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## Deconstructing Lack: A Buddhist Perspective on Egocentric Organizations

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### Abstract

This paper advances the Buddhist insight of ‘no-self’ as a foundation for theorizing the phenomenon of lack, and how such a sense of lack is symptomatic of a more fundamental and primary repression: a fear of no-self, or egolessness. Egocentric organizations depend on the reproduction of collective lack and underlying ontological insecurity, which manifests as a desire to be real, enduring, and self-existent. Egocentric organizational dynamics bind anxiety by channeling ‘reality projects’ which feed compulsive desires for power, territory and control. The Buddhist perspective offers a liberative path as a counterforce to dominant egocentric organizational narratives. Rather than accepting lack as cultural condition, the Buddhist path focuses the mind directly on the source of lack, which, paradoxically is a gateway to seeing through the delusion of the egocentric self.

### Introduction

This paper begins by introducing the Buddhist path of insight as a theoretical lens for deconstructing the self as having a permanent and independent existence. This everyday way of experiencing the self is correlated with an existential feeling of lack. The paper argues that lack is both a personal and collective phenomena, symptomatic of a primary repression: a deep fear that the self is ungrounded and not real. The Buddhist perspective will describe how our repressed sense of no-self and groundlessness returns to consciousness in the form of a symptom: a feeling of lack. Drawing from the contemporary dialogue between Buddhism and Western psychoanalysis (Bobrow, 2003; Engler, 1998; Engler, 2003; Molino, 1998a; Moncayo, 2003), I examine how our unconscious desire to become “a real self”, “to be somebody,” fosters a collective sense of lack which is the basis of egocentric organizations. Further, the paper goes on to show that egocentric organizations depend on collective “reality projects” and forms of discourse that attempt to bind anxiety by privileging a unitary, continuous and separate sense of self. The paper concludes by describing how Buddhist methods such as Zen can be employed to counteract the dominant egocentric narrative that relies on feeding compulsive desires to become real.

### Deconstruction of Self and Identity in Buddhism

Buddhism is a practical philosophy aimed at removing the root cause of human suffering. All the various schools within Buddhism—Zen, Tibetan Vajrayana, Theraveda, Mahayana, Vipassna —share in common that what we normally take to be the self is fundamentally void of any independent existence, essence or enduring substance. Rather than

asserting such a truth as an abstract philosophical position, Buddhist practice requires that such insight be developed through intensive meditation practices and study in conjunction with a teacher or guide trained in the tradition. The goal of insight meditation is not intellectual understanding, an exceptional altered state, a rare peak experience, or a fleeting epiphany—but a “permanent and irreversible reorganization of self-structure” (Engler, 2003:65).

Psychoanalysts have shown a great deal of interest in Buddhism, going back to the early dialogues with Eric Fromm and D.T. Suzuki (Fromm, Suzuki, and Demartino, 1960). Buddhist practice is aimed at seeing through the mechanism of mind that perpetuates a belief in an ontological self. Buddhist meditative inquiry is concerned with seeing into the “illusory ontology of the self” (Hanley, 1984:255). Even Freud recognized that the ego (*das ich*) can impute to itself its own independent existence and treat itself as an object (see Sterba, 1934:120). Thus, Buddhism does not attempt to annihilate or denigrate the psychologically differentiated self of psychoanalytic theory, nor the Western conception of the self as a highly autonomous individual (Engler, 2003:50). Rather, Buddhist insight into *anatman*, or “no self,” is a transformation of awareness—an internal revolution in consciousness—based on a deeply embodied insight that reveals the belief in an independent, substantial, and enduring sense of self is a misperception. Stolorow and Atwood (1992) refers to as the “myth of the isolated mind,” the notion that each human being is a separate from the world. This is a fundamental dualism, a myth which perpetuates an alienation from nature, society, and estrangement from oneself. It is the basis for both self-centeredness and egocentricity (Magid, 2003:268).

The Buddhist path of insight meditation challenges our habitual sense of “having a self-identity” which appears as permanent and unchanging. Engler (2003:88) states that our so-called normal sense of self has “the tendency to regard every object of experience or perception as a separate entity or ‘thing’ having its own separate concrete existence and identity and only secondarily related to other ‘things’.” Insight or “mindfulness” meditation is a Buddhist method which trains practitioners to observe their moment-to-moment elements of psycho-physical experience—advancing to stages where attention is focused on seeing directly the essenceless of self. Mindfulness meditation develops and refines the ability to discriminate and observe the successive arising and dissolution of the contents of the mind.

According to Buddhist psychological doctrines, each constituent of experience can be categorized as belonging to one of the five *skandhas*, often translated as “heaps,” “sheaths,” or aggregates--- 1) form, 2) feeling, 3) perceptions, 4) volition, and 5) consciousness<sup>2</sup>. The first *skandha* of form refers to the human perception of dimensionality, namely shapes and colors. Prior to the scientific worldview, Buddhist doctrine understood the realm of form as being comprised of a mixture of the four elements—earth, wind, water and fire, along with an invisible element of space. Forms exist in space, and are constantly in a state of flux. The five sense fields—visible objects (eyes/seeing), sounds (ears/hearing), smells (nose/olfactory), tastes (tongue), tactile sensations (skin/touch)—are capable of perceiving form. The second *skandha* of feeling or sensation is triggered by contact with the perception of form. Contact with form usually evokes a particular sensation or feeling, pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. These feelings arise as a basis of such contact. Pleasant feelings tend to generate attachment, and a desire for such feelings and sensations to continue. Unpleasant feelings evoke aversion (a reverse form of attachment) and a desire to avoid, escape or reject from that which is painful or irritating. Neutral sensations do not generate any charged feelings, but either equanimity or indifference. Both the realms of form and sensations are impermanent phenomena, yet attachments and aversions are attempts to deny this truth. The sensation/feeling *skandha* can be thought of in terms of the responses of the body and mind. The third *skandha* of perception, sometimes also referred to as the cognition or conception *skandha*, can be equated with the active, thinking mind. Such thought is deliberate and effortful mental activity. This *skandha* has to do with the function of categorizing, conceptualizing, classifying, and discriminative perception. The fourth *skandha*, volition, has also been described as the aggregate of impulses, motivational dispositions, and mental volitions. In simple terms, this *skandha* has to do with acting, or the force which impels us to act. This *skandha* has also been associated with the habitual patterns that motivate us at a subliminal and subconscious level. Functions of memory and attention are also linked to the fourth *skandha*. Perhaps the most important aspect related to this *skandha* is behavior. The moral or ethical impulse to correct behavior and show restraint is linked to mindfulness of thoughts and impulses. The volition *skandha* also explains the phenomena of movement, transitoriness, and time. The fifth *skandha* of consciousness is a subtle mental state untouched by the impressions of form, feelings, conceptions and volitions, but acts as the recipient or “owner” of those impressions. This

<sup>2</sup> The teachings of the five *skandhas* are thoroughly discussed in the Abhidharma school, particularly Vasubandhu’s *A Discussion of the Five Aggregates*. According to Abhidharma philosophers, mental objects, or imperceptible physical forms, are perceived by a sixth sense, or a sixth consciousness. Thus, in addition to the ordinary and familiar five senses, the Buddhist system posits that the discriminative faculty of mind is another organ of sense—which perceives imperceptible forms. Mental formations are products of the discriminating consciousness.

skandha is often simply referred to as “the mind,” because it can cognize both physical forms and mental impressions, and accumulate such impressions over time.

The sense of self is constructed and sustained through the interactions of the five *skandhas*. In other words, the *skandhas* are physical-perceptual-cognitive-affective events—constantly changing configurations—that appear to the untrained observer to be continuous and substantial. Buddhist insight meditation trains the mind of the practitioner in powers of concentration, observation and contemplation—with the intent of fostering the growth of insight into *anatman* (no-self)—that what appears as a substantial, enduring and independent entity is rapidly constructed moment-by-moment, with no real sense of permanence or ground. Thus, Buddhist practice aims to foster a deeply embodied insight into the nature of the self, cutting through the delusion in a fictitious and illusory self that we normally represent and mistakenly take to be real (Brown and Engler, 1986). Such insight or realization is not a one-time affair, but is continuously deepened and stabilized through repeated and disciplined meditative practice. Describing the advanced stages of insight (*vipassana*) practice, Engler (2003) states:

...I can observe how individual, discrete moments of consciousness and their “objects” arise and pass away together, are constructed and deconstructed moment by moment without remainder—without any “subject” or “self,” even an observing self, existing apart from the process, enduring behind it, or carrying it forward to the next moment (75).

Buddhist meditation practice weakens attachment and identifications with such false constructions of the self, revealing the self as being empty of any “self-nature,” essentially exposing the groundlessness of identity. Insights into “no-self” nature may come gradually or suddenly (in Zen, *kensho* or *satori*).

The goal of Buddhist practice is not to attain some sort of extraordinary “mystical experience,” nor does it result in regressive return to primary narcissism by basking in oceanic feelings of oneness (Bion, 1963; Epstein, 1998), for example, warned such pursuits could lead to a “catastrophe” (Bion, 1963), triggering psychic fragmentation or disintegration, or even touch what Eigen describes as the “psychotic core” within each individual. However, most psychoanalysts, until recently, have not practiced nor studied Buddhism—and such criticisms and misconceptions are misleading. Clearly, recognition of no-self is often profoundly disturbing, evoking feelings of terror, anxiety and fear (Epstein, 1995; 2007:30; 2008). Preliminary concentration practices are first employed to develop a strong somatic foundation of stability in order to counterbalance the effects of these destabilizing insights. As pointed out earlier, insight into selflessness does not eliminate nor annihilate the self—but only reveals that it never existed in the first place. As Gyatso (1984:40) clarifies, “Selflessness is not a case of something that existed in the past becoming non-existent; rather, this sort of ‘self’ is something that never did exist. What is needed is to identify as non-existent something that always was non-existent...”. The true self of Buddhist awakening is, as Magid (2003:270) points out, more of a recognition of an “absence rather than a presence of something.”

Dialogue between Western psychoanalysts and Buddhists is now shedding light on how the insight meditation can be liberating, rather than destabilizing and pathological (Bobrow, 2003; Brazier, 1995; Claxton, 1986; Rubin, 1998; Safran, 2003; Suler, 1993; Unno, 2006). Until recently, Western psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, particularly Kohut’s (1971) school of “Self Psychology” and its offshoots, did not question the ontological status of the self. Buddhism is often misinterpreted as being nihilistic, equating its project to the loss of personhood or the denigration of psychological functions (Aaronson, 2004; Bobrow, 2009). Unfortunately, many New Age spiritual movements, influenced by Eastern traditions, often resort to such exhortations that a person has to get rid of, or lose, their ego. Mental functions, discernment, healthy ego functioning are preserved, or even enhanced as a result of Buddhist practice. What *is* lost is the erroneous conception of an inherently existing ontological self. Indeed, Buddhist practice does not resort to repression, denial or fantasy. In other words, the object of negation in Buddhist meditation is not the psychological self, but the illusory nature, and seemingly real sense of a metaphysical-ontological self (Finn, 1992). The psychological self does not disappear with a realization of selflessness; a person still uses the word “I,” still has a name and a unique historical identity—but the person is no longer fixed or overinvested in self-images, habitual reactions, or a sense of metaphysical substantiality (Aaronson, 2004). As Fenner (2009:63) points out, there is nothing problematic in having a unique identity, “so long we realize that there is no one who’s having an identity.”

Seeing the emptiness of self-nature, or *shunyata*, is the fruition of the Buddhist path. Often referred to as the “unborn,” “uncreated,” or “unconditioned,” this act of seeing is embodied in lived experience and wholeheartedly expressed in daily affairs. When expressed as lived experience, it could be characterized as acting unselfconsciously, or being “un-managed,” in the sense that thinking, feeling, perceiving and acting can all happen without an agent or self that needs to

defend and maintain its position as the doer (Finngarette, 1958). This amounts to a radical dissolution of an “internal manager or controller” in terms of how the mind operates. Engler (2003:64) points out that such a mode of being is actually conducive to everything happening “much more efficiently and without anxiety and conflict,” freed of the burden of self-centeredness and egocentricity. Buddhist awakening is a direct seeing into the emptiness of self-nature and the ultimate futility of the identity-building enterprise. Through dedicated meditative practice, what emerges is a nondual awareness that draws upon allocentric attentive processing (rather than egocentric) which is at home in groundlessness (Austin, 2011).

Drawing from the emerging field of contemplative neuroscience, Austin (2011:19) has shown how more receptive forms of meditation—such as Zen—activate underused neural pathways in the brain which he characterizes as “bottom-up” or allocentric attentive processing. Allocentric is derived from the Greek *allo*, meaning “other” (Austin, 2011:25). Allocentric pathways of attention bypass our typical self-referential, autobiographical, egocentric self which are associated with the more extraordinary moments of insight or enlightened awareness. This form of other-referential vision presents a more objective version of reality, which cancels our usual sense of self, thereby reducing maladaptive egocentricities (Austin, 2011:37).

## A Buddhist Interpretation of Organizational Lack

Drawing upon the work of Jacques Lacan (1977a; 1977b; 1988a; 1988b), a French psychoanalyst, Driver (2009a:59) has theorized organizational identity is constructed from an imaginary order. In this section, I will build upon much of Driver’s Lacanian (2005; 2009a; 2009b) theorizing which argues that organizational identity discourse is a conscious attempt to compensate for an unconscious lack. According to Driver (2009a:57), “in the end, there is only lack and the ever-present nothingness of work, organization, and self.” The function of imaginary constructions of organizational identity is to assuage a collective sense of ontological insecurity (Driver, 2009a:64). Driver’s conclusion is based on the premise that Lacanian analysis offers no cure or salvation from the quagmire of lack. Like Lacanian psychoanalysis (Homer, 2004), the Buddhist perspective also illuminates how the self struggles with a sense of lack (Lacan’s *jouissance* and Buddhism’s *samsara* often translated as “the wheel of suffering” or a “wheel off kilter”). However, for Buddhism, the struggle with lack is rooted in a fundamental ontological insecurity: the compulsive and unconscious desire to be real. Because all organizational identity discourse is in essence a collective desire to become real, it also constitutes an ongoing egocentricity, amounting to a quest for symbolic immortality through a continuous pressure for expansion and growth, an obsession with the future, and maintenance of institutionalized defense mechanisms (Carr and Lapp, 2006; Low 2008; Sievers, 1994).

Buddhism departs from Driver’s Lacanian interpretation of lack as being a futile and endless struggle (as well as a stopping point for inquiry). To understand this in more depth, I turn to the major theoretical works of Buddhist scholar and Zen teacher, David Loy (Loy 1998, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2008). Loy postulates that lack is symptomatic of a primary repression: a fear of no-self. This is an existential human fear-- that deep down our “self” -- the core of who we are is not real, but groundless (Loy, 2000). However, our usual sense of self is just the opposite—we attempt to live and function as if the self were real. The perception of a self as being independently real and permanent can only occur if it is based on separation. The usual sense of self is egocentric: “I am ‘me’, and ‘I’ exist here separate from ‘you’ over there.

This notion of duality is associated in Buddhism with *dukkha*, often translated as suffering. But *dukkha* also means twoness, or duality. Buddhist practice aims to put an end to *dukkha*, which encompasses the basic anxiety and dissatisfaction that is pervasive in human experience. While there is a wide range of conditions and forms of suffering (physical, emotional and mental), there is also an ongoing sense of *dukkha* that is derived from our basic awareness of impermanence (Loy, 2003:20). In addition, another form of *dukkha*, which is not usually consciously apparent, arises from a repression of an unconscious fear that “...our sense of subjectivity does not correspond to any real ontological self,” and that deep down there “is a suspicion that I am not real” (Loy, 2003:22). This latter type of *dukkha*, essentially a repression of *anatman* (no-self), underlies the desire and *compulsion we have in trying to make ourselves real*—continuous attempts to objectify, secure and ground our fragile sense of self—in other words, to become self-existing.

Freudian Oedipal theory argues that our primary repression is libidinous-sexual urges, whereas the neo-Freudians existential psychiatrists maintained it was the fear of death. Loy has developed a contemporary Buddhist interpretation: our deepest form of repression is a fear of no-self—the fear of identitylessness. Drawing from the existentialist works of Norman O. Brown, Ernest Becker, and Ludwig Binswanger, Loy explains that the Oedipal complex is tied to a realization that the child is separate in consciousness from the mother, which generates an attempt to become one’s own father. To symbolically become the father is a desire is to become one’s own origin, amounting to what Brown (1961) renamed as the Oedipal project. For existentialists like Brown and Becker, the Oedipal project was linked to a primary repression--a

denial of death—which was compensated for by engaging in symbolic immortality projects. Becker’s (1973) thesis on the repression and denial of death is extended to the Buddhist lack of self, the repression of the groundlessness of the sense of self right now. Psychoanalysis tends to focus on the past, on early object relations, and developmental fixations and the working through of repressed memories and conditioning. In contrast, Loy’s thesis is concerned with a universal conditioning that is the result of a deeply rooted delusive sense of self that takes itself as separate, independent, and permanent entity. Commenting on his reinterpretation, Loy (2003:22) states:

In this way Buddhism shifts our focus from the terror of death (our primary repression, according to Becker) to the anguish of a groundlessness experienced here and now. The problem is not so much that we will die, but that we do not feel real now. ... In *Escape From Evil* Becker argues that society is a collective immortality project. Can it also be understood as a collective *reality* project, a group effort to ground ourselves?

In this respect, *dukkha* is not only personal, but also collective—a form of culturally conditioned suffering—which forms the basis for egocentric organizing. As Loy so eloquently points out, the problem with the Oedipal project is that it never succeeds. All attempts at objectification of the self are ultimately doomed to failure. All reality projects, which are symbolic ways we try to make ourselves real in the world, are compulsive substitutes and displacements that can never fulfill our desires. In this respect, discourse and actions aimed at objectification will ensnare us in a Lacanian struggle with lack, with no way out, except to romanticize it as a creative pathology (Driver, 2009a)—akin to the metaphor of the tragic and struggling artist.

For Loy, however, the origin of lack is due to a primary repression that the self is fragile psychic construction and is not real. Such insecurity is experienced as an ongoing sense of alienation, frustration and dissatisfaction—or lack (Loy, 2010:260). Loy (2000:12) cogently explains his thesis:

*The consequence is that the sense-of-self always has, as its inescapable shadow, a sense-of-lack, which it always tries to escape.* It is here that the theory of repression becomes so valuable, for Freud’s concept of the return of the repressed—that what-has-been-repressed returns to consciousness distorted into a symptom—shows us how to link this fundamental yet hopeless situation with the symbolic ways we try to overcome our sense of lack by making ourselves real *in* the world. We experience this deep sense of lack as the feeling that “there is something wrong with me.”

It is important to point out that the ego cannot escape or absolve itself of its own lack, because the ego is a mirror image of lack—or to put it another way, the *self is dukkha* (Loy, 2008:15). Self-identity is inherently haunted by a sense of insecurity and lack, with a gnawing feeling and core assessment that something is missing (Fenner, 2007). To satisfy cravings for security, to pacify and repress the sense of lack, the self identifies with external symbols and experiences, whether it is fame, reputation, power, wealth, material possessions, romantic experiences, and so on. These “reality projects” are attempts to resolve feelings, bolstered by an ongoing stream of autobiographical narratives. However, such narratives serve only to bind identity further, establishing a self-referencing system of meaning that render our assessments true and factual to us (Fenner, 2009). For example, the feeling of lack for academics could manifest as gnawing sense that one is not recognized enough among their scholarly peers, that one needs to publish and read more, pursue more grants, apply for endowed chair positions, go to more conferences and so on. But such pursuits never deliver the security and grounding which the self so desperately seeks. Collective solutions that promise to resolve our sense of lack take many forms—such as nationalism, corporate capitalism, mass consumerism, technological control of nature—but such solutions amount to institutionalized forms of greed, ill will and delusion (Loy, 2003:28). As Loy (2003:27) points out:

The problem is “thirst”—not the emptiness at the core of our being but our incessant efforts to fill that hole up, because we experience it as a sense of lack that must be filled up. The problem is not that I am unreal but that I keep trying to make myself real in ways that never work. This implies that there might be another way to experience our groundlessness.

Driver (2009a) suggests that embracing the repeated failures of imaginary identity discourse can allow us to reflect on how powerful we are as subjects of the unconscious. According to Driver (2009a), since there is no escape from the lack

inherent in the symbolic order, the best we can hope for is a bitter sweet type of enjoyment, or *jouissance*, which at least allows us to catch a glimpse of the creative powers of the unconscious. Based on Driver's reading of Lacan, liberation resembles a form of ego surrender or resignation that requires a coming to terms with the limits of desire and lack, which, in her estimation, "...provides opportunities for the experience of creative and liberating struggles with lack" (Driver, 2009a:65).

For Buddhism, implied in its third noble truth, is that the struggle with lack itself can be liberated because it is symptomatic of a primary repression of our groundlessness. In this respect, we can never secure a sense of self or identity, because the very nature of the self does not exist—it is fundamentally insecure, and that insecurity is experienced as a lack. In other words, we falsely experience our inherent groundlessness as lack, and then attempt to flee from it by trying to objectify ourselves in various sorts of reality projects (Watson, 1998:114). This is, in effect, a form of confusion, or miscognition—what Buddhists identify as ignorance (*avidyā*)—a lack of wisdom into seeing the true nature of the self. Buddhist diagnosis shows how investments in self-identity lead to a desire to cling to, or crave, phenomena that are in reality impermanent (*annica*) and insubstantial (*anatman*) (Soeng, 2004). Pointing out this fundamental error, Watson (1998: 230) notes, "For Buddhism this sense of lack or deficiency arises directly from misperception, and is an unreal lack, a lack of something which never existed and never will exist, a permanent autonomous self."

### Egocentric Organizations as Collective Lack

The insights generated from a Buddhist perspective can now shed light on how egocentric organizations are symptomatic of a collective lack, and why such "centers of lack" are insatiably driven by desires to satisfy fantasies of autonomy, control, expansion and power. I am even suggesting that egocentric enactments are not only defenses against anxiety, but a form of collective delusion (Jacques, 1955). Building on Driver's points that organizational and personal identities are mutually constituted, the Buddhist perspective shows that egocentric organizations are formed as a culturally conditioned way of coping with our collective sense of lack, and how these organizations function as mechanisms to institutionalize an antagonistic duality between organizations and the socio-ecological environment. Buddhist theorizing of organizational identity challenges much of the mainstream literature (Dutton and Durkerich, 1991; Dutton, Durkerich and Harquail, 1994; Gioia, 1998; Pratt, 1998; Whetten, 2006; Whetten and Godfrey, 1998). Bateson (1972) description of an egocentric orientation as constituting an epistemological fallacy of a separate "I"—is resonant with the Buddhist perspective. As I have pointed out, Buddhist diagnosis traces the root of suffering (personal and collective) to delusion or ignorance—that is, a lived fallacy which creates the illusion of duality between self/other world. For Bateson, an egocentric orientation erects, selects, limits and demarcates rigid boundaries when in fact such boundaries are only a matter of linguistic convention. Morgan (2006: 248) describes egocentric organizations as "those [organizations] that have a fixed notion of who they are or what they can be and are determined to sustain or impose that identity at any cost...They see themselves as discrete entities faced with the problem of faced with the problem of surviving against the vagaries of the outside world, which is often constructed as a domain of threats and opportunities." Moreover, egocentric organizations conceive of their identity as existing in opposition to the larger socio-ecological environment (Purser, Park and Montuori, 1995). As such, it is hard to deny egocentric organizations are responsible for various forms of stress and maladaptive behaviors that have ripple effects into society and natural environment (Low, 2008; Purser, 1994).

Before embarking on this path, it makes sense to ask a fundamental question, which I will show has relevance to this discussion. If egocentricity is so problematic, that is, if a belief in a unitary, separate and permanent identity is nothing but a delusion and the cause of pervasive human misery, conflict, and social and ecological problems, why is it the norm for how human and organizational experience is constructed? If the construction of identity, whether on an individual or organizational level, is only based on the imaginary, on fantasy, which inevitably leads to continuous disappointment and a feeling of lack, why do we continue to do it? Engler submits that all psychological structures emerge because they serve a need, what he refers to in a psychodynamic sense as a compromise function (Engler, 2003:78). In effect, we construct an illusory identity as a response to anxiety and a means of confronting a "danger situation." In this case, nominal identity serves as a means of binding anxiety, repressing knowledge and feelings that are a threat, but in so doing, it puts that very identity at risk, causing feelings of vulnerability that must be defended at any cost. The ultimate "danger situation" is a fundamental fear of that our sense of self may not be real. To ward off such dread that our identity is ungrounded, the identity construction process takes over consciousness, and such habitual thought patterns become entrenched and self-sealing, making it immune to any inquiry that might call its ontological status into question.

The adaptive self, or the pragmatic ego (Austin, 1999; 2006), is not at issue here. Self-preservation and defensive behaviors that ensure the physical survival of the human organism are natural biological functions, evolutionary

developments that are hard wired into the brain. The Buddhist path of awakening does not seek to eliminate or weaken basic functions of the pragmatic ego. Rather, Buddhist meditative training focuses on unlearning or undoing the multifaceted layering of the nominal and linguistic self-system which is entangled with habitual patterns of emotionality which have maladaptive overtones (Austin, 1999:50). Thus, egocentricity is maladaptive; perceived threats are to an illusory self-system which is linguistic and imaginary, rather than physical in nature. In short, the egocentric orientation is a protection against the basic ontological anxiety that arises whenever the nominal sense of identity is threatened or called into question. These symbolic and imaginary threats, however, are perceived and reacted to as if they were actually threats to the survival of the physical organism.

Austin (1999) describes the self-system in terms of the “I-Me-Mine” triad. The “I” is sovereign, it exists and it acts. The “Me” reacts; it is vulnerable and it suffers. Things happen to it; the “Me” is the ultimate victim. The “Mine” possesses; it grasps, clings and attaches to things—whether they are its own opinions and beliefs, or external objects and persons. The “Mine” is the owner and a defender of its boundaries; when maladaptive, it is driven by greed and fear. The “I-Me-Mine” triad forms a tightly interlocking self-system. Table 1 differentiates between adaptive and egocentric self-systems in terms of the “I-Me-Mine” triad.

**Table 1. Operational Aspects of Self-System: The “I-Me-Mine” Triad**

Triad Function	I	ME	MINE
<b>Adaptive</b>	Exist, feel, know and act	Things happen to me.	These are my thoughts, body, parts and possessions.
<b>Egocentric (maladaptive)</b>	Aggressive, arrogant, autocratic, arbitrary and grandiose self.	Besieged, battered, victimized, vulnerable and fearful self.	Grasping, clinging, attaching, greedy self.

(Adapted from James Austin, 1999: 44)

Egocentricity represents an over-conditioned, maladaptive function of the “I-Me-Mine” triad, which is neurologically linked to the limbic system of the brain, particularly the front end of the dorsal thalamus (Austin, 2011:35). These neural circuits tend to transmit emotionally charged longings and distorted interpretations of events that are highly self-referential in nature (Austin, 1999; 2003; 2006). Egocentric organizations inflate the “I-ME-MINE” triad through the use and deployment of “reality projects.” In Loy’s terms, egocentric organizations are a culturally acceptable means for enacting collective *reality* projects—organized efforts to make ourselves feel real and grounded, but which inevitably exacerbate our insecurity, alienation and cultural malaise (Loy, 2003:23). This goes beyond the collective Western belief in immortality (Sievers, 1994), or Becker’s (1975) thesis of society as a collective immortality project. Rather, egocentric organizations are institutionalized mechanisms that promise to resolve our sense of lack through the production of fantasies, narratives and other fetishized symbolic goods. For example, corporate capitalism is fueled by fantasies and narratives of unlimited growth, large monetary rewards, power and elite status associated with greater dominion over territory—all of which feed and amplify the maladaptive sense of “mine.” In psychoanalytic terms, egocentric organizations are intrinsically alienated because the desires of organizational actors are fantasies produced by the Other (Fink, 1995; Lacan, 1977a). The Buddhist study of lack explains why egocentric organizations can never deliver on their promises of fulfillment, nor can they ever provide for a collective sense of ontological security. Haunted by a collective sense of insecurity, egocentric organizations amplify maladaptive behaviors, especially pride, fear, and greed. Loy (2002:13/15) sums up this process:

The objectification of our lack into impersonal “secular” institutions means that basic questions about the meaning of our lives—the central spiritual issue for a being that needs to understand and resolve its own lack—have become alienated into a “not enough yet” that can never be enough... If the modern, more subjectified ego-self is a delusion whose lack is never satisfied, it will understand its dissatisfaction as caused by having failed to attain its goals, which generates a need to develop more ambitious goals, at the end of still longer teleological chains... Economically, GNP is never big enough, corporations are never profitable enough, and consumers never consume enough.

And since our desires can never be satisfied by chasing fantasies that are defined by lack, we continue to avoid coming into full contact with our authentic and true spiritual Self, which escalates our alienation, ensuring the continuous reproduction of desire (Gabriels, 1995; Harding, 2007; Stavrakakis, 2008). In addition, egocentric organizations reflect a collective *méconnaissance* in their propensity to misrecognize and inflate their own image through a devaluation of their environmental context.

Using an analogy of facial recognition in a mirror, Morgan (2006:249) states that egocentric organizations over assert the relation between figure and ground. This is resoundingly similar to Lacan's mirror stage, but in our case, the organizational equivalent to a mirror stage occurs as members identify with a distorted image of the firm, mistaking its identity as being autonomous, stable, and bifurcated from its environment, which, however, is purely imaginary and is, therefore, impossible to realize (Felluga, 2009:2). Put differently, egocentric organizations depend upon maintaining a fantasy image of themselves, restricting the range and depth of their discourse to narratives that support and protect this image. In this sense, the environment serves only as a mirror for a collective form of narcissism. This may provide insight into the intransigent dualism between egocentric organizations and their socio-ecological environments. And because egocentric organizational discourse is self-referential as an attempt to ground itself, the environment is merely an instrumental means and necessary resource for accomplishing that end. Given this dualism, egocentric organizations are preoccupied with power and domination, as compensation for the collective insecurity of the "I-ME-MINE" triad (Loy, 2003:29). The ongoing feeling of lack and insecurity drives a compulsive need to increase power and control. The dualism and binary opposition between egocentric organizations and the natural environment in effect canonizes an "almost ritual neglect of our dramatic interdependence" (Herschock, 1996:xii), and valorizes fantasies of omnipotent control and a preoccupation with power. Loy (2003:28) even goes so far to say that egocentric corporations are forms of "social dukkha," collective centers of suffering, delusion and dis-ease, and a "worldly-ideology," that offer false "promises to resolve our sense of lack with an abundance that can fulfill all our needs." Therefore, Buddhist social theory focuses on the root cause of suffering in egocentric organizations—institutionalized forms of greed, ill will and delusion (Loy, 2003:195).

## Coda

Given the imaginary nature of organizational (and personal) identity, any attempts at objectification will suffer the fate of lack. From the Buddhist perspective, struggling with lack, unfortunately, yields no fruit, because collective reality projects and substitute immortality symbols can never make us feel real. Driver (2009a:57) recognizes that our attempts to grasp what cannot be grasped routinely fail, and concludes that we are destined to being divided against ourselves, "...where there is only lack and the ever-present nothingness of work, organization and the self." Driver (2009a:59) aligns herself with a tragic and nihilistic Lacanian position, resigning to the reality of lack. She offers solace in suggesting that we should celebrate such breakdowns, disruptions and failures because they offer us opportunities for "feeling intensely alive." Driver apparently believes the struggle with lack in organizations should be accepted by simply glamorizing and romanticizing it, akin to that of the struggling artist. Certainly there are opportunities for a shift in awareness during these moments of world collapse, but more often than not, such moments are causes of despair and confusion rather than celebration and creativity. The "not-knowing" of identity (*jouissance*) that Driver hopes will emerge when our identities fail to cohere, unfortunately, is a very short-lived celebration.

It is true, as Driver submits, that we can never truly say or know who we are, because we are at root, "no-thing," we have no independently existing self. Indeed, the Buddhist perspective also accepts that the nature of all things is transient and impermanent, and attempts to derive security and happiness from such things will lead to disappointment, suffering, and a feeling of lack (Magid, 2008). This is the Buddhist diagnosis of conditioned reality; security, peace and lasting happiness cannot be found by clinging to a self that does not permanently exist. Attempts to solidify and perpetuate an illusory sense of egocentric self-identity will be met with failure and disruptions. However, this is where Buddhism and Lacanians, like Driver, part company; the Buddhist prescription is not merely to glamorize lack and subsequent disruptions of identity, but to radically transcend and transform the false and delusive "I-ME-MINE" self-system complex. We are not simply resigned to a never ending struggle with lack.

Buddhist social praxis aims to free human beings from struggling with the futility of seeking security and happiness things which lack permanent substance and are actually fleeting and impermanent. Rather than seeking to "fill the self" up with things of this fleeting world, Buddhist practice "empties out" the self, so radically that such a void (which is mistaken on the surface for lack), opens up into fullness. This transformational change is counterintuitive: the prescription is to dwell in that which we fear most: groundlessness and egolessness. The compulsive drive towards reality projects, whether individual or collective, is seen as never being able to fill the "bottomless pit" or hole in our being. The Buddhist path of

meditative inquiry allows the practitioner to experience a sense of lack in a radically different way, dissolving the illusory boundaries of egocentricity. Noting this transformation, Loy (2003:30) states:

We do not need to make ourselves real, because we always have been real. I do not need to ground myself, because I have always been grounded; not, however, as a separate, skin-encapsulated ego somewhere behind my eyes or between my ears and looking out at the world—for there has never been a self. Rather, the bottomless, festering black hole can transform into a fountain and become a refreshing spring gushing up at the core of my being. The bottomless of this spring means something quite different than before. . . .I can never understand the source of this spring, for the simple reason I am this spring. It is nothing other than my true nature. And my inability to reflexively grasp that source, to ground and realize myself by filling up that hole, is no longer a problem, because there is no need to grasp it. The point is to live that spring, to let my fountain gush forth. My thirst (the second noble truth) is “blown out” because a letting go at the core of my being means my sense of lack evaporates as this fountain springs up.

Loy is metaphorically pointing to the emergence a nondualistic, or *allocentric* way of knowing, that is the fruit or result of meditative practice (Austin, 2009; 2011). Direct realization or insight into the emptiness of self and phenomena (*shunyata*) awakens the aspirant to the utter futility of egocentric grasping at things and experiences as a way attempting to ground or make oneself real. A nondual perspective is inextricably linked to a Buddhist moral ethics. Indeed, a Buddhist moral ethic is contingent upon a radical awakening from the delusion of an over-inflated egocentric sense of self. It is in this respect that a Buddhist social theory of change emphasizes the need for personal transformation at the core. Transforming the collective plight of egocentric organizations will require deeper and unconventional interventions—going beyond typical programmatic “systems change”—whether it is organization development, sustainability programs, or even personal coaching. These traditional interventions rarely challenge nor train organizational members to develop the mindfulness and meditative wisdom necessary to awaken from the delusion of the egocentric self (Fleischman, 1998).

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