

Transformative Nonattachment: Unraveling the Prison of Perfection in the Neoliberal Academy

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This essay reflects on how the prevailing neoliberal logic in academia induces faculty to live in a self-imposed prison of perfection that is detrimental to their holistic wellbeing. Drawing on the Buddhist concept of nonattachment, I use the term transformative nonattachment to advocate for a contemplative political intervention to unravel this prison of perfection in the neoliberal academy. This intervention adopts a two-pronged approach, working both from the inside out (i.e., working on our bodyminds to effect change in the external world) and from the outside in (i.e., working on the external world to generate effects on everyone's bodyminds).

Over the last two decades, there has been a proliferation of critical literature and discussion on how neoliberalism is creeping into and turning the university into a corporate enterprise (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Seal, 2018; Wolfson & Taylor, 2020). As David Harvey defines it, neoliberalism is “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2005, p. 2). In the realm of higher education, neoliberalism has entailed massive disinvestment in higher education at both the state and federal levels that compels the university to recalibrate its financial strategy and operational orientation by adopting a growth-driven model (Wolfson & Taylor, 2020). To be sure, operating in a public institutional environment with dwindling state support, pursuing growth seems an essential strat-

egy for the university to accommodate equal access, promote inclusive hiring and enrollment, and explore nontraditional programming. At the same time, these key educational benefits have come at the cost of the commercialization and privatization of education as a public and common good. This is reflected in a series of revenue-driven policies and directions in higher education such as the ever-rising college tuition; repackaging education and degrees as marketable commodities in the global knowledge economy and career marketplace; pursuing private funding revenues in forms of gifts and endowments; and growing the contingent labor force of the precarious adjunct faculty while shrinking the stable tenure-track faculty positions.

When it comes to teaching and instruction, it is also palpable that universities have increasingly become one-dimensional “credential mills” that serve corporate interests while disregarding/deemphasizing the actual quality and substance of undergraduate learning from a holistic vantage point. This holistic learning encompasses not only traditional analytic and independent critical thinking (e.g., Cote & Allaha, 2007; Arum & Roksa, 2011) but also the transformation of classroom into a dynamic space “where teaching and learning can nurture [genuine and authentic] ‘creativity and spontaneity’” (Shahjahan, 2015, p. 498). Such spontaneous authentic interaction engages not only students’ minds but also their hearts—a pedagogical engagement that is irreducible to quantified, neoliberal metrics of student learning achievements/outcomes (Beer, 2016). In short, what Shelia Slaughter and Gary Rhoades (2004) identify as the state of academic capitalism has become the *modus operandi* of the neoliberal academy, and well-meaning administrators, educators, and students operating in higher education constantly face the tormenting dilemma between personal values and expediency.

Importantly, academic capitalism and its embedded market logic and rationality are affecting the psyches of students and faculty by constantly provoking feelings of “anxiety, shame and uncertainty” (Beer, 2016), compelling them to study harder and work harder without end to continuously improve and fit themselves into the ideal mold of productive workers valorized by neoliberalism. For students, neoliberal

ideology induces them to embrace “individual responsibility, entrepreneurship, and self-management”; see their peers “as competitors rather than collaborators ... [in a] rat race ... to outcompete and devour one another in grades, extracurriculars, and volunteering”; use every opportunity to improve themselves so they can get into the door of profitable, elite careers as “doctors, lawyers, politicians, engineers, and entrepreneurs”; feel guilty about resting and “not working hard enough, ... falling behind while everyone else is getting ahead” (Yang, 2019). For faculty, the neoliberal logic compels them to reorient and rebrand themselves as academic entrepreneurs who need to demonstrate their marketable values by seeking to perfect their tools of the trade in research, teaching, and service (or construct an appearance for the development of such perfection) in ways that will promote their greater visibility and recognition in the academic industry, thus maximizing their material and surplus values that are worth university investments. They are conditioned to map their progress on a linear quantitative trajectory of *more* publications, *more* external grants, *more* student enrollments, *more* services, *more* leadership experiences, *more* awards, *more* publicity, and *more* honors.

To be sure, this hegemonic neoliberal logic is never complete in its ideological dominance but coexists with alternative, contradictory, or resistant logics, messages, and practices in contemporary society (Lull, 1995; Shahjahan, 2014), as there is also now more emphasis on teamwork, collaboration, ethical business, solidarity, and/or mutual aid that has been adopted by many organizations, institutions, advocacy groups, and activist circles. However, while the existence of alternatives underscores “the fluidity of subject positions in the academic hierarchy” (Shahjahan, 2014, p. 225), it has yet to dismantle or overtake the hegemonic structure-culture of academic corporatism that continues to condition many subjects to conduct themselves in accordance with the neoliberal norm of market logic and rationality. Particularly for faculty, the linear trajectory of “success” that is inculcated in us through institutional discourse, professional development training, and promotion and tenure guidelines can often create an overwhelming disposition towards perfection that functions like a self-imposed prison, calling on

us to put in still more work to attain the desired comfort, status, and security while insidiously reminding us that our output is still inadequate and not good enough.

This mental “prison of perfection” induces us into a perpetual search for a higher or happier state of being within the constant grind of academic capitalism even as it limits our potential and divests our ability to be our genuine, free, and diverse selves that would have enabled us to form a much more genuine and meaningful connection with our students and colleagues. It is palpable that we have become what the philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2015) describes as the hapless “achievement-subjects” who are constantly trying to achieve more and more but derive less and less meaning and satisfaction from what we do. For Han, we may even internalize this illusory instinct of striving for achievement to such an extent that we turn our own embodied species-being into an instrumental project in itself. In the words of Adrian Nathan West (2017):

The achievement subject is no longer liable to external control, but exploits himself under the burden of a freedom that brings with it the imperative to positive yield. Identifying himself as a project, he no longer differentiates work from leisure, and his relentless engagement in the process of self-production gives rise to a number of maladies, from depression to nervous collapse. (para. 8)

Indeed, under these conditions, it is perhaps unsurprising that we are witnessing ever-rising numbers of faculty and graduate students afflicted by mental and emotional health issues precisely in the midst of the institutional restructuring brought about by neoliberalism (Else, 2017; Flaherty, 2017; Anonymous, 2018; Lashuel, 2020). While many university administrators are now actively promoting counseling services and mindfulness practices to deliver stress- and anxiety-reducing aid to faculty, staff, and students, they have yet to confront and address the very ideological-structural operations of their academic institutions that have played an underlying role in producing or contributing to these mental- and emotional-health issues and conditions (Cain, 2018; Trembath, 2018).

To grapple with these insidious effects of the neoliberal academy in Buddhist and contemplative terms, I suggest that we understand this prison of perfection that traps our bodyminds as achievement subjects as an illusory form of attachment. In response, I draw on the Buddhist concept of nonattachment to articulate a contemplative political intervention that I call *transformative nonattachment* to disrupt and unsettle this neoliberal illusion.¹ True to the spirit of nonattachment, transformative nonattachment advises that there is no one way to interrupt and unravel the prison of perfection created by the neoliberal logic; rather, it involves an organic two-pronged approach, working both from the inside out (i.e., working on our internal bodyminds to effect change in the external world) and from the outside in (i.e., working on the external world to generate effects on everyone's internal bodyminds). In the following, I first provide an explication of the concept of transformative nonattachment. Next, I reflect on how such transformative nonattachment can be enacted both from the inside out and from the outside in, respectively, to undercut the churning operation of neoliberalism in the university.

Transformative Nonattachment as a Contemplative Political Intervention

As a concept that is embedded in Buddhist thought, nonattachment is not to be confused with an apathetic state of indifference and disinterest. Rather, the notion contains expansive and organic meanings that can shift according to the impermanent state of our bodyminds. In certain moments, nonattachment provides a spacious container for us to be non-striving towards, and simply sitting with, the struggles in life. In other moments, it allows a grounded space for our active engage-

¹ While I focus on nonattachment as a Buddhist concept, it bears noting that the idea is not necessarily only or primarily Buddhist in nature or origin but related to other wisdom traditions beyond Buddhism. For instance, the Hindu scripture Bhagavad Gita offers a similar message: "It is better to live your own destiny imperfectly than to live an imitation of somebody else's life with perfection." See Thapaliya (2017).

ment with the world but without clinging onto the fruits of our actions so that it does not cause our suffering and trap us in a state of anxiety and distress. In other words, nonattachment enables us to operate in an elastic and delicate position where we can act with care without being attached to our agendas so we do not fall into a situation that overwhelms and confounds our own bodyminds. With nonattachment, we can exert our efforts in each particular moment and situation, but with a willingness to let go of our control of the outcome and simply live and coexist with whatever that arises from our actions. To let go of our control of the outcome is to release our hold on perfection that insists that things must go in a certain direction or result in a certain way, and to see that whatever effect that our actions generate is only transient and subject to further change—to which we can still further respond but without the ability to fully control—in this impermanent and everchanging world. Nonattachment requires our ongoing practice and cultivation; when we are able to internalize and embody it, we can reach a state of “effortless action” that allows us to act freely and live in flow without straining our bodyminds in trying to dictate the outcome (Slingerland, 2007; Rasheta, 2016).

By itself, nonattachment is inherently active and transformative as it contains the seed to disrupt the corporate norm and logic that inculcate attachment to materialist pursuits and growth-driven agendas. My intent of adding the qualifier *transformative* is thus not to make a seemingly passive state active. Rather, I use *transformative* to accentuate and remind us of the inherently transformative power and potential of nonattachment as a way to unravel the prison of perfection that exerts colonizing control over our bodyminds in higher education. When put into practice, transformative nonattachment can, from moment to moment, empower us to reset and refresh our bodyminds by operating on our own desires and tempos, which may not escape co-optation by the corporate academy but can exceed its surveying control and imprisoning effects. Furthermore, the word *transformative* also signals the broader sociopolitical vision of nonattachment vis-à-vis academic corporatism. When we use our non-attaching minds to collectively dissolve and let

go of the prison of perfection, it can exert exponential effects in destabilizing the hegemonic neoliberal logic.

As a contemplative political response to the neoliberal academy, transformative nonattachment presents a radical openness of the present that cuts through the straightjacket of the prison of perfection, guaranteeing no assured result or expected outcome (Kabat-Zinn, 2006; Pyles, 2018). It presents each moment as a possibility only—a possibility that can be further acted upon, or not acted on at all, to generate further possibility. It exhorts us to live freely and authentically in each present moment by issuing our acts continuously, or not engaging in any act, without being attached to the resulting outcomes, responses, or perceptions (which are fleeting and subject to change in innumerable subsequent moments). Each moment is worthwhile as a transitory stop in the flow of trial-and-error for us to find our own elastic ground and fluid balance.

Below, I discuss how transformative nonattachment can be elastically and fluidly deployed and embodied as a contemplative resistant method *vis-à-vis* the prison of perfection in academic corporatism, both as an inside-out model of change and as an outside-in approach. This cyclical, two-pronged intervention can allow transformative nonattachment to exert its most potent effects in breaking or loosening the deceptive and pervasive attachment to the neoliberal rationality that is colonizing everyday academic life.

Transformative Attachment from the Inside Out

As the Zen Buddhist teacher Rev. angel Kyodo williams states, “Without inner change, there can be no outer change. Without collective change, no change matters” (williams et al., 2016, p. 209). The first step to release and transform the prison of perfection in the neoliberal academy is to work on our own bodyminds to project our own energy and force of nonattachment to the collectively shared external world. As Ashwani Kumar puts it, “the crisis that is reflected globally in economic and political spheres is a crisis of the human mind and needs to be approached meditatively and holistically rather than merely structurally” (2019, p. 4).

Turning meditatively to our inner minds allows us “to understand the crisis of human consciousness at a profound existential level so that the seeds of transformation are sown in our consciousness” (Kumar, 2019, p. 5). Here, I would like to draw on my own experiential practice of nonattachment in teaching to reflect on how the possibility of unlearning perfection can be opened up in academic institutions. What I offer are not blueprints but snippets of perspectives that may provoke our thinking on how to use transformative nonattachment to ground our intellectual-political work in unraveling the prison of perfection at a collective level.

As someone coming from an immigrant background and whose first language is not English, teaching in U.S. academic institutions that are immersed in prevailing white/Western norms has often intensified my feelings of racial difference and self-consciousness and brought me stress and anxiety. The neoliberal logic that it is my individual responsibility to overcome any racial-cultural-linguistic-mental-emotional obstacles and strive linearly for quantified instructional excellence in the classroom has further exacerbated my feelings of nervousness and tenseness when speaking in front of students and interacting with them. Deeply sensing the adverse effects of these internal struggles on my bodymind, since a few years ago I have become intentional in bringing nonattachment into my teaching. This entails being less concerned with teaching techniques and instructional outcomes per institutional standards and criteria and more with how I can practice being comfortable and relaxed in each and every moment in the classroom so I can be more natural and genuine with and towards my students in my communications and interactions with them. I realize that doing so helps dissolve the perceived and imagined boundaries between us and allows me to connect to my students in a more personal, authentic, and meaningful way. This in turn enables the students to be more open and receptive to my teaching—and to the possibility of being transformed by my pedagogical offering.

Bringing nonattachment to the realm of teaching is thus to practice doing something that is counterintuitive—to unlearn teaching as

a “performance” towards perfection and to engage the students in a way that I can shed my outward image as a “professional” so that I am more at ease being my natural and genuine self. While to perform as a professional seems to describe what we do (and we do need to pay attention to the necessary pedagogical objectives and details), to be attached to this external end can unwittingly create internal barriers and roadblocks to our transformative experiences with the students. From the perspective of transformative nonattachment, what we are doing in teaching is learning how to be down-to-earth human beings who have the opportunity to act with care, understanding, and compassion towards students, from moment to moment, in the process that we work on opening, challenging, and molding their minds. When I am able to be at ease in being authentically human, everything flows from there and I trust my teaching to be “good enough” in doing its own work. I have noticed the effects of doing this as I feel that more students are able to enjoy my classes and get more out of the course materials when I create a discussion space that also allows them to be at ease in being their genuine selves, as it enables them to connect to the ideas and materials that I teach in a more personal, authentic, and meaningful way. Like what Kumar describes in his approach of meditative inquiry, transformative nonattachment allows me and my students “to be with ... [our] thoughts, feelings and experiences as they are rather than suppressing them” (Kumar & Downey, 2018, p. 71). This has enabled us to cocreate a class environment where we engage in “authentic dialogue as a flow of meaning between people ... and ... [seek] to understand not merely through the intellect but through the felt sense and the heart” (Sable, 2022, p. 189).

Interestingly, as I extend this practice to my interactions with colleagues in the institutional space, my way of being has also changed. I become more open to share my genuine and embodied thoughts and feelings that orient me to the inner voice of my humanity that has often been suppressed and buried by the instrumental imperative of academic corporatism. In fact, connecting with our underlying felt sense may entail that we be genuine and authentic in ways that destabilize corpo-

rate institutional harmony and ideological status quo—a gesture that is not always welcomed by everyone, as others have also pointed out in the context of Buddhist and contemplative communities (Williams et al., 2016). But opening ourselves up without attachment to the resulting outcomes, responses, or perceptions not only can generate a felt connectivity with like-minded colleagues and inspire them to do the same, it can also give renewed meanings to our intellectual-political existence in academic institutions as we reclaim our intrinsic freedom to prioritize our inner thoughts, desires, and wellbeing over—or bring them in critical balance with—neoliberal logics and demands.

Notably, transformative nonattachment does not devalue our scholarly or institutional work that results in outward achievements, but it advises against our attachment to these outcomes in the same breadth. It provides a grounded compass for us to bring our critical awareness to each present moment—a flow state of mind that is immersed in the present—without being caught up in the external outcomes measured by the growth-driven criteria of academic institutional perfection.

Transformative Attachment from the Outside In

At the same time that we cultivate nonattachment to disrupt the prison of perfection that controls our bodyminds, it is critical that we also work on the external world of academic institutions to generate policies, programs, and directions that can further help interrupt the ideological operation of neoliberalism and bring about liberating effects on everyone's bodyminds. After all, it can be particularly difficult (if not impossible) for pre-tenure or contingent faculty to aspire for a state of nonattachment that disregards the outcomes of their research and/or teaching that can have material consequences on their lives. From this angle, we need to press for meaningful institutional-structural reforms both within and outside the university. It would also be worthwhile to enlist the participation and support of administrators and senior tenured faculty in the practice and cultivation of transformative nonattachment so that they can serve as alternative and healthier models of change for junior faculty and other university members. These external measures are needed

to create the kinds of institutional conditions that can make our bodyminds less incited and triggered by academic corporate stimuli and more responsive to calming and composed nonattachment. Complementing transformative nonattachment from the inside out, these outside-in strategies can be understood as motivated by a liberatory desire to detach everyone's bodyminds from neoliberal logic and rationality and help us realize our full potential as genuine, free, and diverse beings in the pluriverse—that is, a world that welcomes and embodies heterogeneous worldviews and practices oriented toward our radical interdependence and equitable flourishing irreducible to the dominant paradigm of development and progress rooted in Western capitalist modernity (Kothari et al., 2019).

Without being exhaustive and definitive, some examples of these institutional-structural reforms can include modification of tenure requirements; better work-life balance; unionization of faculty, staff, and graduate student employees; investing in a more sustainable academic workforce (instead of in flashy university buildings and amenities); and instituting genuine democratic mechanisms of shared governance that incorporates the collective input of faculty, staff, students, surrounding communities and other stakeholder groups in higher education into the administrative decision-making process of the university. Beyond these steps, there is also a critical need to push for campaigns and legislations that would have the federal and state governments recommit their funding for higher education; cancel or alleviate student debt; implement tuition freeze or provide free college education; and create disincentives for the university to prioritize the growth of private gifts and endowments.

Administrators and senior tenured faculty who have the most privilege and the least to lose should be invited or enlisted to be at the forefront of these struggles, modeling the kinds of change agents and transformative leadership we want to see in the university commons and the planetary world. While we can all acknowledge the overwhelming difficulty in drastically reversing the ideological and structural direction of the neoliberal university, practicing the contemplative political method

of transformative nonattachment can create a momentary pause and space for university administrators to do a genuine self-reflection, asking themselves what the true meaning of their work is if it is systemically turning out a mass population of workers and students who are collectively unwell in their mental and emotional health due to the institutionally induced and imposed pressure to attach their lives to the prison of perfection in the academic space in which they work and study. Even in a corporate environment, those in administrative and leadership positions can make a meaningful difference by instituting policy directions that efficaciously foster a critical balance between institutional growth and holistic wellness.

Conclusion

As we pursue the outside-in approach alongside the inside-out model of change, it is important that we do not become attached to the outcome of transformation itself, for attachment to that end can also become another self-imposed prison of perfection that makes us lose our balance, causing our suffering and clouding our vision in ways that we may not always realize. Transformative nonattachment suggests that we continue to advocate and press for institutional-structural change while letting go of our expectation that transformation must be the eventual outcome and instead focusing our awareness on each present moment of our engagement. In fact, it is unlikely that we can dismantle the academic industrial complex anytime soon, but transformative nonattachment offers a key route for us to, individually and collectively, create an unending and cyclical intervention whereby the perfection logics of the corporate academy become less and less relevant to our career and hold less and less control over our lives and wellbeing. Transformative nonattachment does not offer any blueprint for liberation, but it provides a path of courage and authenticity for us to take any given moment as a possibility to act to generate further possibilities and tentative results, without clinging onto them.

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