

The Borobudur: A Psychology of Loving-kindness Carved in Stone

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Abstract

This essay discusses the meaning of The Borobudur from a psychological perspective which unfolds while virtually and actually touring this majestic *stupa*-like pyramidal construction. The Borobudur dates from about the year 800 and is located between two twin volcanoes on Java-island. Its significance is testified by the immense building itself which conveys Javanese Buddhism as revealed by its premier interpreter: Dharmarakshita Suvarnavipa. It is surmised that the lava-stone “Mahayana wonder” served as

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² If one picture is worth 10.000 words, this article cannot replace the pictorial power-point show of c.300 slides (as e.g. presented at the 4th International Conference of the Sri Lanka Association of Buddhist Studies, December 10-12, 2010).



a ceremonial place where the Sailendra kings were crowned as *Bodhisattvas* and also, as it does today, a place of pilgrimage for devotion to glorify Buddhism. Definitely, it was and still is an educational center, an “open university” , and a royal gift to the people. Ascension of The Borobudur can be instrumental in realizing an awakening in one lifetime. Ascending it up to the pinnacle is said to extinguish craving (*Nirvana*) and to awaken motivation (*absolute bodhicitta*). Descending back to the secular world (*relative bodhicitta*) is said to liberate from the cycle of psychological malaise (*Samsara*) as one learns to absorb, embody, and exude loving-kindness in mindful speech. The *Gandavyuha Sutra* is carved on The Borobudur’s upper reliefs and apex, exhorting pilgrims to the realization that the formless world is an “empty bubble”. This is a practice-oriented view which goes beyond the *Abhidharma* philosophy in that it depicts a psychology of “Relational Buddhism” wherein meaning and happiness are derived from *interpersonal* care in *intrapersonal* balance against a backdrop of formless emptiness. These depictions accentuate the “linguaging” dimension of the Body/Speech/Mind triad of Karma, and in this sense they embrace a postmodern social constructionist vista of the Buddhist message, illuminating the emptiness of “Transcendental Truths” and elucidating “Relational-Interbeing-in-Between-Non-Selves”. The Borobudur conveys a deep and lasting relational harmony which is achievable through imbibing the interpersonal value and quality of loving-kindness. Loving-kindness itself is rendered as full of empathic compassion, sympathetic joy, and relational equanimity. This essay also highlights recent social psychological studies which corroborate some of the essence of The Borobudur’s spirit. In effect, a fact-finding field trip to The Borobudur might boil down to accomplishing “aha” uphill, emptiness at the top, and “haha” downhill, which rounds off the seeker’s quest full circle.

Introduction

Javanese Buddhism is relatively unknown by Buddhists around the world because it has been relatively extinct for some 10 centuries. Some villages in remote areas have remained Buddhist since the Mahayana heydays on Java island until now (Kustiani, 2010; pers. comm.). Its spirit may live on as long as The Borobudur,



the biggest Buddhist structure to date, remains a UNESCO protected heritage. Surfing on the wave of a global upsurge of interest in Buddhism, there is increasing attention by “newborn” Buddhists for The Borobudur heritage. However, many Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike question what this *mandala*-based pyramid in *stupa*-like form is actually all about.³ This brings us to the enigma on the function of this mysterious construction which, although engineered in a *stupa* form, does not contain any relics. Based on the literature and my own research *in situ*, I surmise that The Borobudur was not only a ceremonial site for the dynasty’s crowning, but was also a dynasty’s gift to the people as an “open university” in the framework of a royal action on the rulers’ wholesome Body/Speech/Mind Karma.

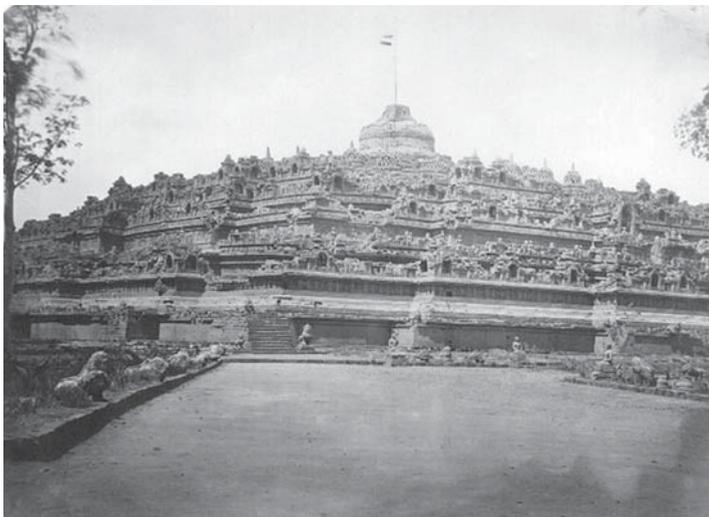
The Borobudur, a huge Mahayana Buddhist building of circa 55.000 cubic meters, with a base of 15.129m² (123x123m) and a height of now 34.5m (originally: 42m) which is located near Magelang in Central Java, stems from about the year 800 and was erected between two twin volcanoes: mounts Sundoro and Sumbing in the North-West and mounts Merbabu and Merapi in the North-East. To be exact, on its 10 floors the lava-stone structure has a tower, 72 *stupas* (domes of more than 3m in height), 504 Buddha-statues in lotus sitting posture (conspicuously, no reclining or standing statues), and 1460 story-telling bas relief panels. The name “Borobudur” is seemingly derived from the Sanskrit “vihara”, meaning sanctuary and pronounced in Javanese as “biara” or “boro” located on the hill: “bidur” or “budur”; thus “borobudur” and its function has been traditionally designated by the local people as the “Mountain of the Bodhisattva’s 10 Developmental Phases”. These phases correspond with the 10 floors of The Borobudur which correspond to the “10 perfections” of the *Bodhisattva* (Buddha-to-be) as narrated in the *Avatamsaka* or *Flower Garland Sutra* (Cleary, 1993) which is about “Indra’s Jewel Net”, a splendid infinite cosmos comprising endless universes mutually reflecting endless universes. Climbing the floor means acquiring the Bodhisattva qualities toward Buddhahood in one lifetime by working through the relational

³ A *mandala* is geometrical sacred form consisting of circles and squares and a *stupa* is usually a dome- or mound-like structure containing a relic (Wayman, 1981). The first two floors (the foot, hidden for constructional purposes) represent the sphere of lust (*kamadathu*), the next four floors, square platforms, represent the sphere of form (*rupadathu*), and the last four floors, three circular platforms plus the main dome, represent the sphere of the formless (*arupadathu*).

scenarios of balancing: 1. generosity, 2. righteousness, 3. forbearance, 4. endeavor, 5. meditation, 6. wisdom, 7. skillfulness, 8. equilibrium, 9. education, and 10. awakening. In effect, it emerges that the major function of The Borobudur is both to metaphorically accommodate and physically illustrate the last (39th) book of the *Flower Garland Sutra*, called the *Supreme Crown Sutra*. Thus, this crown is displayed by the 7m, highest dome, of The Borobudur, so that it seems that the story of the *Supreme Crown Sutra* is cast there in stone to educate visitors in emptiness and loving-kindness, qualities to be experienced while ascending and descending the construction.

An overview

Magnificent parts of the building, panels, statues, and domes have been robbed, damaged or partly damaged by vandals rather than by nature's violence. It was probably abandoned and forgotten around the time of Mt. Merapi's 11th century volcanic eruptions and remained covered until 1814. After local inhabitants pointed it out to Sir Thomas Raffles during the short British rule of Java (1811-1816), The Borobudur was freed from a jungle strangle in 45 days by 200 men. Relevant missing parts of The Borobudur are conserved in a museum in Leiden, Netherlands and in Thailand. In 1896 the Dutch colonial government bestowed King Chulalongkorn eight train wagon loads of the finest panels and statues (Davisakd Puaksom, 2007).



In the first photograph of The Borobudur, taken in 1873 by Isidore van Kinsbergen⁴, the andesite structure of more than two million volcanic blocks, accommodates not only a tower, domes, and statues, although this is not as clearly visible, but it also has nine circumambulating corridors of more than 5km long. These corridors are flanked on the left-hand and right-hand side by bas reliefs which are each one meter in height and two meters in width.⁵ Roughly half of the approximately 3000 panels refer to five Buddhist books, while the other half is meant as embellishment (Soekmono, 1976). At the time of The Borobudur's construction, reading all Buddhist scriptures would have taken more than a lifetime, if one in fact could read. It would in any case have been an impossible task as there was no book-printing.⁶

Depicting enchanting scenes The Borobudur is a practical guide teaching how to nurture the psychological qualities present in and growing out of loving-kindness. They are derived from books considered relevant in Javanese Buddhism: (1) *Karmavibhanga Sutra* (on the working of *kama*/lust and Karma), (2) *Jataka Stories* (on the Buddha's lives as a *Bodhisattva*), (3) *Avadana Stories* (on renowned Buddhists' noteworthy deeds), (4) *Lalitavistara Sutra* (on the unfolding narrative of Siddharta's life until awakening), and (5) the *Gandavyuha Sutra*, alluded to above. The first four books are preludes which lead to the last book via a Mahayana "gimmick" : instead of discoursing, the Buddha tells the story of Sudhana. At the end of the *Lalitavistara* the Buddha set the "wheel of teaching" in motion (cf. *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*) by narrating a young man's journey which could be anybody's inner quest. Sudhana is a wealthy young prince who, like the Tathagata, was satiated by material luxuries and so looked for inner wealth and the meaning of life. Sudhana is an allegorical name which means "Good Wealth". As a descendent of a noble family, Good Wealth started a quest of "kingliness without and sageliness within" . This ended up in the pinnacle of the Buddhist experience: emptiness, to be filled and overflow by the nectar of loving-kindness. Apparently, this kind

⁴ Copyrights of the three photographs in this essay are expired.

⁵ This allows *parikrama* devotional circumambulating meditation around the centre of the *mandala* which symbolizes the mythical Mt. Meru.

⁶ Mahayana scriptures plus the associated ancient commentaries are about 50 times the Bible in length, being approximately 62.000 pages.

of seeking by affluent young men is an archetypical pattern in the Buddhist lore throughout Asia during those days.

Story-telling is in line with the narrative tradition of Asia and evidently these stories were so appealing that they were considered worthy of being carved in stone. The panels which are dedicated to the *Supreme Crown Sutra* start as from the fourth floor. Because circa one-thirds (460) of all the narrative panels (1460) are dedicated to the last book, it leaves no doubt that this was considered to be the most relevant by the constructors and principals, the ruling kings and queens, who aspired to being adorned as *Bodhisattvas*. Thus it seems that we are actually looking at a huge comic book of Buddhist educational stories in the open air, an open university.

Reflecting on Body/Speech/Mind

The earlier mentioned five books on psychological stages are pictorially depicted on successive panels each reflecting enchanting scenes displaying: (1) lust/pleasure and intentional (inter)action (*kama* and Karma), (2) the Buddha's previous lives as a *Bodhisattva*, (3) noteworthy deeds of renowned Buddhists, (4) Siddharta Gautama's life until he attained Buddhahood (*bodhi*/awakening), and finally (5) Good Wealth's travels traversing the karmic domains of Body/Speech/Mind (*kaya/vak/citta*) toward *bodhi* and beyond. Recommended and guided by "Wisdom" who possesses inner wealth (the cosmic *Bodhisattva* Manjushri) Good Wealth started his pilgrimage of meaningful meetings during which he was "counseled" by 52⁷ other teachers/guru-friends (*kalyanamitra*; 20 of them are female). They include *bhikshus*, kings, queens, princesses, rich people, mendicants, intellectuals, boys, girls, doctors, householders, laywomen, sailors, prostitutes, and so on, and notably "Loving-kindness" (the cosmic *Bodhisattva* Maitreya) and "Virtue" (the cosmic *Bodhisattva* Samantabhadra).

Each of the carved books suits the student's developmental phase. Thus, the first two books are apt for an elementary level, the third and fourth book for an intermediate level, and the last book, leading up to the summit, for an advanced level. This division

⁷ In the Mahayana spirit of expediting awakening, this number could be allegorical to the 52 weeks of a year.



corresponds with the three realms of the two lowest floors of body (craving/*kamadhatu*), the five middle floors of speech (form/*rupadhatu*), and the three upper floors of mind represented by domes (symbolizing wisdom, loving-kindness, and virtue) wherein one finds sitting Buddha-statues (formless/*arupadhatu*). The Borobudur is “crowned” by a single huge dome. This threefold arrangement can be traced back to the Buddha’s teaching on Karma which is basic to the practice of Buddhism which aims at ending suffering. The origin of unwholesome Karma is threefold: greed (covering fear of losing and grief of the lost), hatred (covering aggression and depression), and ignorance (on how the mind works, the illusion of self, and the delusion of god/s). Karma manifests itself as the intentional/relational action emerging from Dependent Origination and impacting interpersonal relationships. It is a causality hypothesis in need of verification/falsification by oneself and which refers to cause and effect in the domains of Body/Speech/Mind (*Kamma Nidana Sutta*).⁸ As Karma’s effect and cause start, affect, and end in Body/Speech/Mind, The Borobudur reflects this tripartite scheme. Note that the Buddha’s tripartite root metaphor of Body/Speech/Mind transcends Descartes’ dual mind-body artifact. The inclusion of speech is a reminder that Buddhism strives at lifting the fictive boundaries created by self-illusions and soul-delusions to working toward attaining the reality of non-self and non-individuality through the practice of loving-kindness.

Thus, Good Wealth learned to meditate in 52 various ways to aim the highest goal. This goal is depicted by his entering the “Tower of Infinite Light”, Vairocana Buddha’s abode of ultimate “emptiness”, which contains Indra’s Jewel Net. However, he could only step into it accompanied by Loving-kindness, his guide or “admission ticket” so to say. Admission to the apex can only be earned through a long and winding road of transforming Body/Speech/Mind Karma which we nowadays would call “psychotherapy”. Psychotherapy by Karma Transformation modifies karmic relational

⁸ These happen to be the subjects of study in 21st century “biopsychosocial” clinical science and practice (Engel, 1977). The body, particularly the connection between brain and behaviour, is the subject matter of neuropsychology. The connection of unwholesome perception/thought/feeling/interaction and behaviour is accentuated in clinical psychology, while the connection of speech and interpersonal behaviour is attended to in social psychology and its exponent: Social Construction.

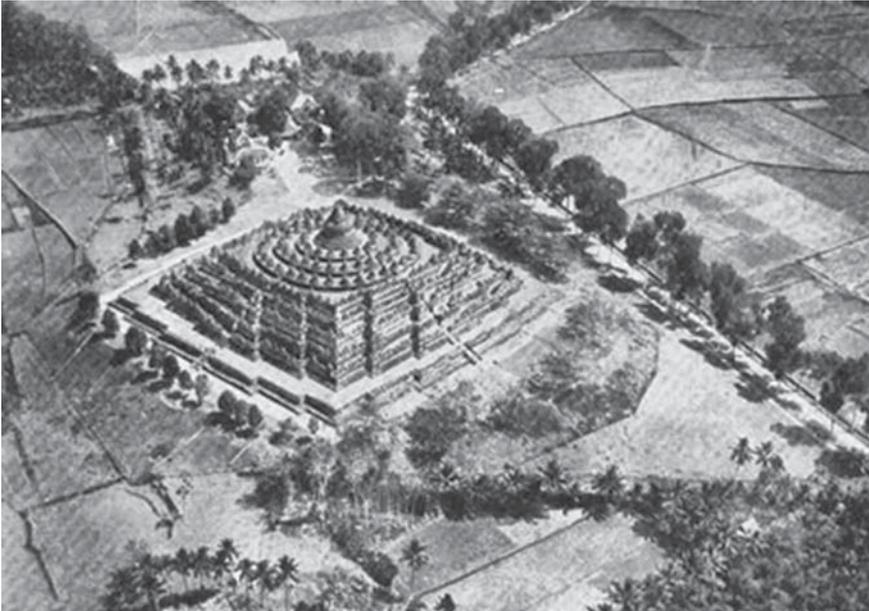
intention and karmic interpersonal action.⁹ In psychological terms, he attained a state free from clinging to illusions of self, free from grasping to delusions of god(s), and free from craving greed and hatred. To this end, ignorance of how the mind works, which is the root cause of suffering due to inner poverty, needs to be alleviated. Thus, Good Wealth went through a process leading to “full emptiness”. Before he met his last guru-friend, he met Wisdom again which is a meeting symbolizing a “full circle”: he arrived at where he began. The wisdom and inner wealth he was painstakingly seeking had always been there, right from the beginning of his journey; thus he searched for his horse he was already sitting on). Finally, he met Virtue, who taught him that inner wealth is only meaningful if shared with and benefits others. So, Good Wealth made a vow to disseminate the 10 Bodhisattva qualities as listed above (*Bhadracari*) and commenced a journey downhill, back home.

Today, the student who ascends The Borobudur in the footsteps of Good Wealth learns to meditate via the pictorial instructions on the way up. According to the *Supreme Crown Sutra* insight into “the empty” is not a goal in itself but a reset point and springboard to improve the practice of the social meditations which promulgates the pro-social values/qualities of loving-kindness, empathic compassion, shared joy, and relational equanimity in “the mundane world of the market place”. Once “liberating emptiness” is understood, one starts on a humane mission to fulfill “*antara-atman/antaratman*” a concept found in Javanese Buddhism (Brandes, 1913)¹⁰, which means “in-between-selves” or rather “non-selves” and which is equivalent to what Thich Nhat Hanh (1998) has called “Interbeing” and what I have called “Relational Interbeing”, alluding to Gergen’s (2009a) “Relational Being”.

⁹ See, the my conference paper from: http://www.undv.org/vesak2012/book/buddhist_psychotherapy.pdf

¹⁰ It is noteworthy to mention that a Mahayana variant of Buddhism entered Sumatra and Java as from the early 5th century, while Brahmanism was already there for two centuries. Despite contrary speculation, there is no evidence that Theravada Buddhism had a strong presence on these islands. Furthermore, it is plausible that Mahayana came from ancient India (Kalinga and Bengal) and Cambodia, via the trade route to Sumatra and Java. A prince/guru from Kashmir, Gunavarman (367-431), was recorded in Chinese annals to have stayed and spread Buddhism on Sumatra and Java, perhaps for two decades, until 424 when he started a mission to China on imperial invitation (Zürcher, 1972).

Vairocana Tower is the delightful abode of meditative insights into the meaning of the “formless” (*dharmadhatu* or *arupadhatu*), that is, in the (un)becoming of things in “Dependent Origination”, in their ubiquitous and pervasive emptiness (cf. *Mahasunnata Sutta*), and in the non-obstructive-interpenetrating-interconnectedness of the human race (cf. *Ariya-pariyesana Sutta*). The very essence of these texts repudiates the self and soul which implies a message of non-individuality, i.e. there are no selves, only provisional selves in interrelatedness. This latter message is readily translatable into Social Construction, a postmodern offshoot of mainstream social psychology, whose collaborative practice is poignantly captured by Gergen in his adage “I am linked therefore I am”¹¹, an answer to Descartes’: “I think, therefore I am”. In effect, *to act* means *to inter-act* and *to be* means *to be related* and *to inter-be*. The implication of these inspirational ideas is that they confluence in Relational Interbeing (Kwee, 1990, 2010, 2012abcde, and Kwee, Gergen, & Koshikawa, 2006).



¹¹ See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kenneth_J._Gergen

Royal context and location

Located on the Kedu plain, The Borobudur is aligned with three other relatively smaller shrines (*candis*, a term which refers to any Indonesian ancient construction). These *candis* were constructed on the same plain in one straight line to the East of The Borobudur. As tradition has it, they were connected by a road in the old days. Candi Ngawen is the furthest away from The Borobudur (8km), the next is Candi Mendut (3km), and the closest is Candi Pawon (2km). Candi Ngawen, whose existence was noted in the year 824, consists of five small shrines, a number which might well allude to the Mahayana “cosmology of five”, listed below. As two of them have four guarding lion-shapes, it might be surmised that this rather destroyed little complex (there is only one damaged *candi* left) was a ceremonial gate to enter the “educational tour” up to The Borobudur’s top. It seems that the Ngawen shrines may have also functioned as a testimony of gratefulness to the donors as evidenced by their images being displayed on the walls (Moens, 1951).

Candi Mendut, which probably already existed in circa 750 as a Brahmin shrine, contains three huge statues. In the middle, the historical Buddha Shakyamuni is seated in a western way on a chair with hands in the setting-the-wheel-of-teaching *mudra* (posture). He is flanked on his right hand by the cosmic *Bodhisattva* Avalokiteshvara (Compassion) and on his left hand the cosmic *Bodhisattva* Vajrapani (Joy/Power). These figureheads augur five cosmic (*dhyani*) Buddhas as described in an ancient Javanese Mahayana text (*tantra*), the *Sang Hyang Kamahayanikan Mantrayana*¹², which was written in Q&A form and was meant to inaugurate the neophyte. It renders The Borobudur’s wisdom. The latest authority it cites is the champion of Buddhist logic and reason Dignaga (c.480-540, a student of the great Yogacara epistemologist Vasubandhu; c.320-380), who discerned that

¹² This Javanese title refers to the “dedication of” (*Sang* or *semba*) “the unseen/formless” (*Hyang* or *hilang*) “as in the *Mahayanistic Mantrayana*”; Brandes (1913) listed other Javanese Buddhist works: the *Sutasoma*, *Vighnotsava*, *Kunjarakarna*, and *Buddhapamutus*, which do not differ from pre-tantric Mahayana as known in India. Neither The Borobudur, nor the *Kamahayanikan* conveys the tantric use of “sexual images” for meditation suggesting that Javanese Buddhism stems from an early Vajrayana period, which in India was in c.600-700. This view is corroborated by Osto (2009) who rather speaks of “proto-tantra” than “pre-tantra” to designate the *Gandhavyuha Sutra*.

inference and perception are two different processes and that perception is pure sensation (Eliot, 1921).¹³

Candi Pawon, in the village Bajranalan, is a stop on the way to The Borobudur, as indicated by the Javanese meaning of the word *pawon*, meaning *kitchen*. This function explains why there is only one square chamber inside which is void, or rather devoid of cooking equipment, and contains a square (washing) basin in the centre. The rectangular small windows were necessary for ventilation when preparing food. It is plausible that it was well used during ceremonies, royal or otherwise, and during any procession. The name of the village, Bajranalan, derives from the word *bajra*, a corruption of the word *vajra* meaning thunder, diamond, or adamantine, like in Vajrayana, a vehicle of Buddhism practiced in the Himalayas, which applies a ritualistic “five pronged teaching tool of wisdom” (known for its use by the 8th century guru Padmasambhava to conquer the non-Buddhist deities of Tibet). The second part of the village’s word, *analan*, means *flame* or *passion for wisdom*. Unlike in Tibet, the *vajra* was known but not particularly emphasized on the Indonesian archipelago. The walls of *candi* Pawon are decorated by the main *Bodhisattva*-gurus depicted later on The Borobudur: the guide Wisdom (Manjushri) and the acting teachers, Loving-kindness (Maitreya), and Virtue (Samantabhadra). Other decorations refer to males and females dressed as human *Bodhisattvas*, most probably members the royalty known to have built The Borobudur.

The Borobudur was financed by the Sailendra dynasty (c.750-832). The Sailendras were indigenous Javanese rulers. Their name is derived from “mountain” (*caila*) and “king” (*Indra*). The Sailendras, who were Buddhists, co-existed peacefully with the Sanjayas of Mataram, who adhered to Brahmanism and whose King, Panangkaran (reigned in c.746-784), apparently authorized the building (under his aegis) of Buddhist sanctuaries, *candis*, and sculptures on the Kedu plain “in honor of Tara”, revered in

¹³ Dignaga was the before last of the great Buddhist thinkers. No reference was made to the last great Buddhist thinker, the 7th century epistemologist/cognitivist Dharmakirti (c.600-660), who wrote extensively on valid/non-valid (*de facto*: rational/irrational) cognitions. This seems to imply that Javanese Buddhism and The Borobudur did not tap from this late development.

Brahmanism as well as in Buddhism.¹⁴ Apparently due to one Bengali Buddhist teacher, highly venerated by Panangkaran, there was a constructing spree around 800 resulting in more than a dozen Buddhist *candis* in Central Java. The Sailendras were rice cultivators as well as seafaring merchants who shared their thalassocratic power with the Srivijaya dynasty from Sumatra. Together they dominated the maritime spice route between China and India, and traded and raided the Malay Peninsula, Cambodia, and SW-Kalimantan. Their ties in matrimony and in Buddhism with the Srivijayas are evidenced by for instance the similarity of their diadems as in Mendut, Pawon, and Palembang on Sumatra Island. The Borobudur construction was finished under the reign of the Sailendra King Samaratunga, who reigned over Java until circa 832 as well as over Sumatra as a Srivijaya King (c.792-835), because he was married to a Srivijaya princess: Dewi Tara. The Borobudur was probably used for his coronation ceremony as a *Bodhisattva* and later for celebrating his daughter's marriage to Rakai Pikatan, a Crown Prince from a neighbouring Brahmin Sanjaya Kingdom. Eventually Samaratunga's son-in-law toppled his father-in-law and later defeated his brother-in-law the Sailendra Prince Balaputra (c.856). Balaputra was forced to retreat to Sumatra where he succeeded his father as a Srivijaya king in Palembang. As a Buddhist Balaputra had a monastery built in the renowned Buddhist University town of Nalanda. The Srivijaya Buddhist dynasty of Sumatra thrived as a great maritime and colonizing power up until the 14th century (Soekmono, 1973).

Javanese Buddhism

The construction workers of the majestic *candi* Borobudur, which is held together like Lego-blocks, was in the beginning spearheaded by the master-mind architect Gunadharma. Despite his Sanskrit name, he was probably a Javanese indigenous genius. There are many much older *candis* around built in the same peculiar style, so that the architectural skills, even if once imported from India, inevitably have become Javanese by the time The Borobudur was

¹⁴ While the Brahmin Tara represents a deity (wisdom star), the Buddhist Tara is a cosmic *Bodhisattva* who is a transformation of Avalokiteshvara's tears of compassion. Avalokiteshvara is able to hear the cries of everybody who suffers and may appear in the five cosmic colours representing a variety of virtues and actions leading to liberation.

built. Assuming it was built between c.770-840 three to four generations of constructors must have worked on the construction after Gunadharma.¹⁵

The following question lingers on: “why was The Borobudur constructed in *stupa* form if there were no human remains whatsoever?” Small spaces have been found at the center on two levels reserved for boxes wherein noble metals, treasured seeds, and precious stones were kept, which in the Mahayana lore symbolize Body/Speech/Mind respectively. In a center-base pit, there was a box with metals and over the pit, in a small room with a crowned statue in a stone superstructure; there was a second box with seeds. These “symbolic relics” had most probably been used during a Sailendra *Bodhisattva* coronation, whereby ritually the gems of loving-kindness descended from Vairocana’s Tower into the boxes imbuing *Bodhisattva*-hood. Considering the royal history, this function was likely used once. Following this, the Buddhist-Brahmin syncretism probably warranted the educational use of The Borobudur until its demise in the 11th century. Whatever function The Borobudur might have served, central to its function is the teaching it reveals, which can be denoted as Javanese Mahayana Buddhism. The earlier mentioned principal text on Javanese Buddhism, “the devotion of the formless according to the Mantrayana of Mahayana”, explains that Shakyamuni transforms into Loving-kindness (Vairocana Buddha of the Centre), Avalokiteshvara transforms into Compassion (Amitabha Buddha of the West) and into Benevolence (Amoghasiddhi Buddha of the North), and Vajrapani transforms into Joy (Akshobhya Buddha of the East) and into Equanimity (Ratnasambhava Buddha of the South). This implies that the education is toward the cultivation of these five human values or personality qualities which are supposed to bring about lasting happiness: *Loving-kindness*, *Compassion*, *Joy*, *Equanimity*, and *Benevolence*. The Mahayana pantheon originated not only these psychological states and traits, but also generated an extended cosmology of five, like Buddhas, *Bodhisattvas*, elements, colors, senses, hallowed syllables or *mantras*¹⁶, *skandhas* (psycho-

¹⁵ According to experts, The Borobudur influenced Angkor Wat, built 300 years later; also one might want to bear in mind that The Borobudur was erected 300 years before the European cathedrals were built.

¹⁶ Evidently, *mantras* are of great importance in a Mahayana variety called Mantrayana which emphasizes the use of *mantras* during meditation; the sacred sound of Java is “aah”.

logical modalities of Body/Speech/Mind, sensation-perception, cognition, conation, emotion, and interaction), and so forth.

There are several peculiarities in Javanese Buddhism when it is compared to the Mahayana denominations known in the literature. One peculiarity is that the self-originating and self-emanating primordial principle of the Adhi-Buddha¹⁷ or Nondual-Advaya is said to bring forth the three conquerors (*jinās*) of the three poisons: greed (conquered by Avalokiteshvara/compassion), hatred (by Vajrapani/joy-power), and ignorance (by Shakyamuni/loving-kindness). These three bodies (*trikaya*)¹⁸ originate the five *dhyani* Buddhas. Secondly, in addition to the types of selves in Mahayana, there are five types of self in Javanese Buddhism. These are: self/*atman*, low-self/*cetanatman*, higher-self/*paratman*, fluid-self/*niratman*, and between-selves/*antaratman*. Particularly, the Sanskrit terms *antara*, which might mean “in the middle” or “between”, in relation to *atman*, which means “self”, are emphasized. Thus, the concept of “in-between-selves” is accrued, which directly points at Relational Interbeing. Another peculiarity is that one can find here the typical Javanese mix of Buddhism and Brahmanism which might already have been originated in India: out of Vairocana springs to the Zenith the creating force Brahma and to the Nadir the annihilating force Shiva, and to the center on the same level as Vairocana we meet Vishnu, the maintaining force. This is in line with the Brahmin idea that Shakyamuni is a reincarnation of Vishnu. In this syncretistic way Buddhism and Brahmanism existed side-by-side on the island of Java for many centuries and eventually became fused into a fused Buddhist-Brahmin system as from the 11th century. Most probably this fusion was a defensive reaction to the Islamic conquest of the island which took place gradually and incessantly, without blood-shed, but which gained momentum as from circa 1200. This resulted in that in circa 1515 the Javanese Brahmin-Buddhist upper class fled to Bali where the syncretistic faith survives to this day (Brandes, 1913).

¹⁷ To adhere to Indonesian constitution that warrants freedom of religion, present-day Buddhists in Indonesia, among whom indigenous adherents who for centuries (or maybe for about a millennium) live in several Buddhist villages on Java, elevate the Adhi-Buddha as their creator-god.

¹⁸ *Kamahayanikan's trikaya* is reflected in the Body/Speech/Mind triad: body-craving (*dharmakaya*), speech-form (*samboghakaya*), and mind-formless (*nirmanakaya*).

Dharmarakshita Suvarnavdipa

Any discussion of Javanese Buddhism is incomplete without going into its practice as disseminated by a widely celebrated 10/11th century eminent prince/guru: Dharmarakshita Suvarnavdipa (an ancient name which means Dharmarakshita “from Sumatra Island”). Related to the Srivijaya dynasty, he was as much Javanese as Sumatranese, and considering his *bodhicitta* and Karma teaching, he must have had The Borobudur that is much about the teaching of *bodhicitta* (awakened motivation) as his intellectual mainstay. In his younger years Dharmarakshita was a student/scholar at Odantapuri in Bihar, India.¹⁹ He was known for his writing on “heartfelt *bodhicitta*” and on “Karma which works like a boomerang”. Dharmarakshita (1981) designed the healing meditation of loving-kindness and compassion by “*terima*” (receiving) and “*kasih*” (offering), known in Tibetan as *tonglen* and which is the contemplative congenial/gluing practice of *antaratman*. This technique, a component of an extensive, seven point mind training toward karmic whole someness, is nowadays practiced daily world-wide along with Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama.

Dharmarakshita is revered up until today in Tibet, where he is called Serlingpa, as the teacher of Dipankara Shrijnana, a Bengali prince/guru who is known as Atisha in Tibet (c.980-1054). After studying with renowned Indian teachers, Atisha was eventually advised to go to the most outstanding teacher of his time in Palembang, where he arrived after a journey of a year. There he studied with Dharmarakshita and allegedly Atisha must also have visited The Borobudur, the concrete center of the *bodhicitta* teaching he was learning. At the end of a 12 year of stay with his renowned teacher (c.1012-1024), Atisha was encouraged to go to the “land of snows”, which he eventually did in 1039. In Tibet, Atisha became a key figure in four out of the five Tibetan schools, so that Dharmarakshita’s teachings and reputation not only survived, but continued to thrive for eleven centuries and play a pivotal role up to this day. Leaving the archipelago, Dharmarakshita gave Atisha scripts containing

¹⁹ Odantapuri is the second oldest Buddhist educational centre (as from the 7th century) neighbouring the famous Nalanda on the Indian subcontinent. It could accommodate 1000 students among whom many Tibetan scholars. Many Vajrayana texts were composed there. Unfortunately it was destroyed by Muslim invaders in c.1193.

the revered teaching on *bodhicitta* with the cardinal message that *bodhicitta* should come from the innermost depth of the heart.

As a scholar Dharmarakshita reviewed the literature on *bodhicitta* and made it easy to understand by his clear-cut interpretation of the writings of illustrious predecessors, from the Buddha to Shantideva (an 8th century Nalanda scholar in Nagarjuna's tradition, champion of bodhisattvahood, *raison d'être* of The Borobudur). In fact the main theme of The Borobudur is *bodhicitta* which is the intrinsic motivation to awaken toward Nirvana when ascending The Borobudur in order to benefit all beings trapped in the cycle of suffering (*Samsara*). Logically, this benefitting is particularly done during the descent of The Borobudur. The person whose activities are motivated by heartfelt *bodhicitta* is called a *Bodhisattva* whose path is conveyed/depicted on the 10 floors of The Borobudur. As depicted on the outer wall of Pawon, the *Bodhisattva's* *bodhicitta* is linked to Manjushri (who represents wisdom by carrying a sword to root out craving, grasping, and clinging), to Maitreya (who represents loving-kindness which is conditioned by compassion and joy), and to Virtue/Samantabhadra (who formulates the vow of the 10 perfections). In effect, the awakened mind of *bodhicitta* comprises the union of compassion and wisdom, which can be discovered and experienced whilst ascending and descending the sanctuary on the mountain.

Ascending The Borobudur, *bodhicitta* is “absolute”; that is, the *Bodhisattva* strives at attaining Nirvana, the extinction of craving, and the highest of wisdom: emptiness (*sunyata*) as elucidated in the *Prajnaparamita Sutra* (“Perfection of Wisdom *Sutra*” or its shortened versions: the *Diamond Sutra* and the *Heart Sutra*), which was commented on by Nagarjuna in the 2nd century. Descending The Borobudur, *bodhicitta* is “relative”; that is, the *Bodhisattva*, who has realized *antaratman*, “loving-kindness in-between-selves”, works at saving all beings who suffer due to existence itself (birth, aging, illness, and death), due to the poisons of greed, hatred, and ignorance on how the mind works, and due to separation from loved ones, union with unloved ones, and social failure. This suffering is by nature psychological and throughout relational/interpersonal in its emanation and manifestation. The combination of relative and

absolute *bodhicitta* is the Middle Way which helps balancing the individual in the context of the social, displayed on one of The Borobudur panels as rafting oneself and others to the other shore. Dharmarakshita emphasized *bodhicitta* that is felt from the bottom of one's heart which will result in a non-manipulative/non-egotistic helping by visualizing the people to be saved as one's mother: her care in the past is gratefully reciprocated. This is in line with the 10 *Bodhisattva* vows as depicted on the highest panel walls. Traditionally, this boils down to practicing the cherished "Four Social Meditations" the pursuit of which is to immeasurably multiply kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. These are four divine qualities of experiencing as denoted by its name, the *Brahmaviharas* (where the "gods" dwell), which make the *Bodhisattva* feel "divine". Feeling divine or godly is very different from being or becoming a god: after all Buddhism is non-theistic.

Karma as relationally intended action

Dharmarakshita (10/11th century; 1981) innovated not only the social contemplation of "*terima* and *kasih*"²⁰, but also dealt with interpersonal or "relational Karma". His poetic work "*The sharp-blade wheel hitting the enemy's heart*", explains how Karma plays out in interpersonal life as cause and effect. When we crave for, and grasp to and cling on conventional I/me/mine-self/soul, we fail to see the ultimate empty non-self, which seeing requires *bodhicitta*: heartfelt motivation, steadfast resolve, and self-commitment. As the only enemy is within us, the wheel of sharp weapons will sooner or later return full circle upon us.²¹ The teaching's core metaphor refers to Manjushri's razor-sharp sword used to cut off the root of craving in a heart that breeds greed and hatred toward others. By proliferating interactive feelings and thoughts of enmity and being ignorant about the working of "relational mind" and Karma, one is one's own enemy. In effect, what is thrown out in greed or hatred, for example, dumping emotional garbage on the other person, will cut oneself by the other's reciprocating action or by one's own mindless way of life. This "boomerang effect" is caused by emitting

²⁰ Log on to www.taosinstitute.net/manuscripts-for-downloading

²¹ For the full English text, log on to www.bodhicitta.net/The%20Wheel%20of%20Sharp%20Weapons.htm ; this teaching is kept alive by e.g. Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama: http://dharma-gates.org/html/dalai_lama.html.

unwholesome action, so that the advice is to be mindful of Maitreya's loving-kindness and Avalokiteshvara's empathic compassion in order to prevent and abolish the inflammation and escalation of interpersonal pain and suffering, and to instead powerfully install Vajrapani's reciprocal joy, in order to eventually dwell in happiness. To be sure, The Borobudur is on Karma: cause and effect as emerging out of and as manifesting qua outcome in Body/Speech/Mind which are embedded in a network of relationships. Thus social psychology is quite relevant.

Social psychology aims at explaining how thought, feeling and behavior are influenced, directly or indirectly, by people within their culture. Research can be quantitative in the laboratory or qualitative as collaborative field action and is typically focused on attitudes, social influence, social cognition, and social affect (like greed and hatred). The stance taken here is that the results of quantitative and qualitative studies complement each other. However, rather than viewing language as a mirror of reality, the quantitative project, the present stance views language as qualitative tool through which communities socially construct reality. Adhering to the idea that what something "is" depends on one's approach and to which social group one belongs, reality is constructed in collaborative practice through ongoing dialogues, comparisons, negotiations, agreements, and so on. Although this "togetherness" premise is simple and straightforward, its impact is far-reaching. It requires re-thinking of virtually everything that has been taken for granted. If reality is a social construction, then nothing can be real in, by, and of itself (including Buddhism and Social Construction itself). This reasoning corresponds with the Buddhist practice of mindfulness meditation leading to the insight on the non-existence of inherent existence or self-nature of things (*svabhava*), which is represented in the *summum bonum* of The Borobudur, the pinnacle of Buddhist wisdom: the baffling emptiness experience of Vairocana's Tower. Working on decreasing suffering and increasing happiness amidst existential adversity is not a matter of earning merit for an individual ticket to a paradise in the beyond but is about the Dependent Origination of reality, on making "here/now" wholesome choices and engaging in karmic intentional interactivity.

Such a view of emptiness is in accord with the social psychology of Social Construction as championed by Gergen (2009b) who offers a radical picture of the mind and the human condition which surprisingly coincides with the Buddhist vision as displayed by The Borobudur. The mind is “intermind”, not located inside the skin behind the eyeballs within the skull in-between the ears, but arising in Dependent Origination²² in-between people. Both views appreciate the experience of Relational Interbeing as depicted in the root metaphor of Indra’s Jewel Net which renders how people are interrelated and interconnected as gems at each crossing of the net mirroring each other in infinite mutual interpenetrations and merging subject and object in non-duality. This is a 4th century Mahayana practice of the Yogacara denomination that is based on the “Buddha Womb *Sutras*” which emphasize a *Brahmavihara* filling in of the emptiness expounded in the “Perfection of Wisdom *Sutras*” which could mistakenly leave many adherents in a *horror vacuum*.

Relational Buddhism

“Relational Buddhism”, the central viewpoint from which the *suttas* and *sutras* are interpreted here, is grounded in the axiom that *there is nothing that can be perceived or thought of, conceived and imagined which is not socially constructed*. Relational Buddhism is an amalgam of the practices of Social Construction and Buddhism which share the basic idea that “we can’t share brain, but we can’t but share mind”. It centers round the meta-composite term Relational Interbeing, a concept which denotes “loving-kindness-in-between-non-selves” and which is an advanced state of being that understands the wisdom of emptiness and the futility of “Transcendental/Eternal Truths”. Derived from the awareness that human beings are interconnected this state suggests that the real, the reasonable, and the good are enshrined in socio-cultural processes. All that we know is embedded, not in the bounded mind of the individual, but in-between communal cultures. Mind conceived as inter-mind is an intersection of multiple

²² Dependent Origination is the Buddha’s causality hypothesis that describes the arising and ceasing of Karma triggered by craving and traversing through Body/Speech/Mind craving (by sensing/feeling, thinking, conating, emoting, and interacting), resulting in grasping and clinging (cf. *Paticca-samuppada Vibangha Sutta*).

relationships. Before we were born, the socio-cultural was. Thus, individual minds are socialized through participation in the culture one lives by, not the other way around. Thus, from this social constructional perspective the private mind inside the skull full of hidden meanings is not as intimate as one traditionally might assume.

Relational Buddhism proposes that meaning and meaningfulness do not exist in a solipsistic manner but in an acculturated way through a process of co-action. Apparently, what is considered to be separate in the private mind (perception, thought, and affect) arises in interrelationships and is meaningless outside the context of collaborative practice. In effect, although carried out privately, self-talk is only intelligible, even for oneself, as *socialized* speech. The same applies to action: even dancing alone is a social performance. In the same vein one might consider the five hand postures (*mudras*) of “meditation”, “fear-not”, “generosity”, “grounding”, and “teaching” as displayed by the 504 *dhyani* Buddhas of The Borobudur as making the relational, which inhere in these qualities, explicit in their depiction. As The Borobudur is traversed, one questions the affective states inside the individual heads and bodies and one asks what can be done to overcome greed and hatred. Having located the origin of meaning in interpersonal exchange, one discovers that emotions are not solely bodily reactions belonging to the private domain but instead are components of the relational. This implies a shift in experiencing “my” act of kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity into “our” activity for the betterment of us all. The understanding and transformation of greed and hatred is enlarged when the view from a “natural given” of these affective states is translated into scenarios of interpersonal interaction. Sudhana’s quest, which comprises meetings with 52 guru-friends, is basically a narrative of such transformative relationships and of dialogues which deliver.

Speech is the third Buddhist assignment in the “8-Fold Balancing Practice”, a practice that walks the talk toward balanced views, intentions, *speech*, actions, living, effort, awareness, and attention. Taking into consideration the striking correspondence of Social Construction and Buddhism, the rendering of Relational

Buddhism is obvious and close to home. By discarding transcendentalism and eternalism, Relational Buddhism is not a belief system whatsoever, but an invitation to dialogue ways of understanding which coincides with the Buddha's charter of free inquiry expounded in the *Kalama Sutta*.

The spirit of free inquiry

Relational Buddhism includes evidence-based psychological research which informs practice. Interestingly, some of the concepts, values and qualities highlighted on The Borobudur's panels are recently the subject of social psychological research. Illustrative is that "intentional activity" was re-discovered in "Positive Psychology" (Lyubomirsky, 2008), apparently without being aware of the Buddhist meaning of Karma. Evidence was found that sustainable happiness is determined by a genetic set-point (50%), circumstantial factors (10%), and intentional activity (40%) (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). Human beings are equipped by an idiosyncratic genetic set-point like for weight or length, which is hardly modifiable. People with high set-points will find it easier to be happy; people with low set-points will have to work harder to achieve or maintain happiness under similar conditions. Happy people do not just sit around being happy but make things happen. This activity spins off a by-product which is happiness over and above the genetic set range and life circumstances. Long-term overall circumstances include demographic data (age, health, education, money, country, religion, and marital status).



Two studies have been conducted specifically on loving-kindness. The first study (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008) was a longitudinal field experiment with working adults (n=139) randomly assigned to either a wait-list control condition or to begin a one week, one hour per day meditation of loving-kindness meditation which is meant to cultivate warmth and caring for self and others. Evidently, this meditation practice had a gradual and cumulative positive effect on people's experiencing of positive emotions. This resulted in building on a wide range of personal resources (e.g. increased mindfulness and awareness, stronger sense of purpose in life, increased positive relations with other people, and decreased illness symptoms). These increments predicted increased life satisfaction and reduced depression scores. A second study on loving-kindness examined whether the fundamental human motive of social connection could be engendered toward strangers in a controlled laboratory setting (Hutcherson, Seppala, & Gross 2008). A few minutes of self-engendered loving-kindness increased feelings of social connectivity/positivity toward unknown people. These studies show that brief practice of an easily implemented meditation

is helpful for increasing positive social affect and for decreasing irrational feelings of isolation.

A number of recent studies touch upon the human interdependence and unconditional happiness aspects of the Buddhist experience. In one study (Jaremka, Gabriel, & Cavallo, 2010) compelling evidence was found that people's best and worst moments occur within relationships. It is the interaction with other people and the fulfillment of social connection rather than the individual accomplishment, the award, or the completion of a task, which mark life's ups and downs. People feel best in sharing success and feel worst when failing in the presence of others. Evidently, social networks shape lives and lifestyles, whether obesity or smoking. Moreover: happiness is contagious. Another study (Christakis & Fowler, 2009) reported that each happy friend increases the likelihood of happiness by 9% and each unhappy friend decreases it by 7%. Finally, Nobel Prize winner Kahneman and Deaton (2010) analyzed Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index (GHWBI) data of 450,000 US residents and discovered that money buys happiness only to a certain degree. Happiness and unhappiness refer to experiencing joy, fascination, anxiety, sadness, anger, stress, worry, and affection. In effect, more money does not necessarily buy more happiness, but less money is associated with emotional suffering. The happiness threshold in 2008 was \$75,000, \$3500 more than the median household income. Above this, income no longer improves one's ability to do what matters most to happiness, that is, spend time with people one likes, avoid pain and disease, and enjoy leisure.

In closing

The Buddhist way of life as modeled by the Buddha's life story and as delineated in The Borobudur's allegory of Good Wealth, provides us with an archetypical template illustrating that leading an affluent life might pave the way to entering a quest for life's meaning. Living in relative comfort, or even perhaps in "princely" circumstances, middle class people all over the world are in principle all Sudhanas who are ready to seek and learn what life is about, and to start on a profound inner journey of discovering

wisdom. Travelling The Borobudur might be helpful for Buddhists, and indeed for any other interested person irrespective of background, to comprehensively find what they seek, as the record shows in this article. It has been a long journey of *bodhicitta* up and down The Borobudur, from ascending in the awe of accumulating wonderful “aha”-insights, reaching a reset point of emptiness, and descending in the contentment of “haha”-joyfulness. *Bodhicitta*, a specialty of Javanese Buddhism, provides a springboard to leap onto Relational Buddhism via discovering postmodern Social Construction and social psychological research. In effect, this is an attempt to narrow a gap of the Buddhist approach to the wisdom of human experience lasting some 1200 years. To date emptiness may still be considered to be profound wisdom, a reset point and starting block to disseminate loving-kindness from within the heart. As yet no-one in the world can claim to have a monopoly on Absolute Truth for humanity, this includes Buddhism.

Adhering to the message of The Borobudur, Relational Buddhism submits that the wisdom of sustainable happiness amidst adversity is largely an *intrapersonal* equilibrating experience of relationship and an epiphenomenon of harmonious *interpersonal* interactivity. Buddhist wisdom, savvy, and sagacity necessitate us to adhere to the relational scenarios of being genuinely kind, compassionate, and joyful in a mutually balanced togetherness. To this end, mindfulness of speech, which includes mindful listening and collaborative practice, is highly recommended. In effect, this is realizing amicability “in-between-non-selves” in the pursuit of gluing peaceful relationships. Individuals do not exist independently from one another, but rely on interconnectedness and interdependence for their very survival.

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