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SEVERANCE AND BUDDHISM:
AN ETHICAL TREATMENT
LONG ESSAY

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Severance is a science fiction psychological thriller series that portrays a world where workers at a company called Lumon undergo a severance procedure that separates their work and personal selves¹. The show shed light on some ethical issues concerning the capitalist economy and corporate life (Ibid). It also challenges the viewers to reflect on their own relationship with work and how it affects their happiness and well-being (Ibid). In this essay, I will examine the show from the perspective of Buddhist ethics and will focus on three components of the Eightfold Path that are particularly interesting to discuss in regard to the show: right action, right livelihood, and right mindfulness. The present inquiry will draw on two primary sources that expound on the ethics of Buddhism and my observations from when I watched the show. The main sources are "An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics" by Peter Harvey and "Buddhist Ethics: A Very Short Introduction" by Damien Keown.

We begin with the practice of right action. It underscores the significance of abstaining from actions that cause harm to oneself and others, while simultaneously engaging in actions that promote happiness and well-being². This principle is intricately linked to the concept of Karma, which posits that our actions produce outcomes that affect our future lives or the cycle of rebirth³. The practice of right action not only demands acute awareness of our actions and their outcomes but also necessitates that we assume full accountability and responsibility for them (Ibid). Notably, the practice of right action is greatly challenged and hindered in the television series "Severance." The show portrays a company that provides a severance procedure involving the insertion of a chip into the brain to artificially create two distinct versions of the same individual, designated as "Innies" and "Outies." The two separate versions are prohibited from communicating or contacting each other, creating two separate lives and memories that are led by and belong to the same person. As soon as the severed employee steps into the work's elevator, the severance occurs, and the Innie version is activated. Though the operation ostensibly aims to attain an ideal work-life balance, it introduces a multitude of ethical predicaments pertaining to moral accountability, agency, and self-determination.

¹ Poniewozik, James, (2022, February 17). 'Severance' Review: That Makes Two of You. The New York Times.

² Harvey, Peter. (2000). An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values, and Issues. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 38.

³ Harvey. (2000), 57.

One of the principal ethical quandaries arising from the severance procedure concerns moral accountability for one's conduct. In the event that the two versions lack a persistent memory of their actions, they may undertake actions that result in harm to others without recognizing the detrimental effects or the unethical character of their behaviour. This is evident in the relationship between Mark and Petey inside and outside of work. Mark and Petey were considered best friends within the workplace. However, Petey was suddenly removed from his position and stopped coming to work. We discover later on that Petey went through a reverse severance procedure and wanted to expose the company for what they do. He looks for Mark, his best friend, and finds him but Mark, the Outie, did not recognize him since Outies do not recognize each other. This implies that the severance procedure disturbs human relationships and divides them into two separate sets of relations, one inside work and the other outside it. Petey the Outie meant nothing to Mark the Outie while Mark the Innie considered Petey the Innie his best friend.

The two versions' lack of awareness regarding the personal lives and relationships of each other raises the question of whether both versions should bear moral responsibility or culpability for actions that may cause harm to the other version or to others. The question is admittedly difficult to answer. The practice of right action requires the assumption of taking responsibility for one's own action but should we hold each version accountable on its own terms? We can obviously see how this develops quickly to become a matter of identity and a dilemma of which version is the true representation of the person and thus the one that should be accountable for the actions of the other.

In addition, the implementation of the chip presents another dilemma, precisely the agency dilemma. The dilemma concerns the question of who is in control over the actions of the severed person since the Innies and Outies may hold different desires and motivations. The consequences of this question are exemplified in the character of Helly, whose Innies expressed discontent with the working conditions and intended to resign. However, the resignation request needed to be made by her Outie who appeared content with the work without even knowing anything about the conditions of this work. Though Helly the Innie attempted several times to secretly sneak out notes to her Outie, she could not pass the words detector implemented in the elevator. In episode four, the company displayed a video

clip of her Outie stating a message to her Innies. The message conveyed that her Outie holds the agency and control over her continuity with the company, thereby refusing her resignation request.

This created a conflict between Helly the Innies and Helly the Outie over the issue of who holds decision-making power. Subsequently, Helly engaged in a life-ending activity by attempting to strangle herself in the elevator to regain control over her Outie. This event highlights how the severance procedure hinders the practice of right action by dividing the agency and creating a power dynamic where the employees are dragged into a struggle for agency and control as conflicts arise when the Innies and the Outies happen to have different wishes. In light of Helly's, the Innies, failed attempt at committing suicide to end her suffering, a moral conundrum arises: in the event that the situation had resulted in the loss of human life, which version of Helly would bear the moral responsibility of ending that life? Would be the Innies herself, who made the conscious decision to take her own life, or the Outies, who placed the Innies in a position where she was deprived of any autonomy to make choices for herself? It is not exactly a mere yearning to end one's own existence. Rather, it is a scenario that involves two distinct abstract individuals with unique yet correlated desires and aspirations. Should one decide to end their life, the consequences would undoubtedly result in the termination of the other, without any regard for their shared existence and the relations they may have cultivated. Although this scenario may not precisely qualify as a suicide attempt propelled by noble altruistic motives, it nonetheless presents a contentious moral dilemma⁴.

Another key practice is right livelihood that is closely associated with the notion of right action⁵. It involves the conscientious selection of an occupation that is both ethical and conducive to promoting the well-being and happiness of others (Ibid). The concept of right livelihood pertains not solely to earning a living but rather emphasises the ethical considerations surrounding how one earns a livelihood without causing harm to oneself or others⁶. Therefore, it is primarily associated with the context of the workplace and the nature of the work being performed (Ibid). The company Lumon appears to be contravening the principles of right livelihood. The company fosters an environment of secrecy, such

⁴ Delhey, Martin. (2006). Views on suicide in Buddhism: some remarks. *Buddhism and violence*, 37-38.

⁵ Damien, Keown. (2020). *Buddhist Ethics: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 41.

⁶ Keown. (2020), 59.

that employees are not fully aware of the nature and consequences of their work. Their work is limited to deleting encrypted-into-numbers data based on certain observed patterns in these numbers. This lack of transparency may compel workers to contribute unwittingly to unethical practices or to participate in covering up such practices. The company's strategies for control extend even to the division of departments, with Lumon fomenting fear and distrust between different teams in order to prevent communication and collaboration. Overall, these practices demonstrate the insidious ways in which Lumon exploits its employees and manipulates them to work on advancing only the company's unethical interests.

Lumon's practice of severance has also created a system of control over its workforce. Not all employees are subjected to this process, with some occupying critical positions within the company. This disparity in treatment grants the non-severed employees the ability to monitor and interfere in the private lives of the severed individuals. This dynamic is realised in the character of Mark, who is unaware that his boss is also his neighbour. Such manipulation allows the company to exert a significant degree of control over the lives of its employees even outside work. The company's manipulation of its employees is further underscored by its ability to temporarily turn off the severance process in emergencies. This ability grants the company an increased capacity for interference in the private lives of its workers to ensure that the company's work goes smoothly. Furthermore, Mark's story serves as an exemplar of the potential consequences of Lumon's unethical practices on its employees. Mark was coerced into accepting employment at Lumon under the false pretence of his spouse's death. He resigned from his prior position as a teacher, an occupation that conceivably was more ethical and aligned with the tenets of Buddhism, to join Lumon. Subsequently, it is revealed that Mark's wife is not deceased, but his Innies are oblivious to his marital status. In fact, his supposedly deceased wife is his counsellor at work which Lumon seems to utilise sparingly to control Mark's temper. All of the above mentioned suggests that Lumon operates with a lack of transparency, integrity, and clarity, making pursuing a profession at Lumon in contradiction with the practice of right livelihood.

The last practice is right mindfulness which highlights the significance of attuning oneself to the present moment, free from any form of prejudice and attachment, and being mindful of one's thoughts,

feelings, and bodily sensations⁷. This mindfulness may be cultivated via meditation, enabling individuals to attain a lucid and accurate perception of reality and the root of their afflictions (Ibid). However, the case of Mark and his motive for undergoing the severance procedure contradicts the principles of right mindfulness. Instead of being fully aware of his thoughts and emotions regarding the death of his wife, Mark chose to be severed in order to temporarily avoid his grief during the day. Such avoidance is not likely to be a viable long-term solution for Mark, as he appears to be still grieving while driving to work alone. By using the severance procedure to avoid his grief, Mark deprives himself of the experiences that could potentially facilitate his healing and personal growth. While it may be tempting to evade difficult emotions in the short term, such avoidance may ultimately lead to more suffering in the long run. However, as Mark's case exemplifies, mindfulness practice can be challenging and necessitates a commitment to facing one's emotions and experiences head-on. For individuals to genuinely benefit from mindfulness practice, they must be honest with themselves and confront challenging emotions, even if this may result in temporary discomfort or pain.

In conclusion, the television series "Severance" presents a unique perspective on the relationship between work and personal life and raises several ethical concerns that challenge our understanding of moral accountability, agency, and self-determination. Through the lens of Buddhist ethics, we can examine these concerns in light of the Eightfold Path, particularly the practices of right action, right livelihood, and right mindfulness. The show prompts us to reflect on our own relationship with work and its impact on our well-being and happiness. Ultimately, by examining these ethical dilemmas, we can better understand the complexities of the modern workplace and the need for ethical considerations in our professional lives.

⁷ Harvey. (2000), 38.