

## From Individual Happiness to Relational Citizenship: A Buddhist Perspective on Interdependence and Collective Well-Being

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### ABSTRACT

This article analyses a transformation in Buddhist philosophy and ethics, away from self-centred happiness to what the author calls "relational citizenship". From the fundamental teachings of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), *anattā* (non-self), compassion (*karuṇā*), loving-kindness (*mettā*), and the Bodhisattva ideal, it articulates that genuine well-being is not a solitary psychological state but a relational way of being expressed through interconnectedness, relational care, and shared ethical participation. By combining traditional Buddhist teachings with positive psychology as well as engaged Buddhism, the research recasts collective accountability, social justice, and earth compassion as a praxis of "relational citizenship". It establishes that Buddhism provides a philosophically integrated and scientifically informed alternative to liberal individualism in its account of the collective good — an account all the more significant in an era of social disintegration and environmental disaster. Buddhist-inspired relational ethics has the conceptual depth to serve as a principle for rethinking citizenship in the era of intensifying social and planetary danger.

**KEYWORDS:** Dependent origination, relational citizenship, collective well-being, engaged Buddhism, Buddhist ethics.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The nature, sources and boundaries of human happiness have been a concern of philosophical investigation since the earliest times. In Western liberal tradition, theories of happiness have focused primarily on happiness as an individual accomplishment—that is, happiness has been conceived as a state of subjective well-being that the self, as an autonomous entity, pursues and achieves as a result of the exercise of individual freedom and rational self-interest. Whether it be the utilitarian calculations of Jeremy Bentham, Aristotle's eudaimonic ethics, or the hedonic lenses of contemporary positive psychology, the single subject is the core unit of moral and psychological investigation (Seligman, 2011). But while this individualizing tendency is hypercultural hegemonic, it is increasingly out of alignment with the relational, ecological, and collective modes of human existence and thus engenders us a set of recalcitrant, residual questions about the nature of social, civic, and communal vulnerability.

In contrast to this individualist conception, the Buddhist tradition has a unique philosophical anthropology, which holds that the self is not an independent, stand-alone entity but rather it is relational and embedded within a web of interdependent causes and conditions. The key principles of *pratītyasamutpāda*, otherwise known as dependent origination, dependent arising, interdependent co-arising holds that the entirety of mind, moral functioning and social life arise from systems of interdependent causation (Payutto, 1994; Analayo, 2021). This ontological revelation has implications not only for theories of liberation but also for the concrete aspects of communal ethics. The argument made in this paper is that the Buddhist pathway offers a compelling approach for happiness reconstruction -- not as something achieved at an individual level but as something attained at a community level through almost identical, interdependent status, inherent self compassion, and proactive involvement. More specifically, it articulates the idea of "relational citizenship" as a modern expression of the social and ethical implications that Buddhism harbours in its teaching – a way of civic being predicated on recognition of interdependence, nurturing compassion, dedication to communal well-being, and participatory involvement with mechanisms of collective pain. Seeing the Sangha (monastic and lay community) and the Bodhisattva ideal of Mahāyāna Buddhism as paradigmatic expressions of relational citizenship, in this light, I suggest that these ideals "resonate," at least potentially, with contemporary concerns in social and political life.

### 2. BUDDHIST ONTOLOGY: PRATĪTYASAMUTPĀDA AND THE WEB OF INTERDEPENDENCE

The Pāli version of this principle, *paṭicca-samuppāda*, which is derived particularly from the corresponding Pāli text in Theravāda tradition, is widely considered to be the most unique and profound aspect of Buddhist philosophy (Payutto, 1994). Dependent origination is also translated as dependent arising and conditioned co-production and is the principle that no phenomenon (whether

material or mental, whether personal or social) is ever independent. All things are born of conditions, and when the conditions are no more, so are all things. The canonical statement, found in the Theravāda Saṃyutta Nikāya's Nidāna Saṃyutta, expresses this principle with exquisite brevity: this being, that is; from the arising of this comes the arising of that. When this is not present, that is not produced in the world; when this ceases, that too ceases (Analayo, 2021).

The classical formulation of the theory is a dynamic twelve factor model of causation: these twelve vital links or nidānas weave together to comprise the cyclic process of conditioned existence (saṃsāra) to include ignorance (avijjā), volitional formations (saṅkhāra), consciousness (viññāṇa), name-and-form (nāma-rūpa), the six sense bases (saḷāyatana), contact (phassa), feelingtone (vedanā), craving (taṇhā), clinging (upādāna), becoming (bhava), birth (jāti), and aging-and-death (jarā-maraṇa) (Payutto, 1994). This sequence/model therein the rise of suffering and leads to its probable end: by transposing or modifying the factors—principally the root factor of ignorance or avidyā—the entire pattern of conditioned suffering can be brought to an end.

There is, however, a Buddhist philosophical academic who compounded between two related but not alike applications of this doctrine (Analayo, 2021). The first approach, known from early Buddhist teaching, takes a specific conditional: that is, certain causes are identified as the conditions which mediate the happening or stopping of certain effects. The second, most fully developed in Huayan thought, takes this to a metaphysics of total universal interpenetration—what is sometimes translated as the net of Indra—wherein all phenomena condition and reflect each and every other, (Analayo, 2021). Analayo (2021) stresses that these two interpretations should not be confused and that the Milky Way idea of all-encompassing interconnectedness is a profound philosophical development and is not to be equated with the early Buddhist theory of causality.

But regardless of the scholarly interpretation, both applications posit a consequence with central ethical and existential relevance, to comment on the difference that the sharp boundary of self and other, or the sharp boundary of individual and community, or the sharp boundary of personal well-being and collective welfare is not a given ontologically, but is a matter-form of ignorance from which one must awaken (Payutto, 1994). It is this understanding that leads Buddhist philosophy away from the path of modern liberal individualism and towards the path of relational Self, Ethics, and Happiness. Like Payutto (1994) notes, the law of dependent origination is relevant not only to mind-events on the level of individuals, but to whole natural, social, political and cultural systems, which, too, are governed by the same universal law of conditioned interdependence.

The philosophical consequences of this ontology are far-reaching. Since all phenomena are dependently co-arisen—conditioned through relations rather than having its own essence—then seeking individual happiness separate from the milieu of collective existence is not only an unethical act but also an ontological error. Well-being cannot be achieved by fulfilling the desires of the isolated individual and at the same time turning one's back on the web of relationships and conditions that sustain one's life. Dependent origination as one classical explanation states is transformative not just for the individual level but as an understanding of connectedness is one of the most truly transformative - enlightening on a global or universal level - as it begins to unravel the feeling of separateness and strangeness.

### 3. FROM DUKKHA TO WELL-BEING: THE BUDDHIST SOTERIOLOGY OF HAPPINESS

The Buddhist path to well-being starts not with a statement of happiness as the natural state of being but with an intense investigation into suffering. The first of the Four Noble Truths - the truth of dukkha - holds that the normal state of conditioned saṃsāric being is one that is riddled with dissatisfaction, suffering, and fleetingness. Dukkha is not only bodily pain, but also includes the profound existential anxiety associated with clinging to impermanent things, to craving, and to the erroneous perception of a figural self in an ocean of impermanence (Harvey, 2000). The Four Noble Truths are both the diagnosis and the medicine: they diagnose the condition of suffering (dukkha), its cause (craving and ignorance), the prognosis or result (cessation), and the therapy (the Noble Eightfold Path).

This soteriological framework has profound consequences for the nature of happiness in Buddhism. Unlike the hedonistic or completely subjective descriptions of well-being, the Buddhist happiness is not simply the presence of a pleasing sense of feeling or gratification of desire—indeed, the pursuit of gratification is mentioned as one of the prime sources of suffering (Ngo, Mehmet, & Nguyen, 2025). Instead, true well-being – expressed in Pāli as sukha – is the result of wisdom, virtue, and mind training: a steady happiness grounded in understanding the nature of experience and not contingent on positive external circumstances. The well-being factors of Seligman's (2011) PERMA model of flourishing (positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment) are also widely reflected in Buddhist psychology though the Buddhist analysis moves beyond this to the examination of the fundamental ontological misconceptions that cause suffering (Seth Zuihō Segall, 2024).

The Eightfold path with its eight factors Right View (sammā ditthi), Right Intention or Right Thought (sammā saṅkappa), Right Speech (sammā vācā), Right Action (sammā kammanta), Right Livelihood (sammā ājīva), Right Effort (sammā vāyāma), Right Mindfulness (sammā sati) and Right Concentration (sammā samādhi) is the Buddhist formula for well-being. Woven together into the threefold structure of wisdom (paññā), morality (sīla), and meditation (samādhi), the practice is not to be conceived as a linear path of stages but as an integrated and synergistic matrix of practices (Ngo et al., 2025). Buddhism Right Intention also includes developing the intention of renunciation and good will for all beings, as well as refraining from violence — attitudes that are

relationally oriented and that travel the practitioner's focus and efforts outwards to other beings and their environment. Right Livelihood goes the same way to include ethics into the economic side of social existence, and asks that the way you make a living should not harm others.

Modern scientific studies verify its link to well-being Buddhist ethical practice. A research on the influence of Buddhist ethics and prosocial behavior among university students in Hanoi revealed that the factors of compassion, mindfulness, and ethical reasoning continuously ranked among the top elements for predicting prosocial behavior in the form of empathy, cooperation, altruism, and civic involvement (Pham, 2025). Ethical reflection was the strongest predictor of civic engagement ( $\beta = .30$ ,  $p < .001$ ), followed by compassion ( $\beta = .25$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and the model accounted for 24% of the variance (Pham, 2025). These results strengthen the Buddhist assertion that the good life for the individual and the good life for society are not isolated fields but are interdependent aspects of one ethical undertaking.

Thus, Buddhist well-being is not fully captureable through individual psychopathology. It is relational by nature, shaped in the ethical interaction with other people and nurtured by shared practice communities and aspirational. Toward reducing suffering on and within the surface of interdependent life. Soon, I'll begin to address that latent relational component (It really is hidden, not obscure—along comes Mahāyāna, the Bodhisattva ideal, and of course, the contemporary movement of engaged Buddhism) with respect to which this paper now moves on.

#### 4. ANATTĀ, THE RELATIONAL SELF, AND THE GROUNDS FOR COLLECTIVE ETHICS

The redefinition of happiness and what it means to be a good citizen within Buddhism turned out to rest largely on the Buddhist notion of no-self—or, if you want to use the Pāli term, *anattā*; in Sanskrit, it is *anātman*. Against the Brahmanical view of an eternal, permanent self (*ātman*), and against ordinary folk-psychological presuppositions about there being a fixed personal identity, Buddhism claims that the notion of the “self” is a pragmatically convenient but ultimately illusory label that attaches to an ever-changing, dependent process of physical and mental phenomena (Collins, 1982). The five *khandhas* (aggregates) – form (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), mental formations (*sankhāra*) and consciousness (*viññāṇa*) – arise and cease in a moment, conditioned, relational and without any inherent nature that could be regarded as an eternal self.

The ethical significance of that ontological teaching is far-reaching. Since the stark separation between self and other turns out to be a conceptual construction borne of ignorance rather than a metaphysical reality, the ontological basis for affective and moral differentiation between care of self and care of others evaporates. Another's suffering is not in an absolute sense distinct from one's own; the prerequisites of another's happiness are not separate from the prerequisites of one's. The teaching on *anattā* in Buddhism therefore negates the philosophical foundation on which egoism rests, and thus becomes the ontological basis for universal compassion (*karuṇā*) and *metta* (loving-kindness), as proper responses to the very nature of existence, rather than being understood as exceptional (Harvey, 2000).

Legal and political philosophers have up to now largely neglected the relevance of this doctrine for issues of collective responsibility and citizenship. The Buddhist idea of *anattā* (the denial of existence of a soul-self) allows the human perspective to see itself as connected. It is from this perspective that the Buddhist worldview supports collective responsibility when we realize that the well-being of one depends on the well-being of all, social justice is nothing more than an extension of our own interests. This reconceptualization of social interest eliminates the tension between individual rights and collective duty within classical liberalism: the care for community is not the sacrifice of individual interests, but rather their fulfillment, if the self is relational in its nature.

Similarly, comparative political theory scholars have found that the Buddhist notion of *anattā* poses a radical challenge to the liberal humanist subject, upon which rights discourse depends and opens the door to a more relational conception of political community. While liberal political philosophy bases rights on the essential dignity of an autonomous individual, Buddhist political philosophy bases its ethical imperatives on the awareness of shared vulnerability, mutual conditionality, and the network of relations which give rise to and sustain persons. On such a view, rights arise not from individual entitlement but through reciprocal responsibilities in relationships, contrasting with the Lockean concept of innate individual rights.

This reconceptualization of the self in ontological terms also has important implications for our understanding of citizenship as elaborated in this article. If people are relationally constituted—if who we are is largely determined by the communities, relationships, and environments of which we are a part—then citizenship cannot merely be conceived as a legal category that grants rights to individuals who exist prior to politics. Instead, citizenship should be seen as a way of being relational mode: way of being in one's interdependence with consciousness, responsibility, and care. The self in Buddhist thought serves as the philosophical foundation for exactly such a relational model of civic identity.

#### 5. THE BODHISATTVA IDEAL: UNIVERSAL COMPASSION AS CIVIC OBLIGATION

The most clear institutional expression of the social aspects of Buddhist soteriology is to be found in the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva ideal. Bodhisattva literally means “an awakening being”. Whereas the Theravāda ideal is that of the Arhat who achieves enlightenment for himself, the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva ideal is that of a Bodhisattva achieving enlightenment for the sake of all

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sentient beings, even the most wicked appearing human beings such as the god King Mara, an enemy of the Lord Buddha. The Bodhisattva (one who is dedicated to pursuing enlightenment) makes a strong commitment (bodhicitta) not to pursue personal nibbāna (nirvāṇa) until all beings have attained deliverance, offering the rewards of their practice and the benefits of their activities to the diminution of universal dukkha (Harvey, 2000). This motivation is not thought of as a renunciation of personal joy but rather as its highest embodiment: the awareness that one's salvation is tethered to the salvation of others.

The Bodhisattva ideal was what scholars have identified as a turning point in the development of Buddhist ethical awareness – the move from the practice of personal virtue and the path to liberation for oneself toward the active, empathetic remediation of the social conditions that engendered suffering for all sentient beings. This is not a rejection of earlier Buddhist teaching but its natural unfolding: the recognition of interdependence, once fully internalized, culminates in a wish for the survival of all beings conditioned by the same net of causes and conditions that shapes one's own. The practice of the six perfections (pāramitās) – generosity (dāna), ethics (sīla), patience (kṣānti), diligence (vīrya), meditation (dhyāna), and wisdom (prajñā) – articulates the Bodhisattva's engaged praxis in the world, as one of contemplative depth and commitment to the alleviation of suffering (King, 2005).

The Bodhisattva ideal has been identified by scholars of engaged Buddhism as the most direct historical and philosophical precedent for the present-day form of socially engaged Buddhism, and as such offers the strongest Buddhist foundation for a what might be termed civic obligation, defined as a responsibility to the conditions of our shared life that is not grounded in legal mandate but is informed through understanding and compassion (King, 2005). In her exploration of Engaged Buddhists social ethics, Sallie B. King (2005) traces the foundation of its moral philosophy in the classical Buddhist principles and practices of interdependence, compassion and meditation, and illustrates how these can be applied to specific social and political problems. She argues that this engagement is not a rejection of Buddhist orthodoxy but its fullest expression in a time of universal social suffering. And the Bodhisattva is concerned with the conditions of suffering, as well as its causes—the background of suffering, as Bhikkhu Bodhi (2009) has recently termed this a radical reinterpretation of spiritual priorities, a reorientation of one's practice away from the quest for transcendental liberation or heavenly rebirth, towards the task of transforming the oppressive institutional systems that bring about so much suffering in the world today. And this organizational shift is critical: Buddhist compassion is not simply reimagined as a personal ethic, but rather a political obligation to work for reforming social, racially unjust practices. From this angle, individual flourishing is not really a private accomplishment but a collective enterprise, and the prerequisites for the later are at least partially politics, economics, and institution.

Thus the Bodhisattva ideal, forges a very strong philosophical basis in terms of relational citizenship. Instead of rooting civic duty in terms of contractarian or legal obligation, it turns to the origins of civic duty in an awareness of dependence and an ethical response of empathy which in turn, carries its own political sides. The Bodhisattva's outlook on the world — demonstrated by wisdom and compassion, and extended to all sentient beings through skillful means — offers an ideal paradigm for a practice of citizenship attuned to the countless relations of our interconnected world.

### 6. THE SANGHA AS PARADIGM OF RELATIONAL CITIZENSHIP

The most concrete institutional embodiment of relational community in Buddhism is the Sangha—the community of practitioners, monastic and lay, united by shared commitment to the Dharma and to one another in the path. Classical Buddhist sociology regards the Sangha as the third jewel of the Three Jewels (along with the Buddha and the Dharma) and is a requisite cause for the growth and dissemination of Buddhist spiritual praxis. The historical Buddha's pronouncement preserved in the Samyutta Nikāya, good friendship, good association, good intimacy is not half but the whole of the holy life (Harvey, 2000, p. 112) announces the irreducibly communal facet of Buddhist soteriology – emancipation is not a solitary act, but a relational one that is upheld by communities of common praxis.

Researchers have described the historic Sangha as one of the earliest social anarchist experiments in history. In establishing the Sangha, the Buddha intentionally formed a community in which former social distinctions—caste, class, gender—were made secondary to the common vow to the path. His famous statement that the sea has one taste, the taste of freedom, was commented parallelly with his assertion that in the Sangha, all discourses, its followers become equal members of the Buddhist order, regardless of their birth. This community living society, straight out of a dystopian future, was a complete contrast to India's traditional caste and class system where birth decided everything. The Vinaya -- the code of rules which governs the Sangha -- functioned as a kind of constitutional law, including democratic deliberation, conflict resolution, and group governance (American University Repository, n.d.).

The Sangha and its organizing principle highlight several key features of what I have described elsewhere as relational citizenship. Rather, the Sangha's membership is defined by a voluntary commitment to a set of shared values and practices, an associative citizenship model in which political theorists have recently taken interest as a non-national or non-ethnic model of civic belonging. And secondly, Sangha operates on what Buddhist leaders call “checks and balances,” ensuring that decisions benefit rather than harm the entire community of practitioners (not simply its teachers and clergy). Third, the Sangha's model of community is expressed by a particular form of reciprocity between monastic and laypersons: monks and nuns offer spiritual counsel, instruction and moral



exemplariness; lay devotees furnish material aid and hands-on participation in societal affairs—a triumvirate of relationship the state, the Sangha, and the laity that has molded Buddhist Asian civilizations for the better part of one hundred centuries.

Modern proponents of engaged Buddhism have attempted to adapt and transform the Sangha model for the modern world. This ideal for Sangha as a model of just community—placed around common practice instead of hierarchy, focused on collective welfare rather than personal gain—is one of Buddhism’s most enduring contributions to contemporary civic thought. why democratic Sanghas should be created where members participate in an egalitarian manner, sharing the fruits of their knowledge, life experiences, and meditative practices and that the manner in which engaged Buddhists relate within their Sang has should be informed by modern day progressive values of equality, democracy, involvement and inclusiveness.

Furthermore, the Sangha ideal is not limited to Buddhist practitioners. Developed and rooted in the relational ethics of Sangha membership, the notion of interbeing (Thich Nhat Hanh) as a modern expression of *pratītyasamutpāda* reaches out towards all those who participate in the matrix of interdependent living— or, for that matter, to all living without exception. From this point of view, the Sangha’s horizons and that of relational citizenship expand with sentient existence itself.

### 7. ENGAGED BUDDHISM: INTERDEPENDENCE IN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PRACTICE

An individual khmers Buddhists must practice day to day Buddhist teaching so would be a strong supporter of engaged Buddhism in that is was the focus of the previous generations teaching the current generations how to return to a strong moral because of the ancient laws it was enthnice religious nationalism before that deaths and amongst the souls environment, the practical concern for a better society\better political life is the thread that binds Buddhist teachings of interdependence to contemporary social and political issues is now validated fashihly in Engaged Buddhism nowadays in which there are transnationalism intermingled with the love for the land concerns to social and political radicality. Though the term was coined by the Vietnamese Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh in his 1967 book *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire* (avifauna in Lin, 2001), the movement’s sources are much older and more widespread in Buddhist history, including the social reforms of B. R. Ambedkar in India, the humanistic Buddhism of Taixu in China, and the charitable works of monastic communities of Buddhist in old avifaunal records (Pluralism Project, N.d.).Engaged Buddhism tries to activate Buddhist morality, wisdom, teachings of meditation practice, and of the Dharma in modern times, to advance social-political, environmental and economic suffering as well as wrongdoing.

The conceptual basis of engaged Buddhism rests on the understanding that there exists a deep relation between personal *dukkha* and social *dukkha* – that the suffering of individuals is intertwined with social, political, and environmental infrastructures of oppression, and that these social infrastructures function as. This awareness causes Thich Nhat Hanh and later engaged Buddhist teachers to assert that what they do is not a new development, but rather the most complete realization of the Buddhist path in the present day: since the goal of Buddhist practice is to emancipate all beings from *dukkha*, and since systems of social inequality intensify *dukkha* at scale, engaged action in response to such systems is not just desirable but required by the Buddhist duty of compassion.

Thich Nhat Hanh’s *Order of Interbeing* (1966) expresses this commitment through its fourteen guidelines for engaged Buddhism—these guidelines represent an articulation of the five precepts, imbuing each with a manifest political, social and economic relevance. The first precept to refrain from taking life is turned into an active command: do not kill, do not encourage killing, use every possible method to protect life and to prevent war. This proactive, systemic perspective is what defines engaged Buddhism in general: refraining from causing direct harm has not been sufficient, it was also necessary to work toward “eliminating the conditions that allow harm to be done, and become habitual”. Within this logic, mindfulness practice includes more than the inner life of the solitary practitioner, covering instead the social and political relations manifested through collective consciousness and collective practice (Fukuoka, 2023).

The application of principles of engaged Buddhism to social justice movements covers an amazing breadth of fields. Engaged issues of Buddhism have included peace activism, environmentalism, consumerism, racism, prison reform, hospice care, globalization, gender equity, and economic justice (Pluralism Project, n.d.). In all spheres, our distinctive Buddhist critique discerns the causes of suffering in the three root poisons of greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*)—conceived as more than isolated mental conditions but as systemic social constructs: structural greed embedded in economic systems, collective hatred enshrined in racism and nationalism, communal delusion sustained by ideological systems that mystify interconnection and propagate the notion of separateness.

Therefore, the engaged Buddhist perspective offers a systematic conceptual interpretation of how unique spiritual practice relates to collective political activity. The understanding that individual good fortune is tied to that of the community offers a common cause for problems like inequality, climate change and social justice, and engaged Buddhism illustrates how contemplative practice can inspire and guide social activism, representing a path between detachment from social issues and activism that is devoid of spiritual basis (Dhamma USA, 2025). This middle way rooted in Buddhist ontology cultivated through practice manifested in compassionate engagement is the pragmatic aspect of what I term relational citizenship in this paper.

### 8. BUDDHIST WELL-BEING AND POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY: EMPIRICAL CONVERGENCES

Although the philosophical and doctrinal analysis of the prior sections serves as the primary warrant of this paper, modern psychological research does afford additional empirical support to a number of its premises. At issue here is a deeper theological/philosophical question: the Buddhist claim that well-being is relational and interdependence grounds collective ethical responsibility not only can, but also must be, established on its own non-constructural support—not by arriving at a certain threshold of consonant “Western” perspectives, but rather by evaluating it against higher teachings and perspectives within the tradition itself; the consonances outlined in this section are but a glimpse of the wider reverberation of Buddhist insights and do not underfuttoil their internal justification. The philosophical assertions of Buddhist teachings related to well-being, interdependence and collective flourishing have been aligned with empirical evidence from recent studies in psychology. The convergence of Buddhism and positive psychology is one of the most fecund areas of current scholarship in psychology and in Buddhist studies more broadly, with much to say about how the relation between individual and collective well-being ought to be understood and fostered (Segall & Kristeller, 2022).

The positive psychology movement whose originators were were Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi, Christopher Peterson, and Ed Diener aims at studying the factors that contribute to happiness, wellbeing, and positive human functioning (Seth Zuihō Segall, 2024). Although positive psychology grew out of a generally individualistic perspective, its research increasingly affirms the significance of relational variables in well-being: relationships are one of the five elements of Seligman’s (2011) PERMA model and research on compassion, generosity, and prosocial behavior consistently shows that other-oriented values & practices are some of the strongest predictors of subjective well-being. This resonance with Buddhist teaching is not accidental: Buddhist-derived approaches, particularly mindfulness-based interventions and lovingkindness meditation, have had a profound impact in shaping the empirical research agenda of positive psychology.

One of the most notable areas of convergence is the Buddhist tradition of mettā (lovingkindness) meditation, which includes the generation of wishes for the happiness, security, and welfare of oneself, friends, neutral parties, adversaries, and all sentient beings. Popularized in the English-speaking West by Thich Nhat Hanh, loving-kindness meditation directs the practitioner to open their heart to love and care for others and increases the capacity to feel empathy, goodwill, and compassion for oneself and others (Segall & Kristeller, 2022). Research indicates that lovingkindness meditation practice has positive effects on prosocial emotions such as love, positive feelings toward the outgroup, feelings of social connection, and well-being—precisely the effects that Buddhist teaching predicts as a consequence of cultivating relational virtue.

The research of Kristin Neff (2003) on self-compassion, deeply based on Buddhist psychology, is another empirically informed example of relational ethics and well-being (Seth Zuihō Segall, 2024). Neff’s understanding of self-compassion consists of the element of common humanity—the awareness that one’s own imperfections and hardships are not isolating but rather what every human experiences. This idea of shared vulnerability—which lies at the heart of Buddhist teachings on the interconnected nature of all things—has been empirically linked to increased happiness, optimism, and life satisfaction. Higher levels of self-compassion have been found among individuals who report feeling more positive and happy about their life and their relationships (Seth Zuihō Segall, 2024). Therefore, the Buddhist notion that recognizing interdependence and mutual vulnerability nurtures, rather than diminishes, one’s own individual flourishing is substantiated by such findings.

The research of Yu, Mak, and Chio (2020), tailored quoted in Analayo (2021), explores the concept of interconnectedness awareness and the positive outcomes of well-being by revealing that individuals who score higher on interconnectedness are more likely to support social justice ideologies and to possess a stronger prosocial orientation. These findings are consistent with what is taught in Buddhism, that developing awareness of interdependence leads not to a passive resignation to the way things are but to an active engagement in transforming the conditions that lead to suffering. The empirical literature therefore supports the central claim of this paper: that Buddhist well-being is not merely relational but its cultivation in fact produces orientations to the collective welfare that are precisely those to which relational citizenship subscribes.

But scholars have cautioned against an uncritical secularization of Buddhist mindfulness practices that removes them from their relational and ethical context. Critics have cautioned that numerous mindfulness-based interventions degenerate into McMindfulness—the commodification of Buddhist practice by corporations, the military, and institutional systems that attend to managing individual suffering while leaving structural sources of that suffering intact (Purser, 2019, as cited in Seth Zuihō Segall, 2024). Seth Zuihō Segall—political progressives (see social gospel and neoliberalism) say that because many root causes of individual unhappiness are social rather than intrapsychic, people would be better served by undertaking collective efforts to address political, economic and social injustice (Seth Zuihō Segall, 2024). The notion of relational citizenship constructed in this article grounds this critique: the good of Buddhist well-being, and by extension the kind of citizenry it generates, simply cannot be articulated as techniques of individual stress management but must grapple with the conditions of collective life at the structural level.

## 9. TOWARD A BUDDHIST THEORY OF RELATIONAL CITIZENSHIP

Through several aspects of Buddhist philosophy and practice, the preceding argumentation has followed a consistent line from individual happiness to relational citizenship as this paper has framed it. Synthesizing these strands, in this part pertains a formal conceptualization of relational citizenship rooted in Buddhist thought—a conceptualization that encompasses ontological, ethical, psychological, and political elements within one coherent theoretical structure.

The relational citizenship articulated here is a way of being a member of one's communities that involves four interrelated aspects: 1) an ontological sense of interdependence, 2) the development of relational virtues such as compassion, loving-kindness, and generosity, 3) concern for the well-being of all the community which in principle includes all sentient beings, and (4) a commitment to contributing to changing the structural conditions of collective life, including the transformation of those institutions and systems that generate harm on a large-scale.

The first dimension is the ontological cognition of interdependence as the cognitive-affective foundation of relational citizenship. We learn through Buddhist practice that we are constituted by relationships, that we do not precede them. This disintegrates the false idea of the isolated self and allows the meditator to recognize the completeness of his or her interconnectedness with other people, with society, with the natural world. It is not only an abstract theoretic assertion of a metaphysical proposition but a transformation in perception—what Thich Nhat Hanh calls looking deeply where the separation between one's self and others disintegrates and the sufferings of people are seen as interconnected with one's own (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1995, as quoted in PDX Press Books, 2020).

This ontological awareness informs the second component, that of development in relational virtues. The fantasy of Separateness vanishes and compassion (*karuṇā*) and lovingkindness (*mettā*) naturally evolve as the correct responses to the insight of shared vulnerability and interdependence. Some elements of the Buddhist tradition have a complete array of practical methodologies to develop these qualities, like loving-kindness meditation, compassion practices, refinement of equanimity (*upekkhā*), and empathetic joy (*muditā*) for others' achievements. As a group the *Brahmavihāras* are a complete course in cultivating altruistic emotion that benefits the meditator and produces practically helpful expressions of care and compassion.

The third dimension of relational citizenship, concern for the common good, extends the scope of relational citizenship beyond immediate community relations to include relations with all sentient beings. In fact, this universalist outlook, most eloquently expressed in the *Bodhisattva* ideal, excludes the constraint of relational citizenship to in-group based or any form of narrow altruism. With its strict ethic of discipline and relentless fairness – extending *mettā* not just to those we care for, but also to neutrals, enemies, and finally to all beings in the cosmos – the Buddhist tradition offers a religious foundation for an authentically global civic ethic that can overcome national, racial, or species-based barriers (Harvey, 2000). It is in this aspect of Buddhist relational citizenship that has a universalizing direction, that is most taken up, if one is to realize present condition of global environmental catastrophe and transnational inequalities.

**Dimension Four: Structural Conditions Active Dimension of Buddhist Relational Ethics** The fourth dimension—active engagement with structural conditions—politicizes Buddhist relational ethics. Relational citizenship is more than an identity or an interpersonal way of being or feeling about others, but rather it is an aspirational engagement with the remaking of the collective conditions that produce the scales of well-being and suffering. As the engaged Buddhist tradition demonstrates, such commitment follows immediately from the Buddhist assessment of suffering: since *dukkha* is conditioned—since it arises from causes that can be determined and that can be mitigated by addressing those causes—compassion does not simply imply hospice work for individual sufferers but it becomes systemic work for the conditions that sustain suffering. Bhikkhu Bodhi's (2009) portrayal of engaged Buddhism as a third phase in the evolution of Buddhist ethical awareness after individual emancipation and societal maturity, as a progression toward the reformation of oppressive systems in particular, captures this facet of relational citizenship with precision. This fourfold portrayal of relational citizenship synthesizes the strands of Buddhist teaching considered in this article – dependent origination, no-self, compassion, the *Bodhisattva* ideal, *Sangha* community, and engaged practice – into an integrated and holistic model. It offers a Buddhist ontological based account of citizenship, which presents a challenge and an alternative to liberal individualist accounts of citizenship, is substantiated by empirical psychological research, is historically practiced in Buddhist institutional practice, and is ended in practical application in the contemporary movement engaged Buddhism. Critically, it does not pit individual welfare and group welfare as rival values, but acknowledges them as intersecting and interdependent aspects of one relational process.

## 10. CRITICAL REFLECTIONS AND CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE

Any rigorous consideration of Buddhist political philosophy must confront significant tensions and problems of the tradition itself. The connection between Buddhism's transcendental orientation and its political life has always been a source of tension for the religion throughout Buddhist history. In many cases in history, the Buddhist institutions at least acquiesced, and sometimes even openly supported rather than undermined, social hierarchies and more repressive forms of government. The relationships between Buddhist kingdoms and their subject have been complex, partial and contested, even at times providing justifications for violence and nationalism—a pattern with contemporary expression in places like Myanmar and Sri Lanka, if not more.

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Engaged Buddhist writings acknowledge these historical complexities. ‘Protestant Buddhism’ is the selective citation of universalist Buddhist texts, ignoring hierarchical or quietist strands, coopted for ideological ends to fit modern and secular needs that distort historical truth. The notion of relational citizenship developed in this paper draws upon the best resources of Buddhist teaching and practice, not from a naive romanticization of Buddhist institutional history. To read the Buddhist tradition in a sophisticated and self-critical way, using the Buddhist tools of analysis, non-attachment, and commitment to truth to examine its own historical missteps, is itself a Buddhist practice.

Another important issue for religious studies is the ways in which the relational citizenship framework theorised here resonates and diverges from wider nonrelational citizenship theories. While the idea of relational citizenship is based on Buddhist sources, it can be discussed with similar ideas from other religious traditions. In Christian tradition, for example, the Pauline metaphor of the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12) expresses a vision for communally embedded care in which the pain of one member is the pain of the entire body—a relational anthropology with parallels to Buddhist ideas of *pratītyasamutpāda*, despite being elaborated within a distinct theology of divine love (*agape*) and the common good. The Confucian tradition of *ren* (benevolence or humaneness), defined as embedded in right relationships within expanding circles of moral community, also presents another non-Western alternative account of relational civic virtue that should be judged along with Buddhist relational ethics. These convergences do not erase the profound philosophical divergences among these traditions, the Buddhist *anattā*, the Christian personhood, and the Confucian relational selfhood each is anchored in unique ontological premises, but they do indicate that the challenge of formulating relational citizenship in an age of individualism is a concern common to religious traditions, and that comparative religious studies can contribute uniquely to contemporary political philosophy. Such engagement at the level of Buddhist perspective and theology enriches — rather than compromises — the distinctiveness of Buddhist contributions by situating them within a broader discussion of the religious dimensions of civil life.

Another line of tension is associated with the complex relations between individual conversion and social change. A persistent critique of Buddhist-inspired approaches to political reform is that its emphasis on inner change can be used as a substitute for, rather than as a complementary pathway toward, structural political work—a form of politics that remains uncritical of the status quo and is overly focused on inwardness. In the engaged Buddhist tradition have responded to this critique by underscoring the vital interrelation between transformation-in-the-person and transformation-in-the-world: in the absence of the inner work of cultivating wisdom and compassion, political activism threatens to reincorporate the very dynamics of ego, hatred, and delusion that fuel the matrices of oppression being contested. The relational citizenship proposed here embraces both halves of that dialectic, insofar as it calls for inner relational virtues on the part of subjects even as it calls for sustained engagement with structural conditions from without.

Nevertheless, despite these conflicts, a Buddhist-inflected relational citizenship theory is of contemporary relevance. At a moment and place of escalating social stratification, democratic decay, environmental crisis, and the fragmentation of the social *per se* under the strain of market individualism and technodigitalities, the Buddhist tradition has philosophical resources that are astonishingly amenable to pragmatic considerations. Its metaphysics of interdependence also challenges the metaphysics of atomistic selfhood, which has fueled many societal ills in the modern age. Its history of tender and non-violent treatment of others might offer a model for a politics of solidarity that moves beyond the barriers of ethnicity, nation and even species. Its practical tradition of *Sangha* community provides a reliable relational organizational model that marries contemplative profundity to engaged commitment... And its empirically validated discoveries on the correlations between relational virtue and well-being offer scientific confirmation of what Buddhist praxis has always proclaimed — that genuine happiness is a collective enterprise, calling for the metamorphosis not only of individual minds but also of the common milieu of communal life.

### CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to establish that the Buddhist tradition provides a philosophically advanced, empirically informed and practically elaborated analysis for understanding happiness as a by-product of relational and collective dynamics, rather than solely as an individual psychological state. From the fundamental tenet of *pratītyasamutpāda* — which reveals the interdependence inherent in all phenomena — to the related principles of *anattā*, compassion, the *Bodhisattva* ideal, *Sangha* community, and engaged practice, it has articulated the journey from individual flourishing to what has been described as relational citizenship: a form of community membership defined by ontological recognition of interdependence, the development of relational virtues, dedication to the universal good, and intervention in the systemic features of shared life.

The notion of relational citizenship proposed in this article contributes a lacuna both to Buddhist studies and political theory. It develops a contemporary Language for the socio-political aspects of Buddhist ethical teaching adequate to the complexity and immediacy of our time as addressed in current global challenges in the field of Buddhist studies. In political theory, it provides a non-liberal individualist conception of citizenship rooted in other fundamental ontological presuppositions, based on alternate values, and giving rise to a different mode of civic existence. The Buddhist claim that the flourishing of the individual and the



welfare of the group are not competing ends, but mutually reinforcing aspects of a single relational process, is a radical re-articulation of what private life and public service should mean and how they should be conducted.

The problems of today (global warming, poverty, fragile democracy, cultural cleavage) are not just an opportunity for Buddhists to burn outmoded wisdom in a bonfire because its adherents could not imagine the challenges. As the engaged Buddhist tradition has explained, it is indeed an extension of the Buddhist analysis of suffering and dependent origination into the realm of the social and contemporary politics. If this web of interdependence is seen as total—meaning not just personal psychology, but also social, and even environmental and global systems of cause and effect—the imperative to practice becomes, for Buddhism, a mission to influence the collective human condition for the better in avenues of wisdom, kindness, and cooperation in continuation.

Potential avenues for future research to extend the analysis presented here would include:

a comparative exploration of Buddhist relational citizenship with other non-Western traditions of political philosophy; empirically based studies of how Buddhist communal practices cultivate civic engagement and prosocial behavior; developing pedagogical models for applying Buddhist principles of interdependence as a framework for civic education; and applying Buddhist-informed critical theories to current global issues of concern, including climate change, economic injustice and ethnic strife. In these domains, the path that has been sketched out here—beginning at the subjective idea of happiness and ending with relational citizenship—opens up a promising and rich line of inquiry that enables us to connect not only with the philosophical domain but also with the lived conditions of human existence.

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