

# Buddhism and the Question of Relationality in International Relations

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## ABSTRACT

Relationality seems to have attracted a broader audience in international relations (IR) in the last decade. Unlike other approaches of the relational turn that concentrate more on analyzing or stabilizing the international order, the Buddhist theory of IR is mainly concerned with the political practice of the liberation and healing of people. In this article, I will illustrate how Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings can contribute to IR by using case studies. The cases to investigate include the Okinawa base issue, Denmark's 'light in the darkness', and South Korea-Japan diplomatic relations.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, IR Theory, Relationality, Subjectivity, Ethics

## Budizm ve Uluslararası İlişkilerde İlişkisel Sorunu

### ÖZET

İlişkisel, son on senede uluslararası ilişkilerde daha geniş bir okuyucu kitlesi çekmiş görünmektedir. Uluslararası düzeni analiz veya stabilize etmeye daha fazla odaklanan diğer ilişkisel dönüş yaklaşımlarının aksine, Budist uluslararası ilişkiler teorisi, esas olarak insanların kurtuluşu ve iyileştirilmesinin politik pratiğiyle ilgilidir. Bu makalede vaka çalışmaları kullanarak Mahāyāna Budist öğretilerinin uluslararası ilişkiler alanına nasıl katkıda bulunabileceğini göstereceğim. İncelenecek vakalar Okinawa üs sorunu, Danimarka'nın "karanlıktaki ışığı" ve Güney Kore-Japonya diplomatik ilişkilerinden oluşmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Budizm, Uluslararası İlişkiler Teorisi, İlişkisel, Öznellik, Etik

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## Introduction

Relationality seems to have attracted a broader audience in international relations (IR) in the last decade. Patrick T. Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon's well-known work on relationality before the state was the inception<sup>1</sup> and Qin Yaqing's *Relational Theory of World Politics* followed the relational path and developed it into an established approach to contemporary world affairs.<sup>2</sup> Others present extensive research on how the relational approaches differ from mainstream IR discourses as well as from each other.<sup>3</sup> One of these relational approaches is Japanese Buddhism, which applies a particular style of relationality, *engi* or *pratityasamutpad*, to IR, and assumes spontaneous relationality prior to the construction of its subjects. Unlike other approaches of the relational turn that concentrate more on analyzing or stabilizing the international order, the Buddhist theory of IR is mainly concerned with the political practice of the liberation and healing of people.<sup>4</sup>

Buddhism contains diverse theories and thoughts, including Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayana. Therefore, using 'Buddhism' as a perspective based on just one of the Buddhist philosophical discourses is too much of a generalization. Accordingly, from among them, this article will mainly focus on Mahāyāna Buddhism, as it emphasizes relationality with 'others' more than 'self'. Mahāyāna Buddhism considers spontaneous and fluid relationality as a key component of reality and leads to the perspective that everything, including the conscious 'self,' is impermanent.<sup>5</sup>

In this article, I will illustrate how Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings can contribute to IR. First, I will briefly explain the discourses of relationality in IR in general. Second, I will introduce the *engi* relationality of Japanese Buddhism and focus in particular on language and being in order to reiterate the Mahāyāna Buddhist perception of ontology. Third, I will use a case drawn from the Okinawa base issue to clarify how to apply Buddhist relationality to foreign relations. Fourth, I will introduce the second case study, Denmark and the 'light in the darkness,' to illustrate the applicability of Buddhist IR relationality even outside of the East Asian context. Finally, the uneasy diplomatic relations between Japan and South Korea over the issue of sexual slavery during the Second World War will be introduced as a case to which the Mahāyāna Buddhist approach could have been applied but has not succeeded.

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- 1 Patrick T. Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon, "Relations Before States: Substance, Process and the Study of World Politics", *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 5, No 3, 1999, p. 291-332.
  - 2 Yaqing Qin, *A Relational Theory of World Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018.
  - 3 Tamara A. Trowsell et al., "Recrafting International Relations Through Relationality", 2019, <https://www.e-ir.info/2019/01/08/recrafting-international-relations-through-relationality/> (Accessed 12 December 2020); Astrid H. M. Nordin et al., "Towards Global Relational Theorizing: A Dialogue Between Sinophone and Anglophone Scholarship on Relationalism", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 32, No 5, 2019, p. 570-581; Tamara A. Trowsell et al., "Differing About Difference: Relational IR from Around the World", *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 22, No 1, 2021, p. 25-64.
  - 4 See also, Stephen Chan et al. (eds.), *The Zen of International Relations - IR Theory from East to West*, Basingstoke, Palgrave/Macmillan, 2001. While Chan et al. focuses on the emancipation practices more from epistemological side, this paper does so from ontological side. In this sense, it comes closer to post-Western IR theories instead of non-Western ones. See for example, Navnita Behera, "Re-imagining IR in India", *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 7, No 3, 2007, p. 341-368; Giorgio Shani, "Toward a Post-Western IR: The 'Umma', 'Khalsa Panth', and Critical International Relations Theory", *International Studies Review*, Vol. 10, No 4, 2008, p. 722-734; Kosuke Shimizu, "The Genealogy of Culturalist International Relations in Japan and Its Implications for Post-Western Discourse", *All Azimuth: a Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace*, Vol. 7, No 1, 2018, p. 121-136.
  - 5 Kosuke Shimizu and Sei Noro, "An East Asian Approach to Temporality, Subjectivity, and Ethics: Bringing Mahāyāna Buddhist Ontological Ethics of *Nikon* into International Relations", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, (forthcoming in 2021).

## **Buddhism and Relationality**

Relationality has been one of the main subjects in the recent literature on critical engagement with IR.<sup>6</sup> The first explicit attempt to introduce relationality to the field was Jackson and Nexon's article on "relationality *before* the states."<sup>7</sup> They developed a relational understanding of IR to argue that the identities of actors are determined by the relationality between them, not the other way around, by taking relationality as a process. Another variant of relationality in IR is Confucian IR, which has been largely developed and disseminated by prominent Chinese scholars such as Yan Xuetong, Qin Yaqing, and Zhao Tingyang.<sup>8</sup> Their discourses employ Confucian canonical texts, including Confucius's *Analects* and Mencius.

While these are forerunners of relational approaches, Nordin et al. state "that any analysis of international affairs should begin with relations, not with the putative essences of constitutively autonomous actors."<sup>9</sup> For Nordin et al., a relational approach appears simply to be a form of IR theorization with a particular focus on the relationality among the actors. Townsell et al. define relational approaches to IR, saying that "ontologically relationality begins by assuming interconnection as *prior* to the existence of entities."<sup>10</sup> Like Jackson and Nexon,<sup>11</sup> Townsell et al. take the standpoint that relations come first and the identities and roles of actors second. A relational approach also epistemologically means that the research object cannot exist without the researcher. This involves an ethical dimension of how one can conduct social research by taking into consideration the relationship with "others"<sup>12</sup> when focusing on relationality itself does not necessarily answer the question "whether any existing relations are good or bad."<sup>13</sup>

These approaches are connected by their critical understanding of the mainstream IR that presumes an autonomous and independent actor that presumably always tries to maximize its profit.<sup>14</sup> Mahāyāna Buddhism offers one possibility for such discussions and has the potential to provide possible theoretical cores for further development of IR theory, given that it is critical of fixed identity and ego and provides extremely interesting insights into their relationship with language.<sup>15</sup> Before thoroughly investigating the theoretical potential of Mahāyāna Buddhist IR, we need to understand Mahāyāna Buddhist relationality in general. When we try to grasp the quintessence of Buddhism, we need to understand how subjectivity is constructed and how it is related to temporality.

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6 Nordin et al., "Towards Global Relational Theorizing"; Townsell et al., "Recrafting International Relations"; Townsell et al., "Differing About Difference."

7 Jackson and Nexon, "Relations Before States."

8 Xuetong Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2011; Qin, *A Relational Theory of World Politics*; Zhao Tingyang, "All-Under-Heaven and Methodological Relationalism", Fred Dallmayr and Zhao Tingyang (eds.), *Contemporary Chinese Political Thought: Debates and Perspectives*, Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 2012, p. 46-66.

9 Nordin et al., "Towards Global Relational Theorizing", p. 571.

10 Townsell et al., "Recrafting International Relations", p. 3.

11 Jackson and Nexon, "Relations Before States".

12 Shimizu and Noro, "An East Asian Approach".

13 Nordin et al., "Towards Global Relational Theorizing", p. 573.

14 L.H.M. Ling, *Postcolonial International Relations: Conquest and Desire between Asia and the West*, Basingstoke, Palgrave/Macmillan 2002.

15 Jikisai Minami, *Choetsu to Jitsuzon: Mujo wo meguru bukkyoshi* [Transcendence and Existence: A History of Buddhism on Impermanency], Tokyo, Shincho, 2018; Shimizu and Noro, "An East Asian Approach".

Before starting a detailed discussion on Buddhist relationality, it is worth noting here that my understanding of Buddhism is not confined to the traditional interpretations of Buddhist teachings. Instead, I deliberately expand my focus to such unconventional figures as Izutsu Toshihiko, Nakamura Hajime, Hiromatsu Wataru, and Sueki Fumihiko, who are generally regarded as philosophers rather than specialists in Buddhism. This deliberately widened area of focus is because I assume that their philosophies are profoundly influenced by Buddhism, particularly their articulations of ontology.

The primary goal of Buddhism is, in principle, to be free of suffering. The distinct traditions in Buddhism, Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayana, all aim to investigate the truth in the world for liberation. Among these, Mahāyāna Buddhism aims to liberate people in general from suffering, not just monks, as Theravāda Buddhism assumes. Thus, Mahāyāna Buddhism is, from the beginning, social as well as political. Geographically, Theravada Buddhism is more popular in South East Asia and Vajrayana in Tibet, whereas Mahāyāna Buddhism was substantially developed by a Buddhist monk, Nagarjuna, in the fifth century, and can be found mainly in East Asia, typically Japan, where almost all Buddhist sects belong to Mahāyāna Buddhism, including Zen Buddhism.<sup>16</sup>

In this article, I focus on Mahāyāna Buddhism partly because of its concept of *ku* (emptiness), on which my argument exclusively relies, and partly because the idea of *ku* drives our focus towards the relationality with 'others'. Indeed, in Mahāyāna Buddhism, the subject only appears out of relations with others. It is not the subjects that create relations with others, such as in Wendtian constructivist IR.<sup>17</sup> It is rather a relationality that comes first, and then it generates subjects.

This Mahāyāna Buddhist relationality is spontaneous and not initiated by any presupposed agent. In other words, it is an action without the subject that appears to us as a relationality. As the action is a process, not a form, Mahāyāna Buddhist relationality is impermanent, unlike the Confucian IR, which assumes embedded and fixed roles.

For example, a desk in front of me only becomes a desk when I write, say this paper, on it. The desk connects me and the paper as a desk, and this is the relationality. Without this relationality, and thus a desk, I would not be the author, or the paper would not be written. Similarly, without the person to use it as a desk and the paper to be written on it, the desk would not be a desk. In this way, the *engi* relationality presupposes spontaneity, and it is this spontaneity that generates not only subjects and objects but also how these are connected. In fact, the desk can also become a base if I stand on it to replace a light bulb. It may function as a tea table if I put a cup of tea on it. In these cases, the base connects me to the light bulb, and the tea table connects me and a cup of tea, and simultaneously it becomes a base or tea table. Whether this furniture in front of me is a desk, base, or coffee table depends entirely on how it connects the person who uses it and the objects their conduct is aiming at.

How to use the desk is not totally controlled by the subject who uses it either. The subject uses the desk as a desk because they are forced to write an article or book. Even if not forced, they like to write articles or books instead of playing a baseball game that they are supposed to play for their team. Regardless of the reasons, they did not decide to use the desk as a desk out of the blue. There are other relationalities that compelled them to use the desk as a desk. Similarly, they use the desk as a base because they find that the bulb needs replacing. A certain action, thus relationality, is, in fact, a result

16 Fumihiko Sueki, *Nihon, Bukkyo Nyumon* [An Introduction to Japanese Buddhism], Tokyo, Kadokawa, 2014.

17 Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Relations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

of other relationalities and the chain of relationalities goes infinite. The subject we think of is also the result of the immense relationalities from moment to moment, and we come to see the illusion of established and permanent 'self' in this chain of relationalities.

On the contrary, Confucian relationality presupposes the function of the desk. It connects the paper and me, but the relationality is embedded and fixed in the context of a desk. Anyone sitting in front of it is supposed to write a paper; thus, the desk is a desk from the beginning and is fixed, although the subject and object are replaceable with others. The subject could be my colleague or me, and the paper could be a letter or a notebook, but the subject must use the desk as a desk, and the object of their conduct must be appropriate to be placed on the desk. If the subject uses it as a base for changing a light bulb or placing a teacup, they would be seen as violating the moral code.

In this way, the difference between Confucian and Buddhist relationalities stems from the extent to which relationality is "embedded" in the social context.<sup>18</sup> In other words, whereas Confucianism assumes that context is given according to the existing hierarchy, Buddhism has no given context. All in all, the way to refer to the self entirely depends on the relationality between the teller and the told. In the Confucian understanding of relationality, how one can relate to another involves elements such as age, gender, social class, etc.

Unlike other relational approaches, the ever-changing nature of beings in Mahāyāna Buddhism is the most important presumption regardless of the sects or organizations and is called *ku*. Despite the diverse Buddhist sects and related canonical texts, *ku* is commonly recognized as "the real and the beginning of all inquiries of (Mahāyāna) Buddhism."<sup>19</sup> Ontology in Buddhism is set before the language's interventions. Mahāyāna Buddhism sets an ontological assumption that reality and the truth come before language and are thus indescribable. Once it is described in the form of language, it is no longer a reality. Rather, it is a vestige of reality, the reality that is empty.

Language divides reality into certain given categories. Imamura Hitoshi calls this division the "original violence."<sup>20</sup> According to him, dividing reality into different pieces, thus describing and narrating the 'reality', is the beginning of violent actions. In this sense, we can never describe reality, nor understand reality simply because it is indescribable. Izutsu similarly argues that this is the reason Buddhism has a strong resentment of language.<sup>21</sup>

Losing oneself is the main goal of Mahāyāna Buddhist practice in the world of ever-changing nature. Losing oneself means losing one's ego attachment and liberating oneself from the chain of desires, thereby saving oneself from suffering. In other words, fear, anxiety, pain, and all other difficulties in everyday life emanate from persistence; therefore, losing oneself is a means to transcend this state of mind of desire.<sup>22</sup> From this ontological perspective, what is good is to become the true self, that is, to become nothing, *mu*. All Zen practices of meditation and *koan* are, for instance, meant to achieve

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18 Keiko Sakai, "'Gurobaru Kankeigaku' Shiron: 'Gurobaru na Kiki' Bunseki no Tamenō 'Kankeigaku' wo Mosaku suru [In Search of Relational Studies on Global Crisis]"; Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research on Innovative Areas "Relational Studies on Global Crisis" Online Paper Series, No 1, 2018, [http://www.shd.chiba-u.jp/gblcrss/online\\_papers/onlinepaper20180520.pdf](http://www.shd.chiba-u.jp/gblcrss/online_papers/onlinepaper20180520.pdf) (Accessed 5 September 2021)

19 Kiyoshi Miki, "Shinran", *Miki Kiyoshi Zenshu* [Collected Works of Miki Kiyoshi], Vol. 18, Tokyo, Iwanami, 1968, p. 423-525.

20 Hitoshi Imamura, *Boryoku no ontōrogi* [Ontology of Violence], Tokyo, Keisoshobo, 1982.

21 Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ishiki to Honshitsu: Seishinteki Toyo wo motomete* [Consciousness and Essence: In Search of Eastern Spirituality], Tokyo, Iwanami, 1991.

22 Minami, Choetsu to Jitsuzon.

this state of mind, and this practice-oriented approach to truth and ethics has been considered a core component of Buddhism.<sup>23</sup>

It is not surprising that truth and ethics are inseparable in Buddhism. Science and ethics are not a binary opposition but different sides of the same coin if we adopt Buddhist thinking.<sup>24</sup> In this way, the practice of losing oneself in Buddhist teachings guarantees both finding the truth and achieving the transcendental state of an ethical mind.

The subject is triggered and caused by an uncontrollable relationality, and when the relationality is narrated, it creates an autonomous and independent subject. Here, the narration is imperative for fixing and essentializing subjects with clear boundaries to others, which only becomes possible with language in Buddhist teachings. Language fortifies subjectivity by giving it a clear boundary by which one can distinguish oneself from others.<sup>25</sup> The subjectivity given in the word ‘I’ means that ‘I’ am no longer ‘you’, while ‘I’ and ‘you’ are the same under the category of ‘we’. In the latter’s case, ‘we’ is distinguished from another alterity, ‘them’. In this way, language sets clear boundaries and makes a distinction between the self and the other. So long as one retains a particular word to refer to the self, subjectivity would become relatively stable. This stabilized subjectivity is a prerequisite for the contemplation of the past and future. In other words, “the world is not the ‘world’ when we were born ... It becomes the world after the establishment of the order with language.”<sup>26</sup>

## Buddhist Relationality and IR

Applying this Mahāyāna Buddhist understanding of IR makes it clear first that the nation-state, which has been the prominent actor in the discipline, must also be relative. A ‘superpower’ only becomes possible when there are less powerful nations. As far as IR is concerned, regarding military capability or material wealth, there must be the powerful and the powerless. In other words, if there is a no less powerful nation such as a middle power or a small power, the ‘super’ power will be meaningless. Similarly, law-abiding ‘normal’ nations in the international community require some other ‘rogue’ or abnormal nations. ‘Civilized’ nations need ‘uncivilized’ ones in order to enjoy the privileged status of the alleged ‘Western’ club. Liberal nations need despotic ones in order to call themselves liberal.

This line of thought appears to be similar to the poststructuralist argument of binary oppositions of the self and other. In fact, the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition shares some philosophical aspects with such poststructuralist thinkers. This is because both Mahāyāna Buddhism and poststructuralists conduct inquiries into the function of language by assuming the ever-changing nature of reality. What distinguishes Mahāyāna Buddhism from poststructuralism is the ceaseless effort to find ethics in the world of impermanency. In this sense, Mahāyāna Buddhism comes close to Immanuel Levinas’s ethics of alterity.<sup>27</sup>

23 Xiaoming Huang, “The Zen Master’s Story and an Anatomy of International Relations Theory”, Stephen Chan et al. (eds.), *Zen of International Relations: IR Theory from East to West*, Basingstoke, Palgrave/Macmillan, 2001, p. 222-243; L. H. M. Ling, “Kōanizing IR: Flipping the Logic of Epistemic Violence”, Kosuke Shimizu (ed.), *Critical International Relations in East Asia: Relationality, Subjectivity, and Pragmatism*, London, Routledge, 2019, p. 64-85.

24 Antony Goedhals, *The Neo-Buddhist Writings of Lafcadio Hearn: Light from the East*, Leiden, Brill, 2020.

25 Jikisai Minami, *Nichijo Seikatsu no Naka no Zen Shugyo no Susume* [Zen in Everyday Lives: An Encouragement of the Zen Practice], Tokyo, Kodansha, 2001.

26 Ibid.

27 Immanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteritority*, Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1969.

In the Mahāyāna Buddhist reading of relationality, relationality is spontaneous and not pre-existing or given. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, relationality is never predictable or controllable and is unfixed and changeable. This is because Mahāyāna Buddhism assumes that everything is impermanent. Even if a subject is assigned a certain identity by relationality, it will not last long as an unexpected new relationality can occur and replace the pre-existing one even if it appears to be embedded in the context. This way of seeing the world is best exemplified by the opening passage of *Heike Monogatari* [The Tale of Heike], which states,

“The sound of the Gion Shōja bells echoes the impermanence of all things; the color of the sāla flowers reveals the truth that the prosperous must decline. The proud do not endure, they are like a dream on a spring night; the mighty fall at last, and they are as dust before the wind” (author’s translation).

The tale of Heike is an ancient story of two Japanese clans, one of which seemed to have had invincible dominance but was later replaced by the other. This passage illustrates the rule of *mujo* (impermanence) based on the concept of *ku* and is often referred to as the best expression of the Buddhist teaching of impermanence.

From the point of view of impermanence, the nation-state assumed in IR appears to be created, maintained, and essentialized through the given relationality. IR narrators tend to construct their identities by comparing their nation-states with others in the given relationality and often make the distinction of peaceful advanced nations and bellicose rogue nations by assuming a linear progressive temporality in which the self is always presumably running ahead of the other in the case of the narrative of civilization.

This interpretation is subject to alteration if we are to consider Mahāyāna Buddhist thinking of impermanency, and we would conclude that the nation-state and the concept of sovereignty prescribed as essentialized existence are also created in the alleged fixed relation to others, although this relationship is actually temporal and impermanent. In IR, this means that we should question the common understanding of power to control others as an exercise of politics, whether it is based on the realist concept of hegemony or the liberal market economy. The international structure is always undergoing dynamic processes, and the processes are under the profound influence of unexpected and unpredictable *engi* relationality.

## **Overcoming the Westphalian Subjectivity**

What is the practice of worlding that contains the possibility of transcending the subjectivity of Westphalia? The contemporary Westphalian discourse assumes that international order is a prerequisite for people’s safety and peaceful lives. The nation-state is the only agent that protects people’s everydayness. In mainstream IR to date, sovereignty and securing people’s lives have been understood as synonyms. The maintenance of sovereignty has become the guarantor of the peaceful lives of people. Perhaps the first systematic objection to this understanding was the advent of the human security discourse. Beginning in the 1990s, this movement began to expand throughout the 2000s, involving many researchers, NGOs, and government agencies. In the 2010s, this trend was transformed into the form of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by enjoining the sustainability discourse. The approach to paying attention to people’s everyday lives rather than to the nation-state or interna-

tional order is common here, and the nation-state is positioned only as a means to guarantee people's everyday lives. The change in the role of state sovereignty, that the maintenance of state sovereignty functions as a means rather than an end, is extremely important. However, in actual policy recommendations and diplomatic plans, state sovereignty has been given an absolute and universal ontological quality and runs the risk of considering it the end instead of the means. It is the fixed relationality of state sovereignty and people's peaceful lives ingrained in the IR discourse.

This is also the case in pluralist IR, even if it involves humane authority, relationality, the theory of *tianxia*, or Global IR; they all assume the maintenance of the sovereignty of the state and set the nation-state as the main actor. Here, the problem of the means-become-ends remains untouched. This problem seems to be persistent because pluralism in IR is also taking the geopolitical division as a given. It does not allow any critical considerations of the nation-state and state sovereignty and questioning the premise of state sovereignty is often considered as denying the academism of IR itself. This was evident when we witnessed that while diversity in IR discourse was encouraged and preferred, the membership of this pluralist IR circle was drawn on the premise that certain conditions should be accepted in any possible discourse to be counted as IR. What is conditioned then is to accept that an IR discourse must see the nation-state as the main actor, maintenance of the state sovereignty as the key purpose, and fixing certain identities as the norm (China is China, America is America). When these conditions are accepted, various discourses can become members of the plural IR circle.<sup>28</sup> This is similar to the controversy between Habermas and Foucault that took place in the philosophical world in the 1980s, and the Third Debate between rationalism and poststructuralism in IR in the 1990s.<sup>29</sup> The focus was on what type of reason was supposed to guarantee democracy, and who could examine, decide, and grant the qualifications to participate in democracy, and in what capacity. In pluralism in contemporary IR, the point that this is a problem of ontology becomes clear by asking, for instance, who the main actors are, and regarding the concept of relationality, by asking what relationship qualifies for the name of the theory of relationality.

Thus, Mahāyāna Buddhist contribution to IR can be summarized as follows. First, Mahāyāna Buddhism's aim to liberate people from suffering may not seem to be related to the academic field of IR. However, the Mahāyāna Buddhist idea of critical self-reflections ushers us to the question of whether the discourses of IR have caused suffering for the sake of state sovereignty and world order. Have we not victimized particular peoples to resolve international problems to maintain the system of sovereign states? For Mahāyāna Buddhism, national sovereignty is only a political method to achieve the goal of the liberation of people from suffering. State sovereignty is relative and always under the pressure of relational change. Even if national sovereignty seems to be fixed and institutionalized, it is only a snapshot and a temporal vision. Therefore, Mahāyāna Buddhists think that there is no reason to stick to the idea of sovereignty in pursuing the goal of liberating people if state sovereignty is a means rather than the end. This act was thought of as being primarily based on the perception of the impermanence of subjectivity and approximates the Buddhist understanding of the world.

Second, Mahāyāna Buddhism also emphasizes its pragmatic orientation. Mahāyāna Buddhism fundamentally utilizes pragmatic thinking. The idea that all things have never been fixed

28 Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, "Why Is There No Non-Western International Relations Theory? Ten Years On", *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 17, No 3, 2017, p. 341-370.

29 Steve Smith, "Positivism and Beyond", Steve Smith et al. (eds.), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 11-44.



means that all things established will necessarily be destroyed sooner or later. Whether it is a cup in front of one's eyes or national sovereignty in front of IR audiences, we must assume that things will disappear one way or another. If this is the case, it is not important what it was in the past or what it will be in the future, but rather what it is in the present. We will make the best choice for the goal of the liberation of people by focusing on their suffering at the moment, and this makes Mahāyāna Buddhism pragmatic.

Third, the idea of equality for every living being is obviously an important aspect of Buddhism. Mahāyāna Buddhism assumes that everyone has *busho*, the essence that leads one to become a Buddha. There was indeed a heated debate among Japanese Buddhists about whether plants and trees have it, but it is universally accepted among them that every human being has *busho*.<sup>30</sup> What is important in the context of the application of Mahāyāna Buddhism to IR is that because of this presumption, Mahāyāna Buddhist IR must be committed to equality among people. In other words, Mahāyāna Buddhism sees everyone to be on the way to Buddhahood, and it is precisely in this sense that everyone should be treated as equal.

## Case Study 1: The Okinawa Base Issue

The Okinawa US base issue gives us a concrete idea of how Mahāyāna Buddhism can contribute to IR. As is well known, the US military base in Japan is concentrated in Okinawa in the name of East Asian security. This fact is usually narrated in the context of the territorial dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands<sup>31</sup> or the confrontation between the US and China for regional hegemony. However, it is often overlooked that Okinawan people have continuously made clear their disagreement with the stationing of US troops in their islands through democratic procedures. Despite many Okinawans' active movements over the years against the bases due to the violence and crimes committed by US soldiers against the local people, their claims have not been taken seriously by the Japanese government. On the contrary, the Japan-US Security Treaty, which stipulates the sustaining of the bases, determined the default relationality of Japanese diplomatic relations with the US in the name of the preservation of Japan's state sovereignty and the East Asian international order. The maintenance of Japan's state sovereignty and security of East Asia in this context is not considered a method but rather as a goal. In other words, the goal of people's safety (of course the people of Okinawa are included in this) is being rebutted by the targeted security framework.<sup>32</sup>

Mahāyāna Buddhist IR shows that the Okinawan base issue proves the importance of *engi* relationality with its absence. Despite the successive calls for negotiations on the part of the Okinawan prefectural government, the Japanese government repeatedly refused the proposal. As there have been few interactions between Okinawa and the central government, it appears that the relationship between them had become completely fixed and that the Japanese government seemed to prevent new dynamic relationships from emerging.

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30 Sueki, Nihon, Bukkyo Nyumon.

31 G. John Ikenberry and Michael Mastanduno, *International Relations Theory and the Asia-Pacific*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2003.

32 Kosuke Shimizu, "Human Security, Governmentality, and Sovereignty: A Critical Examination of Contemporary Discourses on Universalizing Humanity", Francois Debrix and Mark J. Lacy (eds.), *The Geopolitics of American Insecurity: Terror, Power and Foreign Policy*, London, Routledge, 2009, p. 143-160.

The Okinawan case also illustrates the question of equality among peoples. It is more than evident here that the locals of Okinawa were unfairly treated. As mentioned above, there were massive instances of resistance to the stationing of US bases in Okinawa, but the central government had never succeeded in removing them. When the Japanese government attempted to investigate the possibility of moving the US bases to the main islands of Japan from Okinawa, they never strived further to persuade the locals of the possible relocation sites when they encountered massive resistance. Here, it became evident that the government was treating the Okinawans and those on the main islands differently. In order to treat the Okinawans fairly, the government needed to set up a new law that either required local consent or ensured absolute state power overriding local voices in order to install and maintain the bases. However, this has never been the case so far.

However, there are other historical events in the Okinawa–mainland Japan relationship that prove the importance of *engi* relationality in a more positive manner. For example, the former Emperor Akihito's case is compelling. In his first visit to Okinawa on 17 July 1975 he was attacked by extreme left-wing activists for his father's wrongdoings during World War II. Okinawa was the only place where an actual battle took place in Japan, and it was abandoned by the central government. Almost 300,000 people died during the battle, many of whom were forced to commit suicide by the Japanese military. Akihito's visit was not welcomed at first, although it was gradually accepted when the locals found that the former emperor was determined to sit with and listen to them. Years after his visit to Okinawa, he became one of the most accepted mainland Japanese figures there,<sup>33</sup> and a recent opinion poll suggests that 87% of Okinawan locals have favorable impressions of the former emperor.<sup>34</sup> It is, of course, still difficult to evaluate his visit. Some argue that his visit only diverted the attention of the audience and that of the locals from the pressing political issues of the time,<sup>35</sup> whereas others argue that it eased the locals' pain and re-established a good relationship between Okinawa and Japan. In any case, however, his action of sitting close and listening to those suffering or, in other words, sharing the moment together, is indeed a typical Mahāyāna Buddhist action to liberate people from suffering, although this by no means erases the tragic memories of Okinawa or condones Japan's transgressions.

One recent intriguing development in the case of the Okinawa base issue is that local Diets in the main island of Japan began passing resolutions to demand that the central government reconsider the construction of the new US base in Henoko or at least foster respect for democracy in Okinawa. According to *Sankei Shimbun*, a conservative nationwide newspaper, at least 25 resolutions were passed in the House of Representatives, while 39 demands were directly submitted to the Japanese government to reconsider the new base in Henoko in 2015.<sup>36</sup> This phenomenon gained momentum after the massive victory of the anti-base movement in the referendum in the Okinawa prefecture in early 2019. This is because the local Diets in Japan and the main islands received the Okinawan NGO's request letters to pass resolutions to respect democracy in Okinawa in relation to the base is-

33 Koji Yabe, *Senso wo Shinai Kuni: Akihito Tenno Messeji* [Nation with No War: Messages of the Emperor Akihito], Tokyo, Shogakkan, 2016.

34 "Tenoheika ni 'kokan' 87%, Okinawa Kenmin, 30 nen de ohabani Kawatta Ishiki [87% Okinawans have favorable impression, change in perceptions in 30 years], *Okinawa Times*, 30 April 2019. <https://www.okinawatimes.co.jp/articles/-/415062> (Accessed 12 December 2020).

35 Toshihiko Saito, *Akihito Tenno to Heiwa Shugi* [The Emperor Akihito and Pacifism], Tokyo, Asahishimbun Publishers, 1975.

36 "Chiho Gikaide Henoko Hantai no Koe [Voices against the Henoko Base in Local Diets]", *Sankei Shimbun*, 27 October 2015, <https://www.sankei.com/premium/news/151024/prm1510240011-n1.html> (Accessed 1 May 2019).

sue.<sup>37</sup> These included Iwate Prefecture and cities such as Sakai (Osaka), Koganei, Kodaira (Tokyo), and Muko (Kyoto).<sup>38</sup> This phenomenon in the main island of Japan can be explained by the unexpected *engi* relationality between ordinary Japanese citizens, and not the central government, and the Okinawan population, which certainly disrupted the fixed relationality of the given hierarchy of Japan and Okinawa.

The effect of the former emperor's visit to Okinawa is still a matter of heated discussion. While the main discourses of the debate are explained in this article, there is another intriguing discourse that asserts that the relationship between Okinawa and Japan has not become violent because of the former emperor's ceaseless effort to sit close to the local Okinawans. The empathy of local diets towards Okinawa can also be explained as an extension of former emperor's efforts. Although it is extremely difficult to evaluate, proving this effect surely contributes to the Buddhist IR discourse by adding a new way to clarify the power of *engi* relationality.

## Case Study 2: The Light in the Darkness in Denmark

This is an example that Hannah Arendt put forward in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and is a story handed down as the miracle of the Danes, or the "light in the darkness" during the Second World War (Brudholm, 2007).<sup>39</sup> Arendt described this case as an example of the "enormous power potential" of non-violent resistance.<sup>40</sup> In 1940, Denmark, which was diplomatically neutral, was invaded by Nazi Germany. It took only a few hours for the Nazis from the beginning of the progression to complete full occupation. During this time, the Danish army barely showed their intention to resist the Nazi invasion. This was because the Nazi Army's armaments were vastly superior to the Danish Army's, and the Danish resistance seemed almost pointless. Whereas Denmark's action was inexplicable in terms of IR theory, which prioritizes the maintenance of sovereignty, it was, in a sense, a heroic and pragmatic decision to save human lives by allowing the occupation to continue at the cost of losing national sovereignty. However, interestingly, this decision ended up rescuing Denmark. At the time of the Nazi invasion of Denmark, Norway was also invaded and occupied by Nazis. After a fierce battle, the fascist government was consequently established, and the pro-Nazi policy was forcibly implemented in Norway. In contrast, a neutral government was maintained in Denmark, which also frequently resisted Germany politically and diplomatically. Therefore, the German occupying authorities came to think differently from other occupation authorities in Europe and ended up intentionally having leaked information on the 'final solution' of the Jews to the Danish authorities. As a result, many of the Jews who lived in Denmark fled to Sweden, and some estimated that more than 92% of the 7,800 Danish Jews were saved.<sup>41</sup>

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37 "Futenma Hikojo no Daitai Shisetsu Kohochi Zenkoku de Giron wo [Promote a Discussion on the Possible Replacement for Futenma Airport]", *Ryukyuu Shimpo*, 16 March 2019.

38 "Iwate Gikai 'Shinkichi Hantai' [Iwate Prefectural Diet Against the New Base]", *Ryukyuu Shimpo*, 27 March 2019; "Okinawa no Mini Soncho wo: Muko Shigikai ga Seifuni Ikensho [Respect Okinawa's Referendum: Muko City Diet Sent a Resolution to the Central Government]", *Okinawa Times*, 9 December 2019.

39 Thomas Brudholm, "A Light in the Darkness? Philosophical Reflections on Historians' Assessments of the Rescue of the Jews in Denmark", Robin May Schott and Kirsten Klercke (eds.), *Philosophy on the Border*, Copenhagen, Museum Tusulanum Press, 2007, P. 195-226.

40 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York, Penguin, 1963, p. 191.

41 Samuel Abrahamsen, "Introduction and Historical Background", Leo Goldberger (ed.), *The Rescue of the Danish Jews: Moral Courage Under Stress*, New York, New York University Press, 1987, p. 3-12; Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 173.

Some commentaries view the Danish miracle as a result of the racial similarity between the Germans and the Danes.<sup>42</sup> However, this discourse misses the difference in the occupational policies of Germans between the Norwegian and Danish cases, which clearly presents the fact that nearly opposite governing tactics were employed by Nazi Germany despite the similar racial composition. My intention here is not to argue that the racial similarity between the Germans and the Danes did not affect the favorable treatment of Danish authority. However, there is something more than racial similarity that made the Danish miracle possible. The unprecedented *engi* relationality of Germans and Danes during the Nazi's occupation of Denmark was possibly one of these factors, and it became possible by surrendering state sovereignty.

From the Buddhist perspective, the rescue of the Danish Jews can be understood as a typical example of the power of unexpected *engi* relationality. The unconventional action (or non-action) against Nazi Germany's intrusion into Danish lands could be understood as a result of the Danes' commitment to human lives. The securing of peoples' lives was their choice. There is no liberation without a life. It could also be interpreted as a consequence of their pragmatism. As there was no possibility of winning the battle against the enemy with incomparable military capacity, the Danes chose a pragmatic answer – to be invaded.

It is also worth mentioning that while the sovereign state of Denmark had disappeared under Nazi occupation, the Danes' commitment to equality among people was intact. In this, Denmark strongly inscribed its existence into history in the form of relief for the Jews, although Danish society was by no means tolerant towards the Jews before this incident.<sup>43</sup> What led the Danish people to support Jewish relief? Although there could be various interpretations of this, there was no doubt an undeniable recognition of the equality of lives prevalent among Danish citizens.

Finally, the transformation of German executives should be analyzed in detail. Of importance here is the relationship, that is, the change in the subjectivity of Nazis as a result of the relationship between the Nazis and the Danish. In Buddhism, subjects always appear after the relationship. This was also the case in the Danish context. After the long interaction between the Nazi authorities and the independent government under the Nazi occupation of Denmark, the relationship changed the Nazi officials' subjectivity, and they went as far as resisting "the measures they were ordered to carry out by the central agencies."<sup>44</sup> This is a typical example of the power of spontaneous and fluid relationality to construct and alter subjectivities.

### **Case Study 3: The Diplomatic Issue between Japan and South Korea over Sex Slaves in World War II**

It is well known among Asian IR scholars that the issue of the sexual slavery in the Second World War (also known as the 'Comfort Women' issue in Japan) has long been regarded as an impediment to South Korea–Japan diplomatic relations. The historical dispute is about understanding the Japanese

42 "Facing History and Ourselves, Denmark: A Nation Takes Action", Facinghistory.org, <https://www.facinghistory.org/holocaust-and-human-behavior/chapter-9/denmark-nation-takes-action> (Accessed 1 May 2019); Steven Borish, "Hal Koch, Grundtvig and the Rescue of the Danish Jews: A Case Study in the Democratic Mobilisation for Non-Violent Resistance", *Grundtvig Studier*, Vol. 60, No 1, 2009, p. 86-119.

43 Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem.

44 Ibid., p. 172-173.

imperial government's inhumane acts in the region before the Second World War, particularly in Korea and China. It is an issue of human rights, dignity, and pain of the victims of wartime sexual violence, although it is now largely regarded as a diplomatic one. This case study illuminates an example of failure to apply the teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism to the context of diplomatic relations.

The first time the issue of wartime sexual violence came to public attention in 1991, when three South Korean victims of the 'Comfort System' sued the Japanese government, asking for an apology and compensation. Although the issue started on the basis of individual compensation and demand for an official apology, it turned into a diplomatic issue and became the biggest impediment in the development and normalization of diplomatic relations between South Korea and Japan.<sup>45</sup>

Although this issue is often regarded as a question of the past, it is also a question of the present. This is because the demands of the victims of the "Comfort System" for individual compensation and formal apology were not welcomed by Japan's nationalist politicians and conservative intellectuals. Against these lingering uneasy diplomatic relations between the two nations, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo announced in 2015 that he would devote himself to "resolving" the issue and decided to dispatch Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio to South Korea for the resolution of the diplomatic obstacle.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, Kishida and Yun Byung-Se, his South Korean counterpart, announced that they had reached an "irreversible agreement" on 27 December 2015, which would presumably "settle" the dispute.<sup>47</sup> They celebrated the "historical" achievement in recent South Korea–Japan diplomatic relations, and the Japanese right-wing audience regarded the diplomatic agreement as the end of the story.

However, in this context, the voices of the victims of the "Comfort System" and the fact that they were demanding an apology and compensation, were largely disregarded. The victims' experiences were politicized and distorted into the state–state diplomacy, and their pain has never been regarded as being at the core of the issue. The Japanese government was exclusively concerned with what the South Korean government said and never paid sufficient attention to the voices of the victims, not to mention the fact that they never showed their interest in directly seeing and apologizing to the victims.

What is salient in the history of the "Comfort Women" issue is the continuous struggle over the legal and moral responsibility of the Japanese government, and the focal point is mainly brought upon political actors such as South Korean and Japanese governments as well as the supporting groups of the victims and right-wing activists in Japan. What has not received sufficient attention is, however, the variety of voices of the victims and the offenders or former Japanese soldiers. The picture of the issue has been showcased and frozen in time in the form of a state–state relations, and this composition has been structured in a confrontational form. In other words, the issue has largely been captured in the timeless binary opposition of Japan–South Korea; therefore, the form of the issue itself has been transformed to fit in the timeless structure of state sovereignty.

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45 Hirofumi Hayashi, *Nhongun "Ianfu" Mondai no Kakushin* [The Essence of Japanese Military "Comfort Women" Issue], Tokyo, Kadensha, 2015.

46 "Japan-South Korea Deal on 'Comfort Women' Draws Mixed Reaction", *Japan Times*, 25 December 2015, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/12/29/national/politics-diplomacy/japan-south-korea-deal-comfort-women-draws-mixed-reaction/> (Accessed 26 March 2021).

47 "Lack of Consultation with Victims Means 'Comfort Women' Deal Should not be Final: Support Group", *Japan Times*, 31 December 2015, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/12/31/national/politics-diplomacy/group-says-as-victims-were-not-consulted-comfort-women-deal-not-final/> (Accessed 26 March 2021).

In this way, this obvious human rights violation committed by Japanese imperialism was transformed into diplomatic relations, and the pain of the victims was overlooked in the discourse of national pride and interests. As explained above, Mahāyāna Buddhism focuses on the liberation of people from pain rather than solving tensions of politics or diplomacy. To achieve this purpose, Mahāyāna Buddhism substantiates the importance of the ‘present’ where new *engi* relationality takes place, and this leads us to dynamic changes. Rather than solving conflicts and confrontation through the logical reasoning of politicians and diplomats, it prompts the process of healing the pain of suffering through the relational approach. While this approach by no means omits the war responsibility of Japanese government that has been the target of feminist IR and the apology literature, and indeed I agree that it should be fulfilled, the Mahāyāna Buddhist approach will provide an opportunity for mutual understanding and reconciliation between the former assaulters and survivors.

In this sense, the remark made in February 2019 by Moon Hee-Sang, South Korea’s National Assembly Speaker, that Japan’s emperor should hold hands with women forced to work as forced sexual labor, could be comprehended as an attempt to promote new *engi* relations between the victims and the emperor, and this act could have eased the pain of the victims. However, his remark was met with a massive backlash from Japanese conservatives and failed to achieve the initial goal. Due to the severe criticism of Japanese conservatives and government, he was forced to apologize for what he had said.<sup>48</sup>

The rare chance to heal the pain of the victims through *engi* relationality was eventually drawn into the logic of state–state relations and melted into the epistemic violence of national pride and interests. Dynamic changes through the present and a new stage of diplomacy between the two nations could not materialize. However, Moon Hee-Sang’s proposition offered one possible methodology of reconciliation between the peoples of the two nations, and this is what Mahāyāna Buddhist IR is desperately promoting.

## Conclusion

This paper attempted to address the existing research vacuum of relational IR by applying *engi* relationality to the context of IR. By taking up case studies directly related to the question of state sovereignty and the emancipation of people, I tried to clarify; the Mahāyāna Buddhist idea of critical self-reflections ushers us to the question of whether the discourses of IR have caused suffering for the sake of state sovereignty and the world order; second, Mahāyāna Buddhism emphasizes its pragmatic orientation and this aspect appears to be immensely important in the question of ethics; third, what is important in the context of the application of Mahāyāna Buddhism to IR is its commitment to equality among people.

The three case studies in this paper illuminate how useful it is to focus on the *engi* relationality in understanding world affairs. It unveils the untold stories and hidden backgrounds of Okinawan people’s non-violent actions, Danish people’s miracle, and South Korea and Japan’s deadlock of diplomatic relations. It gives us an insight to comprehensively understand how relationality works in world affairs and ushers us to more humane IR.

48 “S.Korea Speaker Apologizes over Japan Emperor, Yonhap Says”, *China Daily*, 14 June 2019, <https://www.chinadailyhk.com/articles/112/192/115/1560493218295.html> (Accessed 12 December 2020).

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