mostly solved the riddle by firmly pointing to the non-ontological nature of the Buddhist teachings: Without ontological assumptions of, e.g. ‘self’, ‘soul’ or even ‘mind’ and without any essentialized notion of ultimate reality, a particular meaningful way to understand the framework of the Buddhist intention-led, yet subject-essence-free karmatic theory arises as an exercise in deconstruction of essentialism by practice (or *performance* in [Judith] Butlerian terms).

In this pedagogical or ‘andragogical’¹¹ reading of Buddhism and Buddhist *praxis* - i.e. thought and performance -, questions of ontologically essentialized selfhood and truths are rendered obsolete in favor of the soteriological pragmatics, experience-oriented andragogy aiming only at showing methods to enduring happiness. In the famous *Snake Simile Sutta* of the Pāli canon’s *Middle Length Discourses*, the Buddha as interlocutor proclaims “I only teach suffering and its ending.”¹² This can be read as the Buddha saying that he does not concern himself with essentialized identities; ontology, cosmology and other conceptualizations of reality. Instead, the focus of his teachings is freedom from *dukkha*: ‘pain’, ‘unsatisfactoriness’ or ‘suffering’. *Dukkha* in Buddhist terms is juxtaposed to *sukha*: ‘happiness’, and points to the lack (*duḥ-*) of permanent happiness (*kha*). The Buddhist concept of suffering includes the inextricably interpolated complexes of individual psycho-physical integrity as the *dukkha-dukkhatā*, the pain of experiencing pain,

⁷ Bee Scherer, ‘Crossings and Dwellings: Being behind Transphobia,’ paper given at the conference *Fear and Loathing: Phobia in Literature and Culture*, 9-10 May 2014, University of Kent, U.K. Available at the Queering Paradigms blog, <http://queeringparadigms.com/2014/08/11/crossings-and-dwellings-being-behind-transphobia/> (accessed 12 April 2016).

⁸ Susanne Mrozik, *Virtuous Bodies: The Physical Dimensions of Morality in Buddhist Ethics* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2007).

⁹ B. Scherer, “Karma: The Transformations of a Buddhist Conundrum,” in *Vajrayana Buddhism in Russia: History and Modernity*, edited by Chetyrova, L.B. et al. (St Petersburg State University: St. Petersburg, 2009), 259-285.

¹⁰ David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2008).

¹¹ Scherer, ‘Karma’, 265 and 277-8.

¹² *dukkhañceva paññāpemi dukkhassa ca nirodham* M 22 I 140. Pāli texts referred to are the editions of the Pāli Text Society, London. Abbreviations follow the *Critical Pāli Dictionary* (see the *Epilegomena* to Vol. 1 and online at http://pali.hum.ku.dk/cpd/intro/vol1_epileg_abbrev_texts.html, accessed 12 April 2016).

within ever-changing and fluid conditioned reality as the *sankhāra-dukkhatā*, the pain of karmatic flux, and the ensuing experience of lack, due to the constant change, the *vipariṇāma-dukkhatā*.

The Buddhist notion of karma without individually essentialized agent and of rebirth without anyone who is reborn, hence, points to the experience of our ever-changing spatial, temporal and ‘cosmic’ (psycho-spiritual) context as a continuity without ontological, fixed identity – a flow without essence. In this reading of Buddhist philosophy, widening Butler’s concept of performativity to the extreme, reality itself is performance. The view of simple, variable causalities without self - without judging, blaming, shaming, and guilt-trapping variable embodiments - mitigates the Buddhist karmatic views on ‘disability’ or embodied variabilities: it can be argued that that from a Buddhist point of view body variances express genealogies or actualizations of generic human potentials rather than essentialized, individual histories of (non-)virtue.

This non-judgmental and in its potential arguably dehegemonic Buddhist approach does not preclude the moralizing of (un)virtuous Buddhist bodies in cautionary narratives; nor has it on the level of socio-cultural organization and expression prevented Buddhists and Buddhisms from variability-based discriminatory practices – most importantly on the level of the monastic discipline. All extant and still valid and mostly enforced Buddhist monastic codes preclude applicants with physical and mental variabilities from ordination. For example, in the Theravāda tradition the Pāli canon’s section on monastic discipline or *vinaya* congenital and acquired impairment are physiologically grouped together with those having received corporeal punishments - such as branding, scourging, marking as robber, cutting off of hands, feet, ears, nose, fingers, thumb, tendons - with congenital and/or acquired variabilities - such as webbed fingers, humpback, dwarfism; deformity; blindness, dumbness, deafness, lameness and other walking impairments; paralysis - and general medical problems such as infirmity, bad health, contagious disease; goiter; elephantiasis.¹³ The list is quite consistent across the five extant early *vinaya* traditions.¹⁴ Equally, those seen as having non-normative sex/gender – i.e. the ‘neither-male-nor-female’ *paṇḍakas* and the ‘both-and’ intersex¹⁵ - were and are prohibited from ordination; interestingly, were they inadvertently ordained their ordination was deemed annulled¹⁶ while the inadvertent ordination of those disqualified due to impairments such as various degrees of blindness, deafness, skeletal deformation etc., was and is still deemed as valid.¹⁷

Ordination to the Buddhist monastic community was and is not governed by soteriology but according to social context and societal pragmatics. The *vinaya* rules establish a physiologically elite in-group, which feels the need guard itself from societal damage both by behavior and by association. However, Buddhist modernisms are challenging the elite status of the monastics by privileging soteriology above sociology. Modernist lay movements in particular in the Global North vocally advocate equality of *virtuosi* status for householders and non-monastic ‘yogis’ in Buddhist praxis; transnationally, many ‘new’ lay Buddhist modernists move their traditions along onto a path of democratization, dehierarchization and counter-heteropatriarchal reform. In this context, it is relevant to keep in mind that the traditional monastic rules are, indeed, limited to the governance of monastic elite: they cannot be argued to establish a universal ethical governance or code, which could be utilized to encouraging discrimination.

¹³ Mahāvagga Vin I 71 i 91; cp. IX, 4, 10-11 i 322; Vin I 76 i 93-95 adds leprosy, boils, eczema and epilepsy.

¹⁴ For the parallels on ‘cripples’ in the other four early Buddhist *vinaya* traditions see the references in Erich Frauwallner, *The Earliest Vinaya and the Beginnings of Buddhist Literature* (Is.M.E.O.: Rome, 1956), 77.

¹⁵ Vin I 61 i 85-86; see Bee Scherer, “Variant Dharma: Buddhist Queers, Queering Buddhisms” in *Queering Paradigms VI* (Oxford: Peter Lang 2016).

¹⁶ Vin IX, 4, 10 i 322.

¹⁷ Vin IX, 4, 11 i 322.

In doctrinal terms, the imperative of universal compassion is absolute paramount in Buddhisms and explicitly includes ‘out-groups’ and the marginalized. All variabilities – within and without the normative boundaries - are seen as manifestation of karma. Those physically and/or socially afflicted by these manifestations are prominently deserving of love-in-action. In canonical stories we can find that caring for ‘the blind and old parents’¹⁸ is narratively constructed as a valid reason for refusing to become a monk, as happened in the case of the potter Ghāṭikāra; and Buddhist rulers regularly are praised in chronicles as sustaining institutions for the blind and sick and otherwise variable.¹⁹

From a Buddhist modernist point of view it can be argued that, what has opened up Buddhist traditions to discriminatory interpretations of - and practices with regard to - variabilities, is the popular and unsophisticated utilization of karma theory in the form of attributing guilt and shame for past(-lives) actions. This form of moralizing ignores the intricacies of Buddhist psychologies of (no-)selfhood and is based on cautionary explanations of karma abounding in Buddhist scriptures. In the Buddhist canonical texts karmatic ‘foolishness’, equaling to non-virtuous behavior, is directly linked to non-favorable physical variability, e.g. prominently in the Theravāda Pāli canon in the *Discourse on the Fool and the Wise*²⁰; although the judging and moralizing is aimed at the non-virtue which causes the variability it is difficult to ignore the real socially stigmatizing consequences for the subjects of embodied variability whose physicality is traced back to human non-virtue - however non-essentializing and ‘no-self-ed’ such causality philosophically is meant to be. The non-virtuous fool (*bāla*) experiences embodied aspects of his moral deficit in a variety of impairments, combined in the following stock phrase list in the Pāli canon: ‘ugly (or: of inferior class), unsightly, deformed, diseased, or blind or crooked or lame or paralyzed’.²¹ This mnemonic list is usually preceded by a paragraph detailing (re-)birth into a socially abject group or caste (*nīcakula*) such as the untouchables.²² The list-heading term *dubbaṇṇo*, ‘of bad color’, implies both aesthetical and social abjection²³: the overlaying of physical and social appearances is paramount in the South Asian social context of the Buddhist sources, in which social inferiority was and largely still is equivalent with corporeal unattractiveness. The description of a boy in the Buddhist Sanskrit *Avadāna-Śatakam*, a collection of religious-didactic poetic narratives probably redacted around the first century CE, drastically exemplifies this marriage of social abjection to the non-normative physicality: the youngster is depicted as ‘ugly (or: of inferior class), unsightly, deformed, his body smeared all over with feces, and foul-smelling’.²⁴

The Buddhist ‘physiomoral discourse of the body’²⁵ includes abject class and non-normative sex/gender²⁶ and the inferior female birth.²⁷ Any progress on the Buddhist path

¹⁸ *andhe jīṇṇe mātāpitaro* M. 81 ii 48 and 51-52.

¹⁹ For example, the *Lesser Chronicle* of the Buddhist rulers of Sri Lanka, the *Cūlavamsa*, mentions such charity for the 4th century CE king Buddhādāsa (Mhv 37. 148 and 182); the 7th century CE ruler Aggibodhi (Mhv 45.43) and the 8th century CE king Udaya I (Mhv 49. 20).

²⁰ *Bālapaṇḍita-sutta*, M. 129, iii 167-178.

²¹ *dubbaṇṇo duddasiko okoṭimako bavhābādho, kāṇo vā kuṇi vā khañjo vā pakkhahato vā*, Vin II 90 S I 194 A I 107, II 85, III 385 Pug 51; the *Bālapaṇḍita-sutta* M 129 III 169 substitutes *khañjo* ‘lame’ for *khujjo* ‘humpbacked’.

²² E.g. M III 169; S I 194 A I 107, II 85, III 385 Pug 51. Additionally, parts of the stock phrase occur separately throughout the Pāli canon.

²³ Sanskrit *varṇa* (Pāli *vaṇṇo*) denotes both color and caste.

²⁴ *durvarṇo durdarśano avakoṭimako ‘medhyamrakṣitaḡātro durgandhaś ca* Av 50 i 280; p. 125 Vaidya (abbreviations and editions of Sanskrit texts refer to Franklin Edgerton, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary* (1953) with occasionally relevant alternative or newer editions added by editor’s name only).

²⁵ Mrozik, *Virtuous Bodies*, Ch. 4.

²⁶ *paṇḍaka* and intersex; see above Scherer, *Variant Dharma*.

²⁷ *itthibhāva* (cp. Mrozik, *Virtuous Bodies*, 70-71). See, for example, the list in the para-canonical verses in the *Jātaka commentary* (J-a I 44) and the statement in the *Milindapañha* Mil 93 PTS on the inferiority (*itaratā*) of woman (*itthi*, note the wordplay!).

towards enlightenment is impeded by physiomoral problematic rebirth as the Pāli commentarial list of eighteen ‘impossible states’ (*abhabbaṭṭhāna*) shows²⁸: among humans, the list features the physical abject as blind, deaf, dumb, deformed and leper together with the sex/gender abject and the social abject as ‘barbarian’, slave, notorious criminal and heretic.²⁹ Within the early Sanskritic Buddhist traditions, such ‘inopportune’ (*akṣaṇaprāpta*) birth as result of karma is described in the *Pravrajyāntarāya-sūtra* as quoted in Śāntideva’s 8th c. *Compendium of Discipline*:

He is born blind, stupid, dumb, an outcaste - certainly not privileged, a notorious slanderer; a sex/gender deficient and deviant (*ṣaṇḍaka* and *paṇḍaka*), a perpetual slave, a woman, a dog, a pig, a donkey, a camel and a poisonous serpent.³⁰

Another Mahāyāna discourse quoted in the same compendium, the *Inquiry of the Girl Candrottārā*, enumerates being ‘blind, lame, without tongue, and deformed’ among the karmic results of sense-attachment or desire (*rāga*)³¹: “Those who lead the low-life of lust become party to the various multitude of defects.”³² Again, as in the case of the earlier quoted *Pravrajyāntarāya-sūtra*, mental disabilities or learning difficulties³³ and various animal rebirths are included in the shortly following summary of such physiomoral expressions of causality: “Truly, those lustful will continuously be born as blind, deaf, and idiotic...”³⁴ With the self-referential ‘cult of the book’ emerging within Mahāyāna praxis, disregard for the respective scripture becomes another karmic cause for disadvantageous births with variable bodies. The *Lotus Sūtra* illustrates this when it claims that “those who do not have faith in this discourse I dispense, when they are born human again are then born idiots, lame, crooked, blind and dull.” The blasphemer, “foolish and deaf, does not hear the *dharma* (liberating teaching)”; “and when he obtains human birth he becomes blind, deaf and idiotic; he is a slave, always poor.”³⁵

However, the karmic ripening of impairing conditions within one’s lifetime does not necessarily preclude spiritual progress and realization. The canonical texts testify to the achievement of variable-bodied and/or impaired monastics; famously, the Ven. Bhaddiya ‘the dwarf’ is depicted in the very terms of physiomoral rejection discussed above as ‘ugly (or of inferior class), unsightly, deformed’ and as ‘shunned by most monks’³⁶ – yet he is praised by the Buddha for his high spiritual achievements. Another example is the story of the blind Elder Cakkhupāla as told in the commentary to the famous collection of doctrinal verses, the *Dhammapada*. The narrative illustrates the *Dhammapada*’s very first verse on intention-led and mind-governed karma; it relates how Cakkhupāla, by accepting the loss of its sight during rigorous asceticism dissolves a great karmic obstacle on the spiritual path.

²⁸ *Suttanipāta commentary* Sn-a i 50 and *Apadāna commentary* Ap-a 141.

²⁹ See Toshiichi Endo, *Buddha in Theravada Buddhism: A Study of the Concept of Buddha in the Pāli Commentaries* (Buddhist Cultural Centre: Dehiwala, Sri Lanka, 2002), 160-164, and Mrozić, *Virtuous Bodies*, 71.

³⁰ *jātyandhaś ca jaḍaś cājihvakaś ca caṇḍālaś [ca] {na} jātu | sukhito bhavaṭy abhyākhyānabahuś ca ṣaṇḍakaś ca paṇḍakaś ca nityadāsaś ca | strī ca bhavati śvā ca śūkaraś ca gardabhaś cōṣṭraś ca āśvīṣaś ca bhavati tatra jātau || Śikṣāsamuccaya Śikṣ p. 69; all translations are my own unless indicated otherwise.*

³¹ *kānāś ca khañjāś ca vijihvakaś ca | virūpakāś cāiva bhavanti rāgāt Candrottārādārikāparipreṣā, Śikṣ p. 80.*

³² *bhavanti nānāvidhadoṣabhājāś caranti ye kāmacarīm jaghanyām (ibid.)*

³³ Here denoted by the term *visaṃjñā* cp. above *jaḍa*.

³⁴ *jātyandhabhāvā vadhiraś visaṃjñā | [...] bhavanti nityam khalu kāmaloḥ || Śikṣ p. 80.*

³⁵ *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra* SP 3 verses 122; 129ab; 132 a-c: *puruṣātmabhāvaṃ ca yada labhante te kuṇṭhaka laṅgaka bhonti tatra | kubjātha kānā ca jaḍā jaghanyā āsradadhantā ima sūtra mahyam || 122; na cāpi so dharmā śṛṇoti bālo badhiraśca so bhoti acetanaśca | 129ab; manuṣyabhāvatvamupetya cāpi andhatva badhiraśca jaḍatvameti | parapreṣya so bhoti daridra nityam 3.132a-c.*

³⁶ *dubbaṇṇam duddasikam okoṭimam yebhuyyena bhikkhūnam paribhūtarūpaṃ Ud VII 5, 76.*

As has become clear, the Buddhist physiomoral encoding of variable corporealities through the doctrine of karma can be - and is only - resolved by the nirvāṇic soteriology. Such nirvāṇic or *bodhi* orientation projects a utopia of invariable bliss and translates this salvific impetus into the healing activities of enlightenment. In fact, the Buddha had compared the non-essentializing pragmatics of his liberating teachings to a physician removing a poisonous arrow without the delay of forensic over-scrutinizing.³⁷ Following on from Early Buddhist praises of the Buddha as the unrivalled physician of humanity, the ‘supreme surgeon’³⁸ who removes the poisons of attachment, aversion and ignorance which fuel the ego-delusion, Mahāyāna scriptures metaphorize the spiritual transformation of suffering as healing rays born out of the deep contemplative trance and fueled by the higher compassion of enlightened beings.³⁹ For example, the influential Mahāyāna scripture *Discourse of the Golden Light* describes in its second chapter the healing contemplation rays emitted by the Bodhisattva (enlightenment-being) Ruciraketu, whose name can be translated as ‘Radiant Brightness’⁴⁰:

And all the beings in this triple-thousand great-thousand world-sphere by the Buddha’s power became possessed of divine happiness.[...] And beings blind from birth see forms with the eye. And deaf beings hear sounds with the ear. And unconscious beings regain their mindfulness. And beings whose minds were distraught were no longer distraught in mind. (9) And naked beings became clothed in robes. And hungry beings became full-bellied. And thirsty beings became thirstless. And disease-afflicted beings became diseaseless. And beings whose bodily organs were defective became possessed of complete organs (tr. Emmerick⁴¹).

The salvific power of the Bodhisattvas is described in similar ways in the *Ratnolkadhāraṇī* as quoted in Śāntideva’s *Compendium*, Chapter Eighteen.⁴² The Enlightenment-being’s salvific aspiration is founded upon the wish for universal happiness. Hence, the confessional aspiration liturgies include the prayer that all varieties of suffering in sentient beings cease. The *Discourse of the Golden Light* includes in Chapter Three, the ‘confession chapter’ (*deśanā-parivarta*), such an elaborate aspirational prayer of hope and healing for all kind of variably disadvantaged⁴³:

³⁷ M 63 i 429.

³⁸ *sallakato anuttaro* Sn 560; Mil 215.

³⁹ For Buddhism and Healing see [Paul Demiéville], *Buddhism and Healing: Demiéville’s Article “Byo” from Hōbōgirin*, translated by Mark Tatz (University Press of America: Lanham, 1985); Raoul Birnbaum, *The Healing Buddha* (Shambhala: Boston, 1989); Tadeusz Skorupski, ‘Health and Suffering in Buddhism: Doctrinal and Existential Considerations,’ in *Religion, Health and Suffering*, edited by J.R. Hinnells and R. Porter (Kegan Paul International: London, 1999), 139-165; and Anālayo, ‘Healing in Early Buddhism’ *Buddhist Studies Review* 32n1, 2015, 19-33.

⁴⁰ *Suvarṇaprabhāsottama-sūtra* Sv 8-9 *sarve cāsmiṃstrisāhasramahāsāhasralokadhātau sattvā buddhānubhāvena divyasukhena samanvāgatā babbhūvuh | jātyandhāśca sattvā rūpāṇi paśyanti sma | vadhiraśca sattvāḥ sattvebhyaḥ śabdāni śṛṇvanti | unmattāśca sattvāḥ smṛtiṃ pratilabhante | vikṣiptacittāśca smṛtīmanto babbhū-| vuh | nagnāśca sattvāścivaraprāvṛtā (Bagchi 5) babbhūvuh | jighatsitāśca sattvāḥ paripūrṇagātrā babbhūvuh | tṛṣitāśca sattvā vigatarṣṇā babbhūvuh | rogasprṣtāśca sattvā vigatarogā babbhūvuh | hīnakāyāśca sattvāḥ paripūrṇendriyā babbhūvuh |* (I have omitted [...]) ‘Beings whose senses were incomplete became possessed of all their senses’, which is most likely an interpolation duplicating the concluding sentence quoted and only found in the Tibetan and Chinese versions, but not in the Sanskrit manuscripts. Nobel conjectured and added this passage as *aparipūrṇendriyāḥ sattvāḥ sarvendriyasamanvāgatā babbhūvuh*.

⁴¹ Ronald E. Emmerick, *The Sutra of Golden Light: Being a Translation of the Suvarṇabhasottamasutra* (Pāli Text Society: Oxford, 2001), 4.

⁴² See in particular Śikṣ 341-2.

⁴³ Sv verses 3.81-83 (p. 39 Nobel) *andhāśca paśyantu vicitrarūpān vadhiraśca śṛṇvantu manojñaghoṣān || 81 nagnāśca vastrāṇi labhantu citrā daridrasattvāśca dhanāṃllabhantu | 82ab mā kasyacidhāvatu duḥkhavedanā sudarśanāḥ sattva bhavantu sarve | abhirūpaprasādikasauṃyārūpā anekasukhasaṃcita nitya bhontu || 83*

And may the blind see the various forms, the deaf hear delightful sounds, the naked obtain various garments, poor beings obtain treasures [...] May the experience of woe harm no one. May all beings be good-looking. May they have beautiful, gracious, auspicious forms and continually have a heap of numerous blessings (tr. Emmerick⁴⁴).

The popularity of the aspirational hope for those in disadvantaging variabilities is evidenced by the intertextual variation of key formulations found throughout Buddhist literatures. For example, most influentially, the seventh to eighth century CE Buddhist poet-philosopher Śāntideva, in the concluding chapter of his seminal *Entering the Path to Enlightenment (Bodhicaryāvatāra)*, concisely includes an only slight alteration to a central verse in the Sūtra's wishing prayer: 'May the blind see and may the deaf hear always.'⁴⁵

What emerges from the discussion above are contradicting and idiosyncratic Buddhist approaches to embodied variance and impairment, which exemplify attempts to negotiate different hegemonic social regimes of bio-power with soteriological universalism and inclusiveness. Buddhist modernisms with their main modes of detraditionalization, demythologization and psychologization⁴⁶ have found creative ways to propagate the demarginalization of the Buddhist 'un-ordainable', including, in modern terms, convicts; LGBT people; sex workers; and the 'disabled' variable.⁴⁷ Within the heterogeneous plethora of contemporary Buddhist modernist groups and flows called 'Socially Engaged Buddhism' karma is inventively rethought in terms of social justice and human rights advocacy.⁴⁸ Socially Engaged Buddhists most visibly aim their activism at ecological and socio-economic cause and they campaign for peace and gender equality; but just as in the case of Buddhist LGBT liberation, Buddhist 'disability' activism appears to be comparably underdeveloped⁴⁹, with the exception of Buddhist and Buddhist-derived approaches to depression and anxiety such as *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy* or *Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction*.⁵⁰ Still, variable-bodied people are able to self-narrate meaning and hope through Buddhism.⁵¹ Buddhist Modernist 'disabled' writers such as postpolio paraplegic Lorenzo Milam in his *CripZen: A Manual for Survival*, and right-hand-lacking Joan Tollifson in her *Bare-Bones Meditation* are utilizing the experience of variability for spiritual transformation and offer pathways to variable Buddhist empowerment.⁵²

The time seems ripe for Socially Engaged Buddhist *Crip Liberation* and a fuller Buddhist 'theology' of embodied variability. The idiosyncratic and contradictory orientations of social marginalizing and soteriological inclusiveness found within Buddhist thought on human embodied variance by karma theory can firmly be reintegrated and dissolved by refocusing embodied experience from an essentialized individual subject and its misconstrued individualized past, to the opportunity in the here and now for the future. As the leading socially engaged, Buddhist Theorist David Loy points out:

⁴⁴ Emmerick, *The Sutra of Golden Light*, 16.

⁴⁵ *Bodhicaryāvatāra* BCA 10.19ab *andhāḥ paśyantu rūpāṇi śṛṇvantu badhirāḥ sadā* (ed. Minaev 1889; the tenth chapter is missing in Prajñākaramati's commentary ed. by de la Vallée Poussin 1904-1914).

⁴⁶ McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 45-57.

⁴⁷ Cp. Christopher Queen, 'Introduction: From Altruism to Activism,' in *Action Dharma: New Studies in Engaged Buddhism*, edited by Christopher Queen, Charles Prebish and Damien Keown, pp. 1-35 (RoutledgeCurzon: London, 2003), 18.

⁴⁸ See Sally B. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism* (University of Hawai'i Press: Honolulu, 2009).

⁴⁹ See King *Socially Engaged Buddhism*, 163-164.

⁵⁰ See, e.g., Jon Kabat-Zinn, 'Some Reflections on the Origins of MBSR, Skillful Means, and the Trouble with Maps', *Contemporary Buddhism*, 12n1, 2001, 281-306.

⁵¹ For example, see Darla Y. Schumm and Michael Stoltzfus, 'Chronic Illness and Disability: Narratives of Suffering and Healing in Buddhism and Christianity', *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health*, 11:3, 2004, 5-21 and Kampol Thongbunnum, *Bright and Shining Mind in a Disabled Body* (Friends of Morak Society: Bangkok, 2007).

⁵² See Susan Squier, 'Meditation, Disability, and Identity', *Literature and Medicine* 23n1, 2004, 23-45.

Karma is better understood as the key to spiritual development ... When we add the Buddhist teaching about not-self [...] We can see that karma is not something the self *has*, it is what the sense of self *is* [...].⁵³

By utilizing a twofold Buddhist hermeneutics of preliminary (socio-cultural) and ultimate (soteriological) contexts, I argue accordingly for a Buddhist liberation ‘theology’ and praxis as non-judgmental, demarginalized and dehegemonized, celebratory approaches to bodily variability and neuro-diversity, in the full acknowledgment of the universal principle of *samsāric* conditionality and the individual expression of *samsāric* challenges.

Despite the multiple examples of missed opportunities to challenge embodied and body-oppressive normativities - and the margins they produce – in Buddhist cultural contexts, I maintain that Buddhist notions such as (re)birth as a ‘continuity without identity’, ‘no-self’ and ‘interdependency’ or ‘inter-being’⁵⁴ and as karma taking charge of the future rather than paying a debt to the past offers a wide array of emancipatory impulses, which can provide new tools to critical ‘disability’ theory and advocacy. Oppressive body-normalcy as regimes of bio-power can be successfully critiqued through Buddhist (modernist) social theory, which provides pathways for navigating variability-affirming anthroposcapes.

Conclusion

Buddhist realities, Buddhist utopias clash, and their battleground are real, historical defined and culturally refined embodied experiences of variance, marginalization, stigmatization, but also experiences of emancipation, transformation and liberation. The shift advocated in this edited volume toward telling historical bodies, far from heralding an end of theory, ought to decisively (in)form contemporary practical philosophy, social theory and cultural critique from the grassroots and is bound to co-create new accents and insights in critical theory, including Foucauldian derived approaches; Feminist; and Queer Theories. The human journey through the temporal and spatial landscape of our embodied experiences manifests within primary parameters of identity and difference; inside and outside; sameness and otherness; inclusion and rejection. Rather than being binary absolutes, the fundamental parameters of identitarian belonging form in protean, shifting ways with situation, context, time and space always in orientation to an underlying ‘prototype’⁵⁵ center attracting the most enduring, extreme and recognizable example. The Lakoffian prototype distribution and its center(s) for psycho-social identitarian recognition is hence paradoxically oriented at an almost impossible (hence extreme) ideal; while each individual’s embodied human experience is unique and varied, it is co-shaped by parameters gauging its distance to the center of the human prototype, which in many cultures through history manifests as the essentialized ideal of the (binary, cisgender) male (patriarchal bias; sexism; cisgenderism; transphobia); racially elite-constructed (as for example in white supremacy; racism; colorism); heterosexual (homo, lesbo-, bi-, queerophobia); abled-bodied (ableism), young (ageism), healthy (nosemaphobia) and beautiful (lookism; beauty-fetishism; fat-ism; cacophobia) person. The closer to the center individuals performs their embodiment, the stronger is their participation in psycho-social power (the *phallus* in Lacan’s terms). In particular, in relationship to transphobia, homophobia and sexism I have suggested to think of the underlying power dynamic as

⁵³ David R. Loy, *Money, Sex, War, Karma: Notes for a Buddhist Revolution* (Wisdom: Boston, 2008), 61.

⁵⁴ ‘Inter-being’ is a term coined and popularized by Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen teacher who also is credited with coining the term ‘Socially Engaged Buddhism’.

⁵⁵ George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 1987).

*aphallophobia*⁵⁶: the very fear of losing that individually channeled societal power of the essentialized, ideal center. Extending the aphallophobia-principle to intersections beyond heteropatriarchal oppressions with regard to gender and sexuality, I maintain that the key struggle for inclusion and social justice lies exactly in the rethinking of the illusion of identitarian stabilities, essentialism or in other words the ideal yet illusionary and random centers of belonging. The radical acceptance of human variability transforms the struggle to *include* variable embodiments within a projected center of ‘ontological security’⁵⁷ into the celebratory recognition of belonging as being the *same, only different*: varyingly performed embodiment, flowing from time and space and context and situation. Inhabiting such variable anthroposcapes without center and margin restores the possibility of (biographically fluid or relatively static) individual body-performances without creating oppressive body-normativities.

In terms of post-phallic forms of governmentality, after heteropatriarchy and theocracy, the ethical imperative of social action can re-establish itself as aiming at the full protection of the integrity of the variably embodied individual. Where freedom from harm and suffering is established as highest legal good, competing societal discourses of meaning-making are disempowered to affect oppressively the variable embodied individual. These discourses include the two dominant exponents of oppressive cultural modes, the medical-pathologizing and the religious-stigmatizing discourses.⁵⁸ Culturally harmful practices, disconnected from hegemonizing and essentializing discourses, can be discontinued for the benefit of the suffering individual. If the individuals’ rights to being asserted within their own variable center and their freedom from harm become the key parameters of trans-national solidarity, embodied experiences can become the pivotal angles to challenge oppression without the need to navigate a jungle of competing hierarchies of rights and cultural relativisms: this individual, ‘body-without-center-and-margin’ angle changes the evaluation of both contested and mainstream harmful practices, including the binarist sex inscription through mutilation of healthy infant intersex bodies; the pseudo-medical and/or religious scarring and penile desensitizing of healthy male infant bodies in the form of circumcision; the dramatic heteropatriarchal mutilation of healthy female bodies in the form of Female Genital Cutting (FGC); and the ageist, sexist and misogynic re-‘normatizing’ mutilation of healthy bodies through cosmetic surgeries, only to name a few examples. Within these debate, the proposed dehegemonic and aphallic affirmation of variable-bodily integrity differs from some arguments around individual ‘agency’, which dominate contemporary postcolonial, feminist and queer intersectional discourse and which in their well-meant privileging of decolonization and postcolonial and subaltern agency sometimes disempower inter-human solidarity and hence ignore the real, embodied suffering of the subject constructed as agentive. The here proposed approach is capable of devaluing the oppressive contexts (rather than affirming it), which co-shape ‘agentive’ decisions manifested as pseudo-agency or disempowered agency such as is the case in women’s complicity to oppressive heteropatriarchy in the context of, among others, dowry; behavioral prohibitions and prescriptions, e.g. regarding clothes; FGC and other culturally harmful practices; or in the case of developing ‘Stockholm syndrome’ among queer subjects in fundamentalist queerophobic religious contexts.⁵⁹

Infusing the concept of variability and, more broadly, critical social theory with the opportunities afforded by Buddhist (modernist) philosophies I maintain that pathways appear for navigating variability-affirming ‘anthroposcapes’. By relaxing the artificial

⁵⁶ Scherer, ‘Crossings and Dwellings’.

⁵⁷ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 1991), Ch. 2.

⁵⁸ Bee Scherer, ‘QueerThinking Religion: Queering Religious Paradigms’, *Scholar & Feminist Online* 2016 (forthc.).

⁵⁹ Ibid.

boundaries of our anxious Selfhood into the ravishing of ontological uncertainty and fluidity we are able to perform compassion without essentialized Self; solidarity without colonizing and hegemonizing overpowering; and dehegemonized embodiment, *same only different*.