



Reflections on Perspectives of Transhumanism, Buddhist Transhumanism, and Buddhist Modernism on the Self

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Abstract A claim made by Buddhist or Buddhism-affine scholars such as Michael LaTorra and James Hughes is that transhumanism, neuroscience, and the teachings of Buddhism are compatible because they aim to alleviate suffering and pain and attain a stable state of happiness. This claim can be challenged. At first glance, the approach seems valid, because since the 1980s there have been dialogues and scientific collaborations with representatives of Tibetan Buddhism and scientists on the topics of neuroscience, consciousness, ethics and technology, and in this context new interpretations of Buddhist thought have emerged such as ‘Buddhist modernism’ (E. Thompson). In this discussion note, however, two main arguments are advanced as to why the claim and terminology of Buddhist transhumanism are difficult to reconcile with Buddhist terminology, values, and methods: (1) the difference between the use of such methods as meditation and contemplation and the application of so-called human enhancement technologies (2) and differences concerning self-understanding in Western science and Buddhism.

Introduction

An investigation into the reconcilability of Buddhist and transhumanist key concepts and ideas concerning the self needs to start with backgrounds. According to the transhumanists James Hughes and Michael LaTorra, Buddhism and transhumanism share two main goals: to reduce suffering and to increase and stabilize happiness. The key difference is that Buddhist transhumanists promote the use of modern science and technology in this context, whereas Buddhist practitioners use methods of mind training and meditation for over 2500 years. However, contemporary scholars of Tibetan Buddhism such as the Dalai Lama, Thupten Jinpa, or Matthieu Ricard are open and even promote a dialogue with modern sciences which is reflected in the foundation of institutions such as the Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education (CCARE) at Stanford University School of Medicine or the Mind & Life Institute (MLI) which organizes meetings between the Dalai Lama and scientists on science and Buddhist philosophy and meditation practice as well as various conferences and symposia on consciousness and cognitive science. Already the first two Mind & Life Dialogues in 1987 and 1989 dealt with Buddhism in the context of cognitive sciences, neurosciences followed by *Transformations of Mind, Brain,*

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and Emotion (2001), *Latest Findings in Contemplative Neuroscience* (2012), *Mind, Brain, and Matter: Critical Conversations Between Buddhist Thought and Science* (2013) and *Perception, Concepts, and Self: Contemporary Scientific and Buddhist Perspectives* (2015).

To provide a comparative approach of transhumanism, Buddhist transhumanism, and Buddhism, differentiations have to be made. According to Evan Thompson, it makes sense to distinguish self-identifying Buddhists or buddhism-affine protagonists in the environment of the MLI and similar institutions from Buddhists who are Buddhist by ethnicity or the choice of religious life in a monastery. The former case he frames as *Buddhist modernists* [13] whose approach to Buddhism is connected to neurosciences or a modern and Western form of Buddhism [13] in contrast to traditional Buddhist scholars and religious practitioners. Being a trans- or posthumanist¹ or a Buddhist transhumanist is a matter of self-identification. Though, it can also be determined by the association with the two most influential institutions regarding trans- and posthumanism which are the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies (IEET) and Humanity Plus (previously known as the World Transhumanist Association). This paper aims to elaborate on the self in the context of transhumanism² and Buddhist transhumanism referring to Western³ and Buddhist⁴ approaches in philosophy.

¹ The philosophical differentiation of the aims of transhumanism, techno-posthumanism and critical posthumanism will be addressed in the second chapter but often transhumanism will be used as an umbrella term.

² In chapter 2, I will also elaborate further that not many of the protagonists involved in transhumanism follow a philosophical distinction of trans- and posthumanism. In this context, transhumanism refers to self-identified transhumanists – which might include posthumanist directions of thought as well.

³ Most trans- and posthumanists do not explicitly refer to a certain philosophical (body-mind-relation) or psychological position (differentiation of levels of consciousness or personhood, identity, self, Self, etc.). Differentiations made here are direct quotes of self-identifying transhumanists.

⁴ As the aim of this discussion note is to sketch traditional Buddhist values and perspectives and set them in relation with the contemporary debate in cognitive sciences and the movement of Buddhist Transhumanism, texts, and teachings of contemporary Tibetan Buddhist scholars and teachers who are familiar with scientific debates to a certain extent are used instead of traditional Buddhist texts.

Transhumanism and Self: If We Upload Your Mind, Will You Survive?

There is a discussion going on in the transhumanist community and context concerning the implications of radical modifications of the human body and mind and their impact on the individual self. As the field of personal identity, personhood, “I”, self, or the Self is rather complex and multi-layered and transhumanism has several peculiarities as well, several terminological differentiations regarding transhumanism and self have to be made.

From a philosophical point of view, trans- and posthumanism follow a different agenda concerning how and why humans and humanity should be transformed. Janina Loh [8] proposes that transhumanists seek to establish an improved version of human x.0 by using technology for human enhancement. Advocates of techno-posthumanism on the contrary seek to establish an artificial alterity to overcome the human species altogether. In practice, these positions often mix up: some of the envisioned technologies and procedures like mind uploading involve radical methods which would imply significant changes for the individual and societal human condition. Humans might even be modified to the extent that the resulting organism is no longer fully identifiable as a member of *Homo Sapiens*, but as a transhuman or posthuman lifeform which leads to drastic questions [14]: Are you still ‘you’ if devices improve your memory, attention span, and cognitive skills? Which one of several similar copies of your uploaded mind are you? In an extreme case, not only the members of *Homo Sapiens* but also the discussion about issues like self and selfhood are obsolete by then. However, many protagonists such as Marvin Minsky or Ray Kurzweil assume that their individual selves will survive these modifications despite their support for techno-posthumanist arguments.

The complexity and difficulty of the terminology in the discourse about the self are reflected in the richness of various conceptualizations and terms. This is because the self is an interdisciplinary topic of philosophy, anthropology, sociology, medicine, psychology, theology, and cognitive sciences which frame and develop these terms further in various directions such as metaphysical, anthropological, naturalistic, subjectivistic, systemic, materialistic or holistic ones. All these approaches often interlace and are important to

be aware of. In the following, standpoints emphasized in transhumanism will be presented, based on Susan Schneider [11, 12] and Ray Kurzweil [4–6].

First, there is the understanding of self which refers to preconditions of body-mind dualism and persistence and focuses on the issue of what characterizes an individual independently of time and space. This is also referred to as the numeric identity of a person. It implies physical and psychological characteristics, although it is disputable whether the latter can be ascertained with empirical methods. Following this, a person's self is the soul or a nonphysical substance, and this substance can survive the death of the body.

The second option is the psychological continuity theory referred to by most transhumanists which explain identity as a qualitative, descriptive matter. Essential to this position are memories, the ability to self-reflection, and the overall psychological configuration (patternism). Identity or self is referred to when an individual person understands herself or himself by her or his memory, opinion, and wishes by self-image and self-conception. Identity as psychological continuity permits radical changes to the body and brain as long as the sense of continuity of memories and mental states is maintained to the present moment. Even a radical modification such as the "recording" of a "personality" in a brain and its reinstallation in a computer would count as this person if the mind in the computer would be able to remember the process leading to the change and would identify with the prior biological person. To ensure this continuity, some followers of patternism opt for a slow and gradual transformation to make sure that the continuity of the personal identity pattern is preserved. On the contrary, scholars like Susan Schneider [11, 12] criticize seeing psychological continuity as the main point about identity because these patterns could be multiplied as well – and who would be the one original person who we refer to as "I"? [10].

A third theory mentioned by Kurzweil [4–6] is a brain-based materialism position which is often presented in neuroscience. This is an essentially monistic viewpoint stating that matter is the only and fundamental substance and the reference to "I" is a reference to the brain though the extent to which the sense of self can be explained in the language of neuroscience is still discussed as there is no single brain structure that embodies the self. Therefore, the mind,

consciousness, and sense of self are the results of brain activity. As matter creates and determines consciousness, of course, changes in the body and brain have an impact on personal perception but not on personal identity.

The fourth point of view is based on the "no-self theory". It states that there is no metaphysical category of self at all. Within this theory, two perspectives on self have to be distinguished: (1) in a psychological sense in which we attribute variable things like symbols, memories, or status on an individual person, and (2) in a categorical sense which means that the sense of self is only fiction or imagination because of the smooth flow of perceptions and the continuity of those.

Emphasizing the metaphysical category of no-self does not imply that issues connected with personal identity – the subjective perception of „I“ – are solved and that we can enhance ourselves unconcerned: problems with the accounting of moral or legal responsibility remain. The no-self theory is most relevant for the following discussion of Buddhist transhumanism.

The Self: Buddhist Approaches

The Buddhist concept of no-self entails a paradox between absolute and relative⁵ truth and one between eternalism and nihilism. Buddhism rejects the idea of a self that is a separate entity located, for example, in a certain region in the brain or the body and that is eternal and essential for a person. The self is more a process than an entity and it develops in interrelation and interdependence between the physical body, mental factors, and the environment. This process gives rise to subjective experience and the idea or construct of "I", similar to some concepts in poststructuralism⁶ or systems theory⁷ which refer to bodies as open agglomerations in a field. The construct of "I" is considered a purely imaginary construct with no reference to either relative or absolute reality in Mahayana Buddhism, however, it contains the subjective sense

⁵ Absolute and relative categories only apply to Mahayana Buddhism.

⁶ See works of Jean-Luc Nancy, Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattarie.

⁷ See works of Bruno Latour and Niklas Luhmann.

of a separate self, a notion of “non-I”, including the identification of “I” or “me” as the one who is experiencing suffering or happiness, etc.

The concepts of the interdependence and inseparability of phenomena – including the self – are the core of how Buddhists envision the nature of reality, different to both eternalism and nihilism. According to Buddhism and such poststructuralist concepts as Gilles Deleuze’s ‘rhizome’, phenomena cannot exist autonomously, they are always interconnected with other phenomena and therefore do not exist *per se*. Still, we have the impression, especially when it comes to recognizing ourselves as a self – as an “I” – and we thus perceive a phenomenon that is not another one. In Buddhism, this is called relative truth because it is true in a subjective way as a mental construct, but it is not absolutely true. In terms of absolute truth, Buddhism adopts the idea of mutual causality. Phenomena are seen as a flow of events that are linked together and are depending on each other, they form agglomerations and part again [9]. The assumption that there are autonomous entities that are separate from us occurs because we perceive the flow from a certain angle and cling to the one thing in the flow that we have seen in this very moment, like taking only one picture from an entire movie. In Buddhism, this understanding of interdependence leads to a new perception of “I” and the “other” in a way that all phenomena are empty of any permanent and unchanging essence that could be grasped definitively as “it”, “you”, or “I”. These boundaries get blurred, as the interrelation of the thoughts and identity of another person with the perception, thoughts, and identity of oneself gets clear. This insight does not lead to nihilism but to an awareness of ultimate responsibility. To sum up, Buddhism can neither be said to advocate a no-self view, nor a view of the self as a psychological entity of memories and habit patterns in an absolute way.

Buddhist Transhumanism

LaTorra writes: “The meeting of ancient Buddhism from Asia with a modern orientation towards science and technology in the Western world has led to a burgeoning movement that combines these in new and innovative ways. Lacking much institutional structure, but with many shared goals among its adherents,

this movement seeks to attain the traditional Buddhist goals of reducing suffering and realizing Awakening, but with the assistance of scientific knowledge and technological means” ([7], 219).

Buddhist transhumanism is a movement within transhumanism that seeks to attain traditional Buddhist goals – reducing suffering and increasing happiness – using scientific knowledge and technology. As regards the methods of traditional Buddhism, there is nothing in the teachings that forbids the inclusion of science and technology in Buddhist practice. One could argue that the Buddhist notion of “skillful means” may include science and technology as long as the practice has good results [7]. Still, a major difference concerning the overall approach is that transhumanists want to transform material conditions by using science and technology. Buddhists on the contrary want to change how human beings relate to outer conditions and one another, using transformative practices like meditation.

The transhumanist James Hughes [1, 3] claims that science and technology may eventually enhance the human mind and body, so that existential inevitabilities such as suffering, sickness, and death may become things of the past, whether through cybernetic implants, physical alterations, genetic manipulation, or advanced pharmacology. To attain happiness and enhance virtue, he is also in favor of mood enhancement by using new or emerging neurotechnologies [2]. Of course, key terms like suffering and happiness have many interpretations. LaTorra distinguishes the end of suffering as a Buddhist term as ending suffering and rebirth altogether, to drop out of Samsara and achieve Nirvana, from the goal of uploading: to live eternally in a blissful, but not liberated state. He also distinguishes the Buddhist state of liberation from such a state as the one achieved by uploading, not categorically rejecting the latter, but seeing it definitely as the lesser attainment, a temporary satisfaction, not the ultimate achievement [7].

Conclusion

The transformation of the human condition to a higher level is a motive in many religions and in transhumanism. Are transhumanism and Buddhism thus compatible, or on the contrary even antagonistic? As we have seen, there is a fundamental difference in

how *the self* is perceived in Buddhist and Western philosophy for the most part. Modern Buddhism does not oppose science, but are new and emerging technologies a way to accomplish happiness in Buddhist terms? We have reached an advanced level of technological sophistication that is about to increase even more whereby physical suffering is decreasing – though, suffering itself has not been eliminated yet. Supporters of the transhumanist idea work towards a point where we will live with even fewer diseases and physical suffering and even have longer or possibly indefinite life spans; with the help of advanced pharmacology and smart drugs, we might even be able to control mental and emotional states.

However, Buddhism is not aiming toward specific mental or physical states. Certainly, reduced suffering and increased happiness are intended side effects of Buddhist practice, but the overall spiritual goal is the total elimination of suffering and the attainment of a state which does not depend on any cause or condition. Provisionally, this state which ultimately cannot be characterized is described as happiness in the literature. If the goal of uploading is to live eternally in a blissful state with one's identity as an individual self intact, that might be understood by Buddhists as a possibility in relative terms according to the conditions of technology. However, it would be problematic in terms of Buddhist views of the changing nature of all phenomena—including technology—and quite incompatible with the Buddhist goal of freedom from the delusion of selfhood.

A distinctively Buddhist approach to the use of neurotechnologies would seek to avoid being stuck in any set of mood or mental state, which would also imply happiness as a state of bliss and pleasure. From a Buddhist point of view, using a device or implant that creates an addiction to such a state of pleasure would be as unwholesome as making oneself numb or more ignorant. One could have a hard time speaking of freedom and liberation which are among the highest goals in Buddhism, being fully dependent on the functionality of a device.

The reflection on this issue in the context of transhumanism is of utmost relevance as an interdisciplinary as well as intercultural approach to comparative work. It illustrates the hidden difficulties of the dialogue between Buddhism and science, highlighting the question of how “Buddhist transhumanism”

is possible if both approaches do not share the same base regarding key philosophical terms and concepts such as truth and self.

Other questions that would be pertinent to this discussion are concerning if and what we would lose if we lose the ability to suffer or to die. To attain ‘the deathless’ is certainly a goal of Buddhism, but this has never meant the eternal continuation of self-identification.

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