Mahayana Buddhism and Deweyan Philosophy

Jim GARRISON
Virginia Tech, USA
wesley@vt.edu

Abstract

My paper examines some of the many similarities between Mahayana Buddhism and Deweyan philosophy. It builds upon two previously published works. The first is my dialogue with Daisaku Ikeda President of Soka Gakkai International, a UN registered NGO currently active in one hundred ninety-two countries and territories, and the Director Emeritus of the Center for Dewey Studies, Larry Hickman (see Garrison, Hickman, and Ikdea, 2014). My paper will first briefly review some of the many similarities between Buddhism and Deweyan pragmatism. Second, I will also briefly review additional similarities in the published version of my Kneller Lecture to the American Educational Studies Association (see Garrison, 2019). In the present paper, I will introduce some new similarities of interest to educators. Among these are Dewey’s surprisingly Buddhist notions of language and logic as merely useful conventions. Secondly, I examine Dewey’s argument that “causation as ordered sequence is a logical category,” not an ontological category (LW 12: 454). The similarity to the opening chapter of Nagarjuna’s Madhyamaka, or Middle Way, is striking. I will suggest a logical reading has some interesting implications for student-teacher relations.

Keywords

Buddhism – causation – Dewey – Ikeda – Nagarjuna – metaphysics

I think it shows a deplorable deadness of imagination to suppose that philosophy will indefinitely revolve within the scope of the problems and systems that two thousand years of European history have bequeathed to us. Seen in the long perspective of the future, the whole of western European history is a provincial episode. (LW 5: 159)
My paper puts John Dewey’s philosophy into dialogue with Mahayana Buddhist thought. It does so by pointing out a surprising array of shared beliefs and commitments. The first part of my paper is a review and extension of previously published work. The extension involves showing how Dewey agrees with the Buddhist insight that our linguistic and logical constructions are only useful conventions that are harmless if we do not reify them as antecedently existing things. The second section introduces another new comparison. Nagarjuna is the leading philosopher of the Mahayana tradition. The opening chapter of his *Madhyamaka*, or “Middle Way” is titled “Examination of Conditions.” It is a devastating argument against causation as a metaphysical substance that has the power to bring about its effect. Nagarjuna’s argument is remarkably like Dewey’s argument that claims, “causation as ordered sequence is a logical category,” not a metaphysical category (LW 12: 454). Nagarjuna and Dewey there are only dependent, co-originating conditions and their consequences. A logical understanding of causation has important implications for understanding the student-teacher relationship. Teachers are not the metaphysical cause of students’ learning; instead, while important, they constitute just one among a multitude of dependent co-originating conditions required for learning to occur.

I first became aware of the similarities between Dewey and Buddhism while in a dialogue with Larry Hickman, director emeritus of the Center for Dewey Studies, and Daisaku Ikeda, the third president of Soka Gakkai and the current president of Soka Gakkai International (see Garrison, Hickman, and Ikeda, 2014). Ikeda is influential both as an educator and in the troubled context of Chinese-Japanese relations. He is the founder of the largest system of private schooling on the island of Japan, including Soka University Japan. As of the publication of this paper both the Chinese and the Russian ambassadors to Japan were educated there. Ikeda is known and respected in China for meetings with Zhou Enlai in which he acknowledged Japanese atrocities in China during WW II. Among his published dialogues is one with Mikhail Gorbachev.

One in every eight native resident of Japan is a member of the Soka Gakkai (meaning “value creating society”), which is a form of Nichiren Buddhism, a Japanese variant of Mahayana Buddhism established through the teachings of Nichiren, a thirteenth-century Japanese priest Nichiren. It is based on the *Lotus Sutra*, perhaps the most popular of the Mahayana Sutras. Analysis of the Chinese and Sanskrit versions of the Sutra suggest its earliest parts date back over two-thousand years.

---

1 Nowhere has emphasis been added to citations.
At the conclusion of my dialogue with Hickman and Ikeda, I acknowledge, “This surprising compatibility between Nichiren Buddhism and Deweyan pragmatism has made an enduring impression on me” (LL 272). Some of the compatibilities I mention are “dependent origination,” “anti-dualism,” “ameliorative action,” “humanism,” and Ikeda’s own observation identifying “Dewey as a follower of the Middle Way” (LL 272, see also 205). I address all these compatibilities just mentioned and more in a paper titled, “Nichiren Buddhism and Deweyan Pragmatism: An Eastern-Western Integration of Thought,” which is based on my 2018 Kneller lecture to the American Educational Studies Association (Garrison, 2019). The next section draws from and expands on that paper.

1 Buddhism and Deweyan Pragmatism: The Middle Way

All forms of Buddhism emphasize the following universal truths: (1) everything is impermanent, (2) there is no permanent and unchanging substantial self; and (3) the impermanence of the self and of the world causes suffering. They also share the Four Noble Truths, namely that life is suffering, suffering is caused by attachment, suffering arises from dependent, co-arising conditions and, it ceases when those conditions no longer exist.

In a chapter titled “Existence as Precarious and Stable,” Dewey asserted: “A thing may endure secula seculorum and yet not be everlasting; it will crumble before the gnawing tooth of time, as it exceeds a certain measure” (LW 1: 63). Dewey cited the renowned Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, who proclaimed that “there is nothing permanent except change” over 2,000 years ago (LW 17: 131). He went on to state that “today it seems to me, looking back over my fourscore years of work and study, that too few men have recently paid attention to this great truth” (131). Every “thing” is impermanent. Hence, as Dewey observed, “even the solid earth mountains, the emblems of constancy, appear and disappear like the clouds” (LW 1: 63). Moreover, what is true for “everything” is true for the self.

Dewey famously rejected the spectator stance toward existence, instead favoring a participant stance in which the mind and the self are a part of an ever-changing universe:

The essential difference is that between a mind which beholds or grasps objects from outside the world of things, physical and social, and one which is a participant, interacting with other things and knowing them provided the interaction is regulated in a definable way. (LW 4: 161)
Instead of passively contemplating an antecedent reality, participants recognize their transactional, dependent co-origination. From an epistemological perspective, knowledge is not about discovering something that already exists; rather, it is something produced by arranging interactions in diverse ways while always remembering:

What is known is seen to be a product in which the act of observation plays a necessary role. Knowing is seen to be a participant in what is finally known. Moreover, the metaphysics of existence as something fixed and therefore capable of literally exact mathematical description and prediction is undermined. (LW 4: 163)

There is no creation ex nihilo; existence precedes essence, but without makers of meaning, knowing, and value, there is no meaning, knowledge, or value in the universe. As participants in an ever-changing universe, we ourselves are continually changing, and will eventually vanish as the relationships that sustain us begin to “crumble before the gnawing tooth of time” (op. cit.). We are as impermanent as the rest of existence.

The purpose of knowledge is to enable individuals and their progeny to live long and well amidst the flux of existence. Dewey declared that “the great vice of philosophy is an arbitrary ‘intellectualism,’” implying that knowledge is not our primary relation to reality (LW 1: 28). Mere intellectualism leads to “the denial to nature of the characters which make things lovable and contemptible, beautiful and ugly, adorable and awful” and much more.” (LW 1: 28). Our noncognitive relations with existence provide the context for knowledge. The function of knowledge is to help put us into the right relationship with surroundings so that we may live long and prosper while providing a better world for future generations. Of course, the process of acquiring knowledge may itself be a creative and pleasurable pursuit. Dewey claimed that “science is one among the arts and among the works of art” (LW 1: 287). The artifact of the scientific art is knowledge. Knowledge is useful other arts, so “science itself is but a central art auxiliary to the generation and utilization of other arts” (LW 10: 33). Dewey further argued that “science states meanings; art expresses them” (LW 10: 90). Statable meanings are useful for creating expressive meanings. Still, for all the artifacts of art, we and all we love shall perish; hence, we suffer.

Knowledge contributes to ameliorating suffering. Many misunderstand Dewey’s progressivism. He does not think we are progressing to some ideal end rather, although we may always make progress toward ameliorating suffering. He writes:
Meliorism is the belief that the specific conditions which exist at one moment, be they comparatively bad or comparatively good, in any event may be bettered. It encourages intelligence to study the positive means of good and the obstructions to their realization, and to put forth endeavor for the improvement of conditions. It arouses confidence and a reasonable hopefulness as optimism does not. (MW 12: 182)

The only alternative to tuche (i.e., luck) is techne (i.e., the arts of production). Dewey asserts, “Art is the sole alternative to luck; and divorce from each other of the meaning and value of instrumentalities and ends is the essence of luck” (LW 1: 279). Nevertheless, wisdom is beyond knowledge. Wisdom comprehends the good of knowledge because it perceives ameliorative possibilities beyond the actual. We must work hard to actualize ideal values:

An ideal is a sense of the possibilities of a situation and is of value only as inspiring action and directing of ameliorating its evils; meliorism as compared with optimism and pessimism. Happiness is found not in possession or fixed attainment, but in the active process of striving, overcoming and succeeding; failures are to be turned to account, and are not incompatible with moral happiness. (MW 11: 348)

According to Thomas A. Alexander, (2013) Dewey’s book, A Common Faith, expresses a “spirituality of possibility” (354). Ideals as imaginary ends-in-view serve as goals of artful ameliorative inquiry.

One consequence of Dewey’s participant stance is strident anti-dualism. Hinayana Buddhism tends to emphasize the extinction of desire as the key to overcoming suffering and entry into Nirvana. As with most of Mahayana Buddhism, Nichiren Buddhism identifies sources of suffering other than desire including, among others, arrogance, negligence, hatred, and vilification, while finding the supernatural notion of Nirvana at best a sometimes useful expedient means.² Nichiren Buddhism emphasizes the proper appeasement of desires, not their extinction.³ In Western terms, the proper appeasement of desires would involve the education of eros to desire the genuinely good (see Garrison, 1997). In his Theory of Valuation, Dewey distinguishes between

---

² According to the final part of chapter 8 of the Lotus Sutra, “the Buddhas in their capacity as leaders preach nirvana to provide rest. But when they know you have become rested, they lead you onward to the Buddha wisdom” (Watson, 1993, 142).

³ Dewey himself seems to think all Buddhist sought to extinguish desire and enter a heaven-like state of Nirvana (see MW 14: 198).
value and the truly valuable, desire and the truly desirable. Distinguishing an immediate object of desire from a genuinely desirable object is the task of intelligent inquiry. Dewey rejected a rigid fact versus value dualism as Hilary Putnam (2002) observes in his book *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy* (9). Any parent or educator understands that if their offspring or charges possess the wisdom to pursue only the genuinely good, everything else would be fine. Overcoming the fact/value dualism contributes considerably to intelligent amelioration.

Buddhism emphasizes the oneness of life and the environment; their separation is a distorting illusion. In Deweyan terms, it is a false dualism: “Life (or functions, activities) includes within itself the distinction of Environment and Organism” (MW 6: 467). In *Art as Experience*, Dewey says:

> As the developing growth of an individual from embryo to maturity is the result of interaction of organism with surroundings, so culture is the product not of efforts of men put forth in a void or just upon themselves, but of prolonged and cumulative interaction with environment. (LW 10: 35)

Understood transactionally, organisms and their environments, individuals and their social environments, or nature and culture are merely useful methodological distinctions.

Dewey presents his entire philosophy as “empirical naturalism or naturalistic empiricism, or, taking ‘experience’ in its usual signification, naturalistic humanism” (10). Presumably, “naturalistic humanism” renders Dewey susceptible to post-modern critiques of humanism. However, these critiques totally ignore Eastern philosophies, which are not especially susceptible to the post-modern onslaught.

The first of Ikeda’s works that I encountered was *A New Humanism* (2010), which is a compilation of lectures delivered at various universities worldwide, including Fudan University and Peking University. In one lecture, Ikeda asks: “Does religion make people stronger, or weaker?” (171). Referring to Marx’s description of religion as the “opiate of the masses” (171), he expressed concern over the “dogmatism and insularity” of many religions that “run counter to the accelerating trend toward interdependence and cross-cultural interaction” (171). While appreciating the accomplishments of science, Ikeda worries about “the omnipotence of reason” and those “blindly convinced of the power of technology” that can lead to the “hubris of assuming that there is nothing we are unable to accomplish” (158). Ikeda urges “a third path, a new balance between faith in ourselves and recognition of a power that is greater than we
are” (158). He cites Nichiren, “Neither solely through one’s own efforts ... nor solely through the power of others” (158).

Steven C. Rockefeller (1991) subtitles his book on Dewey’s philosophy of religion, “Religious faith and democratic humanism.” In A Common Faith, Dewey is especially concerned with “the exclusive preoccupation of both militant atheism and supernaturalism with man in isolation;” whereas supernaturalism is obsessed with the “lonely soul of man” while the atheist envisages “man living in an indifferent and hostile world and issuing blasts of defiance” (36). He thinks, “The essentially unreligious attitude is that which attributes human achievement and purpose to man in isolation from the world of physical nature and his fellows. Our successes are dependent upon the cooperation of nature” (LW 9: 18). Dewey argued that beyond resignation to the natural world, conceived as being fully determined, and unquestioning belief in supernatural beings and ideals, imaginary ideals of the possible beyond the actual may assume prominence in our lives, providing ideal ends-in-view that guide moral action. He distinguishes dogmatic faith in the supernatural from “aggressive atheism” which he finds lacks “natural piety” (LW 9: 36). Ikeda (2010) identifies Dewey’s A Common Faith as also advocating the middle way of religious humanism (171–172). Dewey’s practice of the middle way was discussed in my dialogue with Hickman and Ikeda (2014, 205).

Critics ranging from Fredreich Nietzsche to Martin Heidegger, Michael Foucault, and Jacques Derrida have supposedly devastated humanism. They have demonstrated that concepts such as human nature and humanity are hopelessly metaphysical and historically relative. There is simply no metaphysical substance of humanity whether conceived in terms of rationality, the possession of 46 chromosomes, or being featherless bipeds. or having forty-six chromosomes. In A New Humanism, Ikeda (1996) cites Dewey statement that “Everything which is distinctly human is learned” (54; see LW 2: 331). If everything distinctly human is learned, then it is evident that human subjects are entirely contingent on historical socio-cultural constructions born into a world of pre-existing institutional, social, and linguistic practices that condition the very habits of their bodies and the feelings those habits channel into emotions. Culture has us before we have it. The human sciences may help us understand how cultural practices condition our conduct, and subjects may use the knowledge to reconstruct their culture and thereby themselves, but these sciences cannot disclose some unalterable foundation of self, if only because they are themselves cultural practices requiring reflective inquiry to be understood. They cannot be used to complete what Dewey calls “the quest for certainty” (see LW 4). In the first paragraph of an essay titled, “Does Human Nature
Change?” Dewey proclaims in the first paragraph that “the proper answer is that human nature does change” (LW 13: 286). This is true simply because everything changes. Education is the effort to change things for the better.

Both the Nagarjuna and Dewey are anti-foundationalists that reject metaphysical substance; there are no eternal immutable essences underlying the impermanent and ever-changing flux. Nagarjuna sought the middle way between two metaphysical extremes. Richard Hayes (2019) explains that Nagarjuna “avoids the two extremes of eternalism – the doctrine that all things exist because of an eternal essence – and annihilationism – the doctrine that things have essences while they exist but that these essences are annihilated just when the things themselves go out of existence” (1). The former defends the absolute, eternal, and immutable continuity of metaphysical essences, abstract concepts, or universals; the latter are those materialists, atomists, nominalists, and mechanists that nihilistically assert the transient, mutable discontinuity of metaphysical essences annihilated when things vanish on the other. Both are committed to the metaphysics of substance (i.e., svabhava).

All commentators agree that the central idea of the middle way fundamentally entails the rejection of a metaphysics of substance underlying an impermanent, ever-changing flux. However, Jan Westerhoff (2009) argues that we must distinguish two fundamental kinds of svabhava, the first of which is not metaphysical. They are essence-svabhava and substance-svabhava. The former refers to “the specific quality that that is unique to the object characterized and therefore allows us to distinguish it from other objects” (21). He concludes:

The notion of essence-svabhava, which equates svabhava with the specific qualities of an object and contrasts them with those qualities it shares with other objects, serves mainly epistemological purposes. It provides a procedure for drawing a line between a variety of objects with shared qualities and thereby allows us to tell them apart. (23)

Dewey concurs.

Dewey claims that “objects are the objectives of inquiry” (LW 12: 122). He thinks objects are “produced” by the various social practices of inquiry, including science. Objects do not exist prior to the practices that produce them. He identifies what he calls “the philosophic fallacy;” that is, the “conversion of eventual functions into antecedent existence” (LW 1: 34). Objects are artifacts of inquiry. Dewey remarks that “an enduring object is all one with the determination that it is one of a kind” (LW 12: 248). Kinds are constituted by bundles of qualitative traits. Of themselves, “Immediate qualities in their immediacy are ... non-recurrent” (248). Hence, “qualities are not recurrent in themselves
but in their evidential function. As evidential, they are characteristics which describe a kind" (351). Further, “the existential traits employed to determine descriptively a kind should be conceived in terms of modes of interaction” (LW 12: 425). These modes of interaction are dependent co-originating transactions:

The traits or characteristics which describe a kind are taken to go together in existence. The ground of their selection is logical but the ground of their going together is existential. The ground is that, as a matter of existence, they do go together or are existentially so conjoined that when one varies the other varies. (268)

When one quality or set of qualities are present, another quality or set of qualities comes to be. When one quality or set of qualities are absent, another quality or set of qualities does not come to be.

Substance-\textit{svabhava} is metaphysical primary existence: “Primary existents constitute the irreducible constituents of the empirical world. Secondary existents, on the other hand, depend on the linguistic and mental construction for their existence” (24). Essence-\textit{svabhava} has only conventional (conceptual, linguistic, logical, etc.) existence; they are constructed to serve our finite, human (sometimes all too human) purposes (20 and 30). Secondary existence conceptually constructed for practical epistemological purposes (essence-\textit{svabhava}) is not the point of Nagarjuna or Dewey’s criticisms if we do not ontologically reify our contingent constructions by committing “\textit{the} philosophic fallacy” (op. cit.).

Supposedly, there are three ways substance-\textit{svabhava} subsists in complete existential independence. First, there is causal independence, implying that the substances’ existence does not depend on causes and conditions. Second, there is mereological independence, meaning that such substances are not a part that depends on a larger whole. Finally, substance-\textit{svabhava} is conceptually independent from a designating mind or linguistic designation (see Westerhoff, 2009, 27). Substance-\textit{svabhava} is also notionally or descriptively independent. Westerhoff concludes:

[T]he notion of substance-\textit{svabhava} is much stronger than that of essence-\textit{svabhava}. In particular we can assert the existence of the second without affirming the first. It could be the case that every object has some properties it could not lose without ceasing to be that very object … and therefore be endowed with essence-\textit{svabhava}. But at the same time everything could in some way (either existentially or notionally) be dependent on something else so that substance-\textit{svabhava} did not exist at all. (29)
For Nagarjuna, all things are entirely empty of inherent, independent natures (substance-\textit{svabhava}). There is only the dependent co-origination of all that arises and ceases. Everything is impermanent:

\begin{quote}
How could there be becoming
Without destruction?
For impermanence
\textit{Is never absent from entities} \hspace{1em} (Madhyamaka, Chapter XX, Garfield, 1995)
\end{quote}

Eventually, every object loses its characteristic qualities as the dependent co-originating conditions that gave rise to it alter. In Dewey’s terms “it will crumble before the gnawing tooth of time, as it exceeds a certain measure” \hspace{1em} (\textit{op. cit.}).

Like Nagarjuna, Dewey’s emergent empirical naturalism rejects ultimate substances or what classical metaphysics calls \textit{ousia}. Indeed, one of the leading commentators on Nagarjuna’s middle way reads him as a Jamesian radical empiricist (Kalupahana, 1986). William James, including his radical empiricism wherein relations as well as the things being related appear and disappear in the stream of consciousness, greatly influenced Dewey. As Thomas M. Alexander (2013) remarks, Dewey’s version of radical empiricism in such essays as “The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism” challenges one of the principle dogmas of twenty-five hundred years of western thought arising from Parmenides’s identification of Being and knowing: “For it is the same thing, To-Be and To-Know” (Parmenides cited in Alexander, 34). Essence-\textit{svabhava} is not substance-\textit{svabhava}.

The impermanency posited in the theory of evolution presents a dramatic challenge to Western metaphysics. In “The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy,” Dewey declares:

\begin{quote}
In laying hands upon the sacred ark of absolute permanency, in treating forms that had been regarded as types of fixity and perfection as originating and passing away, the Origin of Species introduced a mode of thinking that in the end was bound to transform the logic of knowledge, and hence the treatment of morals, politics and religion. (\textit{MW} 4: 3)
\end{quote}

He could have added education to this list.

Before Darwin, Dewey argued, “the conception of ειδος, species, a fixed form and final cause, was the central principle of knowledge as well as of nature” \hspace{1em} (\textit{MW} 3: 6). Dewey did for fixed and final nonlogical, essences (substance-\textit{svabhava}) what Darwin did for species. Usually metaphysical essences (\textit{eidos})
are teleologically determined by their ultimate end states. A telos, and especially a perfect telos or an entelecheia (ultimate purpose), is a critical aspect of classical metaphysics. From Aristotle to Piaget, rationality has constituted the essence of “man,” the final cause, the entelecheia. Every individual mind and self is emptiness devoid of substance. Having rejected the notion of a human essence (eidos) and (entelecheia), Dewey has no choice but to assert: “Since growth is the characteristic of life, education is all one with growing; it has no end beyond itself” (MW 9: 56).

Given his anti-foundationalism, Dewey rejects the idea of a metaphysical arche, wherein ultimate principles, beginnings, or endings; first or final causes; or any causes can be conceptualized as latent or active power. The opening chapter of Nagarjuna’s Madhyamaka, titled “Examination of Conditions” is a refutation of metaphysical causation as substance, self-nature, or svabhava. It refutes the metaphysical concept of self-acting or inter-acting entities with an intrinsic, nondependent nature or essence, including human selves, or any other metaphysical forces.

Nothing possesses an intrinsically self-moving power. This is an important insight because in the words of the Buddha, “He who perceives causation ... perceives the dharma [the Law]” (cited in Kalupahana, 1976, 30). The Buddha proclaims:

    When this is present, that comes to be;
    From the arising of this, that arises.
    When this is absent, that does not come to be;
    On the cessation of this, that ceases. (Cited in Kalupahana, 28)

Instead of change due to metaphysical causal powers, the Buddha only acknowledges dependent co-arising, or what Dewey identifies as the conditions and consequences of emergent trans-actions.

Sleeper (1986) argues that Dewey advocated “transactional realism” (3). Transactionalism is dependent co-arising: “But all changes occur through interactions of conditions. What exists co-exists, and no change can either occur or be determined in inquiry in isolation from the connection of an existence with co-existing conditions” (LW 12: 221). In a section of my dialogue with Hickman and Ikeda (2014) titled “Dependent Origination,” Ikeda highlighted the following passage written by Dewey: “[N]othing in the universe, not even physical things, exists apart from some form of association; there is nothing from the atom to man which is not involved in conjoint action” (175, fn. 12; see LW 7: 323).
Dewey rejected self-action and, later in life, inter-action. By self-action he means some intrinsic power or force “where things are viewed as acting under their own powers (LW 16: 101). Aristotelian physics and metaphysics are examples. By “inter-action” he means the notion of two separate things operating on each other: that is, “where thing is balanced against thing in causal interaction” (101). Newtonian elastic collisions, wherein for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction, is a good example. So too is organism and environment inter-action. The emphasis here is on “transactional observation of the ‘organism-in-environment-as-a-whole’” (103). Transactional observations do not require synthesis if the various aspects and phases can be envisioned together.

Dewey argued that common sense “is given to ascribing ... consequences to some ‘power’ inherent in the things themselves (an ingredient of the popular notion of substance), and to ignoring interaction with other things as the determining factor” (LW 12: 440). Here, we can discern Dewey’s earlier use of “interaction,” considered as transactional and entailing avoidance of “attribution to ‘elements’ or other presumptively detachable or independent ‘entities,’ ‘essences,’ or ‘realities,’ and without isolation of presumptively detachable ‘relations’ from such detachable ‘elements’” (101–102). The transactional realist views all transactions as reciprocally transformative, evolving (or developing), and emergent.

Transaction involves “functional observation of full system” (71). When proceeding “in the transactional,” it is always possible to “see together, extensionally and durationally, much that is talked about conventionally, as if it were composed of irreconcilable separates” (67). Seeing together poses the greatest challenge to thinking transactionally; it is also perhaps the greatest challenge to understanding dependent co-origination. One might observe a bird in flight, but transactional observation allows the observer to “take in not just a bird while in flight but bird nest-building, egg-laying and hatching” (50). Recalling that “the subject matters of observation are durational and extensional,” it may even be possible to “see” birds together with the dinosaurs (most likely theropods) from whence they evolved and which they visibly resemble (83). Similarly, we should attempt strive to see teachers, students, and the teacher-student relationship together within a single transaction.

2 Buddhism, Causation, and the Teaching Transaction

For Dewey, “mind” is “an added property assumed by a feeling creature, when it reaches that organized interaction with other living creatures which is
language, communication" (LW 1:198). Language and its consequences, accordingly, “are characters taken on by natural interaction and natural conjunction in specified conditions of organization” (145). In Dewey’s realism, minds and selves emerge from physically and biologically dependent co-originating transactions without any breach of continuity:

A requests B to bring him something, to which A points ... There is an original mechanism by which B may react to A’s movement in pointing. But natively such a reaction is to the movement, not to the pointing, not to the object [O] pointed out. But B learns that the movement is a pointing; he responds to it not in itself, but as an index of something else. His response is transferred from A’s direct movement to the object to which A points ... He perceives the thing as it may function in A’s experience, instead of just ego-centrically ... Something is literally made common in at least two different centres of behavior. To understand is to anticipate together ... [It is] a transaction in which both participate. (141–142)

As in any dependent co-arising transaction, A, B, and O emerge are transformed together. When this [A and B] is present, that [O] comes to be. From the arising of this [O], that [A and B] arises. Think of A and B as teacher and student and O as some object, the subject matter, or curriculum and remember: “Everything which is distinctly human is learned” (op. cit.). Human beings not only learn from each other, they co-create each other’s minds (and selves) and worlds in the process.

As in any dependent co-originating transaction, teacher and student, or in Buddhist terms, mentor and disciple is merely a useful distinction. In my dialogue with Ikeda and Hickman, the former observed that “Buddhism considers the disciple the cause and the mentor the result. Though we say, ‘mentor and disciple,’ the disciple is the key, and everything depends on the disciple. The two are inseparably united and nondual” (LL, 36). For “A” to be a teacher there must be a student “B.” One could say that the student is the “cause” of the teacher. Mentor and disciple arise and cease together in a single, co-transformative transaction.

Learning is an instance of dependent co-arising involving a vast array of conditions. However, here, I will examine only two of them: the teacher and the student. The first verse of the “Examination of Conditions,” which is the opening chapter of Nagarjuna’s Madhyamaka, presents the following tetralemma:

---

4 We now know the “original mechanism” involves mirror neurons.
Neither from itself nor from another,
Nor from both
Nor without a cause,
Does anything whatever, anywhere arise. (Garfield, 1995, 105)

There is no such thing as a power of self-causation (“from itself”) or of a self-caused thing that causes something else (“from another”); the third alternative is either a combination the first two forms of causation (“from both,” or as Dewey says, “where thing is balanced against thing in causal interaction.”) or a subtle concession that every “thing” that arises does so from co-dependent conditions, which is Nagarjuna’s point. Ultimately, nothing arises spontaneously.

Teaching is not a substance. Therefore, teaching is not self-caused (i.e., self-action), which would not require a student. Nor does the teacher have some intrinsic power to force students to learn. Moreover, in the student-teacher transaction, there are not two separate substances, powers, or forces that are balanced against each other in causal interaction. Finally, student learning is not simply spontaneous, although learning can occur without teaching because there are dependent co-arising conditions of learning that do not involve teachers at all. For example, a sage in the social role of teacher could simply create a good learning environment. There is no such thing as metaphysical causation; there are only dependent, co-originating conditions (including students, teachers, and their natural and cultural environments) and consequences including, hopefully, learning. A cause never arises without an effect; it could be posited that the effect is the cause of the cause. Cause and effect, like organism and environment, mind and body, knower and known, or mentor and disciple is merely a useful distinction among co-arising events.

Recall that for Dewey, “causation as ordered sequence is a logical category,” in the sense that it is an abstract conception of the indefinitely numerous existential sequences that are established in scientific inquiry (LW 12: 453). Consequently, Dewey’s concludes:

For when events are taken strictly existentially, there is no event which is antecedent or “cause” any more than it is consequent or “effect.” Moreover, even when an event is taken to be an antecedent or a consequent [a condition or consequence] … it has an indefinite number of antecedents and consequents with which it is connected, since every event is existentially connected with some other event without end. Consequently, the only possible conclusion upon the basis of an existential or ontological interpretation of causation is that everything in the universe is cause and
effect of everything else – a conclusion which renders the category completely worthless for scientific purposes. (LW 12: 453)

Nevertheless, in a practical context, we need to “see together” some aspects of the infinite vastness to grasp what must be done. While we are finite participants in what appears to be an infinite universe, we must simplify in practice, and in service to our contextualized human needs, desires, and purposes. However, “no event comes to us labelled ‘cause’ or ‘effect.’ An event must be deliberately taken to be cause or effect. Such taking would be purely arbitrary if there were not a particular and differential problem to be solved” (LW 12: 453). When we call something “the” cause or effect, what we are really saying is that to accomplish our finite human purposes, we have selected certain aspects of the vast universe that we know how to use as conditions from whence certain consequences follow. For practical purposes within this logic of inquiry, calling such conventions causes is not harmful unless we reify them as ontological substances existing antecedent to and apart from their taking and use in an inquiry.

For Dewey, logic is “the generalized idea of the means-consequence relation” (17). In an inquiry, the inquirer searches for conditions as a means of bringing about the desired consequences. Dewey defined inquiry as “the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole” (LW 12: 108). A situation becomes problematic for individuals because they participate in it. Consider, for example, the case of a teacher in a student–teacher transaction that is not proceeding smoothly. A good teacher will strive to transform the indeterminate situation into a harmonious, fully unified whole. If that is not possible, she or he will strive to ameliorate the situation.

It is a mistake to assume that an antecedently existing cause exists as a metaphysical substance. What can be identified are dependent co-originating conditions (the means) for bringing about desirable pedagogical consequences (the ends). Dewey declared that “every intelligent act involves selection of certain things as means to other things as their consequences.” (LW 12: 454). What should the inquirer choose? The choice would be “purely arbitrary if there were not a particular and differential problem to be solved” (op. cit.). If the inquirer chooses not to ameliorate troubled student–teacher relations, then the search for conditions and consequences may end up simply being the evasion of responsibility. Bad teachers often look for deficiencies in their students, blaming failure on them, perhaps by claiming that the student is simply too lazy or too dumb. Bad school administrators often do the same
thing with teachers. Sometimes students, teachers, or administrators assign blame to the parents or to the wider community. In such cases, no inquiry toward seeking ameliorative occurs.

When student-teacher transactions fail there is a temptation to look for the cause “inside” the student or teacher as a self-acting power. However, both the student and the teacher are among a vast array of the dependent co-arising conditions, which is not to say some change in one, the other, or both student and teacher may not be required if they are to coordinate their transaction. However, we must not forget that the student-teacher transaction is only one part of a much larger situation. There is also a temptation to simply blame the interaction. Practically, it might be best to assign a student to a new teacher. However, again, the wider transactional situation must be considered.

Often a failed student–teacher transaction arises from differences in personal and cultural histories and traditions, social classes, ethnicities, genders, and so on. Here it becomes especially important to “see together, extensionally and durationally, much that is talked about conventionally as if it were composed of irreconcilable separates” (op. cit.). The complexity is immense, but because we must act, we cannot let such complexity paralyze us. While identifying appropriate means for ameliorating consequences requires considerable intelligence, ultimately it requires wisdom. We must avoid the “vice of arbitrary ‘intellectualism’” (op. cit.). Although wisdom requires knowledge, it extends beyond knowledge alone.

In artful ameliorative inquiry, it is sometimes more important to be than to know; being perceptive, sympathetic, intuitive, reflectively aware, imaginative, and much more may be essential. Rather than considering the daunting complexity of student–teacher relationships as a burden, good teachers view them as opportunities to exercise their creativity to connect better with their students.

References

Alexander, Thomas M. (2013). The Human Eros: Eco-ontology and the Aesthetics of Existence. New York, N.Y.: Fordham University Press.

Dewey, John. References are to the critical edition published by Southern Illinois University Press. Volume and page numbers follow the initials of the series. Abbreviations for the volumes cited are:

MW The Middle Works (1899–1924).

LW The Later Works (1925–1953).
Garfield, Jay L. (1995). *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Garrison, Jim (1997). *Dewey and Eros: Wisdom and Desire in the Art of Teaching*. New York: Teachers College Press. Reissued by Information Age Press, 2010.

Garrison, Jim, Hickman, Larry, and Ikeda, Daisaku (2014) *Living as Learning*. Cambridge, Mass: Dialogue Path Press. LL in the text.

Garrison, Jim (2019). *Nichiren Buddhism and Deweyan Pragmatism: An Eastern-Western Integration of Thought*, *Educational Studies*, 51, 12–27.

Hayes, Richard (2019). "Madhyamaka", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.). Retrieved from https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/madhyamaka/.

Ikeda, Daisaku (2010). *A New Humanism*. London, UK: I.B. Tauris.

Kalupahana, David J. (1986). *Nagarjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press.

Putnam, Hilary (2002). *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Rockefeller, S.C. (1991). *John Dewey: Religious faith and democratic humanism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Sleeper, R. (1986). *The necessity of pragmatism*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Westerhoff, Jan (2009). *Nagarjuna’s Madhyamaka*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Watson, Burton (1993). *The Lotus Sutra*. New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press.