

Metabletics In the Light of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism

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Metabletics and Indo-Tibetan Buddhism are quasi-phenomenological traditions which examine psychological life in diametrically opposed ways. Metabletics examines historical-cultural phenomena, placing its focus on the world, while Buddhism examines the mind and its workings, placing its focus inward. Although both traditions conclude that there is ultimately no separation between inner and outer, their different motivations and methods reveal varying understandings of the nature of reality. This article begins with an examination of how each approach would account for a handprint embedded in stone in a cave wall in Nepal; this image provides an avenue for articulating the underlying philosophies of each. Then methodological differences are explored, whereupon I argue that Indo-Tibetan Buddhism reveals an ontological self within which the psychological self of metabletics can be situated. Conversely, this psychological self provides a realm of imagination for which Buddhism cannot account. Together, metabletics and Indo-Tibetan Buddhism provide complementary emphases on the immanent and transcendent aspects of reality and the psychological and spiritual aspects of humanity.

Outside the town of Pharping, Nepal, a cave wall famously bears the impression of a human handprint in stone. It is said that the hand belonged to the Indian Buddhist saint, Padmasambhava, who lived in the eighth-century.¹ Having been summoned to Tibet to help establish Buddhism, he had stopped in this cave to meditate. Upon realizing the emptiness of all phenomenal display, he pressed his flesh into stone in defiance of conventional reality. Understandably, this cave is a significant pilgrimage site for Buddhists, and one that I myself ventured from Kathmandu one afternoon to see. Given that the skeptic in me assumed the alleged handprint would be unconvincing, I was quite astonished by the detail with which the impression in the rock actually did resemble a human hand. The artifact in question is pictured in Figure 1.

While it is tempting to assume that there is a rational explanation for this phenomenon—where “rational” in this context means preserving our ordinary understanding of reality—let us, in line with the phenomenological tradition, bracket this assumption. In this paper I examine two different philosophical-phenomenological systems and consider how they would accommodate and account for the possibility that Padmasambhava actually *did* press his hand into the stone. The first is, naturally, Tibetan Buddhism, grounded in Mahayana philosophy and practice, while the second is Dutch psychiatrist J. H. van den Berg’s phenomenological metabletics. Although



Figure 1. Padmasambhava's handprint in stone

both traditions are phenomenological in character, they originated roughly 2500 years apart on opposite sides of the globe. The motivations from which they arose were dramatically different, and their methodological foci are as opposed as their physical positions in the world. Nevertheless, in spite of these differences, there is remarkable convergence and complementarity in the ways in which they understand the nature of reality and humanity. In this article, I use the philosophical and practical system of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism as a means of shedding light on metabletics through comparison and contrast.²

The use of the image of Padmasambhava's handprint is deliberately provocative, and serves to begin the discussion grounded in a concrete (or at least stone) image. First, I will briefly examine the central tenets of metabletics and Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, explaining how each would account for the phenomenon of this handprint. With this foundation laid, I will tease out critical points of difference and similarity in order to situate each vis-à-vis the other with hope of promoting a more integrative understanding of the nature of humanity, world, and reality.

The Metabletic View

J. H. van den Berg's historical psychology, named metabletics—literally, *theory of changes*—posits that cultural changes reflect changes inherent in the nature of human beings (Van den Berg, 1961). In this perspective, the nature of reality is not fixed, but rather is variously revealed and concealed, in contradistinction to more standard teleological systems. In particular, the metabletic stance is at odds with transpersonal developmental theories that suggest human beings are evolving into ever higher levels of structural integration; rather, the quest for progress—itself a linear, rational enterprise—obscures more poetic and felt dimensions of human existence that are to be revealed rather than accomplished.

As a phenomenology, metabletics rejects the Husserlian transcendental ego with its attendant idealism by casting its gaze not on consciousness itself, but rather on the *world* of which we are conscious (Kruger, 1985; Van den Berg, 1971). This gaze is best accommodated by a Heideggerian conception of human being as Being-in-the-World, locating reality in the co-constitutive relationship between humanity and world. Examining cultural-historical phenomena with this view brought Van den Berg (1961) to a new paradigm for historical study, which he announced in the preface of his first work, *Metabletica* (translated as, *The Changing Nature of Man*):

The whole science of psychology is based on the assumption that man does not change...This book stems from the idea that man *does* change...the supposition that man does change leads to the thought that earlier generations lived a different sort of life, and that they were *essentially* different. (original emphasis, pp. 7-8)

As Van den Berg goes on to suggest, the changing nature of humanity as well implies the changing nature of material reality, organic *and* inert. If reality is a relationship between humanity and world, then a change in one implies a change in the other.

Van den Berg prolifically studied the psychological life of human beings throughout various historical ages. He supported these studies by noticing the timely appearance or disappearance of key cultural phenomena. For example, in suggesting that the splitting of the atom “raises the question of whether matter itself has not played a role in achieving this end” (p. 286), Van den Berg (1971) argues that celestial explosions bearing similarity to those of

an atomic bomb are not evidenced in any literature prior to the splitting of the atom. The implication is that such explosions were not described because they didn't exist; prior to humanity's splitting of the atom, the fundamental nature of matter was non-atomic. Accordingly, Van den Berg asserts that it is methodologically inappropriate to import our own modern scientific viewpoint into the examination of phenomena from previous ages. Instead, we must suspend our habitual frameworks and imagine earlier times on their own terms, opening in sensitivity to their lived meanings.

Robert Romanyshyn, whose own work extends that of Van den Berg's, views the metabletic approach as a form of dream analysis in which history itself is the dream (Romanyshyn, 1985, 1989). In this view, psychological reality is a metaphorical reality, and metabletics is recast as *metaphorics*. Because reality is inseparable from how humanity imagines or envisions it, psychological life is made visible in specific, concrete historical manifestations. Harvey's discovery that the heart is a pump required that he first *imagine* it as a pump—otherwise he could not have found a pump upon cutting into the human body. However, lest we in this instance grant our imagination a transcendental egoic function, Romanyshyn (2001) clarifies:

This way of seeing and speaking in relation to which the pumping heart appears does not create reality...the Harveian heart is no more a thought in the mind than it is a thing in the world. It is not there before Harvey and his age envision it, it is nevertheless there when one looks and speaks in a specific way. (p. 164)

No position is granted literality here. The heart-as-pump is neither a product of thought nor discovery; rather, it arises due to the irreducibly coordinated activity of mind and matter. In a similar vein, in comparing two paintings of Florence from different eras Romanyshyn observes: "The Florence of 1359 and that of 1480 are *different* cities...and yet, it is the *same* city" (Romanyshyn, 1985, p. 100). Thus we have what Romanyshyn terms a *paradoxical picture of reality* in which "a thing is both what it is and not what it is" (p. 100). This statement recalls the famous Zen Buddhist maxim that undercuts both dualism and monism: "not two, and not one" (Suzuki, 1970, p. 25).

Now let us return to the image of Padmasambhava's handprint to consider how metabletics might explain this phenomenon. As an expression of a cultural-historical reality, Padmasambhava's pressing his hand into stone

can be viewed as a unique incident that signals a change in the relationship between humanity and materiality. Something has shifted in the way that Padmasambhava *imagines* the stone, and this stone has transformed into something that is receptive to such imaginings. In a different context, yet imbued with surprising applicability, Romanyshyn (1989) states:

Architecture is a visible expression of how a specific cultural-historical age shapes its space and draws its boundaries between the inside and the outside. Church architecture in particular reveals how an age carves in stone its boundaries of the sacred and the profane. (Romanyshyn, 1989, p. 32)

As a nomadic yogi, Padmasambhava's cave *was* his church, and in the pressing of his hand in stone, he drew the boundary between the inside and the outside in such a way as to underscore the inseparability between them, between self and other, and between the sacred and the profane. Nevertheless, there is something quite remarkable about this particular metabletic shift that seems qualitatively different than those typically described by Van den Berg.

If we accept the idea that the relationship between Padmasambhava and his world was a dream made incarnate in the world, manifested in perpetuity as the handprint in stone, how do we explain that this shift remained the province of one individual and did not become a shared cultural dream? In this sense, it is as though Padmasambhava enjoyed his own private reality. According to Van den Berg, metabletic shifts begin with a unique event, and when such events become the norm, they lose their significance. In this case, it is because this event did *not* become the norm that it retained its significance such that the handprint continues to draw pilgrims. However, if the stone in this new reality is malleable to Padmasambhava's touch, how is it that we don't find impressions of his body all over the cave? How is he able to walk without leaving a trace? Perhaps the handprint evidences a reality that enabled him to control when he pressed his flesh into stone and when he did not. Perhaps he had realized, as an "activity of making the reality of the world real" (Romanyshyn, 1985, p. 88), a state of consciousness that recognized and could consciously exploit the non-literality of reality itself. That is, Padmasambhava hadn't simply recognized a new *ontical* reality—he had realized an *ontological* reality. In fully realizing the metaphoric nature of reality, he gained access to a meta-level with regard

to metabletic understanding. Is that how we can account for the fact that Padmasambhava's handprint-in-stone appears within a larger inter-subjective reality? To gain deeper insight into this provocative situation, let us now examine the Indo-Tibetan view.

The Indo-Tibetan Buddhist View

Whereas Van den Berg rejected examination of consciousness itself in favor of gazing upon the world, Prince Siddhartha, the man who would become Buddha (meaning, literally *awakened one*), abandoned the everyday world and turned his gaze inward. Upon learning that old age, sickness, and death await everyone, he left his kingdom, its exquisite palaces and pleasures, and his wife and son, choosing to wander through India engaging in austerities and meditation practices. His goal was to eliminate suffering, and his method was to find its source within his own consciousness. Van den Berg focused on *noema*; Siddhartha focused on *noesis*. Both discovered that the two are so integrally connected as to be inseparable. However, they diverged significantly in the ways they understood and expressed this reality, and in how they carried their insights forward.

Despite beginning his investigations with the mind, Siddhartha, like Van den Berg, ultimately rejected the notion of a transcendental ego. In fact, he found ego, or self, to be an altogether empty concept, an achievement won through training his mind. In gaining steady, concentrative focus, Siddhartha slowed his mind down and penetrated the ordinary veil of overlapping patterns of thoughts and feelings. In opening with mindfulness to the vast array of interconnected phenomenal experiences—including physical sensations and impressions in addition to thoughts and feelings—he came to deep insight into the true nature of the mind and of the world. He discovered that the self is nothing more than a constellation of compounded aggregates, known as the *five skandhas*, which include physical forms, feelings, perceptions, concepts, mental formations, and the experience of consciousness itself. Meditation master Chögyam Trungpa (1973) explains: “This sense of self is actually a transitory, discontinuous event, which in our confusion seems to be quite solid and continuous. Since we take our confused view as being real, we struggle to maintain and enhance this solid self” (p. 8).

According to the Indo-Tibetan tradition, the insight into *no-self* forms the basis for the first of three rounds of teachings, or *turnings of the wheel of dharma*. The first turning comprises the *four noble truths*, which are

presented in terms of how things appear to ordinary beings, whereas the other two turnings (which comprise the Mahayana, or “Great Vehicle”) are presented from the perspective of the way things actually are (Karr, 2007). The second-turning teachings emphasize the principle of *shunyata*, meaning that *all* phenomena are empty of independent selfhood. To realize shunyata is to cut at the root of one’s own ignorance and suffering, and to awaken one’s heart in compassion for the suffering of others whose own ignorance endures. Thus, in this view, the goal of eliminating one’s own suffering transmutes into the goal of seeking enlightenment for the sake of liberating others.³ In turning one’s focus away from the self and toward others, the practitioner thereby eliminates self-importance and ego-clinging, making possible a fuller enlightenment than can be achieved through the realization of no-self alone.

It is important to understand that *shunyata*, or the emptiness of all phenomena, does not imply a nihilistic stance—an error of interpretation that long plagued Buddhism’s initial foray into the West. Rather, emptiness cuts through both *nihilism* (the doctrine that nothing exists) and *eternalism* (the doctrine that things exist in an intrinsically real way). In the Buddhist view, phenomena arise and exist as the manifest display of a whole host of causes and conditions in a process called *interdependent origination*. This principle accounts for the manifestation of an individual’s world and that of inter-subjective reality as well. As the Dalai Lama (2005) explains:

The world, according to the philosophy of emptiness, is constituted by a web of dependently originating and interconnected realities, within which dependently originating causes give rise to dependently originated consequences according to dependently originating laws of causality. (p. 68-69)

The world of which the Dalai Lama speaks is the *prima materia* from which our sense of self is drawn, a stance compatible with the notion of Being-in-the-World. That the world as it appears is contingent upon an infinite set of factors and relationships—and that the laws of causality that govern them are likewise dependently arising—offers an account for the discontinuous shifts in manifest reality in Van den Berg’s vision. The Tibetan Dzogchen tradition refers to the phenomenal world as being like a dream, placing it in accord as well with the metaphoric reality described by Romanyshyn.

The principle of interdependent arising is theoretically grounded in Nagarjuna's principle of the two truths (Chandrakirti, 2002). *Relative truth* refers to the matrix of interdependent phenomena engaged in cause-and-effect relationships, while *absolute truth* is the inherent emptiness of all phenomenal reality. This emptiness, again, means that nothing that appears has an independent, intrinsic selfhood. From the relative perspective, these two truths are mutually interdependent, and from the perspective of absolute truth, they are identical. Thus, rather than dismissing relative reality, Mahayana Buddhism gives it an equiprimordial status with absolute reality. The Dalai Lama (2005) explains that "to reject distinct identity, causation, and origination within the everyday world, as some interpreters of the philosophy of emptiness [have] suggested, simply because these notions are untenable from the perspective of ultimate reality, constitutes a methodological error" (p. 67-68). Within relative reality, we *do* have an ego, and that is what permits social interaction. Thus, Buddhism freely uses terms such as self, inner, outer, projection, and so forth as descriptive of the relative realm, while remaining cognizant of their empty status.

While the second-turning teachings deconstruct all conceptual formulations of reality, the third-turning teachings return to the world of appearances to characterize what actually *is* there. Although all constructed or conditioned phenomena are empty of intrinsic existence, in the Madhyamaka Shentong teachings, emptiness is understood to have its own essence, named the *tathagata-gharba*, or Buddha-nature (Maitraya, 2000). This Buddha-nature is the primordial wisdom from which we see the *suchness* of the world, the world in its fundamental richness and purity. In terms of Western phenomenology, this world is synonymous with the *Lebenswelt* (Husserl, 1954/1970), the pre-reflective lifeworld that we ordinarily distort by overlaying a conceptual framework upon it. The Buddhist analysis and practices, however, are oriented toward recovering this view in a permanent way while retaining the ability to function within the lawful, causal framework imposed by relative reality.

Regarding the handprint in Nepal, from the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist view, Padmasambhava had so fully realized emptiness that he was no longer bound by conventional reality. In fully realizing, beyond the level of intellect, that nothing exists in a solid way, including his own ego, he was liberated into the vast expanse of natural mind beyond the distinction between self and world, between hand and stone, and in which all appears in its suchness, radiant and pure. Despite his newfound powers, Padmasambhava continued

to function within relative reality so that he could pursue the benefit of others who remained bound in ignorance.

Metabletics and Indo-Tibetan Buddhism in Comparison

Both systems of thought accept the primacy of perception and articulate a vision of reality that is nondual in character. They also delineate two modes of perception, one that is authentic, and another that conforms to a conventional understanding of reality. However, they differ considerably in their understanding of these modes of perception, and in their means of approaching their investigation. In this section, I examine their methodological similarities and differences with an eye toward establishing whatever rapprochement is possible between them.

Methodological Differences

Although each is phenomenological in basic character, neither metabletics nor Buddhism is a pure phenomenology. Van den Berg (1971) denied that metabletics is a phenomenology in order to distance it from the Cartesian and idealistic elements of the Husserlian transcendental ego. He observed: “The phenomenologist has—as officially stated in his method—bracketed the question as to whether the phenomena handled by him with such utmost care are real or not” (p. 283). For Van den Berg, the question of reality is the central question, and he does not wish to deny reality to the phenomena that arise in his immediate experience. Nevertheless, his approach is to return to the things themselves in a way that Husserl had intended to accomplish, and in recognition of the debt owed to Husserl’s approach, Van den Berg called his method “phenomenological metabletics.”

Buddhism also returns to the things themselves, but it does so with the intention of eliminating the suffering that arises in ordinary living. As such, it places emphasis on the ways in which we tend to distort our immediate perception. These distortions are uncovered and investigated through meditative discipline conjoined with rational analysis of the nature of mind so as to establish an understanding of the ultimate nature of reality. Its use of critical inquiry gives Buddhism a rational character distinctly different than Western phenomenology. In this vein, it also stands in sharp contrast to metabletics, which places complete confidence in appearances and holds with suspicion the notion of a reality more fundamental than that which is revealed through our senses.

Of course, the objects of their inquiry are very different. Metabletics studies cultural-historical phenomena with no reference to the mind. As Jacobs (1985) describes: “It is the *contents* of the togetherness of man and world which metabletics seeks to explore, with the result that light is cast on the meaning of our own existence, here and now” (p. 63-64). Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, by contrast, focuses on the contents of the *mind*, not the world, and in doing so, it is not interested in the *meaning* of our existence here and now; rather, it is interested in the nature of mental *process*. In focusing on and dwelling with meaning, metabletics recovers that which has been lost by the conventional attitudes that shape our habitual ways of being and cover over more felt sensibilities; by focusing on the processes of the mind, Buddhism starts with that which provides the cover, exposing its insubstantial nature that we might see what lies beneath. Whereas metabletics offers a cultural therapeutics that recovers metaphorical reality from the tyranny of linear and scientific modes of revealing (Romanyshyn, 1985), Buddhism offers a spiritual therapeutics that recovers the individual from the tyranny of *all* forms of abstraction and conception. Let us examine this difference more carefully.

Romanyshyn (2001) writes of Galileo’s admiration of Copernicus’s ability to “rape the senses” in order to conjecture that the world revolves around the sun (p. 23). He observes that, in disregarding the appearance of things for an idea, Copernicus promotes a psychological abandonment of the human body, thereby precipitating the dehumanizing modern technological age.⁴ At first blush, we might think that Buddhism is guilty of a similar “rape of the senses” for suggesting that there exists a genuine reality different from that which appears before us. If we mistake a piece of coiled rope for a snake, Buddhism argues, we *are* distorting reality, and we suffer accordingly. In the moment we see the rope as a snake, it is *not* a snake—it is in actuality a rope. We are mistaken, and it is desirable to eliminate such perceptual errors.

Consider, by contrast, the following similar scenario posed by Romanyshyn (2001). While driving his car one evening, he sees on the road before him a dark and sinister shape which later appears as a twisted tree trunk that has fallen. He nevertheless insists: “At the moment when I saw the dark and sinister shape, I was not seeing an illusion” (p. 156). For Romanyshyn, as with metabletics, the perception *is* real, and to suggest otherwise is to enter into an abstract realm that is removed from our sensory reality, thereby raping the senses. From this viewpoint, if we see what later appears as a rope to be a snake, it *is*, in that instant, a snake.

Whereas the phenomenological attitude embraced in the metabletic stance is one of dwelling with phenomena to reveal their deeper meanings, Buddhism dwells with them in order to reveal their inherent structure. Toward this end, the Buddhist gaze is directed toward the subtler levels of our conscious experience to which we do not ordinarily attend, a process that not only does not rape the senses, but gives them extraordinary care and attention while situating them within the largest context possible. Our own mind, which is an integral part of this context, is regarded in Tibetan Buddhism as a sensory organ in its own right, accepting as its objects thoughts and emotions. If we train our minds sufficiently, we learn at a perceptual level to see phenomena in their fullness, which includes their interconnectedness to all other phenomena in existence. From that perspective, it is not an act of rape to see a phenomenal appearance as an illusion, provided the illusion consists of seeing the phenomenon as separate from the overall context within which it appears.

Different Tools for Different Worlds

Although Van den Berg recognizes that the nature of human beings changes across historical time, the methods of metabletics cannot account for changes over smaller periods, particularly those occurring moment-to-moment. Were we able to slow the speed of our minds sufficiently, as do meditation masters, we could recognize change at subtler and subtler levels, and at those levels we would see there is nothing solidly existing to be identified. This process of slowing the speed of one's own mind in order to look more deeply is in some ways analogous to examining the workings of the mind with a microscope. The question becomes, what is the impact of introducing such a technology?

In *Things* (1970), Van den Berg discusses using a microscope to examine one's own blood only to discover malarial parasites. He distinguishes between two structures, the first being lived experience and the second being the structure that we see peering through the microscope. If we take quinine to treat the malaria, we might get better in the first structure (lived reality), and doing so surely would coincide with the reduction or absence of malaria parasites in the second structure (amplified observation). Of this circumstance, Van den Berg argues:

If, however, I regard this recovery in the second structure as the recovery of my illness, I am wrong. For *I* was ill, and only *I* can say of

myself or my body that it becomes healthy. This reality of illness or health is something which escapes the microscope. For I cannot say that the observed slide is diseased or that it is healthy. By way of a neutral structure, which is neither healthy nor ill, I pass from illness to health. The relationship between these two structures is obvious, but also obvious is their difference. Between the two structures stands the magnifying glass—and everything connected with it. This takes the object out of its dimensions and takes away its meaning. (original emphasis, p. 14)

The applicability of this example to meditation is striking, for in its non-contemplative forms—such as shamatha, vipassana, or Dzogchen—meditation does indeed take away the usual meanings of our phenomenal experience. They do this by focusing not on the content of the experience, but on its form, its structure, its dynamic unfolding within the totality of interconnected phenomenal display. Insofar as Western phenomenology intends to uncover the structures of consciousness through meaning, Buddhism reveals them through direct empirical observation of consciousness itself. And, just as the microscope that finds malarial parasites leads to a cure, meditation provides insight that leads to healing.

At this point one might think that meditation, like the physical microscope, introduces a second order reality. However, consider the nature of the technologies used. The physical microscope intervenes to produce an image of a world that is wholly unlike that which would otherwise be available to our direct experience. It makes that aspect of our body *present-at-hand* in a way that it can never be experienced *ready-to-hand*.⁵ In the case of meditation, the tool used is our own mind, the same instrument through which our immediate experience is revealed to us. When we peer through *this* “microscope,” we do not lose our immediate experience—rather, we extend its range. By bracketing the meanings that we ordinarily attach to our phenomenal experience, we recover not the lifeworld as reflected in our lived meanings, but the deeper structures of our conscious experience. In doing so, we learn to see through the delusions that arise when we conflate direct perceptions with concepts, enabling us to be more fully present to the lifeworld outside of our meditative experience. The meanings inherent in phenomenal appearance are not lost, but rather are contextualized in a richer way.

Further, the physical microscope narrows the range of what can be seen, isolating that which is observed from its larger context in a way that meditation does not. In effect, the meditator peers through a microscope *and* a telescope at the same time: the technique known as *shamatha* cultivates concentrative focus, while *vipassana* orients us to the inherent spaciousness of our natural mind. The two processes are used in a coordinated manner in order to open the expanse of our awareness while simultaneously endowing us with attentive focus on the fine details of any particular phenomenon that arises. Phenomena are thus investigated in a way that not only preserves their larger context, but *recovers* them from an everyday mind made narrow by obsessive thinking. Heidegger's (1927/1962) "idle talk" (p. 211) lived as an internal dialogue. Buddhism doesn't merely recover the lifeworld from the tyranny of a mathematical, scientific reality; it goes farther to recover the lifeworld from the tyranny of our own grasping. In this view, it is this state of mind that is the most fundamental root cause of modern technology run amok.

Psychopathology and Health

In *A Different Existence* (1972), Van den Berg critiques the psychoanalytic viewpoint that patients' illnesses arise when their own opinions about their experiences do not conform to the facts of reality. To the patients, this subjective reality *is* real, and the best therapeutic approach is not to show them their errors or try to change their beliefs; rather, it is to take their world seriously, to avoid imposing conceptual theory on them, and to help them change their meanings.

For Van den Berg, the central meaning to psychopathology is loneliness. Rather than regarding a hallucination as a perception with no object, as would conventional psychoanalysis, Van den Berg asserts hallucinations *do* have objects, and that these objects are for the patient alone, in the "world of his own that is founded in isolation" (p. 107). On the question of whether these objects *exist*, Van den Berg points to the ambiguity of the question—it straddles the existence of two different worlds. The objects are most real for the patient, even as they are not to the healthy person. The same is true for delusions, which similarly isolate the individual in his or her own world. When we take into view the totality of the entire system, then the reality of the hallucination or delusion is a question of perspective, and as such, this view is in alignment with the Buddhist principle of *shunyata* or emptiness.

In fact, Van den Berg provides his own eloquent version of the principle of interdependent origination when he states:

With alienation, isolation, loneliness...we can summarize the fact that all these mental states never stand by themselves and are never abstractions, but they ceaselessly reveal themselves in the reality of the surrounding world, in the reality of the objects, in the reality of personal relationships and in the reality of body and of time. Everything is mutually dependent and nothing comes first. No matter at what corner we start first...we always lift the whole carpet...Even if we think we are adhering to our own particular theme—the description invariably results in the description of the whole—everything is connected with everything else. (pp. 109-110)

While Indo-Tibetan Buddhism would agree with Van den Berg's characterization of psychopathology and of hallucination, it would go further in applying a similar view to psychologically healthy individuals. Whereas what distinguishes neurosis or psychosis from the healthy individual is loneliness or isolation, what separates the healthy individual from the fully realized one is the belief in a solidly existing and permanent self. In this view, any sensation or thought that is contaminated with the notion of selfhood is a hallucination or delusion, accepting as an object something that is not inherently existing. That is, the self only exists relative to other selves and a host of other causes and conditions. In essence, the Buddhist view does not reject the psychoanalytic pretext that the patients' illnesses arise when their own opinions about their experiences do not conform to the facts of reality; however, it does understand that illusion in a very different way, placing focus not on ontical considerations, but rather the ontological status of self.

An Integrative Vision

In developing a phenomenology of the historical world, metabletics draws the curtain away from the objectified *empirical self* of natural science and everydayness. In this process, metabletics reveals and recovers a *psychological self* which is the province of metaphor, poetry, and dreams, and which is imagined as a figure in a story.⁶ With its focus on the mind and on the nature of self, Indo-Tibetan Buddhism similarly draws the curtain away from the empirical self, but in this instance reveals and describes an

ontological self that is not separated from the entirety of phenomenal display, and is empty of independent or intrinsic existence. The ontological self is the fundamental ground of Being out of which the empirical and psychological selves manifest. Whereas metabletics hints at the ontological self, it is not equipped by its methods and goals to describe it; likewise, Buddhism works to recover the ground for the psychological self, but lacks the methods for engaging it by activating the imagination, revealing lived meanings, and undertaking the work of soul-making.

This framework of three selves—empirical, psychological, and ontological—positions the Buddhist view as ontologically prior to that of metabletics. Let us consider this the other way around. In *Technology as Symptom and Dream*, Romanyshyn (1989) refers to “the Buddhist denial of substance” as, itself, a “cultural dream” (p. 190). Is the principle of *shunyata* merely a cultural-historical dream, or does it describe the actual nature of reality across all cultural-historical instantiations? If we adopt the metabletic stance that a reality as experienced by an individual be accepted on its own terms, then we must grant that for some people enlightenment is an actual phenomenon. If this is the case, then a Buddha such as Siddhartha or Padmasambhava *can* transcend cultural-historical ways of seeing. Perhaps the cultural-historical dream of Buddhism is one from which it is possible to awaken, or, from the Mahayana point of view, dream in a lucid way. This does not logically invalidate the notion that emptiness is a cultural-historical dream—but it suggests that within such a dream there are possibilities that lie beyond the dream itself. Perhaps now more light is shed on the handprint in stone.

We can similarly investigate metabletics as its own cultural-historical dream, performing a veritable metabletics of metabletics. Van den Berg (1971) implies this possibility when he states:

Edmund Husserl...started by pulling down the untenable wall between subject and object...[however] he has more or less restored the wall to its original state. What he wanted to achieve was apparently at his time not yet possible. (p. 283)

Does this imply that before the time of metabletics subject and object were separate? *Were* human beings at one time constant and immutable, in line with the understanding of modern psychology? If so, what could have caused the state of constancy and immutability to have changed? If not, how do we know when a set of cultural beliefs reflects a different reality and when

it does not? Metabletics distinguishes between the psychological reality that is genuine and the empirical reality that is not, but it is unable to bring them into rapprochement in the way that Buddhism does with its complex understanding of the two truths. From a Buddhist viewpoint, it is precisely because the entire humanity-world complex is empty that it *can* change, and therefore the principle of emptiness is the one indestructible truth. From that principle, we can understand the arising of both the empirical and the psychological realities, which themselves are ultimately bound together in the manner of interdependent arising.

What is most important and valuable in metabletics is the recovery of a psychological life that is in line with psychology in its original sense as revelatory of soul. It provides access to dimensions of experience which tend to be leveled down by the natural attitude and modern technology. As such, the metabletic method is wary of logical analyses, which are second order phenomena in comparison to immediate lived experience. Meanwhile, Buddhism recognizes the limitations of logic as operating strictly in the relative realm, yet appreciates how its proper use can ironically direct us toward an immediate experience that is freed of all conceptual contamination. The metabletician is like the filmgoer who suspends disbelief and resists distraction in order to experience the movie with all of its visceral impact, while the Buddhist is in the projection room marveling at the projector and the manner in which it makes the movie seem real. The two systems take interest in different aspects of human experience: one values meaning while the other values wisdom; one revels in passion, the other in compassion; one views personal proclivities as a matter of choice, the other as a matter of karma.⁷ And, of course, all of these dichotomies are, in metabletic parlance, not to be taken literally, and in Buddhist terminology, empty.

Conclusion

Whereas metabletics directs its phenomenological inquiry at the history of mankind, Buddhism presents a phenomenology of the mind gained through contemplation and meditation. Metabletics asserts that, owing to the co-constitutive relationship between the human being and the world, the basic nature of each is mutable across time. Although Indo-Tibetan Buddhism likewise understands the realm of relative, conventional reality to be completely mutable, it places emphasis on a process of interdependent origination wherein that which we take to be reality is in fact no more

substantial than a rainbow whose appearance depends upon a wide array of causes and conditions. These causes and conditions include not only the constitutive power of an individual human consciousness, but of other consciousnesses as well, including other humans, animals, and unseen beings. While the human imagination can generate a lived experience that may be taken as real for that person, there nonetheless exists a relative, conventional reality which, though mutable, operates with a lawfulness which is based on more than that person's own experience. From the Buddhist perspective, this conventional reality is marked by a belief in the separate and essential self, and would be construed as the clay within which the various historical-cultural manifestations described by Van den Berg are formed.

Further, the methods of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism reveal the existence of an essential nature (*tathāgata-garbha* or Buddha-nature) that is invariant across phenomenal manifestations. Although beyond change itself, this absolute nature is expressed, albeit in distorted ways, in and through the cultural manifestations that form the subject matter of Van den Berg's investigations. As such, Indo-Tibetan Buddhism offers a larger map within which metabletics can be situated, and it accounts ontologically for the ethical stance that Van den Berg himself unquestioningly adopts. On the other hand, while Buddhism provides precise and astonishingly detailed descriptions of mental processes as they unfold within the moment,⁸ it fails to account for more temporal phenomena, such as the psycho-physical development of the individual, let alone the psychological significance of historical phenomena. Metabletics for its part provides a means of reading the relative realm of appearances to reveal the lived meanings that permeate our experience. Together, metabletics and Indo-Tibetan Buddhism provide complementary emphases on the immanent and transcendent aspects of reality and the psychological and spiritual aspects of humanity.

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Notes

¹ Padmasambhava is an actual historical figure who is revered by followers of the Nyingma lineage of Tibetan Buddhism as the Second Buddha. He is considered to have been fully enlightened.

² The term Indo-Tibetan Buddhism recognizes that Tibetan Buddhism is grounded in the philosophy of India, and it incorporates the Tibetan interpretation of the early schools of Buddhism (known as the Hinayana, or Lesser Vehicle) as well the later, more comprehensive and sophisticated philosophical and practice traditions of Mahayana ("Great Vehicle") and Vajrayana ("Diamond Vehicle"). For the most part, these distinctions needn't concern us for the purpose at hand. The interested reader may wish to consult Reginald Ray's *Indestructible Truth* (2000).

³ This motivation is known as *bodhicitta*, and the Mahayana path is known as the Bodhisattva path to emphasize the importance of waking up for the benefit of others. From the perspective of the Mahayana tradition, which is found in Tibet, China, Japan, Mongolia,

and Vietnam, the schools that follow the first-turning teachings exclusively are known as the Hinayana, or “Lesser Vehicle,” regarding the realization of no-self and its attendant liberation to be a lesser form of enlightenment (Conze, 1980).

⁴ Romanyshyn provides a convincing exposition of these developments in *Technology as Symptom and Dream* (1989).

⁵ These terms come from Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1917/1962). Those phenomena that are present-at-hand are brought into an objective framework in order to examine them from the scientific, linear gaze perspective. Phenomena that are present-at-hand are simply available for our non-self-conscious use. Heidegger’s classic example, is the hammer that in use is ready-to-hand, but when broken becomes present-at-hand.

⁶ This view is developed in beautiful, lyrical detail in Romanyshyn’s *Mirror and Metaphor* (2001).

⁷ Karma literally means “action.” It conveys that the consequences of our previous actions create the reality in which we find ourselves, including whether we might feel more drawn to metabletics or Buddhism.

⁸ A sample of the sophistication of the early Abhidharma systems, expressed through detailed cartographies of consciousness, can be found in Govinda (1961).