[1]DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS, DEVELOPING THE SELF: BUDDHISM AND ACTION RESEARCH:

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Action research has frequently been interpreted as an attempt to overcome the alienation of work-based relationships in hierarchical, bureaucratised organisations. Rationales for this perspective on action research have drawn on a variety of Western intellectual traditions, such as Marxism (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991), critical social theory (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Winter 1989; Winter & Munn-Giddings, 2001), postmodernism (Stringer, 1996), organisational relations theory (Whyte, 1991), and the literature on 'reflective practice' (Schon, 1987, Elliott, 1991). The purpose of the following argument is to argue that the transformation of relationships also requires a transformation of the self and to suggest how our understanding of this aspect of action research can helpfully be illuminated and informed by analogies and parallels with the complex synthesis of epistemology, psychology, ethics and moral practice represented by Buddhism. Each section of the chapter starts out from a key concept in the methodology of action research and attempts to add both precision and depth through a comparison with some Buddhist themes and doctrines.

The Importance of Values: Care, Collaboration

The defining characteristic of action research is that it involves an attempt to create new understanding through negotiating and implementing improvements in the quality of social practices. This has important consequences. Firstly, it means that every phase of the work is in itself intended to enhance professional values (justice, rationality, care, autonomy, etc.). 'Good action research is informed by the values practitioners want to realise in their practice' (Elliott, 1995, p.10). In other words, the relationships of the inquiry process must enact and model the values of the organisation where the inquiry is taking place. More particularly, it means that the inquiry process must model human values such as 'co-operation' (Heron, 1996; 1998), 'participation' (Reason, 1994) and 'collaboration' (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p.199-200; Winter, 1989, Chapter 4).

Action research requires this form of relationship for a very practical reason: the inquiry process is going to require participants to take part in a change process, and this is unlikely to occur unless everyone feels that the process is one to which they have fully and autonomously committed themselves, rather than one which has been imposed upon them. But action research also insists on 'empowering' 'democratic', collaborative / co-operative relationships for moral and political reasons, i.e. to overcome a widespread sense of alienation, fragmentation and powerlessness (Reason, 1995, chapter 1). Only within a set of relationships which are experienced as 'empowering', where there is a genuine sense of trust, mutual respect, equality and autonomy, will the inquiry be able to draw on all individuals' inherent creative potential (Heron, 1996). And it is in this universal human capacity for emotional transformation (Dadds, 1995, pp. 121-2), for 'critical subjectivity' (Heron, 1998) and for 'innovative thinking' (Hart 1996) that action research locates the possibility for developing new and valuable knowledge. Indeed, both Reason and Heron go further and

identify this person-centred, experiential, creatively co-operative aspect of action research as having an inherently spiritual dimension, i.e. an essential link with those aspects of human consciousness which transcend ego-awareness and instrumental rationality (Reason, 1995, pp. 50, 53; Heron, 1998, pp. 1-3).

These arguments from within the action research tradition can be related to Buddhist ideas at a number of points [2]. To begin with, one of the most immediately distinctive features of Buddhism was that it rejected the caste divisions of Brahmin culture. Whereas Brahminism emphasised that wisdom and understanding were restricted to the Brahmin caste, and that the lower caste *suddas* were *forbidden* to hear the Vedic scriptures, the Buddhist teaching was intended for *all* people, since all (regardless of status, gender and experience) have the 'ability' to understand (Payutto, 1995, pp.38-43). Thus, for example, there is the story of the Sakyan princes, who presented themselves to the Buddha in order to be ordained as his followers along with their barber of long standing, Upali, requesting that in order to humble their pride, Upali should be ordained first – a request to which the Buddha readily assented (Nanamoli, 1995, p. 83). Returning to a research context, one might deduce from this that it is dangerously pride-ful to assume in advance that we know who will contribute wisdom to our work, i.e. that we can rigidly divide participants into lower caste 'research subjects' (who can only contribute the data of their mundane opinions or experiences) and the 'Brahmin researchers' (who decide on theoretical meanings).

One of the key dimensions of action research is the attempt to establish collaborative, co-operative patterns of communication, in order to heal the distorted or inadequate communication processes that so often limit the effectiveness of professional situations and roles. And on this topic the principle of 'harmonious speech' (a sub-section of the Buddhist 'Eight-fold Path') is instructive:

> At the fourth and the deepest level…right speech promotes concord or harmony. 'Concord' in this context does not mean just intellectual agreement: it is not just sharing the same ideas…It really means what we may describe as mutual helpfulness leading to mutual self-transcendence.
>
> (Sangarakshita, 1996, p.140)

And indeed, writers on action research regularly invoke, as the basis for collaborative relationships, Habermas's 'ideal speech situation', in which all conflictual, power-based roles are suspended and only the power of the better argument prevails (see Carr and Kemmis, 1986, pp.142-4). Nevertheless one might respond to all this by saying, "This is all very fine as an ideal, but how do we put it into practice? How do we learn to converse 'harmoniously' and in a climate of 'mutual helpfulness' when we live so much of our lives in settings where self-interest, competition and conflict are considered quite normal?"

Buddhism can offer practical answers here, since its basis is not just a system of theoretical principles but also a system of value-based practices in which the aim is quite directly to change one's behaviour. One of the central Buddhist practices is, of course, meditation, and one of the most important meditation practices is based on the principle of *metta*, usually translated as 'loving-kindness' but having much in common with the idea of generosity and the Christian usage of 'love'. In the meditation to develop *metta* the aim is to develop positive feelings, of 'wishing well' first towards ourselves, then towards a close friend, then towards someone we are aware of but do not know well, and then towards someone for whom we have some sense of hostility. The next step is to focus these positive feelings simultaneously and *equally* towards ourselves and the three people we have

identified, and finally towards all people in general. (The practice is described in, for example, Proto, 1991, pp. 89-91; Sumedho, et.al., 1990, pp.61-63, Kamalashila, 1996, pp. 25-32.)

The value and effectiveness of meditation practice is widely attested (see Marion Dadds' chapter in this volume). So there are good reasons for thinking that it would also be worthwhile exploring how it might be included within an inquiry process, to guide participants towards 'harmonious speech'. Even from the brief outline above, it is clear that a lot of practical wisdom is implicit in the sequence of stages, e.g. the idea that you can't feel positive towards others unless you are feeling positive about yourself, and the importance of practising one's ability for imaginative empathy on a stranger before tackling the problem of explicitly hostile feelings. But there are further useful details to be noted. *Metta* is the first of a set of four so-called 'sublime states of mind' (see Nyanatiloka, 1970, p.37) and in some ways the other three can be seen as an analysis of its key elements. The first is *karuna* – a sense of compassion for the general suffering and pain that (inevitably) underlies human beings' words and actions, our own and others. This reminds us that we can avoid responding harshly to others' insensitive or abrasive behaviour, but can instead interpret it as merely careless or, as Buddhists would say, 'unskilful', and thus choose to 'overlook' it. The second is *mudita* – an empathetic joyful pleasure in others' achievements, which reminds us how easy it is to resent others' success ("Why did everyone agree with X's interpretation of the data and ignore my suggestions?") and respond competitively, which prevents the discussion building constructively on everyone's contribution. Finally there is *uppekha* – a state of 'equanimity' in which joy and compassion are combined and transcended in a generalised understanding of both the difficulties and the potentialities of the human condition (see Kamalashila, 1996, pp. 201-4).

Another helpful set of ideas concerning how one might seek a skilful approach to co-operative working may be derived from Vajradaka's suggestions as to the sequence of attitudes one should try to cultivate in preparation for meditation (Vajradaka, 1997). His sequence is as follows: 1) Curiosity, 2) Contentment, 3) Confidence, 4) Enthusiasm, 5) Kindliness. Like many Buddhist lists this seems to encapsulate neatly a lot of practical wisdom. The first two (combined) suggest that we need to start by cultivating a balance between alertness to new possibilities and an absence of egotistical assertiveness. The implication is that it is this rather complex state of mind that is needed to form a secure basis for confidence, perhaps because an awareness of a desire for egotistical assertion can make us feel nervous about possible disappointment or failure. Our sense of confidence then enables us to feel enthusiasm about the value and probable success of our inquiry. This in turn leads to feelings of kindliness towards the others with whom we are working, as part of our confidence in their capacities, which brings us back to the previous discussion on *metta.*

Dialectics: Difference , Change, Creativity

The source of the potential creativity of collaborative inquiry lies in the differences between individuals. This is why the need for skilful communication is so crucial, as indicated in the previous section and why action research is frequently said to be founded on a 'dialectical' process – the reflective, developmental dialogue between participants with different experiences, interests and perspectives (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, pp. 33-4, 179; Reason, 1994, pp.30-1; Winter, 1989, chapter 4). However, dialectics is not just a matter of learning through dialogue: it is a general theory (with a long tradition going back through Hegel and Marx to Heraclitus) about the nature of the social world and how we understand it. Its relevance for

the conduct of action research may be summarised as three basic propositions (see Israel, 1979; Fisk, 1979; Winter and Munn-Giddings, 2001, pp. 213-5, 248). First, all phenomena are changing; so unless we understand the way in which they are changing, we won't understand them in a way which reveals the possibilities for the changes in practice with which action research is concerned. Second, all phenomena (people, situations, ideas, feelings, organisations, etc) are connected with one another in a dynamic (change-generating) network of mutual influences; so it is always important to consider the broader context of the specific situation on which we are focusing. Third, all phenomena are changing because they are complex, made up of contradictory elements, and therefore cannot be understood as unities; so we must analyse our data in a way that reveals its contradictions and thus enables us to construct new interpretations and to formulate new practical strategies. (In order to clarify the link with Buddhist concepts, this last point will be discussed in the next section, under 'reflexivity'.)

Action research, therefore, by definition, actively seeks change as its main resource for learning. In this respect it follows Buddhism, within which 'impermanence' (*anicca*) is the first and most fundamental characteristic of existence:

> Impermanence is a basic feature of all conditioned phenomena, be they material or mental, coarse or subtle, one's own or external: 'All formations are impermanent'…'Things never persist in the same way, but…are vanishing and dissolving from moment to moment.'
>
> (Nyanatiloka, 1970, p. 14)

Although at some level we all know perfectly well that our physical bodies, our states of mind, our social relationships, etc. are subject to change, in everyday life we focus on the permanence and fixity of things (e.g. we experience people as individual 'personalities' who have 'beliefs' and hold 'opinions'). Social science follows this familiar perception in identifying, for example, structures, concepts, and specific cause-effect relationships. From both perspectives a radical emphasis on impermanence would seem an unreal abstraction, an unhelpful distraction from what is important. For Buddhism, in contrast, to forget impermanence is to be in a state of delusion, and to focus rigorously upon it is to regain insight into reality (Kamalashila, 1996, pp. 92-3); it is 'a natural law that gives human beings hope', reminding us that 'It is possible...for people to alter their circumstances, to bring about improvements in the world' (Payutto, 1995, p.66).

The principle of *anicca* thus suggests that action research is quite right to embrace change as a source of understanding, and it also implies some quite helpful practical suggestions. As we engage in inquiry we can expect to feel a strong desire to keep certain things fixed (the focus of the topic, our theories, or our initial interpretative framework), and we can feel confident that letting go of these fixed points is a step in the right direction (improving our understanding) rather than in the wrong direction (losing focus, 'getting in a mess'). One might add that it is obviously easier to be aware that other people need to embrace the principle of impermanence and let go of their favourite ideas as the inquiry progresses than to remember that we ourselves need to do so! The quotation from Nyanatiloka also reminds us that change is occurring at every moment (in a discussion, in our thinking, in our actions), so that every moment is an opportunity for innovation, development and learning. In general terms, the implication is that 'reflection' needs to be a process of 'deconstructing' the 'fixed formations' of our spontaneous experience.

Buddhism also provides direct support for the second dialectical principle – the interconnectedness of phenomena – in the law of 'conditioned co-production' or 'dependent origination' (*paticcasammuppada)*:

> All things are inter-related and inter-dependent; all things exist in relation to each other; all things exist dependent on determinants….The fact that all things appear in their diverse forms of growth and decline shows their true nature to be one of a continuum or process….The form of a continuum arises because the various determinants are inter-related.
>
> (Payutto, 1994, p.14)

The underlying pattern of the whole of existence, therefore, is one which links together physical events, social events, sensations, feelings, psychological and spiritual states of mind and ethical requirements. This means that explanation must consist in explicating patterns of inter-relatedness between a multiplicity of phenomena, rather than seeking a single cause for a single phenomenon, since that would be to return once more to the assumption of fixed and permanent formations (Payutto, 1995, p. 91). But the inclusion of the spiritual and ethical dimension is of particular importance, since it reminds us that for Buddhism understanding is inseparable from spiritual evolution and ethical action, that *paticcasammuppada* is a process of freeing ourselves from the burden of determinism that is created when we see the world in terms of fixed identities and single causes (Cooper, 1996, p. 156-7). This poses an interesting methodological challenge, since it suggests that effective inquiry must involve tracing the links between physical events, social relations, organisational structures, psychological states of mind and moral values in order to formulate wise and compassionate action.

This may sound like rather a tall order, but it is clear that the practical points discussed in the earlier section on *metta* are relevant here, and the doctrine of *paticcasammuppada* itself also provides us with further practical guidance, in the form of the law of *kamma*. This states that every action has causes which could be traced backwards (in time) and outwards, to an infinity of personal, social and environmental influences. Similarly, every action has effects which are never ending:

> Whatever we do, with our body, speech, or mind, will have a corresponding result. Each action, even the smallest, is pregnant with its consequences….As the Buddha said, "do not overlook negative actions merely because they are small; however small a spark may be, it can burn down a haystack….Do not overlook tiny good actions, thinking they are of no benefit; even tiny drops of water in the end will fill a huge vessel." Karma does not decay or ever become inoperative.
>
> (Sogyal Rinpoche, 1992, p. 92)

Moral actions thus make up a universal system of causes and effects.   This has two important consequences. Firstly, since every action is the outcome of a multitude of past influences, individuals are never entirely responsible for the situations in which they find themselves. (This places a limit on the extent to which we need to accept feelings of guilt when we find ourselves involved in painful situations). Secondly, since every action will create a multitude of future effects, individuals must always take responsibility for trying to make those effects as beneficial as possible. This means that we can never simply hide behind the alibi "There is nothing I can do: I am constrained by forces, events or social structures beyond my control." (Payutto, 1995, p.146). Thus, at the heart of action must always be an acceptance of an ethical responsibility for consequences. What we do will always, in the end, 'make a difference'. It will, even if only in a small way, make a situation better or worse, and even if its immediate

impact is merely on how people *feel* about what is taking place, that also will eventually have an impact on future events.

As a way of thinking about an inquiry process, then, the law of *kamma* may be seen as insisting that we need to analyse the processes of research (e.g. collecting and analysing data, discussing development strategies) in a way that helps us to anticipate the effects of our behaviour, to understand the significance of our feelings and to appreciate our moral responsibilities. It also focuses on the creative potential within each moment of the work, and in this respect supports and extends the emphasis within action research on interpreting the dialectical structure of human action as both reflexive and creative.

Reflexivity: Deconstructing the Self, Mindfulness

There is a long-standing emphasis in action research on 'critical reflection', which raises the crucial question: how do we try to ensure that 'reflection' is indeed 'critical' and creative, rather than merely an elaboration of the familiar.

One answer to this has already been mentioned: the dialectical principle that phenomena are made up of contradictory elements, even though they present themselves as apparently unified. Thus we can reflect on data by seeking the contradictions it conceals. For example, an interaction within an 'educational' process may contain 'controlling' elements which conflict with the principle of 'learner autonomy'. Another approach to the problem of reflection is provided by the principle of 'reflexivity'. Reflexivity is that aspect of the process of making a judgement about reality (interpreting an event, a piece of data, some-one's state of mind, etc.) that is dependent on ('bent-back-into') our previous thoughts and experiences. A judgement such as, 'Martin knows the rules for multiplication' may look at first sight as though it is a simple statement about an objective state of affairs; but when we remind ourselves that it is 'reflexive', we remember that it is constructed by means of our own prior assumptions and experiences about what it means to 'know a rule'. The significance of the principle of reflexivity is that although most of our statements have a reflexive quality, we ignore this most of the time and treat our statements as being about external facts (see Winter, 1989, p.41; 1996, pp.18-21). During an inquiry process it is particularly important that we engage in reflection that entails noticing the reflexivity of our judgements, because it enables a discussion involving differing points of view to move forward in a more creative way than if people are all defending their own view as being 'the fact of the matter'.

Buddhist concepts can throw further light on the nature of reflection and on the need for and the possibility of 'reflexivity', both in terms of theory and practical method. First, there is the doctrine of 'not-self' (*anatta),* which may be thought of as a direct consequence of the principle of impermanence noted above. 'There is no separate Ego-identity…In reality there exists only [the] continually self-consuming process of arriving and passing bodily and mental phenomena.' (Nyanatiloka, 1970, p. 13). Payutto elaborates:

> Human life consists of a current of numerous corporeal and mental phenomena that exist in accordance with interdependent causes and conditions. When people are unaware of this truth
>
> they cling to the feelings, thoughts, desires, habits, views, beliefs, and impressions that arise at each moment and take this to be the self, even though this self is continuously changing.

In other words, the self of which we are conscious in each moment is but another impermanent phenomenon which is always changing in response to the ceaseless flow of events. Whereas our spontaneous tendency will be to 'cling' *(tanha)* to our idea of our fixed self and to the responses and opinions of which our self seems to consist, the doctrine of *anatta* is that in order to understand the nature of reality we must 'let go of' this fixed self. To grasp the importance of *anatta* helps inquiry to be developmental, because it reminds us that our work must be a change process in which we ourselves change. We will always feel tempted to hold on to opinions and ideas that are part of our current sense of our selves and attempt to focus our work so that it reinforces our sense of 'expertise'. But we can see that the process of inquiry, if it is to result in creative insight or innovative development, requires us to let go of who we were and what we knew when we started. Again, this is where a practical contribution might be sought through the practice of meditation, as a process of stopping the flow of familiar thoughts and feelings in order to create a state of 'concentration' *(samadhi),* which allows unexpected thoughts and feelings to arise.

In order to 'reflect' creatively, then, we need a general shift in our consciousness (of ourselves, of others, of the nature of thoughts, feelings, professional practices, etc.) through developing 'mindfulness' *(sati).* In the context of *anatta* this means developing an intense and continuous awareness of the illusory quality of all fixed identities, of how all the ideas, perceptions and feelings in our consciousness are in a continuous flux of arising and dissolving in response to a multitude of influences, some momentary, some long-term (Nyanatiloka, 1970, pp. 165-7). In this way those taking part in an inquiry (exchanging interpretations of data, for example) may avoid arid personal confrontation and achieve the 'mutual transcendence' which we might take as the ultimate aim of all inquiry (see earlier quotation from Sangharakshita on 'harmonious speech').

Conclusion: Emancipatory Critique, Enlightenment

Many writers on action research would hope that action research can (and should) be thought of as having an 'emancipatory' aim – liberating us, through the process of 'critique', from the structures of our existing assumptions and habitual practices ('ideology'), insofar as these are perpetuating 'irrationality, injustice, alienation and unfulfilment' (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p 204). However, in the social sciences even basic concepts are the focus of differing cultural, political and ethical values. So, returning to Carr and Kemmis's list, different individuals will have alternative interpretations of 'rationality', 'justice' and 'fulfilment'. From this perspective, 'emancipation' is itself, within action research, a 'contested concept'. The agreements negotiated within the collaborative process may be seen by some as merely temporary political or interpersonal compromises, and the nature of their validity is therefore always open to question.

Let us, then, see how Buddhism might throw light on the issue of validity in social inquiry. We have already seen that Buddhism offers a powerful intellectual framework for describing the process of 'critique', within which all fixed, separate and permanent entities, including our own 'self' with its thoughts and feelings, are treated as unreal, as constructed 'illusions'. In this way, Buddhism may seem to be, apart from anything else, reminding us of the practical significance of modern theories in biology, radical ecology and sub-molecular physics in conceptualising the nature of mental events and of observable phenomena (see Capra, 1996; Cooper, 1996).

However, Buddhism is not just a descriptive theory of reality but also a system of practical guidance, in which intellectual insight is inseparable from emotional and spiritual progress. The purpose of Buddhist thinking and practice is to seek 'Enlightenment', usually analysed into Ten 'Perfections': Liberality, Morality, Renunciation, Wisdom, Energy, Patience \ Forbearance, Truthfulness, Resolution, 'Loving Kindness' and Equanimity. A further list of seven 'Factors' of Enlightenment' overlaps somewhat with the Ten Perfections, but adds, importantly: Mindfulness, Investigation of mental events and Concentration (Nyanatiloka, 1970, p.125; p.35). It is clear, then, that within Buddhism rigorous intellectual analysis also involves rigorous self-awareness, emotional self-discipline and an ethic of generosity towards others. So, whereas Western social science is basically a matter of generalising from empirical observation, Buddhism is concerned with a much more complex process. It emphasises that *understanding* other people can only begin from a state of mind in which, having recognised that we are not 'separate' from them, we must necessarily feel compassion towards them. Above all, it entails moving from a state of unwitting 'delusion' (in which our minds and feelings are determined by factors beyond our understanding) to a state of 'freedom', in which we are mentally and emotionally in tune with the real nature of phenomena, including ourselves.

But, we may ask, what is this 'real nature of things'? Are these various Buddhist propositions part of an authoritarian body of 'religious' doctrine, which we are simply asked to accept? Because if so, this is clearly not compatible with what we would take to be the essentially open and critical spirit of inquiry. There are two ways of providing a reassuring answer to this question. First there is the emphasis within Buddhism that doctrines should never be accepted merely because they have been delivered by an authority, but only when one has ascertained for oneself their practical effectiveness in contributing to the qualities comprising enlightenment (see *The Kalama Sutta:* Woodward, 1932). Similarly, Payutto emphasises the importance of each person making up their own mind through a process that he specifically describes as 'critical reflection', i.e. on how principles are to be applied on different occasions (Payutto, 1995, p. 227). Second, although Buddhism, unlike most recent Western philosophy, does indeed suggest that human beings can gain access to an 'ultimate' reality, this is not the realm of a separate Divine Creator Being, but a level of awareness within each of us as individuals:

> In Buddhism it is always, clearly, even categorically stated that…archetypal forms [i.e. The Buddha and other Fully Enlightened Beings] are ultimately phenomena of one's own True Mind, or projections from one's own unconscious, and that they are to be integrated.
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> (Sangharakshita, 1996, p.43)

In Tibetan Buddhism this is referred to as our 'Buddha nature' (*rigpa)* – 'the innermost essence of mind, [usually] enveloped and obscured by the mental scurry of our thoughts and emotions [but capable of offering us occasional glimpses of] a primordial, pure pristine awareness….the knowledge of knowledge itself' (Sogyal Rinpoche, 1992, p.47).

In other words, the validity of Insight and Enlightenment within Buddhism is not externally derived, but rests on *human* capacity for recognising courage, wisdom compassion and other forms of fine ethical and spiritual action, based on our own conscience or 'self-respect' (*hri*) and our awareness of the 'wise opinion of others' (*apatrapya*) (Sangharakshita, 1998, p.119, pp.125-7). At this level Buddhism can support and enhance the humanistic optimism underlying action research, creating a model of inquiry that is clearly based on our

deepest and most comprehensive awareness of human nature and human understanding (see Marion Dadds' portrayal of 'objective subjectivity' in her chapter in this volume). At its best, the process of action research generates a sense of the developmental creativity and imaginative compassion inherent in relationships of inquiry and professional 'care'. To this, Buddhism adds, firstly, an ideal – a recognition 'that the transcendental is there beyond one's mundane experience of the world, and that one is trying to work towards that' (Sangharakshita, 1998, p.137). And, secondly, Buddhism offers a methodology – an account of the possibility of (and practical methods for) self-transcendence on the part of the individual and mutual transcendence in human interaction. In this way, Buddhism simultaneously re-defines the scope of social practices and offers practical guidance for re-defining the processes and relationships of inquiry.

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[2] Among the first to do so was Arphorn Chuaprapaisilp, whose article on Thai Buddhism and Action Research was published in *Educational Action Research,* Vol. 5, No. 2, 1997, pp. 331 - 336