

## Chapter 20

### **If You Meet Social Construction Along the Road... A Dialogue with Buddhism**

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The origins of Buddhist teachings are over 2,500 years old; social constructionist thought comes into intelligibility only within the recent decades. Buddhist teachings were grounded within an ancient cultural milieu, often identified as traditional; social constructionist gains impetus in a rapidly globalizing, or postmodern world in which we become increasingly conscious of multiple representations of the real, the rational and the good. And yet, we find remarkable affinities in major assumptions and implications. We explore, in particular, both intersections and tensions in the accounts of suspended or contingent realities, a constructed or non-substantial self, and an ultimate but unutterable condition of relatedness. Further, both orientations are deeply concerned with fostering practices that may contribute not only to individual but to societal and global well-being. In the end, it is not the particular array of words or theoretical formulations that are important, but the forms of practice that they encourage or invite.

The two of us have been long and deeply immersed in social constructionist inquiry. At the same time, we have both been absorbed - both theoretically and personally - in the Buddhist tradition. Neither of these investments were derived from each other. They emerged in quite different contexts. However, their co-existence was scarcely fraught with conflict; on the contrary they seemed to play in scarcely conscious but harmonious parallel. The time has now arrived for meeting along the road, for exploring the possibility of kinship. Through this exploration we hope to locate the basis for this sense of harmony. We anticipate that its dimensions will be conceptual, practical, and personal. It is our hope that we shall not only locate mutually supportive relationships, but scaffolding for new developments, and an appreciation for neighboring endeavors in research and therapy.

As the reader will note, we write here of anticipation and hopes, of insights not yet formed. And this is indeed the case. We do not begin here with answers already in place, but with questions and curiosity. For this

exploration we also choose the medium of the dialogue. In fact, this choice serves as the first signal of affinity between these traditions. Within the constructionist domain dialogue plays a pivotal role as the progenitor of all meaning. And, within the Buddhist tradition it is within dialogue with the wise that the neophyte achieves illumination. Meaning and illumination walk hand in hand. It is in this spirit that our conversation begins:

### **Encountering Social Construction**

**Ken:** Especially for the readers of this book, I think it would be useful to begin with a brief account of social constructionist deliberations. This will prepare the way for exploring connections with Buddhist traditions. There are many variants of the constructionist story but one that I have tried to articulate in previous writings (Gergen, 1994, 1999) involves a particular orientation to knowledge. This orientation assumes that all we take to exist, to be real, to be the subject of scientific or spiritual consciousness is constructed in relations with others. This contrasts with the more usual assumption that accounts of the world are reality driven. In this sense constructionism stands in striking contrast to several hundred years of Western thought that views knowledge as built up from the individual's observations and rational thought. On this traditional account, careful observation can inform the individual of "what there is," and one's thoughts about the world can be tested against reality. In this way we move progressively toward objective truth. For constructionists, however, whatever there is becomes meaningful to us primarily as a result of our relationships with others. Not only will different communities of scientists each have their own particular language of description and explanation, but so will various religions, professions, ethnic traditions, and so on. The constructions of the world will be tied closely to the shared values of these groups, whether it be in sending a rocket to the moon, spiritual illumination, relieving mental anguish, or making chicken soup. Any observational test of a proposition must rely on a set of communal agreements about what exists and how it is manifest. There are no foundations for such agreements. Thus, all empirical truth is communally based.

**Dian Marie:** Indeed there is considerable diversity within what we could broadly refer to as the dialogues on social construction. My own orientation emerged from my involvement in social psychology in general, social processes in particular, and a concern for what social psychology could offer to studies of organizational life. This meant exploring what is distinctive

about a social-psychological view of personhood, drawing upon approaches such as symbolic interactionism and phenomenology and exploring the 'how' of reality construction processes as ontology rather than knowledge.

**Ken:** Both of us have found that once you have entered the dialogues on constructionism, it is difficult to return to the traditional view of knowledge as a mirror of reality. We are indeed speaking of communally constructed ontologies. For me, the focus is on the ways in which realities and values are created within relationships. This focus has fostered two dramatic revelations. First, we recognize that *all claims to knowledge are culturally and historically situated*. In spite of the claims of many communities to universal and trans-historical Truth, there is no means of justifying such claims save through a community's limited premises. This recognition invites critique and humility - essential both to prevent totalitarian expansion and to soften the boundaries of separation and difference. The second important realization is that we are *free to create together* new realities and related ways of life. We need not be bound by any conception, tradition, or vaunted claim that degrades or destroys the processes by which meanings come into being. In effect, we have an enormous canvas available for painting new futures.

**Dian Marie:** I think it might be a good idea to sound a cautionary note at this point. As we both have seen, social constructionism can easily be misunderstood as some liberal, individualistic and naïve story that we are free to create anything we like, in other words 'anything goes'. Indeed, social constructionist lines of argument are often misunderstood because people relate to them on the basis of outworn assumptions. I have found that it can be useful to invite people to explore the potentials of social constructionism by assuming that they don't know what 'it' is. So, for example, the critique that 'anything goes' suggests that social constructionism has foolishly rejected 'external reality' as a real-world source of constraints. But, in my view, the social constructionist orientation "emphasizes the historical-cultural rather than the natural-scientific" (Hosking, 2005). This means a focus on processes of social construction and the ways these simultaneously resource and constrain action within whatever it is we are calling reality. Central to these processes of social construction is language –now viewed as a vehicle for reality construction rather than reality mapping.

**Ken:** It is true that language has played a central role in most constructionist scholarship to date. In part this is because much of what we take to be knowledge is constituted in language. We use lectures and assign books to “impart knowledge;” we view our libraries as repositories of knowledge, and the endpoint of most of scholarly and scientific research is contained in publications. At the same time, the unquestioned trust of western scholars and scientists in the capacity of language to mirror or map the world has left the knowledge making disciplines in a very vulnerable position. As philosophers (see for example, Quine, 1960 ), linguists (see for example, Saussure, 1983), and sociologists (see for example, Garfinkel, 1967), have shown, whatever relationship our words have to the world depends on highly malleable social conventions. The world does not dictate a particular account of its nature. Which is to say, the world makes no ultimate demands on what we take to be true. In this context, constructionists also draw heavily from Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations. In his account of the language game, Wittgenstein generates a replacement for the traditional mapping and mirror metaphors of language. Wittgenstein compellingly develops a view of language as a pragmatic medium through which we do things with each other. In effect, language becomes a relational medium.

It is largely for these reasons that many constructionist scholars focus on the way in which linguistic devices such as metaphor and narrative function in our constructions of reality. For example, many cognitive psychologists rely on the metaphor of the brain as a computer (see for example, Leary, 1990). Once a mechanistic metaphor like the computer is in place it will largely determine what we can say about the nature of thought (e.g. the “truth about the mind.”). Similarly, many constructionists focus on narrative constructions of reality (see for example, Sarbin, 1984, M. Gergen, 2001) . Narrative structure is essentially viewed as a property of language, and once we begin to describe the world in narrative or story form, it is the demands made by traditions of narration that will determine what we take to be true. Thus, for example, the constructionist will question the “truth of evolutionary theory,” or the capacity of historians to give a true account of history. Rather, they will be drawn to the uses made of these accounts in cultural life.

**Dian Marie:** Perhaps this is a good point to note that the constructionist view of language can be narrow or broad. Wittgenstein can again be helpful here – in his expansion from talk of “language games” to talking about “forms of life”. This in turn connects with the constructionist move that

treats language as a form of communicative action. In this sense, “language” can also be taken to include other formal systems such as music, mathematics and statistics (e.g., Iverson, 2003). In addition, non-verbal actions, and co-ordinations of bodies, things, and events may also be included as ways of ‘doing’ particular “forms of life” (see e.g., Hodge & Kress, 1988; Latour, 1987).

This broadening in the conception of language also sensitizes us to historical-cultural shifts in the ways cultures communicate. Particularly important in this regard is the shifting dominance of vision relative to audition and how this relates to constructions of nature, what it is to be a person, constructions of sacred and secular, knowledge, and so on (e.g., Berman, 1983, 1990). So, for example, in aural/oral cultures sound dominates and word and sound are strongly related. Language is a matter of vocalization - a here and now happening - a live event and the past is present in what people say and do i.e., in live action. In contrast, cultures of the alphabet and print communicate more by visual means. In so doing they give a more permanent sense of existence to words, freeze words in space and time, and make it possible to ‘look up’ the past. These cultural shifts increasingly link language with visual perception and with dead words and ideas. Thinking becomes a silent mind operation – stripped from its connection with communication in live action. So, whilst constructionism centers on language, it is clear that this can mean a lot more than just spoken and written forms of action.

### **Suspending Realities**

**Ken:** For me, it is this emphasis on the constructed world that forms an initial bridge to much Buddhist thought. I recall my initial excitement with Buddhist ideas when I encountered its deep suspicion of the taken for granted concepts through which we understood the realities of the world and self. The work of Suzuki (1973) and Watts (1957) was most inspirational to me, and in significant ways these ideas launched me toward a constructionist conception of psychology (Gergen, 1983). In fact, a 12th century koan of Tai-hui could serve as a constructionist centerpiece: “If you call this a stick, you affirm; if you call it not a stick, you negate. Beyond affirmation and negation what would you call it?”

**Dian Marie:** This suspicion of the conventional forms of understanding “the real” also furnishes one of the chief grounds for meditation practices. One might say that such practices help us to pay attention to our discursive

mind and the ways it gets tricked into believing in the representation of things. Studying Buddhist texts is said to be not so much a matter of 'acquiring new information' but more a matter of learning a view that helps us to attend to what we are doing (Jamgon Mipham 2000, p.14). In effect meditation practices help us to avoid being captured by the taken for granted, by thoughts, concepts and conditionality.

**Ken:** There is a parallel theme in social constructionism. For the constructionist there are two major moments in practical work, the first being *deconstructive* and the second *reconstructive*. It is the deconstructive turn that is most similar in its effects to meditation. That is, one comes to break the spell of language as a map or picture of the real, and to understand it as situated culturally and historically. One comes to see the possibility that one's understandings are not demanded by "what there is," but are means of constructing it for some human purpose. Such realization may often come by learning that there are multiple ways to construct the existing state of affairs, that one's characterizations of the real are dominated by traditional literary forms (e.g. narrative structure, metaphor), or that one's understanding of the real and the good are specific to a particular tradition. Most of these realizations are accomplished in language and not meditative action, but the immediate ends are similar. In a broad sense one might view the result as *liberation* in both cases.

Yet, for many constructionists the liberatory move is insufficient. In particular, for practitioners the primary goal is reconstructive. That is, they seek to locate or co-create alternative realities more serviceable within the life of the person in his or her relationships. Narrative therapy is a good example here (see for example, Angus and McLeod, 2004). As narrative therapists generally agree, the goal of therapy is to re-story. Rather than living in misery resulting from understanding one's life as failure, for example, is it possible to work with the client and others in his or her life, to comprehend this same life as one of heroic survival? As the constructionist would understand it, one cannot step out of history and culture. All intelligible actions are lodged within a history of relationship. If all intelligibilities were abandoned, there would be a void. And this would not be the void of "no mind," for even the meditative state of Buddhism is what it is by virtue of the Buddhist tradition of intelligibility.

**Dian Marie:** Yes, but for many Buddhists there is a strong sense that we should somehow suspend stories and live in the real world. As Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche observed, "The point of meditation is to have a genuine

experience...as close to reality as possible” (Jamgon Mipham 2000, p.59). And the “absolute truth” of reality cannot be expressed in words. Perhaps this is one reason why novice practitioners are constantly storied as being socked on the nose by their master or given an absurd answer when they try to discover the truth about the Buddha outside themselves and in language.

**Ken:** Let us put aside the issue of whether one can experience reality for what it is, and focus on the more profound implication that both Buddhism and social construction share: in using language we are unable to “tell the truth” about either Buddha or social construction! For constructionists it is consciousness of the constructed character of constructionism itself. Because our words are not maps of the world, but born out of communal convention, there is no final or accurate or foundational account of the process of construction. And here in lies the choice of our title for this dialogue, The Buddhist saying asks us to avoid externalizing, solidifying and deifying the Buddha by “killing him” at the moment we think we have met him. In the same way constructionists warn against any final fixing of constructionism itself. There is a certain humility here that I find an attractive alternative to the attempt of so many theorists (along with religious teachers) to treat their accounts as final truths. Speaking of deconstructing the taken for granted, I think it would be useful to now illustrate some of these ideas by turning to the status of the self in social construction and Buddhism.

### **The Self as Construction**

**Dian Marie:** To appreciate the Buddhist orientation to the Self, I think it would be useful to say something about the three major occasions on which the Buddha taught – usually referred to as the three turnings of the wheel of Dharma. In the first turning (The Hinayana teachings), the Buddha talked about the Four Noble Truths. The first truth is the truth of suffering which the Buddha said was part of the human condition. Second, is the truth of the origins of suffering – said to result from attempts to create and hold on to a solid and stable concept of Self, from seeing Self as a source of pleasure and from actions oriented towards making Self bigger, better and more special relative to others. Third is the truth of the cessation of suffering i.e., the possibility of giving up the struggle ‘to be me’. And fourth is the truth of The Path’. Broadly speaking, this involves learning to let go of ego (the fixed and solid sense of self) and ego-centered constructions of reality with the help of practices such as meditation.

**Ken:** This echoes our previous conversation about the suspicion of language and the ability to remove oneself, either through meditation in the Buddhist case or by deconstructing and reconstructing in the constructionist orientation. If we think of therapy, it seems that all these practices are similar in their outcome. Here I begin to think more eclectically. What are all the available means at our disposal for problem dissolving and for opening ourselves to new futures?

**Dian Marie:** Let me elaborate on this issue of “dissolving” a little further from a Buddhist perspective. I think it is helpful here to have a look at the conceptual framework or “View” that is both central to the earlier Hinayana teachings, but also to the later Mahayana refinements. The View provides an all-important context for the methods (the Path) by which the practitioner can experience “cessation” (the 4<sup>th</sup> Noble Truth). Many aspects of The View, particularly the Mahayana version, seem to resonate with social constructionism. Key amongst these is how Buddhism breaks down the seeming solidity of what is conventionally experienced as a very solid body (person) and a solid and stable Self. To understand this we have to know something about the Abhidharma - the basic conceptual framework of Tibetan Buddhism. The central concept is *dharma*. This is conceptualized as the smallest unit of experience of which humans are capable. The concept refers to a momentary appearance that ‘is what it is’ and has nothing ‘behind it.’ When consciousness, also storied as a dharma, connects with other dharmas the result is *an experience*. Dharmas are organized in a variety of different conceptual frameworks each of which helps our understanding of non-self. Most relevant to our present purposes is the framework of The Five Skandas.

The Five Skandas were introduced by the Buddha in response to people’s questions about his teachings on non-self (Jamgon Mipham Rinpoche, 1999, p.82). Apparently he received questions along the lines of ‘oh yeh, so what is this body and mind then, huh?’ (rather like the stone kicker or table thumper out to refute the supposed claims of constructionist relativists!). So the Buddha answered by speaking of the 5 Skandas as different types or aggregates of *momentary experiences* that together make up our experience of our (apparently solid) Self. The Skandas can be summarized as follows. (1) Form “... refers to those momentary events that we experience as physical” (Ray, 2000, p.373). It includes physical elements, sense organs and their corresponding sense objects. (2) Feeling refers to the more or less fleeting sensation of positive or negative affect or of indifference. (3) Perception refers to the categorization of something as

unfamiliar or as a member of some known conceptual category. (4) Karmic formations refers to all the extra discursive fragments and narratives that we attach to the experiences of the first three skandas. And finally (5) consciousness (*vijnana* in this context) involves relating to the first four skandas in terms of how they affect 'me.' The key point of all this is that it is possible to explain experience without resort to the assumption of a solid, stable Self. In following The Path, practitioners find that when they examine their experience they cannot find a solid, permanent Self or 'I'. The Fruition then is that they can give up their struggle to sustain that which doesn't exist! For the Hinayana practitioner who seeks individual liberation this is "cessation" i.e., the fruition or realization of the 4<sup>th</sup> Noble Truth.

**Ken:** Social constructionists would fully support the notion of a non-foundational self, and the significance of being able to suspend this particular construction. Yet, there are interesting differences to consider, as well. You point out that the basic unit of the skandas is the momentary experience, and that the experiencing agent ultimately finds that one may engage in experiences without resort to a conception of the Self. The constructionist would fully concur in the notion of an artificial, or let us say non-foundational, sense of the self. However, to bring up an earlier point, the question of experience remains to be illuminated. The danger for the constructionist is that the concept of experience will ultimately reinstate the individual as a primary source or ontological foundation of being. Most constructionists would wish to avoid this conclusion. Rather, we might view the very activity of experience as ultimately an outcome or expression of fundamental relatedness. Could constructionists and Buddhist converge, then, on an understanding of experience as in itself relational?

The second issue has to do with whether the liberation achieved by deconstructing the self is a sufficient end in itself. As we recognized, many constructionists are critical of the ideology of the self-contained individual, and for many of the same reasons that Buddhists find this conception problematic. However, there is a common understanding among constructionists that to abandon a tradition of understanding is also to suppress traditions of living, to silence voices. This would be to eradicate forms of relationship. Thus, the process of deconstruction is considered non-lethal. That is, while we are liberated from the presumptions of the individualist tradition, we may continue on a contingent basis to live within its forms of life. We may, for example, wish to sustain the traditions of democracy, public education, and trial by jury for the time being, because these are more comfortable than the alternatives currently available.

I think these remarks will be clarified if we take up the central issue of relatedness.

### **The Primacy of the Relational**

**Dian Marie:** Yes, both constructionism and Buddhism are invested in the periodic suspension or dissolving of the self. But in the same way that their approaches are lodged in different traditions so too are their approaches to relationship. I think the most important thing, however, is the resulting affinity. And, because these affinities are put in different terms both orientations stand to gain; we see new ways to understand and appreciate, and to expand our sensitivities.

**Ken:** We have found that for both constructionists and Buddhists the Self ceases to occupy the center stage of society. And in the constructionist case, it was proposed that all intelligibility, reason, standards of right and wrong, and the like, emerge from the process of relationship. In this sense, relationships are not the result of individuals coming together, but rather it is out of relationship that the very concept of the individual arises.

Or, to put it another way, the individual, rational agent is a social construction.

**Dian Marie:** The way constructionists place the idea of a bounded self in brackets is similar to the distinction in Buddhist writings between conventional mind and the mind of a meditator. Conventional mind is said to assume that the world is composed of individual, bounded, and relatively stable entities, each possessing its own defining characteristics. This goes together with a view of relationships as either *inter*-personal or *intra*-personal. A related development is the view of knowledge as “in the head” and communicated in words.

The term “*Subject-Object*” (S-O) has been used to speak of this (conventional mind) construction of relations. Briefly, the S-O construction makes a dualist opposition between the rational and responsible agent (Subject) and Other who is acted upon in causal fashion. The Subject is storied as active in building their own individual knowledge (as a private possession) useful for achieving their own goals in the world. At least one of these goals is to avoid letting others gain power over one’s actions (e.g. freedom), and by implication, to secure one’s autonomy by ensuring that others are not free to act upon one’s Self in any way they wish.

Relationships are reduced to largely instrumental means for enhancing one's own well-being. One asks, "what about me?" and "what can Other do for me or against me?" The centering of Self leaves little space for asking "what about you" or for the appreciation of Other in ways that are untainted by one's own Self-oriented interests and constructions. This S-O construction of relations seems very much connected with our earlier (and necessarily) brief discussion of language and with the emergence of individualism in cultures increasingly dominated by vision

**Ken:** I am glad you brought up the issue of instrumentalism. Whereas Hinayana Buddhism focuses on the shortcomings for the person when the self is "made real," constructionists and Mahayana Buddhism emphasize the societal repercussions when we construct ourselves as autonomous and self-contained individuals. Thus, to construct oneself as independent, generates a fundamental sense of distance between us; "care of self" becomes a primary goal in life; we begin to see a world of competition, of "all against all," in a Hobbesian sense. As Edward Sampson (19 ) has called it, the West is dominated by an ideology of self-contained individualism.

**Dian Marie:** As I see it both social constructionism and Buddhism offer a radical re-storying of "conventional mind" and its view of relations. In this re-storying, relational processes become the constantly moving 'construction site' in which Self, Other and relations are always in the making. The conventional view of stable and solid entities in S-O relations is replaced by a view of ongoing processes in which entities and relations are always becoming. For constructionists "thingness" and indeed no-thingness are a byproduct of language-based relational processes. Further, we could say that relational constructionism views Self and Other as a relational unity in ongoing construction in relational processes.

**Ken:** One of the ways I have tried to articulate this concept of relational unity takes as its metaphor the way meaning is created in language. Single words standing alone typically lack significance. The words, "tree," "river," or "grew" are virtually meaningless in themselves. They begin to come into meaning when they are supplemented by other words as in "the tree grew by the river." It is the same for our words and actions. Alone they are virtually meaningless. It is when others supplement them with other words and actions - affirmations, questions, elaborations, associations, and so on - that they begin to take shape as meaning this and not that. One may say that the voices in a conversation, like the moves of two tango dancers, are co-

constituting. In this sense we see that we have a world of fundamental relatedness from which all meaning is derived. This is a world of ultimate fusion, as opposed to separation.

**Dian Marie:** Yes, another way to put it is that the Self is no longer viewed as necessarily fixed in Subject-Object relation, independent of Other. Instead, we see that the sense of a fixed, solid and closed Self is an achievement that requires ongoing maintenance through the active (re)construction of closure from Other and Otherness. But now of course it is clear that experience could be otherwise. In other words, - and as Buddhism emphasizes - it is possible (and from certain points of view desirable) to construct relations in ways that are other than Subject-Object.

**Ken:** As I have tried to set this out in various lectures, we can view the person as the common intersection among a multiplicity of relations. That is, I carry with me residues of an enormous array of relationships. Every word I write, every action in which I engage, is issuing from this array of relations. It is not that I am produced or determined by these relations. One cannot separate out the participants from relationship, so there is nothing extraneous to me that has determined or caused my potentials in the moment. There is a quote in Herrigel's early book, Zen in the Art of Archery, that speaks to me in this case. The author has learned the art of archery from a Zen master. At the close of the book, the teacher says to him, " You have now reached a stage where teacher and pupil are no longer two persons, but one. You can separate from me at any time you wish. Even if the broad seas lie between us, I shall always be with you when you practice what you have learned." In effect, we are at this moment, cemented to all those with whom we have related in the past. And the moment we communicate we bring together worlds of relationship, creating yet a new form that will follow us into the future.

**Dian Marie:** I think this is the point to explore relations with another important framework in Buddhism, namely The Twelve Nidanas. Like the Five Skandas, it addresses issues that arise when the solidity and permanence of Self is questioned. But this framework provides a way of talking about what constructionists refer to as relational processes. So, rather than experiencing a separately existing Self, the practiced meditator will experience a stream of momentary and constantly changing dharmas (now viewed as Nidanas rather than Skandas). The particular contribution of this framework is that it provides a way of talking about relations between past,

present and future and what goes from lifetime to lifetime – given that there is no Self. In this aspect, it provides a way of storying ongoing processes as they construct seemingly solid ‘things’ - or not.

In the Hinayana tradition the Nidanas are links in a chain of “conditioned co-production”. But there is an important shift in the (later) Mahayana view of the Nidanas and their relations. This change comes in Nagarjuna’s reinterpretation of the Hinayana view of “conditioned co-production.” Nagarjuna critiqued the interpretation of the 12 Nidanas in the Abhidharma, asserting that it failed to appreciate their “critical relational dimension” (Ray, 2000, p.395, emphasis added). So the more highly developed relational interpretation emphasizes that every Nidana (indeed, every dharma) has existence and meaning in relation to the web of relationships in which it appears, viewed as a totality that could never be put into words. The re-interpretation of conditioned co-production emphasizes simultaneity and the mutual co-construction of interrelated dharmas. All dharmas now are viewed as empty of self-nature – not just the Self – but also Other.

**Ken:** It is this metaphor of the web of relations that I find most congenial with constructionism. As I pointed out earlier, from a constructionist perspective the person is never an independent being. Not even the body is independent of all else. Most importantly, the person is inherently the manifestation of an infinitely extended process of relationship. In this sense, in my constructionist orientation I am drawn to the early metaphor of Indra’s net, a net that stretches infinitely in all directions, and at every node we find a jewel that reflects the surface of all other jewels in the net. I also like one of Shunryo Suzuki’s (1973) contributions, to the effect, “When you become Zen... you have become one with our surroundings.” As I understand it this is the Tibetan view of *dependent origination* in which all things come into being only by virtue of other things, with no starting or ending point. I have also been quite taken with Thich Nhat Hanh’s (1999) articulation of *interbeing*, which essentially means that “everything is in everything else.” Constructionist ideas indeed grow richer through these insights. As I mentioned earlier most constructionist work centers on human relations alone. Buddhism invites an expansion of the notion of relation to include all that there is. Meaning emerges from the matrix of all, and “the all” cannot be captured by any particular assemblage of words to which it has given birth.

**Dian Marie:** We seem to have reached the domain of the unspeakable. Perhaps this is a good point to turn from words to various life practices

invited by social constructionism and Buddhism. Will you start by saying something about social constructionism, Ken, and then I will say something about meditation. And if we each continue to articulate these two voices then we can both finish by saying something of how each shifts to talk of society and the kind of societal practices that might break out of “self contained individualism and its ethics of individual freedom and success.

### **Life Practices**

**Ken:** One of the affinities between constructionist and Buddhist orientations that I especially appreciate is their mutual concern with everyday practices. For both orientations there is a substantial theoretical foundation. Each draws from a rich theoretical tradition, and in the Buddhist case the literature is enormous and the tradition longstanding. However, unlike most world views, neither is content to issue wisdom unattached to specific forms of action. Rather, both are ultimately concerned with how we live our lives from day to day. In constructionism this concern with action follows congenially from the theory itself. As we have discussed, for constructionists language does not function as a mirror or map of the world, but is itself *action within relationship*. The function of theory, then, is not to tell us how the world really is, so that we may know how to act. Rather, by engaging in theory we are already participating in a relationship of a certain kind. The question, then, becomes one of the limits and potentials of differing forms of relationship.

Very much like the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, for many constructionists there is profound concern with enhancing the human condition - from issues of local suffering to those of societal and even global concern. For constructionists there are certain domains in which there has been a flowering of practices. I have already mentioned some of the work taking place in the therapeutic community. However, there are also notable developments in organizational change practices, conflict reduction, education, mediation, and research methodology. I should point out that in most of these cases the emphasis is placed on collaboration among people as opposed to changes within the single individual.

**Dian Marie:** It is true that most practices in the Buddhist tradition are focused on the individual practitioner. However, as we saw in our discussion of ultimate relatedness, ‘the individual’ is not the ‘self-contained’ entity of western individualism. Furthermore, Mahayana Buddhism extends its

interests well beyond the individual practitioner. Let's return to this issue later. First I think we need to explore meditation and related practices a little further since they are key to letting go of the overly solid and permanent sense of Self ("ego") and Self-related constructions (the fourth "noble truth"). Strictly speaking, we should be speaking more generally of The Path – which includes meditation. Further, we must be careful not to entify "meditation" as some-thing; as the practitioner continues to practice the distinction between meditation and 'post meditation' becomes more and more blurred.

With these caveats in mind, and using the language of relational constructionism, we could say that meditation provides a practical methodology for dissolving the differentiation of self and other - by seeing both self and other as "empty" of independent existence. This implies that the ground of any and all "life practices" must come from the first hand experience of meditation and openness to Other, to relatedness, to multiplicity, simultaneity and ongoingness. In this context, meditation is not about learning to concentrate, not about connecting with some higher being or state, and not about trying to escape from some external world (Chogyam Trungpa, 1996, p.60). Rather, it is for example, "concerned with trying to see what is here and now," including becoming aware of and developing an up-close familiarity with the patterns we continually re-create and of which we are a part. Meditation is a process of: softening and dissolving of Self; becoming more and more open to Buddha nature (we could say, basic goodness), and; feeling a growing compassion for (and desire to do something about) the suffering of others.

**Ken:** But I think that a common view of meditation (held by non-Buddhists) is that it is about stopping thinking - about 'getting outside' of discursive mind so to speak.

**Dian Marie:** Yes. But, at least in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition with which I am familiar, the idea is not to suppress thought – but rather to see the mind as a mind stream of multiple and constantly changing moments of experience. The idea is not to try to change or to reject thoughts or to blame one's Self or other(s). Rather the idea is not to get involved - by applying concepts to label some thoughts as 'positive' and others as 'negative' – with the intention of grasping more of the former and rejecting the latter. "So... concepts are very good, like wonderful manure" (Chogyam Trungpa, 1996, p.22). "The whole point is to cultivate the acceptance of everything, so one should not discriminate or become involved in any kind of struggle"

(Chogyam Trungpa, 1996, p.78). The practitioner learns to observe, accept and respect; it is an appreciative orientation.

**Ken:** This emphasis so much resembles one of the pivotal ideas in constructionism. In that context we talk a lot about the power of affirmation or appreciation in constructing worlds together. It is that moment in which your words bring forth an affirming embrace by another that you sense exciting potential. As you are quite aware, one of the most widely used constructionist practices, developed by our Taos Institute associate, David Cooperrider and his associates, is called Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider and Whitney, 1999; Barrett and Fry, 2005). This practice is often used to create organizational change or reduce conflict in organizations. It begins by having people speak in pairs to each other, telling stories about times in the organization that have given them joy or life. These stories are shared with others, until the point that the larger group can begin to locate major themes. The group then inquires into the implications of these positive themes for building the future of the organization. Plans are then developed with future meetings established to discuss progress. The future of the organization thus represents not the vision of a select few at the top, but by the bulk of its participants. It is an enormously inspirational practice, and is now used around the world.

**Dian Marie:** Along these lines Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche described meditation in many ways, one of which was a “widening and expanding outward” (Chogyam Trungpa, 1996, p.63) and developing *openness*. As we noted earlier, this involves collapsing the self-other distinction. It includes learning ways of relating that could be called *not knowing*. Here I think we can see important connections with constructionism and with related “life practices” that try to avoid (re)constructing Subject-Object relations where e.g., the therapist or change-worker knows better than the client and attempts to achieve influence over the client (see e.g., Anderson, 1997; Hosking, 2005). So, for example, the Madhyamaka (part of the Mahayana) speaks of letting go of fixed reference points (Ray, 2000, p.417). And knowing that you don’t know (Ray, 2000, p.413-414) is linked with the experience of “emptiness” and with freedom from discursive thinking – which gives room for spontaneous compassion and creativity.

**Ken.** I want to focus for a moment on this subject of compassion. Many Buddhist writings speak about the ways in which meditation or mindfulness practice brings forth a sense of compassion for others. I have sometimes

heard people voice suspicion of this view as such practices seem almost exclusively to emphasize well-being of the self. Yet, when we put together the Mahayana view of conditioned co-production (inter-being or dependent origination) with what you say about “not knowing” it is easier to see how these practices are linked with compassion. It is through these practices that we realize the insufficiency of Self, and our profound connection with others.

This also reminds me of the focus of many constructionist practices in education and research. The term “compassion” would not be so appropriate, but the emphasis on ultimate connection is wonderfully congenial with Buddhism. For example, in education, there are significant movements toward “collaborative classrooms,” educational contexts where teachers facilitate students working together to achieve educational goals. In many cases students may even write essays or reports together, each contributing from their own resources and informed by the knowledge of others. In a similar manner, many researchers in the social sciences now turn from doing research *about* other people, to carrying out research *with* them. Many of the more recent developments in “participatory action research” are based on just such a premise (see Reason and Bradbury, 2006).

**Dian Marie:** This brings me to what perhaps should be a final point about meditation and the purpose of meditation practice. I think you are right in pointing to the frequent misunderstanding that these practices (and Buddhism more generally) are quite compatible with the assumptions of self-contained individualism. This turns meditation into an individual practice aimed at individual liberation – in the sense of freedom from suffering. But such a construction would fail to understand the significance of the Mahayana teachings and, as I said earlier, would be to construct meditation as a bounded ‘thing’ or set of techniques that one is either doing or not doing. As one progresses along the Path, the distinction between meditation and post-meditation becomes more and more blurred. Furthermore, the ‘techniques’ are but scaffolding – just temporary structures that at some point become unnecessary. As someone remarked somewhere, Tibetan Buddhism offers a very “earthy spirituality” which, whilst collapsing Self-Other dualism, also collapses the sacred and the secular or mundane. Now everything is sacred: the words we use, the ways we dress and occupy space, our home, the natural world... everything is alive, we are part of the living world, and we are responsible. This means that Buddhism is not so much an individual life practice as a matter of “developing an enlightened society”.

**Ken:** I like this expanded view very much. One of the companion concepts in social construction is that of *relational responsibility* (McNamee and Gergen, 1998). The idea here is to set aside our traditional tendency to view the world as made up of self-contained agents of responsibility. This is a world in which we blame individuals for evil acts, and make heroes of those who champion our values. However, if each of us is altogether related with others, this tradition is severely limited. Rather, we should think in terms of our collective responsibility to the process of relationship itself. For, it is to the relational process that we owe any sense of the good.

**Dian Marie:** The Mahayana path in Buddhism especially emphasizes liberating all sentient beings through a commitment to put others before oneself, to becoming more open and responsive to the wider world, to the liberation of all sentient beings - without expecting anything in return. And it is a commitment grounded in knowing that one *doesn't know* – doesn't know what to think – and cannot know what others might need. The experience of *emptiness* disables conceptual or discursive activity and provides the basis for being-in-the-moment (nowness), open to what the situation might call for and open to Buddha nature and compassion. According to the Mahayana, it is “ineffable reality, the very nature of emptiness that...alone provides a sound basis for ethical conduct” (Ray, 2000 p.413). And “ethical conduct” is key to producing a better society. “Like any other ideas, like science, economics and politics, Madhyamaka philosophy<sup>1</sup> is trying to create a better society, very simply speaking. In fact, if possible, the Madhyamaka aims to create an enlightened society” (Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, 1996, ch6, pp.70-71).

**Ken:** Of course, we may well want to press forward past society to thinking globally. Isn't the implication of both Buddhism and social constructionism that global harmony and well-being is the ultimate goal? But perhaps what is called for at this juncture is a deep breath of humility.

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