

Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge

Volume 6

Issue 3 *Thich Nhat Hanh's Sociological Imagination:
Essays and Commentaries on Engaged Buddhism*

Article 11

2008

Ideology and Manas

Sujin Choi

University of Massachusetts Boston, sujin.choi001@umb.edu

Marc Black

University of Massachusetts Boston, burnedrecords@hotmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/humanarchitecture>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Choi, Sujin and Black, Marc (2008) "Ideology and Manas," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*: Vol. 6: Iss. 3, Article 11.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/humanarchitecture/vol6/iss3/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact library.uasc@umb.edu.

Ideology and Manas

Cover Page Footnote
Engaged Buddhism in Sociological Context



Ideology and Manas

Sujin Choi & Marc Black

University of Massachusetts Boston

sujin.choi001@umb.edu • burnedrecords@hotmail.com

Abstract: Freedom from ideology is quite different from freedom within ideology. This article, which problematizes the sense of separate self, seeks to help approach this distinction by connecting some early writings of Marx with Thich Nhat Hanh's explanation of manas. Ideology, as an unexposed system of thought, may constitute the self. Also, manas, as a level of consciousness or as a type of awareness, constitutes the self. In both cases, self, ego, or individuality, becomes an isolating and disempowering condition that seems to be who we are. Exposure of the ideological trap of self, however enticing, and awareness of interconnectedness can help surmount the divisions between people and lead toward new forms of empowerment and freedom. There may be some forms of empowerment and freedom within ideology, but those forms can be quite limited when they prevent awareness of species being, interconnectedness and the compassion that can develop with such awareness.

The concepts of freedom, empowerment and self can have meanings in one context while having very different meanings in another context. Showing these differences involves showing the different contexts and the different meanings within the contexts. Toward this goal, one context is submersion in ideology and manas.¹ The other context is exposure or awareness of ideology and manas.

Some writings of Marx and Thich Nhat Hanh² can be very helpful with defining, illuminating and exploring submersion in ideology and manas as one context; expo-

sure or awareness of ideology and manas

¹ Manas is the seventh consciousness according to Manifestation Only Buddhism. Manifestation Only Buddhism is a Mahayana Buddhist school based on the study of the nature of consciousness. The school is more commonly known as Mind Only or Consciousness Only school. However, Thich Nhat Hanh clarifies that he prefers using the term, "Manifest Only," to prevent its misunderstanding as "a kind of idealism" (2006, p.23). In this paper, manas is also used to mean, "The sense of separate self," which is what it brings, for the convenience of comparison to ideology. We would like to mention that this kind of use of the term could be opposed to Buddha's teaching in some context.

Sujin Choi is a graduate student in Applied Linguistics at UMass Boston. She studied elementary education in Jinju National University of Education, Korea and has worked as a public elementary school teacher. She studied Buddhism in Dongguk University, Korea. Her interests include exploring how different cultural perceptions and assumptions can be learned and taught; critical consciousness, how it can be developed; and forms of empowerment we can get from the ancient wisdom, such as Buddhism. Marc Black is a graduate student in Applied Linguistics at UMass Boston. He is writing his thesis on multicultural education. His BA is in African American Studies from Oberlin College. Black's research interests include how explorations of race, especially whiteness, hidden ideology and Buddhist conceptions of self can help expose and address issues of self, ego and kinds of critical thinking and compassion that may develop through awareness of self, ego and other under-explored conditionings.

as another context; and concepts and contexts of freedom, empowerment and self within these two contexts. Ideology, as part of critical theory is defined first and then manas, as a part of Buddhism, is defined.

As an operational definition for this paper, ideology is how sense is made. Sense is made by ideology. Sense is made ideologically. In that way, ideology is what determines, defines and explains the reality a person experiences. Ideology does not directly determine the physical reality, but it does determine how we understand and experience and engage the physical reality. Ideology is not our ideas, but it shapes and arranges those ideas. It is not our self, but it constructs and explains our senses of self, the world and our relationships with the world and its parts. In these ways, we think through ideology, but it is very difficult to think about ideology because ideology is our thinking. It is through unconsciousness or unawareness of ideology that we receive our consciousness, our sense of reality. In this way, our reality requires our being unconscious. We are manifestations of ideologies. They make us. We are them. However, by exposing ideology, we do not have to be ideologues. We can be free from ideologies. We can be without them if we become aware of them.

In some ways, this issue of exposure of ideology may be similar to aspects of Buddhism. According to Buddhism, everything that we have experienced or perceived includes the feelings, desires, ideas and all other content of our consciousness. These experiences and perceptions are stored and preserved as a form of “seeds”³ in our store consciousness.⁴ Those seeds manifest within the conditions of their manifestation. For example, when someone says something bad to us (one of the conditions of anger), the person ‘waters’ the seed of

² Thich Nhat Hanh is a Vietnamese Buddhist Zen master, poet, scholar, and human right activist. In 1967, he was nominated by Martin Luther King, Jr. for the Nobel Peace Prize.

anger and we can get angry (manifestation).

When those “seeds” manifest, manas, which also arises from the store consciousness, erroneously clings to the arising (e.g., anger) which is the manifestation of “seeds” in our store consciousness caused by various conditions, and believes the arising as ‘mine, I, self (e.g., ‘my’ anger, ‘I am angry, ‘you’ made ‘me’ angry). Therefore, manas is what makes our sense of separate self possible when, in reality, we are manifestation of non-me⁵ elements. Because the notion of “self” itself is a delusion of manas, what we do with the sense of “self” is easily distorted by this delusion and most of our suffering results from this sense of separate self. According to Buddhism, we can get out of this trap through “deep looking into the impermanent and interdependent nature of reality.” In this way, looking deeply at our conditionings can illuminate the delusions of self and the ideological sense of self.

This delusional and ideological sense of self both connects and conflicts with writings of Marx and Althusser. These connections and conflicts can be introduced through Althusser and then elaborated through Marx.

The connection with Althusser occurs when Althusser says,

...Marx said that it is in ideology
(as the locus of political struggle)

³ Thich Nhat Hanh defines “seeds” as “something that has capacity of manifesting” (2006, p.78). If something exists, its seed has manifested within various conditions of it; if we can’t perceive something (something doesn’t exist), its seed exists as a form of seed unmanifested in store consciousness.

⁴ Thich Nhat Hanh explains that according to Manifestation Only Buddhism our minds have eight consciousnesses: the first five consciousnesses, “the sense consciousnesses of eye, ear, nose, tongue and body”; the sixth is mind consciousness; the seventh is ‘manas’; the eighth is store consciousness, which is the base, the ground, of the other consciousnesses.

that men become conscious of their place in the world and in history, it is within this ideological unconsciousness that men succeed in altering the “lived” relation between them and the world and acquiring that new form of specific unconsciousness called “consciousness.” (1969, p. 233)

This notion of a form of consciousness, ideological consciousness, as deriving from an unconsciousness of the ideological basis of that consciousness is a connection between the operational definition of ideology in this paper and Althusser’s and Marx’s meanings of ideology. In other words, ideology shapes reality in unidentified ways.

Buddhism shares this point of view on world or consciousness. Thich Nhat Hanh explains,

According to the Manifestation Only teachings, we live much more in the world of representations and mere images than in the world of things-in-themselves. Our consciousness rarely touches reality. We imprison ourselves in our own distorted images of reality. (2006, p.55)

⁵ According to Thich Nhat Hanh, non-me elements are “namely, all of you, all phenomena, and the entire cosmos.” (2006, p. 99) For example, just for our survival, we need air, water, food, etc. And, to get a slice of bread, we need wheat seed, soil, sun, water, farmer, egg, chicken, people who take care of chicken, people who make bread, people who deliver, people who made the transportation possible, etc. If we consider more than just survival, for instance, our thoughts, the lists of the influences that made possible the way we think are limitless, e.g., all the people we met, media, books, all the people who are involved in media and books, etc. In other words, what takes for us to be ourselves includes almost everything in the universe and we are the manifestation of all the conditions including our consciousnesses.

We experience reality as determined, defined and explained by manas or ignorance of the reality;⁶ we experience reality “through our own distorted images of reality.” In other words, our consciousness is not as genuine or pure as we think.

When the sense of self is situated as delusional, as a result of manas distorting store consciousness, the sense of self can also be seen as preventing awareness of interconnectedness. The sense of self prevents awareness of, or identification with, non-self elements as who we really are. In writings of both Thich Nhat Hanh and Marx, people are identified beyond individualism, as interdependent beings. The separateness of self, the sense of individuals as separate, is a result of manas or ideology.

Outside manas and outside ideology, because we are composed of non-self elements, the feelings and self that I think of as “me” are the same things that others experience in their own ways as the feelings and self that they think of as “them.” So, we are all the same. Just the details are different. And we do seem to really exaggerate the importance of those differences. Perhaps we need to exaggerate so we can feel like we are all different and special. However, exaggerating the significance of the different details really makes us all very miserable with conflicts of egos and actually quite dangerous to each other and the whole planet. And all we get from that is a feeling of being much more special than we and others actually are. It is beyond the manas and ideology of separate selves that interconnectedness is apprehended as reality. Marx seems to concur when, in “On the Jewish Question,” he says,

⁶ The nature of reality in Buddhism could be best explained as “empty of separate self.” Specifically, things cannot exist permanently (impermanence) and things cannot exist without everything else (interdependence); therefore, everything co-arises with everything else and there is nothing that can be called a separate “self.”

Man, in his most intimate reality, in civil society, is a profane being. Here, where he appears both to himself and to others as a real individual he is an illusory phenomenon. In the state, on the contrary, where he is regarded as a species being, man is the imaginary member of an imaginary sovereignty, divested of his real, individual life, and infused with an unreal universality. (1978, p.34)

The idea of a species being is that people are mistakenly defined as individuals because it is as social beings, as within their wholes, that people are authentic and natural (1978, p. 34). When the delusion and ideology of self are exposed, we are species beings who can be aware of the self without being invested in the self as reality. However, the self, and the societies created by the selves, prevents such exposure. The imprisonment within distorted images of reality becomes institutionalized, so instead of the broader community freeing us from delusions of self, the broader community traps us within delusions of self. Marx says,

But liberty as a right of man is not founded upon the relations between man and man, but rather upon the separation of man from man. It is the right of such separation. The right of the circumscribed individual, withdrawn into himself. (1978, p. 42)

The rights of liberal democracy, with its preoccupation with individualism, the delusion of self, is disempowering because it isolates people antagonistically against each other as separate entities. However, liberal democracies claim to be the apex of empowerment and freedom. That claim, and the unconsciousness from which it derives and deceives, is ideology. Also, as shown in the last quote—"The right of the

circumscribed individual, withdrawn into himself"—it is ideology that provides the consciousness of self. That sense of self is circumscribed as the individuality that is, therefore, estrangement.

In Buddhism, what is done by ideology or ideological consciousness according to Althusser and Marx is conducted by manas, the seventh consciousness, according to the teaching of Manifestation Only Buddhism. Thich Nhat Hanh says,

Manas arises from store consciousness, turns around and takes hold of a portion of store consciousness, and regards this grasped part as a separate, discrete entity, a "self." (2006, p.24)

Thich Nhat Hanh elaborates by saying,

Manas looks at store consciousness with attachment and makes a portion of it into an object that it can cling to. When this happens, store consciousness is caught and cannot be free. The object of manas is made possible by the contact and overlap of manas and store consciousness. But this object is not the thing-in-itself, it is only a representation. It is merely a composite of the subject of store consciousness and manas, related a tiny bit to the original substance of store consciousness, which is suchness. (2006, p.93)

Thich Nhat Hanh explains that manas clings to an object which is only a representation or "a tiny bit to the original substance of store consciousness" and believes it as a separate "self." In other words, manas is what deceives us to believe "a composite of the subject of store consciousness and manas" as 'I,' 'mine,' 'self' and what provides us with the consciousness of self. According to him, since the consciousness is

far from the reality; the original substance of store consciousness; suchness; the thing-in-itself; “our suffering results from this wrong perception.”

In these ways, Marx and Thich Nhat Hanh may agree that exposure of ideology or awareness of manas can help us surmount the limitations of self-delusion. However, Thich Nhat Hanh and Marx may seem to diverge when Althusser says,

Marx never believed that an ideology might be dissipated by a knowledge of it; for the knowledge of this ideology, as a knowledge of its conditions of possibility, of its structure, of its specific logic and of its practical role, within a given society, is simultaneously knowledge of the conditions of its necessity. (1969, p.230)

Althusser is saying that Marx argues that exposure of ideology does not diminish an ideology because understanding that and how an ideology works is necessary for the function, and revolution, of society. This rejection of exposure of ideology or manas, however, may be a problem that is familiar to Buddhism. This might be similar to the way we could react when Buddhism seems to urge us to, “Get rid of the sense of separate self.” It looks impossible to diminish self because ‘I’ am a social agent who tries to change the world; ‘I’ am a feminist who tries to improve women’s rights; ‘I’ am a teacher who tries to read the world with ‘my’ students; who else could I be other than ‘myself’?

Similarly, although Althusser claims that Marx did not believe exposing ideology could dissipate ideology, there is evidence in Marx’s response to Hegel in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and in *The German Ideology* that may suggest that and how ideology diminishes when it is exposed.

Marx writes,

Hegel having posited man as equivalent to self-consciousness, the estranged object—the estranged essential reality of man—is nothing but consciousness, the thought of estrangement merely-estrangement’s abstract and therefore empty and unreal expression, negation. The annulment of the alienation is therefore likewise nothing but an abstract, empty annulment of that empty abstraction—the negation of the negation. The rich, living, sensuous, concrete activity of self-objectification is therefore reduced to its mere abstraction, absolute negativity—and abstraction which is again fixed as such and thought of as an independent activity—as sheer activity. Because this so-called negativity is nothing but the abstract, empty form of that real living act, its content can in consequence be merely a formal content begotten by abstraction from all content. As a result there are general abstract forms of abstraction pertaining to every content and on that account indifferent to, and consequently, valid for, all content—the thought-forms or logical categories, torn from real mind and from real nature. (1978, p.122)

Here, Marx is addressing a process of, as he wrote in *On the Jewish Question*, the right of the circumscribed individual, withdrawn into himself. That sense of self constructed by ideology is circumscribed as the individuality that is, therefore, estrangement. When this estrangement and disempowerment and isolation is not recognized as such, but is considered a right of liberal democracy, then this ideology negates its negation of agency by presenting that negation, that estrangement, as freedom. That is the negation of the negation. That may be

similar to the problem posed by Buddhism when it reveals how our manas or ideology traps us within questions of who else we could be other than ourselves. Self negates the negation of self. With the negation of its negation, as Marx explains in *The German Ideology*,

[C]onsciousness can really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it really represents something without representing something real; from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of “pure” theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc. (1978, p.159)

In these writings, Marx seems to argue that empowerment or freedom should be through a completely different approach, not through “consciousness,” “alienation,” “negation,” “the estranged essential reality of man.” He seems to suggest that exposing ideology can diminish ideology. That is, as an empowering exposure of ideology that diminishes the ideology, when people realize their sense of freedom and empowerment is an ideological unconsciousness that renders them powerless against the structure of their unconscious based consciousness, then their investment in individualism as empowerment can be exposed and diminished. And, that can lead to agency over, not just within, ideology.

This aspect seems deeply related to Thich Nhat Hanh’s saying,

The Buddha offered impermanence as an instrument from us to explore reality and discover the truth of nonself. Just as a flower is made of non-flower elements [earth, water, air, etc.] the self is made of nonself elements. I am made of non-me elements. When I

look deeply, I see the non-me elements that compose me—namely, all of you, all phenomena, and the entire cosmos. But manas is unaware of nonself. It continues to believe in the idea of a permanent, eternal self, and so it is always separating and discrimination between what is self and what is not self. The only way to help manas stop grasping at the notion of self and not-self is for us to practice deep looking into the impermanent and interdependent nature of reality. (2006, p.99)

We think or perceive that we are independent, unique, separate entities distinguished from others. However, “the self is made of non-self elements” or there is no separate thing that can be called a self. Referring to Manifestation Only Buddhism, Thich Nhat Hanh explains that manas brings “This sense of separate self;” “Being unaware of nonself;” “The belief in the idea of a permanent;” “Eternal self;” “Discrimination between what is self and what is not self;” when, in reality, everything is just co-arising with everything else. This seems to correspond to Marx’s explanation of hidden ideology in which he argues that individuality, alienation, negation, consciousness, is disguised as freedom or empowerment when, in reality, it is ‘illusory’ or disempowering. Also, the way we interpret Marx’s writing seems to connect to what Thich Nhat Hanh suggests as the way out of manas or the separate sense of self. As Marx urges for different approach that exposing ideology can diminish ideology, Thich Nhat Hanh urges us to deeply look at ‘the impermanent and interdependent nature of reality’ or what manas brings to diminish what it brings, the sense of separate self.

One important question that arises from this discussion about Marx and Thich Nhat Hanh is in regard to the meanings of

agency. Does agency have contradictory meanings when it is contextualized amid manas or ideology and when it is contextualized via the exposure or awareness of manas or ideology?

Agency may trap us within senses of individuality that are disempowering because agency amid individualism can prevent freedom from individuality. What kinds of freedom, agency, and empowerment can be found when we are aware of our selves, not from, within ourselves, but with an awareness of self as an ideology or as a deception of manas? These are problems that can be posed with seekers of Buddha's teaching and critical theory orientations.

Perhaps critical pedagogy can help pursue how, or if, empowerment within manas and ideology can be explored in relation to empowerment through exposure and awareness of manas and ideology. Hopefully, we would like to see the emergence of new forms of agency that are passionate about social change not because of anger at the world but because of compassion toward the world which came from the understanding that we are not quite separate. We hope to witness what kinds of changes such new agency could bring to the world and what kinds of freedom we could then explore.

REFERENCES

- Althusser, L. (2005). *For Marx* (B. Brewster, Trans.) [Pour Marx]. New York: Verso. (Original work published 1965)
- Hanh, T.N. (2006). *Understanding Our Mind*. Parallax Press
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1978). R. C. Tucker (Ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader* (2nd ed.) New York: Norton.