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Toward a Reevaluation of Buddhism*

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Cruel Theory/Sublime Practice: Toward a Revaluation of Buddhism

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Cruel Theory/Sublime Practice: Toward a Revaluation of Buddhism. By Glenn Wallis, Tom Pepper, and Matthias Steingass. Roskilde, Denmark: EyeCorner Press, 2013, 211 pages, ISBN 978-87-92633-23-1 (paperback), \$29.95.

In *Cruel Theory/Sublime Practice: Toward a Revaluation of Buddhism*, Glenn Wallis, Matthias Steingass, and Tom Pepper suspect quiescent and supernatural states. They reject what they term “x-buddhisms” as adjectival labels that proliferate to distinguish various schools of Buddhism. They promote a radical practice grounded in liberating socially engaged agents, who are committed to intellectual rigor, ideological application, and political confrontation. Expanding ideas discussed at the [Speculative Non-Buddhism](#) online project, they deny world-transcendence as a possibility for Buddhists or any sentient beings.

Following a brief preface from Wallis, the book comprises three sections, meant to complement each other but written independently by these three collaborators at the online project. The first section, which Tom Pepper titles “The Radical Buddhist Subject and the Sublime Aesthetics of Truth,” affirms a collective mind outside the individual brain,

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with communal aims allied with radical politics to overthrow capitalism. Wallis and Pepper advocate a vanguard of liberated subjects revitalized by their encounter with a “truth-event” of a conceptual breakthrough into existential freedom that they conjecture may have arrived with (or has been attributed to) the historical Buddha. The middle portion, “Speculative Non-Buddhism: X-Buddhist Hallucination and its Decimation,” incorporates Wallis’ survey of his project as a means to the end of replacing Buddhist convention with a theoretically grounded, rigorously formulated, densely articulated, and radical subversion of the status quo. Finally, Steingass in a chapter on “Control” critiques the counter-cultural credulity given to reactionary “x-buddhisms.”

Likely readers for this project will overlap with those who have welcomed or denounced its online inspiration. This book may appeal to those curious about interdisciplinary theoretical discussions of Buddhist and progressive concepts, but who are also disenchanted with current forms of Buddhism. Wallis’ iconoclastic stance, advanced into an advocacy of communism by Pepper, demands that a reader must dismiss “x-buddhist” pieties. Readers immersed in philosophy, political theory, psychology, popular culture, sociology, and literary criticism will find many familiar and some eclectic references taken from the European intellectual tradition. These fields intersect with Wallis’ familiarity with Pāli and Sanskrit texts in the original.

This exacting analysis demands concentration. Cruelty, applied by Wallis as exemplified by Antonin Artaud’s theater, unnerves the practitioner, and a reader uninformed about “non-buddhism” may enter a similar bewilderment. These three authors expect their audience to look terms up, to study their online project, and to do supplemental reading if they are unfamiliar with theories or texts. Out of this regimen, the trio expects that a practitioner, invigorated by theory, will revive as an informed and radicalized subject. Wallis’s précis about this book’s individually authored chapters refuses consistency or coherence. Less an editor than a compiler, he instigates the debate continued by his two

colleagues. Tom Pepper rejects an “ultimate cosmopolitan anti-intellectual aesthetic practice” which constitutes most of Western Buddhism. In the book’s first chapter, “The Radical Buddhist Subject and the Sublime Aesthetics of Truth,” Pepper equates postmodernism with “sophisticated anti-intellectualism” (22).

Given Pepper is a literature professor, I pondered (fresh from reviewing Thomas Pynchon’s recent novel *Bleeding Edge*) if erudite evocations of power and control within Pynchon’s works or, for example, Roberto Bolaño’s *2666*, Don DeLillo’s *Libra*, Haruki Murakami’s *1Q84*, or José Saramago’s allegories and chronicles deserved this tacit dismissal as “anti-intellectual” for their own sophisticated postmodernism. Pepper may intend to blame the secondary orality of postmodern culture. When fewer people read closely, they parrot received ideas with less self-awareness. Such lassitude, in the view of the three authors of this book, enables the solipsism of consumers seeking Buddhism now, as marketed often in the West.

Pepper prefers to dismantle philosophical rather than fictional constructs that ease disengaged, dissatisfied audiences away from “the desolate landscape of postmodern thought.” He castigates those Western Buddhists who eschew thought within meditation, and those who further “global capitalism” by choosing a more comforting “aesthetic negotiation” which prefers the comfort of beauty to any confrontation with an edgy, uneasy “sublime” harnessed to economic reform and radical change (23).

Moving from David Hume’s aesthetics, through Pāli texts, past Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* into Louis Althusser’s “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Pepper promotes as a corrective Alain Badiou’s version of the sublime. Here, Pepper’s definition meshes with postmodern literature, if by implication: “The sublime assumes a lack or emptiness, a gap in our World, our ideology, and also assumes the emptiness of conventional truth” (58). Pepper sharpens his perceptions, urging the need to acknowledge conventional truth. He reflects on

Nāgārjuna in light of Hume, Althusser, and the search for the Higgs Boson, as ways to start remapping worlds which stop reifying false premises. He uses Badiou's agency to propose common efforts which, as in the Aristotelian sense of making a habit a commitment to serious play and immersion in moral action, together create social transformation.

How this revives Buddhism might be, Pepper suggests, akin to how Keats's "Ode to Melancholy," the *Harry Potter* series, or the film *Avatar* may be studied. Students can unite to dismantle ideology, and to rebuild it. Exposing the mind as the core, not the brain, for "symbolic communication, which must always take place between multiple individuals," Pepper draws on Marx and Lacan (in passing), Badiou, and Buddhist thought for his remodel (56). This "sublime" may not soothe, but it can awaken. No-self, dependent arising, and conventional truth provide markers by which humans can achieve consciousness rather than submission to "reactionary or obscurantist subjectivity" (83). How this will be achieved pragmatically, as in many manifestos, remains nebulous, but the promise of philosophical and political change lingers. Pepper's section concludes with an acknowledgement of necessary human dependence on a better ideology. He encourages those who apply his philosophical tactics to develop a wiser set of ideological constructions that will transform reality.

Elaborating his scrutiny on the *Speculative Non-Buddhism* site, Glenn Wallis has moved beyond his phenomenologically inflected interpretations infusing his translations of the *Dhammapada* (2004) and sixteen suttas as *Basic Teachings of the Buddha* (2007). Neither merits mention in this volume. Wallis turns away in this new project from his decades as a practitioner and a scholar of Buddhist Studies. Currently teaching applied meditation at the Won Institute of Graduate Studies near Philadelphia, he devises "non-buddhism" inspired by the procedures of François Laruelle. Wallis alters "critical operations" to produce "theorems that are buddhistically uninterpretable" (91). By what he has called

disinterested interest, he exposes the hidden syntax, the viability of the propositions, and the “ideological excess” within Buddhism (92).

Through fifty-eight numbered sub-sections of the second part of this book, titled “The Radical Buddhist Subject and the Sublime Aesthetics of Truth,” Wallis establishes his terms, with a coda revising a few as a thought-experiment. His training as a Sanskrit and Pāli scholar, his incisive tone, and his occluded career as a hardcore punk guitarist (he applies “decimation” as taken from digital sound processing) hover around a set of propositions and definitions. Confronting “x-buddhisms,” (these usages are as phrased throughout this book) where x=“unending modifiers” (93), Wallis locates in each version an embedded “decision” to affirm that type as a synecdoche for the whole of the Dharma. The “non-” disables the Buddhist “network of postulation” while enabling Buddhism to remain as a “positive value” (95-96). “Speculation” requires that x-Buddhism remain as is, so that critical inquiry may proceed, doing what x-Buddhism will not do.

Therefore, integrating Laruelle’s “radical immanence,” this non-Buddhism exposes x-Buddhism. It can dissect, say, a concept such as *sūnyatā* to demonstrate how it works within a “symbolic system” freed from having to prove or disprove the truth-claim of emptiness itself. (103) “Decision” unplugs the current of self-reflexivity, the self-sufficiency of a Buddhist version unable to examine its own syntax. Non-Buddhism, neither negating nor affirming Buddhism, incorporates a concerted strategy that “aims to stimulate the cognitive and affective conditions that render decision intelligible” (105).

Ironically, as a doctrine abounding with metaphors of voids, fingers pointing at a moon, discarding rafts, or burning houses down, x-Buddhism refuses to notice its “flinch” when presented with these tropes. It resists its radical terms. Within a loop, trapped by clinging, it fails to provide “*knowledge of real processes*”; tautologically, it whirls within a “matrix of hallucinatory *desire*” (112). As a counter-measure, Wallis adapts Althusser’s formulation of interpellation, the way people

are molded into subjects through “ideological state apparatuses,” to show how a “contemporary Westerner” refashions into an “x-buddhist subject” (115). Unless the “bad” subject disidentifies (as Althusser’s student Michel Pêcheux phrases this oppositional stance) with the community’s ideology, that interpretation seems natural and self-evident. This complacency, Wallis (Pepper concurs although nearly no cross-references connect their essays) demonstrates, prevents the adept from challenging, revolting, or leaving the dominant system. Liberation lets go of the “thaumaturgical refuge of x-buddhism” full of “ventriloquized subjects,” as the one unthinking one’s self as a non-Buddhist enters into exile (121).

Wallis directs the exiled subject towards “non-buddhist terms for practice” (124). Intrigued by the potential within x-Buddhism yet no longer bound to its “dharmic norms,” he lists three-dozen varieties of a heuristic within which speculation may work. “Buddhemes” as the reiterations of x-Buddhism, Buddhism as a constantly morphing ideology credited to “The Protagonist,” a “Gotamic calculus,” “humophobia” or a fear of flesh and blood, the “principle of sufficient Buddhism” as a nostrum for all that ails us, “spiritual narcissism,” and a “voltaic network of postulation” speckle these exempla with provocative insight if considerable compression. Eager to defeat Buddhism as a “particular variety of sameness,” Wallis escorts “x-buddhism’s representatives” (136) to his “Great Feast of Knowledge” (144). There, these claimants can hold their own, albeit democratically, under the “same rules of engagement as all of the sciences and the humanities, as all local knowledges.” I add that feasters might look up a Chinese student statement issued in June 1986, “The Not-Not Manifesto.” Consider this snippet, cited by Jonathan Spence in his *The Search for Modern China*: “Not-Not is not the negation of anything. It is only an expression of itself. Not-Not is aware that liberation exists in the indefinite.”

Concluding with a thought-experiment substituting non-Buddhist terms for x-Buddhist ones, Wallis reckons a “decimated calcu-

lus” to distinguish, for instance, *sūnyatā* from “nihility” or “truth of void.” He argues that nihility concocts an “antidote to the inexorable human drive toward transcendental illusion” (148-149). If the Dharma defines the void while it evades this truth, it cannot endure as it is.

Those less consoled by Wallis’ ambitious plan to undermine the truth-claims of the Dharma may prefer his two deftly edited, slyly subversive editions of the sixteen basic suttas and the *Dhammapada*. After his rejection of the underlying Buddhist teachings in this new book and through his online project, Wallis stays silent on the reasons for his evolution away from belief, after practicing as a Buddhist for many decades. This may perplex readers. Wallis assumes that the subversive intent of this project speaks for itself. Wallis refuses readers or practitioners any comfort. In his project, once the truth-claims of the Buddha and “x-buddhisms” have been dismantled, the human subject must confront his or her existential possibilities, stripped of any veils or any solace. This presents an imperative to wake up, one that eliminates the assurances of an afterlife or rebirth.

After this pair of scrupulously academic entries, a digressive approach in the third section, simply titled “Control,” follows from Matthias Steingass, who runs the German site [Der Unbuddhist](#). (I have commented about articles by all three authors online and I have contributed to Steingass’s spin-off [The Non-Buddhist](#)). “Control” opens with Steingass’ anecdote about stumbling across a lavish, graphic book of war photography, in a store tucked away within one of Europe’s wealthiest cities, and the unease this juxtaposition created. He sidles into a riposte to the supposition by Robert Thurman and Sogyal Rinpoche that the ego is but an “expert at trickery and guile” (161). Thurman’s “terrorist in your brain” can only, it appears, be disarmed by not thinking, a release of the self into pure consciousness.

Steingass pinpoints in Thurman’s salvific, Tibetan version of Buddhism a lack of ethical embedding in a “social context” (165). An apolitical, disengaged version cannot impel followers to awaken. Thur-

man garbles the roles of Morpheus and Neo from *The Matrix* with those of the spectator. Steingass confesses confusion as to why peace-promoting Thurman advocates a film with such a splatter-specked climax.

Paralleling this viral, slapdash “Neo-Buddhism,” Steingass charges Thurman with denying “Tibetan Buddhism’s violent heritage” (172). (Unmentioned by Steingass, Robert Thurman in Joshua Glenn’s 1996 *Utne Reader* interview [“The Nitty Gritty of Nirvana”](#) responded to such allegations. Thurman encourages engaged Buddhism, although his extended paean *Inner Revolution*, strangely missing from Steingass’ citation, will appease no non-Buddhists. *Why the Dalai Lama Matters* speaks for itself). Charting cruelty within the rise of the Dalai Lamas, Steingass notes that neither a Shangri-La fairytale nor a dynastic clash of titans reveal a realistic approach towards Tibet, drifting as “oscillations in a fantasmatic landscape” mirroring a Western gaze. He nods at Tibet’s noble savage as the West’s preferred reflection.

This crosses (if covertly) with Wallis’ discussion of the credulous x-Buddhist; if x=Tibetan for Steingass, then by adapting Max Weber’s definition of a charismatic leader, Steingass reveals how journalists endow the current Dalai Lama with such an aura. Pascal Boyer’s notion that most religious concepts serve as parasites on mental systems (akin to the aesthetic, vis-à-vis Pepper’s inclusion of Hume) furthers this dependence on evolutionary psychology, an urge to bow before the shaman or submit to the seer. This propensity endures “below the conscious threshold of individual phenomenological access” (186).

As a “ritual specialist,” the lama or priest, Steingass elaborates, gets singled out by Western as well as Eastern cultures as special. This human propensity appears deeply rooted in phylogeny, irrespective of explicitly religious manifestations. Icons endure as both gurus and guitar heroes, after all. As another musician-contributor, Steingass segues into how cultural movements and modern music lack a guiding principle or a framing device-- any more than that aligned by Thurman to limit Tibet.

Steingass summons not only Nietzsche and Foucault but Arthur Rimbaud to match Woodstock and intense social experimentation in the 1960s with the arrival of Chögyam Trungpa in the U.S. Blaming that lama for a “here and now” immersion into a simplistic view of reality “as it is,” Steingass adapts Wallis’ “principle of sufficient Buddhism” to account for what became a perennial philosophy brand of “Neo-Buddhism” (198-199). Unstated by Steingass, Wallis’s analogous appraisal of the “human drive toward transcendental illusion” propels Trungpa’s Shambhala vision. It rushes past ecological issues to assure the retrieval of a basic goodness without situating this phenomenon within consumer capitalism. Trungpa peddled a remedy to “spiritual materialism,” yet he failed to analyze the sexual, political, and social predicaments his own actions and those of his *sangha* then generated.

“Just look inside and the rest will follow” keeps the meditator on autopilot, according to Steingass. Post-1968, an insular authenticity at work or play rules. Whether Jimi Hendrix jamming care of vacuum tubes and magnetic tapes invented in WWII (I detect Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*) or Marina Abramović slipping into shamanism as museum performance, capitalism perpetuates the search for the “authentic.” It’s a long march from Trungpa’s childhood in pre-communist Tibet, but these pop gurus--by reproducing aesthetics and commodifying their emanations – may nudge, however slyly, individuals to find their empowered vocation, to achieve their own self-actualization.

Winding back to what disturbed him in the war photography volume in that elegant bookstore, Steingass reflects that the sudden encounter “shifted my perception and intensified it” (208). Options exist beyond Abramović displaying herself, Hendrix recording at Woodstock, or Trungpa, Sogyal, or Thurman selling entry into a “gated community” of blissful disciples as a portal to freedom. Instead of acceptance or resignation, Steingass concludes, we as liberated spectators turned wise subjects can look at each other differently, as he looked at the war photos, or how museum-goers look at an artist as an installation. Abramović

posed herself in a gallery where visitors expect to find a framed masterpiece or an imposing sculpture. She tapped into the market, fueled by her own novelty.

Similarly, Steingass reminds us as do his co-contributors separately, Buddhism pulses with a potency that jolts a witness. (The sublime is achieved, not the aesthetic, to apply Pepper's terms, albeit unspecified by Steingass). Freeing viewers as actors, as those liberated from consumers to appropriators who own the art, and who create their own, radical reclamation beckons.

Each section contains documentation but each remains autonomous. A few introductory paragraphs by Wallis and three synopses of the chapters by each contributor provide a cursory overview. The authors could have transcribed a panel discussion on "what is to be done," sifting and refining their collective ideas. But, this lacks an agenda to synchronize students and critics of Buddhism dissatisfied with so many x-Buddhisms. Instead, three authors demand a radicalized reader who will reply with reason to x-Buddhisms, to unplug what Wallis hears as their "dharmic vibrato." Moving in theory from "x" to "non-," the next step stays shadowed in practice.

The reader, after examining three expansive exegeses, will find a few hints how to put non-Buddhism into action. Wallis's revised vocabulary as a thought-experiment, Pepper's admonition for an ideologically aware cadre, or Steingass's wish for an invigorated viewer's insight to adapt as a common vision offer suggestions, if inclined toward subtlety or density. The adamant tone of two-thirds of this treatise may daunt some readers, however familiar with Buddhist and philosophical concepts. By contrast, Steingass roams into popular culture and recent history widely, but he shrouds several thematic links. What deserves keeping and what needs discarding from the *Dharma*, after such fierce scrutiny, waits as tenuous. Context may be gleaned by inspecting the *Speculative Non-Buddhism* website, but this book does not duplicate, be-

yond the numbered elements underlying Wallis's section, the objectives of that contentious online project.

Encouragingly, this volume moves into fresh areas of inquiry. Pepper's hopes for a revolutionary vanguard and Steingass's concluding appeal to passive consumers turned engaged appropriators of art tend not to intersect on their respective paths to pursue the possibilities of non-Buddhism. However, with Wallis's ambitious formulations as the book's pivot, the patient reader will uncover his or her own suggestive resonances and correspondences. Although Wallis spurns cohesion, a tighter connection between essays and a bit of proofreading (I tally a few slips in the first section for spelling and usage and a couple in the last) would have amplified the long-range impact of *Cruel Theory/ Sublime Practice*. All the same, as a reevaluation and valuation of the hidden drives within Buddhism, this strategy invites those in search of radical renewal.