**THE DIALECTIC OF AWAKENING**

***Buddha, Plato, and Aristotle***

Buddha’s archeology of the psyche exhibits a paradox. On the one hand, Buddha explodes the notion of self, arguing instead for *anatta* (no-self; in Pali: *anatman*). Meanwhile, Buddha argues that self-realization is our primary task.

Self-realization is awakening. The word “Buddha” means “awake.”

Awakening is enlightenment. Enlightenment is nirvana.

Buddha says humans are a pedagogical adventure; an awakening process. A journey from samsara to nirvana; from ignorance to wisdom; from suffering to freedom. In Sanskrit: the journey from *avidya* to *vidya*; from not-knowing to knowing.

But how can a no-self *realize* itself? How can something empty (*shunya*) actualize its creative potential? Or is it the emptiness (*shunyata*) – code for “interbeing” (*pratitya-samutpadha*) – which both allows for and stimulates the drive for becoming?

To tackle this Buddhist conundrum, we need to engage in paradoxical thinking. Kierkegaard says: “Paradox is the passion of thought. A thinker without paradox is like a lover without passion.”

Paradoxical thinking is dialectical. Dialectical thinking is wary of either**/**or. Buddha’s philosophy – like that of Heraclitus, Hegel, and Lao Tzu – is dialectical. Buddha’s *negation* of self is at the same time an *affirmation* of existential and karmic responsibility. This is a paradox, not a contradiction.

On the one hand, the self is negated as an absolute. It is not a Hindu *atman*, nor a self-sustaining, independent, Cartesian/Lockean *substance*. On the other hand, selfhood is an existential fact; a nexus of creative interaction; an evolving process.

Buddhism, like Taoism, is a process philosophy. It undermines the notion of “substance,” which, as a pivotal idea in the Western canon, may be traced back to Aristotle.

But Aristotle might also be read as a philosopher of interbeing. Coupled with his emphasis on teleology, he thus becomes helpful in explicating Buddha’s dialectic.

Aristotle’s notion of *entelechy* – the instinct to actualize creative potential – clarifies the Buddhist view of human being *as* becoming.

For Aristotle, sentient beings – plants, animals, humans – are what they are in virtue of an instinct to become what they could be. They are *animated* by an instinct for growth. Aristotle calls this instinct *entelechy*. It is quite specific. Acorns become oak trees. No rose bush tries to grow peaches. The goal for each sentient being is to become what it could be within the parameters of its mode of being.

Entelechy is ideal guiding process. The goal is present in the pulse of becoming.

In Buddhist terms, if awakening is our entelechy, then nirvanic bliss is like a seed inside us which needs to be nourished until it blooms. Socrates would later call this process “care and perfection of the soul.” Plato combines Socrates with Pythagoras, and affirms a karmic doctrine of rebirth – pedagogical and evolutionary – surprisingly Buddhist in outline.

Plato and Buddha share another feature: awakening is recollection; what Plato calls *anamnesis*. Plato’s *Agathon* – The Good, The True, The Beautiful – is the very stuff out of which we are made; and, therefore, there is a sense in which “we are already enlightened.” But this enlightenment – a kind of fire at the core of our being – is covered over by webs of illusion-habits; and each of us must do the work of sweeping these webs aside, in order to emerge from the cave and unleash divinity within.

Plato is closer to Tantric Buddhism when he waxes mystic about our innermost, ever-present, fully actualized communion with *Agathon* – as if our seeming distance from it, in long cycles of samsara, is a dream, a joke, a trick, a play: what Hindus call *lila*, and both Hindus and Buddhists occasionally call *maya*.

Yet Plato – like Buddha, Lao Tzu, Pythagoras, and Aristotle – emphasizes *the journey* *to* awakening. All five emphasize pedagogy, virtue, and The Middle Way.

In sum, Buddha shares with Plato and Aristotle a notion of “entelechy” at the core of human being.

Buddha shares with Plato an emphasis on karma, rebirth, and recollective enlightenment.

Buddha shares with Aristotle an emphasis on teleology.

Now, in Buddhism, there is a subtle distinction between sutra and tantra. In sutra discourse, awakening is like a seed at the core of our being; a seed which needs to be nourished into blooming. This mirrors Aristotle’s entelechy. We are *called* to self-realization.

In tantra discourse, one imagines awakening as already fully actualized. One drills into nirvanic luminescence through tantric techniques, culminating in a kind of Platonic *anamnesis* – emerging from a shadowy dream cave into a sunshine that never ceased.

Does Buddhism, then, posit a self, despite its famous doctrine of no-self? The answer, I suggest, is yes.

The samsaric, empirical ego – more process than thing – must assume existential responsibility for its choices, acts, and evolution. And within or behind samsaric ego there must be some kind of soul which – more in line with Plato than Aristotle – is a reincarnational process; diaphanous and co-originating in a soulful web of interbeing stretching toward the ineffable: the Agathon, the Tao, the Dharma.

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