

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://jbe.gold.ac.uk/>

The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory

Reviewed by Dan Arnold

University of Chicago Divinity School

Email: d-arnold@uchicago.edu

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Review of *The Great Awakening:
A Buddhist Social Theory.*

Dan Arnold*

The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory. By
David R. Loy. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003. 228
pages. Paperback. ISBN 0861713664.

David Loy's most recent book comprises a series of essays that frame and analyze various socio-political issues – such as the “war on terror,” globalization, poverty and development, possible reforms in the American system of justice – from a basically Buddhist perspective. The idea behind this attempt is that, although, as Loy notes several times, “Buddhism lacks an explicit social theory” (75), “[w]hat is most striking about our collective plight today is how much it resembles the problem we face as individuals....” (49) The approach, then, is to understand constitutively social phenomena in terms of the conceptual tools that Buddhist traditions characteristically deploy in understanding the predicament of persons – as expressions, for example, of greed, hatred, and delusion. The topical

* University of Chicago Divinity School. Email: d-arnold@uchicago.edu

essays in the book are preceded by a lengthy introduction (constituting fully a quarter of the book) that addresses the question of what, precisely, it could mean to speak of a “Buddhist social theory.” While there is much with which I, and I suspect a great many readers of this journal, agree in the specific analyses that follow, the framing attempt to characterize, in general terms, a “Buddhist social theory” seems to me problematic. Insofar as the problems here seem to me to typify a characteristically modern approach to Buddhism – the kind of approach that Stephen Batchelor has commended as “Buddhism without beliefs”¹ – and insofar, as well, as these issues arguably have consequences for ethical discourse, I would like in this review to focus on the question of the metaphysical ground of Loy’s analyses.

As an expression, though, of sympathy for the basic project here, I would first note that it has long seemed to me that the Buddhist tradition affords ample conceptual resources for analyzing the kinds of issues here addressed. One might, for example, argue thus: Through much of the past century, and particularly since the events of September 11, 2001, U.S. foreign policy has arguably exacerbated precisely the problems that ought to be of greatest concern. Intent on making (at least certain interests of) the U.S. secure, the formulators of current policies have demonstrated a systematic misunderstanding of what is in their own best interest. As a result of (sometimes seemingly willful) ignorance of relevant complexities, the policies whose execution is said to constitute a “war against terrorism” have served only to increase the measure of “terror” – in the form of violated civil liberties, stoked fears, outsourced torture – at home and abroad, as well as further destabilizing the world in precisely the ways that are most conducive to the emergence of terrorist movements. Far from effecting the cessation of the problems it is ostensibly meant to address, the currently prevailing approach seems likely only to foster

further instances of large-scale suffering – in which case it is itself an example of precisely the problem to be overcome.

The foregoing could reasonably be characterized as a basically Buddhist analysis. On this reading, the point is that institutions and nations, like persons, structure their being around the satisfaction of “desires” (for, say, growth and security); but insofar as they systematically misunderstand themselves and their own motives, agents, whether corporate or individual, mostly act in ways that only further enmesh them in what are the real causes of their “suffering” – most basically, the illusory sense that ultimate satisfaction or completeness can be brought about by getting what we want and by eradicating whatever prevents that.

Note, though, my use of scare quotes here, signaling the peculiarity in thus attributing propositional attitudes or intentional states like “desire” and “suffering” to such abstract entities as “nations.” This point may relate to one of the salient questions to be asked of a project such as David Loy’s: if, as is surely the case, it makes sense to speak of suffering (*dukkha*, to use the Pali term that Loy favors) as a constitutively social phenomenon, then what, precisely, is the social analogue of the third and fourth Noble Truths – of the cessation (*nirodha*) of suffering, and of the way (*mārga*) to bring that about? This question is especially compelling since, as Loy quite rightly says, “one of the main causes of evil in this world has been human attempts to eradicate evil.” (105)

To say that historical projects in the “eradication of evil” turn out invariably to have something radically other than their advertised outcome is in effect to characterize them (as Loy does) as driven by ideologies. But of course, “ideologies” never claim that status for themselves; rather, they typically represent themselves as communicating something true. Identifying them as “ideologies” presupposes that there is a historically or logically privileged position from which it is possible to see through rival

pretensions at truth. On what grounds can one claim a perspective that is not itself an “ideology,” and that yet identifies alternative perspectives as such? And mightn’t this claim itself become the basis for another pernicious project in “eradicating evil”? How are we to know?

These questions can be pressed to argue that a philosophically tenable social critique must include an account of the conditions of its own possibility. Such an argument can fruitfully be addressed to Ernest Becker’s broadly existentialist expression of astonishment – commended by Loy – that “the most anxiety-prone animal of all could come to *see through himself* and discover the fictional nature of his action world.” (quoted, p.11) But this just is to say that there is something in the “nature of his action world” that can be known as true – namely, the fact that human “action worlds” are “fictional.”

Loy quotes Raymond Geuss in order to make a similar point: “A full-scale social theory... will form part of its own object-domain. That is, a theory is a theory about (among other things) agents’ beliefs about their society, but it is itself such a belief. So if a theory of society is to give an exhaustive account of the beliefs agents in the society have, it will have to give an account of itself as one such belief.”² Addressing this, Loy invokes the characteristically Mādhyamika idea of the “emptiness of emptiness,” urging that the Mādhyamika analysis itself applies “even to the crucial concept of shunyata (emptiness), which Nagarjuna used to deconstruct the self-existence of things. Shunyata too is relative to those supposed things, it is a heuristic term, nothing more than a way to demonstrate ‘the exhaustion of all theories and views,’ and those who insist on making shunyata into a theory about the nature of things are said to be incurable.” (25) Buddhist teachings, as Loy says, “are tools, not metaphysical claims.” (6)

One of the most vexed issues in both traditional and modern interpretations of Madhyamaka concerns characteristically Mādhyamika claims apparently to the effect that no claims are being made. The most basic critique to which such claims are vulnerable, as Nāgārjuna himself clearly understood, involves the charge of self-reflexive incoherence; met with the claim that, say, “the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth,” it is easy to ask: What is the status *of this claim*? There is much more to be said about the logic of characteristically Mādhyamika claims – such as that it is arguably incoherent to characterize *śūnyatā* as functioning only in a “heuristic” way, and that Nāgārjuna is nothing if not a metaphysician. Most basically, though, I submit that Mādhyamika claims are proposed as really *true*.³

It undermines the cogency of Loy’s analyses – and renders them less likely to have any purchase against those who antecedently reject the value of a “Buddhist” analysis – to represent it as being itself constitutively different from the “religious” or “ideological” claims to which it is opposed. Why not claim that these reconstructed Buddhist analyses are exceptional not insofar as they are something other than “views,” but insofar as they are *true*? To commit oneself to the latter claim is, to be sure, to disagree with those who contradict it – but it is important thus to avoid implicitly claiming an exceptional status for Buddhist analysis; for not only is the idea of such an exceptional status philosophically problematic (there is no perspective free of metaphysical presuppositions, no “view from nowhere”), but it can have ethical consequences. This is nicely brought out by Jeffrey Stout, who too notes the necessity of a critique’s accounting for the conditions of its own possibility: “When critics go too far, their opponents rightly charge them with self-contradiction, with an inability to account consistently for the critique itself. The temptation is then to sidestep the charge by claiming a

perspective distinct from that of the society under indictment. But this entails that anyone who attains the critic's perspective acquires membership in a morally privileged group, above or apart from the people. It is but a small step from this claim to an antidemocratic politics."⁴

It is, then, useful to ask of a book such as Loy's: for whom is this written? The essays comprised in this book develop critiques and analyses that will likely be found persuasive and insightful by most likely readers of this book (as, indeed, by this reviewer). But particularly given the current political moment (and given, therefore, the people who most need to hear the kind of social critique Loy is interested in making), it becomes important to press the question of the perspective from which the analysis is proposed.

This question looms especially large given the illuminating and insightful ways in which Loy reconstructs basic Buddhist insights following the thought of Ernest Becker. On this analysis, the suffering whose pervasiveness is expressed in the first Noble Truth consists, most basically, in a compelling sense of lack.⁵ Loy at one point expresses this in a way that strikes just the balance that Buddhist philosophers are always striving for, eloquently (if indirectly) stating in the same moment the sense in which each of the "two truths" is true. The doctrine of selflessness, he says, suggests that

our dukkha ultimately derives from a repression even more immediate than death-fear: the suspicion that I am not real... The consequence of this perpetual failure is that the sense of self is shadowed by a sense of lack... The problem is not so much that we will die, but that we do not feel real now. (22)

Thus, on this reconstruction of the Buddhist position it is urged at once that we desperately and deludedly grasp at (and work to objectify) a self, and yet dimly intuit (and fear) that very self's ultimate unreality – hence, the desperation of the grasping. But while that anxiety may be brought to nihilism (which is one of the extremes that Buddhists always work to eschew) by the realization that, as Buddhists argue, all attempts to complete or objectify the self will necessarily fail, we also have here the affirmation of the conventional truth: “We do not need to make ourselves real, because we have always been real.” (30) If we are not “real” *in the only way that we mistakenly think can count* (i.e., ultimately real), we are, for all that, real – real, that is, in the only way that anything *can* be real, which is relatively or dependently.⁶

The idiom of Ernest Becker works, I think, very well in thus developing a rational reconstruction (one that Loy characterizes as “psychotherapeutic”) of what is arguably the central Buddhist insight. It also works particularly well in characterizing – in ways that reflect recognizably Buddhist insights – the problems endemic to consumer capitalism. Thus, “the most fundamental problem with present social arrangements is that they do not really make people happy – even those who benefit the most – because they are based on a defective premise, a wrong understanding of how dukkha may be ended.” (36) Specifically, prevailing social arrangements are – like the lives of individuals – based on the premise that we suffer because we have not satisfied our desires, and that we ought therefore to work, above all, at satisfying our desires. The problem with that premise is, in fact, perfectly illustrated by the case of consumer capitalism, which exemplifies the inherent “unsatisfiability” of desires insofar as it must, in order for the system to work, create desires faster than it satisfies them (else there will not be – what capitalism perennially requires – ever-increasing economic growth). “Overproduction

has long since shifted the focus from the manufacture of goods to the manufacture of demand....” (88) In this way, capitalism constitutively exploits (rather than addressing) precisely the failing that Buddhists think is to be overcome – i.e., our deeply mistaken sense that we can make ourselves “real,” and eliminate our suffering, by satisfying our desires. This is the sense, then, in which, as Loy aptly says, “there is a fundamental and inescapable poverty built into a consumer society.” (58)

But this analysis also raises the questions I have suggested above. This becomes particularly clear if we attend to one of the most prominently recurrent themes in the book: the idea (also from Becker) that “ideologies” – which is to say, such rival perspectives and interpretations as are deployed to justify precisely the institutions and developments (e.g., the World Bank, the IMF, globalization, the “war on terror”) that Loy critiques – represent “another attempt to objectify ourselves, by understanding ourselves objectively.” (25) That is, the most salient social expressions of the ignorance that it is Buddhism’s task to overcome are those “fictional” paradigms of the human “action world” that spuriously communicate whatever sense of meaning we take our lives and actions to have.⁷ More precisely, “ideologies” function to suppress the anxiety that goes with not feeling “real” (and with the fact that the certainty of death makes it impossible that we ever will).

The most compellingly social “lack” that Loy identifies, then, has finally to do with the recently emergent failure of such ideologies to alleviate our anxiety – with the fact, most basically, that we now realize the truth that there is no post-mortem existence. What happens, Loy thus asks, “when a whole civilization begins to doubt such afterlife?” (11) Answer: “There is no escaping the corrosive effects of the (post)modern world on premodern worldviews. Today we can no more suppress collective doubts about an afterlife than we can return to a life without

electricity. Premodern innocence about one's sacred canopy cannot be regained once we become conscious of its constructedness." (15)

Again, how do we explain the "construction" of – or, to put it more strongly, the *conditions of the possibility of* – the view that sees this fact? The question matters, since a failure to understand the extent of our own implication in the world we criticize risks encouraging the "antidemocratic" conclusion that "we" who see truly are morally exceptional. And that is precisely the sort of exceptionalism that defines (for many of the most ardent proponents of views and institutions that Loy criticizes) the "secularism" that (on their view) so perniciously characterizes modern society.⁸ With that in mind, it is easy to appreciate that claims to the effect that one is in a position (itself entailing no metaphysical presuppositions) to see through the metaphysical mistakes of everyone else are likely to have a positively alienating effect on precisely the people who most need to hear Loy's insights. Put more sharply, the point is to ask: who is the "we" who have thus lost confidence in the stories that foster our illusions of immortality? And are "we," in thus having lost confidence, constitutively (morally?) different from those still in thrall to such illusions? Of course, one could say from a Buddhist perspective that those who harbor illusions of immortality are simply in the throes of ignorance – that, in other words, those who would defend, say, the policies of the World Bank and the IMF or the globalization of consumer capitalism are simply wrong.⁹ But in order to argue that, one needs to be in a position to propose one's own analysis as really true.

Of course, accepting the philosophical burden of arguing for the metaphysical ground for one's socio-critical claims does not ensure that the resulting critique will have greater purchase on those who antecedently reject such an analysis; far from it. Indeed, one of the things that makes the particular historical moment seem so bleak is precisely the extent to

which so many positions are held in such a way that any critique thereof (even one that claims to be internal to the perspective in question) will, simply insofar as it is a critique, reflexively be dismissed as inauthentically exemplifying the preferred view. This is, to be sure, perhaps evidence of the truth of Loy's Beckerian reconstruction of the Buddhist analysis – evidence, that is, that recommends the analysis according to which the desperation with which ideologies are grasped results precisely from their failure. But it is also, I think, evidence of the need to reflect on the conditions of the possibility of a social critique – and more particularly, on the extent to which those conditions are, for better or for worse (and probably for better *and* for worse), conditions of the possibility also of our talking to those with whom we disagree.

Given the impasse to which we may, nevertheless, inevitably be brought, it may not help to recur to what may be the even more intractable question: that of the social analogues of the third and fourth Noble Truths. Just what social formations and policies ought we to encourage (what *mārga* should we commend) if we are persuaded by Loy's Buddhist analysis of the human situation? Just what would the "cessation" (*nirodha*) of "social dukkha" look like? Indeed, is the *cessation* of suffering even an intelligible idea?¹⁰ As Loy asks, "Can this process of individual transformation be generalized for collective transformation as well?" (35)

In this regard, Loy notes that insofar as "Buddhism does not offer happiness through the fulfillment of desire... the social solution we seek cannot be socially engineered." (32)¹¹ This finally recommends the conclusion that "we cannot expect to become sufficiently aware of our collective motivations unless we also make the effort to become more aware of our individual motivations. I suspect we will not be able to resolve our group sense of lack unless more of us individually address our personal sense of lack." (169)

But if that is right, it may undermine the case for a constitutively Buddhist “social theory” – a fact I suggested above by noting the oddity in attributing propositional attitudes and intentional states (like desire, aversion, and delusion) to abstract entities like nations and institutions. Perhaps, though, the problem here lies not in treating social phenomena as analogous to persons, but, conversely, in representing “our personal sense of lack” as personal; for the conceptual resources of Buddhist traditions would recommend, above all, the recognition that (as so eloquently expressed by Śāntideva) there is a sense in which the suffering of “others” is just as closely related to “us” as is “our own” – given which, it is the very distinction between “personal” and “social” analyses that is to be overcome; there is no Buddhist thought that is not “social theory.”

David Loy is, in any case, to be commended for attempting to bring the rich conceptual resources of Buddhist thought to bear on some of the innumerable social trends and institutions that manifestly cause suffering – including the limited liability corporation, the adversarial system of punitive justice (Loy’s critique of which may owe more to Mennonite Howard Zehr than to Buddhism), and the “development” of “underdeveloped” nations. While there is sometimes a rather ad hoc character to the effort – suggesting that what Loy may really mean by a “Buddhist social theory” is a theoretical program for generating the policy commitments he takes to be desirable – it would, nevertheless, be a good thing if there were more books like this.

Notes

¹Stephen Batchelor, *Buddhism without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening* (New York: Riverhead, 1997).

² Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 56; quoted by Loy, p. 24.

³ See Claus Oetke's remark, "Nāgārjuna was a metaphysician (in a most genuine sense of the term) and... he presupposed that it is possible to employ rational means in order to prove something about ultimate reality – though not in the sense that something is ascribed to ultimate reality as an object." (From Oetke's review of Jonardon Ganeri, *Philosophy in Classical India*, in *Indo-Iranian Journal* 46 [2003], p.152) As evidence of the complexity of the issues at stake here, one would do well to consider Mark Siderits's discussion of "the semantic consequences of the doctrine of emptiness" in Chapter 8 of his *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy: Empty Persons* (London: Ashgate, 2003) – which, though it is one of the most difficult (and least obviously Buddhist) chapters in his book, is also one of the most sensitive and illuminating accounts of the logic of Madhyamaka that I have seen. I have developed my own views in the matter in my forthcoming *Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief: Epistemology in South Asian Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press).

⁴ Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 60.

⁵ See Loy's earlier *Lack and Transcendence: The Problem of Death and Life in Psychotherapy, Existentialism and Buddhism* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996).

⁶ A similarly Mādhyamika point is eloquently expressed by Mark Siderits: "Chariots, houses, forests, trees, rivers, mountains, persons, psychophysical elements, atoms, quarks – all are real in the only way in which something could

be real. Each has its own determinate nature by virtue of its functional role within some human practice. Each is of course empty – devoid of intrinsic nature, hence lacking in the reality of mind-independent reals. But since nothing could be real in that way, the appellation ‘empty’ attaches to everything there is. Only in contexts where the illusory ambitions of realism are still in play will ‘empty’ serve to mark a significant distinction. In ordinary lifeworld contexts, where it applies to everything, the term becomes semantically empty. That rivers and mountains are empty becomes the simple fact that there are rivers and mountains. That persons are empty becomes the simple fact that we are persons. With the world regained in this way, what is there to fear?” (*Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy*, p. 202)

⁷ For example, “socialism and capitalism both offer us a naturalistic salvation in the future, when we (or at least some of us) will become happy because our desires are satisfied.” (28)

⁸ See, in this regard, Jeffrey Stout’s “Secularization and Resentment,” in *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004) pp. 92-117. Stout helpfully distinguishes “secularization” – which identifies the historical trends that have resulted in contemporary ethical discourse’s not being “‘framed by a theological perspective’ taken for granted by all those who participate in it” – from “secularism” – which identifies a commitment to “the denial of theological assumptions [and] the expulsion of theological expression from the public sphere.” (93)

⁹ Note that to say that it is “defenders of the World Bank,” and so on, who are wrong is to grant that assent to a Buddhist analysis of the human situation straightforwardly entails commitment to a specifiable social program or policies – surely a debatable point. Of course, this is not hard to say if one is prepared to say of any historically “Buddhist” society that happens to encourage alternative interpretations simply that it is, ipso facto, not properly Buddhist – which is the sort of judgment that Loy seems to suggest when he says, for example, that “a comparison with the Theravadan societies of South and Southeast Asia suggests

that Japanese Buddhism might be more Japanese than Buddhist....” (155) – as though it were unproblematic to claim that the Buddhist traditions of, say, Sri Lanka or Thailand constitute the criterion of authentic “Buddhism.”

¹⁰ This is a question that can be asked, as well, of more classically formulated expressions of Buddhist doctrine. Indeed, it is arguably the axiomatic belief that suffering – which, the first noble truth tells us, pervasively characterizes lived experience – can and should be eliminated that gives rise to some of the most intractable conceptual puzzles in Buddhist thought. Thus, for example, it would seem that the elimination of something that constitutively characterizes lived experience would be tantamount to the elimination of lived experience – hence, the Buddhist tradition’s felt need always to emphasize that *nirvāṇa* does not consist simply in annihilation or non-being. For insightful reflections on this and related themes, see Paul Griffiths, *On Being Buddha: The Classical Doctrine of Buddhahood* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994).

¹¹ He continues: “It also means that our collective preoccupation with economic growth and ever increasing consumption must also be transforme... providing increasing sense gratification is not the most important function of a social system... the primary concern of a culture of awakening would be education.” (32-33)