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Gems Reflecting Gems:  
An Analysis of the Net of Indra  
In Light of Theravadin and Mahayana Worldviews

In his book *Freedom in Exile*, the Dalai Lama states that the fundamental precept of Buddhism rests in the law of dependent origination (10). Dependent origination finds itself at the focal point of Buddhism because it explains both the rise of suffering and its extinction. This precept shines light on the twelve-linked chain of rebirth and death that arises from ignorance. However, wisdom becomes the glass through which enlightenment pierces ignorance, breaking the chain and shining light on the path to nirvana. Wisdom therefore finds itself at the center of the interplay between dependent origination and nirvana. One of the most revered pieces of wisdom that deals with this interplay comes from the Huayan school of Buddhism in taking the metaphorical form of the Net of Indra. This simple but profound metaphor invites humanity to see the interconnectedness reflected in each being and in each part of this world. It catalyzes humanity to not only see the interconnectedness of all beings, but in doing so to also see the interconnectedness of dependent origination and nirvana. When we view nirvana through this wisdom of interconnectedness—through the looking glass of the Net of Indra—our conceptualization of nirvana changes. Nirvana no longer confines itself to the object-only state of the Theravadin or mainstream view. Rather, building on the Mahayana framework, nirvana becomes a higher mind-only state through which this

mind naturally wants to return to the world and bring others toward this supreme state—the essential core of the Bodhisattva’s compassion. Ultimately, in highlighting the interconnectedness of all beings, dependent origination, and nirvana, the metaphor of the Net of Indra affirms the mind-only Mahayana conceptualization of nirvana as one step more advanced than the limited traditional and mainstream Theravadin view of nirvana.

In order to grasp the heart of the Net of Indra, we must first look into the historical context in which the Huayan school arose. As Francis Cook points out in his book, *Hua-yen Buddhism*, this school “arose and flourished in China in the T’ang dynasty (618-907) although its intellectual roots are far more ancient. This form of Buddhism, called Hua-yen, looked for its inspiration to a Buddhist scripture of Indian, or partly Indian, origin named Avatamsaka Sutra” (Cook 20). The Huayan school thus arose late onto the historical scene sometime after the Mahayana matrix had built itself on top of the mainstream Buddhism of the earlier era. The Huayan school utilized the framework of this Mahayana tradition with its emphasis on compassion and the connectedness of all beings. In doing so, the Huayan school did not strive to create new doctrine. Rather, Cook explains the Huayan approach as such: “Hua-yen created no new school of philosophy. Admittedly, even triumphantly syncretic, Hua-yen thinkers saw their task as that of being able to see the interrelationships between different schools of Buddhist thought and reassembling them to form their real whole” (Cook 25). Instead of creating new doctrine, the Huayan school aims to weave together the accepted truths of Buddhism in a new light. Yet as we will see, this network of truths comes from a Mahayana origin,

and consequently shines its light most auspiciously upon revealing the Mahayana worldview.

The metaphor of the Net of Indra first strives to pierce the ignorance that fails to see the intercausality behind all forms of existence and behind dependent origination.

Robert Gimello describes this metaphor in his article on the Net of Indra:

Perhaps the best known and most effective example of this is the metaphor of the “Net of Indra.” This inspired trope pictures a universe in which each constituent of reality is like a multifaceted jewel placed at one of the knots of a vast net. There is such a jewel at each knot, and each jewel reflects not only the rest of the jeweled net in its entirety but also each and every other jewel in its individuality. (Gimello 4115)

This metaphor enlightens the reader to see interconnectedness in all things. Each jewel reflects every other jewel in the net and reflects the net in its entirety. When we apply this interconnectedness to dependent origination, we see a deeper wisdom in the metaphor. Dependent origination or *pratītya-samutpāda* literally means “arising on the ground of a preceding cause” (Boisvert 669). The twelve step chain of dependent origination arises out of ignorance. Ignorance creates this cycle, binding one to rebirth, and keeping one from nirvana. Ignorance comes from not seeing this cycle and not stopping this cycle. We see the wisdom of this metaphor when we ask a simple question: “How could the first jewel, or any jewel for that matter, be made?” This is a question of causality. We are asking for the blueprint of this single jewel. Yet to make this jewel, we would have to have an understanding of the blueprint of all other jewels. Yet again to understand the blueprint of these other jewels, we need to have the blueprint of the first jewel, which reflects all the others. Thus, the question is the problem. We

cannot trace back causality to a single cause or blueprint. As Mathieu Boisvert points out:

Yet it is necessary to stress that a substantial ‘cause’ from which the ‘effect’ was generated cannot be deduced from dependent origination ... each of the links of the chain of dependent origination is necessary for the production of the next element, yet none can definitely be perceived as sufficient on its own. (Boisvert 669)

There is no single cause. The metaphor reveals an intercausality, or an interconnectedness. In order to eradicate our ignorance, this metaphor begs us to look at this larger scale of interconnectedness. Interestingly, by looking at this larger, interconnected scheme, we begin to understand the Net of Indra’s metaphorical window into nirvana.

The Net of Indra reveals that the only sufficient “cause” in this interdependency becomes the sum of all conditions, which can only be fully comprehended upon entrance into the state of nirvana. Cook clarifies this interdependency in explaining the Huayan view of *pratītya-samutpāda*:

All that exists is part of the one great scheme of interdependency. Bertrand Russell said that the only reasonable definition of cause would be the sum total of all existent conditions, in the sense that any event will occur unless any one of the available conditions fails. It is in this sense that we should understand the Hua-yen use of the word, for in the Hua-yen universe, the individual will *be*, and will perform its function, unless some other individual withdraws its support. (Cook 14)

The only cause we can point to in order to fully explain the existence of something is the entire universe of which it is a part. In other words, the sum of all conditions, the whole of the universe, becomes responsible and connected to any one being. The nature of nirvana becomes clear once we adopt this view. In the ordinary state of life, an

individual's consciousness perceives only a portion of this universe. This is because the individual and his own mind constitute a subset of the universe, and consequently this subset can only contain in its discernment a fraction of the universe, of the sum of all conditions. Nirvana, however, can be seen as the state encompassing the sum of all conditions. By its very nature, this sum cannot be contained within the smaller vesicle of the individual mind because the container is a piece of the sum. Rather, for a being to encompass the sum, to enter nirvana, this container of perception must be obliterated. Only through the blowing up of perception can a being become one with the sum of all conditions, with nirvana. For this reason, among various traditions, the liberation of the mind has been compared to the extinction of a lamp (Harvey 201). While most traditions agree with this changing of discernment, they differ immensely on the nature of the change and the nature of nirvana.

The Theravadin perspective views nirvana as the obliterating of all discernment and sees the state of nirvana as an object-only state. As Peter Harvey states in his book *The Selfless Mind*, "The only kind of realization of *nibbana* that these [Theravadin] texts envisage is the knowledge of it *as an object*" (Harvey 214). Harvey points out that this Theravadin view of nirvana as an object "is seen from Nd.II.245, in its comment on Sn.1037, 'Where sentiency and body (*naman ca rupan ca*) are stopped without remainder, by the stopping of discernment, here this is stopped' (cf. D.I.223)" (Harvey 214). This Theravadin view holds that the individual consciousness in attaining nirvana becomes one with the object of the all conditioned sum. Applying this view to the metaphor of the Net of Indra, it is as if a jewel represents a particular being. When this

being becomes conscious of the enlightened view and enters nirvana, this being becomes one with the entire net of the universe; consciousness stops, and this jewel is one with the entirety. This understanding of nirvana comes from the Theravadin historical context that places the emphasis on the individual and this individual's union with nirvana. Metaphorically, this tradition places the emphasis on an individual jewel becoming one with the larger whole of the net. Yet the metaphor of the Net of Indra reminds us that this understanding ignores the reflections and the interconnectedness of each individual jewel with every other jewel.

Rather than placing emphasis on the individual, the Net of Indra illuminates the Bodhisattvan view of the interconnectedness and Buddha potential of all beings. Gimello underscores the following Huayan understanding:

All things and beings, Huayan teaches, are like these jewels. When this "metaphysical" insight is made to yield its soteriological or gnoseological implications it is seen to entail, among other things, the essential Buddhahood of each sentient being, the potential enlightenment at the core of all ignorance, the fundamental purity of all defilements, the eternality of each instant, the presence of the Buddha mind in all objects, and the final attainment implicit in even the most elementary stage of the path. (Gimello 4147)

This emphasis on interconnectedness presents a radically different view than the mainstream Theravadin stance. The highest form of enlightenment does not simply entail achieving the Buddha potential in an individual being; it rests in having this individual being see the Buddha potential in all others. It invites us to see the nirvanic potential reflected in all beings.

The Huayan school presents this radically different perspective as a form of hidden wisdom that acts as a window into deeper truth. As Cook explains the unique Huayan perspective in his book:

But the truth of the matter is that the universe as described in Hua-yen documents is the world as seen by enlightened individuals, Buddhas, and not by ordinary folk of any race, time, or geographic area. Thus the Hua-yen vision is not at all self-evident, even to a Chinese philosopher. The message of Buddhism is claimed to be universal; since all men suffer in the same basic way, the cure is universally beneficial. (Cook 8)

A Buddha, in his wisdom, sees reflected in him the reflections of all others. As a result, the nirvana realized by a Buddha becomes intimately linked with the reflections of other beings. This radical revelation, this hidden piece of wisdom, illuminates the essence of the metaphor of the Net of Indra, the essence of the Mahayana worldview, and the essence of the Bodhisattva.

This wisdom reflected in the Net of Indra affirms the mind-only view of nirvana and illuminates the Mahayana view of the Bodhisattva whose realization of nirvana pulls him back toward his interconnected brethren. Harvey explains the mind-only view of nirvana exemplified by the Yogacara school of the Mahayana tradition: “It [the Yogacara school] teaches that all that is known is *citta-matra*, or ‘mind-only’. All that is ever actually experienced is an unbifurcated flow of *cittas* and accompanying mental qualities” (Harvey 217). He goes on to draw the contrast with the Theravadin perspective: “The Yogacara perspective also sees *nirvana* as an object-transcending state of discernment” (Harvey 218). In contrast to the Theravadin view of nirvana as an object-only state, the Mahayana view sees nirvana as an object-transcending, mind-only state. The Net of Indra ultimately illuminates this latter view as one step more advanced

than the former. Metaphorically, the Theravadin view ends simply with the union of an individual jewel and the entirety of the net. However, this metaphor does not simply describe a net. It describes the Net *of Indra*. It is a net of a higher mind that stands outside of the net itself and transcends the net. Additionally, this higher mind can see all the interconnectedness among its jewels. If one jewel becomes one with the entire net and one with the mind of Indra, it sees its proper relationship toward all the other jewels. In seeing itself reflected in the other jewels, and seeing the other jewels reflected in itself, this being wants all of the jewels to reach this higher state. Thus, this realization of nirvana naturally pulls this being back toward the worldly net where it can guide other jewels toward this transcendental state of nirvana. Out of this wisdom, the Bodhisattva's compassion manifests. As Harvey explains, "The basic idea is that it is a state where a Bodhisattva attains *nirvana* (in life), due to his wisdom, but through his compassion, he has no intention of passing away into nirvana beyond death" (Harvey 221). The wisdom of the Net of Indra reflects the wisdom of the Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva sees reflected in himself and his potential for nirvana, the potential of all other beings. This realization only manifests through a mind-based approach to nirvana which pulls the Bodhisattva back toward liberating the potential Buddha minds in the world.

Ultimately, the Net of Indra acts a prism. On one side of this prism, we see dependent origination. On the other side, we see refracted the brilliant light of nirvana. Inside this gem we see the interconnectedness of all beings, dependent origination, and nirvana. This magnificent prism acts a gem that from different angles reflects the conceptualizations of different traditions. While we can see the Theravadin perspective

contained in part of this metaphor, this metaphor ultimately reveals its deeper truths from a different angle. The Net of Indra reflects this deeper wisdom shining in the Mahayana perspective. As the artificer of this metaphor came from the Mahayana background, we logically find the most beautiful reflections of the metaphor reflecting the wisdom and gems of the Mahayana tradition. This metaphorical gem reflects inside itself another gem, the gem of the Bodhisattva. When seen through the prism of wisdom, refracted in these gems appears a new kind of light. This light is composed of the rays of compassion. As the compassion of these gems bounces off one another, reflecting the interconnectedness of all the gems, this net illuminates until it radiates nothing but supreme light, wholly one with the higher mind.

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