

# Buddhism and Global IR

Written by Kosuke Shimizu

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2023/08/17/buddhism-and-global-ir-from-part-of-the-whole-to-part-of-the-whole/>

KOSUKE SHIMIZU, AUG 17 2023

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The intellectual tradition of Buddhism is highly diverse regarding approaches and sects, and it is unreasonable to see it as a single coherent system of thought. The Buddhist turn in International Relations (IR) can perhaps be traced back to the monumental scholarship by Stephen Chan, Peter Mandaville and Roland Bleiker's *Zen of International Relations* published in 2001. Since then, there have been no significant developments in the study of Buddhism and IR. However, with the emphasis of Global IR on non-Western knowledge traditions, Buddhism is beginning to draw an increasing amount of scholarly attention. In this article, I would like to focus on Buddhism as more of a crossroad of political, philosophical and scientific inquiries. This aspect is essential because it looks at ontology beyond general understandings of diversification in IR, thereby aligning it with the development of 'relational theory' which corresponds to the discussions on 'pluriversality' and 'anthropocene', the perspectives that are gaining momentum in recent times.

Since the initial intervention by Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon (1999), the relational debate has seen significant developments in IR (Nordin et al. 2019, Townsell et al. 2021). And this debate seems to have taken an ontological focus. The focus on ontology is unsurprising, given the assumption during the relational discussions that the subjects and their existence are created (or strongly influenced) through mutual relationships. In fact, relationality is not simply created between independent subjects but it constructs them. In the most radical form of relationality, the subject itself does not exist, i.e., the existence as we think of it (including ourselves) is a web of relations, not necessarily something that is inherently autonomous. Conversely, when the web of relations disappears, the eyes of the web (i.e., the subjects) disappear. In this sense, any essentialist notion of existence is logically impossible in this radical relational theory, which, in turn, informs recent discussions on the actor-network theory and anthropocene.

From a Buddhist perspective, which places relations at the centre of existence, an ontological focus through such relations is unavoidable. For Buddhism, being means suffering. Why does everyone suffer? When this question is seriously considered, being is ultimately transformed into relations. For Buddhism, existence is only a phenomenon, simply a result of relationality, and cannot exist in itself without relationships with others. We suffer because we cannot take the truth that we are only phenomena. We believe and persist that we are actively and consciously living. It is our persistency and false perception that leads us to this conclusion. However, any beings are phenomena according to Buddhism. We are like waves in the ocean. The phenomenon of waves cannot exist as waves if you scoop a wave with a bucket and bring it back home. It is not a wave any more. It is just water. We are waves. If a wave persists in being a wave, it creates suffering. We are like waves produced by the relationship between water, wind, time, space, observer, etc., and if any one of these is absent, waves cannot exist, like us without others. It is important to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of incorporating such Buddhist thoughts into IR. The present article aims to achieve this goal. It begins with an overview of Buddhism's tryst with IR, especially the inferences derived from the notion of relationality. It then establishes Buddhism as a meeting ground of three distinct areas: religion, philosophy and science. Finally, it discusses how these three areas can allow Buddhism to contribute to Global IR discourses.

### Buddhism and Relationality

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While Chan, Mandaville and Bleiker's *Zen of International Relations* (2001) brilliantly depicts the relationship between ontology and epistemology, the ephemeral nature of the concept of security, and the contemporary obsession with existence through Zen, William J. Long's *A Buddhist Approach to International Relations: Radical Interdependence* (2021) is based on an extensive knowledge of Buddhism. Of these, the reign of King Asoka, which Long extensively focused upon in the book, deserves a special mention. King Asoka was the third king of the Mauryan dynasty of ancient India (third century BC). Asoka turned Buddhist after the Kalinga War, by that time he had already conquered most of India. This change of heart was prompted by the massive death and destruction he witnessed. King Asoka's rule based on *Dharma* (Buddha's teachings) is reported to have multicultural and multi-religious connotations. This was due to King Asoka's religious discernment that the *Dharma* is not a creed of one religion but applicable to all. This open political system is the ideal type of Buddhist governance and is still often brought up where politics and Buddhism intersect. These books seem to be good introductions to Buddhism and IR, but when it comes to the question of relationality, they do not seem to be sufficient.

The debate on relationality in IR has been very much on the rise over the last twenty years, with Jackson and Nexon's pioneering article "Relations before States", which appeared at the end of the twentieth century as a new development in constructivism. A special issue in the *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* titled "Towards Global Relational Theorising" (Nordin et al. 2019), a forum in *International Studies Perspectives* titled "Differing about Difference: Relational IR from around the World" (Trowsell et al. 2021), and an *E-International Relations* article "Recrafting International Relations through Relationality" (Trowsell et al. 2019) are worth mentioning here. These works address a variety of relationalities, including constructivism, Confucianism and indigenous cosmology, and articulate a new dimension of IR theory. This trend is rapidly developing, and the *International Studies Association's* annual conference in 2024 will be held in San Francisco under the theme "Putting Relationality at the Centre of International Studies".

Of these, a particular focus has been on Confucianism-based relationality theories here for the purpose of contrasting with Buddhism. Confucianism-based relationality theories are an argument developed by Chinese scholars, primarily represented by Qin Yaqing. Confucianism centres on the five relationships embedded in society and this leads to its original moral theory (Qin 2018): namely, the relationships of master and servant, father and son, elder and younger brothers, husband and wife, and friends. As can be seen from these five, the relationality in Confucianism is vertical, except for the last one, friendship. In other words, Confucianism assumes a social image stabilized on the basis of hierarchy. This hierarchy is very important to Confucianism, and various rituals are performed to maintain it. In this sense, Confucianism has been inherited as the moral code of the ruling party. From the perspective of IR, it can be seen in very solemn and fixed ritualistic relationality, such as the tribute system. Tributary states such as Japan before the Edo Shogunate and the Ryukyus until the formal annexation to Japan in the late nineteenth century, regularly paid tribute and showed a certain level of courtesy to the Chinese Empire (i.e., Ming and Qing). In response, the Empire would show its authority by giving several times the amount of the tribute as a souvenir. It is a well-known fact that this ritual was very important for the maintenance of the empire and that political stability in East Asia was brought about through this ritual (Kang 2010).

In contrast, there is a Buddhist thought of IR that is also a religion-based theory of relationality originating in the Asian region. In contrast to Confucianism, which emphasizes rituals to maintain a stable hierarchy, Buddhism has always had a perspective of the world that changes and never stays the same. All things are impermanent, and everything is in flux. Eternal existence is 'nothing', and existence that we know of is only an illusion momentarily created by the web of various relationality (*karma*). This very radical relationalism is definitely not the ideology of the governing side. It was meant to liberate ordinary people from suffering pains such as poverty, illness and ageing.

## Buddhism as the Intersection of Religion, Philosophy and Science

Buddhism, which began with Buddha in India, was succeeded by many branches after Buddha's death. There are many variations of Buddhism. *Theravada Buddhism* is said to be relatively close to ancient Buddhism and is mainly found in South-East Asia, whereas *Mahayana Buddhism* emphasizes the idea of 'emptiness' and has been widely spread in East Asia; and *Tibetan Buddhism* is characterized by its esoteric Buddhist tendency. Until now, Buddhism has basically developed at a certain distance from the political parties. In contrast, the position of Buddhism in Japan

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is more subtle. Although Japan is known as a Buddhist country, its Buddhism has developed in a very unique way: Buddhism in Japan was closely associated with politics during the Edo Shogunate from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century and also worked in favour of colonialism during Japan's imperialist period. It is well known that the *Kyoto School*, which developed a philosophy based on Buddhism, similarly glorified WWII (Shimizu 2011, 2022b). In recent years, Buddhist scholars have emerged who take a critical view of this history, and there is a movement to clarify the war effort of Japanese Buddhism at the time (Nakanishi 2013, 2016; Otani, Yoshinaga, and Kondo 2016; Sueki 2006; Victoria 1997). Although not elaborated further here, this issue is unavoidable when considering the contribution of Buddhism to IR studies.

When considering the contribution of Buddhism to IR, it is necessary to focus on the relationship between Buddhism in general and Mahayana Buddhism in particular. As is well known, a new form of Buddhism was created around the third century with the advent of the Nāgārjuna. Nāgārjuna opened the path to *nirvana* (liberation from the cycle of birth and death), which had been promised only to practising monks, to all laypersons. Nāgārjuna (1995) claimed that this new Buddhist movement, unlike the various variant offshoots, was a movement going back to Buddha's original Buddhism. Although the truth of this claim is not known, there is no doubt that at least his version of Buddhism had a significant influence on the subsequent development of Buddhism in East Asia. This is because Buddhism took on a new *raison d'être* as its teachings were opened up to the general public. Subsequently, this new development in India was extensively transmitted to East Asia through China. Unlike Indian Buddhism, which was taken over by the Hindus and virtually marginalized until recently, Buddhism in East Asia has been building up its own position continuously since its propagation. In China, it was divided into the Tendai (Tiantai), Kegon (Huayan), Pure Land and Zen sects, which were directly transmitted to Japan. Despite the variations of Mahayana Buddhist sects, the concept of peculiar relationality underlies all of them.

Mahayana Buddhism differs significantly from other theories of relationality, given its philosophy and science. Mahayana Buddhism's similarity to Western philosophy has been, regardless to say, indicated numerous times in the past. The proximity to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, and to some extent Heidegger, has been pointed out in various ways, but in recent years particular attention has been paid to the proximity between Mahayana Buddhism and quantum theory. The concept of relationality in Buddhism is called '*engi*'. This is also translated as 'dependent origination', a worldview which claims that existence is always dependent on relationality to other existence. Everything we think of as existence is a phenomenon which has only ephemeral life. And it is reiterated in many Buddhist texts that existence is based on relationality and does not exist independently of them. This is particularly characteristic of Mahayana Buddhism, and many Mahayana sects use the term 'emptiness' (*ku*) to describe this relational world. In this argument, there can be no existence of the self before the existence of the other, and it is only the relationships that create the self and the other. In other words, there is nothing before the relationship. Therefore, it is indeed 'empty'.

The Kyoto School, which developed its own philosophy based on Buddhist motifs, adopted the idea of emptiness and produced a genealogy of the so-called philosophy of nothingness in the first half of the twentieth century (Nishida 1947, 1948). There, they developed a new philosophy based on the premise that the subject is nothing and is produced by relations. However, their philosophy did not necessarily deny Western philosophy, but on the contrary, was a philosophy to further develop the philosophy of the Western tradition (Sakai 2010a, 2010b). What they argued for was the emptiness of the subject and the fragility of existence, as well as a philosophy of human existence that fundamentally connects the West/East divide (Nishida 1951). In this sense, the contribution of Kyoto School philosophy to the contemporary discourses on Global IR (a cluster of knowledge-forms that seek to bridge the West/East divide) is immeasurable. At the same time, however, the Kyoto School philosophy is the most abominable in the history of Japanese thought. Like the Buddhist organizations during the interwar period, the School too affirmed colonialism and supported Japan's imperialist territorial expansion (Kosaka, Nishitani, Koyama, & Suzuki 1943). For reasons of space, we cannot go further into this issue either, but interested readers should refer to various studies that specifically focus on the Kyoto School's war collaboration (Arisaka 1996; Heisig & Maraldo 1995; Osaki 2019; Shimizu 2011, 2015, 2022a; Yusa 1995).

In what ways, then, does Mahayana Buddhism, which is premised on the ephemeral nature of these subjects, intersect with science? In the recent publication *Helgoland*, a leading Italian quantum physicist Carlo Rovelli spared a

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chapter for Buddhism. Quantum theory, as we all know, is the field of physics that studies the ultimate microscopic world, where it has become clear that, oddly enough, when we look at the world at the quantum level, nothing there essentially exists. Everything we regard as existence is a phenomenon which is produced by relations with others (Rovelli 2020). This is due to the fact that the smallest unit of the world is a wave. This wave becomes a particle the moment the observer observes it. The wave disappears as soon as a relationality with another existence is established. This is the so-called 'collapse of the wave function'. This phenomenon overlaps with the Mahayana Buddhist idea that all existence is based on the concept of dependent origination that suggests that all beings do not exist independently but emerge through the relationality of *engi*.

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What does this idea of existence as a phenomenon mean in the field of Global IR? Karin Fierke (2022) describes in the postcolonial context that the world we think we know is a snapshot of a series of events. The subject (self) exists as an observer witnessing a constantly changing world, and this relationality gives rise to self and others. In this context, existence is not an individual affair. The self and the other do not pre-exist but are produced by the relationship. She goes on to say that "parts, including individuals, are always already bound up in the whole, just as the whole is in the parts", thus the self-other relations are not an 'inter-action' but an 'intra-action' (Fierke 2022, 313)

This ontological argument overlaps with the idea of Quantum Holography developed by Chengxin Pan (2020). Here, the part is not merely a part of the whole but, at the same time, a mirror reflecting the whole. A part is the whole, and the whole resides in a part. This expression is compatible with the Hua Yan view within Mahayana Buddhism. The idea of 'one and many' is similarly advocated there. Parts (many) are different representations of the whole (one) and vice versa. This expression particularly makes sense in the contemporary context of Global IR. IR theories from different regions are not simply a part of the whole of IR, but the whole is within a part. In other words, the current international situation is localized in each region in its own way, which in turn affects international relations as a whole. It is not only a spatial relationship of whole and part but also a temporal relationship of whole and part, i.e., a continual process of multiple partial local-global interactions that affect the whole international situation – that is, a flow of relationality 'from part of the whole to part of the whole'.

More to the point, Mahayana Buddhism is also suggestive of the position of the researcher. Mahayana Buddhism posits a unique entry called *Bodhisattva*. Bodhisattvas are those who have the virtue to attain Buddhahood but do not enter *nirvana* and stay in the secular world to help ordinary people attain Buddhahood. A Bodhisattva can be said to be a being who accompanies people in their sufferings and difficulties and accumulates virtues together with them. He or she does not look at people from a third-party perspective but actively bears the suffering of these people. Therein lies the significance of the existence of a Bodhisattva (Shimizu & Noro 2021). What, then, is our position as researchers of Global IR? The idea of Bodhisattvas forces us to question the meaning of engagement with the theory and practice of IR. Why do we study IR? What is the ethics of the researcher in a world of impermanence? These questions must be asked again and again. Finally, it should also be mentioned that a critical analysis of Buddhist perspectives must be made. This is because non-essential Buddhist teachings can easily be essentialized, as I explained above. At least, historically, such cases seem to be very common. The war collaboration of Japanese Buddhism and the affirmation of imperialism by the Kyoto School referred to in this article must be examined in detail and with a critical perspective. In this sense, the study of Buddhism and Global IR needs to be conducted from two aspects: the ideological aspect drawn from its doctrines and the history of Buddhism in relation to politics.

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