Constructing the Self in Pure Land Buddhism: The Role of Ritualized, Embodied Activity in a Social Context

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INTRODUCTION

The study of religion generally, as well as Buddhism when it is constructed as "a religion," continues to focus on doctrine. Tomoko Masuzawa has evidenced this as dating from the nineteenth century formation of the category of Buddhism as a world religion. She indicates that "this early notion of Buddhism [involved] the privileging of its original metaphysic over and against modern practices and institutions."[1] That doctrinal concerns are still central to the Western study of Buddhism is evident by how much academic attention is given to the field of Buddhist "philosophy."

The conception of religion as fundamentally credal and experiential is a legacy of the concerns of nineteenth century theology and the goals of global mission. The consequent focus on doctrine creates an only fragmentary and distorted understanding of Buddhism. The focus on doctrine is closely entangled with a particular conception of the self as an individual, rational agent—one who, understanding what it is that is proper to believe, deduces what is proper to do. In other words, this focus on doctrine both derives from and reinforces the illusion of the conscious self as the determinative source of thoughts, judgments, decisions, and actions.

Despite the continuing dominance of a focus on doctrine, several scholars are giving greater attention to the embodied and material

1. Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, Or How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 127.

aspects of those activities and practices categorized as religious. This clumsy locution, "activities and practices categorized as religious," is intended to indicate the point that to categorize one set of activities and practices as religious is to imply that those are somehow distinct from other activities and practices that are not being marked by the adjective "religious," and are somehow more the norm. Although he is writing about Zen ritual, Dale Wright draws on the work of Wittegenstein and Heidegger, whose arguments apply to all human activity.

> Wittgenstein and Heidegger, two designers of post-Cartesian thought in the West, claim that our most basic grasp of the world—our most fundamental way of understanding it—is the practical mastery that we have of our physical, embodied world. Fundamental knowledge, they assert, is "know-how," the deep knowledge we have through routines and rituals that have long since taught us how to get around in the concrete dimensions of our world.[2]

This emphasis on embodied cognition as fundamental is not limited to some special category of activity that we can label as religious, but rather Wittgenstein and Heidegger are talking about all human engagement with the lived world (*Lebenswelt*).

Similarly, several of theorists whom Patricia Q. Campbell draws on in her study of two Buddhist centers are concerned with ritual, but there are several who are concerned with understanding human activity more generally.[3] The difficulty of overcoming Cartesian dualism, of engaging in "post-Cartesian thought" as Wright puts it, is evident in Campbell's need to explicitly state that her approach involves a "view of ritualizing [that expands] beyond physical, performative postures and gestures. Learning through ritualizing takes place in all aspects of body-mind: Physical *and* mental aspects change through the development of knowledge *and* skills."[4] A shift to an understanding construction of the self that is rooted in the concept of ritualized, embodied action will be useful in creating a fuller understanding of Buddhist praxes, that is, by placing doctrines and concepts in relation

2. Dale S. Wright, "Rethinking Ritual Practice in Zen Buddhism," in *Zen Ritual: Studies of Zen Theory in Practice*, ed. Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright (Oxford and New York: Oxford Univesity Press, 2007), 3–20: 13.
3. Patricia Q. Campbell, *Knowing Body, Moving Mind: Ritualizing and Learning at Two Buddhist Centers* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13–17.
4. Ibid., 16.

to practice, and both in relation to the embodied self, and the locatedness of subjective experience.

In Western philosophical thought, the relation between mind and body has become increasingly highly contentious since the time of René Descartes (1596–1650). Descartes, considered by many to be the founder of modern philosophy, established mind-body dualism—a very strong separation of mind and body as ontically distinct, two different kinds of existence. Where mind was defined as "unextended being" having no physical size or shape, body was defined as its opposite, that is, as "extended being." This mind-body dualism has since Descartes' time become not just widely influential, but effectively naturalized, that is, presumed to be just the natural way things are, rather than a particular way of defining how things are.

Particularly in the middle of the twentieth century, however, Cartesian dualism came under increasing scrutiny. This occurred first in the circles of Husserlian phenomenology in which figures such as Martin Heidegger and others began to reconsider the relation between mind and body in light of the concept of consciousness and find the sharp dualism of Descartes problematic. Phenomenological inquiry influenced the development of existentialism, that is, the work of figures such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Of the two, we focus here on the ideas about embodiment developed by Merleau-Ponty, whom I have found to be more scientifically grounded in his approach, and who has continued to be quite influential in the disourse on Buddhism and cognitive science.[5]

MERLEAU-PONTY: THE BODY

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961), a leading French philosopher of the mid-twentieth century, gives centrality of place to the body in his analysis of human consciousness. Rejecting Cartesian dualism, which continues to pervade much of Western philosophical and religious thought, Merleau-Ponty points out that "I observe external objects with my body, I handle them, examine them, walk around them, but as for my body, I do not observe it itself: to be able to do so, I would need

5. Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2016).

to use a second body that would itself not be observable."[6] In his understanding of the body, Merleau-Ponty goes well beyond simply giving one's own body a privileged position as a container of consciousness that imposes some specific perspective. In other words, it is not the case that consciousness is located somewhere inside the head, which serves as the merely incidental container for consciousness. Nor is it the case that because of the nature of the physical body there are limitations placed on consciousness by the particular structure of our sensory organs. Instead, one knows the world, experiences the world, has perceptions of the world because of the body. As one commentator, Taylor Carman, summarizes, for Merleau-Ponty, "The body is not just a causal but a transcendental condition of perception, which is itself not just an inner subjective state, but a mode of being in the world. In short, we have no understanding of perception in abstraction from the body and the world."[7] Because of the pervasive and unreflective Cartesian dualism of mental and physical, "it is difficult to see what ground could be common to 'physiological facts' that are in space and 'psychic facts' that are nowhere."[8]

The non-dual perspective suggested by Carman's discussion of Merleau-Ponty's view regarding the body points us toward considering religion from the perspective of embodied activity. William Sax has taken such an approach, emphasizing the importance of embodied activity in the construction of the self.

SAX: THE PERFORMATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF

The *pāṇḍav līlā* is a ceremony or ritual drama performed in the central Himalayan region in which the stories of the five Pāṇḍava brothers of the Mahābhārata are danced and recited. In his study of this ceremony, William S. Sax introduces a theoretical orientation for understanding the performative construction of the self, an important dimension of ritual efficacy. Sax discusses such rituals in terms of two interlocking dimensions: cognitive content and sociological efficacy. The former

6. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (orig. pub. Gallimard, 1945); quoted in Taylor Carman, *Merleau-Ponty* (London & New York: Routlege, 2008), 82.
7. Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 82–83.
8. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*; quoted in Taylor Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 83.

comprise "cosmological information," which, following Tambiah, Sax notes is not limited to religious cosmologies, but include all the various forms of social organization, such as "legal codes, political conventions, social class relations,"[9] and so on. A person's social identity and social status is both located within the socio-cosmological order, and changes of social identity and social status can be effected through ritual performance, which takes place within the socio-cosmological order. Sax indicates that such ritual performances have both meaning and function. Meaning in Sax's use refers to cognitive content regarding the ordering of the socio-cosmos, while function refers to sociological efficacy in reordering the socio-cosmic location of the individual. Regarding the *pāṇḍav līlā* itself, Sax presents it as an illustration of "how a particular genre of public performance achieves the cognitive task of constructing (at least in part) personal 'selves' as part of a nexus of social relations while legitimating them in terms of an overarching cosmology."[10]

Sax uses the term "performative" in the sense that J. L. Austin talked about performative language.[11] Austin's ideas regarding the performative efficacy of some language use lies in the background of Tambiah's approach to ritual. Of this approach, Sax says that the

> great value of this approach lies in the way in which it shifts the terms of analysis of ritual away from judgments of truth or falsity, according to which ritual and its practitioners must inevitably be regarded as mystified, irrational, or downright foolish, to judgments of felicity, according to which ritual is seen as one of many human devices for ensuring an ordered social existence.[12]

The ritual performance is itself the efficacious action—the ritual "does not merely reflect the 'selves' of those who participate in it but actively creates them."[13] By taking this approach, Sax explicitly rejects the common dichotomous understanding of action as either "expressive"

9. William S. Sax, *Dancing the Self: Personhood and Performance in the Pāṇḍav Līlā of Garhwal* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 4.

10. Ibid., 4. This understanding is the same as that promoted by Ray Rappaport in his work as well.

11. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 6.

12. Sax, *Dancing the Self*, 4–5.

13. Ibid., 5.

or "instrumental." Under this common view, action either expresses some inner state of consciousness, or is directed toward the attainment of some goal.

Sax, however, extends performance theory from understandings of how public ritual performances "serve to create, reaffirm, and alter collective worlds of meaning and relationship" by asking, "How is the self constructed in and through performance?"[14] He calls attention to the way in which self-representation, the formation of the self in relation to others, is not simply a matter of "concepts or texts or cognitive facts," but rather that the cultural construction of selfhood takes place in "public, embodied performances."[15]

Sax examines the ceremonial of the *pāṇḍav līlā*, or "play of the Pāṇḍava brothers," as effecting change in several different dimensions of the self—as having a regional identity, as gendered, as a member of a caste, being a member of a generation, and so on.[16] One of the implications that can be drawn out of Sax's discussion is that social identity, that is, a sense of self, is not something static and fixed, nor is it even something that only changes at times of significant transition, such as marriage. While the latter significant transitions do effect one's sense of self in a significant way, the sense of self is constantly being maintained in all interactions with others, and even self-reflectively in the silence of one's time alone.

RITUALIZING: REGULARIZED, EMBODIED ACTIVITY

For some or perhaps many Shin Buddhist adherents in the US today, it would seem that there is a degree of ambivalence about understanding the tradition as a form of practice. Even more generally many people in the US today are at least ambivalent if not antagonistic toward understanding their religiosity as involving ritual. Rather than debating the concepts of practice and ritual, thinking in terms of regularized, public, embodied activities will allow us to consider the constructive function of these activities in forming the self. By self here I am referring to the constructed sense of personal identity, which has both

14. Ibid., 6.
15. Ibid., 8.
16. Ibid., 15.

social and private dimensions.[17] And, rather than engaging the contentious task of arguing whether Shin Buddhism has or doesn't have practice, whether it has or doesn't have ritual, we can conjoin Sax's focus on the cultural construction of selfhood in public, embodied performances together with Catherine Bell's concept of ritualization.

Bell moves to replace the dichotomy between ritual and everyday, pragmatic activity with a scale of ritualization. She notes that "When analyzed as ritualization, acting ritually emerges as a particular cultural strategy of differentiation linked to particular social effects and rooted in a distinctive interplay of a socialized body and the environment it structures."[18] More fully, she explains that she uses

> the term "ritualization" to draw attention to the way in which certain social actions strategically distinguish themselves in relation to other actions. In a very preliminary sense, ritualization is a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities. As such, ritualization is a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the "sacred" and the "profane," and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors.[19]

In other words, usually discussion of ritual operates within a conceptual framework built of two mutually defining oppositional pairs, sacred and profane, and ritual and ordinary activity. Sacred and ritual are identified with one another and set in opposition to profane and ordinary activity, which are identified with one another. Bell's analysis demonstrates that this conceptual framework does not meet the task of attempting to understand how the great variety of "rituals" constitute a single category. Instead, she identifies a set of characteristics that activities may evidence in greater or lesser degree, that is being more or less ritualized. The four categories are created by the activity,

17. I have heard Joseph Goldstein refer to the self as a designation for a process, such as the way we identify dark clouds, rain, lightning, and thunder as a storm. In the case of a storm there is some naturally occuring referent of the term, a "natural kind." Selves, however, are even more variable in what is considered included in the designation.
18. Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 7–8.
19. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 74.

employing the "culturally specific strategies," rather than the activity operating within one or the other of the pre-exisisting category pairs. Bell's emphasis on the social dimensions involved in ritualization both complement the emphasis on embodied activity developed above, and contrast with the common cultural conceptions of the nature of religion.

Contemporary American society largely understands religion as a private, individual choice. But this is a cultural value, rather than an objective fact, and does not mean that the private dimension of the self is in any way privileged over the social. Engaging in regularized, embodied activities is both socially *and* privately formative of the self, whether those activities are publicly performed or not. Even meditating in the privacy of one's own home, or like the legendary Bodhidharma retreating to a cave for nine years, is a social—and regularized and embodied—act. One useful approach that draws together the characteristics discussed above—embodiment, enactment, and social—is found in David Morgan's treatment of embodiment in religion from the perspective of material culture, all of which contributes to an understanding of the role of subjective experience in the form of ritualized, embodied activity in constructing the self.

SIX FACTORS OF EMBODIED RELIGION

Morgan, following the work of Merleau-Ponty, discusses the material culture of religion from the perspective of the body.[20] He emphasizes that "Consciousness is not an abstract space of representation, set off ontologically from the world as a thinking substance; rather, it consists of relationships between the body and the world produced by sensation and movement."[21]

Morgan identifies six ways[22] that embodiment and material culture interact in the realm of religion:

1. shaping the body

20. David Morgan, "Religion and Embodiment in the Study of Material Culture," Oxford Research Encyclopedia, Religion, publ. online March 2015, DOI: 10. 1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.32

21. Morgan, "Religion and Embodiment in the Study of Material Culture," 4.

22. Morgan makes no pretensions of having created a list of categories that is either comprehensive or systematic. It is, it seems to me, all the better for that fact.

2. collectivizing the body
3. augmenting the body
4. transforming the body
5. housing the body
6. projecting the body.

These six aspects provide an analytic tool for understanding the role of embodiment in religious activity as the context for construction of the self as discussed by Sax in the ritual dances of the *pāṇḍav līlā*. Examining contemporary Shin practice as found in the Buddhist Churches of America (BCA) provides an analysis of the construction of the self in BCA temple life.

1. Shaping the body. Religion shapes the body in a variety of ways, meaning that religious significance is both found in and given to different embodied experiences. A familiar instance of shaping the body is the practice of offering incense. On several occassions I have seen a grandmother leading a small child to the censer, folding the child's hands into *gasshō*, modeling the proper way to bow for the child, and then helping the child to offer incense. Repeated over the course of years, either with a grandparent, or a parent, or an older sibling, the embodied experience creates a set of positive associations at a subliminal, embodied level. This instance is similar to the one Morgan gives of the associations created for a child being read to by his/her mother from a Bible, and held in a warm embrace. The physical object of the Bible gains the associations of a mother's warm embrace.[23]

2. Collectivizing the body. One way that the body is collectivized is the arrangement of seating inside a temple or meditation hall. If we contrast the interior facility of most BCA temples with either, for example, a Zen temple or an Insight meditation center, perhaps the most obvious difference is the presence of pews. Historically, of course, this is part of the adaptation to Christian, or specifically Protestant, models of religious services that took place at the end of the nineteenth and first quarter of the twentieth century in both Japan and the United

23. David Morgan, "Religion and Embodiment in the Study of Material Culture," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (March 2015): 6, http://religion.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-32.

States.[24] However, the embodied experience of sitting in pews, in rows together facing the naijin, is distinctly different from sitting on a *zafu* and *zabuton*, and facing the wall (for Sōtō, or into the meditation hall in Rinzai). Alternatively, the Insight meditation centers with which I am familiar also provide cushions on the floor, perhaps with chairs set against the walls around the meditation room. In this case, the seating is often either in loose lines, or rather haphazard as people find a place to sit where it is convenient.

All three instances discipline the body, shape the body in particular, but in very different ways, though always in relation to other people, that is, socially. The message conveyed by pews is that the sangha member is to listen attentively to the dharma message, in exactly the same fashion that Protestant Christians sitting in pews are expected to pay close attention to the sermon.[25] Both of the other settings are, however, clearly focused on the practice of meditation. This is not to say that meditation is absent from all BCA services, or that there are no dharma talks in Zen temples and Insight centers. Rather, the way that the body is disciplined by the style and arrangement of seating gives greater priority to one or the other.

3. Augmenting the body. Morgan points to dress as a common means of augmenting the body, though this refers more generally to the creation of a social body that is shared with others. While BCA generally does not employ uniforms for lay members as some other Buddhist groups do, it is not uncommon to see lay members wearing kesa. In some other Japanese American churches, *kesa* have different insignia attached to them. These insignia record and make public the

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24. Michihiro Ama, *Immigrants to the Pure Land: The Modernization, Acculturation, and Globalization of Shin Buddhism, 1898–1941* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011).

25. Some analyses suggest three different kinds of preaching in the Christian tradition after the Reformation. One of these is an expository style in which a Biblical text is taken as the subject of the sermon, and is then expounded upon. Much of Shin preaching employs personal anecdotes, rather than being scripturally based, though there have been suggestions that this is part of what makes Shin difficult for post-Christians in the US, and should be changed: "Logical presentations of theological positions are a necessary but not sufficient precondition for religious success." Carl Becker, "Japanese Pure Land Buddhism in Christian America," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 10 (1990): 143–156: 146.

completion of certain religious activities as social actions—pilgrimage to Japan, for example. Closer to home we note that members of the MAP program are allowed to wear robes and sit in the *naijin*—bodily markers of a certain social status within the church.

4. Transforming the body. Morgan discusses the power of amulets in relation to ideas that they have the power to transform the body. Amulets have long been part of Japanese Buddhism, but are not part of Shin, and therefore not part of BCA. However, the transformation of the body at death is in fact a much clearer instance of transforming the body, as in most cases the corpse is cremated. Some temples, such as Mountain View, have a columbarium where the urn of the deceased can be placed by the family and visited on special occasions. At the same time, the deceased is thought to have gained a new body, being born in the Pure Land. And in some traditions, a memorial tablet on the family altar also constitutes a post-mortem body, making the deceased a continuing presence in the home.

5. Housing the body. Housing the body refers to the "built environment" of religion. Though some BCA temples were acquired as existing structures, the interiors have been adapted on the model of Japanese temples. Other temples were built anew, and in most cases were modelled on traditional Japanese styles of temple architecture, though with interior adaptations such as the pews discussed above. The styles adopted by different temples communicate to the sangha members, and decisions about how to remodel the interiors express different values of different communities. Some *naijin* are very traditional, looking very much like a temple in Japan. Others, such as those at the Berkeley Buddhist Temple and the Jodo Shinshu Center, are more modern in style. This implicitly communicates a message of wanting to be up to date and fit in with contemporary architectural styles to the sangha members, without needing to say so explicitly.

6. Projecting the body. By "projecting the body" Morgan refers to the way in which embodiment involves a temporality. Projecting oneself imaginatively into either the past or the future necessarily involves a sense of embodiment in that past or future. This projection of embodiment transforms the bodies of religious adherents "from actual structures into virtual agents."[26] One instance that comes to mind is when in the course of a funeral, mourners are reassured that they will meet

26. Morgan, "Religion and Embodiment in the Study of Material Culture," 14.

the deceased in the Pure Land, the present body is imaginally extended out of the present and out of this sāha world into Amida's Pure Land.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Morgan's analysis moves from the body to the material culture of religion. The question that we are interested in here, however, moves in the opposite direction. If we consider the influence of the material culture of BCA, what can we conclude regarding the experience of members in the environment of that material culture, and the contributions that makes to the personal or subjective religiosity of members?

It is important for our analysis here to understand the three terms that ground Morgan's list—embodied activity, material culture, and religion—as all dynamically interrelated. There is a mutually constitutive relation between each and every one of the three—there is, in other words, no stable or foundational element.

Joining together the various dimensions supplied by Merleau-Ponty, Sax, Bell, and Morgan in this analysis, we can see the relation between embodied activity, material culture, and ritualization as constitutive of subjectivity. Personal lived experience that molds the conception of oneself can be conceptualized as taking place at the intersection of these three. That is, one way to think about how personal self identity is constructed is to look at the effect of each of these three on the self both individually and in relation to the others.

First, material environment and the ritualized, embodied activities one performs in that environment construct the self as a participant in the religious tradition that is presented there. Second, the tradition conditions the nature of the material environment and provides directions for ritualized, embodied activity. And, third, ritualized activity molds the material culture in dialogue with the conceptions and practices of the religious tradition.