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Un-asking the question: Introducing a Critical Buddhist Analytic

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Listen Sariputra,
this Body itself is Emptiness
and Emptiness itself is this Body.
This Body is not other than Emptiness
and Emptiness is not other than this Body.
The same is true of Feelings,
Perceptions, Mental Formations,
and Consciousness.

Listen Sariputra,
all phenomena bear the mark of Emptiness;
their true nature is the nature of
no Birth no Death,
no Being no Non-being,
no Defilement no Purity,
no Increasing no Decreasing.

That is why in Emptiness,
Body, Feelings, Perceptions,
Mental Formations and Consciousness
are not separate self entities.
Excerpted from The Heart Sutra (Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya)
translation by Thich Nhat Hanh (Hanh, 2017).

1 Asking the Question

The call for critical social work, the incitement to engage in the study and practice of social work from a position of reflexivity and resistance against its dominant discourses, is not a new phenomenon. In recent decades, for example, social work scholarship has argued for the inclusion of critical race theory (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Daftary, 2020; Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018; Nakaoka et al., 2019; Razack & Jeffery, 2002), a postcolonialist lens (Deepak, 2012; Eliassi, 2013; Ranta-Tyrkkö, 2011), and methods of decolonization (Crampton, 2015; Gray et al., 2016; Ibrahima & Mattaini, 2019; Tamburro, 2013), to name a few. Especially in the United States, nevertheless, social work practice and scholarship remain stubbornly

entrenched in scientific positivism and its foundational ideals of the universal human subject. As Wilson and Lynch (2021) conceive in the call to imagine a different "social work," moreover, even scholarship that can be considered the "vanguard of critical social work remains tethered to modern concepts of liberalism and communitarianism, redistribution and recognition" (p. 1). Both mainstream social work and its critiques are, in other words, bounded within the onto-epistemological legacies of Western humanisms that buttress ongoing projects of racial and social violence.

Ameliorating the weight of Enlightenment humanism's vision of the human—as tethered to the "requirement of rationality" (Watson & Huntington, 2008, p. 258)—through engagement with and the inclusion of the Other, in one form or another, has been long marked as a reparative need for social work (Beck et al., 2017; Bozalek & Pease, 2020a; Crabtree et al., 2014; Mignano, 2008; Ranta-Tyrkkö, 2011; Wong, 2002). Posthumanisms, taken up in recent years by a coterie of social work scholars (see for example, Bozalek & Pease, 2020a), are arguably the newest frames of critique in social work engaged to reimagine the discipline's possibilities by unmooring itself from the onto-epistemological limits of humanism. In line with such endeavors, emphasizing the "increasingly unavoidable" recognition that "human life is not separate from all life" and the necessity for devising ways of surpassing this "modern lore of human exceptionalism" (p. 1), Wilson and Lynch (2021) called for a "social work" apt for the unique troubles of the present and a future whose existence itself is "more uncertain than ever" (p. 1). It is in response to this call for a social work that reimagines the contours and content of the "social" (Wilson & Lynch, 2021, p. 1), that we explore in this paper, a set of theoretical contributions that Buddhism can offer to the conversation.

The articulation of Buddhism and social work, hitherto, has occurred almost entirely through mindfulness-based interventions, a commodification of a type of Buddhist meditation practice trivialized down to its most transactional superficiality.[1] Usually packaged as a method for stress reduction or other cognitive behavioral modification, mindfulness, largely stripped of Buddhism's radical philosophical roots, functions often as an enabling aid for neoliberal self-management, rather than the practice for upending existential certainties that it has been for more than two millennia across the vast Asian continent and beyond. This reductionistic form of Buddhist practice, in our view, contravenes Buddhism's ethico-onto-epistem-olgy.

In pointing to the radical potentialities of Buddhism as a critical analytic for social work, we invite social workers animated about the promise of posthumanisms and other critical theories to look beyond the onto-epistemologies of the West. The negation of all dualisms, including the refutation of the anthropocentric world view with which posthumanist social work theorists have only begun to grapple recently, are central tenets of Buddhism, believed to have originated some 4-6 centuries BCE. The lack of acknowledgement of this history, within and outside of social work, is another example of the West's long history of material and epistemic colonization of the Orient; its erasure of Other knowledges and their appropriation and transmutation into "new" discoveries. Elements from Other perspectives can be included, incorporated, and appropriated *into* the existing social work knowledge base. The Western subject and subjectivity, however, remain intact as the universal, the base, the center; the

[1] See two discussions of Buddhism and social work outside of the mindfulness domain: Canda, E. R., & Gomi, S. (2019). Zen philosophy of spiritual development: Insights about human development and spiritual diversity for social work education. *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought, 38(1), 43-67.* Mukerji, S. J. (2021). *Ocean of Suffering, Ocean of Compassion: Person, Environment, Self, and World in Social Work and Zen Buddhism.* Loyola University Chicago.

Orient remains the colonial object from whose wealth of traditions, cultures, and superstitions, resources can be extracted. Orientalism (Said, 1978) remains entrenched.[2]

Historically marginalized onto-epistemologies—whether Indigenous, Asian, or otherwise—are not legitimated as onto-epistemologies, in other words. As Maria Rubins (2019) puts it, "non-Western traditions and discourses are rarely drawn into the conversation *directly*" [emphasis ours] (p. 762). Our attempt here is to do so; to write about Buddhism as directly as we—two academics immersed in the discourses of the West—are able to, resisting the impulses to sift Buddhism through the logics of Western traditions. What Frantz Fanon (1952/1967) so long ago averred in *Black Skin, White Mask* about the colonial dictum on language, that the "Negro of the Antilles will be proportionally whiter—that is, he will come closer to being a real human being—in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language" (pp. 17-18), applies here, to our naturalized tendency to justify our engagement with Buddhism through showing its congruences with the ideas and ideals of European philosophical traditions.

Working against this grain, we introduce in the following pages two concepts central to the Buddhist analytic: śūnyatā, usually translated as "emptiness" and anātman, or "no-self," the anti-essentialist concept of śūnyatā as applied to the self, the subject. We do so without attempting to explicate Buddhism's relevance for social work, that is, without offering a map for how social work can utilize Buddhism as has been done with mindfulness, as a tool disembodied of its roots and radical potentialities. We resist, moreover, the desire to present Buddhism as a better option. Indeed, we challenge investments in a *good* social work future. To borrow from Reid Miller's (2016) discussion of ethics and race and apply to it social work, the very endeavor to marshal critical theories towards a *good*—more appropriate, more apt, truer, better—social work future, can be understood as an attempt at "stain removal" (p. 54), a "fantasy of rediscovery," of social work's innocent intentions, if not origins.

Such attempts are predicated on the view that the material and epistemological violences social work has and still perpetrates, are "expressions of a superimposed deviance" (p. 54) that hide social work's authentic state of innocence. Reading from this perspective, theories of critique, as they are taken up in social work to improve it, can be understood to have functioned as efforts towards removing the stain of racialism, humanism, and colonialism, not by returning to a utopic past, but by projecting better social work future, cleansed of the harms of its past. They, including "new" posthumanist formulations, remain importantly entrapped in the very onto-epistemologies they seek to move beyond, for they do not radically destabilize the paradigm in which social work resides. While they seek to think beyond the human, they do not think beyond the possibility of social work.

Just as the posthuman is not "an intrinsically subversive category" (Braidotti, 2019, p. 35), neither posthumanisms nor other theories engaged by social work, should be understood to be inherently subversive of the epistemic violence of the West and its many material manifestations. Rubins' (2019) argument that posthumanist endeavors, even some of those

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[2] We utilize the sign-concepts of "the West" and "the Orient," which are unavoidably problematic in and of themselves, to refer to the socio-political relationship in post- and settler- colonial modernity between Europe and its various Others. The "Orient" is, according to Edward Said (1978), "a scholar's word, signifying what modern Europe…made of the still peculiar East" (p. 92) such that they might "judge and rule" it (p. 92). That is, neither term should be understood to refer to a naturalized territory or people, but to a fraught and actively unfolding intimacy of socio-political relationship.

taken up outside of the Western center, can remain a "Western enterprise" in which "a familiar paradigm is at play: a new Western academic discourse defines itself in opposition to another Western discourse" (p.762) articulates this point. Bozalek and Pease's (2020) recent discussion of the need for the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge in social work illustrates it.

> Indigenous peoples understand the entanglement of humans with the environment. In developing critical posthuman, new materialist, affective approaches in social work, we should look to indigenous cultures: Indigenous people understand the importance of relationships between people, non-human animals and the environment, and we have much to learn from them (Bozalek & Pease, 2020b, p. 7).

Even as they seek to highlight the importance of Indigenous epistemologies and to direct the reader towards them, the "we" and "they" binary that Bozalek and Pease (2020) construct to demarcate posthuman social work from Indigenous epistemologies, as well as the social worker from the "Indigenous people," sediment the centrality of that Western subjectivity and the marginality of the Other.

In the edited volume *Post-anthropocentric Social Work: Critical Posthuman and New Materialist Perspectives*, Stephen Webb (2020) asks:

> What does it mean to think beyond the human in social work? Is it possible to craft a mode of intervention and ethics that rejects mainstream social work preoccupations with the human and the classic humanist binaries of self and other, mind and body, society and nature, human and animal, organic and technological? Can the privileged place designated to the human, with its related artefacts of rationality and purpose, be overcome? (p. 20)

Applying to Webb's query the concept of śūnyatā, which refutes the discrete thingness of materiality, and anātman, which abjures the essentialized knowing/observing subject of materiality, compels us to ask a different set of questions: Who is the subject that thinks beyond the human, if not the human? Who is the subject that overcomes rationality and crafts new modes and interventions, if not the thinking human? What new tools and interventions can be wrought by this thinking human subject that are not already bound within an epistemology that constructs problems and solutions as binaries? The Buddhist analytic we outline in the following pages refutes the very rationalities and meaning categories necessary for formulating elements of Webb's questions as he poses them. How does, then, a social work future become possible?

2 A Buddhist Analytic

We note, as we begin, that there is an inherent impossibility in writing about an onto-epistemology whose central premise is emptiness (śūnyatā). Since describing emptiness is an act that itself requires treating emptiness as a phenomenon and ascribing characteristics to it, the very sentences formed to describe śūnyatā contravene its meaning. To borrow from the Vedic tradition, the Sanskrit phrase *neti, neti* (translated usually as "not this, not this") approximates this dilemma that anything we posit about Buddhism is an inaccuracy.[3] Buddhism works as a heuristic. Buddhism, the study of Dharma—a term meaning both "phenomenon" (dharma) and Buddhist teachings (Dharma)—is the boat that gets you to the other shore; it is not the shore itself. We should not misconstrue "the finger pointing to the

[3] As is the very formulation of the binary accuracy/inaccuracy.

moon for the moon itself"(Brunnholzl, 2004, p. 31). Our very words here, bound within the linear, dualistic rationality—not *this*, but *that*—that we seek to critique through the Buddhist analytic, should be similarly understood as merely a finger pointing to the Dharma.[4]

Buddhism is believed to have originated on the Indian subcontinent in what is present day Nepal, some 4-6 centuries BCE, and has since been developing as a philosophy, a psychology, an ethical framework, as well as a popular religion and an intentional embodied practice, throughout Asia. Contemporary Buddhism is usually categorized into two major branches: Theravada, or the "School of the Elders" mostly practiced in South and Southeast Asia in countries such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar; and Mahayana, or the "Great Vehicle," the predominant form of Buddhism in East Asian countries such as Tibet, China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Theravada, the older form of Buddhism, emphasizes the path of the Arhat, the practitioner of the Dharma whose aim is the attainment of personal liberation from the karmic ties of the illusory world (Harvey, 2012). In contrast, Mahayana Buddhism, believed to have developed in the first century BCE, is called the path of the Bodhisattva, an enlightened being who has attained of liberation from the karmic ties of the illusory world, but remains in it to practice the Dharma for the benefit of all beings. The centrality of the concept of compassion (karuṇā) in addition to wisdom (prajñā) is one of the hallmarks that differentiates Mahayana Buddhism from the Theravadan. Karen Barad's (2007) formulation of ontico-epistemology as an insufficiency that needs to be superseded by an ethico-onto-epistem-olgy, may be useful in understanding the difference between the former, Theravadan Buddhism, and the latter, Mahayana Buddhism.

Śūnyatā and anātman are central concepts in all schools of Buddhism. With full acknowledgement that even the barest cataloguing of the extraordinary depth of scholarship on these two concepts advanced by the many schools of Buddhist thought throughout its 2,500-year history is well-beyond the scope of this paper as well as our expertise, we locate our discussion broadly in the Mahayana tradition. We begin with an explication of the insight of śūnyatā. We then illustrate the concept through a kōan, an unanswerable question utilized in some traditions of Zen Buddhism as a heuristic to simultaneously express the concept of śūnyatā and to provoke its realization. The story of Huineng, the sixth patriarch of Ch'an Buddhism, elucidates the concept of anātman, the application of śūnyatā to the self, the subject.

3 Emptiness (śūnyatā)

The notion that all dharma (phenomena) are empty was a central doctrine of the Madhyamaka ("Middle Way") School, founded by the 2nd century Indian Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna, who is credited with settling the concept of śūnyatā as both an insight and practice in Mahayana Buddhism. Śūnyatā is often misunderstood as a denial of material reality, a nihilistic claim that nothing exists, but the emptiness of śūnyatā is, rather, a radically anti-essentialist refutation of fixity. No dharma is abiding, permanent, unchanging; no dharma has svabhāva, a Sanskrit term translated variously as self-nature, intrinsic nature, self-essence, or own being. In contrast to the usual explanation of śūnyatā as a negation—denial of essential and independent existence of dharma—the late Vietnamese Zen (Thiền in Vietnamese) master Thích Nhất Hạnh (2017) expressed śūnyatā positively, describing that "existence is empty for

[4] The well-known analogy of the Buddha and thus Buddhism and Buddhist practice, as a vehicle, heuristic—a finger pointing to the moon rather than the end, the moon, itself—is attributed to the Śūraṅgama Samādhi Sutra, an early Mahayana Buddhist text.

it is dependent on the existence of everything else" (p. 33). A piece of a paper, for example, does not exist in isolation.

> It cannot just be by itself. It has to inter-be with the sunshine, the cloud, the forest, the logger, the mind, and everything else. It is empty of a separate self. But empty of a separate self means full of everything (Hanh, 2017, p. 33).

The phenomenon of "inter-being" in Thích Nhất Hạnh's coinage, usually termed "dependent origination" (pratītya-samutpāda)—alternatively "dependent co-arising" or "dependent arising"—is another way that the notion of emptiness as a lack of intrinsic, independent existence is articulated in Buddhism. Dependent origination is the Buddhist theory of causality that holds that "all factors, psychic and physical, subsist in a web of mutual causal interaction" (Macy, 1979, p. 39). The existence of all things is dependent on that of all other things; "when this arises, that arises; when this does not occur, that does not occur" (as cited in Garfield, 2015, p. 25). The 14th century Tibetan Buddhist monk, Tsongkhapa, the central teacher of the Gelugpa tradition whose current head is His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, expressed this "radical relativity" (Macy, 1979, p. 38) as "dependent arising, dependent existence, and dependent designation" (as cited in Garfield, 2015, p. 26). All existence depends on other existence; all meaning depends on other meaning. Or as Buddhist scholar Peter Hershock (2019) puts it, reality "ultimately consists in dynamically evolving mutual contribution" (p. 16).

The Questions of King Milinda (*Milinda Pañha* in Pali, the language of the Theravada canon), is a Buddhist text dated sometime between 100 BCE and 200 CE that purportedly recounts a series of conversations between the Indian Buddhist sage Nāgasena, and the Indo-Greek king Menander I of Bactria. One of text's didactic tales relates Nāgasena's illustration of the concept of śūnyatā using the example of Milinda's chariot, by which the king had traveled to see the monk. Nāgasena asks king Milinda to show him the chariot in which he arrived and asks the king to deliberate what makes the chariot a chariot. Is the chariot its axle, its pole, or its wheels? Is it its reins, its body, or its flagstaff? At each step in the dialogue, the king answers in the negative. Finally, having established that the chariot is none of those individual elements, Nāgasena asks the Milinda if there *is* a chariot, apart from the wheels, axel, pole, and body. The king finds that to this he must also answer no, there is not. The chariot is both not its component parts and nothing but its component parts. "It is not asserted that a chariot is something other than its parts…It does not exist in the parts, nor do the parts exist in it" (Brunnholzl, 2004, p. 268). There is no such *thing* as a chariot; there is no *thingness* of a chariot. *Chariot* has no essence, it is an empty name, because neither the parts nor the aggregation of the parts of the chariot constitute an original *suchness*. The king, understandably, is alarmed by this insight. Since he experienced himself as being in a chariot, then how can it be said that the chariot does not exist (nor, for that matter, the subject "I" that experienced themselves arriving)?

Here Nāgasena offers another important insight of the Madhyamaka school, that there are two levels of truths: the conventional and the ultimate. The chariot has materiality; it is conventionally real. It is, however and also, ultimately empty, without essential identity. The everyday materiality of life and our experiences of it mark "the conventional transactional truth…that things do come into being and that their arising is conditioned" (Hayes, 2021, p. 15). Conventionally, a dependently arising king has arrived by chariot and conversed with a monk. The ultimate truth, the realization of which is the point of Buddhist practice, however, "is that phenomena do not come into being" (Hayes, 2021, p. 15); there is neither chariot nor

king nor monk. Describing the ultimate truth of emptiness is beyond the limits of language and the rationalities that underwrite language. The ultimate truth, emptiness, is also not an object to be grasped, a destination to travel towards.

It is important to understand, however that the Buddhist notion of "interdependence is not a contingent, external relation among essentially separate entities; it is internal or constitutive." (Hershock, 2019, p. 11). This means that on the level of an ultimate truth, emptiness itself must also understood as being empty; it is incorrect to say that things exist, but it is also incorrect to say that they don't exist—*neti neti*. Garfield (2015) writes of śūnyatā:

> …. emptiness is empty; it is emptiness all the way down, with no ontological foundation. Nothing exists ultimately. Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka can hence be seen as neither a realism nor an anti-realism, but a transcendence of the realism/anti-realism distinction through a critique of the very notion of reality it presupposes (p. 65).

The meaning and the nuanced distinctions between conventional and ultimate truth are varied across Buddhist schools and have been debated among them for more than two millennia. As with all our offerings in this paper, we merely scratch the surface of the complexities of its philosophical history. Still, we offer the notion of two truths, the conventional and the ultimate, as another insight of the Middle Way, and another interruption of binaristic thinking, of rationality, and of the singularity of Truth. The Madhyamaka "middle path" is an alternative to the existence/non-existence binary. A refutation of both dualism and monism, Buddhist nondualism should be understood as the space between "being" and "nonbeing" (Hershock, 2019, p. 16) that is neither—*neti neti*.

4 Unasking the question – MU

Another entry point into the insight of śūnyatā is the "psycholinguistic puzzle" (Heine, 1990, p. 360) best known by the Zen term kōan (In Chinese, gong'an (公案) meaning "public case"), developed originally in Ch'an Buddhism. A strand of Mahayana best known in the West as Zen, its Japanese name and form (Korean: Sŏn; Vietnamese; Thiền), Ch'an Buddhism developed originally in Han dynasty China as a syncretic mix of imported Indian Buddhism and local Taoist metaphysics. Kōans—paradoxical questions or sayings that defy rational understanding—became a part of the standard teaching methods Sung dynasty Ch'an teachers utilized in training students in meditation (dhyana) practice. Two well-known examples are:

> Question: What is Buddha? Answer: Three pounds of flax.
>
> Two Hands clap and there is a sound, what is the sound of one hand?

Because "ego-consciousness is fortified by the shield of a dualistic conceptual paradigm" (Nagatomo, 2020, p. 4), the rationally unanswerable kōan is intended to trigger "the exhaustion of the ego" (Heine, 1990, p. 360) and propel insight into the nature of ultimate reality.

Not all Zen traditions use kōans in their practice, but among those that do, the kōan Mu is undoubtedly one of the most iconic. "Mu" (無, pronounced "*wú*" in Chinese; "mu" in Korean and Japanese), meaning "no," "not," "nothing," or "without," was purportedly the answer the Tang dynasty Ch'an master Zhàozhōu Cōngshěn (Jōshū Jūshin in Japanese) gave to a disciple's question "does the dog have Buddha nature"? Given the established doctrine that all

beings have Buddha nature, that all beings are always already Buddha, “mu” is a nonsensical answer that rebukes the questioner for formulating a question that seeks a rational answer and highlights the questioner’s misunderstanding of the Dharma. “Mu,” in this way, is not a denial of the existence of Buddha nature in dogs, but a paradoxical response that challenges the basic premises of the question itself: the existence of dogs, the existence of not-dogs, the existence of Buddha nature, the existence of Buddha nature as something that can be possessed, the existence of Buddha nature as a thing that can be possessed by some but not others, and, indeed, existence itself as other than śūnyatā (emptiness). Mu refutes the limitations and parameters of the question itself, in other words, challenging the conceptual framing of the question, rather than answering it. To answer the question, positively or negatively, is to acquiesce to the ontological and epistemological frame from which the question is formulated and delimits the possibilities of answers.

The point of a kōan is not only to show the conceptual error inherent in the question—or perhaps more accurately, the conceptual error of the question—but to provoke the non-rational, embodied realization that “reason in its discursive use is incapable of knowing and understanding in toto what reality is” (Nagatomo, 2020, p. 13). Kōans are intended to function as catalysts for enlightenment, the state of embodying the imponderability of ultimate reality, that which cannot be understood by logic. “Mu” is, in this way, an interruption to conventional reality, the usual way of understanding our experiences and ourselves in relationship to those experiences. As a refutation of the rational paradigm, of the binaristic answer, and of the binaristic question itself, the answer “mu” can thus be understood as a disavowal, a move to un-ask the question.

5 Anātman (No-Self)

One the most famous illustrations of this act of un-asking is found in the apocryphal story of Huineng, the sixth patriarch of Ch’an Buddhism and his exposition of the concept of anātman, śūnyatā as applied to the Subject, the self. Transmission of the Dharma in Ch’an Buddhism is through a lineage of teachers called Patriarchs or “Founding Masters"(祖師). Bodhidharma, the semi-legendary Indian monk who is said to have brought Buddhism from India to China during the 5th or 6th century CE, is known as the first patriarch of Ch’an. In 7th Century Sung Dynasty China, the 5th Patriarch, knowing he was dying, announced his plan to find his successor through a contest. Whoever produced the best verse (gatha) explaining the nature of the mind, the self, would be recognized as the next patriarch. Shenxiu (c. 606-706), the lead disciple of the 5th patriarch, considered the obvious candidate for the role, produced the following gatha.

> The body is the bodhi tree.
>
> The mind is like a bright mirror's stand.
>
> At all times we must strive to polish it
>
> and must not let dust collect.

According to Buddhist mythos, Sakayamuni, the historical Buddha, realized enlightenment while meditating under a bodhi tree (in current day Bodh Gaya, in the Indian state of Bihar). The bodhi tree serves, thus, as the symbol of enlightenment—Buddhahood—and the path to it. Shenxiu’s gatha is understood as an incrementalist, linear, teleologic methodology of progress to enlightenment. To effect the realization of śūnyatā, the Dharma must be

assiduously studied; dhyana must be attentively practiced; attaining correct understanding and tireless practice was the key to the attainment of enlightenment.

Huineng (638—713), an illiterate lay worker in the monastery who became enlightened suddenly when he heard the Diamond Sutra being recited by the monks, produced an answering gatha to that composed by Shenxiu.

> Bodhi originally has no tree.
>
> The bright mirror also has no stand.
>
> Fundamentally there is not a single thing.
>
> Where could dust arise?

In contrast to Shenxiu's description of enlightenment as a thing to be gained, and the way to it as a diligent practice, Huineng emphasizes anātman, usually translated as "no-self," the non-dualistic, non-existence of an abiding, independent, essential self. Huineng's gatha insists, instead, that there is no mind/self/subject separate from śūnyatā. There is no author of enlightenment, and enlightenment, the realization of the ultimate truth of śūnyatā, is not a goal to be attained. Huineng does not offer a different or better method to enlightenment than that outlined by Shenxiu, in other words, but instead, rejects the binaristic premise of Shenxiu's gatha which sets up the subject—the self/mind who works to clear away the distractions of the world—to get to the object of its diligent practice, the prajna-paramita (Perfection of Wisdom) of enlightenment.

6 Is a social work future possible?

Social work functions in the lineage of Enlightenment onto-epistemolgies. These are lineages of Other-making; of material and epistemic colonization and enslavement and their justification through liberal ideologies of the human, and teleological notions of civilization (Ferreira da Silva, 2007; Lowe, 2015; Wynter, 2003). Posthumanisms are arguably the latest theoretical frames taken up by scholars engaging in critical social work to contest such ideas and ideals, and we welcome their introduction into social work scholarship. There is much resonance between the Buddhist analytics we present here and the posthumanist critical theories with which social work has begun to engage. The notion that all dharma (phenomena), including the self, are empty of svabhāva (intrinsic existence) undermines the onto-epistemological binaries that created the discourses of the human and their material manifestations in the multifold crises of the late capitalist present. In a field dominated by positivist certainties, moreover, where even first- and second-generation theories of critique remain marginalized, critiques such as those offered by posthumanist social workers and others who so sumptuously contest humanist ideals naturalized in social work, feel like intellectual luxuries the field must embrace without demur. Yet we demur. To be clear, this demurral arises neither from our disagreements with their goals nor their assessment that the problematics of the present could need different ideas, approaches, and conceptualization than those we have used in the past.

We are troubled by the ongoing occlusion in Western academic institutions and realms of professionalized practice alike, of knowledges from outside, before, and beyond "the center." Even in critical endeavors politically aligned with the ideals of decolonization of various kinds, Western intellectual tradition seems to remain stubbornly lodged as the central, and

seemingly only possible philosophical foundations for formulating futurities. Even when Other epistemologies are engaged, additionally, their destabilizing possibilities for the current order seem to be kept decidedly at bay. As the example of the mindfulness industry cautions us, this is at least true for social work's articulation with Buddhism. While social work is willing to extract elements of it and commodify it, the discipline has hitherto been unwilling to engage Buddhism on its own terms as an ethico-onto-episte-mology.

We are not, to be clear, making an argument that Eastern theories should replace Western ones, nor that we hold such binaries as untroubled actualities (Vitkus, 2002). As tempting as it is to offer Buddhism as a new tool for a better social work future—rooted in an embodied practice predicated on the radical refutation of binarism, rationality, and essentialism—such an endeavor is an impossibility. Buddhism, as we have discussed in this paper, does not offer alternative answers but refutes the questions. The concepts we have introduced here should make clear, if nothing else, that grasping for better answers through improved rationalities is not the point of Buddhism. Ch'an Buddhism, for example, has insisted for nearly two millennia that enlightenment is "not a process of rational distillation" (Hershock, 2019, p. 2), that it is not possible to think—or feel, for that matter, since feeling is not the antithesis to thinking—oneself to enlightenment. We posit that dislodging a variety of humanist binaries: mind/body, nature/culture, ontology/epistemology, human/animal, human/machine etc., is similarly not possible to accomplish within theoretical frames that remain mired in the anthropocentric conceptualization of the Western subject and its anchoring rationalities. Just as Ch'an Buddhism insists that "we cannot read or reason our way out of conflict, trouble and suffering" (Hershock, 2019, p. 3), we conclude that it is not possible to reason our way out of the primacy of reason.

Precisely contrary to the normalizing workings of mindfulness, the Buddhist analytic we introduce here is intended to invoke unease, discomfort, and disquiet appropriate to a world on fire. Buddhism promises, to borrow Sarah Ahmed's words (2010), no "happiness," no "good defense against crisis" (p. 217). Buddhism is not intended as a method for generating comforting fictions about the world or our, that is, human, interactions with it, or self-soothing narratives about our, that is, social work, functions within it. It is not intended to remove a stain, nor find a good or better future. It is intended, instead, to provoke recognition of and questions about our thirst for theories, methods, and answers that offer the possibilities for such reassurances.

We question, in this vein, the very notion of futurity, a concept anchored in the existence of a knowing subject whose present serves as the fulcrum for remembrances of the past and anticipations of the future. Embedded in the notion of a social work future, whatever the theoretical grounding, is an underlying assumption that social work theories entrenched in a long lineage of western ontological assumptions, undergirding centuries of epistemic colonization, can be retooled to formulate a better, less problematic social work futurity. We invite those critically oriented social work scholars, already engaged with the insights of theories and methods of critique, including those of the posthumanist canon, to consider the myriad aims and potentialities of their project. What does it mean to try to move beyond the human, without imagining moving beyond social work? Is it possible that social work's newest forays into a better social work is another investment in its own good future, in its own good self-object, a further entrenchment of the very self/other binary that it intends to dislodge? Is "the anthropological machine"(Agamben, 2004) that undergirds the social work project, so deeply invested in the "the coloniality of being" (Wynter, 2003, p. 257), possible

to overcome by retooling itself to become a better science? Is a social work future possible? The answer, we offer, is “mu.”

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