

## Special 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Issue

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/>

Volume 20, 2013

# Liberation as Revolutionary Praxis: Rethinking Buddhist Materialism

James Mark Shields  
Bucknell University

*Copyright Notice:* Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to: [cozort@dickinson.edu](mailto:cozort@dickinson.edu).



# Liberation as Revolutionary Praxis: Rethinking Buddhist Materialism

James Mark Shields<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Although it is only in recent decades that scholars have begun to reconsider and problematize Buddhist conceptions of “freedom” and “agency,” the thought traditions of Asian Buddhism have for many centuries struggled with questions related to the issue of “liberation”—along with its fundamental ontological, epistemological and ethical implications. With the development of Marxist thought in the mid to late nineteenth century, a new paradigm for thinking about freedom in relation to history, identity and social change found its way to Asia, and confronted traditional religious interpretations of freedom as well as competing Western ones. In the past century, several attempts have been made—in India, southeast Asia, China and Japan—to bring together Marxist and Buddhist worldviews, with only moderate success (both at the level of theory and practice).

---

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor of Comparative Humanities & Asian Thought, Bucknell University.  
Email: [james.shields@bucknell.edu](mailto:james.shields@bucknell.edu).

This paper analyzes both the possibilities and problems of a “Buddhist materialism” constructed along Marxian lines, by focusing in particular on Buddhist and Marxist conceptions of “liberation.” By utilizing the theoretical work of “radical Buddhist” Seno’o Girō, I argue that the root of the tension lies with conceptions of selfhood and agency—but that, contrary to expectations, a strong case can be made for convergence between Buddhist and Marxian perspectives on these issues, as both traditions ultimately seek a *resolution of existential determination in response to alienation*. Along the way, I discuss the work of Marx, Engels, Gramsci, Lukàcs, Sartre, and Richard Rorty in relation to aspects of traditional (particularly East Asian Mahāyāna) Buddhist thought.

## Introduction

A person of wisdom is not one who practices Buddhism apart from worldly affairs but, rather, one who thoroughly understands the principles by which the world is governed. The true path lies in the affairs of this world. The *Golden Light Sutra* states, “To have a profound knowledge of this world is itself Buddhism.” The *Nirvana Sutra* states, “All the non-Buddhist scriptures and writings are themselves Buddhist teachings, not non-Buddhist teachings.” When the Great Teacher compared these passages with the one from the sixth volume of the *Lotus Sutra* that reads, “No worldly affair of life or work are ever contrary to the true reality,” he revealed their meaning and pointed out that although the first two sutras are profound, because their meaning is

still shallow and fails to approach that of the *Lotus Sutra*, they relate secular matters in terms of Buddhism, whereas the *Lotus Sutra* explains that in the end secular matters are the entirety of Buddhism. The essence of the sutras preached before the *Lotus Sutra* is that all phenomena arise from the mind. To illustrate, they say the mind is like the great earth, while the grasses and trees are like all phenomena. But it is not so with the *Lotus Sutra*. It teaches that the mind is itself the great earth, and that the great earth itself is the grasses and trees. The meaning of the earlier sutras is that clarity of mind is like the moon, and that purity of mind is like a flower. But it is not so with the *Lotus Sutra*. It is the teaching that the moon itself is mind, and the flower itself is mind. You should realize from this that polished rice is not polished rice; it is life itself.

Nichiren, *Hakumai ippyo goshō* (“The Gift of Rice”)

Contrary to the propaganda, we live in probably the least materialistic culture in history. If we cared about the things of the world, we would treat them quite differently—we would be concerned with their materiality. We would be interested in their beginnings and their ends, before and after they left our grasp. As it is, what we are really consumed by are the dreams and myths temporarily attached to the objects around us; and when these dreams and myths wear off, the object to which they were attached is pitched into the waste bin. The consumer heads off again on the trail of the beckoning image of delight.

Peter Timmerman, “Defending Materialism”

The materialistic conception of history is not to be compared to a cab that one can enter or alight from at will, for once they enter it, even the revolutionaries themselves are not free to leave it.

Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation"

As Critical Buddhists Hakamaya Noriaki and Matsumoto Shirō highlighted several decades ago, the interdependence between Buddhist institutions and various despotic Asian kingdoms and states from ancient times until the modern period is—however problematic to modern and contemporary progressive Buddhists—undeniable.<sup>2</sup> This, of course, is also true for Christianity in the Western world—at least since the time of Constantine—as well as most other major religious traditions. Although the historical link between *philosophy* and the state may appear less obvious, for theorists Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) and Félix Guattari (1930-1992), Western philosophy as well, by way of its "bureaucratization" of consciousness, has never been able to abandon its origins in the codifications of the despotic imperial state. Thus, Deleuze and Guattari follow Marx in asserting the necessity of establishing a new form of thought—a new task for philosophy—one that controverts the traditional philosophy without, somehow, allowing itself to be "codified."<sup>3</sup> The way to do

---

<sup>2</sup> See my *Critical Buddhism: Engaging with Modern Japanese Buddhist Thought* (Ashgate, 2011) for a contextual analysis and critique of the Critical Buddhist movement. The present essay is an attempt to extend some of the insights of Critical Buddhism by picking up a topic they virtually ignore: materialism. I would like to assert at the outset that I am not making any assertions here about *real* or *true* Buddhism, but rather suggesting alternative ways to re-envision Buddhism along materialist lines.

<sup>3</sup> See Kołakowski 66-67 on Marxism as "a new philosophical possibility and a new eschatology" based on a "conception of humanity self-present as an Absolute in its own

this, argue Deleuze and Guattari, is to reject the “drama of interiority” that Western thought has made foundational, replacing that with “the creation of concepts that can register and delineate the transmission of forces to bodies” (Surin 160).

Here, Kenneth Surin suggests, the precursors of Deleuze and Guattari are less Marx and Engels than Spinoza and Nietzsche. And yet, to some extent this entire approach towards a new “physics of thought” is rooted in the fundamental materialist insight underlying Marx’s theory of ideology: that is, *every idea or concept is itself conditioned by various material forces* (see Mannheim 244). As Surin summarizes: “the new philosophy that will experiment with the real, will eschew such abstractions as universals, unities, subjects, objects, multiples, and put in their place the processes that culminate in the production of the abstractions themselves” (161). It will be, in short, a “universal acid” liquidating all philosophical presuppositions—including those of conventional, “hylomorphic” materialism (Deleuze and Guattari 45). As a result, as with the neo-pragmatist thought of Richard Rorty (1931-2007), philosophy is not so much a form of *reflection* as a sort of *constructionism* instituted on “the plane of immanence” (35-37). Also like Rorty—and, I suggest, the “Dharmic materialism” of radical Buddhists such as Seno’o Girō (1889-1962) and B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956)—Deleuze argues for a “limit” to the materialist conception of the world. Philosophy cannot rest on a reductive physicalism, one that simply “insists on the substantiality of Being.” Rather, *physicalism* must be paired with *noology*, which insists on the primacy of “the image of thought” (Deleuze and Guattari 44).

---

finitude,” as well as a concomitant “rejection of all solutions that involve man realizing himself by the actualization, or at the command, of an antecedent absolute Being.”

For Deleuze, the image of thought is a kind of pre-philosophy, which operates on the plane of immanence, and constitutes a pre-philosophical presupposition that philosophy has to satisfy. And yet:

The image of thought, even it is an immaterialism, is not antithetical to a strict materialism. The plane of immanence reveals the “unthought” in thought, and its absolute incompatibility with materialism only comes about when philosophers forget that thought and the constitution of matter have the fundamental ontological character of events, and instead identify “matter” with Body, and “thought” with Mind, in this way saddling themselves with an impasse that cannot be resolved because Mind and Body are said to possess mutually incompatible properties (“inert” vs. “active,” “material” vs. “spiritual,” and so forth). The ontology of events, by contrast, allows the material and immaterial to be interrelated and integrated in a ceaseless dynamism. (Surin 161; see Deleuze and Guattari 44-49)

What is it, then, that links concepts to matter? The answer, for Deleuze, as for Rorty, is *function*. It is through function that “concepts are returned to material things... and things are integrated with concepts.” In short, a radical *immanence* withstands the introduction of concepts via the process or event of function. And although it would seem that philosophical materialism should go hand-in-hand with a commitment to immanence, in fact this is often not the case, as matter itself takes on a transcendent guise as the ultimate locus of meaning and value.<sup>4</sup> For

---

<sup>4</sup> Unlike Marxist doctrine, which has its origins in the 1840s, philosophical materialism—the basic insight that all things are composed of matter and all phenomena the result of material interactions—is an idea with deep and wide-ranging historical roots. However, it seems that philosophical materialism first made its appearance in ancient India with the Lokāyata or Cārvāka school, several centuries prior to the theories of Democritus, Epicurus and Mozi. The Cārvākas are generally considered, along with Buddhists and

Deleuze, “the materialism of philosophy is compromised only when the immaterial is harnessed to the transcendent: without resort to the transcendent, immaterialism and materialism can be kept on the same plane—immanence—and made to interact productively” (Surin 161).

A related critique of the “excesses” of philosophical materialism, particularly as expressed within orthodox Marxism, can be found in the work of two prominent twentieth-century European Marxist thinkers—Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) and György Lukács (1885-1971). Gramsci, in particular, developed a highly sophisticated alternative foundation for Marxist theory, rooted in a perspective of what we might call “total historicism.” In this view, the *only* absolute reality, and thus the only means for determining *meaning*, is collective praxis. This is not only a denial of materialism—at least philosophical materialism as normally conceived—but, as Leszek Kołakowski notes, amounts to a denial of any metaphysic whatsoever (976). In short, according to Gramsci, Marxism teaches that: “there is no ‘reality’ existing in and for itself [*per se stante, in se e per se*] but only in historical relation to human beings who modify it” (Gramsci 23). A strong critique of reductive materialism arises out of this “prag-

---

Jains, one of the three main heterodox philosophical systems of ancient India. Sadly, their original works have been lost, and thus we are left to glean what we can of their writings from the texts of their opponents—Buddhists, Jains, and Brahmanists. Despite this distorting influence, in the work of the early Indian materialists we see the combination—later to become central to both Epicurus and Marx—of both a radically physicalist conception of the universe *and* a conviction that human welfare is first and foremost material welfare. In other words, early materialism in India, although it opted out of both mainstream cosmology and the associated vision of a spiritual essence and destiny for humanity, it did not thereby revoke what we might call the *ethical* or even *humanist* imperative. Against the argument—found in orthodox texts—that the Cārvākas opposed all that was good in the Vedic tradition, Dale Riepe writes, “It may be said from the available material that Cārvākas hold truth, integrity, consistency, and freedom of thought in the highest esteem” (75).

matist” reading of Marxism: philosophical materialism, far from being the contrary of religion, is in fact the direct outcome of religious superstition: “it is like primitive common sense, the apparent ‘obviousness’ of which only conceals a lack of critical thought” (Kołakowski 977; see, for example, Gramsci 13). This Gramscian reading of a Marxian anti-ontology seems to parallel the early Buddhist conception of reality as “that which is capable of objective action” (Sk. *arthya-kriyā-samartham*), as discussed by Rahul Sankrityayan:

Sweets and bread are real because they are capable of objective action, i.e., they are capable of the objective action of nourishment of satisfying our hunger; but the sweets and bread seen in a dream are not real because they cannot satisfy our hunger; they are incapable of objective action. (Sankrityayan 6)

Though Lukács’s interpretation of Marxism was in many respects more orthodox than that of Gramsci, he, too, attempted to pull Marxism back towards its Hegelian, historicist and humanistic roots. For Lukács, a common misunderstanding amongst both Marxist proponents and critics is that the dialectic is a “scientific method” that one applies “objectively” to an independent reality “out there”; rather, Lukács argues, the dialectic is an “active constituent of the social reality to which it is applied as a method.” In short, for Lukács, Marxism is not a scientific description of historical reality but rather the *theoretical consciousness of a particular group of people* (that is, the proletariat) as they struggle towards existential-political liberation.

Thus, to gloss Marx’s well known but easily misread phrase about changing the world rather than (merely) interpreting it, Lukács argues that the proletariat transforms the world in the very process of understanding it; these are “not two separate processes, but one and the same phenomenon.” Another way of framing this is to say that, in Lukács’s

Marxism, the Kantian division between “is” and “ought” breaks down; for in the revolutionary struggle, knowledge of the conditions leading to human emancipation coincide with actions to bring about this emancipation—which *ipso facto* contains an ethical component. Moreover, this revolutionary knowledge/action brings freedom, because those involved in the struggle gain full consciousness of human possibility (that is, their “species-being” or “social beings”), while liberating themselves (and others) from the chains of selfish individualism. Just as there can be no such thing as an “armchair Buddhist”—that is, one who “knows of” the Dharma but does nothing to put these teachings into practice—so too there cannot be, for Lukács, a “theoretical Marxist,” because “the theory is nothing but the self-awareness of the movement” (Kołakowski 1003).

Now of course, given what we have seen of the historical legacy of communist revolutions in the twentieth century, these ideals seem tremendously naive. However, the point I wish to make is that there are distinctive and surprising parallels in this revisionist Marxism with both traditional and modernist interpretations of Buddhism as a hybrid of teachings and practice that aim towards a “revolutionary” transformation of consciousness (and thus society) away from the “poisons” of greed, hatred and delusion. In that sense, it is no surprise that twentieth-century radical Buddhists such as Seno’o Girō and B. R. Ambedkar were attracted to Marxist thought—even though they had no direct contact with either Marx’s early writings, or with the work of European Marxist revisionists such as Gramsci and Lukács.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is a comparative dearth of positive references to Buddhism in the work of twentieth and twenty-first century Western Marxists or Marxist sympathizers. The two exceptions are anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009), who spends a chapter of *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) discussing the “obvious” connections between Marxist and Buddhist criticism; and psychologist Erich Fromm (1900-1980), whose personal and professional connection to D. T. Suzuki from the 1950s resulted in

More recently, Bill Martin's work picks up on some of the same critiques of earlier Marxist humanists like Gramsci and Lukács. In response to the common pitfall of "reductive productivism"—"which might otherwise be expressed in the words 'man does indeed live by bread alone'"—Martin develops a soft (or perhaps "linguistic") materialism. Martin rejects a materialism of "brute stuff," "where humans are simply one form of causally determined 'material,'" in favor of a perspective that, although still rooted in materialist premises, particularly the *heuristic* or *critical* aspect, also gives pride of place to language, meaning, and subjectivity. These, Martin asserts, "are peculiar 'things', and strange motions are generated as a result of their existence" (34). As such, they must be addressed by anyone involved in the task of social theory.

As Martin notes, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) was one of the most prominent students of Marx to recognize the singular flaw in Marxism—or at least in the standard interpretations of Marxism—that is, the fact that "'real, sensuous human beings' (to use Marx's language from the 'Theses on Feuerbach') drop out of the picture in any theory, even an historical materialist theory, that takes history as working out according to strict laws" (Martin 37). In his *Search for a Method*, Sartre frames this tendency within mainstream Marxist thought in terms of a denial not so much of language but of *particularity* and *contingency*:

Sartre proposes that the big, totalizing 'system' (in this case, of Hegel and Marx), requires a reassertion of the existential particular and singular, or else the system will have

---

an increasing attempt to bring together a humanist Marxism and Zen (see for example, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, 1950). Both Lévi-Strauss and Fromm have faced criticism for their "Buddhist Marxism": the former from his student Jacques Derrida and, later, Bill Martin, and the latter from Leszek Kołakowski, who calls Fromm's reading of Marxism selective and one-sided (1095-96).

an overwhelming tendency to not only totalize, but to proclaim itself the transcendental totalizer—in other words, God. A ‘thinking’ of the planet Earth that is unaware of the earth that is here, or there, or somewhere, or that subsumes the particularities of this earth into a big concept and thereby obliterates the particularities, has the character of the sort of cosmic, theological thinking in which finite beings do not count for much. It is undeniable that Marxism has gone down this path more than a few times, in theory and practice, thus Sartre’s corrective. (Martin 273)

Which leads me to pose the question, following on the work of the Critical Buddhists: Can Buddhism today provide recourse for “real, sensuous human beings”—that is, a humanistic materialism—or does it too, fall prey (as Jacques Derrida and Martin both suggest) to a similar tendency towards “ahistorical historicity” and the “drama (or dharma) of interiority”? Can Buddhism add anything to this debate? Before moving on to examine some Buddhist “responses,” to the challenge of Marxian materialism, I will briefly examine some historical connections between Buddhism and Marxism.

### **Buddhism and Marxism: Historical Connections**

The conversations between Asian Buddhism and Marxism began surprisingly early; that is, very soon after Marx’s death in 1883. In the tumultuous decades between the 1880s and the 1930s, increasing contact between Western Marxists—both intellectuals and activists—and Asian progressives and radicals, in addition to greater exposure on the part of Asian intellectuals to the texts of Marx and Engels and an outpouring of

secondary literature emerging from Europe and eventually Asia, made such a dialogue inevitable. This was especially true in Japan, which during these six decades was experiencing significant upheavals in religion, economics, politics and ideology. Unsurprisingly, it is in the context of a modernizing Japan—where truly, all that was once solid was melting rapidly into air—that the conversation between Buddhism and progressive and radical politics was most intense and arguably most fertile.<sup>6</sup>

As early as 1882, the founder of the Eastern Socialist Party (Tōyō Shakaitō) Tarui Tōkichi (1850-1922) wrote that the “children of the Buddha” had a special mandate to look upon the people with compassion. At about the same time, Katayama Sen (1859-1933) began promoting a “spiritual socialism” founded on both Christian and Buddhist ideals. Although the early Shōwa scholar Tanaka Sōgorō (1894-1961) viewed socialism as a mixture of Confucianism, Buddhism and western ideas, others felt that the Mahāyāna insistence on compassion was enough to render the Buddhist traditions of East Asia socialist in nature. Though most of the self-consciously modernizing “New Buddhists” of the early twentieth century were resistant to socialism, a few, such as Mōri Shian, were sympathetic to the Commoner’s Society (Heiminsha), founded in 1903. The final years of the Meiji period saw a turn towards Buddhist socialism in the writings of Shin priest Takagi Kenmyō (1864-1914)—for whom so-

---

<sup>6</sup> I will focus here on the cases of Buddhist-Marxist dialogue in Japan, for two reasons: a) it is the context I am most familiar with; and b) Japan, by virtue of the Meiji Restoration of 1868 and the ensuing attempt to “modernize” at breakneck speed, was the Asian country most “open” to Western political ideals, including, at least until the 1930s, radical ones. Having said, I would be remiss in failing to note that there were early experiments in Buddhist Marxism in south Asia, and India in particular, as far back as the 1880s, with the work of Iyothee Thass (1845-1914), a founder of the Dravidian Self-Respect movement, and, somewhat later, Lakshmi Narasu (1861-1934), Kumaran Asan (1873-1924) and Bodhanand Mahasthvir (1874-1952). As Braj Mani argues, these figures can be seen as forerunners to the work of Ambedkar in the 1950s; see Mani, “Dr. Ambedkar’s Predecessors.”

cialism was “much more deeply related to religion than to politics” (Takagi 55)—and, most dramatically, in the famous case of Uchiyama Gudō (1874-1911), the Sōtō Zen priest who protested against rural poverty as “unjust and anti-Buddhist,” and, as a result, was arrested and executed on trumped up charges of plotting to assassinate the Emperor in what is known as the High Treason Incident (Taigyaku Jiken). Even the writings of the Shin sect reformer Kiyozawa Manshi (1863-1903)—whose “spiritualism” (*seishinshugi*) comes under criticism from progressive Buddhists—contain hints of utopian socialism, for example, his references to a “Buddhist country” (*nyorai no kokka*) that might one day replace the present capitalistic and materialistic one.

And yet, by far the most significant theorist of Buddhist Marxism in Japan prior to the Second World War was Seno’o Girō (1889-1962), founder of the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism, a Buddhist socialist movement based on the straightforward notion that the capitalist system generates suffering and, thus, violates the spirit of Buddhism. Although the League itself was shortlived, caught in the maelstrom of ultranationalist ideology sweeping Japan in the mid-1930s, Seno’o’s ideas about the connections between Buddhism and Marxism, and particularly his thoughts about ethics, the self, and materialism, remain of great significance in rethinking Buddhist progressive politics in the twenty-first century. Along with Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), the Indian Buddhist political activist often cited as a father of Socially Engaged Buddhism, Seno’o’s work grapples with the problems and possibilities of Marxist Buddhism (or Buddhist Marxism). As I have written extensively of Seno’o’s life, work and thought elsewhere (for example, Shields “Blueprint,” Shields “Life and Thought”), I will confine myself here to an analysis of several of the most significant problems and possibilities raised in his work, as well as the work of other progressive and radical Buddhists of the past century.

### Grasping Things by the (Selfless) Root<sup>7</sup>

Where, exactly, do Buddhism and Marxism meet? What, in particular, are the points of contact that have allowed this dialogue to exist? For radical Buddhists, as well as sympathetic Western theorists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) and Erich Fromm (1900-1980), the connection was obvious. Both Buddhism and Marxism take the following question as their fundamental point of departure: *How are human beings to be reconciled with themselves and the world?* Furthermore, both assert that the human condition is one of rampant suffering, and that suffering is both physical and cognitive/emotional. Finally, both Buddhism and Marxism, at least in theory, aim to provide some form of *liberation from suffering*—understood, certainly for Marxists and usually for Buddhists, in a this-worldly fashion.

Moreover, both Buddhism and Marxism, as generally interpreted, provide tools for a critical analysis of ordinary existence—towards the goal of (radical?) *change*. In addition, both traditions call for a significant *transformation of consciousness*, which is assumed to bring about an end to *alienation* as well as *selfish individualism*—or, in the case of Buddhism, the illusion of the *self*. And yet, in both traditions, alienation or suffering cannot be overcome simply by thought alone—*practice* is necessary (albeit the traditions differ on the forms of practice required). Both Buddhism and Marxism emphasize a deep recognition of causality; suffering can only be eliminated by removing its causes (though here, again, what

---

<sup>7</sup> “The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism by weapons, material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses. Theory is capable of gripping the masses as soon as it demonstrates *ad hominem*—as soon as it becomes radical. To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But for man, the root is man himself” (Marx, *Contribution* 182).

they means will differ between the two traditions). And finally, we might add that, just as Buddhism is difficult to categorize under the limiting rubrics of “philosophy” and “religion,” so too Marxism, although obviously rooted in a distinctive philosophical tradition, aims to present a global perspective on human affairs, one that—at least potentially—intrudes upon various disciplines and such as psychology, sociology, economics and politics. Indeed, perhaps the major stumbling-block to interpreting the work of Marx is its hugely ambitious scope. Far too many of his many epigones forget that:

Marx was not an academic writer but a humanist in the Renaissance sense of the term: his mind was concerned with the totality of human affairs, and his vision of social liberation embraced, as an interdependent whole, all the major problems with which humanity is faced... Marx’s own purpose...was to provide a global interpretation of human behaviour and history and to reconstruct an integral theory of mankind in which particular questions are only significant in relation to the whole. (Kołakowski 8-9)

Let me begin with the first point of correspondence raised above. It goes without saying that Buddhist tradition is rooted in a concept of “liberation”—and that liberation is understood by all Buddhists as a liberation from “suffering.” That much, again, is uncontroversial. Things begin to become more cloudy, however, when we start to deconstruct the early Buddhist terms for suffering: *duḥkha* (Sanskrit) and *dukkha* (Pali). Many contemporary scholars point to the problems with the translation of these terms as “suffering,” suggesting a more complex host of inter-related connotations including “dissatisfaction,” “dis-ease,” or “alienation.” Clearly, the term includes not only physical pain and discomfort, but also, and seemingly more importantly, cognitive and emotional forms of dissatisfaction or alienation—rooted primarily in an inability

and unwillingness to accept change. Perhaps the best way to summarize this idea, which is formulated in the classic set of teachings known as the Four Noble Truths, is that liberation from suffering entails a radical transformation of personal existence, which is traditionally understood as resulting in a condition known as *nirvāṇa* or “release.” Although this release has implications in Buddhist tradition for what happens upon one’s death, the primary significance is what occurs in this world; that is, in the here and now. There are, of course, a multitude of interpretations of how this transformation is enacted, and what it implies for the “self” and world, but for now I would like to leave this matter in order to explore the traditional Marxian understanding of liberation.

On the Marxist side, things are equally if not more complex. Despite the fact that most Marxists have understood Marxist liberation in purely materialistic terms; that is, a release, via political and economic revolution, from all forms of suffering associated with economic poverty, social mistreatment and political injustice, Marx was primarily concerned with alienation and dehumanization as *the* fundamental problems of human existence; and one that affects not only the proletariat but all humans, to some degree.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, according to some Marxist scholars, such as Bill Martin and Leszek Kołakowski, mainstream or orthodox Marxism (including the influential work of Engels and Lenin) has deviated significantly from the ideas of Marx—especially early Marx—in adopting and promoting a form of “reductivist” philosophical materialism that

---

<sup>8</sup> “Dehumanization, although in a different form, is also an attribute of the possessing class, but the privileges that class enjoys prevent it from being clearly aware of its own dehumanized condition, in which it rejoices instead of chafing at it” (Kołakowski 183). Compare traditional Buddhist cosmology, and idea that, although the rebirth realm of gods (and perhaps asuras) is in some sense ‘higher’ than that of humanity, it is *better* to be reborn as a human, precisely because only humans experience a ‘balance’ of pleasure and suffering that allows them the capacity to ‘recognize’ suffering and attempt to overcome it by entering the stream and becoming a buddha.

ultimately leads to a fixation with Truth and subsequent devalorization of particular human beings.<sup>9</sup> Another way to put this—reflecting the critique raised by Deleuze, Gramsci, Lukàcs and Sartre—is that the *noological* element of Marxian thought is completely displaced by the *physicalist* element. I would like to argue that a revisioning of Marxian theory of liberation along noological lines allows for a closer connection, and greater ease of cross-fertilization, between Marxist and Buddhist thought.

### Species Being, No-Self and Buddha Nature

Though Marx is well-known as a fierce critic of (Western) religious dogma, ritual and institutions, I argue that his vision of human liberation can be read as the clearest and most sustained attempt in Western thought since the classical Greeks to reconnect the realms of individual and communal flourishing (and also of suffering)—and in such a way that is, I suggest, palpably “Buddhistic.” Marx, too, understood the potential in politics for fundamental, all-encompassing human liberation (as well as its opposite). Marx’s starting point, was not, as is sometimes assumed, poverty, but rather *dehumanization*: “the fact that individuals are alienat-

---

<sup>9</sup> “For Marx, and this is one of a number of areas where Engels... just didn’t seem to ‘get it’, materialism is not first of all a matter of some (in reality, quasi-theological) allegiance to an ontology (a theory about what sorts of substances there are in or underlying the world), but instead the material of what Marx called, in the famous ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, sensuous human practices. We learn from practices. Our practices ultimately take place in the context of the forms of which human life is produced, perpetuated, and reproduced. These forms, at least beyond tribal societies that are not based on class division..., depend on divisions of labor, especially between mental and manual labor, and on a division between those who control the means of production and those who do not” (Martin 317).

ed from their own labour and its material, spiritual, and social consequences in the form of goods, ideas, and political institutions, and not only from these but from their fellow beings and, ultimately, from themselves” (Kołakowski 183). In his essay “On the Jewish Question” (1843), Marx develops his ideas of social emancipation in such a way as to push beyond merely political liberation towards full “human emancipation.” He contextualizes his argument by criticizing Bruno Bauer’s call for liberating the state from religion, arguing that Bauer, as many others, had it backwards: “religious restrictions were not a cause of secular ones, but a manifestation of them.”

The political emancipation from religion is not a religious emancipation that has been carried through to completion and is free from contradiction, because political emancipation is not a form of *human* emancipation which has been carried through to completion and is free from contradiction.... The perfect political state is, by its nature, man’s *species-life*, as opposed to his material life. All the preconditions of this egoistic life continue to exist in *civil society outside* the sphere of the state, but as qualities of civil society. Where the political state has attained its true development, man—not only in thought, in consciousness, but in *reality*, in *life*—leads a twofold life, a heavenly and an earthly life: life in the *political community*, in which he considers himself a communal being, and life in *civil society*, in which he acts as a private individual, regards other men a means, degrades himself into a means, and becomes the plaything of alien powers. (Marx, “Jewish” 152-54)

For Marx, Bauer’s idea, like the fundamental premise of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* and the United States Constitution, is limited and ultimately self-defeating, as it merely solidifies a theory of rights

based on monadic individualism. In short, the state “does not help to abolish the egoistic character of private life but merely provides it with a legal framework.” And thus, political revolution “does not liberate people from religion or the rule of property, it merely gives them the right to hold property and to profess their own religion.” In short:

Only when the real, individual man re-absorbs in himself the abstract, and as an individual human being has become a *species-being* in his everyday life, in his particular work, and in his particular situation, only when man has recognized and organized his “*forces propres*” as *social forces*, and consequently no longer separates social power from himself in the shape of *political power*, only then will human emancipation have been accomplished. (Marx “Jewish” 168).

With this notion of “an integrated human being overcoming his own division between private interest and the community,” Marx develops a conception of humanity that is, in the Western philosophical context, radical if not entirely unprecedented. What sometimes goes unnoticed, however, is that in developing this thought Marx effectively displaces religion from the focus of his critique—unlike Feuerbach (or Bacon), Marx sees religion/superstition as one among many other manifestations of social servitude, rather than its root. The true “recovery” of humanity comes from “the free recognition by each individual of himself as the bearer of the community”—a task that resonates well with a primary thrust of many of the world’s religions, including Buddhism.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> With respect to a plausible Buddhist interpretation of “species-being” in relation to karma, see Herschok 41.

Although the above ideas, expressed in “On the Jewish Question” and *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law*, would later be dismissed by Marx himself as “utopian”—that is, positing an imagined unity in abstract terms—we cannot so readily dismiss the fundamental insight here. Moreover, even in his later, more “scientific” writings, the necessity of a transformation of consciousness—an awakening to social ontology as means of overcoming alienation—remains a key element. Somewhat akin to the realization of Buddha-nature in some Mahāyāna texts and traditions, Marx’s reformed consciousness was not simply a conscious turn towards an arbitrary ideal, but a revelation and explication of something that had already been there, albeit in an implicit fashion—a conversion of “an unconscious historical tendency into a conscious one, an objective trend into an act of will.” In other words, revolution was not about converting reality into something new (via the will or obligation), but understanding reality more fully (via a transformed consciousness, though one not separated from activity). This is perhaps best summarized in the following quote from Marx’s *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law*, which sets the famous “opiate” condemnation in a broader context, and hints at subtleties often ignored in Marx’s perspective on religion vis-à-vis politics and criticism.

Religion is the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again. But *man* is no abstract being encamped outside the world. Man is *the world of man*, the state, society. This state, this society, produces religion, an *inverted consciousness*, because they are an *inverted world*. Religion is . . . the *fantastic realisation* of the human essence because the *human essence* has no true reality. The struggle against religion is therefore indirectly a fight against *the world* of which religion is the spiritual aroma. . . [Religion] is the *opium* of the people. To abolish religion as the *illusory*

happiness of the people is to demand their *real* happiness. The demand to give up illusions about the existing state of affairs is the *demand to give up a state of affairs which needs illusions...* The immediate *task of philosophy*, which is at the service of history, once the *holy form* of self-estrangement has been unmasked, is to unmask self-estrangement in its *unholy forms*. Thus the criticism of heaven turns into criticism of the earth, the *criticism of religion* into the *criticism of law* and the *criticism of theology* into the *criticism of politics*. (Marx *Contribution* 175-76)

As Leszek Kołakowski notes, contrary to common misperceptions, Marxian socialism never involved the “extinction of individuality” or a leveling for the sake of some “universal good”—though this was characteristic of many previous (often monastically-inspired) communist doctrines. For Marx, rather:

socialism represented the full emancipation of the individual by the destruction of the web of mystification which turned community life into a world of estrangement presided over by an alienated bureaucracy. Marx’s ideal was that every man should be fully aware of his own character as a social being, but should also, for this very reason, be capable of developing his personal aptitudes in all their fullness and variety. There was no question of the individual being reduced to a universal species-being; what Marx desired to see was a community in which the sources of antagonism among individuals were done away with. This antagonism sprang, in his view, from the mutual isolation that is bound to arise when political life is divorced from civil society, while the institution of private property

means that people can only assert their own individuality in opposition to others. (Kołakowski 107-8)

Thus, for Marx an overcoming of alienation—and dehumanization—involves nothing less than a recovery—via revolution—of humanity’s “species-being” (alternatively called “social being”). At one level, to make this claim is to assume that humanity has some sort of “essence,” and that Marx, or the proletariat, know what that is. And yet, as Kołakowski persuasively argues, human nature or the “self” for Marx is *not* conceived as “a set of features which may be empirically ascertained,” but rather “as a set of requirements that must be fulfilled in order to make human beings genuinely human.” In other words, although Marx does indeed presuppose a non-historical norm of humanity, this is “not a collection of permanent, unchanging qualities belonging to some arbitrary ideal, but a conception of the conditions of development enabling men to display their creative powers to the full, untrammelled by material needs” (Kołakowski 217-18). Human fulfillment, then, is not a matter of attaining some sort of utopian state of perfection, but rather of liberating humanity from the conditions that make us the slaves of our own works.

### **World-Denying Buddhism?**

One counter to the argument that Buddhism can contribute meaningfully to the discussion of a revised materialism is the common conception that Buddhism—to some extent *qua* religion, but even more so by virtue of its *ascetic* qualities—is simply incompatible with materialism. Without getting into the problematic and arguably modernistic bias in the assumption that religions are *prima facie* rooted in idealist metaphysics, this point needs to be addressed. Certainly there are ascetic roots to Indian Buddhist monasticism; a simple, abstemious life was and remains

for the most part a non-negotiable requirement for membership in the *sangha*. No one would dispute that “materialism” in the (“consumerist”) sense of “fulfillment of life via the pursuit and attainment of material possessions” is unacceptable by any Buddhist standard. And yet, this is surely true of most or all normatively inclined thought traditions—including Marxism. After all, alienation in Marx’s thought is nothing less than the subjugation of humanity by its own works; that is, through “reification” (Lukács) or “commodity fetishism” (Marx), which might be summarized as “the inability of human beings to see their own products for what they are, and their unwilling consent to be enslaved by human power instead of wielding it” (Kořakowski 227; see Marx *Capital, Volume I*, and Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*).

The somewhat weaker, “hedonistic” form of materialism is somewhat more complex; and yet, this need not be merely a form of “selfish” pleasure-seeking, but may in fact amount to a valorization of the simple, the mundane, and the everyday (one thinks here of the humble and potentially Buddhistic “hedonism” of Thoreau’s *Walden*). Perhaps the strongest case to be made for a Buddhism that embraces a limited hedonistic materialism (that is, of the Thoreauian sort) would be the Chan/Zen traditions that emerged out of a medieval and early modern Sino-Japanese cultural context.

Moving further among types of materialism, we come to the philosophical materialism generally accepted by Marxists, following upon classical and Enlightenment thinkers such as Democritus, Lucretius and Bacon. Here the emphasis is less on *pleasure* than on an acceptance of the *conditioning power of material relations*. And yet, as noted in the first sections of this essay, even here there is some dispute within Marxist theory. Although Engels and Lenin, along with most orthodox Marxists, followed the materialist emphasis on *matter* as the foundation of meaning and value, Marx himself clearly understood materialism less as a theory

about reality—an ontology or metaphysic—than a “warning” against the tendency to privilege ideals and totalities at the expense of particularity and contingency, and the “human.” At the heart of Marxian materialism is a fundamental element of *critique*; one that points towards causal factors that may otherwise go unnoticed in our attempts to discern—and ultimately address—our existential situatedness.

Another related concept deeply embedded in Marx’s writings is the unity of theory and practice—understood as *praxis* or the practical interpretation of human consciousness.<sup>11</sup> Though this slogan is often employed by Engels and later Marxists, what it frequently amounted to was the straightforward idea that practice was the basis of knowledge and the touchstone of truth—or, alternatively, that a theory can only be judged by its “fruits.” Although there is some merit to both of these interpretations, they miss the more fundamental and subtle Marxian thrust, which is part of his more general critique of the “contemplative” or “transcendental” conception of knowledge; that is, the “traditional [Western] conception of truth as consisting in the conformity of our judgement with a state of affairs completely independent of our cognitive activity” (Kołakowski 1035). Knowledge in this familiar scenario ultimately amounts to a passive reception of a world “out there.”

The Marxian critique of contemplative knowledge, which aligns with Rorty’s “constructivist” preference for Bacon over Descartes, noted above, has rarely been revisited since Marx’s time, but it seems to be another potentially fertile point of contact/contrast with traditional Buddhist thought—and one that has especial implications for a reconstructed Buddhist materialism. The emphasis on the “mind” in early Buddhist thought—as one finds expressed, for example, in the opening stanzas of

---

<sup>11</sup> One of the only Marxist thinkers to take up this issue in earnest was Karl Korsch (1886-1961), who saw it as the very essence of Marxism. See, for example, his *Marxismus und Philosophie* (1923).

the *Dhammapada*—seem to suggest that Buddhism, too, may fall into a into the contemplative or transcendental trap. In an article entitled “Buddhist Dialectics,” Rahul Sankrityayan argues that “Buddhism in its highest and final form is in a large measure similar to the idealism of Hegel”—in particular, the Yogācāra school, with its emphasis on the idea (*vijñāna*) that is at once dynamic and nonmaterial. (Sankrityayan 3)

And yet, it is equally clear that even early Indian Buddhism placed a high premium on engagement with the world—whether as a *bhikkhu* or a “lay” follower. Arguably, the closest equivalent to the Marxian conception of knowledge as a unity of theory and practice in terms that might be considered “political” comes from the writings of twelfth-century Japanese sect founder Nichiren, for whom “there is only one *sa-hā* world. Vulture Peak, the place where the Lotus Sutra is taught, represents both this world of ours and the most perfect world, the only possible ‘paradise’. There is no other reality, neither for humanity, nor for the Buddha” (Dolce 232-33). The point is not, for Nichiren, that we are presently living in the perfect world, but rather that we are living in a world that is, with faith, dedication, and great effort—“perfectible.” As Linda Dolce puts it, his emphasis “is not on the absolute per se, but on the relative that has to become absolute” (Dolce 235). As I have argued elsewhere, this is the primary source for the ineluctable political dimension of Nichiren Buddhism from the Kamakura period through today (see Shields “Lotus Sutra”).

### **Rethinking Buddhism Materialism: Seno’o Girō**

Given the above, it hardly comes as a surprise that Seno’o Girō, the early twentieth-century Buddhist thinker most invested in establishing a practicable Buddhist Marxism, was himself working on explicitly

Nichirenist premises (though he distanced himself from the Nichiren institution). In his writings, Seno'o insists on a comprehensive understanding of the causes and conditions of poverty—and subsequent dehumanization of the poor. Because, he argues, these causes and condition are both material *and* non-material, then naturally the solutions to poverty/alienation must also—against orthodox Marxists but in line with some Marxist revisionists—include aspects of human existence that go beyond the purely material (Seno'o 1975, 312-13, 386). Seno'o came to reject the metaphysics of harmony—what Critical Buddhists would later call “topicalism”—found within much of the Mahāyāna philosophical tradition, and reaching a peak within the so-called Tendai synthesis. It is perhaps more accurate to say that—in developing his commitment to Nichirenism (*Nichirenshugi*)—Seno'o came to see harmony and the overarching vision of totality presented in Mahāyāna/Tendai thought and the *Lotus Sutra* as a goal to be reached through historical (including economic and political) transformation, rather than an *a priori* ontological ground that must simply be recognized (see Lai 1984, 22). In similar fashion, suffering was an existential condition to be analyzed and eliminated, rather than—as some within the Tendai and associated traditions would have it, and as some contemporary critics of Buddhism assert—an illusory concept to be transcended via a dialectics of emptiness or a deeper realization of Buddha-nature.

In making his case for materialism against the pitfalls of abstract idealism, Seno'o is quick to note that the importance of “love” (*ai*), which, he argues, “is neither a concept nor an illusion,” but rather a practice (*jissen*)—and one that, when properly accompanied by objective criticism, allows us to recognize (the problems of) ordinary life” (Seno'o 1975, 363). Here, Seno'o's activist interpretation of Buddhist compassion is brought in to soften the otherwise hard-edged Marxist critique. Buddhist love—embodied in the way of the bodhisattva—provides the humanist foundation for social revolution. In the same essay, Seno'o insists

that his Youth League is more than simply an economic movement (*tan naru keizai undō*), but rather one that promotes a “new idealism” (*shin risōshugi*—note that this is not the same as *seishinshugi*, “spirit-ism”) and a “new humanism” (*shin jindōshugi*) in order to construct a “pure buddha-land” (*jōbukkudo*) in this world. In some sense, whether he was aware of it or not, Seno’o was actually restating a point made by Marx in his later writings, warning against the tendency of traditional philosophical materialists to neglect social engagement; that is, to merely *interpret* the world, rather than attempt to *change* it.

In further elaborating what Buddhism can bring to socialist analysis and critique, Seno’o notes that at the root of the Buddhist worldview is a fundamental conception of the interdependence of matter and mind, and of mind and form. Thus it would be a huge mistake to simply reduce problems of economic welfare and the need for social restructuring to purely material concerns. Rather, progressive Buddhists must demand a movement that allows for the development of social existence in its various facets. For Seno’o, this entails a recognition of the fuller implications of the social extension of the Buddhist doctrine of no-self—alternately rendered *mugaizumu*, *mugashugi*, or *muga-ai* (Seno’o 1975, 367). This term becomes, for Seno’o, the very embodiment of the Dharma, and must replace any and all attempts to find salvation by way of “idealistic abstractions” such as Pure Land’s Amida, Shingon’s Dainichi, and the Eternal Buddha of the *Lotus Sutra* (Seno’o 1975, 378).

Also of note is Seno’o’s emphasis on awakening as “human liberation”—which adds a communal element lacking in most traditional renderings of the experience of *nirvana* or *satori*. The term *kaihō* is in fact best translated as liberation or emancipation, and is generally used to apply to social or political freedom as understood in Western liberal and progressive traditions (for example, women’s liberation movement: *josei kaihō undō*; emancipation of serfs: *nōdo kaihō*; liberation theology: *kaihō*

*shingaku*). In Seno'o's reading of early Buddhism—or at least the fundamental teachings of Śākyamuni as he understands them—there is a decisive rejection of the existence of superhuman forces of any sort and a focus on contingency and the practice of selfless compassion for others. It is this unrelenting commitment to humanism that forms the bridge between Buddha and Marx, and forms a tool of critical resistance to the “nonsense” forms of Buddhism that practice reverence to superhuman beings, as well as to forms of Indian and Abrahamic theism.

### **Dharmic Materialism as Non-reductive Physicalism**

In the following section, I would like to extrapolate upon Seno'o's analysis, because it gets to the heart of what I have been calling Dharmic materialism, and extrapolate this framework onto contemporary movements of socially engaged Buddhism. Wary of the tendency of ideologies, even or especially progressive ones, to lead to extremism, Dharmic materialism seeks a balance by focusing on both the significance of material needs and structural suffering on the one hand, and the problem of absolutist or reductive thinking—which slides so easily into scientism and antihumanism—on the other. The problem with conventional Marxism, for Seno'o, lies in its absolute commitment to materialism as an ideology, rooted in an understanding of philosophical materialism as an ontological statement about the way things are—rather than a pragmatic suggestion about how best to transform self, community and world. Another way to say this is that, for Engels and *most* Marxists after Marx (and perhaps even, at times, Marx himself), the fundamental, radical insights of historical and dialectical materialism—which asserts a potentially Buddhistic understanding of change, transformation, and contradiction—are overturned by a static and limiting conception of unchanging *reality*, one that ultimately privileges material being/suffering/satisfaction over all

else, including emotional and mental being/suffering/satisfaction. And to clarify, this is not identical to the more standard critique—common to religiously-inclined progressives such as Leo Tolstoy, Takagi Kenmyō and B. R. Ambedkar—that laments the Marxist rejection of so-called higher “spiritual” ideals. Seno’s critique is more subtle: it is not a matter of judging whether spirit or matter is higher, but of questioning a commitment to *any* form of metaphysics, whether materialist, idealist, or otherwise.

In addition to the work of Marxist revisionists like Gramsci, Lu-kács, and Sartre, we might see a parallel between Seno’s Dharmic materialism—which aspires to be both pragmatic and humanist—and the *non-reductive physicalism* of American pragmatist thinker Richard Rorty. Without going too much into the details of Rorty’s argument, which draws heavily on the prior work of Donald Davidson, the central thesis behind non-reductive physicalism is the dual assertion that: a) “every event can be described in micro-structural terms, a description which mentions on elementary particles, and can be explained by reference to other events so described”; and b) “‘reduction’ is a relation merely between linguistic items, not among ontological categories” (Rorty “Physicalism” 114-15). In other words, although the world of objects and events can be traced, as most contemporary scientists would have it, to elementary physical levels, these levels are not more *real* than any other, and the use and relevance of such descriptions will depend primarily on context and intentions. Davidson himself showed that a materialist perspective does not rule out “anomalies”—that is, “pockets within the material world that, though they are the product of causal interactions, do not themselves follow strict causality.” Following both Marx and Darwin, we might say that humanity itself is one such anomaly, given that, unlike all other species, we make our own means of subsistence. As Bill Martin argues, this fact cannot be separated from other phenomena that make for

the human form of being: “language, meaning, valuation, consciousness and self-consciousness, a deep concern for finitude and mortality, and the attendant concern for ‘something more’, life more abundant” (403).<sup>12</sup>

To some extent, this may be obvious to anyone but a philosopher, but as Rorty puts it: “the best way to predict the behavior of tables will probably remain to talk about them *qua* tables rather than as collections of particles or as fuzzy replicas of the Platonic archetypal Table” (Rorty “Physicalism” 115-16). Another way of putting this is to say that reductionist materialism contains a lingering commitment to metaphysics, whereby the deeper material structure of an object (or an event) becomes its “truth” or “essence.” In contemporary society, this leads to the phenomenon of *scientism*. Now, given the anti-essentialist stance of traditional Buddhism, it is not hard to see why even traditional Buddhists would reject such reductionist thinking. The key here is, however, that is not the materialist or physicalist aspect that is the problem, but rather the metaphysical assumptions that often cling to a materialist analysis of history and society.<sup>13</sup> For both Rorty and Seno’o, to dispense with materialism (or physicalism) is to throw out the baby with the bathwater.

Moving from philosophical analysis back to social theory, let us look briefly at how Dharmic materialism relates, if at all, to contemporary movements of socially engaged Buddhism. Perhaps the first attempt by a Western scholar to bring together Buddhism and economics was E. F. Schumacher’s classic essay entitled “Buddhist Economics,” first pub-

---

<sup>12</sup> Compare, in this regard, Peter Herschok’s reflection on a Buddhist conception of “liberating change” (Herschok 94).

<sup>13</sup> Given the theme of this essay, it is also of note that Rorty’s piece was originally written for a presentation at the Institute of Philosophy of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and originally appeared in Chinese translation. This may be why Rorty remarks that the bridging accomplished by non-reductive physicalism goes against the grain of Western philosophical tradition—so much so that the acceptance of such by the culture at large might even render the culture nonwestern.

lished in 1966 but reprinted as a chapter in his bestselling 1973 book *Small is Beautiful*. Here Schumacher presents a sweeping critique of Western development models, arguing instead for a “Middle Way between materialist heedlessness and traditionalist immobility” (56). In this phrase we hear distinct echoes of Seno’o Giro and the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism, particularly in the insistence on the importance of Buddhist action and engagement in the face of institutional tendencies towards accepting the status quo, whether economic, social or political. One important distinction, however, is that Seno’o analysis probes beyond a critique of “materialist heedlessness” towards a more nuanced appraisal of materialism as a philosophical position.

Other, more recent attempts to work out a “Buddhist economics” fall prey to then sort of idealism that Seno’o ruthlessly criticized. For instance, H. N. S. Karunatilake’s analysis in *This Confused Society* (1976) looks back wistfully to the age of the Mauryan Emperor Asoka as a model, painting an idyllic picture of a co-operative and harmonious agrarian community (Karunatilake; see Harvey 216-17). Still more recent attempts to construct a Buddhist economics tend to focus on a critique of consumerism rather than materialism per se, and thus, although undoubtedly of use, move further away from the structural and anti-metaphysical critique offered by Seno’o Girō. Thus, both P. A. Payutto, author of the 1994 work *Buddhist Economics: A Middle Way for the Market Place*, and Buddhadasa Bhikku, who espoused a form of Dhammic socialism, focus their critique on the “worldly” character of both capitalist and communist systems, upholding an idealized Buddhist tradition as the moral exemplar (see Santikaro). Although more nuanced in his appreciation of the complexities of Marxist thought, Ambedkar, too, shares with these later critics a tendency towards a reading of Marxism on the basis of its most problematic “fruits,” while giving historical Buddhism a pass in favor of a highly idealized *dhamma* (see Ambedkar).

The basic thesis presented by Payutto is familiar: an idealized and dehistoricized “Buddhism” becomes the new “middle way” (or even “third way”) between the two dominant socio-economic systems of the twentieth century: capitalism and state socialism. It is not hard to tear this picture apart. First, as noted, “Buddhism” is abstracted from its actual historical effects and embeddedness in states and societies. Second, now that actual state socialism has largely gone the way of the dodo, the pressing need to bridge the imagined divide also withers away. This, I believe, gives us an opportunity to rethink not only Buddhism in its relation to socio-economic forms but also to reconsider socialism and communism—particularly their understanding of and commitment to philosophical materialism.<sup>14</sup> In short, we might say that contemporary Buddhist or Buddhist-inspired critiques of economics tend to espouse individual, moral transformation rather than structural change, and thus focus less on materialism as a philosophical stance than as a synonym for consumerist acquisition (or “commodity fetishism”). They also often present an idealized vision of Buddhist tradition, which is contrasted favorably to a Western tradition or traditions ostensibly rooted in greed, selfishness, and individualism. As such, they fail to examine problems rooted within Buddhism, such as the tendency towards forms of idealism and transcendence—or what Critical Buddhists call *topicalism*.

### From Materialism to (Non-)Subjectivity

The difference between materialism (I mean *good* materialism) and idealism in philosophy might be understood as follows: with materialist philosophy there is always more

---

<sup>14</sup> I am inspired here by a recent series of writings by mainly European thinkers under the lead of Alain Badou and Slavoj Žižek regarding the potential rebirth of what Badou calls “the communist hypothesis.”

to do and more to learn (and in this sense it resists “meta-physics”), while idealism proceeds from the self-conception that, when it is finally “done right,” there will be nothing left to do.

– Bill Martin, *Ethical Marxism*, p. 363

Let me summarize briefly my Dharmic revisioning of Marx’s concept of liberation inspired by the work of Seno’o Girō and Marxist revisionists such as Gramsci. For Marx, the disarray of capitalist production affords the opportunity for the majority of suffering people to organize itself in a movement of protest and thus become conscious of its own revolutionary force. In other words, the working class *makes use of* objective material conditions (here, suffering caused by contradictions in the capitalist system) to *overcome suffering* by way of a transformation in consciousness brought on by collective social action. As this recovering of humanity’s “species being” is necessarily *collective*, it might be reconceived as a breaking away from subjectivity towards an expanded sense of self, and with it an expanded sense of duty and responsibilities—that is, a new form of “selfless” humanism.<sup>15</sup> Of course, the issue remains as to whether this form of liberation must emerge—as Marx and Engels insist—from a particular class of people, rather than anyone who experiences suffering. But even the difference here between Marx and Buddhism may be less great than appears, because Marx clearly saw that alienation and dehu-

---

<sup>15</sup> “The notion that Marx regarded socialism as a system for depressing individuals into a Comtean universal being deprived of all subjectivity is one of the absurdest aberrations to which the study of his work has given rise. What can be said with truth is that in Marx’s view personality is not a mere matter of self-experience on the lines of the *cogito ergo sum*, because there is no such thing as pure self-knowledge apart from consciousness of the social life in which the individual has his being” (Kołakowski 256).

manization were conditions faced by all people regardless of class or social status; it was simply that those facing the most severe forms of suffering had less to lose by breaking their chains, and would be the ones ultimately responsible for the more general transformation of humanity into truly social beings.

In a recent essay called “The Common in Communism,” Michael Hardt argues that, far from being an extreme version of state socialism, communism might be reconceived a “middle path” between private property and public property, as its focus is primarily on what is held—or better, *utilized*—“in common.” Hardt goes on to lament the turn in some of Marx’s later writings—such as *Capital*—away from a nuanced, to my mind, potentially Dharmic, understanding of materialism, one that prioritizes the “appropriation of our own subjectivity, our human, social relations” (140). As Hardt notes, when Marx in his early work wrote of “appropriation,” he was using the term against the grain—almost ironically, because what is really meant is not the grasping onto what really exists, but rather “creating something new,” that is, nothing less than a new form of humanity, both individual and communal. Indeed, Marx was suspicious of the forms of materialism he saw around him, in which cognition was conceived as a passive reception of the object, transforming it into a subjective content. Marx tended to describe his own view as *naturalism* or *humanism*, which, he says, “differs equally from idealism and materialism, being the truth which unites them both.” As Kołakowski notes, this is, fundamentally, an anthropocentric viewpoint,

. . . seeing in humanized nature a counterpart of practical human intentions; as human practice has a social character, its cognitive effect—the image of nature—is the work of social man. Human consciousness is merely the expression in thought of a social relationship to nature, and must be considered as a product of the collective effort of the spe-

cies. Accordingly, deformations of consciousness are not to be explained as due to the aberrations or imperfections of consciousness itself: their sources are to be looked for in more original processes, and particularly in the alienation of labour (113-14).

Here we have a picture of a *humanistic naturalism* (or noological physicalism?) that locates meaning within collective praxis—premised upon, or constituent with, a radical transformation of consciousness via an awakening to its “deformations.”

Might this correspond to a Buddhist conception of liberation? Most striking from the perspective of my argument here is Hardt’s conclusion that, contrary the common interpretation of the early Marx, and to some of the writer’s own admissions:

Marx’s notion of communism in the early manuscripts is far from humanism, that is, far from any recourse to a pre-existing or eternal human essence. Instead the positive content of communism, which corresponds to the abolition of private property, is the autonomous human production of subjectivity, the human production of humanity—a new seeing, a new hearing, a new thinking, a new loving. (141)

Although this might sound—especially to the later Marx—as a insufficiently complete liberation from the chains of Hegelian (or Platonistic) idealism, it is crucial to note that this vision of a transfigured subjectivity (and society), based in what Hardt calls “biopolitical production,” remains rooted in the basic assumptions of philosophical and historical (if not dialectical) materialism. Noteworthy here is Hardt’s notion that *radical humanism*—that is, grasping humanity by the roots—entails a recognition and acceptance of a *lack* of human nature; and one might

conclude, of the substantial *self*. Rather than see this as a capitulation to nihilistic passivity, however, it is the very ground of liberation itself.

## References

Abū al-Faẓl ibn Mubarek. *The Ain i Akbari, Volume 3*, translated by H. S. Jarrett. Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1893.

Ambedkar, B. R. *The Buddha and his Dhamma: A Critical Edition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Bacon, Francis. *The Novum Organon: or, A True Guide to the Interpretation of Nature*, translated by G.W. Kitchin. Toronto: University of Toronto Libraries, 2011.

Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckmann. *The Social Construction of Reality*. Garden City: Anchor Books, 1966.

Birnbaum, Max. "Beyond Marx in the Sociology of Religion." In *Beyond the Classics? Essays in the Scientific Study of Religion*, edited by Charles Glock and Philip E. Hammond. New York: Harper and Row, 1973.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *What is Philosophy*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri C. Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1978.

Gramsci, Antonio. *Opere di Antonio Gramsci*, vol. 2. Turin: Einaudi.

Harvey, Peter. *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Heera, Bhupender. *Uniqueness of Cārvāka Philosophy in Traditional Indian Thought*. New Delhi: Decent Books, 2011.

Hershock, Peter. *Valuing Diversity: Buddhist Reflection on Realizing a More Equitable Global Future*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2012.

Karunatilake, H. N. S. 1976. *This Confused Society*. Colombo: Buddhist Information Centre.

Kołakowski, Leszek. *Main Currents of Marxism: The Founders, The Golden Age, The Breakdown*, 3 Volumes. New York: W. W. Norton, 2008.

Lai, Whalen. "Seno'o Girō and the Dilemma of Modern Buddhism: Leftist Prophet of the Lotus Sutra," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 11, nos. 2-3 (1984), 7-42.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Tristes Tropiques*, translated by John Russell. New York: Criterion Books, 1961.

Lukács, György. *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972.

Mani, Braj Ranjan. "Dr. Ambedkar's Predecessors on the Path Towards Narayana." In *Buddhism and the Contemporary World: An Ambedkarian Perspective*, edited by Bhalchandra Mungekar and Aakash Singh Rathore, 57-85. New Delhi: Bookwell, 2007.

Martin, Bill. *Ethical Marxism*. Chicago: Open Court Publications, 2008.

Marx, Karl. *Capital, Volume I: A Critique of Political Economy*, translated by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling. Mineola: Dover Books.

\_\_\_\_\_. Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law, in *Collected Works*, Volume 3, 175-87. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975.

\_\_\_\_\_. "On the Jewish Question," in *Collected Works, Volume 3*, 146-74. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Theses on Feuerbach," in *Collected Works, Volume 5*, 3-5. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975.

Nichiren. "Hakumai ippyō gosho." In *Complete Writings of Nichiren Daishōnin*, 1596-97; English translation, "The Gift of Rice," in *The Writings of Nichiren Daishōnin*, 1126. Online. Available HTTP: <[www.sgilibrary.org/view.php?page=1126&m=1&q=gift%20of%20rice](http://www.sgilibrary.org/view.php?page=1126&m=1&q=gift%20of%20rice)> (accessed 21 May 2013).

Payutto, P. A. *Buddhist Economics: A Middle Way for the Marketplace* (1992). Online. Available HTTP: <[www.buddhanet.net/cmdsg/econ.htm](http://www.buddhanet.net/cmdsg/econ.htm)> (accessed 30 December 2010).

Radhakrishnan. *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967.

Riepe, Dale. *The Naturalistic Tradition in Indian Thought*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1964.

Rorty, Richard. "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity." In *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers, Volume 2*, 164-76. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Rorty, Richard. Non-reductive Physicalism. In *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, Volume 1*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Sankrityayan, Rahul. "Buddhist Dialectics." In *Buddhism: The Marxist Approach*, 1-8. New Delhi: People's Publishing, 1973.

Santikaro Bhikku. "Buddhadasa Bhikku: Life and Society through the Natural Eyes of Voidness." In *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Move-*

*ments in Asia*, edited by Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King. Albany: SUNY Press, 1996.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Search for a Method*, translated by Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963.

Schumacher, E. F. *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*. London: Blond and Briggs, 1973.

Seno'o Girō. *Seno'o Girō shūkyō ronshu*, edited by Inagaki Masami. Tokyo: Daizō Shuppan, 1975.

Shields, James Mark. *Critical Buddhism: Engaging with Modern Japanese Buddhist Thought*. London: Ashgate Press, 2011.

\_\_\_\_\_. "A Blueprint for Buddhist Revolution: The Radical Buddhism of Seno'o Girō (1889-1961) and the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism." *Journal of Japanese Religious Studies* 39, no. 2 (2012): 333-51.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Political Interpretations of the *Lotus Sutra*." In *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, edited by Steven M. Emmanuel, 512-23. London: John Wiley & Sons, 2013.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Seno'o Girō: Life and Thought of a Radical Buddhist." In *Understanding Buddhism through Biography*, edited by Todd Lewis. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.

Surin, Kenneth. "Materialism + Philosophy." In *The Deleuze Dictionary*, edited by Adrian Park, 160-62. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

Timmerman, Peter. 1995. "Defending Materialism." *People and the Planet* 4, no. 1, 30-31.