

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

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

Volume 25, 2018

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Charles R. Strain

DePaul University

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Is a Buddhist Praxis Possible?

Charles R. Strain¹

Abstract

The question that forms the title of this essay may well evoke an instant response: “Of course, why not?” This answer assumes a vague and quite elastic understanding of praxis. Latin American Liberation theologians saw praxis, to the contrary, as arising from a dialectic of critical reflection and practice. Following the example of Liberation Theology, this paper argues the thesis that the pieces of the puzzle of an adequate critical reflection on *Buddhist* praxis exist but they have yet to be put together into a Buddhist theory of political transformation akin to any number of Liberation Theologies. The following definition of praxis serves as a heuristic device to examine engaged Buddhist theoretical contributions to a Buddhist praxis: *Praxis is action that is: (1) symbolically constituted; (2) historically situated; (3) critically mediated by a social theory; and (4) strategically and*

¹ Department of Religious Studies, DePaul University. Email: cstrain@depaul.edu.

politically directed. After examining each of these components in turn, the article concludes by asking what might be the “vehicle” of a distinctively Buddhist praxis.

Introduction

In *Earth Household*, a collection of essays for which he received a Pulitzer prize, Gary Snyder, poet and Buddhist practitioner, declared “The mercy of the West has been social revolution; the mercy of the East has been individual insight into the self/void. We need both” (92). Traditional Buddhism, he argued, excelled in the liberation of “a few dedicated individuals from psychological hang ups and cultural conditioning. Institutional Buddhism has been conspicuously ready to accept or ignore the inequalities and tyrannies of whatever political system it found itself under. This can be death to Buddhism because it is death to any meaningful function of compassion” (90). Almost a half century later and despite the impressive record of engaged Buddhism across the globe, the hybrid species of Buddhism envisioned by Snyder, fusing two histories and two trajectories of emancipation, remains more promise than reality.²

The Western vision of social revolution was metaphorically mapped in the biblical story of Exodus. It grounded liberation from oppression in the combined action of God and human beings. Again and again the motifs of Egypt/Wilderness-Covenant/Promised Land have resurfaced to shape the politics of the West. Repeatedly the story has catalyzed critical reflection on the prevailing forms of oppression (Walzer). In

² An earlier version of this article was presented at the Critical and Constructive Buddhism Section of the American Academy of Religion, San Antonio, November, 2016. I am grateful to my colleague Christopher Tirres for comments on an earlier draft.

the late 1960s this story became the catalyst for Christian base communities in Latin America seeking liberation and it gave rise to a new form of theology—Liberation Theology—that quickly spread globally. These theologians appropriated Marx’s famous dictum in his Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach (“The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it”) and saw it as encouraging an “epistemological break” with preceding ways of reflecting theologically (Marx, “Theses” 402; Boff 13, 197-198). Their break can be expressed in a single phrase: *Praxis* is the key to any integral form of liberation. At key moments in this paper I will appeal to the example of Latin American Liberation Theology to illustrate the various components that are entailed in building an engaged Buddhist praxis.

Originally employed by Aristotle, the concept of praxis has become so variously used as to have virtually no shared meaning left.³ It has been used as synonymous with action, with acts that bring about any sort of transformation, and with practices as well as with actions seeking some form of social revolution. Christian theologian David Tracy offers a helpful clue to a more precise understanding of praxis. “Praxis is correctly understood as the critical relationship between theory and practice whereby each is dialectically influenced and transformed by the other” (243). This dialectical understanding of praxis is widely confirmed by Latin American liberation theologians for whom praxis gives rise to critical reflection which, in turn, sharpens and shapes further world transforming action (Boff xxi, 190-193, 207-208).

³ While praxis in Greek was used to refer to action in general, with Aristotle it took on a distinctive meaning. Aristotle “uses ‘praxis’ to designate all of the ways of life open to a free man, and to signify the sciences and arts which deal with the activities characteristic of man’s ethical and political life” (Bernstein ix-x).

The rapid rise of theologies of liberation rooted in various traditions and in different social contexts has led a number of engaged Buddhist thinkers to ask what Buddhists can learn from their Christian counterparts. John Makransky focuses on epistemological issues in his reflections on the import of liberation theology for Buddhist social thought. Makransky sees the epistemological core in the liberation theologians' identification with God's "preferential option for the poor."

[Latin American Liberation Theology] seeks to awaken the consciences of all who participate in unjust structures and to empower the poor to recognize their special place in God's care, to move from the margins to a new position as historical subjects, and to imagine a world of justice in which the social order can be remade. The epistemology of this approach . . . points our attention intensively to the most poor and socially marginalized, and, through them, to the oppressed structures that mediate their suffering, a social analysis that goes beyond what Buddhist epistemology, in its classical forms, has attempted to do. This perspective . . . has significantly informed elements of engaged Buddhism today and . . . should further inform many aspects of Buddhist thought and practice. (120-121)

Although Makransky's critical appropriation of Liberation Theology's preferential option is thoughtful and robust, I believe that it misses the true epistemological break represented in Gustavo Gutierrez's classic formulation of theology as "Critical Reflection on (Christian) Praxis" (5-11). Opting for the poor in the Latin American context meant allying oneself with Christian base communities with their methodological approach coined in the phrase "See-Judge-Act." Liberation theologians worked with this embryonic praxis to develop their own dialectic of theory and praxis implied in Gutierrez's trenchant phrase.

The question before us, then, is this: are engaged Buddhist thinkers able to offer a robust “critical reflection on (Buddhist) praxis?” One immediate answer might be: Why not? Another answer might be: Have not engaged Buddhists done so already? To address such questions requires going beyond the vague notion of praxis as a dialectic between theory and practice. My approach in this paper will be to examine the dialectic of theory and praxis from the theory/critical reflection pole of the dialectic. My thesis is: *the pieces of the puzzle of an adequate critical reflection on praxis exist but they have yet to be put together into a Buddhist theory of political transformation akin to any number of liberation theologies.* To this end I offer a definition of praxis as a heuristic device for teasing out the theory moment in the dialectic of theory and praxis:

Praxis is action that is (1) symbolically constituted; (2) historically situated; (3) critically mediated by a social theory; and (4) strategically and politically directed.⁴

In what follows I examine various Buddhist forms of engagement in light of these four components.

1. Symbolically Constituted Action

Action brings forth the new, argues Hannah Arendt (155-61). It is intentional and as such both strategic and communicative. At the deepest level, movements for social change frame actions by drawing upon what James

⁴ This definition is eminently contestable. I choose not to defend it theoretically. As a heuristic device, it will either illuminate or it will not. Much earlier with Dennis P. McCann I did develop a model of practical theology (the genus to which Liberation Theology as one species belongs) that offers arguments in favor of a similar definition (McCann and Strain).

Jasper calls “condensation symbols,” which are deeply rooted in our unconsciousness and emotionally freighted. They are “connotative, evoking associations in an audience, or constitutive, helping to create the audience’s world” (112-113, 159-161). Or, more powerfully, both. Gandhi’s Salt March to the Sea, Rosa Parks’s refusal to move to the back of the bus, the United Farm Workers grape boycott, and, more recently, the Black Lives Matter campaign all framed action with powerful condensation symbols. Such actions are already an embryonic praxis. Here, argue liberation theologians, is where we begin to reflect. I offer two examples of action by engaged Buddhists that are condensation symbols, powerful reinventions of classical, culturally rooted and emotionally freighted frames. The first is the practice of “tree ordination” by “ecology monks” in Thailand. The second is the way in which the Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka has reinvented the Four Noble Truths.

In the past half century, Thailand has undergone a massive deforestation with resulting increase in droughts, flooding, soil erosion, and contaminated water. All of these consequences have severely impacted the lives and livelihood of rural villagers. In the wake of this devastation, a few Thai monks, beginning in the late 1980s, invented a new ritual of tree ordination (Darlington *Ordination*). In these rituals, monks recite Buddhist scriptures and wrap the trees in a monk’s saffron robes. “I called the ritual ‘ordination’ to give it more weight” argues one of the early inventors, Phrakhnu Manas Natheepitak. “The term ‘tree ordination’ sounds weird to Thai people since an ordination is a ritual applied only to men. This weirdness has spread the news by word of mouth” (as cited in Clipard 227-28). Weird or not, the ritual became a powerful condensation symbol, an emotional connector linking Buddhist teachings—particularly about this new form of suffering among the villagers—with guidance about developing new sustainable forms of village agriculture that do not depend upon clear cutting of forests. More precisely, tree ordination *per-*

formed this linkage (Darlington *Ordination* 2-3, 5-6, 22; Darlington “Translating” 185; Darlington “Buddhist Ecological Movement” 6; Jasper 13-14, 160).

In fact, the monks while robing the trees never followed the traditional script for a monk’s ordination. Rather they used an eclectic mix of scriptures chosen for their environmental educational value. They even modified the traditional role of the laity in gaining merit through giving gifts to the monastic sangha to include the robes used in the tree ordination and seedlings for reforestation. Susan Darlington argues that what some scholars view as an unprecedented transgression of the tradition, villagers saw as a creative adaptation of the monks’ traditional role of benefiting their rural communities (Darlington *Ordination* 58, 69-74). The very drama of the ritual conveyed embryonically an ecological ethic or, more precisely, embodied it.

Sarvodaya is a rural development organization that has transformed over 15,000 villages in Sri Lanka. It seeks the awakening of all as a dual revolution, first, within each person’s mind and, second, within each village through empowering villagers to work together and rely upon their collective action. Sarvodaya’s reinterpretation of the Four Noble Truths is the second example of symbolically constituted action. The First Noble Truth becomes “There is a decadent village.” The Second Truth identifies the causes of this particular form of *dukkha* as including materialism, disunity, ethnic hatred, competition, and domination. These modern forms of the three poisons, Sarvodaya argues, are exacerbated by the Western model of development which has been imposed on Sri Lanka. The Third Noble Truth, focusing on the overcoming of *dukkha*, is exemplified in the Shramadana or work camp in which villagers of all ages come together, meditate, and reach consensus on a work project. Even the elderly and young children are given tasks to do that are within their capacities. Finally, each one of the Eightfold Path is reinterpreted. For example, a

Sarvodaya trainer explained Right Mindfulness as staying “open and alert to the needs of the village. . . . Look to see what is needed—latrines, water, road. . . . Is anyone getting exploited?” (Macy 132, 136-138; Bond 10, 14-16. 49).

Right Understanding of the systemic causes of villagers’ suffering, Right Speech in building village consensus around basic needs, Right Action in which everyone makes a contribution (*dāna*), all of these reinterpretations open up a vision of a “no poverty/no affluence society” in which basic needs including cultural and spiritual needs are met. This vision is consciously promoted as an alternative to the Western form of development. Beyond this symbolic constitution of a new vision of integral human development, Sarvodaya combines basic strategies for community organizing with Gandhian methods of nonviolence and village-based self-reliance to build its own form of praxis. Sarvodaya’s slogan, “We build the road, and the road builds us,” puts this strategy into a nutshell (Macy 144-151; Bond 8-10, 96, 103-108).

2. Historically Situated Action

One of the axioms that emerged from the epistemological revolution at the heart of Latin American Liberation Theology is that all theology geared toward praxis is contextual. Praxis itself is not the expression of abstract, universal norms. It arises within particular communities in particular places and at particular points in time. These communities have a history and praxis represents the cutting edge of that history, its emancipatory thrust. To say that praxis is historically situated is both a fact and a challenge. A genuine emancipatory thrust entails a critical appropriation of the past that has brought a society to a present crisis. I see this critical historical interpretation as, first, a *diagnosis* of a culture’s developmental pathology and that of the tradition (in this case Buddhism) that

claims transformative power. Second, it entails a *retrieval* of emancipatory possibilities from both within the culture and within the tradition that would transform that culture. If a culture were completely without emancipatory possibilities, it would be impossible for those within it to even imagine that—in the Zapatistas’s phrase—“another world is possible.”

I offer two examples of critical historiography from a Buddhist slant, David Loy’s *A Buddhist History of the West: Studies in Lack* and Rita Gross’s *Buddhism after Patriarchy*. In the opening pages of his *Buddhist History*, Loy insists that “[t]he history of the West, like all histories, is plagued by the consequences of greed, ill will and delusion” (*Loy Buddhist History* 2). The consequences of the first two poisons are readily grasped. Loy chooses instead to focus on the third, “the largely unconscious ways we have tried to resolve our lack,” compounding our suffering (1-3). At the same time Loy agrees with the virtual truism that the history of the West is the story of the development of freedom; it is a story of a collective drive for emancipation of the individual self. But this truism conceals as much as it reveals. Loy takes on the task of interrogating the shadow side of the freedom-seeking self (8-9, 17-18). Towards this end he relies upon a psychological and existential interpretation of the Buddhist concept of *dukkha*. Haunted by impermanence and our lack of any solid ground, humans strive to make themselves real, a Sisyphean task. Trying to ground itself, the self creates a chasm separating itself from the world. Freedom becomes the illusion of independence from any form of “external” control and a thoroughly dualistic worldview results (3-5).

[S]uch a self will never be able to experience itself as enough of a self—that is, it will never feel free enough. It will try to resolve its lack by expanding the sphere of its freedom, yet that can never become large enough to be comfortable. This dynamic helped to generate what we know as the history of the West (20)

Using this critical tool as a laser beam that lights up key aspects of Western history, Loy labels as idolatry the multiple ways in which the self, acting both individually and collectively, projects an absolute ground to its ungrounded self. Most of *A Buddhist History* is taken up with the process that is called “secularization.” Secularization, Loy argues, represents merely a shift in idolatries to those that are more virulent than those of traditional cultures because their spiritual roots are repressed (121-124).

The Protestant Reformation intensified the sense of a self, isolated in its relationship to God and thereby rendered more anxious. A corollary to this understanding of the self was the collapse of a sense of being securely placed within an organic, hierarchical universe. Through a convoluted process but one marked, as it were, by a telltale genetic flaw, humans sought reassurance by creating the institutions that still dominate our lives: the nation state, corporate capitalism, and the science/technology establishment. “Our Fall,” Loy argues, “is both objective and subjective” (90-94, 151). The mega-institutions of modern life are the objectification of a collective effort to escape an unbearable sense of lack. Created out of this need, they come to exercise coercive power over us. The unacknowledged spiritual root of our dilemma is the reason that modern revolutions have not resulted in genuine liberation (151-152). Loy argues:

The history of the nation-state system demonstrates that they are externally unstable and internally self-aggrandizing. Economically GNP is never big enough, corporations are never profitable enough, consumers never consume enough . . . The objectification of our lack into impersonal “secular” institutions means that basic questions about the meaning of our lives . . . have become alienated into a “not yet enough” that can never be enough. (122)

The strength of Loy’s critical history is its consistent use of a psychological-existential understanding of our lack to diagnose how *dukkha*

takes on myriad forms over time. His critique is particularly illuminating in its presentation of an alternative reading to the historical treatment of secularization as a history of emancipation. There are, however, limits to Loy's critique. Part of the task of a critical history, I argued earlier, is to retrieve a "utopian kernel" within the culture itself. This kernel forms the heart of an immanent critique, a critique of a culture's own false consciousness in terms of its own evolving ideals. The kernel also reveals the search for another world as a "practical necessity." As a relatively new religious import to the West, Buddhism needs to ally itself with emancipatory elements within a pluralistic Western culture (Geuss 76, 87-88). I do not see Loy's *A Buddhist History* adequately carrying out this second task.

Such an alliance is deliberately developed in Rita Gross's writings but most significantly in *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*. Over a long and productive career, Gross practiced transgressing boundaries. Her work integrates her sustained commitments as a feminist, a historian of religion and a Buddhist practitioner. It may seem less transgressive today than it certainly was three decades ago to think and act at the intersection, even the collision, of these three identities, each with its own moral imperatives. Turning her critical attention to the history of Buddhism, Gross appropriates a "prophetic voice" (Soaring 13-18, 34-48).

Liberation theologians, like Gustavo Gutierrez, are quite clear that critical reflection must focus not only on the history of one's own culture but also the religious tradition that structures one's own practice (9-10). Although it was published over two decades ago, Rita Gross's *Buddhism after Patriarchy*, I argue, remains *the* model of a fruitful critique of Buddhism in the service of its transformation. Gross dissects the androcentric bias in traditional Buddhist stories, beginning with Gautama's abandonment

of his wife and child but she also unburies a few classic non-androcentric texts. She searches for a usable past.

A “usable past” is important precisely because a religious community constitutes itself by means of its collective memory, the past that it recalls and emulates. . . . When the record discounts or ignores women, the community is telling itself and its women something about women’s potential and place in the community. Likewise, when women studies discovers a past for women . . . the whole community is reshaped. (20)

The search for a usable past must be a search for an accurate past. A feminist approach assumes “quite reasonably that a recounted past that ignores data about the female half of the population cannot be accurate.” To say that Buddhism is androcentric in its worldview and patriarchal in its institutions is simply an accurate interpretation of its past (19, 23). Accuracy demands a nuanced treatment of diverse Buddhist traditions. Through surveys of early Indian Buddhism, Mahāyāna Buddhism and Vajrayāna Buddhism, Gross concludes that the majority opinion across traditions is that there is some problem with female birth. Yet the minority opinion that gender is irrelevant to practice is the one most consistent with core Buddhist teachings (116).

This contradiction requires explanation. Patriarchy, Gross insists, is a historical phenomenon, not a reflection of human biology. It is a product of causes and conditions. Early Buddhism emerged within such a culture but it saw withdrawal into a countercultural community as its most viable social expression. Liberation in early Indian Buddhism “was not the result of justice and righteousness but of mindfulness, awareness, detachment and tranquility.” Renunciation, not reform, was the core spiritual action (36, 209-214). The permeation of patriarchal structures and practices throughout the tradition drives home the teaching of dependent co-

arising (*pratītya-samutpāda*). Those who withdrew from society carried its androcentric worldview and patriarchal mores with them. The Mahāyāna corollary to the teaching of dependent co-arising, namely that the liberation of each is contingent on the liberation of all, calls for active resistance to and reconstruction of patriarchal Buddhism which impedes the emancipation of both women and men. Add to this the simultaneous emergence of feminism and Buddhism's encounter with the West and there is an auspicious moment—a moment to be seized (218-219).

Beyond her diagnosis of Buddhism's profoundly ambiguous record in its views about women and its persisting history of domination through patriarchal institutions, Gross is intent on *retrieving* an emancipatory kernel within Buddhism. She argues that the core Buddhist teachings are gender-neutral and gender-blind. Because all phenomena are empty and are products of causes and conditions, there is no such things as fixed gender-based traits. Reified understandings of male and female traits are themselves products of particular historical conditions and can be altered by reshaping their causes and conditions. The teachings of emptiness and dependent co-arising express an emancipatory potential. We are not locked into fixed gender roles (173-185).

Equally important for Gross is the Mahāyāna teaching of *tathāgatagarbha*. While usually translated as Buddha Nature, Gross prefers its more literal translation as *Buddha-womb* or *Buddha-embryo*. She argues that valorizing pregnancy and the process of gestation as “the most apt metaphor for the effects of indwelling Buddhahood” makes the denigration of women and their roles in reproduction contradictory. The potential of all living beings to actualize their *tathāgatagarbha* makes institutional restrictions on the practice of one gender and the tradition's denigration of women's capacity for enlightenment a violation of Buddhism's emancipatory intent.

[T]aken together the concepts of emptiness and Buddha Nature provide a very firm basis to argue that gender equality is a normative, rather than an optional position, for Buddhists. If gender equality is normative, then actively working to undercut gender hierarchy and privilege is a required ethical norm for all Buddhists, not merely a marginal position for a few feminists. (188-189)

3. Action Critically Mediated by a Social Theory

Rita Gross's feminist reading of Buddhist history is informed by her reading of the present. Inevitably we bring to bear some lens when we "read" reality. Our reading of the present situation, argues liberation theologian Clodovis Boff, is informed by some "socio-analytic mediation." Our actions, however tentative, are always structured to some degree by prior "reading" (5, 20-21, 223). The real question is whether or not we are able to develop a *critical* mediation, that is, a systemic social analysis developed in a dialectic with the messy historical course of human affairs. Such a critical mediation, I argue, takes three forms: (a) a social-psychological critique; (b) an ideology-critique; and (c) a critical analysis of systems of power and alienation focused on political economy.

Critical theory as social-psychological critique

In developing his social theory, David Loy dismisses the option of Buddhists buying their theory "off the rack" in contrast to one that is attuned to the Buddhist understanding of *dukkha*. Throughout his writings on multiple aspects of contemporary society, Loy has been consistent in applying what he calls "the psychotherapeutic interpretation of *anatta*" to the deluded sense of a collective self that promises to make us real. Above all, he

does so regarding the delusion of a national security state (*Great Awakening* 9, 18, 22-13, 35, 172; *Money* Chap 1). The understanding of “lack” used as a critical historiographical tool in *A Buddhist History of the West* performs the work of a “socio analytic mediation” in *The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory* and in *Money Sex War Karma*. In *A Buddhist History*, the alienation produced by the self’s sense of its ungroundedness led to the creation of institutions which promise to secure the self. In *The Great Awakening*, Loy sees society as “a collective reality project,” echoing Ernst Becker’s argument that society functions as a “collective immortality project” (11-12, 20-23).

Given the impermanence and emptiness of all phenomena, this project is doomed to failure. As Loy says repeatedly, corporations can never be profitable enough, consumers never consume enough and nation states can never be secure enough. This approach is very productive because it traces our seemingly intractable dilemmas to the *dukkha* at the core of the human heart and to its desperate stratagems manifest as greed, hatred, and delusion. It also aligns with the way in which Buddhism in the West has entered into a dialectical relationship with humanistic schools of psychology and psychotherapy. It is a distinctively Buddhist analysis developed in a Western idiom. Given the virtually unanimous assertion by engaged Buddhists that there can be no outer transformation without inner transformation lest social change simply result in replacing one structure of domination with another, this genre of social-psychological analysis takes on central importance. However, I argue that a critical social theory requires more than a social-psychology. It requires both an ideology-critique and a critical analysis of systems of power and alienation focused on political economy.

Critical theory as ideology-critique

Raymond Geuss points to the importance of ideology-critique as it was developed by the Frankfurt School.

A critical theory . . . is a reflective theory which gives agents a kind of knowledge inherently productive of enlightenment and emancipation. . . . The very heart of critical theory is its criticism of ideology. Their ideology is what prevents the agents in the society from correctly perceiving their true situation and real interests; if they are to free themselves from social repression, the agents must rid themselves of ideological illusion. (2-3)

This argument accords well with Buddhism's understanding of delusion and with many versions of Buddhist epistemology. A contemporary case in point is the first three of the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings of Thich Nhat Hanh's Order of Interbeing. They can be read as ideology solvents. The first training warns against the fanaticism and intolerance that arise from being bound to an ideology. With a gun, you can kill a few people, Thich Nhat Hanh insists, but to kill millions you need an ideology. The second training recognizes that all knowledge changes and attachment to a particular view inevitably impedes openness to new truth. The third training eschews all forms of propaganda or indoctrination as forms of imposing suffering on others (Nhat Hanh *Interbeing* 23-29).

Actually practicing these trainings is no simple task. Ken Jones quotes a saying attributed to the Buddha that expresses both the difficulty and the importance of this endeavor. "[T]he world in general grasps after systems and is imprisoned by dogmas and ideologies." The wise, however, "do not go along with that system grasping . . ." (Saṃyutta Nikāya XII; *Social Face* 59). Not "going along" to be sure involves a thorough reorientation of our basic inclinations. Compelled by our sense of lack, we seek

self-affirmation through collective belonging. Group identity is solidified when we bind ourselves antithetically, that is, over against a group that we project as an evil “other” (*Social Face* 53-57). Antithetical bonding is the cement that turns ideologies into “subjectively freighted articles of faith.” Ideologies, in turn, provide bonded communities with ready-made “identi-kits” (*Social Face* 59-60).

Obviously, viewed in this light, the critique of ideology is not simply an intellectual task. Quite a bit of emotional work must go into dissolving the enmity that metastasizes with antithetical bonding (Jones “Beyond Us” 165-169). Prying the hand of the mind loose from grasping at systems requires spiritual discipline. As the examples of Thich Nhat Hanh and Ken Jones illustrate, engaged Buddhism is able to draw upon a wide range of Buddhist teachings and practices in performing its ideology-critique. By no means are these manifold forms of ideology-critique fool-proof as the fusion of Buddhism with extreme forms of ethnic nationalism in Sri Lanka and Burma attest.

Critical theory as critique of political economy

Always with Jones and Loy we are led back to the self’s sense of lack that leads us to band together to create institutions that invariably alienate us. But what if we were to flip the order which gives priority to this deluded sense of self and assign it to our social alienation? This is what Marx does in his Sixth and Seventh “Theses on Feuerbach.”

Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the human essence. But the essence of man is no abstraction inhering in each single individual. In its actuality it is the ensemble of social relationships. . . . Feuerbach does not see, consequently, that “religious feeling” is itself a social product

and that the abstract individual he analyses belongs to a particular form of society. (402)

Through social action humans produce objects that because of the existing social structures assume a hostile stance towards their producers. For example, in producing food tenant farmers create a farm and themselves as farmers but under given historical conditions they do not control the products of their work, the work itself, or the farm. Alienation is not an ontological concept nor, primarily, a psychological concept but a historical condition residing within the institutions (tenant farming) that structure social existence. Alienated action that reinforces the social structures must be overcome by revolutionary praxis for which consciousness raising is a necessary pedagogy (Marx "Economic" 283-301; Bernstein 44-45, 48, 306-307).

Several points are worth considering here. Marx's understanding of social existence coheres nicely with the Buddhist understanding of dependent co-arising. We are shaped by causes and conditions. More precisely, in Marx's vision there is an internal relation between self and world (Ollman 27-42). Each is the reflex of the other. Or, as Thich Nhat Hanh puts it, we inter-are with all others, with the institutions that we create as they shape us, and with the natural world (*Interbeing* 31, 39, 44-46, 58). The structures to which we are internally related are impermanent. We are socialized into a karmic reality but by awakening to its full complexity we can begin to unmake it and in the process, remake ourselves. Marx says as much in his Third Thesis on Feuerbach: "The coincidence of change of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be comprehended and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice" (401).

So, what elaborations of engaged Buddhism might correspond to Marx's understanding of alienation and its overcoming? Frankly, I suggest that if we look for something on par with Loy's social-psychological anal-

yses or at the level of Gross's feminist interpretation of Buddhist patriarchy, we will not find it yet in the corpus of engaged Buddhist writings. To be sure, we find scathing criticisms of the Western model of development with its institutionalized expressions of greed, ill will and delusion in, for example, the writings of Sulak Sivaraksa. Individual essays in *Mindful Politics* (McLeod) and *Hooked: Buddhist Writings on Greed Desire and the Urge to Consume* (Kaza) sparkle with insights. They do not measure up to a systematic critique of the structural violence of the dominant political economy.⁵ Ken Jones, in *Beyond Optimism: A Buddhist Political Ecology*, describes the neoliberal political and economic order as "both the most efficient engine for wealth creation ever devised yet which has failed to meet the basic needs of most of the world's peoples and which has fueled exploitation, oppression and war on a hitherto unimaginable scale" (133). However, when Jones comes to diagnose the origins of this immensely productive/destructive force, he, like Loy, focuses on the self. Understanding this self is the only diagnosis that goes deep enough to disclose the roots of our alienation. So, for example, Jones criticizes our proclivity to see "[a]uthority . . . as a thing which is intrinsic to government, instead of a belief in the heads of the governed and which they can withhold" (*Beyond Optimism* 40-44, 46). To be sure, there is a clear truth to this formulation but it ignores the ways in which the "thingness" of authority impresses itself upon us in ways that coerce far beneath the level of our awareness. Liberation entails not just the transformation of beliefs but the dissolution of thing-like institutions.

An alternative path to a Buddhist critique of political economy as a major component of a critical social theory would be to carry it forward through multiple intersecting analyses. Imagine, for starters, a Buddhist

⁵ I do not find E. F. Schumacher's classic *Small is Beautiful* particularly helpful in addressing the complexities of a global economy. A better approach is that of theologian John Cobb and economist Herman Daly.

analysis that appropriates and pushes forward Andrew Bacevich's conservative critique of the "New American Militarism" and its fateful entanglement with America's sense of manifest destiny. Perhaps another analysis would be tutored by Michelle Alexander's dissection of the racial caste system manifest in mass incarceration. A third would grapple with Naomi Klein's exhaustive examination of the intersection of capitalism and ecological devastation and its hopeful presentation of the grassroots organizations that mount a fierce resistance to its onslaught. Each of these approaches could be shown to be consistent with core Buddhist understandings.

4. Strategically and Politically Directed Action

Ivan Petrella represents a new generation of liberation theologians. In a series of books and edited works he provides a diagnosis of the eclipse of the first generation of liberation theologies. That demise coincided with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Latin American liberation theologians had committed themselves to a Marxist critical theory which saw capitalism as a monolithic force whose destructive power could only be overcome through a revolutionary politics leading to a socialist state (Petrella *Future* ix, 3).⁶ Socialism, Petrella argues, was the "historical project" of the first generation's liberation theology. With the downfall of state socialism in

⁶ This Marxist analysis was mixed with what became known as "dependency theory." This critical theory traced the subordination of Latin American societies to developed nations beginning with colonialism. During the colonial period, Latin America was systematically mined for its natural resources but the wealth extracted was not used to develop those countries but to harness the colonized to their colonial masters who provided finished products to their own controlled colonial markets. This initial imperialism persists in new forms through which international capitalism continues to keep the Global South in a state of dependency. See, e.g., Gutierrez, 51-54, 65-67, 197-98.

Eastern Europe, Latin American liberation theology lost its historical project. Petrella defines an historical project by quoting one of the first generation founders, Jose Miguez Bonino:

Historical project is . . . a midway term between an utopia, a vision which makes no attempt to connect itself historically to the present, and a program, a technically developed model for the organization of society. . . . A historical project is defined enough to force options in terms of the basic structures of society. . . . It is in this general sense that we speak of a Latin American socialist project of liberation. (as cited in Petrella *Future* 11-12)

Despite the loss of its historical project, Latin American Liberation Theology was able to rescue its core theological concepts: the preferential option for the poor, God's reign, and liberation/salvation, arguing, Petrella agrees, that these concepts retain their symbolic power in the new historical context. But rescue came with a price—without a new historical project to provide strategic guidance for praxis it became unclear what these key theological concepts meant in terms of social action and to what kind of *possible* alternative society they pointed. Liberation theology's key terms are not simply values for judging society. "They are to be developed as alternative social forms, that is, political, economic and social institutions that can be enacted on society's many levels" (*Future* 4; Petrella "Liberation Theology" 149-154).

Petrella takes us back to Aristotle for whom praxis was "that form of truly human activity manifested in the life of the *polis*" (Bernstein xi). Political life is about more than ruling and being ruled. It is about creating in concert with others a just and livable society. Petrella's insight that to be truly transformative, social movements and communities geared toward praxis need to act out of some vision of an alternative society (think of Martin Luther King's "beloved community") that is regarded as a viable

option and not a utopian fantasy coheres with my final component of the theory of praxis. Praxis is not truly praxis unless it is strategically and politically directed action.

Among the various engaged Buddhist movements, to my mind, the movement that comes closest to defining and pursuing a historical project is Sri Lanka's Sarvodaya movement. The code term for Sarvodaya's project is building a "no poverty/no affluence society" which meets ten basic needs for all, including developing spiritual and cultural capacities. "Development," says its founder, A. T. Ariyaratne, "is an awakening process." This entails nothing less than a total revolution beginning with the transformation of the human personality (21, 23, 30-32). The Shramadana camps with their ethos of self-reliance are exercises in consensus-based participatory democracy. They create a social infrastructure within the formerly "decadent village." Organized villages evolve through a five stage process which culminates in their designation as pioneering villages. Such villages take responsibility for facilitating and supporting the development of several nearby villages. This developmental process is supported by the Sarvodaya Economic Enterprises Development Services which provides initial capital resources, technical and entrepreneurship training, and education on innovative agricultural practices. Villages are networked together through this process and power is decentralized giving birth to "a commonwealth of village republics" (Ariyaratne 25-28, 33-36, 51-52, 54-55, 60). From these practices, A. T. Ariyaratne argues, demonstrating a clear grasp of strategic praxis, villagers "build their own economic 'theory' supportive of the life they really live and aim to live" in contrast to professional economic theories that ignore the interdependence of multiple causes that affect villagers's lives (28; Bond 87-88).

I see Sarvodaya's approach to integral human development as strategic in that it:

- Offers a clear alternative to Western models of development which concentrate power in the hands of an elite, exacerbate ethnic conflicts, and foster an unsustainable consumer economy that sacrifices the poor for the sake of the affluent;
- Involves meeting an integral vision of basic human needs and capacities;
- Presents a method for fully engaging rural communities to meet self-defined needs unlike movements which impose a vision of total revolution that ignores local issues;
- Offers a clear path to development through multiple stages;
- Works toward the decentralization of power by creating local and regional networks of villages engaged in mutual support in contrast to movements that aim for the takeover of a central government; and
- Ensures that Sarvodaya as a national organization remains in a support and training mode.

Sarvodaya's form of praxis is contextually appropriate in its strategic use of power to foster the evolution of a "commonwealth of village republics." There is a problem with this case study, however. A majority of human beings on the planet no longer live in rural villages but in urban locations.⁷

⁷ I have not been able to locate any up to date analysis of Sarvodaya that is critical and comprehensive akin to George Bond's earlier treatment. To be sure, there are piecemeal discussions especially of Sarvodaya's efforts to bring Sri Lanka's long civil war to a peaceful end, its rebuilding work after the tsunami of 2004 and its work with internally displaced people after the conclusion of hostilities in 2009. Sarvodaya continues to be in conflict with the government's pursuit of ethnic nationalism and with Western aid

I do not see a strategic, historical project present yet among Western, urban engaged Buddhists that might unify the proliferation of efforts to transform different aspects of society. Why this is the case is undoubtedly a result of numerous factors ranging from Western Buddhism's status as a relative newcomer to a consumerist ethos that affects contemporary spiritual traditions. However, another, perhaps deeper issue also presents itself, namely, an ambivalence among numerous engaged Buddhists towards the exercise of power. "What most people call power, Buddhists call cravings," Thich Nhat Hanh states succinctly. "Misuse of power," he continues, "is the primary cause of suffering for many of us. The way power is used is not just a matter of spirituality, it is a matter of life and death for a whole nation" (*Art of Power* 15, 39). Engaged Buddhists are rightly concerned about the adversarial conflict, the antithetical bonding and demonization of the other, and the inflation of both ego that appear to be endemic even to struggles for justice to say nothing about ordinary electoral politics.

To these genuine concerns Martin Luther King provides a compelling rejoinder in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail": "History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. . . . We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed." Nonviolent action, King continues, does not create conflict. It brings to light a hidden conflict that like a boil must be lanced if healing is to occur. Before King, Gandhi, too, replaced the concept of passive resistance with that of *satyagraha* or firmness in the truth to convey

groups with their narrow interpretation of development (Barry-Murphy and Stephenson; Hayashi-Smith; Noeberichts; Kapadia). Specific form of praxis, as we saw was the case with Liberation Theology in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet empire, are decidedly impermanent. A thoroughgoing treatment of Sarvodaya in its present circumstances would be useful.

a similar understanding. The question that is crucial to any future Buddhist praxis is this: Can engaged Buddhists adopt the concept of *satyagraha* as articulated by Gandhi and King with its clear inclusion of the exercise of power to bring about change?⁸

5. Vehicles of Liberation

Keeping in mind that praxis is collective action, we must ask a final question: *If a Buddhist praxis is possible, what groups might carry it forward?* For the first generation of liberation theologians in Latin America, the carriers of liberation were clear. They were the Christian base communities where priests, nuns and peasants reading and reflecting on scripture together performed the process called “See-Judge-Act” with support from the institutional church. For Sarvodaya, the answer is equally clear: the local villages and their networks with the institutional backing of the Sarvodaya Economic Enterprises Development Services will carry it forward. In both cases there is what sociologist Daniel Levine, speaking about the Latin American context, calls “working the linkages.” A “countervailing institution,” provides material resources, leadership training and, if necessary, protection for community-based organizations. A fuller case of working the linkages was the three-way interaction among the American civil rights *movement* relying heavily on the Southern black churches as its incubating *community* and the NAACP as a countervailing *institution* working with the federal courts (Levine 317-321, 335-344; Strain 114-115, 193-201). Working the linkages and, moreover, developing alliances with like-minded NGOs is particularly important when a religious community is a minority as Buddhism is within the Western context.

⁸ See Sallie King for a thoughtful wrestling with this issue.

How might engaged Buddhist work towards strategic engagement? Let me conclude by offering a few modest suggestions.

- *Begin by holding regional and national dialogues.* The radical decentralization of Buddhist *saṅghas* in the West is a clear weakness as well as a strength. Developing common projects as well as preserving autonomy should be the aim of such dialogues among Buddhist *saṅghas*.
- *Institutionalize an activist arm.* *Saṅghas* are rightly concerned with preserving their spiritual focus as they increase their engagement. Perhaps the Buddhist Peace Fellowship could be expanded to become an activist arm of engaged Buddhists as the American Friends Service Committee is with the Quaker community.
- *Form alliances.* Organizations like the AFSC and the Catholic Worker movement are potential allies because they view their actions as spiritually grounded and have proven themselves able to participate in larger social justice movements while adhering strictly to nonviolent skillful means.
- *Build consensus around specific projects.* Such projects should reflect both current social crises and specific Buddhist strengths. For example, explore the following three projects:
 - *End Mass Incarceration.* Such a specific project would cohere with engaged Buddhism's extensive involvement with prison ministries and with networks of Buddhist prisoners. Alliances with human rights organizations working in this field could be made.
 - *Immigrant Rights and Protection of Minority Religions.* This second project calls for an alliance between *saṅghas*

primarily made up of native born Americans and those comprised of ethnic Buddhists. Support for Muslim and other minority religious communities is increasingly important in our current cultural atmosphere of fear and hatred.

- Climate Change Movement. This last project is a natural for Buddhist communities given manifest correlations between the Buddhist dharma and worldviews underlying the ecological movement. Alliances with movements such as 350.org and Native American activist groups as well as with institutionalized NGOs like Sierra Club would be possible.

Whatever you make of these concrete strategic suggestions, I hope to have convinced you that a Buddhist praxis is, indeed, possible and that a coherent dialectic of theory and practice would be an important contribution to the evolution of engaged Buddhism. We began with John Makransky's argument that engaged Buddhists have much to learn from Liberation Theology. Let us end with his observations as well. Liberation Theology can teach engaged Buddhists, he concludes, to "nuance Buddhist understandings of interdependence, by pointing to ways that each individual in society tends to be conditioned by and conditions others not to notice the nonpersons of their society or the social causes of their suffering" (128). To this I might add that the point of such an awakening is to catalyze Buddhists to work towards ending these social causes of suffering not through blind action but through forms of Buddhist-inspired praxis that fuse the dual revolution for which Gary Snyder called.

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