"IF THE HELLS ARE NOT EMPTY":

A FRAMEWORK FOR A

BUDDHIST CRITICAL

SOCIAL THEORY

by

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Abstract

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Marx's eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach, which stands immortalized as his epitaph, draws a clear line in the sand between the descriptive philosophy of antiquity and the necessarily prescriptive character which he hoped would mark the philosophers and theorists of modernity; a modernity characterized by rampant alienation and exploitation, income inequality, false consciousness, and suffering on a global scale. Modern critical theory, in its attempt to understand these conditions has grown in scope to include innumerable topics from animal rights to pornography. It has also brought into its fold many distinct disciplines from which it may draw insight into the societies and cultures at which it aims its collective weaponry of interpretation and criticism. While religion has long been an object of discussion for critical theorists, this work proposes that the Buddhist religion possesses such a unique character among the major religions of the world that it can be repurposed as a tool of the modern theorist rather than remain simply another subject to be passively theorized.

The purpose of this thesis is to consider the potential of Buddhism as a useful tool for critical social theory in examining and addressing the problems of modernity.

While some level of comparative analysis is necessary as exposition, I focus my efforts on developing a dialogical space between Buddhism and a critical social theory rooted in the revolutionary necessity of modernity. Once such a space has been established this work engages in a characterization of modern society in terms of both Buddhist principles and more traditional critical social theory, demonstrating that they are not only compatible but complementary means of achieving a similar understanding of the problems facing modern humanity. This work concludes by advocating a shift in the role of the modern critical social theorist based on the Buddhist ideal of the Bodhisattva and the revolutionary potential and spirit of a socially engaged Buddhism to serve Marx's edict that the role of philosopher is to change the world.

The intended impact of such a reimagining of the role of critical social theory and theorist is two-fold. First, that it would fundamentally alter the way in which theoretically grounded empirical sociology is done by imposing the necessity of engagement into the act of 'doing' such sociologies rather than continue to promote the role of the sociologist as that of passive observer. Second, it would improve the accessibility of sociological theory and the resulting empirical work to the general population, which, as this work argues, is presently in great need for a renewal of the revolutionary spirit, especially one grounded in sound sociological understanding.

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Chapter 1

The Basis for a Buddhist Critical Social Theory

Introduction

As far as academic targets go, religious institutions, teachings, and practices are arguably some of the most difficult with which to engage. Those of us who choose to do so typically take on the role of observers, describing these systems of belief, the people who practice their tenants, and the relevant social, political, and cultural contexts in which they emerge, grow, and evolve. This process of "doing" religion, from a sociological standpoint, is therefore a passive one. It makes no attempt at reform, nor does it advocate, critique, or engage in histrionics on behalf of religion. It especially does not proselytize in any reasonable sense of the term. For the vast majority of potential religious topics, the reason for this passivity is clear. With very few exceptions, a religion's doctrine, dogma, and philosophical foundations are inseparable from one another. More clearly put, most major world religions, having their philosophical foundations in revelation, deal strictly in matters of faith rather than reason. As such it becomes nearly impossible to make appropriate use of these religious philosophies without also becoming mired in their dogmatic "baggage." The one exception to this condition, as I hope to establish, is the religion of Buddhism. By its very nature Buddhism provokes us to extend the sociological model beyond the simple understanding, reflection, and analysis that has become the mark of social inquiry and to act upon the insight gained for the benefit of ourselves and, ultimately, all sentient beings. This singular addition is the purpose of the present work; to present Buddhism as an engaged critical social theory which, despite emerging in dramatically differing contexts, shares the goals of more traditional critical social theory.

The enormity of this goal cannot be understated. Taking into consideration the body of knowledge which comprises traditional critical social theory as well as the almost innumerable texts addressing Buddhist thought (spanning thousands of years and dozens of languages), it is a priority of this work to focus the majority of its effort on developing the understanding of these

two disciplines as two sides of the same coin and not be bogged down in matters of dogma or semantic discrepancy. Once the requisite terms have been established, and exploration of the dialogical space between critical theory and Buddhism will be explored in the hopes of building on the work which has previously been attempted toward this end. Specifically, this work will attempt to integrate the Mahayana approach to Buddhism into a conversation which has up to this point focused mostly on matters of Tibetan, or Vajrayana, Buddhism. This new paradigm will be used to rethink several fundamental components of modern social criticism under the lens of Buddhist philosophy to more fully demonstrate the necessity of the exercise in which we are engaged. Finally, this work concludes with a discussion of the revolutionary potential of a Buddhist critical social theory as it has been developed and a reimagining and characterization of the contemporary critical theorist in light of the Bodhisattva ideal as emphasized in Mahayana teachings.

Defining Critical Theory

> "…the very act of doing criticism entails a commitment to the future, more particularly, a commitment to appearing in, making a contribution to, or in various other ways forming and affecting the future."-Edward Said, 1984.

As will prove the case with many of the issues this work will address, the act of creating a tidy operational image of critical social theory is one fraught with hazards. As Hattam (2004) is quick to point out in his own imagining of a Buddhist critical social theory, critical theory is less a singular identifiable discipline and more a collections of efforts toward similar ends. Critical theory is at once the attempt to create a systemic and comprehensive social theory intended to confront contemporary social and political problems (Kellner, 1989: 2) and one which does so with a sensibility of reading the world which expresses itself as "a narrative of freedom" (Hattam, 2004: 37). It is radically interdisciplinary, taking place in the "traffic between cultures, discourses, and disciplines…" (Said, 1984) rather than in any one narrow domain. Furthermore, despite the common usage, critical theory as defined by this work is not limited to a singular lineage or school of thought, specifically that established by Marx and carried through the

Frankfurt School. Agger's (1989) definition of critical theory as a 'theory cluster' is especially

useful here as it becomes evident that critical theory is best described in terms of an exercise of

the critical sensibility or disposition toward criticism which defines its practitioners. Agger further

describes this sensibility as one which is driven toward engagement rather than 'disengaged

intellectuality,' and invokes "an interpersonal ethics rooted in mutual respect and care for

humanity and nature" (1977b: 52). The Buddhist undertones of this statement aside for the

moment, it is clear that in this sense critical theory carries with it much fluidity, evolving as the

criticalist evolves. Hattam (2004:43) describes this process,

> "It is through a critical sensibility that a critical intellectual reads the word and
> the world and then acts upon it. Such a sensibility is evolutionary; it is never
> complete, but constantly in process, and constantly being transformed. Such a
> sensibility develops out of the relentless tension that exists when we open up a
> reflexive space between our intellect and our feelings, between our head and
> our heart, between our reason and our emotions and especially our affection for
> others."

This struggle between the rational and emotional faculties of the critical theorist mimics one of

the defining characteristics of critical theory itself, the essential grounding of critical inquiry in

the method of dialectics. Critical theory, as opposed to traditional theory, acknowledges the

mark of intentionality on rational discourse. It does not attempt to present its efforts as taking

place in an axiological vacuum, but instead embraces the value-position on which it rests while

acknowledging, and often criticizing, the positions of those with whom it engages. This

sensitivity to the immutable presence of value-based decision making demonstrates critical

theory's understanding of the human condition as one of intense emotionality. While a society

may respond to crises in ways which can be judged as rational or irrational, individuals respond

on a more basic level, often with fear, anxiety, anger, or panic. In attempting to confront social

and political problems toward the creation of a narrative of freedom, criticalists are actively

engaged in an emancipatory practice, and a symbiotic one at that. In much the same way that

the evolution of the theorist drives the evolution of theory, it must be acknowledged that

changes in the role of the theorist within society and the context of emancipation as envisioned

by criticalists heavily influences the way in which the theorist pushes herself to grow in her craft. Like Buddhism, as we will see later, critical theory is both a sensibility and a tangible activity in which one engages.

While this work relies on the generalized definition of critical theory as a broad practice which transcends disciplinary, cultural, or discursive boundaries, it cannot be ignored that the way in which I have thusly characterized the critical sensibility strongly adheres to Horkheimer's edict that critical theory seeks "…to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them…" (1982:244). It also must be said that to attempt to actively engage with even a representative sample of the works which fall under this broad understanding of critical theory would be a Herculean undertaking by even the most invested academic. As this work seeks to be ultimately grounded in driving a liberatory, even revolutionary, practice of a Buddhist critical social theory, we must narrow the playing field a bit, so to speak.

Critical Theory, in the narrow sense, commonly denoted by capitalization of the term, refers to the work of several generations of German philosophers and social theorists in the Western European Marxist tradition that originated with the Frankfurt School and continues to prevail among many modern social scientists and theorists. The defining characteristics of this lineage are a foundation in a dialectical, or Hegelian, Marxism in its efforts to describe and critique the ailments of modernity and a sympathy for the revolutionary aspirations of Marx himself (Agger, 1977). It is from this common ground that each Frankfurt School theorist contributed their own body of work, shaping Marxism along the way as they integrated the philosophy to address emerging areas of interest such as the culture industry and new issues of political economy.

Critical Theory is further directed at the totality of society in its efforts to improve our understanding of social and political institutions which exacerbate the exploitation and alienation of humanity. Critical Theory from this perspective does so in an effort to provoke a transformation of modern society, specifically society under capitalism, toward its democratic,

inclusive, non-exploitative potential. As we move on to develop dialogical space between critical

theory and Buddhism, the conceptual framework of Critical Theory in this narrow sense gives us

the best opportunity for a meaningful evaluation of this dialogical common ground. For this

reason a more specific examination of our new, actionable, Critical Theory will be left to that

time.

Defining Buddhism

Suffering alone exists, none who suffer;
The deed there is, but no doer thereof;
Nirvana is, but no one seeking it;
The Path there is, but none who travel it.
                    - The Path of Perfection (Visuddhimagga)

Zen Master Shunryu Suzuki, especially in his interactions with students as part of his

dharma talks, was particularly fond of saying that there is no Buddhism, at least for practitioners

of Buddhism. However, according to Suzuki-roshi, this position was only defensible from the

locus of the faithful. Should a scientist attempt to make the same declaration, it would be a great

mistake on his part (Suzuki, 1965). The interaction of faith and adherence to the Buddhism one

chooses negates the need for such an appeal to the authority of a central Buddhism. For

Buddhists, Buddhism simply is and is not. It is a deeply personal pursuit which takes on unique

characteristics based on the interplay of personal history, culture, chosen school, and access to

resources. It is also a concrete and infinitely complex set of teachings and doctrinal and

secondary texts which emphasize and deemphasize particular components for reasons rooted

in thousands of years of growth and transmission, revision and revolution. It manifests in the

lives of its faithful in equally disparate ways. For Theravada Buddhists in South East Asia this

typically involves the integration of many complex rituals into daily life. For these people, making

regular offerings and prayer to any number of spiritual entities comprises a major part of their

Buddhism. For Zen practitioners in Japan, Buddhist practice may be entirely limited to a few

hours each week in silent meditation at their local Zendo as their personal schedule permits. My

own practice, which I will touch on more specifically as I offer commentary and conclusion to

this work, has seen Buddhism manifest as a combination of academic study, meditative practice, and an ongoing exploration of mindfulness and loving-kindness in my daily life. As with most Buddhists, particularly those interested in continually expanding their understanding of Buddhism, I welcome the constantly evolving influence of the dharma. However, as someone involved in an academic inquiry on the topic, I understand the difficulty that this can present.

These are, however, simply manifestations of the practice of Buddhism. The creation of a conceptual understanding of Buddhism as required by the present work, it must be noted, is a similarly individualistic process that involves a continual interaction between scripture, the practitioner, and the religious community as a whole. This process involves the transformation of scripture through practice, as Harold Coward (in Prebish, 2013) describes below:

> The relationship between a religious community and its scripture is complex, reciprocal and usually central to the normative self-definition of a religion. The awareness of this relationship is the result of postmodern approaches that no longer see scriptures as museum pieces for historical critical analysis, but recognize them to be the product of human perception and interaction-both in their own time and in today's study by scholars. (129)

This is the very impetus for this work's focus specifically on Mahayana Buddhism. In order to circumvent the havoc which "no Buddhism" may wreak on my efforts here, the open canon of the Mahayana allows for the exploration of a guiding ethics of Buddhism which is as manageable in modernity as it was in antiquity and can ultimately allow us to engage a Buddhist sensibility parallel to that established for critical theory. The next chapter seeks to establish this sensibility through an interpretation of the fundamental teachings of the Buddha which form the core of Buddhist ethics, philosophy, and practice; the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eight-Fold path.

Chapter 2

Essential Buddhist Teachings

The Enlightened One

The Buddha was born in 566 B.C.E. The only child of the royal family of the Shakya kingdom, he was given the name Siddhartha, meaning 'every wish fulfilled.' As the sole heir to the monarchy, he was quickly set upon the path to take over his father's kingdom. However, at the age of twenty-nine, facing the stresses of imminent fatherhood and the pressures of his father, Siddhartha, having heard of the beauty of the unfolding spring, sought to travel to the nearby forest to seek refuge and relaxation. Despite his father's reticence to grant Siddhartha permission to leave the palace grounds for the first time, he was finally granted permission. Even with his father's best efforts to ensure that all disturbing sights would be removed from Siddhartha's route from the village to the forest, it was on this first trip that the future Buddha witnessed old age for the first time. The presence of a frail and elderly man left Siddhartha saddened and unable to gain pleasure from his excursion. While his exposure to the impermanence of youth was something with which he struggled, his interest in exploring reality outside of his palace home had been piqued and he quickly made plans for future outings. It was on these future excursions that he witnessed two more signs of the affliction of mortality in the forms of a sick villager and a corpse. Each time, as with the elderly man, Siddhartha sought an explanation from his driver whose tongue had been loosened by the gods to be truthful about the impacts of old age, illness, and death as experienced by all living beings. Finally, Siddhartha came upon a monk in his travels. Being told that this man had given up worldly attachment to seek a higher good, he returned to the palace for the last time. That night Siddhartha would leave his wife and newborn son, renounce his kingdom, and begin a six year period of asceticism. After suffering for six years in self-denial he eventually embraced a Middle-Way between complete asceticism and decadence and attained enlightenment while meditating under the Bodhi Tree. It was during this meditation that Siddhartha, now Shakyamuni Buddha,

became aware of the basic principles which he would eventually formulate into the teachings of the Middle-Way (Maguire, 2001).

The first of these principles, karma, also known as the law of cause and effect, simply states that for every cause, there is an effect, which in turn becomes a cause and thus continues the cycle. Its basis is found in the Buddhist doctrine of Dependent Origination. This conceptualization of reality is intended to function as a middle-way between the nihilistic view of reality as entirely constructed and intangible and the eternalistic or substantialist assertion that all phenomena abide independently within their own existence (Hattam, 2004:156), a common component of Vedic philosophy during Shakyamuni's time. Dependent Origination places reality in constant flux and presents a view of causality that is:

> …paradoxical and impossible to grasp intellectually. In words it is not more than a suggestive expression of the meditative insight of the philosopher mystics who originated it. Hence it can only be experienced through our own meditative awareness in which 'I' receded and dependence is reduced on making the myriad distinctions between *this* and *that* and solidly structuring our experience. Freed from the struggle to make of reality what it is not, awareness opens gladly to the contingent, insubstantial and ephemeral nature of reality:
>
> As stars, a fault of vision, as a lamp,
> A mock show, dew drops, or a bubble,
> A dream, a lightning flash, or a cloud,
> So should one view what is conditioned.
> *The Diamond Sutra.* (Jones 1989:88, in Hattam, 2004).

Dependent Origination is above all else a method of situating ourselves 'in' the world. It creates individual agency in our response to both internal and external crises and ultimately justifies the undertaking of revolutionary activities through stigmatizing inaction in the face of suffering, which is eternal and inevitable.

The Four Noble Truths

The second major revelation experienced by Shakyamuni in the course of his enlightenment was that of the Wheel of Life. Simply put, the mechanisms of life, suffering, death, and rebirth were made clear to the Buddha. From this revelation he formulated the basic tenants of Buddhism which have remained unaltered since their inception and are known as the

Four Noble Truths. The first truth is that life is characterized by suffering or *dukkha*. This suffering from a Buddhist perspective is what Watts (1957) referred to as the "great disease of the world for which the Buddha's method is the cure." Watts alternatively offered the substitution of 'frustration' for 'suffering' as a possible equivalence for *dukkha* considering that suffering may be limited in its implications for psychic stresses or more generalized or nuanced instances which may not be immediately recognizable as 'suffering' under certain conditions. As these conditions are innumerable and all intrinsically linked to every experience one may have as a sentient being, so too is the *dukkha* we experience. Personally, one of my preferred expositions of *dukkha* is given by the *Connected Discourse* of the Pali Canon:

> Birth is *duhkha*, decay is *duhkha*, sickness is *duhkha*, death is *duhkha*, so also are sorrow and grief…To be bound with things which we dislike, and to be parted from things which we like, these are also *duhkha*. Not to get what one desires, this is also *duhkha*. In a word, this body, this fivefold aggregation based on clutching (*trishna*), this is *duhkha*.

Ultimately the universality of *dukkha* is what drives us toward a spiritual practice. Regardless of how it is defined, we are all acutely away of its presence in our lives. Whether it only manifests in times of extreme stress or as a daily feeling of incompleteness, longing, or anguish, we all experience the condition of *dukkha* and desire its relief.

The Second Truth tells us that, whatever its specific character, the ultimate cause of *dukkha* is *tanha* (above *trishna*) commonly defined as 'thirst', 'craving', 'desire', or 'attachment'(Bercholz & Kohn, 1997). The first element of this would seem obvious. The constant desire to accumulate material goods, money, status symbols, or any number of things which can be possessed is a major source of conflict and suffering, not only on a personal level but also throughout humanity. To give but one of many examples, the consolidation of wealth resulting from late capitalism has resulted in suffering which ranges from the exploitation of developing nations for natural resources to the alienation and mistreatment of the impoverished in even the wealthiest nations. This reality can be said to reflect *tanha* in its more primitive or simplistic form. Watts is again useful here in his description of this mode of desire as one of

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pure ego. If *dukkha* can be said to be a general sense of lacking, then *tanha* is specifically the lack of self-knowledge, the "…lack of the realization that all grasping turns out to be the futile effort to grasp oneself, or rather to make life catch hold of itself. For to one who has self-knowledge, there is no duality between himself and the external world" (1957:48).

While craving on a material level can be considered a symptom of this lack of self-knowledge, the totality of the Second Truth is arguably better understood in terms of 'attachment' rather than 'desire' or 'craving.' Hattam explains the significance of the Second Truth by describing the process which leads us to cling to the 'I' and thus create for ourselves a painful attachment to that which we objectify as 'mine.' This process begins with the mind experiencing reality in terms of the five *skandhas* of body, feelings, perceptions, compositional factors, and consciousness, which are then understood as 'I', 'me', and 'mine.' The label of 'I' is then reified by our instinct to identify as independent from external phenomenon. Once we grasp the reified 'I' we hold it to the highest regard and thus are driven to be painfully attached to the people and objects which we can then consider 'mine.' Finally, we use this self-cherishing mind to discriminate between these objects and people, categorizing them based on their satisfaction of our needs and desires. This process ultimately leads us to engage in any number of unskillful or negative actions (2004:142-144).

The Third Truth is simply the cessation of *dukkha*. While the potential to end suffering may seem intuitive, especially to Buddhist practitioners, to many the possibility that suffering can be alleviated may seem fantastical. This truth is two-fold however, not simply referring to the cessation of suffering on a more general level, but also referring to the cessation of *samsara*, the cycle of rebirth that all beings undergo until they are able to attain liberation. While clearly much less complicated than the previous two Truths, in fact in many traditions it is often omitted or glossed over as common knowledge, the Truth of Cessation is the expression of one's motivation to undertake the path toward liberation as laid out by the Fourth Noble Truth. It is the assurance that for those who seek freedom from *dukkha*, *nirvana* is attainable.

The Noble Eight-Fold Path

The fourth and final Noble Truth of the Buddha's teachings answers the inevitable

question resulting from an acceptance of the Third Truth, namely, if cessation is possible, by

what means might one go about being relieved of suffering in this life (or the next)? The Fourth

Noble Truth lays out the basic principles of Buddhist practice that represent the path from

ignorance to enlightenment, from delusion to wisdom. This is the Noble Eight-Fold Path. This

path consists of eight factors arranged into three categories as shown below:

1. Right understanding   }
2. Right thought   }   III. Wisdom (*prajna*)

3. Right speech   }
4. Right action   }   I. Morality (*shila*)
5. Right livelihood   }

6. Right effort   }
7. Right mindfulness   }   II. Concentration (*samadhi*)
8. Right concentration   }

Bikkhu Bodhi explains the path and purpose of such an organization:

> The path begins with the minimal degree of right understanding and right
> thought needed to take up the training, and then unfolds through its three
> groups as a systemic strategy designed to uproot the defilements that generate
> suffering. Morality restrains the defilements in their coarsest form, their outflow
> in unwholesome actions; concentration removes their more refined
> manifestations as distractive and restless thoughts; and wisdom eradicates
> their subtle latent tendencies by penetrating with direct insight the three basic
> facts of existence, summed up by the Buddha in the three characteristics of
> impermanence, suffering, and egolessness (1997:64).

This is the foundation of Buddhist philosophy. Like justice for Socrates or spirit for Hegel,

Buddhist theory singularly focusses on the attainment of *nirvana* (Ilaiah, 2004) through the

trainings of *shila, samadhi, and prajna*. Any critique which may emerge in the development of a

Buddhist critical social theory therefore must come from an understanding of and adherence to

this philosophy as developed by the Three Trainings, which we will now briefly explore.

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The Training of Moral Conduct

For one to begin even a modest practice of the Dharma they must first resolve to abstain from all harmful words, actions, and deeds. This mandate, which forms the basis for the philosophy of *ahimsa*, or nonviolence, is undertaken from the beginning of one's practice as a means of immediately ceasing chaos and disruption in both the life of the practitioner and the lives of those touched by their improper speech, actions, and livelihood. It is impossible to perform such unskillful practices as killing, theft, or deception without creating disharmony and agitation, craving and aversion, in the mind now and in the future (Goenka, 1997). This psychic chaos prevents one from gaining insight into their reality through the calm and serene mind that is necessary for proper introspection. The final importance of the practice of *shila* is that in order to seek liberation from all suffering, one cannot take part in the very actions which support the mental habits he is seeking to do away with. Simply put, to attempt to undertake the path to liberation without the practice of *shila* ensures that for every step toward *nirvana* one is able to make, they will take two steps back toward suffering. What then is meant by Right Speech, Action, and Livelihood as the components of a proper practice of moral conduct?

As speech is the way in which we engage the world to express our thoughts and ideas, the practice of Right Speech is equally concerned with the preservation of *karma* for the individual as it is with the benefit of Right Speech to society as a whole. The Buddha taught that the misuses of the tongue through lies, defamation, and useless chatter ultimately spoil the organization of society while Right Speech facilitated the solid relationships necessary to build a properly civilized and mindful society. Shakyamuni described the practitioner of Right Speech as one who:

> …speaks the truth and is steadfast in truthfulness, trustworthy, dependable, straightforward with others. He reconciles the quarrelsome and encourages the united. He delights in harmony, seeks after harmony, rejoices in harmony, and creates harmony by his words. His speech is gentle, pleasing to the ear, kindly, heartwarming, courteous, agreeable, and enjoyable to many. He speaks at the proper time, according to the facts, according to what is helpful, according to Dharma and the Code of Conduct. His words are worth remembering, timely,

well-reasoned, well chosen, and constructive.
(Goenka, 1997)

The benefit of such a practice of the moral conduct of Right Speech to the improvement of society is clear as this description is evocative of many of the great truth-tellers of history. Naturally though, the practice of moral conduct cannot be limited to speech alone.

As with speech, one must not perform actions with the intent to harm. While specific prohibitions on conduct are dependent on several factors related to one's practice and tradition, Right Action is generally intended to reflect one's active dedication to avoid the four impure actions of killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, and intoxication in order to seek the good in all creatures toward the cultivation of a pure life. These four impure actions along with the prohibition against false speech mentioned previously make up the Five Precepts, commonly referred to as the Lay Precepts of Buddhism. This can be understood as the absolute minimum necessary to practice moral conduct as it is taught by the Dharma. There are however many other sets of precepts which are undertaken under a myriad of circumstances and may range from the inclusion of an additional five precepts for the duration of a holiday to the more than two hundred rules of conduct for monks and more than three hundred rules for nuns which form the basis of Right Action for members of the Sangha.

The final component of *shila* is that of Right Livelihood. While this may ostensibly appear to be redundant, (after all, shouldn't a dedication to Right Action prevent one from participating in improper action regardless of the context?) Right Livelihood is meant to deal with the issue of Right Action as it impacts a society as a whole. For instance, Right Action embodies the prohibition of killing because it is both the result of great negativity and the cause of indescribable suffering for all involved. Right Livelihood prohibits earning one's living by creating or selling weapons which may be used to kill. While it may be a lucrative business practice, it is ultimately a destabilizing and harmful practice as it inhibits a peaceful and harmonious society from emerging. While it may not be the express intent of the manufacturer of implements of war that his creations be used for that purpose, the act of selling these items

ultimately encourages their use. Further, in the historical context in which the Eight-Fold Path was developed, the advocacy of Right Livelihood can be understood as an attempt to provide dignity to labor in response to increasing exploitative practices during Buddha's time (Ilaiah, 2004). In this context it becomes clearly necessary to include a distinction between one's working life and their practice outside of an economic context in order to temper the impact that economic necessity may have on the fulfilment of the precepts. Ultimately, one's work should be undertaken to contribute usefully and positively to society in order to support one's self and dependents and to help others. This is the nature of Right Livelihood.

The Training of Concentration

While it may manifest in our speech and actions, ultimately the cause of suffering originates in the mind. Once we have made the commitment to put an end to the external manifestations we must then address the mental processes that drive these manifestations. This is done through the development of concentration (*Samadhi*) and wisdom (*prajna*). The Training of Concentration specifically addresses the mind's ability to manipulate one's speech and action despite the presence of rationality. A good example of this is drug addiction. All drug addicts understand that their use and overuse of illicit substances is detrimental to their physical health. This is but one reason often given by addict as an impetus for wanting to quit using. However, the decision to use is unfortunately not governed by the rational mind, but rather by the irrationality of habit and craving that results from the heavy use of these substances. They may not actively wish to engage in this risky behavior, but under the pressure of these irrational conditions they will continue to do so. It is in this way that ignorance, attachment, and craving within the mind drive unskillful speech and actions within us all. And it is in the same way that an addict may be given the tools to change their way of thinking to cease their addiction that one may undertake the Training of Concentration to take control of the mind's tendency toward craving, attachment, or aversion. Because the three components of this training are those which drive a meditative practice the specifics of which do not further the goals of the present work, no

matter how enjoyable a lesson in awareness of respiration may be at the moment, we can instead focus on the purpose of this training and its intended ends.

Right Effort is most simply understood as an attempt at control; control of both the mind and the way in which we develop an understanding of our reality. The Buddha described the following four types of Right Effort:

> To prevent evil, unwholesome states from arising;
> to abandon them if they should arise;
> to generate wholesome states not existing;
> to maintain them without lapse, causing them to develop and to reach full
> growth and perfection.

Beyond the control meant to be imparted by these forms of Right Effort in one's meditative practice, Right Effort in general can be seen as promoting determination and a persistent effort towards one's goals. The practitioner must develop a drive and zealotry in the pursuit of controlling the mental roots of unskillful behavior in order to achieve liberation.

If Right Effort can be said to improve one's control, Right Mindfulness is then the means by which one may improve their accuracy. It is a means of situating the self in the here and now. In this context the practice of awareness of respiration is clarified in a philosophical sense. By focusing on a behavior such as breath which is acutely of the present, it would seem pointless to try and focus on what our breathing will be like in an hour. One can draw the mind away from the recollection of past events or the fantasies of the future and onto the only moment in which we can exist, the present. "The Dharma is the path of here-and-now" (Goenka, 1997) and as such requires us to refocus into the present moment in order to experience ultimate reality free from the suffering of the past and anxiety about the future. Having become aware of our place in the present, we can in turn improve our understanding of craving, ignorance, and attachment as they arise. We are no longer forced by our mental circumstances to be reactive to these conditions. Through exercise of Right Mindfulness we are able to identify, examine, and move beyond them, staying focused on the present. Having situated our reality we are additionally able to ensure that our practice is actively a positive one. The

analytical process becomes modified and the practice becomes incrementally easier as we move toward liberation.

The final component of the Training of *Samadhi* is that of Right Concentration. Concentration in this context is not limited to our normal conceptualization which could be otherwise termed 'focus' or 'intense attention', but is better understood as an unbroken awareness aimed at the development of self-control. In terms of an active meditative practice, Right Concentration can be called the habitualization of Right Mindfulness as it is developed through a similar practice, although one with an increasing emphasis on a single-mindedness in the experience of one's reality; to develop the mind into an instrument which actively removes barriers to liberation. As this is a practical rather than philosophical component of *samadhi,* I will defer to the Magga-vibhanga Sutta of the Grouped Discourses for an adequate description before moving on.

> And what is right concentration? There is the case where a monk — quite withdrawn from sensuality, withdrawn from unskillful (mental) qualities — enters & remains in the first jhana: rapture & pleasure born from withdrawal, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. With the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, he enters & remains in the second jhana: rapture & pleasure born of composure, unification of awareness free from directed thought & evaluation — internal assurance. With the fading of rapture, he remains equanimous, mindful, & alert, and senses pleasure with the body. He enters & remains in the third jhana, of which the Noble Ones declare, 'Equanimous & mindful, he has a pleasant abiding.' With the abandoning of pleasure & pain — as with the earlier disappearance of elation & distress — he enters & remains in the fourth jhana: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain. This is called right concentration.
> (Bhikku, 2000)

The Training of Wisdom

While certain means of interpreting the two trainings of *shila* and *Samadhi* are uniquely Buddhist, the practices themselves are clearly present throughout various world religions. However, as the Buddha emphasized in his teachings, it is insight into one's own nature which ultimately leads one to the attainment of *nirvana*. Shakyamuni Buddha explained the interplay of the three trainings in the following way:

> If it is supported by morality, concentration is very fruitful, very beneficial. If it is supported by concentration, wisdom is very fruitful, very beneficial. If it is supported by wisdom, the mind becomes freed from all defilements.

The development of concentration and morality are undeniably beneficial, but it is in their contribution to the development of wisdom that the teachings of the Buddha are fully realized. This was his unique contribution; this is the middle path between complete denial and unfettered excess. Morality removes the most patent manifestations of mental disharmony and the continued mental anguish which such actions in turn cause, while through the ability to concentrate the mind we are calmed and can then undertake the work of reflecting on these mental states. Ultimately, however, it is the development of wisdom through Right Thought and Right Understanding that we may penetrate reality and rid ourselves of attachment and ignorance.

Although likely a case of misattribution, the importance of Right Thought is the subject of one of the most popular sayings of the Buddha: "You are what you think. All that you are arises from your thoughts. With your thoughts you make the world." Despite the common understanding that the meditative practice of Buddhism is intended to quiet the mind entirely, ceasing the traffic of thought to improve focus on the here-and-now, this is not the case. Thought will persist; it will continue to shape our actions. It is changing the nature of this thought which is the goal of mindfulness. We begin to relate our thoughts to the Dharma and orient them in terms of our own liberation and eventually the liberation of others as we grow in the Dharma. This sympathy, which is the foundation for the Bodhisattva ideal which will be explored later, defines the potential for change on a societal level as well. As Kosambi (in Ilaiah) explains, "This world is filled with sorrow generated by uncontrolled desire, greed, cupidity, and self-seeking on the part of mankind. The quenching of desire is the path to peace for all." The discipline to not simply filter out thought which is borne from attachment, greed, or pessimism but to eventually think and, as a result, act from a position of positivity is the cultivation of

wisdom through Right Thought. This is the precursor to the development of complete wisdom

through Right Understanding.

> Each one of us must live truth by direct experience, by the practice of *bhavana*
> (cultivating); only this living experience will liberate the mind. No one else's
> realization of truth will liberate us. Even the enlightenment of the Buddha could
> liberate only one person, Siddhartha Gautama. At most, someone else's
> realization can act as an inspiration for others, offering guidelines for them to
> follow, but ultimately we each must do the work ourselves. Truth can be lived,
> can be experienced directly, only within oneself. Whatever is outside is always
> at a distance from us. Only within can we have actual, direct, living experience
> of reality. (Goenka, 2000)

Achieving true wisdom is a deeply personal undertaking. Indeed, if one were inclined to reduce

the entirety of the Buddha's teachings on the way to liberation down to a single individual

practice, that practice would be the cultivation of *prajna,* of which there are three forms which

allow us to achieve Right Understanding as the direct realization of the truth (*vipashyana-*

bhavana). These three forms of wisdom are received wisdom, intellectual wisdom, and

experiential wisdom.

Received wisdom, alternately often referred to as 'heard' wisdom, is the wisdom gained

from exposure to information from an outside source. Reading books, listening to lectures,

exposure to an ideological structure such as growing up in a particular religious tradition, and

even the exchange of information in informal contexts are all forms of gaining received wisdom.

In these situations we are exposed to the wisdom of others, choosing to deny or accept this

wisdom for any number of reasons which may have little or nothing to do with our true

understanding of reality. For example, individuals raised under strict religious guidelines may

incorporate the wisdom of their community because of a fear of damnation, or a desire to

experience grace and go to heaven. Oppressive political regimes typically transmit their wisdom

through similar means. Because such wisdom is rooted in pure emotion and not experience it

can alternatively be called 'borrowed' wisdom as it is not the result of one's own insight into

reality. It is accepted under duress and therefore is not subjected to any level of intellectual

rigor.

As opposed to wisdom which is accepted as a result of an external pressure of some sort, intellectual wisdom is the result of taking external information, often from the same sources one might gain received wisdom, and accepting it based on whether it adheres to one's rationality and is practical and beneficial. The Buddha emphasized the importance of intellectualizing Buddhism and indeed all wisdom which we might adopt in order to ensure that the ideas which inform our thoughts and ultimately guide our actions are consistent with our personal reality. Popularly this teaching is conveyed through the following statement of the Buddha:

> Do not believe in anything simply because you have heard it. Do not believe in anything simply because it is spoken and rumored by many. Do not believe in anything simply because it is found written in your religious books. Do not believe in anything merely on the authority of your teachers and elders. Do not believe in traditions because they have been handed down for many generations. But after observation and analysis, when you find that anything agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it.

Having a personal interest in Buddhism I come across this quote quite frequently and have always enjoyed that the sentiment, the importance of analytical *prajna*, has been made part of the anecdotal public discourse of Buddhism. However, being yet another example of a misquoted and oversimplified conceptualization of Buddhist teachings, it disregards the most important component of the three-fold understanding of wisdom, the ultimate superiority of experiential wisdom as a means of liberation. The doctrinal source of this misquote of the Buddha sheds light on this interplay between intellectual and experiential wisdom.

> Now, Kalamas, don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, 'This contemplative is our teacher.' When you know for yourselves that, 'These qualities are skillful; these qualities are blameless; these qualities are praised by the wise; these qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to welfare & to happiness' — then you should enter & remain in them. (Kalama Sutta)

It would seem that our previous discussion of intellectual wisdom is negated by the teachings of the Kalama Sutta as it restricts the adoption of beliefs by logical conjecture; however the lesson here is not a negative one, but the emphasis that one should come to know through experience

the truth of wisdom gained through intellectual means. It is not enough to adopt this wisdom with no intention of experiencing it directly. To do so would be to make our intellectual understanding yet another barrier to liberation rather than a means to attain it. It becomes a bondage in which we live; no different than received wisdom adopted out of fear or attachment.

A Word on 'Western' Buddhism

There are many conceptualizations of Buddhism in play around the world. Aside from the dozens of formally recognized schools of Buddhism that make up the Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana traditions, the individual practices associated with these various schools are each aligned with a specific understanding and interpretation of the teachings discussed above. There are also emergent areas of Buddhist philosophical inquiry such as critical Buddhism and Buddhist modernism which, while ostensibly useful toward the goal of creating a Buddhist critical social theory, are difficult to define in any meaningful way without becoming mired in doctrinal nuance and lengthy historical and textual analysis. However as this work ultimately seeks to address issues of relevance to modern capitalist society and the modes of critique thereof, it must briefly address the issue of Western Buddhism.

The decision to define the core of Buddhist philosophy in the way I have lends itself, and arguably rightly so, to some degree of criticism. In an attempt to engage modernity and a modernist mode of critical theory, it is tempting to define Buddhism in terms which entirely remove its philosophy from the esoteric and spiritual foundations which underlie traditional Buddhism as it has been practiced for more than 2000 years. In fact, as Hattam (2004) points out through the work of Heelas, Lash, and Morris (1996) and Metz (1987), to attempt to engage critical theory through the lens of Buddhism as it has been defined for this work is to provoke the anxiety which critical theory exhibits in the face of 'noncontemporaneous phenomena.' This is the result of a strong de-traditionalization thesis which he describes as pervasive throughout modern critical social theory. It is in the context of this same tendency throughout Western society, to eschew traditional teachings for a modern scientific approach, that what we may call

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Western Buddhism has emerged. It is not enough however to describe Western Buddhism in terms of a shift away from tradition; it is also a reactionary reformulation of this tradition. Zizek (2001) thusly describes Western Buddhism as much more than a symptom of the ills of modern capitalist society; it is the fetish which allows us to simultaneously cope with the pressures of our condition while maintaining the illusion that we are somehow removed from them. In this way Buddhism as it is widely practiced in the West is subject to the Marxist critique of religion as an 'opiate of the masses' rather than a source of liberation, as this work argues. Zizek goes so far as to conclude that:

> The 'Western Buddhist" meditative stance is arguably the most efficient way for us to fully participate in capitalist dynamics while retaining the appearance of mental sanity. If Max Weber were alive today, we would definitely write a second, supplementary, volume to his *Protestant Ethic*, entitled *The Taoist Ethic and the Spirit of Global Capitalism.*

Western Buddhism as a supplement to the ideologies of an exploitative mode of modernity has abandoned its revolutionary potential, seeking mindfulness and serenity not as a means to liberation, but instead as ends in and of themselves.

This is of course not an indictment of the secular Buddhism of the West as entirely un-Buddhist. Its many manifestations, mindfulness meditation, humanistic Buddhism, and varying Yogic schools, often serve as introductions to Buddhism, planting the seed of the Dharma so to speak. I am further not making the claim that to practice Buddhism with a liberatory orientation requires one to adopt unquestioningly the underlying soteriological framework which is itself older than Buddhism. The purpose of this critique however, is to advocate against the Western tendency to either reorganize traditional or noncontemporaneous practices such as religion to better fit the modern paradigm, or to abandon these practices completely. This tendency is rooted in the singular view of tradition as rigid and dogmatic. In order to overcome this view we must engage these traditions with a creativity that accepts the potential for revolutionary ways of relating to reality to be present in the noncontemporaneous (Metz, in Hattam, 2004).

Chapter 3

A Marxist Buddha or a Buddhist Marx?

>If you want to be free,
>Get to know your real self.
>It has no form, no appearance,
>No root, no basis, no abode,
>But is lively and buoyant.
>It responds with versatile facility,
>But its function cannot be located.
>Therefore when you look for it,
>You become further from it;
>When you seek it,
>You turn away from it all the more.
>   - *Linji*.

Having established an understanding of Buddhism which lends itself to the task at hand, it is now possible to turn our attention to the development of dialogical space between traditional critical social theory and Buddhism through the examination of several relevant areas of intersectionality. This of course will be to develop an intersectionality of liberation rather than domination. In searching for these areas of affinity between Buddhism and critical social theory I have chosen to focus on Critical Theory in the Marxist tradition as it is ultimately oriented toward liberation as demonstrated by the Horkheimian definition discussed earlier. In keeping with the focus of creating a Buddhist critical social theory as a means to liberation, the following chapter will engage Marxist Critical Theory directly as a tradition similarly concerned with human suffering. This engagement will take place in two parts; the development of a general Buddhist-Marxism through a critical interpretation of the common ground which would make such a hyphenate possible. This will also serve as an examination of the issue of subject-position and personal agency in Buddhism and Marxist Critical Theory in preparation for the forthcoming discussion of the revolutionary potential of a Buddhist Critical Social Theory.

Half Marxist, Half Buddhist

His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso is famously fond of resisting his often caricaturized image throughout the West by endorsing ideas and making statements which would seem more appropriate coming from a hardened radical than a simple Buddhist monk.

He has openly endorsed dogmatically flexible positions on abortion and LGBT rights which are often in defiance of a strict interpretation of Buddhist doctrine. He has embraced the role of positivist science in ways that no other religious leader has or arguably could, declaring that, "If scientific analysis were conclusively to demonstrate certain claims in Buddhism to be false, then we must accept the findings of science and abandon those claims" (Dalai Lama, 2006). However, one of his most surprising declarations has been that he considers himself to be a Marxist, a point he routinely makes when discussing issues of economic justice. His position is best summed up by this response from a 1993 interview:

> The economic system of Marxism is founded on moral principles, while capitalism is concerned only with gain and profitability. Marxism is concerned with the distribution of wealth on an equal basis ... as well as the fate of those who are underprivileged and in need, and [it] cares about the victims of minority-imposed exploitation. For those reasons, the system appeals to me, and it seems fair (Halliwell, 2011).

There are however caveats to His Holiness' Marxism. He is not a Leninist as he believes in compassion rather than class consciousness as the key to liberation. He is also quick to point out that his Marxist tendencies do not place him in the company of modern communist states. Being the leader of the Tibetan government in exile, this provides him the frequent opportunity to point out the true nature of these governments, especially the one responsible for his exile:

> I am not only a socialist but also a bit leftist, a communist. In terms of social economy theory, I am a Marxist. I think I am farther to the left than the Chinese leaders. [Bursts out laughing.] They are capitalists. [Laughs again.] (Ueda, 2013).

While this may seem a superfluously novel place to begin a dialogue between Buddhism and Marxism, the importance of His Holiness' political and economic positions should not be minimalized. It is a demonstration that even under the highest levels of doctrinal scrutiny Buddhism is compatible with Marxist theory as both an economic theory and an underlying method of ethically engaging unjust social and political structures.

The Common Ground of Suffering

Despite the 'ironic affinities' which exist between Buddhism and Marxism, very little in the way of comparative academic work exists dealing specifically with the exploration of this space outside of very rigid historical or political contexts. Naturally, it is one thing to examine the transition of Tibetan culture under Chinese control as a means of characterizing very specific incarnations of both Buddhism and Marxism; however such a comparison is of little practical use for my purposes. I will therefore be focusing my attention on developing a Marxist understanding of several Buddhist concepts which are derived directly from the basic formulation of Buddhism which has already been established.

The term 'ironic affinities' is one which I have borrowed from Kevin Brien's (2004) work toward this very end. The irony here is that a system of religious thought which is focused on the internal sources of disharmony and suffering can be reconciled with a philosophical and economic system which is both critical of the influence of religion and focused on external causes of human suffering. The means to this reconciliation, as Brien points out, lies in the Buddhist understanding of the interconnectedness of reality through the philosophy of dependent origination and the training of wisdom as embodied through the practices of Right Thought and Right Understanding. It bears repeating at this point that a cornerstone of these teachings is summed up by the sentiment "With your thoughts you make the world." The extrapolation that this forces us to make is not an illogical one; that individuals, who themselves are subject to suffering through the influence of greed, attachment, and craving, would in turn establish larger systems which can do little else but perpetuate suffering. Brien explains:

> Once again my suggestion is that, were the historical Buddha alive at the present time, and were he fully aware of the humanistic-Marxist perspective on social reality, he would quite naturally extend his notion of dependent co-origination to take account of the various mutually interconnected, and mutually interdependent, external factors operating in a given situation – the sort of factors that generate the various forms of human suffering and of alienation that Marx himself was so concerned to understand. [...] Thus if the historical Buddha, with Marx's *bodhisattvic* help, he could have identified the specific external factors that functioned to generate and sustain specific forms of suffering and alienation, he would quite naturally have seen that, *when these*

> *specific external factors arise, this specific type of suffering and alienation arises; and that if these factors were to cease operating, this suffering would also cease* (2004:51).

In this context the Marxist concern with identifying and understanding these external sources of suffering can be seen as a function of the collision of dependent origination and Marx's own historical materialism. It reflects a social and economic reality that is the result of historical influence on our creation of self which acknowledges the internal sources of the root of suffering itself; and like the traditional Buddhist formulation as defined in the Third Noble Truth, it should be understood as an optimistic undertaking, to ultimately serve as an impetus for change. This formulation of a basic philosophical convergence between Buddhism and Marxism should fly in the face of the criticisms of fatalism which have been leveled at both philosophies. It provides the foundation for a liberatory *praxis* which seeks the cessation of suffering through the exercise of supreme agency across all levels of human organization. It is also rooted in a similar understanding of human nature, the second major interaction between Buddhism and Marxism which is essential to the creation of a Buddhist critical social theory.

Human Nature in Marxism and Buddhism

From a traditional philosophical standpoint, the act of conceptualizing human nature can be seen as an ends oriented task. Humanity's specific nature ultimately dictates the proper fulfillment of our existence and therefore must be understood in terms of the creature which it produces. One of the most far-reaching examples of such an understanding of human nature is the Aristotelian account of human life being ideally contemplative; that the greatest expression of the natural state of a rational being is to live the examined life of which humans alone are uniquely capable. For Marx however, human nature is more complicated, involving the influence of history on what he referred to as man's *Gattungswesen*. The term itself can be understood in two distinct ways; species-being and species-essence (Wartenberg, 1982). 'Species-being' as it appears in Marx's early writings can be best described as a sort of man's state-in-nature. To Marx, man is an inherently species-oriented creature, existing socially and communally in order

to fulfill this nature. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx describes the manner in which this nature has been influenced and essentially destroyed by the process of history and the development of bourgeois society:

> He appears originally as a *species-being, clan being, herd animal* – although in no way whatsoever as a [*political animal*]. Exchange itself is a chief means of this individuation. It makes the herd-like existence superfluous and dissolves it. Soon the matter [has] turned in such a way that as an individual he relates himself only to himself, while the means with which he posits himself as individual have become the making of his generality and commonness (1973:496).

As Wartenberg points out, in first developing this state-in-nature understanding of human nature, Marx is engaging with the Aristotelian tradition and it's formulation of man as a *zoon politikon*. In doing so he is advancing the argument that although man is driven to cooperation in the advancement of a social society, he is not driven to the creation of the state as a means of achieving this condition. While generally minimized in importance to Marx's theory of human nature, this understanding of *species-being* is helpful in the promotion of a unified response to the alienating effects of bourgeois politics through socialist tactics.

Species-essence on the other hand has emerged as the dominant understanding of Marx's *Gattungswesen;* a metaphysical description of man's means of fulfilling his true nature. Here too Marx is radically diverging in his understanding of man from that of the ancients. For Marx, man is fulfilled not simply by thought but by actions; specifically, the 'free conscious activity' done in accordance with one's conscious deliberation (Wartenberg, 1982).

> It is therefore in his fashioning of the objective that man really proves himself to be a *species-being.* Such production is his active species-life. Through it nature appears as *his* work and his reality. The object of labor is therefore the *objectification of the species-life of man:* for man reproduces himself not only intellectually, in his consciousness, but actively and actually, and he can therefore contemplate himself in a world he himself has created (Marx, 1974:329).

It is through this view of our nature as active creators that Marx eventually develops his theory of alienation through the exploitation of this creativity at the hands of bourgeois capitalists.

Another way of understanding this specific form of exploitation in more Buddhistic terms would be 'material suffering.'

Buddhism, as we have come to understand it, naturally shares Marxism's concern with human suffering. It can also be said to share the viewpoint that man is, through one means or another, especially susceptible to suffering because of his specific nature. From a Marxist perspective this suffering is the result of acquisitiveness, greed, possessiveness, and exploitation; precisely the individual traits which are condemned in the teachings of the Buddha (de Silva, 2002). However, these initial similarities must be understood as part of the larger Buddhist view of human nature which I will address in a similar manner in which Marxism has been addressed above.

While the fundamental teachings of Buddhism, unlike many Western philosophies, do not explicitly address a natural state of humanity other than one which is subject to *dukkha*, larger doctrinal teachings have been used in recent scholarship to develop a clearer picture of the state-in-nature of humanity. According to Soka philosophy, human nature is best understood in response to the question of man as essentially good or evil. However, as they point out, the principle of dependent origination makes such dichotomous thinking inherently flawed. Good for a Buddhist is not simply an opposition to evil. It is a reflection of an absolute good, however with the caveat that the realm of humanity represents a battleground between good and evil set against this larger cosmic context. It is in this context that humanity is said to take on the character of the subjective human being (Matsuoka, 2005). This subjectivity is not to be understood as a kind of moral relativism but rather the result of the unique ability of human beings to actively express and engage the teachings of the Buddha to manifest this cosmic good through compassion and the performance of good deeds. In terms which might appeal to the Marxist sensibility this perspective acknowledges subjective compassionate action as the fulfilment of human nature for a Buddhist.

As with the Marxist view of ideal human activity, Buddhist subjective compassionate action is rooted in an understanding of humanity as intrinsically interconnected; the result of the philosophy of dependent origination. This symbiosis, while not identical to Marx's *species-being*, is analogous in its resistance to an alienating individualist approach to human nature. While liberation can be seen as an individual pursuit, it cannot be sought through individualist means. One must cultivate good karma through the fulfillment of the natural drive to manifest positive deeds and in doing so will influence others in their search for liberation. To succinctly combine the two perspectives, man is then best understood as a creature which is driven to deliberate and collectively liberatory action.

Karma and Reincarnation

The law of Karma as a religious concept is one which is not unique to Buddhism. In fact it had existed in the Hindu and Pan-Indian naturalist religions for many centuries before it was adopted as part of Buddhist doctrine. In this historical context it can be understood as a cosmic law which ensures that all crimes are appropriately punished and all good deeds appropriately rewarded (Gombrich, 1975). To this understanding of Karma, Shakyamuni Buddha added a specific emphasis on the intention of an action rather than a singular focus on the actions themselves. For example, the Jainist understanding of karma as physically conceived and blind to intent is a fundamental component of daily life for them as it demands absolute accountability for all actions. One of the many stories meant to demonstrate this philosophy is that of a Jainist monk walking a path in the jungle and coming across a line of ants crossing his path. Rather than risk accidentally stepping on one of the ants and incurring the wrath of karma for this transgression, the monk immediately stops and patiently waits for the ants to finish crossing the path before he continues on his way. While Buddhists and Jainists share the prohibition of killing as the highest precept of their respective practices, the Buddhist response to this situation would naturally take into account the role of intent in the interaction with the offending ants. In this case a Buddhist monk in the same situation would likely step over the ants

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carefully, mindful of the possibility that he may unknowingly step on a straggler, but doing his best to prevent this from happening. This is the function of karma in Buddhism; to promote mindful interaction with the outside world through the understanding that our purposeful actions will ultimately bear fruit.

Beyond the description of a singular manifestation of the differing conception of karma in Buddhism, the manner in which it appears in doctrinal teachings results in a threefold connotation for Buddhist karma; it refers to conditioned action, the shaping power of one's actions, and the cumulative effects of the actions of the past (Brien, 2004). However, for Buddhists this effect is not absolute. The influence of karmic cause and effect on our actions is best understood as a light touch rather than an iron fist. As such actions are shaped to varying degrees with the understanding that one's individual karma is equally malleable; it may be shaped at any time. In much the same way that intentions shape the karmic nature of our actions, individual agency exists within Buddhism to reshape our karma as a whole. As we have seen, this agency is central to the entirety of Buddhism. The Buddha taught that liberation was possible in this life, not simply an inevitability after many lifetimes of cultivating positive karma. Like Marx, the Buddha's revolution can be seen as an immediate response to a problem of the present, albeit a spiritual solution for a spiritual problem. However the problems of finding ground between a spiritual approach and a materialist one are possible to overcome.

Although traditional Buddhist karma is undeniably a metaphysical and spiritual principle of the kind which Marx arguably would have taken some degree of exception to, an analogous concept exists, what Brien refers to as 'social karma,' which is compatible with the humanist-Marxist perspective. According to Brien, the basis for an understanding of 'social karma' is found in this famous selection from *The German Ideology* which begins Marx's examination of the human condition:

> [They] are not arbitrary ones…but the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity…As individuals express their lives, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with

what they produce and with *how* they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production (p31).

In this context, the material conditions to which Marx refers are the result of the past activity of human production. Brien notes that these existing material conditions include both physical materials of production such as equipment and resources and the economic structures which have developed around the utilization of these physical materials. It is this collective deposit of past human activity that constitutes 'social karma.' However, as with the Buddhist karmic influence of historical activity, the influence of past material activity as 'social karma' leaves the concept only partly developed.

While our present conditions and activities are shaped by the influence of the past for Marx, it is how we approach the activity of the present that is of primary concern to the task of liberation. Human agency in the fulfilment of 'social karma' then becomes, in essence, the decision of how to use this existing material structure to in turn create a collective deposit of activity for future generations. We can choose to reproduce the conditions of the present, generating the same output under similar economic circumstances and in doing so maintaining our existing relationship to the material and structural means of production thus perpetuating the 'social karma' of past generations. Or we can choose to alter these circumstances with respect to *what* is produced or *how* we produce, giving rise to new 'social karma.' Such a modification is at the heart of Marx's revolutionary philosophy.

Engaging in a discussion of the Buddhist notion of karma, regardless of how it may be reframed or understood from a divergent philosophical position, demands an acknowledgement and discussion of reincarnation as a principle means of the long term transmission of karma across lifetimes. The doctrine of reincarnation and the cycle of rebirth, like karma, are adopted philosophies within Buddhist doctrine. As with karma, the Buddha, having been raised with this understanding of reality, generated his own teachings of reincarnation as a result of his enlightenment. These teachings moved away from an emphasis on the transmigration of substance, what is commonly called the soul, and embraced instead a focus on rebirth. This

rebirth shares nothing with the previous life with the exception of one's karma as manifested through the mind (Maguire, 2001). As was the Buddha's preferred method of demonstrating this concept to his disciples, I defer to the simile of the candle:

> We can apply this simile to the case of rebirth. The body of the candle is like the physical body of the person. The wick might be compared to the sense faculties that function as the support for the process of consciousness. The particles of oxygen are like the sense objects and the flame is like consciousness. Consciousness always arises with the physical body as its support. It always arises through a particular sense faculty, e.g. eye, ear, nose, etc. It always has an object, e.g. sight, sound, etc. The body, sense faculty and the object keep constantly changing and therefore consciousness and the mental factors are constantly changing. But because each act of mind follows in sequence and passes on the contents to the following, we speak of the body and mind compound as being the same person. When the body loses its vitality and death takes place, that is like the first candle coming to an end. The transmission of the flame to the next candle, that is like the passing on of the current of consciousness to the next life. When the mental continuum takes up the new body, that is like the flame of the old candle passing on to the new candle (Bhikkhu Bodhi).

The Buddhist emphasis on rebirth rather than reincarnation is, again, the result of the Buddha having abandoned the basis for the transmigration of substance which had previously permeated the beliefs of the region. However, this change can only be fully contextualized for our purposes as a result of the larger Buddhist doctrine of *anatman* or 'no-self.' According to the Buddha, there is no singular spiritual entity called the self. Rather, humans, and all sentient beings for that matter, exist as an impermanent combination of the five aggregates collectively called *skandha*. These aggregates are defined as follows:

1. *Matter.* The eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. In Buddhism, each of these terms is considered a sense organ.

2. *Sensations.* The raw data of sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and mental activity.

3. *Perception.* The recognition and naming of the sensations listed above.

4. *Mental formation.* All mental acts that generate activities – for example, will, judgement, fear, repulsion, pride, and so on. This skandha can manifest the three poisons – greed, anger, and ignorance – or their medicinal counterparts – wisdom, compassion, and enlightenment. Its function links us to our karma…

5. *Consciousness.* The awareness, registration, and ordering of the perceptions listed above (Maguire, 2001:88).

The result of this enumerated understanding of *skandha* is both the negation of the existence of a permanent self and the elimination of the need for such an entity. It is this 'self' which when embraced, as it so clearly has been throughout many cultures, results in the manifestation of greed, desire, and a mode of living driven almost exclusively by the unquenchable ego.

While it is only through embracing the impermanence of self can one's life be seen as a result of the *skandha,* it is critical to understand these five aggregates as themselves in constant flux and subject to impermanence. It is in this understanding that we are then able to rectify the metaphysical rebirth of Buddhism with a traditional materialist worldview which would otherwise have difficulty with such a doctrine. As with many religious doctrines, the cycle of rebirth in Buddhism is subject to many competing interpretations depending on which school one finds themselves a part of. Here again Watts in his experience with cultivating a Western affinity for Buddhism is particularly useful.

> Many Buddhists understand the Round of birth-and-death quite literally as a process of reincarnation…But in Zen, and in other schools of the Mahayana, it is often taken in a more figurative way, as that the process of rebirth is from moment to moment, so that one is being reborn so long as one identifies himself with a continuing ego which reincarnates itself afresh at each moment of time. Thus the validity and interest of the doctrine does not require acceptance of a special theory of survival. Its importance is rather that it exemplifies the whole problem of action in vicious circles and its resolution… (Watts, 1957:49).

This interpretation of rebirth outside of the metaphysical doctrine builds on the concept of 'social karma' by situating the human agency to affect change expressly within the present. While this can be interpreted in many ways, it is the argument of this work that a firm situation in the present moment is the hallmark of a revolutionary Buddhist critical social theory as it is a clear indictment of the gradualist approach to social and economic change.

While 'social karma' as it has been developed reflects the traditional Marxist concern with large-scale changes to social and economic institutions, it is purely the collective result of individual transformation through the continual process of rebirth. This however does not

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mitigate its potential for large-scale struggle and liberation. In fact, this very issue has previously been addressed within Marxist critical theory making use of the very form of human agency developed above. In Marcuse's *An Essay on Liberation*, revolution is understood to be primarily a personal endeavor, in which people choose to abandon the values and ideology of capitalism and begin to move toward larger class struggle. This personal change is crucial as each individual under capitalism, willingly or not, becomes "an agent of capitalist social control and ideological conformity"(Agger, 1979). As Agger sums up: "Thus, to Marcuse, the first level of socialist praxis is the struggle to transform the need and value patterns of the individual as a prelude – but only as a prelude – to new class formation." As these transformed values begin to reflect the drive for liberation, the collective influence of an increasingly enlightened population will begin to re-write the existing 'social karma' of the society resulting in material changes which can be built upon as more individuals take up the revolutionary cause. This in turn allows humanity to fully realize its drive for productive work outside of the exploited and alienated conditions of capitalism; the nature of this work naturally being open to debate. What is clear is that this liberated state first requires the capacity of individuals to undergo an internal change which has an immediate karmic effect.

> The social expression of the liberated work instinct is cooperation, which, grounded in solidarity, directs the organization of the realm of necessity and the development of the realm of freedom. And there is an answer to the question which troubles the minds of so many men of good will: what are the people in a free society going to do? The answer which, I believe, strikes at the heart of the matter was given by a young black girl. She said: for the first time in our life, we shall be free to think about what we are going to do (Marcuse, 1969:63).

It is this freedom to think in a radically new context that is the primary tool of Buddhism in its search for liberation. Thought freed from greed and the accumulation of negativity across generations is the only means for individual transformation and the only hope for liberating changes throughout larger social and political structures. The upcoming chapter seeks to bring clarity to the specific manner in which a Buddhist critical social theory might assist in bringing about such changes.

Chapter 4

Struggling Against the Apocalypse; Embracing the Bodhisattva Ideal

Buddhism, as we have seen, is fundamentally revolutionary in its history and teachings. From the Buddha's sudden abandonment of his worldly life to seek out liberation, this revolutionary spirit has been cultivated throughout Buddhist philosophy as a means of promoting the immediate possibility of enlightenment and liberation. This immediacy is what sets Buddhism apart from much of the world's dominant religions and philosophies. It is also what makes it especially well suited to the task of understanding and responding to the pressing issues of the present, the resolution of which cannot possibly be sought through gradualist means. Buddhist philosophy further operates through an understanding that each individual is intrinsically interconnected and therefore must operate as though every action, no matter how superficially benign, is meaningful in that it contributes to the collective activity of society, writing its social karma, and moving society either closer to or further away from liberation in that moment. The individual agency to affect change is meaningless without this understanding, particularly in light of the various alienating forces of modernity; conditions which we must all concern ourselves with. Gary Snyder, in 1961, described the importance of individual action based on Buddhist principles in response to the social, political, and economic conditions of his time:

> No one today can afford to be innocent, or indulge himself in ignorance of the nature of contemporary governments, politics and social orders. The national polities of the modern world maintain their existence by deliberately fostered craving and fear: monstrous protection rackets. The "free world" has become economically dependent on a fantastic system of stimulation of greed which cannot be fulfilled, sexual desire which cannot be satiated and hatred which has no outlet against oneself, the persons one is supposed to love, or the revolutionary aspirations of pitiful, poverty-stricken marginal societies... They create populations of "preta" – hungry ghosts, with giant appetites and throats no bigger than needles. The soil, the forests and all animal life are being consumed by these cancerous collectivities; the air and water of the planet is being fouled by them (1969).

Despite the more than fifty years which have passed since Snyder authored this

characterization, painfully little has been done in the way of alleviating the political, social, and

economic roots of the innumerable sufferings of humanity.

To attempt to select even a short list of the issues which plague modernity in the hopes

of offering a critical Buddhist interpretation and remedy would naturally be an indescribably

enormous task; however this chapter will focus on demonstrating the benefits of a critical

Buddhism by characterizing a great many of these ills as the result of a pervasive apocalyptic

worldview. It will then examine the role of the critical theorist as a vehicle for the transmission of

a Buddhist critical social theory in light of the Bodhisattva ideal of Mahayana Buddhism.

Relieving the Apocalyptic Worldview

For the better part of the last two-thousand years the people of the Western world have

been conditioned to view our existence in terms of our history; not simply the recollection of

events of the past, but a view of history as a revelatory process that carries with it the potential

for a grand fulfillment of one kind or another. This is the root of the apocalyptic worldview; a

reading of historical events as a preordained means of facilitating an absolute end to all things.

It is a way of looking at the world with certainty that a specific outcome is inevitable. These

outcomes naturally vary depending on one's dominant ideology, religion, or political perspective,

but in as much as they serve as a way of interpreting the past with the intention of moving

toward a particular future, they can be said to be apocalyptic.

While the word *apocalyptic* often carries with it a religious connotation, evoking images

of the fulfillment of God's plan by means of rapture, judgement, and the destruction of the world

as we know it, the apocalyptic focus on inevitable ends are present in many of the prevailing

ideologies of the West as well, even those which may seem fundamentally opposed to each

other. For example, proponents of free market capitalism tend to argue that, when left to its

naturally self-regulating state, capitalism will eventually solve issues of poverty, homelessness,

and the like. While income disparity and general economic inequality may exist for any number

of reasons, for the capitalist it is a certainty that all boats will indeed rise if only given the chance. From the opposing position of the Marxist, capitalism's tendency towards crisis, one of its hallmark characteristics, ensures that such a mode of political economy will inevitably be abandoned and replaced with socialism and eventually communism. While modern Marxists would no doubt argue that their political goals are no longer subject to the orthodoxy of Marx's 'laws of motion of modern society', the fact remains that the Marxist position is one which is driven toward a specific conclusion built upon historical conditions.

These are merely examples meant to convey the general form of the apocalyptic worldview, but what of its function? Spellmeyer (2010) points out that this way of looking at the world is so appealing because it provides certainty in the face of an increasingly complex reality. This complexity is all encompassing in modernity, challenging both traditional ways of understanding the world, such as religion, and our individual and collective confidence in a reliable preordained future of any kind. As is often the case when systems of belief, either formal or informal, are challenged, the response to this uncertainty has been a widespread clinging to the apocalyptic worldview. In addition to the certainty provided by such beliefs, they can also be seen as providing one's life with a sense of order and a connection to some transcendent value system.

> That sense of transcendent cosmic order can be internalized and the individual believer is suddenly made to feel his life newly purposeful and in touch with eternity. More than just a sense of immortality, he experiences himself in alliance with the deity – or with history – enabling him to share in His or its ultimate power to destroy and re-create. Feelings of weakness or despair can be replaced by a surge of life power or even omnipotence (Lifton, 2003:61).

Lifton further suggests that it is because such views satisfy the psychological needs for order and purpose that the holders of these beliefs are strongly driven to impose them on others. In cases where these beliefs fall in stark contrast to contemporary scientific or rational understanding this active proselytization serves to both stifle internal conflict and self-doubt and affirm one's convictions. The most obvious example of this would be the prevalence of religious fundamentalism in recent years. Whether in reference to religiously inspired conflict or acts of

terrorism, or the influence of Christian fundamentalism on public policy, we are presented with daily reminders that in spite of the technological and scientific advancement we have undergone as a species, these self-reinforcing beliefs are, for lack of a better word, inevitable under current conditions. Taken as a whole, the apocalyptic tendency of modern society ultimately frames all problems in these familiar and disruptive terms. Issues are framed in terms of past or future, as resulting from a single cause, or as the work of divinity. They are then discussed in similarly apocalyptic language which becomes detrimental to the possibility of legitimate public discourse and engagement.

> If the patterns of argument typical of religious prophecy are also observable in any public discourse that anticipates or predicts catastrophe, then we should be skeptical of the public's ability to reasonably evaluate any appeal to urgency in the face of disaster. At the same time, we also run the risk of dismissing valid threats because they are couched in the form, if not the language, of traditional prophetic warnings. (O'leary, 1997:310, in Foust & William, 2009)

This process is harmful to progress at all levels. It makes all problems the result of a particular mindset; a product of our collective way of approaching reality. Perhaps most importantly it is exploited at every turn by news media and politicians to reinforce public support for existing power structures, which at the moment represent the best hope for addressing many of the most pressing contemporary issues faced by humanity as a whole.

As we have seen, the revolutionary potential for a Buddhist critical social theory to provoke mass change is found in individual agency, and in addressing the issue of an apocalyptic worldview the emphasis remains the same. However, rather than focus on specific individual mental states as they contribute to personal suffering, the creation of a Buddhist worldview in defiance of the apocalyptic position requires the cultivation of a global mindfulness and situation in the present moment. It can be understood as facilitating the embrace of the chaos and complication of the world rather than its destruction. However, before I delve into the specifics of the Buddhist worldview a note of clarification is in order.

The above indictment of Western apocalyptic tradition is not meant to suggest that Buddhism itself carries no apocalyptic traditions; the truth is quite the opposite. While the

Buddha himself refused to speculate on matters regarding the beginning and end of the world, he did foresee the abandonment and eventual vanishing of his teachings from the Earth. This teaching from the *Vinaya*, a monastic text used in many schools of Buddhism, was eventually developed into an apocalypse story which dwarfs its Christian counterpart in severity and scale but serves a much different doctrinal purpose. Forgoing a lengthy exposition, the Buddhist end of the world consists of three cycles of destruction at progressively higher realms of existence until nothing but the highest realms of heaven remain. While complete destruction of the universe may seem difficult to recover from, the Buddhist approach to time as cyclical means that in the moments following absolute destruction, in this universe or the next, creation will emerge as it has many times before. Rather than a literal tale of destruction, the Buddhist apocalypse serves as a warning against an apocalyptic mindset (Spellmeyer, 2010). Its allegorical value is in the demonstration that regardless of the possibility of an absolute end to all things, the conditions of life will reemerge, rife with the same suffering and struggle as has always existed. It is not these conditions which are the true problem for humanity; it is instead the active desire to escape them.

Another way of understanding the Buddhist apocalypse as allegory is in its situation within the three *asankha kalpas*, or great eons during which it is said that the Buddha himself struggled for enlightenment. This cycle of birth, existence, and suffering is understood not as a literal series of uncountable eternities after which one may gain enlightenment, but rather an analogy for the three poisoned states of mind; greed, anger, and delusion. Those who are able to overcome these three poisons are said to have passed through these great *kalpas* and cultivated the three sets of limitless virtues which manifest as countless good thoughts within the mind (Red Pine, 1987). The fulfillment of the *maha kalpa*, the Buddhist apocalypse, is in this way an act of creation and liberation, not destruction.

It is precisely in the act of destruction that the folly of the apocalyptic worldview is best understood. For the West in this mindset, destruction is a symptom of desire itself. We destroy

so as to create a more desirable (read profitable, exploitable) product, which in turn we are more than willing to destroy when that product has exceeded its usefulness. All means of environmental destruction have their roots in this desire for a useful product over the sustenance of natural resources. We actively accept the negative externalities of industrial activity for the promise of economic growth and the hope that the environmental impact of these activities can be mitigated in the future. In this instance however, it is likely that this future will never come as the greed which drives such development will never subside, only create more suffering. For a Buddhist this drive to destructive development is alleviated by shifting one's perspective to the present; to see things as they are not as they should be. This state of mind, known as *Tathata* or Thusness, drive us away from the active destruction and recreation of the world and toward a way of living in the world which imposes no singular view of a potential idealized future of which there is no certainty. As we cannot actively mitigate worldly conditions as they unfold, the uncertainty of the future results in a holding pattern of inaction as we sit, hopeful that our vision will be realized. Our lives become a kind of lottery in which we may only hope that fortune shines down on us and gives us the exact results which we have imagined (Spellmeyer, 2010).

> *The Blue Cliff Record*, a key Zen text, compares this hope to a starving man waiting for a rabbit to crash into a stump so he can cook it for dinner. If he continues to wait expectantly, the man will surely die. And while he is waiting for an event that might never take place at all, a tree could be dropping fruit a few feet away. (2010:61)

This condition of hopefulness can be understood as a secondary reality which, having been synthesized through possibility, is inherently false. There is only one reality with two perspectives; an enlightened perspective in which one realizes that time cannot be constrained to march toward particular ends, where hope becomes meaningless, and the unenlightened perspective which seeks control and focuses on the past and future to the detriment of the present.

The political impact of this lack of focus on the present is a similar mode of inactivity. When mired in the back and forth of political discourse between parties working toward disparate, albeit similarly apocalyptic, ends, the result is often to do nothing, assuming that given enough time a solution will emerge which adheres to the perspective of at least a majority of those concerned. This is of course just waiting for a different rabbit to hit a different stump. It would further seem that the more pressing an issue, the more politicized it becomes, fueling the divisive fires of hopefulness and moving humanity further away from even attempting to act. The obvious example of such an issue is climate change. Despite overwhelming academic consensus on the matter, the social and political response has been largely one of inaction. This inaction is the result of multiple manifestations of the apocalyptic worldview. Across the spectrum we have seen a lack of response justified in many ways; the Christian belief that God ultimately controls all things and therefore we have no agency to intervene, the argument that the economic costs of responding to climate change are not justified due to a particular interpretation of scientific data, the claim that the science itself is entirely faulty, and the belief that if incentivized enough the free market will address the issue itself. Even within more progressive circles conflict is perpetuated between those who support cap-and-trade and those who would like to see a carbon tax. Each of these points of view, as well as the innumerable others, carries with it the hopeful fantasy that it represents a solution, if not *the* solution, to the issue of climate change. What results is a universal hesitancy to act at all in any manner which *might* prove successful. This situation parallels the Buddhist tale of Zen Master Nansen:

> Nansen saw the monks of the eastern and western halls fighting over a cat. He seized the cat and told the monks: "If any of you say a good word, you can save the cat."
> No one answered. So Nansen boldly cut the cat in two pieces.
> That evening Joshu returned and Nansen told him about this. Joshu removed his sandals and, placing them on his head, walked out.
> Nansen said: "If you had been there, you could have saved the cat."
> (Ekai, 1934)

This story is a demonstration of the Buddhist mind oriented in the present. The lesson being that an action taken in the present, toward the preservation of good, in this case the life of the

cat and Nansen's karma, is far superior to inaction. Joshu obviously would have had no way of knowing that his response would have saved the cat's life, but his ability to demonstrate that he would have acted in that moment to attempt a resolution is what sets his enlightened mind apart from the unenlightened minds of the bickering monks. He is not concerned with taking the 'right' path but rather in connecting with the world without hesitation. This is the mindset which facilitates the sudden action of liberation for the self and in turn all beings. It is the heart of a revolutionary critical Buddhism.

Critical Theorist as Bodhisattva

Beings are numberless; I vow to save them.
Delusions are inexhaustible; I vow to end them.
Dharma gates are boundless; I vow to enter them.
Buddha's way is unsurpassable; I vow to become it.
                                - The Bodhisattva Vow (Winston, 2002)

Up to this point this work has focused on facilitating an understanding of the doctrinal foundations and worldview of a potential Buddhist critical social theory. Although these tools are useful for the task of critical social theory from a Buddhist perspective, an impactful undertaking of this task requires a shift in the way we view the character and role of the critical theorist. For the task of developing and transmitting a Buddhist critical social theory there can be no better model than the Mahayana ideal of the Bodhisattva.

Within the Mahayana school of Buddhism the archetype of the Bodhisattva represents the supreme goal of the practitioner. While there are several ways the term can be defined depending on its context, it is most often used to refer to an individual who has attained enlightenment but delays Buddhahood to remain in the cycle of death and rebirth for the benefit of all sentient beings. It is only when all such beings have attained the state of enlightenment that the Bodhisattva will embrace Buddhahood and enjoy the bliss of *nirvana*. More generally it refers to any individual practitioner who seeks to help others along the path to salvation. Bodhisattvas of the first kind are often revered within the Mahayana, with each having its own individual character traits and realms of influence. Despite being commonly referred to as

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'gods,' a more accurate Western analog would be the patron saint of Catholicism. For example, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, one of the most revered divinities in Chinese and Japanese Buddhism, is principally concerned with ensuring the salvation of those existing in lower realms (hells) and is commonly portrayed as the guardian of deceased children, expectant mothers, firemen, and travelers. As with all Bodhisattvas of this kind, she has famously undertaken a specific formulation of the Bodhisattva vow in alignment with her focus:

> If I do not go to the hell to help the suffering beings there, who else will go? ... if the hells are not empty I will not become a Buddha. Only when all living beings have been saved, will I attain Bodhi.

Bodhisattvas of this kind are naturally recognized as existing in a higher realm than ours; however in the Mahayana tradition their goal is the same as worldly Bodhisattvas, the liberation of all sentient beings from suffering. Furthermore, from a doctrinal standpoint, the image of the Bodhisattva also serves the purpose of allowing for external intervention in one's own liberation. The earthly Bodhisattva can then be seen as a teacher, mentor, and peer whose engagement with the world is meant to facilitate salvation on a global level (Maguire, 2001). It is precisely this character which must be cultivated among critical theorists who embrace a Buddhist foundation. To assist in this cultivation Winston (2002) identifies four tools of the Bodhisattva; intention, practice, nonattachment, and action.

Intention

If their work is to be truly impactful and accessible in the spirit of the Bodhisattva ideal it must be undertaken with the intent to advance more than idle knowledge. This is not to condemn pure research; but simply to place it outside of the scope of our concern at the moment. As has been previously discussed, it is the intent behind one's actions rather than the act itself which determines its karma. This altruistic intent, *bodhicitta*, allows one to overcome an attitude of self-cherishing which is strongly associated with the generation of suffering within the self (Hattam, 2004). The mind which cultivates *bodhicitta* works not for the benefit of self but instead from a quality of mind characterized by love and compassion. It utilizes a logic of basic

goodness which disregards preconception and expectation and acts in the moment for positive ends.

For the critical theorist this intent should be fairly straight forward. Those whose work is aimed at the provocation of liberatory action of all sorts can be said to have this right intent. In fact, one of the few tropes present in existing engagements between critical theory and Buddhism is that of Marx as bodhisattva. For Marx, the ultimate goal of the theorist is not simply to facilitate an understanding of the world but to change the material conditions which contribute to suffering. It is not a vehicle for the advancement of a particular political agenda, although this may be an unintended consequence of knowledge gained through critical inquiry. Turning again to Marx, his advocacy of socialism was not the sole purpose of his work but rather the necessary result of his formulation and understanding of political economy and the alienating forces contained therein. Simply put, to undertake the task of critical inquiry with a particular agenda in mind makes one's work a slave to that agenda.

Practice

Just as important as the purpose behind one's work is the way in which the work is performed. There is no singular manner in which critical inquiry should be performed. Each theorist is appropriately free to develop their own style as it reflects their foundations and priorities, however if their ultimate goal is to promote public discourse and the alleviation of suffering by the masses their work must be accessible and, at least to some degree, actionable. As Jacoby (2000) points out in *The Last Intellectuals*, the process of professionalization and academization of intellectual work has replaced the public audience with an academic one. In doing so it has also encouraged the proliferation of discipline specific jargon and the use of additionally overcomplicated language and styles throughout academic work. This obscurantist inclination serves the purpose of drawing a line in the sand between popular inquiry and academic work. As a result, the nature of the public intellectual has fundamentally changed. These figures who were once rooted in literary and social criticism are now primarily concerned

with economics and political science (Drezner, 2008). Even attempts at provoking public dialogue on the part of critically inclined social scientist and humanities oriented academics through blogs and other similarly informal publications has had little impact on the accessibility of truly reasoned work, but instead reflects the personal interests and opinions of the theorist; being more akin to "…private journals with megaphones than reasoned contributions to public life…" (Jacoby, in Drezner, 2008).

This however does not have to be the case. Means of facilitating a public interaction with rigorous academic inquiry, such as blogs and other informal public outlets, can be exploited to begin to reverse the impact of the vitriolic and divisive agenda-driven discourse that permeates popular culture. This can be seen as yet another example of the way that the apocalyptic worldview is spread, carrying with it the paralyzing effects of indecision and politicization. It is central to the performance of critical inquiry that one eschews obscurantism and isolation within academic circles if there is to be any chance at all of engaging the public towards the goal of liberation.

Nonattachment and Action

The final two tools of the Bodhisattva are closely related and thus should be addressed simultaneously. The Buddhist drive toward nonattachment refers specifically to the abandonment of desire for objects, conditions, and mental states which can only lead to suffering. In the context of the task of critical inquiry, nonattachment refers to the detrimental absorption in one's work and its impact in the world. This can be seen as a natural result of taking on a particular project with a specific intent. If this intent is not fulfilled to the creator's satisfaction the natural response may be to become despondent and uncertain in one's foundations and abilities. The result of such a mindset is often inaction in the face of an assumed failure. As we have seen, action, from the Buddhist purview, is of supreme importance. Recalling the tale of Master Nansen and the cat, it is the unhesitating action of Joshu which demonstrates his right mindedness and right intentions. For every situation which

demands action, inaction results in manifestly negative karma, social and personal. While it may seem rudimentary, for a Buddhist the most important thing one can do is to act with right intent, regardless of the barriers or one's chances at success. To focus on the end rather than the act itself is to disregard the present and abandon the Buddhist perspective altogether. This is especially important given the conditions of modernity in which intellectualism is shunned and all means of false consciousness mold the mental states of those who suffer. There is an enormously high probability of failure when taking on the task of liberation. There is however the certainty of failure when we choose to simply not act at all.

Through these four tools the critical theorist is able to not only embrace the Buddhist perspective and foundation, but is able to address the task in a uniquely Buddhist manner, connecting with humanity as Bodhisattva rather than as passive observer, as revolutionary not reactionary, and with the understanding that his own liberation is inextricably linked to the liberation of all peoples who suffer needlessly in this life.

Chapter 5

Beyond Language, Beyond Thought

Conclusion

The first patriarch of Zen Buddhism, Bodhidharma, famously taught that while there are many ways to achieve liberation, there are essentially only two paths; study and practice. As this teaching is one which has strongly influenced my personal engagement with Buddhism, it is in this spirit that the development of a Buddhist critical social theory is undertaken. By outlining basic Buddhist teachings in a way which embraces tradition but eschews religious metaphysical dogma, it is my goal to provoke a study of the unique liberatory potential of Buddhist thought. In demonstrating that this foundation is further compatible with the basic principles of more traditional methods of social criticism, in this case Marxist thought, the basic framework of a Buddhist critical social theory is legitimized outside of its origins in religious doctrine and can then be utilized to influence not only the practice of social critique, but larger practices which impact social and political institutions. In this way a direct line is drawn between the two paths of study and practice in the cultivation of a Buddhist critical social theory.

The purpose of this work is to simply take an additional step in understanding the efforts being made in the formation of a Buddhist critical social theory. While a more exhaustive exploration of each of the component parts addressed here is possible and indeed necessary in this process, it is my hope that their interplay creates the image of what the end result may be; a mode of doing critical inquiry which adheres to the basic tenants of Buddhist thought and which is carried out in a manner that actively engages humanity to express the need for revolutionary change. More long term, the application of such a theoretical grounding will hopefully be seen in the interpretation of and application of legitimate data used to inform policy creation and reform. However, the infancy of such a theoretical model demands that, for the time being, we actively engage with the Buddhist worldview with the goal of writing and rewriting this groundwork in ways which maximize its potential for utilization and future growth. There will absolutely be

reticence to accept the legitimacy of work of this kind, but it is crucial that we explore the unique

contributions to modernity that Buddhist thought has to offer. The greatest benefit demonstrated

here I believe is the ability of this way of engaging the world to strip away illusion and allow

humanity to see its true nature. We are simply beings who suffer. All that comprises our reality

can be seen in these terms. It is the therefore the duty of the enlightened mind to work

unceasingly to show the unenlightened their true nature. To do this however, we must first come

to know ourselves. This is where the Buddhist worldview is unique. It requires active

participation to have a meaningful impact.

> Unless you see your nature, you shouldn't go around criticizing the goodness of
> others. There's no advantage in deceiving yourself. Good and bad are distinct.
> Cause and effect are clear. Heaven and hell are right before your eyes. But
> fools don't believe and fall straight into a hell of endless darkness without even
> knowing it. What keeps them from believing is the heaviness of their karma.
> They're like blind people who don't believe there's such a thing as light. Even if
> you explain it to them, they still don't believe, because they're blind. How can
> they possibly distinguish light?
> The same holds true for fools who end up among the lower orders of existence
> or among the poor and despised. They can't live and they can't die. And
> despite their suffering, if you ask them, they say they're as happy as gods. All
> mortals, even those who think themselves wellborn, are likewise unaware.
> Because of the heaviness of their karma, such fools can't believe and can't get
> free. (Red Pine, 1987:38-39)

Here Bodhidharma, the first Zen patriarch, describes the difficulty of the task at hand perfectly.

The duty of liberation in modernity is a struggle against forms of suffering which are often either

embraced or ignored completely. This must not deter us from acting in compassion to relieve

the suffering of even those whose heaviness of karma blinds them from reality. Acting as

Bodhisattva, having embraced the Buddhist position, success is only found in the liberation of

all sentient beings; if the hells are not empty, our job is not done.

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Biographical Information

John Yowell is a former high school teacher, stay-at-home father, one man rhythm section, and aspiring writer. He received his undergraduate degree in 2007 from The University of Texas at Dallas and his MA in Sociology and Master of Social Work degrees in 2015 from the University of Texas at Arlington. After graduate school he is looking forward to exploring a career in international nonprofit work. He also plans on continuing to write on issues of social justice, critical theory, and the revolutionary spirit.

Fun Facts: In 2009, while living in Southeast Asia, his beard was recognized as the reincarnation of Zen patriarch Bodhidharma. He is a great fan of baseball and the outdoors. Bigfoot has a blurry photo of him.