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## PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

### Meditation, critical psychology, and emancipation: The social construction and deconstruction of the self

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#### ABSTRACT

In this article, it is argued that the original Buddhist notion of meditation can be regarded as an emancipatory practice, as opposed to a legitimization of oppressive social relations. The article first discusses the Buddhist notion of meditation as a practice of the deconstruction of the illusion of a substantial (separate, solid, autonomous) self. Then, it explains theories of the social construction of the self and argues that the notion of the autonomous, separated self is an ideology closely tied to social relations of power. Finally, it concludes that meditation, as a practice of the deconstruction of the self, is an emancipatory practice.

**KEYWORDS:** meditation; critical psychology; social construction; the illusion of a substantial self; emancipation

## INTRODUCTION

Social critics often regard meditation as part of the individualist ideology that reinforces the existing alienated and oppressive social relations (Bazzano, 2014). This view has a basis, if we regard meditation as a stress-reduction method, that helps us get back to work and consumption (Bazzano, 2014, 2017). However, in its original Buddhist context, meditation has a different meaning. It is a social and mental practice for facing the groundlessness of our existence, the fact that everything is constantly changing, and that we ourselves do not exist as solid, delimited, substantial selves (Bazzano, 2016, 2017; Trungpa, 2002). Critical scholars have argued that the concept of an autonomous, substantial self is an ideology in the service of modern state and capitalist power (Fox et al., 2009; Gergen, 1999; Hankiss, 2015). In fact, the subject or self is itself created through subjugation to power (Butler, 1997). If the *illusion* of an autonomous self is an ideology that is part of social oppression, then the practice of meditation can be seen as an emancipatory practice, which deconstructs the self, and therefore relations of domination.

In this article, I first discuss the Buddhist notion of meditation as a practice of the deconstruction of the self. Then, I explain the notions of critical theory and critical psychology. I continue with explaining the processes of the social construction of the self in the context of social relations of power. Finally, I connect these notions, concluding that meditation can be seen as a social practice of emancipation, since it deconstructs the ideology of an autonomous, separated self, which sustains relations of power.

## MEDITATION

The practice of meditation has more than a 2,500-year-old past as part of the Buddhist tradition. It exists in many forms, from the most widely known mindfulness meditation to practices working with compassion to mantras and visualisation techniques (Bodhi, 2010; Trungpa, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). The practice of presence forms the basis and essence of all meditation techniques. In Western psychology, John Kabat-Zinn (2005) developed and popularised 'mindfulness-based stress reduction' (MBSR), which is an adaptation of Buddhist mindfulness meditation.

MBSR has gained great popularity, and has also received numerous critiques from both social critical and Buddhist perspectives. According to social criticism (Bazzano, 2014, 2017, 2019a, 2019b; Purser, 2019), if we regard meditation merely as an individual stress-reduction method, it can bolster self-centredness. Therefore, it can become an ideology and practice which reinforces oppressive and alienated social relations, and supports reactive forces of control, efficiency, and uncritical adaptation, instead of active forces of emancipation. To give a simple example: if you feel bad, go to MBSR training which will help you to quickly go back

to your alienated work and (over)consumption habits, to serve the capitalist economy by exploiting yourself and others.

According to critics from the Buddhist perspective, MBSR takes out meditation from its original context, where it is emphasised that it is a *communal* practice, and the connection with the community of practitioners, the teacher, and all living beings forms an essential part of it (Bazzano, 2014, 2019b; Dalai Lama & Alt, 2017; Trungpa, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). Buddhist teachings emphasise the phenomena of interdependence; that nothing exists on its own, in separation, but only in relation to other existents (Bazzano, 2009, 2017). Therefore, our own happiness cannot be separated from the happiness of all living beings, and, consequently, ethical behaviour is a fundamental part of the practice of meditation (Bodhi, 2010; Dalai Lama, 2000; Dalai Lama & Alt, 2017). Thus, the Buddhist path of meditation cannot be regarded as one-sidedly individualist. Although the goal of individual liberation from suffering is part of it, according to its perspective of interdependence, individual liberation is intertwined with the liberation of all sentient beings—these two goals together form the final aim of Buddhist practice (Dalai Lama, 2000; Trungpa, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). At the same time, to practice meditation, it is necessary to let go of our habitual goal-oriented attitude, and to simply notice and accept the flow of experiencing, whatever arises in it (Bazzano, 2014).

How can meditation lead to liberation from suffering? According to Buddhist teachings, the fundamental cause of suffering is the *illusion* of a solid, separated, substantial *self* or *ego*, and the self-centred perspective that arises from that illusion (Bodhi, 2010). Thus, to terminate suffering, we need to face this illusion, and by facing it, see through it. During the practice of meditation—either in formal meditation or outside of formal practice—an *insight* might arise; that our experiencing, and therefore our world, is constantly changing, and that there is an awareness, or consciousness, that is experiencing this flow, which is, at the same time, inseparable from the flow of experiencing itself (Bazzano, 2017; Dalai Lama, 2000; Trungpa, 2002). This insight is also called the experience of *selflessness* or *egolessness*: the realisation that the experiencer (awareness) is inseparable from the experience (object of awareness) itself. This can be a truly perplexing and unsettling experience, since it makes us face the fundamental groundlessness of our being and our deep confusion regarding the nature of our existence (Bazzano, 2016; Trungpa, 2002). On the other hand, the experience also carries within itself a relief—since maintaining the illusion of the self is highly burdening—and the qualities of freedom, love, and compassion are also present in it (Trungpa, 2013a, 2013b). It is important to emphasise that this is direct experience and not a theory or a concept—it transcends the conceptual mind, and thus it cannot be understood through theoretical contemplation only (Dalai Lama, 2000; Trungpa, 2013c).

Thus, the practice of meditation carries within itself the possibility of reducing self-centredness, and accessing the qualities of compassion and love that are inherent in the mind (Dalai Lama, 2000; Dalai Lama & Alt, 2017). Love can refer not only to *Agape*, the *universal*, unconditional love, that transcends all boundaries, but also to *Eros*, the love that is partial,

desiring, and ambivalent (Bazzano, 2017, 2018, 2019a). Bazzano (2018) describes the latter as taking a minority position, being radical and subversive to the status quo and well-established identities, opposing structures of power and the logic of self-preservation, and hence, creating new possibilities of actualisation.

## **CRITICAL THEORY, CRITICAL PSYCHOLOGY**

What can be the connection between meditation and critical social theory? Critical social theory and critical social science aims not merely at *describing* social reality, but also at *changing* it; it aims to work in the direction of abolishing oppressive power relations, reducing suffering, and advocating social emancipation (Fox et al., 2009; Tar, 2017). Therefore, it puts *social relations of power* into the centre of its analysis. Critical psychology analyses and critiques psychological theories and practices from a critical perspective, by reflecting on the power dynamics involved in them (Fox et al., 2009). One of its main themes is individualism, analysed as an ideology that legitimises and reproduces existing power relations. In the following part of the article, I explore social and critical theories of the self, and I conclude by connecting this analysis to the Buddhist practice of meditation.

## **SOCIAL POWER AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF**

### ***Freudo-Marxist perspectives***

The Freudo-Marxist concept of the internalisation of oppression is one possible level of analysis of the interconnection between social power and the psyche (Erős, 2001; Tar, 2017). According to this approach, social oppression is built into the psyche of the individual through repressive family socialisation—where the father represents authority—and manifests as psychological repression and an authoritarian ('potentially fascist') personality. The latter is characterised by emphasising hierarchy in social relations, respect for power and authority, uncritical submission to authorities, desire for a strong leader and obedience, aggression towards subordinates, tendency to be prejudiced, rigid adherence to conventional values, and closed-mindedness (Adorno et al., 2019; Csepeli, 2005). Later, social and political psychological theories reinterpreted the internalisation of oppression as the internalisation of negative social stereotypes and prejudices by members of minority groups (Jost et al., 2015; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996). According to these theories, this results in negative self-image in minority group members, and the general legitimisation and reproduction of existing unequal social relations (system-justification).

This level of analysis points at some important phenomena regarding the connection between the psyche and social power relations. However, it does not address the possibility that the concept (and experience) of a solid and separate *self* is itself the product of those power relations, and acts also as an ideology that reproduces them.

Several critical thinkers have argued that the concept of an autonomous, substantial self and the individualism resulting from it is the product, tool, and legitimising ideology of oppressive power relations (Gergen, 1999; Hankiss, 2015; Sampson, 1990). One of the main criticisms of critical psychology regarding mainstream psychology is exactly that the latter is overly individualistic: it focuses on the individual and individual-level solutions, thus ignoring the role of social injustice and oppressive power relations in producing human suffering, and by that, it contributes to maintaining and reproducing these social relations (Fox et al., 2009).

### ***Social constructionist perspectives***

The fundamental subject of social psychology is the socially determined nature of the self (Csepeli, 2005). Mead (1934) defined social psychology as a perspective which ‘presupposes an approach to experience from the standpoint of the individual, but undertakes to determine in particular that which belongs to this experience because the individual himself belongs to a social structure, a social order’ (p. 1). According to Baldwin, the child first experiences his or her own existence through the feedback received from others (Csepeli, 2005). Cooley’s concept of the looking-glass self proposes that the self is constructed according to how others reflect their image of the individual back to them, or rather, how these reflections are represented by the individual (Pataki, 1982). As social relations are permeated by power (Foucault, 1978), the social psychological investigation of the social nature of individual identity is closely related to the critical investigation of the role of power in the creation of the self.

In their social constructionist theory, Berger and Luckmann (1966) explain that the self is part of the socially constructed reality, and, in turn, this social reality is determined by relations of power. In his related theory, Foucault (1971, 1978, 1982) analysed the interconnections between social discourses (norms of knowledge, truth, and what can and cannot be said), relations of power, and the creation of the subject (or self). Judith Butler (1997) analysed further Foucault’s ideas and combined them with certain psychoanalytical theories, thereby exploring the social *and* psychological processes of the creation of the subject by power. In the following, based on the above theoretical approaches, I try to point out that the concept of a substantial (separate and solid) self is the product of social relations of power, and, in turn, also reproduces these relations of power and the oppression inherent in them.

In their treatise titled *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), Berger and Luckman basically analyse how human nature and social reality mutually create each other. According to their approach, although the biological nature of humans does not determine the specific form of social order they create, the creation of a social order itself (*externalisation*) is a necessity for humanity in order to mould the inherently open nature of humans into a specific form, channel their energies, and thereby create stability. The social order created by humans

then becomes *objectified*: it appears as an objective reality for the individual who is born into it, lives in it, and, who, through the process of *socialisation*, learns or *internalises* this social reality. Therefore, in a dialectic manner, humans become determined by the social reality that is their own product in the first place.

Social reality includes language, concepts, worldview, social institutions, roles and norms, and also the social categories that determine the individual's identity (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Berger and Luckman note that the social construction of reality is situated in the context of relations of power: the success of possible alternative conceptions of reality is determined by the power of those who put them to work.

### ***Foucauldian, deconstructivist perspectives***

A similar idea is explicated by Foucault (1971, 1978) when he emphasised the processes through which relations of power determine social discourses. These discourses delimit the accepted forms of social communication and knowledge. They define the norms that determine what can and cannot be said, who can be accepted as the legitimate source of knowledge and who cannot, what can be accepted as truth, and what cannot. It's not only that power determines social discourses, but, in turn, the discourses also determine relations of power: according to Foucault (1971), discourse itself *is* power.

Foucault (1971, 1978, 1982) saw power not only as oppressive, but also as a productive force, that is not localised at certain points in society (groups or individuals), but permeates every social relation, and we are best able to recognise its presence through the phenomenon of resistance. The interconnections between the individual and power relations are at the centre of his critical analysis: how do social relations of power—therefore, social discourses—create the subject, determine the individual's identity, and produce their self? (See also Butler, 1997.) Foucault (1982) states:

This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. (p. 781)

It needs to be mentioned here that for Foucault (1982) (and also for Butler, 1997), the word 'subject' means the *identity* of the individual, the self, experienced as an autonomous, solid entity, and acting agent, as opposed to *subjective experiencing*, the direct, nonconceptual flow of experience. The latter is already present in newborns, since they experience bodily feelings, visions, sounds, etc., but they don't associate conceptual categories to these experiences, they don't have a self-concept or a self-image, and thus, they don't experience themselves as separate selves (Cole & Cole, 2001).

Our conceptions and categories about reality, which are determined by social relations of power, delimit how we can possibly imagine ourselves, define our identities, and thus, how we can understand ourselves as *selves*. The example of minority identity demonstrates well how the social categories that determine the individual's identity are permeated by relations of power and oppression (Csepeli, 2005; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996). Social stereotypes and prejudices devalue minority groups, resulting in negative self-image, even self-hatred in individuals who identify themselves or are identified by others as members of those groups. In fact, the creation of minority identity itself is a product of relations of power, since the concept of a minority is based on differentiation or exclusion from the majority: all hierarchies are based on categorical distinction (differentiation) itself (Csepeli, 2005; Derrida, 1981, 1982; Gergen, 1999; Graeber, 2007; Ridgeway, 2011).

The 'self' is a socio-linguistic product (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1999; Hall, 1994); in fact, in the final analysis, it is a function of grammar (Bazzano, 2017, 2019a; Derrida, 1982). The subject is created by *subjection* to power; subjection to the categories that are defined by power (Butler, 1997; Foucault, 1982). Emancipation from oppressive power relations therefore involves dismantling and deconstructing the self (Asenbaum, 2020; Olivier, 2020).

It can be noted here that, as all concepts and theories, the theory of the social construction of the subject by power, and the concept of power itself as a presumption, are also questionable, debatable, and open to deconstruction, since language itself is a relative, arbitrary, and changing system (Derrida, 1978, 1981, 1982; Gergen, 1999; Parker & Shotter, 1990). To put it another way, as Nagarjuna, the Buddhist logician explained in his tetralemma: any proposition is true, false, both true and false, neither true, nor false (Bazzano, 2017). On the other hand, the dynamic, incomprehensible, and conceptually ungraspable nature of reality is not a reason for not creating playful interpretations of it, that can express and foster the free manifestation of life (Bazzano, 2017, 2019).

### ***Butler's perspective***

Thus, one level of the analysis of the determination of the self by social power is how linguistic categories and social discourses construct the individual's identity. Judith Butler (1997) attempted to integrate this level of analysis with psychoanalytic theories, since according to her in Foucault's theory, the *psychological* mechanism by which social power creates the subject is missing. Butler understands this psychological mechanism as the emotional attachment of children to their parents, to whom, at the same time, they are subordinated: 'If there is no formation of the subject without a passionate attachment to those by whom she or he is subordinated, then subordination proves central to the becoming of the subject.' (Butler, 1997, p. 7). This matches with Berger and Luckman's (1966) observation that the internalisation of social reality always happens through emotionally charged relationships. Therefore, primary socialisation, by which children internalise the basic foundations of social

reality—including the language and the social categories that form the basis of their identities—happens through intimate relationships with their parents or significant others.

Later too, changes in people's worldviews and their closely related identities always happen through emotionally charged connections with others. The deeper the transformation is, the stronger the emotional intensity that goes along with it, since the experience of emotional intensity forms the basis of transformations of identity (Bazzano, 2019a, 2020).

Regarding the parent–child relationship that determines the creation of the subject, Butler (1997) emphasises not only the emotional intensity, but also, the quality of *dependency*: being vulnerable and subject to power is the psychological condition of the birth of our selves. The foundation of our dependency is our drive for survival and our need for a socially meaningful existence. Power creates our selves through exploiting these needs: this is what makes us accept the subordination that goes together with the creation of our selves. Our dependency is not merely material, but also psychological and social in nature. As the abovementioned theories regarding the socially constructed nature of the self point out, our social existence and identity can only be constructed through identification with categories and norms that are predefined by relations of power, and are transmitted to us by our parents.

Butler (1997) also analyses the basic paradox regarding the 'autonomous self' being born in dependency: the individual is not able to face the dependency that determines their existence from the very beginning, since then the illusion of being an autonomous self would be lost. Therefore, the person hides their own dependency on power from themselves, so that the idea of existing as a substantial, autonomous self can be maintained. This can be regarded as a possible model for the birth of the unconscious. The hiding of dependency is thus a constitutive element of the concept of existing as an autonomous self: power creates the self *exactly by hiding* that the very same self is dependent on it.

## **CONCLUSION: MEDITATION AS EMANCIPATION**

The idea of being a substantial self and the linguistic tools that form the basis of it are thus created by social relations of power. In turn, this concept of self reproduces those power relations that created it, and therefore, it is an essential part of these relations. Thus, the self and social relations of power mutually condition, and continuously produce and reproduce each other (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Butler, 1997; Foucault, 1982; Gergen, 1999). If that is so, then a social and mental practice, that makes it possible to face the *illusory* nature of the self as a substantial entity, is *emancipatory*, since it carries within itself the possibility of liberation from oppressive power relations—both on an individual and collective level. As I implied above, meditation in its original Buddhist meaning is exactly this kind of practice.



This practice has the potential to *deconstruct the self* as an autonomous, self-existing entity. Thus, it can break down the oppressive relations of power that this illusory sense of self—and the self-centred attitude resulting from it—feeds.

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