

## Digital Commons @ CIIS

---

International Journal of Transpersonal Studies Advance Publication Archive


---

2023

### Zen and the Art of Doughnut Economics: When Limits are Strangely Liberating

Peter Doran

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/advance-archive>

 Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Medicine and Health Sciences Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

---

# Zen and the Art of Doughnut Economics: When Limits are Strangely Liberating

*Peter Doran*

Queen's University  
Belfast, Northern Ireland, UK

Kate Raworth's celebrated book, *Doughnut Economics: Seven ways to think like a 21st century economist*, calls for a reconciliation of our design principles for society and the economy with the rhythms and tolerances of ecological systems. It will demand something akin to a new axial revolution that will have to be experienced as much in the body and in the intimacies of a renewed care and appreciation for our relational and ecological selves as in the collective re-design of our societies, democratic decision-making and collective provisioning. Buddhist scholarship offers a distinctive contribution to this conversation invoked in a book that has sparked a global movement.

**Keywords:** *doughnut economics, Buddhism, growth, capitalism, limits, consumerism, Zen, contemplative, planetary boundaries, Kate Raworth*

In meditation we simply offer ourselves—all our attention-energy—to appreciating the moment in which we find ourselves. It is attending in the sense of vigilant caring—our most primordial mode of contribution... . Meditation can be seen, then, as an alternative technology—an alternative to our technological bias toward control. Meditation breaks down the cycle of our wanting. (Hershock 1999, p. 280)

Kate Raworth's "doughnut economics" (2018)—or economics for the 21<sup>st</sup> century—is predicated on much more than a wholesale policy shift. It will require a breakthrough in individual and collective mindsets, a breakthrough in the ceiling of our imagination that will create a clearing for the emergence of a new political economy or economies that encompass regenerative and redistributive practices *by design* and with deep intention. Raworth's "doughnut economics" (2018) takes its name from her iconic schematic, two concentric circles: the inner circle representing societal provisioning, including human rights and social justice, and an outer circle representing the planetary boundaries or ultimate ecological limits that have been exceeded in this era of the Anthropocene. The concentric circles depict the great challenge for human society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: to re-orient our collective organisation of economic, societal and democratic institutions—at all levels—to align with the outer limits of our Earth systems. They also point to a deep relationship between

the outer exhaustion of the Earth's tolerances for human societies' advanced industrialised models of production and consumption and an inner exhaustion of a dominant social imaginary in the image of global capitalism.

In the words of Cornélius Castoriadis, what is required is a new imaginary creation of a size unparalleled in the past, a creation that would put at the center of human life other significations than the expansion of production and consumption, that would lay down different objectives for life, one that might be recognized by human beings as worth pursuing. (Castoriadis 1996, p.143)

Castoriadis understood this change as a revolutionary challenge to the psycho-social structure of people in the Western world in particular, in their attitude toward life, in their imaginary, implying an abandonment of the capitalist imaginary with its pseudo-rational and pseudo-mastery of the world in pursuit of an impossible dream of infinite expansion. Alongside economic transformations this will demand deep democratic changes, including a de-

scaling of democratic power and the transformation of the modern state in favour of participative models of grassroots decision-making.

This article looks to a number of Buddhist-inspired authors to investigate the problematic at the heart of Raworth's (2019) call for "doughnut economics" – an adjustment of social provisioning and the protection of rights to align with the earth's living capacities to sustain human life, and an understanding of limits as a possible gateway to new understandings of liberation. In other words, we ask, "Can socio-ecological limits—viewed through the lens of Buddhist scholarship—become strangely liberating?"

In an era dominated by the "attention economy," in which oligarchic commercial actors have come to regard our "attention" and time as a scarce commodity, the new economy to which Raworth aspires will demand—among other things—a reversal of the colonization of our attention and imaginaries by the corporate imagineers of growth-led consumerism. Consumerism has become one of the most powerful and pervasive ideologies of our time. It is an ideology that is largely invisible in its algorithmically engineered effects because it is now deeply implicated in how modern subjects are constructed and have come to understand their pre-packed ways of being in the world. It is an ideology with which modern states have become deeply complicit, indeed often conflating their promise of welfare and national economic viability with measures of consumer confidence. The earth and the world in the image of Western lifestyles have been reduced to two dimensions under the rule of *having* over the plural possibilities of *being otherwise*.

### Attention Economy: Colonizing Souls

McGilchrist (2009, p. 28) was correct to point out that *attention* is not just another function alongside other cognitive functions. Indeed, he claimed, its ontological status is of something prior to functions and even to things, because the kind of attention we bring to the world *changes the nature of the world we attend to*, the very nature of the world in which those functions are carried out, and in which those "things" come to exist. He continued: "Attention changes what kind of a thing comes into being for us: in that way it changes the world" (p. 28).

In the far-reaching words of the pioneering ecological architect, William McDonough (2014), "design is the first signal of human intention" (*Newsweek*, Online Edition, June 5). It is into a world of mass attention-deficit that Raworth and a growing network of academic activists are making the case for a profound shift towards a mindful and intentional revolution in how we re-design our economies: regenerative by design (Wahl, 2016). Not a complete sentence Mindful because, in many ways, much of what has gone before has amounted to little more than a myriad of largely unplanned and uncoordinated incremental and fragmented public health experiments masquerading as industrial, technological, chemical, economic and financial innovation, though with one defining characteristic under the sign of capital: the accumulation of *power and control* by a progressively narrow band of beneficiaries that has been deployed to socialize the risks (so called "externalities") at the expense of our individual, social and planetary wellbeing. With origins in the regional Euro-modern project and imaginary, the growth-led project of Capital is irredeemably linked to the historical forces of colonialism and empire that afforded the European territories power to impose a world-system defined by unequal exchange for peoples and nature. Much of the subsequent regulatory attention committed to economy, ecology and finance has been compensatory and protective rather than the driver of system design in pursuit of collective human justice and ecological interests. Impossible visions of infinite growth have never been other than crude alibis for an infinite deferral of justice and equality for the global majority.

The logic of carbon-based neoliberal capitalism is the logic of modern power: the power of the few to enclose land, forests, bodies and labour (and latterly our attention and subjectivities) while concealing that logic by transferring responsibility to the many. One of the most powerful ideologies used to obscure patterns of global and national accumulation and systemic inequality is the ideology of "growth," an open-ended promise by governments who have simultaneously handed over the power to address inequality to the corporate architects of exclusion. Late-stage neoliberal forms of carbon-driven

capitalism are further empowered by attempts at the enclosure and colonization of the human imagination and emotion by forces of consumerism, advertising, celebrity culture and the manufacture of our consent engineered through the use of neuro-algorithms and a plethora of therapeutic industries, including the “McMindfulness” industry (Purser, 2019).

Consumerism is more than a set of material practices at the end of a capitalist value chain: the infrastructures of consumerism—including Hollywood, largeswathes of the traditional media and social media platforms and gaming industries—are the factories of dreams and pacification. Consumerism is the bearer of a modern and colonial ontology, a way of being-in-the-world for modern subjects and objects, a legacy of a troubled and troubling relationship with modernity and its temporalities. As such, our debates about transforming economics are also debates about contested meaning itself. As Ray Scranton has usefully observed in his *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of Civilization* (2015, p. 26), the systems that structure our political desires and constrain our political will have a material history. As the human animal developed increasingly complex social technologies for producing power, from hunting bands tracking migrating herds of giant elk and mastodons to agricultural empires harvesting grain to fossil-fuel-burning global capitalism,

we also developed increasingly complex technologies of collective life. As our technologies of producing power changed, so did our technologies for distributing and controlling it. Today, global power is in the hands of a tiny minority, and the system they preside over threatens to destroy us all...Progressivist belief in the infinite perfectibility of the human animal depends significantly on carbon-fuelled capitalism’s promise of infinite economic growth. Accepting our limits means coming to terms with our innate violence and our inescapable mortality. (Scranton, 2015, p. 26)

### **Kate Raworth’s Doughnut Economics**

Raworth’s (2019) concentric circles that constitute her heuristic “doughnut” economics illustrate two sets of nested boundaries: social (inner

circle) and planetary (outer circle). The Raworth thesis is that humanity’s task for the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to find the middle way: a newly articulated economic design for a shared prosperity path for humanity and all life forms that is compatible with the sustainability and regeneration of the social and ecological boundaries that make life possible for all in dignity, approximated by the United Nations’s seventeen Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2030 (UN DESA, 2015). Raworth (2019, pp. 10–15) advocates seven design principles for a new economy based on meeting our social needs and human rights within the parameters determined by thresholds defined Johan Rockström’s (Rockstrom et al. 2009) nine planetary boundaries<sup>1</sup>. The design principles are:

- i. Change the goal: shifting the chief measurement of national economic success from Gross Domestic Product to the “doughnut,” i.e., framing all economic and social needs with reference to planetary boundaries, including climate change and the capacity of biodiversity to regenerate.
- ii. See the big picture: embedding economic thinking and markets within the purposes and requirements of society.
- iii. Nurture human nature: Re-envision and cultivate “rational economic man” as a socially adaptable human being.
- iv. Get savvy with systems: Shift the dominant metaphor for societal design from one of mechanical equilibrium to one of dynamic complexity.
- v. Design to distribute: Abandon the growth alibi for inequality and replace it with a deliberative design principle that is fundamentally distributive.
- vi. Create to regenerate: Abandon the claim that economic growth will act as a cure-all and the means to address environmental externalities, and replace with a regenerative-by-design intention.
- vii. Be agnostic about growth: de-centre societies’ growth-addiction and adopt a

form of growth agnosticism that places concepts such as wellbeing, democratic deliberation and human rights at the heart of economic policy design. (Raworth, 2019, p. 28)

Raworth is invoking more than a schematic representation of the need to bring societal design within the “planetary boundaries,” a concept involving Earth system processes proposed in 2009 by a group of scientists led by Johan Rockström from the Stockholm Resilience Centre and Will Steffen from the Australian National University (Rockström et al., 2009).

Raworth’s (2019, p. 28) visual framing appeals to a much more nuanced and profound idea that has echoes in many of the world’s most ancient wisdom traditions: a restoration of a delicate dynamic balance between human life (and the principles for the design and organisation of our collective systems of societal reproduction) and the safe ecological space where we must not only encounter conventional limits but enter into an intimate dance of *identification, care and self-regulation* to ensure that human societies are embedded within the logics of regeneration: the fundamental capacities and rhythms that define the ability of nature to flourish. The harmony and wellbeing of human life—both individual and collective—and nature are indivisible and ontologically interdependent, and will ultimately be mediated by a deep democratic culture constructed around an ethos of self-limitation. The Anthropocene era, in which human societies have come to dominate and determine the fate of nature and our living planetary systems, points to a system error in our dominant economic, societal and governance logics and design that must now be addressed. The system error represents a civilizational breach—driven by the logic of Capital—in the spatial and temporal domains: cultures of excess that have no truck with notions of “enough” and “sufficiency” have taken root and been disseminated globally in the image of what was always an essentially regional experience of *the possible*, an experience of power and unsustainable development enabled by the privileged experience of metropolitan capitals and drivers of colonialism,

where the powers of accumulation have been put to the service of systematic exclusion and its concomitant design commitments that are deeply encoded for inequality. This system—which has given rise to our economies of waste, exclusion and hyper-consumerism—has been enabled by patterns of uneven development and a global (state-centric) security paradigm that reproduces profound patterns of ecological insecurity and unequal exchange, registered as so-called externalities (that are only possible by virtue of embedded corporate and regional power imbalances), guaranteed by obscene distributions of spending on a global military-industrial complex and its homologous ideological and attention economy infrastructures.

A reconciliation of our design principles for society and the economy with the rhythms and tolerances of ecological systems will demand something akin to a new axial revolution or revolutions: these will have to be experienced as much in the body and in the intimacies of a renewed care and appreciation for our relational and ecological selves as in the collective re-design of our societies, democratic decision-making and collective provisioning.

The middle way set out by Raworth is a manifesto built on the insight that the defining dance of civilizational fate that we have designated *The Anthropocene* is a dance that aligns the liberation of humanity and nature with the embrace of limits: sufficiency.

In his eulogy for a “carbon-fuelled capitalism,” Scranton (2015, p. 23) described the system that we must undo—an undoing that poses existential questions for our dominant civilization and our ethical lives—as a “zombie system” and an aggressive “one world” human monoculture that has proven astoundingly virulent, toxic and cannibalistic:

Humanity’s survival through the collapse of carbon-fuelled capitalism and into the new world of the Anthropocene will hinge on our ability to let our old way of life die while protecting, sustaining, and reworking our collective stories of cultural technology. After all, our capacities to innovate and adapt depend on our being able to draw from our immense heritage of intellectual

production, living and dead, exotic and close at hand...(Scranton, 2015, pp. 23–24)

Citing the world's deposit of ancient and living wisdom traditions, Scranton suggested that the "truly marvellous achievement" of liberal multicultural tolerance must now yield—if we are to escape the death-throes of carbon capitalism and embrace the Anthropocene—to an acceptance of human limits and transience as fundamental truths (Scranton 2015, p. 24). He added:

Learning to die as an individual means letting go of our predispositions and fear. Learning to die as a civilization means letting go of this particular way of life and its ideas of freedom, success, and progress. These two ways of learning to die come together in the role of the humanist thinker: the one who is willing to stop and ask troublesome questions, the one who is willing to interrupt, the one who resonates on other channels and with slower, deeper rhythms. (Scranton, 2015, p. 24)

### The Temporality of Consumerism

A feature of the dominant economic narrative of capitalism is a disruption of both our capacity for attention and, relatedly, our sense of living purposefully and collectively *in time*. Time, finitude and attention are largely absent from Raworth's analysis and from a good deal of the literature on calls for a new economy dedicated to flourishing within the planetary boundaries.

In his remarkable *The Scent of Time* (2017), Byung-Chul Han drew on the work of Nietzsche and Heidegger to reflect on the importance of a "temporal tension" that can remove the experience of the present from its passing without end or direction and which infuses our experience of time with meaningfulness:

The right time, or the right moment, only arises out of the temporal tension within a time that has a direction. In atomized time, by contrast, all temporal points are alike. Nothing distinguishes one point in time from another. The decay of time disperses dying into perishing. Death puts

an end to life, life as a directionless sequence of present moments, and it does so in non-time. This is the reason why dying is particularly difficult today. (Han, 2017, p. 3)

Han (2017) has associated the "decay of time" with the rise of mass society and increasing uniformity, a uniformity in deep disguise behind the representation of living diversity as consumerist variety (Hershock, 2012).

In a reflection that brings together insights that touch on wellbeing, our understanding of the realm of the economy (and labour), a lost notion of authentic freedom, and learning to live and die well in the Anthropocene, Han (2017, pp. 85–114) offered a profound series of reflections on the value of restoring our appreciation of the *Vita Contemplativa* or contemplative life.

For Han, the relationship between rest (*scholē*) and non-rest (*ascolia*) has been reversed (2017, p. 98); rest is now a time of instrumentalized recreation or relaxation that is necessary for the sake of work. We can observe this absorption in the wellbeing debate and even in the co-option of practices such as mindfulness, in which the concepts are co-opted and instrumentalized in pursuit of enhancing the performance and efficiency of productive *human capital*, in the service of capital per se. Wellbeing and mindfulness are absorbed into an understanding dominated by work and productivism and are valued only insofar as they add to the productive output of the macro-economy. This is only one example of the ways in which the logics and operations of capital absorb their potential counter-logics and re-present (package) them as counterfeit forms of compensation: it is in this sense that the neopolitics of neoliberalism recognize and at once pacify the intrinsic subversive potential of mindfulness in the context of critical self-formation and social practice.

As Han noted, the ancients' notion of *leisure* is inaccessible and even unintelligible to moderns because we live in a world that is absorbed by work, efficiency and productivity (2017). Leisure, for Aristotle, being *scholē*, was conceived outside of work and outside of inactivity (mere rest that punctuates labour time). It is more than "relaxation"

or “switching off.” Rather, leisure, in Augustine’s eyes, required a special ability and specific formation or education (Han, 2017, p.87). Augustine’s understanding of leisure (*otium*) refers to the chance for the pursuit of truth, an active, restful alertness that predisposes the individual for the pursuit of truth, a lingering that presupposes a “gathering of the senses” (Han, 2017, p. 87).

Han traced (2017, p. 88) the eclipse of this understanding of the *vita contemplativa* from a period in the Middle Ages, when the *vita activa* was imbued by the *vita contemplativa*, through to the Reformation when work began to acquire an importance beyond fulfilling meeting the necessities of life and “the economy of time and that of salvation intermingled” (Han, 2017, p. 89). For Han (p. 90) the process of secularization did not lead to the disappearance of the economy of salvation:

The compulsion towards accumulation is based on a striving toward salvation. The latter is still alive in modern capitalism. Material greed alone does not explain the focus on the acquisition of money, which appears almost irrational. The compulsion towards accumulation is based on a striving towards salvation. The latter’s content can take diverse forms. Apart from the desire to have infinitely more time at one’s disposal than one’s limited lifetime through the endless amassing of money as congealed time, the urge towards accumulation is also produced by the striving for power. (pp. 90–91)

Han argued that “with the process of industrialization as mechanization, human temporality approaches the temporality of machines. The industrial dispositif is an imperative of temporal efficiency that has the task of forming the human being according to the timing of the machine,” and life dominated by work is a *vita activa* “entirely cut off from the *vita contemplativa*” (Han, 2017, p. 92). And as the human being loses all capacity for contemplation, it degenerates into an *animal laborans*. (pp. 91–92)

For Han (2017, p. 92), our society of consumerism and leisure is characterized by a particular temporality: surplus time, the result of a massive increase in productivity, filled with events

and experiences that are felt and short-lived. It is a temporality in which “nothing binds time in a lasting fashion” so the impression is created that “time is passing very quickly, or that everything is accelerating” (Han, 2017, pp. 92–93). For Han, consumption and *time as duration* contradict each other, and this explains the key value placed on the velocity rather than utility of the things and services produced. Consumer goods do not last (by design):

They are marked by decay as their constitutive element, and the cycles of appearance and decay become ever shorter. The capitalist imperative of growth means that things are produced and consumed with increasing speed...In the consumer society, one forgets how to linger. Consumer goods do not permit a contemplative lingering. They are used up as quickly as possible in order to create space for new products and needs. Contemplative lingering presupposes things which endure. But the compulsion to consume does away with duration. (Han, 2018, p. 93)

Moreover, Han (2017, p. 93) drew an important distinction between mere deceleration and the characteristics of the *vita contemplativa*. He pointed out that a reduction in speed does not by itself transform the *being* of things. The “real problem is that all that endures, all that lasts and is slow, threatens to disappear altogether, or to be absent from life” (2017, p. 93). In stark contrast, forms of the *vita contemplativa* are also “modes of being,” such as “hesitancy,” “releasement,” “shyness,” “waiting” and “restraint” (p.93) These latter characteristics all rest on an experience of duration. This is in contrast to the “time of work,” which is without duration but “consumes time for production” (p.93) That which lasts and is slow evades being used up and consumed: it founds duration, and entails a practice of duration.... “interrupting the *time of work*.” In meditation, the beginner who reports boredom is invited to investigate and deepen the inquiry, and not avoid such feelings; meditation and the *vita contemplativa* navigate the experience of the temporal, inviting the practitioner into a liberating experience of time that approximates the dance of

improvisation and restored intimacy with all that is co-arising (including that which the experience of boredom reveals about our orientation to time and being).

For Han (2018, pp. 93–94), the franticness and restlessness of modern life has a lot to do with the loss of the contemplative faculty. The totalization of the world of work, including the *vita activa*, contributes to this loss of a vital dimension of human experience. Contemplative “lingering interrupts the time which is labour” (2017, p. 111). The *vita contemplativa* elevates time itself: “A *vita contemplativa* without acting is blind, a *vita activa* without contemplation is empty” (p. 112).

Drawing from Heidegger’s (1977) essay on “Science and Reflection”), Han came very close to an observation common in Zen teaching, about the value of the cultivation of a certain spaciousness that permits the meditator to watch the process of thinking emerge (2017, p.113). Han noted:

Only reflection has access to what is not an image, not an idea, but provides the place in which they may appear. In its ‘surrender to that which is worthy of questioning’ it opens itself up to what is slow and takes long, and what evades any quick capture. Reflection widens its gaze by raising it above the present-at and ready-to-hand with which labour is concerned. Where the hand stops in the act of capturing, where it hesitates, it acquires a vastness. (p. 112)

Only with the hesitating “step back” of pausing can “stillness” be heard which shuts itself off to the linear progress of the labouring process. Contemplative lingering is also linked to the practice of gentleness or friendliness (*schonend*). For Han, it

lets happen, come to pass, and agrees instead of intervening. Active life without any contemplative dimension is incapable of friendly gentleness. It finds expression in accelerated production and destruction. It uses up time...Contemplative lingering gives time. It widens that being that is more than being-active. When life regains its capacity for contemplation, it gains in time and space, in duration and vastness. (Han 2017, p. 113)

The caution here is that if all contemplative elements are driven out of life, it ends in a deadly hyper-activity. The human being risks suffocating among its own doings. Han ponders, “perhaps the mind itself owes its emergence to an excess of time, an *otium*, even to a slowness of breath” (2017, p.113). For Thich Nhat Hanh (2015) too the mindful breath is a moment of deep identification with all that is life-giving, bringing us into loving touch with the earth as inter-being; in touch with the co-emergence of the birth of each breath and life-in-process. In our absorption in the time of labour, immersed in the logic of capital, something essential escapes, and an intimate dance with impermanence is replaced with a frantic series of compensatory investments in congealed time, in a passing series of objects that are required to relentlessly re-create the delusion of fixity and discrete identifications with self. Paradoxically, as Thich Nhat Hanh has observed in the context of climate change (2015), even at the level of our Western civilization, we must embrace impermanence and accept that this civilization will be destroyed much sooner than we think. The earth may need millions of years to be restored while humans disappear. He added,

Once we can accept the impermanence of our civilization with peace, we will be liberated from our fear. Only then will we have the strength, awakening and love we need to bring us together. Cherishing our precious Earth – falling in love with the Earth – is not an obligation. It is a matter of personal and collective happiness and survival. (Nhat Hanh, 2015)

While Raworth’s cite work on doughnut economics foregrounds question of design, the outstanding question of intention and departure points remains under-stated. Han cite and Nhat-Hanh cite call to mind the deep colonization of the Western subject by the material and attentional infrastructure of capital, our compromised relationship with time and our orientation to being in the world. Without such considerations, we risk framing our responses to calls for re-framing dominant economic narratives within the enclosures of a civilization bereft of capacities not only to slow down but to re-evaluate our relation to time itself.



### Zen: Ensō

As Raworth observed in her *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think like a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Economist* (2017), the concentric circles of her “doughnut” graphic have chimed in a world-in-search of a new metaphor: one that can help guide us out of a linear image of economic progression and into an appreciation of “dynamic balance.”

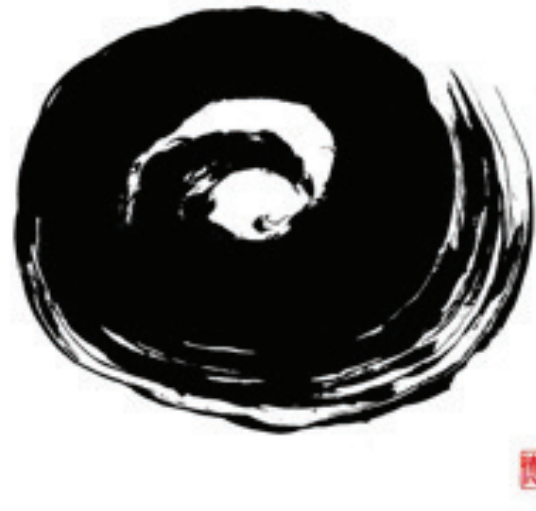
Raworth (2019) was conscious of the power of her use of the concentric circles as a “visual frame” as it appeals to a primordial insight into the nature and value of acknowledging a universal principle that lies behind all living systems. The resonance is as recent as calls by Barbara Ward (1972) for global action to tackle both the “inner limits” of human needs and rights and the “outer limits” of the environmental stress that the Earth can endure, and as ancient as the wisdom traditions and iconography of many parts of the world.

One of the ancient symbols invoked by Raworth’s visual framing of the concentric circles is the painted Ensō circle (Figure 1), a sacred symbol in the Zen school of Buddhism and one of the most common subjects of Japanese calligraphy. The two Japanese Kanji symbols that make up the word Ensō can be translated as “Mutual Circle” or “Circle of Togetherness.” Its symbolism refers to emptiness or fullness, presence of absence. It can symbolize the perfect meditative state, strength, the universe, single mindedness, and the state of mind of the artist at the moment of creation and the acceptance of the imperfect as perfection.

Under the powerful sway of Western modernity much of the world has been transformed into a legible surface, in a kind of false arrest. The new *objects* of the “State”, the “economy”, and the modern all-consuming “subject” cannot exhaust *the real*, but we are confronting the very real prospect that the ultimate “ground plan” (Heidegger, 1977) of consumer-led development now threatens to exhaust the complex ecosystems on which it has been imposed in a violent assault on being. The unprecedented global risk presented by climate change and the wider ecological crises captured in the work of Rockström and his team (Rockström et al., 2009) recalls Michel Foucault’s (1987) warning

that modernity stands at a threshold where the life of the species is now wagered on its own political strategies. The threshold signals not only a unique level of risk but also a challenge to investigate the individual and collective consequences of a decision to buy into a self-imposed closure of a privileged “world-view-as-destiny” associated with a socio-economic model of development defined in the image of the West (Latouche, 1996; Swazo, 1984). Foucault’s observation about our arrival at the threshold is a challenge—above all—to participate in a critical reworking of the unconscious crisis of modernity itself.

Michael Zimmerman (1990) appealed to Zen Buddhism in his search for an explanation of Martin Heidegger’s (1977, *The Question Concerning Technology*) understanding of the path that may



**Fig. 1.** Zen Ensō painted by Peter Culter.

Used with the artist’s permission (see <http://zenbrushgallery.com>)

lead us out of the enclosed spaces of Western modernity via a restored mindfulness. Comparing the contemporary world condition to a Zen koan that must be studied, Zimmerman explained that Heidegger’s account of the person “released” from the “claim” of *Gestell* is reminiscent of what meditation teachers and philosophers have described as an enlightened person: someone no longer driven by the compulsion to control and master. Heidegger used the word *Gestell* to

conjure up the image of the forced technological disclosure of all things under the sway of instrumental rationality. Informed by *being-as-technology*, people force nature to conform to their subjective needs and expectations. Whenever nature proves unsatisfactory for human purposes, people are invited to reframe it as they see fit. Heidegger (1977) saw that this drive towards a technological reframing inevitably compels entities to be revealed in inappropriate ways. These transgressions have begun to rebound in a multitude of environmental crises as the limits of natural systems have been overwhelmed in a tide of human-driven technological hubris concealed by a corporate-sponsored ego-centric forgetfulness that the world it (the ego) encounters is but one possibility among many forced disclosures. The world under the sway of Western modernity has been placed under a false arrest.

Zimmerman (1990) finds in the work of Heidegger a courageous affirmation of mortality and finitude as necessary for letting entities be, a form of meditative thinking—or coming to terms with impermanence—as the condition for the cultivation of a capacity for living a resistance to the totalising compulsion for a transparent and fully legible world where we meet only reflections of ourselves and our all-consuming dreams of control.

### Control

Peter Hershock (1999, p. 105) has applied his considerable scholarship on the Chan Buddhist tradition and thought to the pressing question of how our preferred technologies affect the structure of our awareness and the manner of community or life together. He offered the Buddhist “middle way” as an ethics of resistance to the colonization of consciousness and as a source of concepts for the evaluation of the extent or our complicity in what he described as the market-driven canonization of ignorance. Hershock has identified “control” as the key strategic value that has informed the explosion of technological development that began in the European West and has spread globally from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards. He specified that what we refer to generically as “technology” is actually a particular family or lineage of technologies that has arisen and been sustained through a complex of political,

social, economic, and cultural forces focused on the value of *exerting control over our circumstances to enhance felt independence*: “Technologies biased toward control have made possible and practical the institutionalization of previously unimaginable freedoms of choice” (2006, p. 90) but with a cost.

From the Buddhist perspective outlined by Hershock (2006, p. 90), however, intentions to control our circumstances and enhance felt independence can be seen as a crucial nexus of conditions for suffering that the Buddha gathered under the so-called conceit that “I am.” In other words, to the extent that I insist upon *being independent*—or *being dependent*—I forcibly ignore my interdependent origin among all other things. In effect, the individual establishes a horizon of relevance inside of which is an experience of “me” and beyond which everything else is explicitly “not-me” (2006, p. 90).

Central to Hershock’s (2006) thesis here is the observation that although we remain related to others and to our environment, the prevalence of control fosters a dichotomous perspective on that relationship—a splitting into the objective and subjective—that then facilitates treating our relations with others as either actually or potentially instrumental. This is a particularly important observation when it comes to understanding how we are invited by communications and media technologies to dispose our attention:

No longer intimately continuous with all things—that is, related internally—gaps open in what I can attend to or hold in careful awareness. By ignoring what intimately connects who “I am” with what “I am not,” I render myself liable to being blindsided—subject to accidental or fateful events of the sort that cause the experience of trouble or suffering. Asserting independence through exercising technologically mediated control almost paradoxically renders us subject to new vulnerabilities (Hershock, 2006, pp. 90–91).

The Middle Way as taught by the Buddha is a way of balance, based on instructions to eschew the extremes of asceticism and the pursuit of pleasure. Given the responsibility assumed by the individual

in Buddhist teachings, the technologies designed to address forms of suffering in all its guises are what Hershock described as “social technologies rooted in the training of awareness, the perfecting of attention” (1999, p. 111). He continued:

Instead of stressing increased control over our circumstances, Buddhist technology has aimed at opening up our capacity for improvising with and appreciatively contributing to those very circumstances. Rather than focusing on explicitly altering our situation, techniques like sitting meditation, the use of mantra, bowing, and guided visualization are part of a system for reconfiguring the value complexes that implicitly condition the topography of our experience. (p. 112)

In contrast with an all too typical response to trouble—whether in private or public life—where we are likely to do more of what we have already done to effect ever greater control (new laws, more tools, institutions), new investments in techno-optimistic solutions to the climate emergency, the ideal Buddhist practitioner aspires to cultivate unlimited capacity for “skill-in-means” (*upāya*). Such a person is able to improvise with any situation to orient it (with a minimum expenditure of force or energy) away from false arrest, forced disclosure, blockage, stalemate, rigidity, and frustration and toward freedom, harmony, flexibility and joy. Rather than forcing the situation to change, the practitioner cultivates an ability to appreciate the unique qualities of a situation and draw them out in an appropriate direction. The Chan tradition has adopted the Taoist term *wu-wei* to connote this disposition: “conduct without precedent,” referring to a capacity of spontaneous conduct or virtuosic improvisation that removes blockages to the natural course of things (*tao*). Hershock (1999, p. 114) explained that in both Chan and in the Taoist traditions, *wu-wei* refers to something slightly more subtle than improvisation: it is associated with the free circulation of energy—that is, with a situation in which we need not control a thing because all things are able to take care of themselves. Unlike Western notions of order—predicated on universal, eternal laws and regularity—the Chinese cosmos pivots on the irruption of the unexpected.

From the Buddhist perspective, exerting control and amassing power to effect change has severe limitations. The more we are likely to bring principles of design that lie at the root of our predicament to bear on the symptoms, the more we are at risk of creating conditions for a new cycle of unanticipated consequences, driven by the hubris of control. The more power we amass, the less freely energy circulates, the less we allow things take care of themselves, the more we are obligated to act on them, and so on in an endless spiralling that effectively seals us off from simply “according with the situation, responding as needed” (Hershock 1999, p. 115). With such strategies we will ultimately only succeed in crossing a series of thresholds of utility (ultimately at the expense of the wider system of planetary sustainability at thresholds capable of maintaining the conditions for human life in the image of Capital).

Instead of concentrating on building a perfectly predictable or orderly world, Buddhist technology, according to Hershock (1999, p. 115), emphasizes training ourselves to creatively appreciate—literally impart value to—whatever is present. It is concerned not with “things” or “situations,” but with the direction in which our narration is moving. This means opening up an unprecedented path between any present trouble and the harmonious interpenetration of all things:

Instead of freedom being identified with an absence of restrictions on our ability to choose this or that, Buddhist freedom is understood in terms of virtuosity *as such*—virtuosity in the art of contributing. (Hershock, 1999, pp. 115–116)

For Hershock (1999), relinquishing our obsession with objective control and practicing instead the art of seeing things as enlightening and worthy of limitless appreciation directly orients us away from a world of “things” toward the originally ambiguous narration of which they are but conceptual, emotional, or perceptual abstractions. In Buddhism, things are what they *are* only because our attention has circumscribed them and established at least relatively fixed horizons for their definition. Shifting our attention by relinquishing these horizons is thus our most immediate way of

releasing the energy bound up in form. Practicing emptiness—relinquishing our horizons for what is admitted as relevant—is liberating not because we get anything, but because we are removing blockages to the spontaneous and creative circulation of energy by freeing attention from its customs, habits, and obsessions. And, remember that these customs, habits and obsessions are now carefully cultivated by the infrastructures of the “attention economy” calibrated in an infinite series of algorithmic calculations that increasingly colonize and instrumentalize our so called leisure time (p. 130).

Freeing all beings, Hershock (1999, p. 131) added, means releasing them from the boundary conditions imposed on them by our current and dominant values.

The Buddhist technology of meditation training attention is steadily directed away from the habits of thought, speech, feeling, and deed that normally maintain the identity or fixed horizons of our egos. Robbed of their normal diet of physical and psychic energy, these habitual systems naturally atrophy, freeing up energy for both deepening the meditative training and realizing new levels of improvisation in conduct. Skilled meditation is not a process of controlling attention but arises as the unreserved offering or contribution of our attention to the liberating movement of a present and shared narration. Hershock explained:

In meditation we simply offer ourselves – all our attention-energy—to appreciating the moment in which we find ourselves. It is attending in the sense of vigilant caring—our most primordial mode of contribution...Meditation can be seen, then, as an alternative technology—an alternative to our technological bias toward control. Meditation breaks down the cycle of our wanting. (1999, p. 280)

Meditative technologies and the associated teachings can only form *part* of a collective and systemic transformation of consumer capitalism. They can, nevertheless, provide a first moment of insight and opposition and help to identify the nature of consumerism as a central feature of capital-as-power.

## Conclusion

The Anthropocene summons a potentially liberating encounter with limits—defining “sign of our times” limits that are at once ecological and limits that suggest an imperative to embrace new forms of liberated awareness: a mutual cultivation of critical awareness and deep mind/body practice. The relation-to-the body/mind is the first gateway to wilderness and wilding; it is also our first encounter with (bio) power, power that positively inscribes the subject. It is therefore where we can first cultivate resistance by engaging with affective power, knowledge and the wisdom of our individual and collective dispositions-to-the-world as more-than-commons.

One of the most intriguing questions the modern citizen faces in this new age of limits—an age in which it appears that the anticipated exhaustion of resources and pollution sinks is matched by the psychic exhaustion of what was once a globalising political imaginary with universalising ambition, culminating in an age of sovereign consumers demanding the West of all possible worlds—is the ageless question of freedom. On the meaning of freedom signalled by the rise of the ecological movement, Eckersley (1992) once suggested that the new project entails much more than a simple reassertion of the modern emancipatory ideal of human autonomy or self-determination. It also calls for a re-evaluation of the foundations of, and the conditions for, human autonomy or self-determination in Western political thought (p.18).

Everything depends not so much upon the establishment that limits to economic growth do exist but upon whether humans regard such limits as a bitter disappointment.

## References

- Castoriadis, C. (1996). *The imaginary institution of society*. Polity Press.
- Eckersley, R. (1992). *Environmentalism and political theory*. State University of New York Press.
- Foucault, M. (1987). *The history of sexuality*, Vol. 1. Penguin Books.
- Han, B.-C. (2017). *The scent of time: A philosophical wssay on the art of lingering*. Polity.

- Han, B.-C. (2018). *The expulsion of the other*. Polity.
- Heidegger, M. (1977). *The question concerning technology and other essays* (William Lovitt, Trans.). Garland.
- Hershock, P. (2006). *Buddhism in the public sphere: Reorienting global interdependence*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203970126>
- Hershock, P. (2012). *Valuing diversity: Buddhist Reflection on realizing a more equitable global future*. State University of New York Press. <https://doi.org/10.1353/book21406>
- Hershock, P. (1999). *Reinventing the wheel: A Buddhist response to the information age*. State University of New York Press.
- Jackson, T. (2017). *Prosperity without growth: Foundations for the economy of tomorrow*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315677453>
- Latouche, S. (1996). *The Westernization of the world*. Polity.
- McDonough, W., & Zachariasse, C. (2014, June 5). Building for a better world and making people smile. *Newsweek*, n.p. <https://mcdonough.com/writings/building-better-world-making-people-smile>
- McGilchrist, L. (2009). *The master and the emissary: The divided brain and the making of the Western world*. Yale University Press.
- Nhat-Hanh, T. (2015). Thich Nhat-Hanh's statement on climate change for the United Nations. <https://plumvillage.org/about/thich-nhat-hanh/letters/thich-nhat-hanh-statement-on-climate-change-for-unfccc>
- Purser, R. (2019). *McMindfulness: How mindfulness became the new capitalist spirituality*. Repeater Books.
- Rockström, J., Steffen, W., Noone, K., Persson, Å., Chapin, III, F. S., Lambin, E., Lenton, T. M., Scheffer, M., Folke, C., Schnellhuber, H. J., Nykvist, B., de Wit, C. A., Hughes, T., van der Leeuw, S., Rodhe, H., Sörlin, S., Snyder, P. K., Costanza, R., Svedin, U. ... Foley, J. (2009). Planetary boundaries: Exploring the safe operating space for humanity. *Ecology and Society*, 14(2), 32. <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-03180-140232>
- Raworth, K. (2019). *Doughnut economics: Seven ways to think like a 21<sup>st</sup> century economist*. Random House Business.
- Scranton, R. (2015). *Learning to die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the end of a civilization*. City Lights Open Media.
- Swazo, N. (1984). The ontological meaning of the world order movement. *Alternatives: Journal of Social Transformation and Humane Governance*, 10(2), 267–296. <https://doi.org/10.1177/030437548401000204>
- United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2015). Sustainable development goals and agenda 30. [www.sdgs.un.org/goals](http://www.sdgs.un.org/goals)
- Wahl, C. D. (2016) *Designing regenerative cultures*. Triarchy Press.
- Ward, B. (1972) *Only one Earth: The care and maintenance of a small planet*. W. W. Norton.
- Zimmerman, M. (1990). *Hedeigger's confrontation with modernity: Technology, art, politics*. Indiana State University Press.

### About the Author

**Peter Doran, PhD**, is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Law at The Queens University Belfast, Northern Ireland. He is also a senior editor/writer with the IISD's Earth Negotiations Bulletin at UN negotiations on environment and development. He is the author of *A Political Economy of Attention, Mindfulness and Consumerism: reclaiming the mindful commons* (Routledge, 2017). He is a founding member of Ireland's Wellbeing Economy Alliance and the Environmental Justice Network Ireland, with research histories at the parliaments in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

### About the Journal

The *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* is a Scopus listed peer-reviewed academic journal, and the largest and most accessible scholarly periodical in the transpersonal field. IJTS has been in print since 1981, is published by Floragrades Foundation, sponsored in part by Attention Strategies Institute, and serves as the official publication of the International Transpersonal Association. The journal is available online at [www.transpersonalstudies.org](http://www.transpersonalstudies.org), and in print through [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com) (search for IJTS).