

# **A Critique of Western Buddhism**

Ruins of the Buddhist Real

Glenn Wallis

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# A Critique of Western Buddhism

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Glenn Wallis

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## Preface

A ruin is a curious thing. Imagine the Acropolis or Borobudur, Ephesus or the Great Wall of China. Magnificent structures erected on the foundation of a society's most advanced technologies and its most sophisticated sciences. Constructed from raw materials—wood, metals, stone, lime mortar, marble, glass, turf, and soil—quarried, excavated, transported, and formed by the labor—the debilitating, depleting sweat and toil—of flesh and blood men, women, and children. But a ruin is more than the material out of which it is fashioned. It is infused with the longing of a people; longing for meaning and order; longing for fellowship and community; longing for the reign of beauty on earth. More than mere material, a ruin is saturated with culture. It is a culture's loftiest aesthetic imagination manifest in the light of day in all of its sensuousness. But a ruin is more than the designs and desires of a people. A ruin is nature. Its very matter is fired in the furnace of the elements. And once in place, the edifice is eternally embraced by earth, fire, wind, and water. As Georg Simmel wrote in 1907, "a ruin is fused into the surrounding landscape and, like tree and stone, grows into and is integrated in that landscape." As much as it tries, a thriving cathedral or a bustling office building cannot achieve this integration: its relationship to its natural surroundings is one of artificiality at best, domination at worst. Its atmosphere is charged by an ordering of its own making. By contrast, "an atmosphere of peace emanates from the ruin; for, in the ruin the contrary aspirations of both world potencies [the energies of nature and the conceptions of society] appears as a calm image of purely natural being." What has wrought this change in the charge of the structure's atmosphere is *time*. A ruin, finally, is time. It is transhistorical time, "ruin time," the steady chronicler of past glory and decay, present cause and effect, and future promise and peril. "Ruin time unites," says Florence Hetzler. It suffuses the "biological time of birds and moss" with the immemorial "synergy" of all of living beings—human, animal, bacterial, microbial—whose bodies have touched, however fleetingly, however gently, the ruin.<sup>1</sup>

Western Buddhism is not a ruin. It is a sprawling estate, operating daily at peak capacity. Western Buddhism is a prodigious ancillary of an ancient edifice that, as Simmel says of palaces, villas, and farmhouses, "even where



it would be best to fuse with the atmosphere of its surroundings, always originates another order of things, and unites with the order of nature only in retrospect.” Why should it “be best” to do so? Western Buddhism itself provides the answer: because there is no real division between culture, society, person, and “nature.” The Buddha has taught us that it is nature all the way through. He also taught us that the very nature of nature inexorably impels our—the world’s—very ruination. Ruin is ruin because our desires and actions, however exalted, cannot withstand the nonnegotiable consequences of impermanence, dissolution, and emptiness. And yet, somehow, the edifice that is Western Buddhism does not merely remain in place: it stands fortified against the consequences of its own self-acknowledged insights into our “natural” condition. In doing so, it originates an order, both for itself and for its practitioner, that is at odds with these very insights. For, “to fuse with the order of nature only in retrospect” is to create the illusion that it does not fuse with nature at all. It creates the illusion that the object of Western Buddhism’s fusion—the object of its most abiding desire—is of an altogether different order from nature’s ruin. It is, rather, of a higher order that somehow enables escape from the raw contingencies of nature—the very ones that Buddhism itself articulates—leaving the subject ultimately unscathed.

The term for “nature” that I use in the subtitle and throughout the book is “the Real.” Like Western Buddhism’s “emptiness” or “no-self,” in the history of Western thought, “the Real” names some profoundly productive a priori, awareness of which is a sine qua non of human awakening and of the liberation that such awakening is said to entail (however variously those consequences might be understood). Paradoxically, the Real is as evasive as it is productive, eluding capture by our strategies of linguistic and symbolic communication. Of course, it is we creaturely humans who enable this evasion by constructing obfuscating, at best, symbolization around the nonetheless fecund Real. In his twentieth-century masterpiece of literary criticism, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, Walter Benjamin wrote that “in the ruins of great buildings the idea of the plan speaks more impressively than in lesser buildings, no matter how well preserved they are.”<sup>2</sup> For Benjamin, it is precisely the ruin’s proximity to “creaturely nature” that infuses it with its “uncontrollable productivity.”<sup>3</sup> Of what, then, does the well-preserved building speak? Of what is it productive if not of the very idea that saw it rise from the dust in the first place? In proximity to what would this construction be, if not to the passion and pain coursing through the veins of earthly creatures? Such questions merely postpone my conclusion: Western Buddhism must be ruined.

This, at least, is the belief animating this book. I have come to this belief after forty-some years of actively surveying the Western Buddhist landscape. At turns figuratively and literally, my exploration has taken me from the tropical forests of the *achans* to the austere rusticality of the *roshis* to the stark mountainous terrain of the *rinpoches*. It has taken me from the temple to the practice center to the university classroom. It has enveloped me in the exertion of several practices, each of which is deeply contemplative in the degree of steady concentration involved: still, silent meditation; laborious reading of Pali, Sanskrit, and Tibetan texts; and, the most difficult of all, sustained and unflinching critical thinking. Why is critique so difficult? Well, it is not only philosophers who fall in love with their subject. That love will ensure that the critique that follows does not obliterate, does not grind back to dust, the finely wrought edifice of Western Buddhism. And if I do succeed in my plan, it is only to view the ensuing ruin in the glow of a stranger, more creaturely, light.

I have learned a lot about ruin from the people I mentioned earlier. Another teacher not mentioned is the Persian Muslim poet Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī (1207–1273). Rūmī employed the conceit of ruin as an image of the catalyzing loss required to come in possession of our most potent human quality: love. He doesn't mean love as a commonplace affection. He means love as a ferocious force of ruination: "What care I though ruin be wrought?/Under the ruin there is royal treasure."<sup>4</sup> One collection of his poetry is titled *The Ruins of the Heart*. I have also learned a great deal about ruin from Canadian poet, novelist, and singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen (1934–2016). A line from his 1992 song "Anthem" has become a kind of cultural cliché, like the Vincent van Gogh painting *Starry Night* that can be had on a tee-shirt or coffee mug, but it nonetheless captures his notion of ruin: "There is a crack in everything/that's how the light gets in."<sup>5</sup> For Cohen as for Rumi, ruin is a question of igniting the "furnace of the spirit," whose ardent issue, always, is love.<sup>6</sup>

I first heard Leonard Cohen in 1975 while in the room of my friend, Thomas Adams, who had then borrowed the album *Songs of Love and Hate* from a local library. At that point in our lives, Thomas and I were drinking from the trough of Alice Cooper, the New York Dolls, and Black Sabbath. Yet, we sat in rapt silence as the black vinyl turned, slowly secreting the passionate, melancholy ambience that is Leonard Cohen—his voice, his guitar, his verse. One of those verses, from the first song on the record, "Avalanche," could be the Universal Beloved inciting Rūmī to ecstatic embrace. Or is it Shams, the mysterious dervish perpetually wandering in search of a beloved friend, someone with whom he could speak of secret things? It's impossible to say. Both masters wield double entendre

as a weapon of ruination. After admonishing his wavering lover not to feign such passion in the face of doubt, the singer intones (or cautions?): “It is your turn, beloved/It is your flesh that I wear.”<sup>7</sup> It is a disturbing, almost ghastly, line. But can you conceive of a more direct and unadorned image of union born of annihilation? Imagining that ruined building once again, I picture it obliterated as an edifice for narrow worldly concerns (commerce, service, bureaucracy) because it has become clothed in the flesh of nature.

Thomas and I intravenously ingested Leonard Cohen’s intoxicant. At the same time, together with my brother Damon, we began imbibing the violent metallic hootch of the Stooges’ Vietnam War–contaminated *Raw Power*: “I am the world’s forgotten boy/The one who searches and destroys.”<sup>8</sup> The three of us began imperceptibly to mix the dark elixir of Leonard Cohen and the volatile firewater of the Stooges with a form of music that would come to define our lives: punk rock. Like so many young people in search of an expression for their still nascent superpowers, we formed a band. Joined by like-minded insurgents of the moribund American middle class, we unleashed our Dionysian energy, power, passion, and heat on the Philadelphia (and beyond) underground from 1981 to 1987. The name of our band is Ruin. (Present tense: like an alcoholic, you are never cured of your band.)

With love and with inexpressible gratitude, I dedicate this book to the members of Ruin: Damon Wallis, Thomas Adams, Cordy Swope, Richard Hutchins, and Paul Della Pelle.

Part One

Recognition



## Introduction: Raise the Curtain on the Theater of Western Buddhism!

What are we to make of Western Buddhism? It presents itself as the treasure house of ideas and practices that were formulated by an enlightened teacher who lived in India 2,500 years ago. Followers of Western Buddhism tell us that this man's teachings accurately identify the real conditions of human existence. If true, that is quite a remarkable achievement. It would mean that an ancient diagnosis of human experience still pertains in our hyper-accelerated, ultra-technological modern society. Is such a correspondence possible? Western Buddhism might, conversely, be made out to be less of an unchanging universal account of human reality and more of a contemporary ideology. In its basic sense, an ideology is a strategy that "represents the *imaginary* relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence."<sup>1</sup> To recognize Western Buddhism as an ideology is not to view it as an instance of false consciousness or nefarious deception. It is rather to acknowledge it as being uniquely productive of a quite particular subject, one that imagines his or her relation to the world in quite particular ways. If we view Western Buddhism as an ideology, as, that is, a form of life, an apparently natural way of being within any given social formation, we could certainly better explain the incredible diversity among its forms throughout time and place. For, unlike an idealist timeless teaching, "ideology has a material existence."<sup>2</sup> Its dictates are always enacted within the presently existing social arena and realized as a practice by real people therein. Invoking the prospect of an imaginary relation to one's world suggests a third, altogether different, possibility. Western Buddhism might be understood as a strategy for *engaging* with the dominant ideology of a society. In this case, it would be a practice of critiquing and possibly even improving the social formation in which its practitioners find themselves currently embedded.

My observation of Western Buddhism leads me to the conclusion that it itself is unsure which of these three characterizations best describes it. By "it,"

I mean, of course, the combined effect of the people—the formulators, teachers, and practitioners—who act in the name of “Western Buddhism,” or really of “Buddhism” in the West today. Their accumulated record is an expression of adamant faith in the universal veracity of their teachings. Somewhat paradoxically, they are equally willing to perform operations on those same teachings, to adjust and alter them, in ways that suggest that they are aware of the time- and place-dependent ideological nature of the teachings. More puzzling, these same people regularly invoke concepts that caution, *watch your head! radical critique of self and society underway!*

One contention driving this book is that Western Buddhism functions in all three of these modes, but to varying degrees of explicitness. I see Western Buddhism as a critique subsumed within an ideology subsumed within a faith. I am almost tempted to apply to Western Buddhism, along with a grain of salt, Freud’s famous topography. *Faith* is Western Buddhism’s superego. It internalizes and echoes back society’s sense of morality, righteousness, and goodness. It aims to produce the ideal subject, one who spontaneously conforms to the social law. The superego-faith of this subject compels him or her to eschew expression of aggressions that are forbidden by decorum. The faithful Western Buddhist subject is thus adept at channeling aggression into affirmation. *Critique* is Western Buddhism’s id. The critical drive bound up in certain Western Buddhist postulates (e.g., emptiness, no-self, impermanence) are primitive and instinctual. This drive impels the subject’s visceral desire to be un beholden to subjugating norms, to be free of society’s (and of faith’s) self-serving moralistic constraints. It thus tends to produce a subject who takes up conceptual arms against the deceptively polite policing of those norms and thrusts them into a controverting chaos. The critical Western Buddhist subject is adept at flushing out repressive sleeper cells within the doctrinal and communal compound. *Ideology* is Western Buddhism’s ego. It is the “I” of the subject, the “we” of the community. It is motivated by the demands of society (and of faith) and is thus acutely sensitive and responsive to “reality,” to, that is to say, society’s status quo. The ideological Western Buddhist subject seeks, above all, some form of wellbeing. Happiness would be optimal; but, short of that eternally elusive goal, certainly the reduction of stress and tension isn’t too much to ask for. After all, Western Buddhist ideology, as Freud says of the ego, “serves three severe masters and does what it can to bring their claims and demands into harmony with one another.”<sup>3</sup> Ideology-ego’s “tyrannical masters” are, of course, reality, faith, and critique. Western Buddhist ideology thus paradoxically produces an *anxious* Western Buddhist subject, one who is able to minimize conflicts with

the pious demands of faith only by repressing and shoring up against the primal aggressive force circulating within the concepts of that very faith.

As the title suggests, one aim of this book is to give voice to the critical unconscious, to stay with our psychoanalytic metaphor, of Western Buddhist discourse. I will give the details of my approach later. Here, just a brief word about the general purpose of critique. Marjorie Gracieuse sums up this purpose when she speaks of “wresting vital potentialities of humans from the artificial forms and static norms that subjugate them.”<sup>4</sup> That is a generous definition of the task. It allows at the outset that the object of critique has something of value to offer us. At the same time it suspects that this value comes embedded in a system of thought and practice that has superfluous, and problematic, elements. These elements constitute a symbolic surplus value that functions to capture the desire of the practitioner. It is reasonable to think that it is in this surplus that we discover features that limit and coerce the subject’s agency. Advertising gives us the most obvious examples of the value/surplus differential. It pitches item after item that relates to the fulfilment of some basic human need—food, clothing, hygiene, mating, transportation, security, relaxation, and so on. Yet it should not be difficult to discern how an ad for, say, a Prius SUV or a pair of Aéropostale ripped skinny jeans elicits desires that far exceed fulfillment of basic transportation and clothing needs. In addition, advertisement is produced by, and further reproduces, quite particular social relations (economic, gender, racial, political). Symbolic surplus value is easily discernible when it comes to such goods as a pair of pants that, beyond the basic need of covering the flesh in cold weather, inscribe their young female wearer into “consumer society’s colonization of youth and sexuality through [selling her] ‘freedom’ ... to do whatever she wants with her body.”<sup>5</sup> It becomes more difficult to discern in the cases of the “vital potentialities” that Gracieuse alludes to. At what point, for example, does education cross over from being the practice of developing the human potential for thinking and knowing into a means of social inculcation? Paulo Freire, for instance, holds that all people possess the potential to become aware of the forces (social, political, cultural, linguistic, psychological, etc.) that constitute “the logic of the present.”<sup>6</sup> An educational program can facilitate that end, he says, by training students in “the practice of freedom,” whereby they learn to discern the operations of these forces on their own sense of identity, as well as on the ways in which these forces serve to replicate and perpetuate “the logic of the present.” An educational program can just as likely be put in the service of a political agenda that precisely wants to hinder such awareness of that logic. To do so, it does not deny “the vital potentiality of the human” that is the capacity



for creative critical inquiry. Rather, it perversely directs this potential into a stultifying framework (forms and norms) of preordained outcomes. Another example, one familiar to readers of the present book, is meditation. Let's assume for a moment that sitting still, silently, and attentively serves, like education, the vital potentiality of the human for a certain type of creative critical self-inquiry. At what point does this ostensibly neutral, natural inquiry become a node in an ideological system? Is it not curious that meditators virtually always happen to discover in their meditation the very claims of their community's doctrine? What does such "validation" tell us about the relationship between the vital human potential affixed (possibly) to silent sitting and the apparently overdetermining forms and norms that frame such a practice?

I leave those questions hanging for now. The point here is that critique is a practice that attempts to "wrest" vital value from subjugating surplus. It is a practice that allows us to make explicit the operations of a system of thought and practice that the system itself, in order to remain whole, keeps implicit—its unstated assumptions; its unspoken values; its relationship to existing social, economic, and political formations; and, perhaps most importantly, its tacit formation of individual actors in the world. Without a practice of critique, we cannot distinguish a catalyst for a vital human potentiality from a self-serving prescription of a covertly ideological program, however well-meaning that program may be. The wager of this book is that, in distinguishing between the two types of practice, we are dealing with a difference that makes a world of difference. But what might that difference be? I will deal with this question in depth later. For now, just to give the reader some initial orientation, we can consider the purpose of the "wresting" that Gracieuse recommends. In brief, it has to do with something that will sound familiar to readers of Buddhism, namely, a certain unbinding from violence, delusion, and fugitive desire. We might call this unbinding *freedom*, *liberation*, or even *nirvana*. If these terms sound grandiose in the present context, they may nonetheless name a genuine vital potentiality of human beings. If so, this unbinding will require, like the Buddha besieged beneath the *bodhi* tree, a ferocious struggle against "the world under the sway of death."<sup>7</sup> For, in naming coercive structures, in speaking of subjugation, stasis, and dissemblance, Gracieuse is giving voice to nothing if not the necessity of a kind of human insurrection against the existing world. I believe that Western Buddhism understands this struggle. The crucial question is whether it provides arms in solidarity with the struggling human or whether it performs a kind of spiritualized *Dolchstoß* in the very heat of battle. Or perhaps we will discover another potent image to characterize Western Buddhism in

our time. First, however, we must explore many criticisms and refutations and propose many new ideas, concepts, and claims.

## Why Western Buddhism?

Why *Western* Buddhism? The title of this book surely suggests that I am treating a quite specific variety of Buddhism: that which exists in the West. It would follow that this western variety has *something*—texts, doctrines, teachers, practices, beliefs, communities—that differs significantly from its eastern relatives. Otherwise, why would it be necessary to add the modifier? At the same time, though, the reader will notice that I often use “Buddhism” interchangeably with the modified form “Western Buddhism” and, indeed, rarely differentiate between the two usages. I will have more to say about this matter later. Here, I would like to highlight what I mean by the term “Western Buddhism.”

Western Buddhism originated in the East, in Asia. I am not referring to the obvious fact that Asia, specifically India, is the wellspring of all subsequent international forms of Buddhism. Rather, from its core values to its high aspirations, Western Buddhism is the result of an articulation and self-understanding that initially took shape in Asia. According to the German Indologist Heinz Bechert, the lineaments of what we now think of as Western Buddhism were first drawn in Sri Lanka. This origin should not be surprising. As Bechert points out, since 1517 the coastal areas of the island had been occupied by, first Portuguese, then Dutch, and finally British, forces of merchants, militaries, and missionaries. At that time, too, the Buddhist Kingdom of Kandy (1521–1818) was rising in the land’s interior, preserving the ancient domination of Buddhism in daily affairs. This hotbed of East–West proximity led to encounters such as the spirited public debates between Buddhist monks and Christian missionaries, where opposing worldviews could be aired, evaluated, critiqued, and defended. It is thus also not surprising that Asian Buddhists were subjected to a long and ultimately far-reaching exposure to “European ways of thinking.”<sup>8</sup> The movement of the arrow, though, was turning in the other direction as well: the colonizing Westerners were showing a sustained interest in Buddhism. However scheming and skeptical this newfound interest may have been on the side of the colonizers, it created, in turn, an equally new self-consciousness among Buddhists concerning their own tradition. “Thus,” writes Bechert, “an essential presupposition for the development” of what would become Western Buddhism was this “intensive encounter between western and Buddhist thinking.”<sup>9</sup>

By the early nineteenth century, under British rule, Buddhism in Sri Lanka was, Bechert writes, “exhibiting serious signs of decay.”<sup>10</sup> Significantly, at the same time “the influence of Christian schools and missionaries on the country’s educated classes was rapidly increasing.”<sup>11</sup> By mid-century, members of this new Anglophile elite feared that Buddhism would disappear altogether from the island by the end of the century. Precisely the opposite occurred: Buddhism underwent radical reforms, eventually strengthening its standing on the island and beyond. From a traditionalist’s perspective, however, this preservation of Buddhism must have seemed a deal with the devil. The Westernized Sri Lankan leaders of this Buddhist “renewal,” writes Bechert,

used, for the most part and without being fully aware of the fact, methods and arguments copied from their opponents. It benefited these reformers, moreover, that, at that time, there were several highly educated Buddhist monks who possessed the ability to formulate the reformers’ concerns in modern terms, and to bring these concerns closer to their contemporaries whose ways of thinking had been strongly influenced by the European mindset. They recognized the necessity of compromising with modern civilization in order to secure the survival of the Buddhist tradition.<sup>12</sup>

Following the designation for similar compromising tendencies unfolding within the Catholic Church at the same time, Bechert employed the term “Buddhist modernism” to capture the basic character of this emerging form of Buddhism.<sup>13</sup> He adds that this modernizing tendency would “eventually gain a foothold in every Buddhist country,”<sup>14</sup> from where, of course, it would eventually be exported to the West. Perhaps the most striking claim made by Bechert here is that the Westernized Sri Lankan instigators of the reform had so internalized their former opponents’ values that these values were introduced imperceptibly back into the reformed Buddhism *as preeminently Buddhist*.

What, then, were these epoch-changing values? What were the decisive features of this “European mindset” that so altered Asian Buddhists’ self-understanding? A comment by Gunapala Malalasekera (1899–1973), an eminent product of the English-educated Sri Lankan elite and one of the leading figures behind the modern conceptualization and internationalization of Buddhism, provides several hints.

Asia, after having lain dormant for nearly five centuries, is once more taking its due place in the world and bids fair to be the leader of the new age. It is significant that Buddhism, which, more than any other force, was responsible for the great civilisations and great cultural influences of that continent, should

also be coming back to its rightful place. The Buddha was the first great scientist to appear among men. That Buddha discovered what scientists have only now discovered, that there is nothing called matter or mind existing separately in this world but they are the result of forces which continually cause them to come into operation and that they dissolved and came into operation again. Buddhism seeks the meaning of life in life itself. In this search, life is ennobled. Life becomes an external and a fulfilled Now. Truth is not a revelation but a discovery. The human person has to realise itself as the subject of knowledge, as socially responsible and as artistically creative.

This passage reads like the endorsement of Enlightenment values, Romantic sentiments, and Protestant ethos that it in fact is. It also tacitly repudiates much of what Buddhism had been traditionally understood to represent. For example, Buddhism is no longer the world-denying vehicle that provides refuge from the poisonous, painful lure of civilization. It is now celebrated, retrospectively, as a positive impetus behind the very cultural formations that traditional Buddhists were admonished to renounce. The Buddha, the shamanic superman (*mahāpuruṣa*) who descended from heaven at birth, possessed supernatural power, performed miracles, and attained transcendental cosmic wisdom, was now converted into a rational, empirically minded scientist. Buddhism consequently no longer had on offer the cosmological vision—gods, heavens, hells, rebirth, karmic retribution, and all—that grounded its “total cure, opening to the unconditional beyond space and time.”<sup>15</sup> Rather, it now offers “optimism and activity”<sup>16</sup> on behalf of society and society’s engaged, creatively expressive, if neurotically divided, individual. The practice of Buddhism itself is now seen as predominantly lay rather than monastic. Even here, though, it is no longer realized in the community celebrations and ritual participation that marked superstitious “folk” Buddhism, but rather in the “privatized and internalized” psychological sphere of “one’s mind or soul.”<sup>17</sup> It should be obvious by now that the terms I used earlier—Enlightenment, Romantic, and Protestant—are fitting monikers for this new articulation of Buddhism; and indeed they have been from time to time suggested in place of “modernist.” Thus, we can summarize as follows. Western Buddhism is a progeny of the Enlightenment: it implicitly values, for instance, reason and rationality, progress, equality, empiricism, and the primacy of science. It is the spiritual kin of Romanticism: it valorizes personal emotions, creative imagination, intuition, nature, the exemplar of the heroic figure, and the primacy of the subject. It is a guardian of Protestantism: it reflexively values laicization, individual effort and personal achievement, psychologized internalization, ritual simplification or outright elimination,

return to scriptural sources, and the primacy of “self-culture.”<sup>18</sup> Finally, this modernized and Westernized Buddhism, far from being confined to the West, is international in scope, transcending as it does “cultural and national boundaries, creating . . . a cosmopolitan network of intellectuals, writing most often in English.”<sup>19</sup>

What I have sketched here is, of course, an idealized type of Buddhism. No single instantiation of Buddhism, East or West, fulfills the ambitions of its modernist reformers. And, for that matter, neither do the most fervent devotees of the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and Protestantism live up to their cults’ lofty expectations. If we were to sift carefully through the values I just mentioned and compare them to how people behave historically in real life, would we not find self-delusion, contradiction, and outright dishonesty at every turn? So, let’s bear in mind Max Weber’s warning that “to speak in terms of ideal types” is “in a certain sense doing violence to historical reality.”<sup>20</sup> As Weber further reminds us, however, without this little act of violence we will not get very far in our investigations. So there it is. Whether in Tokyo or Toledo, you now know how to spot a Western Buddhist.

Some readers may still wonder why I am limiting my critique to this *Western*, albeit internationalized, Buddhism. Isn’t Western Buddhism too easy of a target, with its facile prescriptions for happiness and its Pollyannish affirmationism? Wouldn’t this be a much more substantive critique if it addressed Buddhism as a whole, taking into account, for instance, the serious ancient and medieval philosophical traditions? If we dwell on the first point for a moment, we will discover an additional characteristic of Western Buddhism. It is, in fact, a feature that is to a great extent *definitive* of Western Buddhism. I should also admit that it is a feature that strengthens my imaginary interlocutor’s argument against making Western Buddhism the sole target of my critique. I am thinking here of the widespread application of the “Easy-Easy Principle” in Western Buddhist discourse. This principle is a concept of the logician and argumentation theorist John Woods. In brief, the principle states that if a human activity is easy, so is, or so should be, the theory informing that activity. In *The Death of Argument*, Woods offers these definitions:

A task is easy when a human being can perform it competently without formal tutelage, and without noticeable effort . . . An easy theory is similarly one that can be understood by an arbitrarily selected competent individual without tutelage and without noticeable effort. Easy theories include common sense theories, but are not restricted to them.<sup>21</sup>

Elsewhere, Woods says that the theory of such a practice “must likewise be free of technical or theoretically abstruse content.”<sup>22</sup> Western Buddhist rhetoric, of course, is more prone to speaking of the “simple” nature of Buddhism, its practices, and its corresponding theories. The principle, however, still holds, as does the condition that Western Buddhist thought and practice is, according to its rhetoric and unlike “hard” theories and techniques, largely available “without formal tutelage, and without noticeable effort.” As a prominent figure sums up this feature of Western Buddhism: “Practice: you can’t do it wrong.”<sup>23</sup> In fact, simplicity is a trope burrowed within the very marrow of the tradition. Alexander Wynne provides some insight into this trope in *The Origins of Buddhist Meditation*. His intent and context are admittedly different from mine; but what he says is nonetheless instructive. Wynne argues that the simplicity of a particular canonical account of the Buddha’s awakening “likely” proves that account to have greater veracity over another, more complex, variant. Wynne acknowledges that “simplicity is not necessarily an unambiguous sign of the historical authenticity of any Buddhist text,” and yet his acceptance of the simpler account in this case exceeds the old-text critical principle of *lectio brevior*.<sup>24</sup> As is all-too-common in Buddhist studies scholarship, Wynne the scholar is indistinguishable from a devout practitioner when he argues that the “simplicity in the account [of the Buddha’s first encounter with a passer-by after his awakening] suggest the possibility that it is a description of liberating insight, i.e. ‘an immediate verbalisation of (a conceptualisation of) an actual experience,’ rather than a theory.” Wynne, perhaps unintentionally, broadcasts his faith-driven assumptions at work here:

We can assume that the Buddha’s own accounts of his awakening would have been “immediate verbalisations of an actual experience,” rather than secondary theories. If any trace of the original account of the Buddha’s awakening is to be found in the early Buddhist sources, we should expect to find it in a simple description, and not a complex theory; the simpler the description the better.<sup>25</sup>

Unless we subscribe to such values in advance, why we would assume that a “description of liberating insight” would necessarily be simple and untheoretical? In any case, Wynne is giving voice to a widespread rhetorical premise of Buddhism, East and West; and that premise is perfectly congruent with the Easy-Easy—or, in this case, the Simple-Simple—Principle. Another leading figure of Western Buddhism offers a somewhat cruder version of this principle: “*sutras* and *sastras* are treated by Zen as mere waste paper whose utility consist in wiping off the dirt of the intellect and nothing more.”<sup>26</sup> *Sūtras*

and, particularly, *śāstras* are, of course, the repositories of the theoretical “intellectual analysis” of ostensibly untheoretical liberating insights. Such rhetoric, typical of Western Buddhism, assumes that to attach a complex theory to a natural, hence “easy” or simple, human task is to burden it with unnecessary, indeed counterproductive, intellectualization. Worse even, it is to woefully mischaracterize that activity. There is, however, a serious problem with this Easy-Easy Principle: it is “a hopelessly mistaken maxim.”<sup>27</sup> Riding a bike, Woods points out, is easy; but “plotting the underlying kinesiology is not.” Dogen (1200–1253) might consider meditation to be “the *dharma* gate of enjoyment and ease,” but plotting the hidden value system, much less the neurology, of such an activity involves neither.<sup>28</sup> The latter, difficult, project is the theoretically complex working out of what is occurring in the former, ostensibly easy, activity. Western Buddhist figures eschew the supposed overcomplication of its theoretical project because it holds its (superior) practical application to be necessarily of utmost simplicity.

The ubiquity of the Easy-Easy Principle in Western Buddhist discourse—rising quite often to a pronounced anti-intellectualism—might be a cause for turning our critical attention to the supposedly more philosophically sophisticated eastern varieties. The error in that move would be in assuming that the same principle does not hold for the more traditional forms of Buddhist thought and practice. That point is too complex to flesh out here. However, Tom Tillemans’s work on the influential Indian Buddhist philosopher Candrakīrti (flourished around 600–650) suggests a line of inquiry in this direction. Tillemans speaks, for instance, of the fact that for Candrakīrti our everyday “conventional truth is very much a *dumbed-down truth*” requiring, if at all, a theoretical explanation in which “*sophistication itself is to be ruled out.*”<sup>29</sup> To be fair, Tillemans suspects that Candrakīrti sits as high as he does in the Buddhist philosophical firmament only because later Tibetan thinkers, such as Tsongkhapa (1357–1419), wrestled mightily with his “pedestrian world picture,” transforming the Indian thinker into “a significantly better philosopher than he actually was.”<sup>30</sup> This line of inquiry, however, just might reveal that the most sophisticated goods that traditional Buddhism has to offer rarely, if ever, actually rise above faith-bound philosophical theology.

With the neologism “x-buddhism,” which I will explain in Chapter 4 (under the subheading “Decision”), I argue that all forms of Buddhism, East and West, share an identity that is reducible to a common factor. For that reason, a critique of Western Buddhism is a critique of Buddhism *tout court*.

## Theaters comforting, theaters cruel

With that description in mind, it will be useful to revisit the question: what are we to make of Western Buddhism? Is it the serious form of thought and practice that its adherents would have us believe? It certainly speaks in the idiom of seriousness. Buddhist teachings invite us to entertain possibilities that should make even the most impulsive of the proverbial rushing fools balk: emptiness, selflessness, freedom, rebirth, the multiverse, enlightenment, abiding happiness. Topics like these, of course, have occupied some of the brightest minds that humanity has produced since the dawn of recorded human thought, thinkers from Parmenides and Plato to David Hume, Hannah Arendt, and Stephen Hawking, to just barely get the list going. Now, we're hearing about Buddhism's ability to address the most vexing issues confronting the twenty-first century, issues such as the domination of technology, environmental degradation, the intricacies of trauma and addiction, and the mysteries of the human brain. Western Buddhist teachers suffer no loss for words when it comes to any of these topics. Academics, too—principally in Buddhist studies, but also in fields like neuroscience, psychology, and philosophy—laud Buddhism's contributions to interminable debates on epistemology, ontology, logic, language, perception, and consciousness. The accumulated result is that Buddhism enjoys a blue-ribbon reputation in the West as a profound all-encompassing system of thought, or at least, to those less inclined toward intractable conundrums, as a self-help remedy par excellence.

Is this reputation deserved? Perhaps the most obvious approach to investigating the viability of Buddhists' claims for their ostensibly pansophic teaching would be to systematically present and analyze these teachings. Such an approach, however, would be tedious beyond belief and ultimately unproductive. Why do I say this? It would be tedious because "Buddhism" is the name of a two-and-a-half millennia amassing of ideas, beliefs, rituals, worldviews, texts, theories, art, architecture, music, fashion, practices, universities, monasteries, lay communities, virtually *ad infinitum*. And all of this in the cauldron of cultures spanning Beijing and Boston. Although this baroque assortment bears the shared name of "Buddhism," the commonalities across time and space are mostly of the family resemblance variety, wherein the self-identity of each lies in its difference from the others. Like the proud factions of a venerable and extremely large clan, Buddhists seem to be particularly sensitive to this matter of difference. This sensitivity, furthermore, informs the reason that a doctrinal analysis of



Buddhism would be as unproductive as it would be tedious. Contemporary Western Buddhists commonly respond to criticism with an appeal to exception. This tendency parallels what I call a *detail fetish* among Western Buddhists, a kind of exemplification reflex.<sup>31</sup> Providing a particular example in order to make a finely calibrated point is, indeed, not unusual in complex systems of thought. Heidegger has his hammer; Wittgenstein, his slabs. Spinoza has his hatchet, and Descartes, his wax.<sup>32</sup> If you have ever read even the first page of a book on classical Buddhist philosophy, you will almost certainly have come across “the pot.” Buddhists, in the written word and in dialogue, have always been quick at the draw with their own mechanism of ideological damage control: the hyper-specific doctrinal detail. Apparently, there is no criticism of a given Buddhist concept that cannot be decisively dismissed with an added detail, an overlooked facet, an ever-so-slight shifting of the dharmic goalpost. The detail is taken from this teacher’s meticulous interpretation, from that pinpointed textual passage; or, failing its intended effect, from the hidden sphere of wisdom known as personal experience. The detail corrects, alters, refines, and reshapes. And along the way, it inevitably derails any criticism, rendering it irrelevant.

If Buddhism is in equal measure elusive and unassailable, how is an evaluation of it possible? If the term “Buddhism,” or for that matter “Western Buddhism,” is a catchall for such a wide diversity of phenomena, what is it exactly that is being critiqued? And even if we can say, if every particular instance that is offered up for critical analysis is countered by a supposedly more salient yet resistant instance, on what foundation can a critique be raised? To indicate more about my approach to these matters in *A Critique of Western Buddhism*, and to convey a sense of the book’s spirit, I would like momentarily to band together the Buddha and the bearer of such *ad rem* wisdom as “Where there is a stink of shit/there is a smell of being.”<sup>33</sup>

The Buddha did not write books, but if he had, I can imagine him thinking, along with his scatological comrade, Antonin Artaud: “I would like to write a Book that would drive people mad, that would be like an open door leading them where they would never have consented to go; in short, a door that opens to reality.”<sup>34</sup> In the terms that I introduce in Chapter 2, what Artaud calls “reality” is better understood as “the Real.”<sup>35</sup> In one of its uses, the concept of the Real gives us a way to talk about disavowed features of reality that threaten to sunder our constructions of order, sense, and meaning. In another usage, the Real names a facet of existence presupposed, yet unaffected, by human symbolic systems, such as language and ideology. So, I will accordingly adjust Artaud’s terminology here. The Real, in Artaud’s charged and idiosyncratic idiom, is

marked by “cruelty.” It is, in fact, the definitive cruelty. The very purpose of theater, Artaud believed, is to refract this cruelty: theater should be coextensive with the Real. It should ensue *from* the Real, thus operate alongside it. And yet the theater of his day aspired to be little more than a melodramatic retreat from the threats of modern life. It sought to *protect* its audience from the cruel. Artaud had a different vision. He saw in theater a practice that “inspires us with the fiery magnetism of its images and acts upon us like a spiritual therapeutics whose touch can never be forgotten.”<sup>36</sup> With this aspiration, he was up against no less than a popular institution that served, like the church and the police, the creation of a public submissive to an oppressive status quo. Artaud thus made it his mission to transmute this theater of complacency into an “immediate and violent”<sup>37</sup> maelstrom, one that exposed its viewers to the primal truths of *their* lives. Only a theater that wakes up its audience’s “nerves and heart,”<sup>38</sup> he believed, is worthy of the name. Such a theater must be built on the cruelty that is the Real, on those eschewed features of reality that, to evoke Artaud’s wise words from above, stink. Such a theater must not shrink from the possibility that “extreme action, pushed beyond all limits”<sup>39</sup> must ensue from its feral process. For, if not pushed with such intentional zeal, the machinations of delusion and self-satisfaction will overwhelm the vitality that is catalyzed by the lucid acknowledgment of the cruel Real.

What do the fiery dreams of a bona fide madman like Artaud have to do with the cool and eminently sane Buddha? To suggest a parallel, let’s turn to the primal scene of their respective spheres of action. We see demented revels of the Dionysian *maenad* dancing and drinking themselves into orgiastic frenzy, shredding, with their phallic *thyrsos*, then ecstatically devouring, the raw flesh of the sacrificial beast. Out of this appetite, the theater is born. Buddhism’s myth of origin is hardly less dramatic. Revisiting the locus of its founding scene, the seat of the Buddha’s awakening, we are in the presence of overwhelming elemental power: trees, water, sky, fire, earth, bodies beautiful and decaying, lust, passion, storms, death, swirling cosmos, occult powers, animals, sprites, spirits, gods. Sitting against the trunk of a massive *ficus*, the Buddha, as Gilles Deleuze says of writers, uses all the resources of his athleticism to “dip into a chaos, into a movement that goes to the infinite.”<sup>40</sup> By engaging in extreme contemplative experimentation, the Buddha enters into a “Dionysian space of undoing” within which he enacts “not a system of demonstration, but an ordeal in which the mind is given new eyes.”<sup>41</sup>

Each of these spheres represents a literal theater, a *theatron*, a space of violent, if perhaps cathartic, seeing.<sup>42</sup> And yet from a catalyst for the crushing ordeal

of human awakening, the Theater of Buddhism, like that of Artaud's France, lapses into a refuge of comfort, into an institution of sleepy, complacent social conformity, into thought so sluggish as to mope its way into the desert of the Western New Age. That, at least, is one of two major premises of this book. What creates this breach is that the progenitors of Buddhism and of the Theater of Cruelty presuppose a "Real" of which their particular forms are crucial recoveries. This fact, the positing of a relationship to the Real—indeed, the very evocation of the notion—permits a corollary to the premise. In the case of Buddhism, this corollary is that its conceptual materials may, despite its lapses, offer valuable resources for radical reformations of thought and practice and of self and society in the contemporary West. But now a shadow of this first premise appears; namely, the noun "Buddhism" indexes an historical failure to unleash the force of its very own thought. "Buddhism," that is, names an obstinate *containment* of potentially vital human goods. The end result is that Buddhism everywhere functions as a conservative protector of the social status quo, however toxic, and as an ideological fortress spawning subjects whose treasured goal certainly appears to be to remain unscathed—in some sense or another—by life's vicissitudes. Paradoxically, therefore, we cannot look to Buddhism—to its teachers and defenders, to its commentaries and explications, to its communities and organizations—to assist us in removing its auto-erected bulwark of resistance.

The second major premise of this book derives from this paradox. It holds that certain critical procedures must be performed on and with the Buddhist material if Buddhism is to avoid complete absorption into the Western self-help industry. The question twice posed in this introduction—What are we to make of Buddhism?—is thus intended in the most literal of senses. What, if anything, might we do with Buddhism, with Buddhist materials, in our present circumstances? Committed Western Buddhists will be perplexed by the very question. It entails an assumption that, I doubt, would ever occur to them, much less be acceptable. For, to its adherents, Buddhism is nothing if not an exemplary inventory of *what we should do in our present circumstances*. This inventory is, furthermore, nothing if not wholly sufficient. It encompasses the entire cosmos, in fact, including, for instance, what we should do with our minds, our bodies, our speech, and in comportment to others and to the environment. It makes pronouncements on the workings of causality, past, present, and future. It holds the codes to the cosmic vault of meaning and value. So, first, perhaps, among a host of other difficulties that I discuss in this book is that a critique will have to avoid the snares of *the principle of sufficient Buddhism*. Echoing

Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason (all things, according to reason, have a reason) as well as François Laruelle's critical principle of sufficient philosophy (all things, according to philosophy, are philosophizable), this principle holds that Buddhism can be universally applied to its object. Given that Buddhism's overt object is reality, or indeed, the Real, Buddhism's sufficiency knows virtually no bounds. That being the case, any critique of Buddhism that uses Buddhist materials is setting itself up to be absorbed back into the fold as yet one more iteration of Buddhism. A critique will thus have to be nimble and will have to hit hard.

Here, I would like to mention four basic features informing my critique. The details will be found in the chapters that follow. First, I am borrowing elements from the prodigious theoretical apparatus of the contemporary French thinker François Laruelle. The most succinct definition of the aim of Laruelle's critique is that it is "the simplification of transcendence."<sup>43</sup> Laruelle holds that philosophy—the topic of his own critique, which he terms "non-philosophy" or "non-standard philosophy"—suffers a condition whereby it is "intended by necessity to remain empty but which necessarily evades this void with objects and foreign goals provided by experience, culture, history, language, etc."<sup>44</sup> Philosophy must remain empty because of its "intention" of filling the role of an *explicator* of immanent reality or indeed of a kind of science of the Real. That means that philosophy identifies itself as an organon, as an unmediated instrument of knowledge, rather than as *co-author* of the reality it explicates. Instead, what we find is that philosophy habitually affixes its own postulates concerning reality and the Real onto the very instrument of its ostensible science, thereby inevitably mixing these with the object to be known. Through this mixture, philosophy "evades" the immanent Real that it endeavors to think and know, and instead erects a transcendental mirror reflecting philosophy's mixture back onto the world, and into the Real. This circularity entails the failure of philosophy to function as the rigorous organon it so aspires to be. It thus becomes instead a "rumor . . . which is transmitted by hearsay, imitation, specularity, and repetition."<sup>45</sup> As I will show, Laruelle's recognition of philosophy's identity transfers uncannily well to that of Buddhism. In part, this shows the protean nature of his theory. Indeed, he holds that "'non-philosophy' is the generic term for the enterprise which takes on other names locally according to the materials to which it relates."<sup>46</sup> It is a theory that is simultaneously a practice, whereby the practitioner *uses* it to *do something* with the local material. I will say more about this facet in Part 3. In any case, I know of no theory more capable of resisting the reappropriating sufficiency that marks totalizing systems such as Buddhism than Laruelle's non-philosophy.

Second, it should be clear by now that a conviction running throughout my critique will be that an orientation toward immanence is a vital human value. I would hope to convince my readers that thinkers of immanence—whether in the sciences, medicine, economics, psychology, philosophy, even the arts—offer the most promising models for social and personal clarification and, where desired, transformation. This is because, like Heidegger’s “hardness of fate” premise, their promise is rooted precisely in a transcendently minimized assessment of human experience, one that moreover opens up the possibility for “authentic action” in our world.<sup>47</sup> This conviction has a corollary: systems of transcendence, namely, those that posit autonomous yet immanently absent orders of truth and reality, must be forcefully countered. If for no other reason, they must be countered because they are alienating to human beings. Buddhism is a fascinating and rare instance of a system of thought that adamantly posits a version of radical, non-alienating immanence yet aggressively staves off the consequences of its own productive insights via transcendental mixtures of its own making. My critique thus takes seriously those insights of Buddhism (e.g., subjective destitution, phenomenal dissolution, contingency, nihility, etc.) concerning reality in relation to the Real. My hypothesis is that Buddhist materials *might* contribute to serious, immanental models of human transformation, but only in ways that would be unrecognizable to Buddhists. Put in apt if somewhat dramatic terms: we might, after all is said and done, discern the afterglow of liberating human thought in the ruins of “Buddhism’s” destruction.

Third, this critique serves as both a theory and a performance. I don’t mean only that a text like this one is “performative,” that it *does*, or at least aims to effect, something. I am more interested in the performance associated with the *reading* of the text. I hope to stimulate a reading, thinking, living subject, one who regards the Buddhist conceptual material alongside of, hence profoundly affected by, what Laruelle calls “radical immanence.”<sup>48</sup> *Theory-practice* therefore seems like a fitting term here. Theory, like its etymological relative, *theater*, positions us to gaze on the spectacle of Western Buddhism. As Sruti Bala writes, the two closely related terms “deal with orders of perception and meaning-making of reality.” Performance, however, in contrast to theory, “foregrounds action as opposed to perception.” It is thus “connected to the legal act of executing a will or promise, as opposed to the emphasis in the terms ‘theater’ and ‘theory,’ on considering and speculating.” So, one implicit claim made for *A Critique of Western Buddhism* is that it at least endeavors to execute the promise of Buddhist emancipatory materials within some register of thought and action.

“Placed together,” to paraphrase Bala, theory and performance “span a range of investments, from aesthetic and formal to the political and social.”<sup>49</sup>

Finally, I want to reiterate that I am not critiquing Western Buddhism as a flawed deviation from a pure “original” Buddhism or as a corruption of traditional eastern forms of Buddhism. Neither am I putting Buddhism on trial and conducting an inquest into the truthfulness of its claims. The fact is that it is impossible to evaluate “Buddhism’s claims” because, as I have already mentioned, “Buddhism” is too slippery a term. Its very fluidity, however, is a richly instructive fact, one that provides a clue to its identity and thus to how to construct a consequential critique. In brief, I am employing a method that bears no resemblance to approaches such as the history of ideas, the philosophy of religion, or doxography. While readers might excuse me from following either of the first two methods, I can imagine they will be disappointed if I don’t base my critique on the evaluation of actual doctrines. I am following Laruelle here. He writes, “There is a frivolity of doxography from which ‘the history of philosophy’ does not always escape. It is not a matter here of objects, authors, themes, positions or texts; it is solely the matter of a problematic and of the *reconstruction* of this problematic.”<sup>50</sup> I will work out later what I think this problematic is for Western Buddhism. The point that I wish to make here—and it is a crucial point overall—is that whatever Western Buddhist “objects, authors, themes, positions or texts” I could name would amount to little more than indices. That is, names of specific texts, doctrines, teachers, etc., are but “indications of problems that we are striving to demonstrate and analyze in their coherence and functioning; guiding threads for penetrating into a [buddhistic] environment that exceeds them, but the extent, the possibilities and also the limitations of which they have made perceptible.”<sup>51</sup> I am interested in the “environment” that both exceeds *and* precedes any Buddhist text, figure, and so on, that we might name. This environment constitutes the problematic because *it*, and not specific doctrinal details, is the incubator of the countless phenomena that comprise “Western Buddhism.” The general, Laruellean, term for this problematic is “decision.” Very briefly, decision involves cutting knowledge off from its immanent-material-empirical given in order to ground that knowledge in a transcendent-ideal-hallucinated supplement. Such a move is, of course, not a problem for avowedly transcendental forms of thought, such as theistic religion. Decision is, however, a problem for self-declared phenomenologically verifiable systems like biology and Buddhism. I argue that, given its specific practice of decision, Western Buddhism exposes itself as a visionary form of knowledge. In any case, this is not to say that you will not encounter named examples in this critique. Rather,

it means that these instances will only be viewed—to use a famous Buddhist trope—as fingers pointing to the moon of buddhistic decision. The purpose of this approach, indeed of this entire critique, is, once again, not to annihilate the finely wrought edifice of Western Buddhism, but to view that edifice in the glow of a stranger, more creaturely, light.

## The Snares of Wisdom

Lurking throughout this book is the query: delivered from its onerous regency of Wisdom, what might Western Buddhism offer us modern mortals? Given that this is a book on *Buddhism*, the question itself, I imagine, packs enough polemics to put off all but the most forbearing reader. For, why read a book on Buddhism if not to drink from its effusive fount of Wisdom? The promise of Wisdom certainly appears to be what draws people to Buddhism today. As a recent book offering *Wisdom from the Early Teachings* suggests, Buddhism is attractive—and effective, of course—because its “approach to awakening is so simple and free of adherence to any kind of ideology.”<sup>1</sup> With his use of “ideology” here the author seems to imply something like *merely concocted notions about* the constituents of “awakening,” the kinds of fantastical notions that we find in sectarian texts, doctrines, and religions. The author apparently wants to set off these inferior sorts of contrived, approximate forms from that which “points to a direct and simple approach . . . without requiring the adherence to doctrine” or resting on “their authority as scripture.” He wants to set “ideology,” that is, off from “Wisdom.” Wisdom is the unconcocted Truth that floats free from any sort of contingency—linguistic, doctrinal, historical, subjective, and beyond. That is why its truths pertain “not only to Buddhists, but also to the ever-growing demographic of spiritual-but-not-religious, who seek a spiritual life outside the structures of religion.”

It is with this idea—namely, that “spiritual” Wisdom blooms eternal, and eternally pure, untainted by the muddy materiality of religious or any other kind of ideology—that we know we have been coaxed into the pristine regency of the *philosophia perennis*. A critique of Western Buddhism could amble along this perennial pathway of Wisdom, each step of the way pointing out the abject failure of Buddhism, and even of “the Buddha before Buddhism,” to avoid the supposedly disqualifying evidence of contingency. The critic, that is, could with ease garner example after example that renders implausible the essentialist and



universalist conceits of Perennialism. The astute critic could go even further, and illuminate for us exactly how the *authors* of books on Western Buddhism, me included, betray in their treatments of the Buddhist material—selections, omissions, translations, interpretations, evaluations, etc.—*their* own ideological commitments. To do such work here is far beyond the scope of my purpose. Somewhat ironically, however, this point can be summed up in devastating succinctness with reference to the Buddhist concept of dependent origination, which holds that there is precisely *no* “simple and free” existence of anything whatsoever, whether object, concept, person or event; and, on the contrary, that everything emerges due to a variety of entangling causes, conditions, and influences.<sup>2</sup> In any case, it is because of the demonstrable implausibility of avoiding “adherence to any kind of ideology” that Wisdom bears an impossible burden: its protectors simply cannot fend off the cruel intrusion of contingency into its Edenic domain.

Hence, again, my query: delivered from its onerous regency of Wisdom, what might Western Buddhism offer us modern mortals? Anticipating the failure of Wisdom to deliver on any sustainable promises, as I explore below, might we find any other reason to engage Buddhist materials? I propose that we may, and that the reason is “the Real.” The strength of this reason is that it is derived from classical Buddhist postulates themselves, from terms that entail a “Real” notion of something like *that which is excluded from symbolic representation* or, in a more Buddhist idiom, *that which obtains unaffected by the delusions of conceptual proliferation*. Terms intimating the Buddhist Real come in varying degrees of obliqueness, such as (to give the standard English translations) things-as-they-are (*yathābhutam*), truth (*satya*), ultimate truth (*paramārthasatya*), emptiness (*śūnyatā*), impermanence (*anicca*), no-self (*anātman*), dependent origination (*pratīyasamutpāda*), and extinction (*nirvāṇa*). Implicitly or explicitly, these classical postulates remain active ingredients in Western Buddhist discourse. Still, this reason for engagement—“the Real”—is by no means obvious to contemporary readers of books on Buddhism. It is in fact doubtful that any such reader has ever encountered in a book or talk on Buddhism the very term “Real” as I employ it. An obvious rebuttal to my proposition here is that this notion of the Real does not occur in Western Buddhist discourse because it is not a Buddhist notion to begin with. The goal in the following chapters is thus to establish that foundational Buddhist postulates do indeed entail a consequential notion of “the Real.”

Why is this initial goal important for my critique? There are several reasons. First of all, I think it is the absence, or perhaps disavowal, of such a “Real” concept

that makes possible the correspondence between Western Buddhism and New Age self-help or, more broadly, of Buddhism and “Wisdom,” in the minds of present-day observers. To those observers who seek in Western Buddhism practical and ideological means to ends such as happiness and wellbeing, and meaning and purpose, this absence must be reassuring. After all, destinations such as those are surely at odds with the cognitive and affective hammer blows of the likes of nihilism and contingency. To those observers who, on the other hand, seek in Western Buddhism conditions for thought and practice on par with sophisticated philosophical or rigorous scientific practice, it is surely this very disavowal that is a hindrance. For, again, it is this lack or denial of a *Real* concept that enables Western Buddhism to remain locked in its orbit of Wisdom. So, my first task is to explain what I mean by “Wisdom.” After all, Western Buddhism is nothing if not a self-professed instrument of human wisdom. This chapter therefore explores the basic logic of Wisdom, along with its contemporary motivating force, “wellbeing.” Finally, I briefly consider the confluence of Western Buddhist Wisdom and wellbeing rhetoric and that of contemporary neoliberal subjectivity.

## Wisdom

“Wisdom is the most disgusting thing you can imagine,” deadpans the ever-provocative Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek in a conversation with Paul Holdengräber hosted by the Danish Royal Library in Copenhagen.<sup>3</sup> A visibly confounded Holdengräber can only counter, “But it’s so interesting that a *philosopher* should be against wisdom.” Žižek doubles down, “We all *are*.” Varying definitions of “wisdom” are obviously in play in this miscommunication. Holdengräber assumes the colloquial—and classical—sense of possessing an uncannily discerning insight into worldly and cosmic matters, together with virtues such as prudence and judiciousness. Žižek does not. Žižek is naming as Wisdom the “tautological emptiness . . . exemplified in the inherent stupidity of proverbs.”<sup>4</sup> Many readers, I imagine, find in Western Buddhism plentiful examples of wisdom in Holdengräber’s sense. What about in Žižek’s sense? Does Žižek’s characterization apply to Western Buddhism? To find out, we can take as our examples a few proverb-like statements by figures popular in Western Buddhist circles. Let’s consider, for instance, the currently popular trope of *the present moment*: “Life is available only in the present moment. If you abandon the present moment you cannot live the moments of your daily

life deeply.”<sup>5</sup> Like much of the content of Western Buddhism, that statement is meant to point to an elusive feature of reality, one that must be grasped if life is to be properly lived and fulfilled. That is to say, the statement is intended as a profound truth concerning human existence. But, we might ask, is the statement not tautological; is it even coherent? Is it even conceivable to live at some moment other than the present? Then wouldn’t “not abandoning the present moment” just be another expression for “being alive”? Conversely, if the present moment ceases to be available to me or if I choose to abandon it, is that not just another way of talking about death? Nonetheless, a reader might see in this statement certain reasonable, if trite, claims, such as: the present moment must be inhabited for life to be lived. “Wisdom,” though, is more than just a pseudo-profound platitude. It has the ability to shapeshift into its opposite while retaining its resonance of profundity. Here is another popular Western Buddhist teacher: “We find that the term ‘present moment’ is just a label denoting the interface between the tenses ‘past’ and ‘future.’ We cannot actually pinpoint the present. Just a fraction of a second before the supposed present moment lies the past, just a fraction of a second after lies the future.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, in this reversal from the first statement, there really is no present moment either to inhabit or to abandon. “The present moment” is a kind of necessary fiction here. It is an empty signifier that helps us to make sense of temporal experience. We can, of course, also inquire into the coherency of this statement and ask, for instance, whether or not all of language ultimately fails to “pinpoint” its abstract object. Beginning with Plato, at least, the very question “what is x” (justice, love, time) opened up a Pandora’s Box of meaning and signification. So, thus far we have two contradictory statements: first, the present moment is hyper-real; to miss it is to be less than fully alive, and second, the present moment is unreal; to believe in it is to be hopelessly naïve, perhaps even deluded, about the relation of language to reality. Significantly, Wisdom does not stop at contradiction. It soldiers on, seeking resolution. Thus, another teacher proclaims: “All that exists is the present moment, yet we cannot point to it.”<sup>7</sup> It both is and is not. At some point, in other words, the law of noncontradiction obstructs reality and so must be abandoned. As Žižek noticed, however, Wisdom does not even end with the hyper-logical resolution of contradiction. Even after all of this conceptual twisting and turning, he says, “one again obtains a wisdom: ‘the ultimate, unfathomable mystery of [the present moment] resides in its very simplicity, in the simple fact that there is [the present moment].’”<sup>8</sup> The linguistic enigma, the representational void, the ontological mystery, the logical conundrum, and the lived experience are all one and the same. Problem solved. Or rather, non-problem dis-solved.

For, in the unintentionally ironic words of Wisdom from yet another popular Western Buddhist teacher: “No thinking, no mind. No mind, no problem.”<sup>9</sup>

Wisdom is a shapeshifting zombie. It is the ever-mutating persistence of an idea in the face of even the most lethal of objections. Let’s look more closely at that last proverb. “No thinking, no mind/No mind, no problem” is a flagrant, if absurd, tautology. For, we use the term “mind” precisely to denote the faculty of thinking: to change my mind about going to the party is to change my thinking about going to the party, and vice versa. To be devoid of thinking is the very definition of being devoid of a mind. So, finally, to have no mind is to abide no longer among the living, and thus, it follows, is to have no problem. The tautological nature of such statements alone should put an end to the discussion of their perspicacity. But it does not. Wisdom soldiers on. At this point, for example, the Master admonishes me for taking the statement too literally. It might be true that in everyday speech the statement is tautological. Wisdom, however, dictates that the Master engage a practice that is un beholden to the conventions of mere everyday speech. As we learn from one of the preeminent shapers of Western Buddhism:

Language deals with concepts and therefore what cannot be conceptualized is beyond the reach of language. When language is forced, it gets crooked, which means that it becomes illogical, paradoxical, and unintelligible from the point of view of ordinary usage of language or by the conventional way of thinking. For instance, the waters are to flow and the bridge is to stay over them. When this is reversed the world of the senses goes topsy-turvy . . . This [reversal] is intelligible only from the inward way of seeing reality.<sup>10</sup>

Wisdom *must* persist interminably. And it must, by design, do so in a topsy-turvy fashion. It must do both precisely because the profoundest truths of human existence are impervious to human language. The Master sees reality from within. So seeing, the Master has license to speak to us unenlightened worldlings in ways that contravene the stultifying effects of our conventional language. The Master’s unrelenting task—to embody and proclaim Wisdom—requires the incessant contortion of language in order to free us from the benighted delusions engendered by our linguistic conventions. The statement just above, from such a Western Buddhist Master, unintentionally, I think, broadcasts the fundamental problem with Wisdom as a whole. The “tautological imbecility,” as Žižek puts it, that we have been witnessing “points toward the fact that a Master is excluded from the economy of symbolic exchange.”<sup>11</sup> Imagine an oncologist believing herself to be excluded from the rules of this exchange. Her

patient makes an anxious inquiry into the mammogram, and the doctor replies with “No thinking, no mind/No mind, no problem!” How should the patient respond? “The economy of symbolic exchange” entails robust give and take. It means that, for our purposes, the patient may not only challenge the coherency, even more so the wisdom, of her physician’s remark, but may *decisively* do so. Spoken from the lordly seat of the Master, however, the statement insists on profundity, the correctness of which is “intelligible only from the inward way of seeing reality.” In that case, what would it mean to challenge the statement? The reader may object that the wise statement is not intended to be applied to my example, or any others like it. But that objection is precisely a feature of the Wisdom shell game. The precise context wherein Wisdom operates eludes everybody but the Master. Wisdom is exempt from all *specific* contexts. It applies only to life *as a whole*, a mysterious whole that only the Master can behold. That means that you might indeed challenge it, but not effectively; for Wisdom, to paraphrase Laruelle, plays with loaded dice. Wisdom’s exclusion from the economy of linguistically symbolic exchange enables it to generate an endless stream of unassailable, if discordant, statements. Wisdom never fails to win the day.

A critique of Western Buddhism that took the path of discourse analysis, and particularly of Wisdom discourse analysis, would discover an embarrassment of low-lying fruit along the way. That critique would show that the examples I gave above are indicative of general, widespread patterns in Western Buddhist discourse. It is a pattern woven with the fraying threads of truisms, commonplaces, reductionism, and clichés, and framed with the hooks of unchallenged dogmatic certitude. And it doesn’t make for a very consequential critique. So, let’s move on.

## Wellbeing

Wisdom may be as old as the ages, but the motives for seeking it blossom perennially. Quaint motives from traditional Buddhism, past and present, include, for example, ensuring a favorable rebirth, attaining enlightenment, and exiting the brutalizing rounds of birth and death. If we dig further down into the contemporary Western Buddhist discourse on Wisdom, we find its current motivating force: wellbeing. In what sense, wellbeing? Are we talking about the kind of social and personal wellbeing that ensues from the fair distribution of wealth, from shared access to educational opportunity, from

universal healthcare? No. A recent title sums up nicely the general sense of wellbeing in Western Buddhism: *The Buddha's Way of Happiness: Healing Sorrow, Transforming Negative Emotion, and Finding Well-Being in the Present Moment*.<sup>12</sup> As the author elaborates: "The light and radiance are in you. Happiness and peace are in you. Don't go running after it. Open to it—right now, right where you are."<sup>13</sup> The title and blurb capture the crux of what "wellbeing" signifies in Western Buddhist usage. As this comment and the title intimate, Western Buddhist wellbeing involves a complex collusion between positive ego-psychology, New Age idealism, Mindfulness fetishism of "the present moment," and an appropriation of traditional Buddhism. Other Western Buddhist teachers may word it differently, but if it is sold in the Western spiritual marketplace, you can be all but certain that their version of wellbeing will hew closely to the spirit of that title's language.

Interestingly, the last several years have seen a backlash against the near universal celebration of Western Buddhist interventions in what another recent book calls "the happiness industry." Since a major identifying mark of Western Buddhism is this presentation of itself as an ally in the quest for wellbeing, it should be instructive to consider the wellbeing link to Wisdom. Doing so, furthermore, ultimately enables me to bypass another feasible if, for my purposes, divergent path to a critique of Western Buddhism.

"What was a Buddhist monk doing at the 2014 World Economic Forum in Davos lecturing the world's leaders on mindfulness?"—ponders sociologist and political economist William Davies in *The Happiness Industry: How the Government and Big Business Sold Us Well-Being*.<sup>14</sup> The book opens with "the happiest man in the world," Frenchman Matthieu Ricard, a Buddhist monk in the Tibetan tradition, lecturing leading international financial figures and others at the Davos World Economic Forum in Switzerland. To get a quick read on who these "Davos people" are, consider for a moment that the price of attendance at the conference for a company of five exceeded \$622,000 in 2011.<sup>15</sup> That sum can potentially be earned back many times over in business deals struck at Davos; for in attendance are national presidents, government ministers, heads of national banks, too-big-to-fail bank presidents, billionaires, corporate CEOs, economists, currency regulators from bureaucracies like the Fed, captains of industry from chemicals and big oil to media and entertainment, and even rich pop stars. The Forum, founded in Geneva, Switzerland in 1971 amid calamitous economic stagnation in the West, engages these "leaders of society to shape global, regional and industry agendas."<sup>16</sup> One hopeful solution to economic malaise, arrived at in the 1980s, was market deregulation. Indeed, this and

other neoliberal economic policies were widely credited for having enabled the protracted humming of the global economy well into the early 2000s. Thus granted a certain reprieve from economic preoccupations, the Davos conference finally “began to admit a range of more ‘social’ concerns.” Then, suddenly, in 2008, the same *laissez faire* policies that had increased productivity and wealth throughout the 1990s contributed to—some say caused—a worldwide financial meltdown. Primed by its foray into social issues, the Forum came out of the crisis with a newfound perspective that threats to economic stability are as likely to involve upheavals in the social sphere as in the financial sector. In previous years, issues like derivatives and mortgage-backed securities were the talk of the day at Davos. These days the Forum’s agenda is just as likely to highlight socially aware concerns like gender equality, human capital, social inclusion, and LGBTQ rights.<sup>17</sup> Significant for our purposes is the fact that, at Davos, the social is wedded firmly to the financial. For instance, the Forum’s policy paper on LGBT rights opens with the question, “Why is LGBT equality still such a burning issue in the workplace?”<sup>18</sup> The World Economic Forum is principally concerned, in other words, with “how to get the old show back on the road.”<sup>19</sup> And the pivot point to this return to the good old days of a humming market-driven global economy is where the social meets the financial: the workplace.

Enter Matthieu Ricard, Western Buddhist monk extraordinaire. “You are not the slave of your thoughts—just gaze at them, like a shepherd sitting above a meadow watching his sheep go by,” Ricard tells assorted billionaires, hedge fund managers, and A-list celebrities every morning to kick off the day’s program. (Incidentally, Davies’s gloss of the variety of meditation taught by Ricard, “mindfulness meditation,” reads like a recipe concocted in the kitchen of Western Buddhism: “a relaxation technique formed out of a combination of positive psychology, Buddhism, cognitive behavioral therapy and neuroscience.”<sup>20</sup>) Ricard’s presence at the 2014 Davos conference, Davies reports, was a sign of a significant “shift in emphasis” from past meetings. All of a sudden “the forum was awash with talk of ‘mindfulness.’”<sup>21</sup> Ricard’s morning mindfulness meditation sessions were just a sampling of the day’s wellbeing offerings. In 2014, twenty-five sessions at Davos “focused on questions related to wellness, in a mental and physical sense, more than double the number of 2008.”<sup>22</sup> Among the decision-making, agenda-driving, capital-investing class, it seems, happiness—happiness of all things!—is in.

This is now what preoccupies our global elites. Happiness, in its various guises, is no longer some pleasant add-on to the more important business of making

money, or some new age concern with those with enough time to sit around baking their own bread. As a measurable, visible, improvable entity, it has now penetrated the citadel of global economic management. If the World Economic Forum is any guide, and it has always tended to be in the past, the future of successful capitalism depends on our ability to combat stress, misery and illness, and put relaxation, happiness and wellness in their place.<sup>23</sup>

This newfound embrace of wellbeing among the world's corporate elite can only augur a better world for all of us, right? Maybe something like trickle down happiness is on the horizon. After all, more and more corporations now have, alongside of their CEOs and CFOs, a CHO: "Chief Happiness Officer."<sup>24</sup> Well, Davies's argument disabuses us of any such hope. That argument is complex and serpentine, so I can only briefly summarize a few points relevant to the path of my wellness critique not taken.

Davies's quest to chart the contemporary landscape of wellbeing begins with Jeremy Bentham's eighteenth-century utilitarian dream of a science of happiness, one based not on the fuzzy idealist fantasies of his forebears, but on the exact methods of the new sciences: empirical data and concrete measurement. Happiness, reasoned Bentham, unlike, say, goodness and justice, is an actual entity. Happiness is, namely, pleasure in distinction to pain. Significantly, argued Bentham from naturalistic assumptions, pleasure and pain have a basis in human physiology: they are felt experiences. That means that they can be triggered and measured. Once measured, they can then be regulated and increased. The task of monitoring people's pleasure/pain quotient, moreover, falls to the government. "The business of government," proclaims Bentham, now becomes "to promote the happiness of society, by punishing and rewarding." As an enthusiastic supporter of the free market, Bentham believed that the invisible hand of capitalism would unfailingly guide people to the pleasurable rewards they sought—happiness, it turns out, is both felt *and* bought—while the state would become the agent of pain and punishment. The fork in the citizenry's path was thus simple and stark. And a society in which maximal happiness for the maximum number of people obtained lay on the horizon.

If this story sounds like a philosophical pipe dream from our more innocent past, Davies shows that Jeremy Bentham in fact "set the stage for the entangling of psychological research and capitalism"<sup>25</sup> that so enthusiastically hailed Matthieu Ricard to Davos. In Davies's telling, business leaders, indeed even unwitting middle managers, have become latter-day Benthamites. The classic Utilitarian formula, *the best action is the one that procures the greatest happiness*



for the greatest number of citizens, becomes, in the hands of these modern bosses, something like *the most productive business is the one that procures the greatest happiness for the greatest number of employees*. Clearly, the classical Utilitarian ethical principle, *a thing's value is measured by its usefulness*, remains valid. The value of wellness procedures like Matthieu Ricard's mindful meditation is to be determined in the measured increase in employee productivity. More important for our purposes, this ethical principle renders perfectly rational the prominent if quirky presence of an aging French monk of an ancient Tibetan Buddhist order before a group of ultramodern if somewhat staid capitalists in the Swiss Alps. Simply put, Davos people are no longer fearful of insurgent hordes of workers violently seizing the means of production. Davos people *are*, however, terribly fearful of the diminishment of capital, of *their* capital. And of course Davos people are aware of the hit their capital incurs because of "employees who are regularly absent, unmotivated, or suffering from persistent, low-level mental health problems" as well as from apathy, stress, and anxiety.<sup>26</sup> What is the cost of unhappy workers? According to a recent Gallup poll, a dissatisfied workforce "costs the US economy \$500 billion a year in lost productivity, lost tax receipts and health-care costs."<sup>27</sup> While evidence from the field of social epidemiology points to the fact that Western business leaders and government officials created this problem of infectious employee malaise in the first place, evidence from Davos shows that these same agents are now trying to solve it. They created the problem by erecting a brutally competitive work environment staffed by a fundamentally insecure, unequal, underpaid, *yet enthusiastically materialistic*, populace. They are solving it by injecting the ideology of the happiness industry into the workplace.

The key message of that ideology is that workers' unhappiness lies inside themselves. As Google's Search Inside Yourself (SIY) program for corporate leaders puts it, fusing a classical Buddhist premise to a Nike slogan, "The mind is the root of all things" and "greatness comes from within."<sup>28</sup> Thus, SIY "bridg[es] age-old practices of mind training with modern neuroscience and technology, [to] help people in organizations bring out the best in themselves, from the inside out."<sup>29</sup> The goal of SIY's inward-turning techniques, namely, "to grow in self-mastery,"<sup>30</sup> is, of course, consistent with Western Buddhism's. The contemporary twist in this "unexpected path to success and happiness"<sup>31</sup> is that it aims at worker productivity; the path is to be found specifically "at work," and its sole destination is to meet work challenges "with more resilience, more engagement, and more happiness."<sup>32</sup> As one satisfied participant of an SIY seminar said: "I learned relaxed focus, to be able to disconnect from the

overall noise in a high-speed environment and *get things done without feeling too stressed about it*.”<sup>33</sup> The obvious beneficiaries of such an inward-oriented solution to productivity are people who have the most to gain from maintaining the social and economic status quo: the super-wealthy together with their corporate lieutenants and political pawns. If people can be convinced that the way to ease and success at work lies within, that it requires that they only alter their perspective or attitude, that they, in the language of an influential Western Buddhist figure, cultivate non-judgmentalism, non-reactivity, and letting-go,<sup>34</sup> then there is obviously no compulsion to change the very material conditions that made necessary such a destressing practice in the first place. Search inside yourself, worker, but certainly *not* into the nature and conditions of your work, and certainly not into the backroom maneuverings and ulterior motives of the company. And by all means do not search into the farther-reaching social practices that produce the soul-crushing malaise that drives your longing to “let go” in the first place.

It is perhaps not surprising that the new spirit of Davos is now animating none other than Koch Industries and its multibillionaire owners, Charles and David Koch.<sup>35</sup> The Koch brothers and their “Toxic Empire” are much maligned in the American press as “dark and plotting oilman [right-wing libertarian] ideologues” who, in coordination with a secret “small circle of ultra-wealthy conservatives,” are currently launching a plan to spend nearly nine hundred million dollars on political campaigns and special interest advocacy.<sup>36</sup> Desiring to change their public image as American Svengalis, the brothers are now engaged in a carefully calibrated project of rebranding. The “grand strategist” in charge of this plan is the Koch brothers’ long-time political advisor and a New York University economics Ph.D. named Richard Fink. In a leaked audio recording of a closed meeting of wealthy donors, Fink laid out the basic problem facing Koch Industries. It is, namely, that the company’s own research shows that Koch Industries advocates for precisely the opposite of what most Americans desire for their country. For instance, Americans want a clean environment, health care across class and economic lines, and opportunity not only for themselves but for those who have been historically disadvantaged. The Koch brothers “and their network,” on the other hand, “opposed environmental regulation and government action on global warming, and supported privatizing Social Security and health care.”<sup>37</sup> Fink knew that his solution would “sound a little strange” to the antiregulation free-market devotees before him. “So,” he implored them, “you’ll have to bear with me.” The Kochs and their extensive network, he offered, needed to present its

hyper-capitalist ideology “as an apolitical and altruistic reform movement to enhance the quality of life”—as, to be precise, “a movement for well-being.” The network has to convince Americans that the invisible hand of the free market “forged paths to happiness, whereas big government led to tyranny, Fascism, and even Nazism.” As one previously anti-Koch liberal political scientist put it to his eventual Koch organization donors (and rationalized it to himself?), “Who can be against well-being?” A speaker at a recent summit at the Koch’s “Inaugural Well-Being Forum” was a bit more expansive. Speaking next to a sign that blared “H-A-P-P-I-N-E-S-S,” he argued, “The earned-success system that brings you happiness is the system of free enterprise that lifts people out of poverty.” There should have been another sign reading: “Not *The Onion*.”

The point here, of course, is that Western Buddhist teachers, wittingly or not, have positioned their practices and doctrines to be used as strategic elements in a corporate-driven social vision that is demonstrably harmful mentally, physically, and financially to many people, and environmentally to us all. It is a vision that addresses the unhappiness of workers in a way that keeps intact the very business models, corporate structures, and economic systems that create the class divisions, income inequality, and opportunity imbalance that, in large part, drive that unhappiness to begin with. Western Buddhism, however, also replicates the schizoid character of this business logic. It does so by offering a cure *along with* the disease. Slavoj Žižek has argued, for instance, that the problem with Western Buddhism and its meditation practices is not that it is some kind of bogus capitalist con. The problem is not, in other words, that it does not really work. The problem is that it *does* work, and indeed that it works in the precise manner that it claims. In presenting us with a “remedy against the stressful tension of capitalist dynamics,” and “allowing us to uncouple and retain inner peace and *Gelassenheit*” (letting be, composure), Žižek argues, Western Buddhism “actually functions as its perfect ideological supplement.”<sup>38</sup> Matthieu Ricard’s meditation instructions at Davos—just learn to gaze at your passing thoughts “like a shepherd sitting above a meadow watching his sheep go by”—encapsulates Žižek’s larger point that Western Buddhist doctrines, coupled with practices such as mindfulness and meditation, truly do enable the practitioner to:

“let oneself go,” drift along, while retaining an inner distance and indifference toward the mad dance of accelerated process, a distance based on the insight that all this social and technological upheaval is ultimately just a non-substantial proliferation of semblances that do not really concern the innermost kernel of our being.<sup>39</sup>

In an idiom even more conventionally Buddhist than Ricard's, Žižek's comment might sound like this: "All dualities come from ignorant inference/ They are like dreams, phantoms, hallucinations—it is foolish to try to grasp them."<sup>40</sup> We might ask, of course, why we should desire to live thus distanced from the very stuff that makes up our lives, as in a kind of spiritualized state of pathological dissociation. In any case, ameliorating this hallucinated condition and offering strategies for soothing the tensions of daily life is one of the current big-ticket promises that keep the Western Buddhist factory humming. And as Žižek says, who can dispute the fact that it fulfills this promise?

Implicit in this promise, however, is another, more insidious one. When Žižek argues that Western Buddhism is the "perfect ideological supplement" to rabid consumerist capitalism, he is implicitly suggesting that learning to "let go" is not the result of a mere practice or technique. It is the imperative of an ideology, and thus the result of becoming a particular kind of subject (more about this point in the following section). Žižek links Western Buddhism's strategy of unbinding to its ideological complicity in the very capitalist dynamics from which it seeks to unbind. It does so by serving as a fetish, as an object that effectively holds some "unbearable truth" at bay. For Žižek, the term "Western Buddhist" names a subject who preserves that fetish in his or her effort to remain blissfully "unaware that the 'truth' of his existence is in fact the social involvement which he tends to dismiss as a mere game." Again, this stance is not intended to deny the effectiveness of Western Buddhist tactics for survival in a trying world. On the contrary, as Žižek puts it, "The 'Western Buddhist' meditative stance is arguably the most efficient way for us to fully participate in capitalist dynamics while retaining the appearance of mental sanity."<sup>41</sup> Davos people, the Koch brothers, Matthieu Ricard, and an ever-growing host of Western Buddhist teachers and practitioners would no doubt agree.

A critique of Western Buddhism that followed the path of wellbeing would discover sprawling vistas of corporate collusion along the way. Such a critique, for instance, would reveal the often symbiotic historical relationship between Western Buddhism and big pharma's medicalization of sadness, positive psychology's hyper-affirmationism, and even the military's embrace of emotion (and trigger finger) steadying mindfulness practices. But, again, as interesting and valuable as it is, such a critique does not get to the heart of the matter.<sup>42</sup>

## Neoliberal subjects are us, wise, and well

The final dimension of Wisdom that I would like to explore in this chapter is that of subjectivity. Like the previous two sections, this exploration also represents a potentially rich path of critique not taken in this book, and helps clear the way for the more considerable critique that I wish to offer.

Whatever else they may be, the raw materials with which contemporary Western Buddhist figures work are ancient teachings that were forged in conscious retreat from commerce and otherworldly toil. So, why would these figures frame those teachings in a manner that is so attractive to corporate and financial moguls such as the “Davos people”? I might be forgiven for suspecting that some of these teachers are simply savvy opportunists who spy an opening in the marketplace of spiritualized wellbeing, and just go for it. It takes a rare person indeed to resist the lucrative lure of the American military–industrial complex or the God-like reach of Google.<sup>43</sup> I would wager, however, that most Western Buddhist teachers by far are unaware that they are engaged in doctrinal alteration, much less alteration influenced by the capitalist shell game. I take as evidence the casual ease with which they transmute their ancient ascetic materials into instructions for full-on engagement in the modern age. We can look further at an example already touched on. The foundational Buddhist concept of “dependent origination” (*pratītyasamutpāda*) signified the claustrophobic, imprisoning, freedom-crushing mechanism of phenomenal interconnectivity. Such interconnectedness was considered to be “a binding chain, a web of entanglement.” Somehow, our Western Buddhist teachers have transmuted this dark feature of reality into a bright, wide open “world-affirming wonder,” a joyous “celebration of this interwoven world, of intimacy and oneness with the great, interconnected living fabric of life.”<sup>44</sup> I can find little evidence that contemporary Western Buddhist teachers are even dimly aware of their performing such convoluted feats of conceptual gymnastics. They seem to assume reflexively the self-evident naturalness of their contemporary understanding. This example of dependent origination is but one small instance of the wholesale repurposing of Buddhism for contemporary usage. It is, of course, a repurposing that points to the workings of an ideology, rather than to the faithful transmission of “the dharma” for our age, as is typically claimed. It is crucial to keep in mind that my concern here or anywhere else in this book is not to rectify the errors of the present in relation to the Buddhism’s pristine past. The interesting question for this critique is not “what was the original meaning,” but rather, “why now this contemporary meaning?” Why, for example, would a contemporary

teacher desire to create a “secular re-formation” of traditional Buddhism? What lies behind such a desire? A clue might be found in that particular teacher’s proposition “that instead of thinking of awakening in terms of ‘truths’ to be understood one thinks of it in terms of ‘tasks’ to be accomplished.” It does not take a Max Weber to suspect that the invisible spirit of the capitalist taskmaster might be lurking behind this shift from “the belief-based metaphysics of classical Indian soteriology (Buddhism 1.0) to a *praxis-based*, post-metaphysical vision of the dharma (Buddhism 2.0).”<sup>45</sup> It is a shift that, in its apparent naturalness, normalizes the arguably buddhistically counterproductive motto of Google’s SIY leadership program: “We Put Mindfulness to Work.”<sup>46</sup> Why are we seeing, in Western Buddhism, this shift from a metaphor of healing to a metaphor of labor?

One way to get at an answer to that question is to ask: what kind of subjectivity are we dealing with when we deal with contemporary Western Buddhists? That is, what conditions have given shape to the people who in turn give shape to Western Buddhism? It should be obvious that the conditions are not, and could not be, creations of fifth century B.C.E. India. That fact should be obvious, but it is often obscured by the pervasive rhetoric of Buddhist figures as transmitters of “the eternal and timeless dharma.”<sup>47</sup> In any case, giving thought to that matter goes a long way toward explaining why Western Buddhist figures fashion ancient and medieval Buddhist teachings in the particular manner that they do.

“Subjectivity,” of course, refers to the fact that human beings are formed “before the law,” as in Franz Kafka’s parable of that title. To shed light on subjectivity, we have to understand the term “before” in a spatial sense here. If we take it in a temporal sense, then we will have the opposite meaning of “selfhood.” The distinction is worth exploring not only for my immediate purpose of saying what I mean by “subjectivity,” but also because it points to a central theme in Western Buddhism, namely, that of *anātman*, or non-selfhood. My contention, however, is that while *anātman* points firmly in one direction (toward subjectivity) Western Buddhist teachers repurpose it to point in the opposite direction (toward selfhood).<sup>48</sup>

In Kafka’s story, a man from the country has made his way to a gatekeeper who stands guard at the entrance to “the law.” The man asks to be granted entry “into the law.” The gatekeeper informs him that that is indeed a possibility, “but not now.” The fact is, the gate to the law is already open; it is *always* open, so the man tries to look past the gatekeeper directly into the law itself. The gatekeeper is amused at this effort, and invites the man to continue trying. “But take note,” he warns, “I am powerful. And I am only the most lowly of all of the gatekeepers.” Even if the man gets past him, the gatekeeper further says, he

will encounter increasingly powerful gatekeepers from hall to hall. The narrator informs us that “the man from the country did not expect such difficulties; after all, the law should be accessible to everyone at all times, he thinks.” Realizing the impossibility of forcing entry into the law, the man eventually takes the seat offered by the gatekeeper. For years and years he waits for permission to enter. Permission never comes. The man grows old. Just before he dies, waiting, still, before the law, the gatekeeper closes the gate.<sup>49</sup>

The man from the country is an effect of outward conditions, in this case, of the law and of the law’s guardian. He willfully accepts the call of the law, and, in responding as he does, establishes his identity as a subject of the law. Kafka’s parable implicitly abjures any function of a “self,” of, that is, an entity that comes *before* the law in the temporal sense. The man from the country is not a prefigured agent causing his circumstances; he is not the driving force behind the mysterious causal matrix that has led him to stand now before the law. He is, rather, the *lived effect* of that matrix. He is driven by his voluntary, though largely unconscious, responsiveness to the norms, values, and demands of his social situation. He is recruited as a subject by the call of those demands. And he is established as a subject—subjugated—in his response to those demands. This is, of course, precisely the lesson of Althusser’s classic example of subjugation, which also speaks of a man before the law. Althusser’s parable unfolds in the street. What takes place is an explicit “interpellation” by “the most commonplace everyday policeman (or other) hailing, ‘Hey, you there!’” The individual reflexively turns around and, “by this mere one-hundred-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject.”<sup>50</sup>

A crucial feature of these two parables is that the protagonists, that is to say *we*, self-interpellate before the law. We go about our business day to day as seemingly free and unique individuals. We do so until we find ourselves face to face with the law—with the codes, mores, unspoken rules and explicit laws of our society. It is then, in our seemingly natural, unrehearsed, response to those codes that we recognize ourselves (and are recognized by others) as subjects of a particular social formation. In its concept of *anātman*, Western Buddhism offers us material for a similar analysis of the human subject. That concept, too, rejects the necessity of an integral agent to account for actions in the world. It, too, suggests that the person is formed by external material forces to be the kind of person that he or she is, to be, that is to say, a particular subject. The primary force of subject formation is, of course, ideology. This is what Althusser means when he claims that “ideology has a material existence” because it “always exists in an apparatus, and its [the apparatus’s] practice,

or practices.”<sup>51</sup> The question in this section is: what might that apparatus and practice be for us today? It is a relevant question to this critique since the answer sheds light on certain features of Western Buddhism—such as I have been discussing in this chapter and in the introduction—that would be otherwise inexplicable.

As we saw above, Žižek characterizes the Western Buddhist as a person who is “unaware that the ‘truth’ of his existence is in fact the social involvement which he tends to dismiss as a mere game.” Practitioners see their engagement in the social sphere as a “mere game,” recall, because Western Buddhist teachers have constructed a subject who, through mindfulness or meditation, eventually wins the insight that reality, whether conceived as resplendent display or as catastrophe, is “ultimately just a non-substantial proliferation of semblances that do not really concern the innermost kernel of our being.” It is this insight that enables the practitioner “to fully participate in capitalist dynamics while retaining the appearance of mental sanity.” This manner of participation and this façade, however, come with a consequential price, namely, a repressed or deluded disavowal that in truth the practitioner is fully and inextricably embedded in, formed by, and perpetuated by the very social dynamics for which Western Buddhism aims to serve as a revolutionary antidote. Žižek is claiming, in other words, that there is no circumvention of social coding. Like Kafka’s man from the country, we are compelled by the law to stand before the law, waiting in vain for the final liberating insight *into* the law. We discover instead that there is and never was an outside to the law. To stand thus before the law is to stand already within the law’s domain of authority. Lacking a genuine way around this predicament, or, in Buddhist parlance, lacking a refuge, there are only strategies of social engagement. As Freud already taught us, repression and disavowal are two common strategies of such engagement. As the Buddha taught us, delusion is another common one. Žižek sees the Western Buddhist as someone who is in possession of one super-strategy combining all of these forms: meditation. Meditation provides a *virtual* digression around the predicament of being embroiled in our hyper-accelerated techno-corporatist world against one’s ideals and desires. Importantly, Žižek generously allows that the Western Buddhist strategy “definitely works better than the desperate escape into old traditions.” But, “works” has a Pyrrhic quality here.

Although “Western Buddhism” presents itself as the remedy against the stressful tension of capitalist dynamics, allowing us to uncouple and retain inner peace and *Gelassenheit*, it actually functions as its perfect ideological supplement ... Instead of trying to cope with the accelerating rhythm of technological progress



and social changes, one should rather renounce the very endeavor to retain control over what goes on, rejecting it as the expression of the modern logic of domination.<sup>52</sup>

Or, in the words of a contemporary Western Buddhist teacher, “When we reach out to what is unknown to us, we let go of the notion that we can control what we experience.”<sup>53</sup>

Why does Žižek consider this meditative strategy of relinquishing control to “unknown” external forces while pursuing an inner remedy of “*Gelassenheit*” to be the “perfect ideological supplement” to contemporary capitalism? He considers it so, I think, because it involves a type of reasoning, or, as he says, “logic,” that aligns it precisely and unerringly to the dominant form of subjectivity in our time, that of neoliberalism. This collusion between the ideology of neoliberalism and Western Buddhism is not a mere theoretical conjecture. Perhaps more accurately, it may indeed be but a spirited conjecture for Žižek, but when Matthieu Ricard gives mindfulness instructions to the behemoths of world finance at Davos, it is spirit come to flesh. (The World Economic Forum at Davos, recall, arose out of the same conditions that would eventually usher in full-fledged neoliberalism under Reagan and Thatcher.) Born from this union is a quite particular type of neoliberal subject. It is a subject who is able to function, and function well, within the dream-like frenzy of modernity. How? In one popular version, he does so by perpetually self-calming before voluntarily releasing himself back into the frenzy, and by ostensibly remaining in this nonreactive condition throughout the day. There are numerous other Western Buddhist strategies. They all involve either a psychological (radical acceptance, letting go, non-judgmentalism) or affective (loving kindness, compassion, deep empathy) adjustment *on the side of the subject*. We should not be surprised that it is a subject whose actualization warms the hearts of the Davos people. For, their Big Question for the twenty-first century is, after all, “what if contemplative practices can be made beneficial both to people’s careers and to business bottom lines?”<sup>54</sup> And for that reason alone, you would think that the more politically astute among Western Buddhist figures would want to further investigate the consequences of this collusion.

“Neoliberalism,” of course, is typically understood as designating a theory and practice of political economy. It is a strange, often confusing, term in that, as Noam Chomsky famously observed, it names something that is neither new nor liberal. Neoliberalism has its roots, of course, in classical nineteenth-century liberalism. Economist Adam Smith set the stage for it already in 1776 when he

argued that trade markets are governed by an “invisible hand” that knows better than any actual, socially situated human agent what is good for the whole.

Every individual . . . is led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.<sup>55</sup>

Similar to the Western Buddhist teacher I cited above, Smith dismisses our conceit that we are capable of controlling experiences or outcomes in the face of such an unknowable force: “I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the publick good.” In both cases, it is thus advisable to leave that force largely free of interference. For the Western Buddhist in Žižek’s example, this is accomplished through “letting go.” Our Western Buddhist teacher is more explicit: “We leave behind the conceptual mind and the mind of emotional reactions. And we may end up exactly where we wanted to be: face-to-face with what is beyond ordinary understanding.”<sup>56</sup> For Smith, too, the trader’s conscious intention is impotent in the face of the invisible hand. If he would but stop thinking (as a trader with self-interest, with the conceit of intentionality, etc.) and just let the market forces be, he will come face-to-face with that which is beyond his ordinary understanding: the invisible hand’s mysterious movement toward wholly unintended social good.

The spirit of this *laissez faire* dogma will eventually be revived by the predecessors of today’s Davos people. In the intervening years, liberalism developed into several distinct traditions. The tradition that most readers are familiar with is the social liberal variety. Social liberalism shares with neoliberalism an appreciation for a market economy. It differs, however, in denying the invisible hand premise. Where neoliberalism is focused on the growth and expansion of markets, social liberalism is attuned to the conditions that impede personal liberty. It holds, moreover, that these conditions are exacerbated or even caused by an excess of unchecked market capitalism. Such conditions include many of the issues that we hear from those groups that we generally associate with the term “liberal” today, such as poverty and low wages, lack of access to quality education and health care, institutionalized racism and discrimination, and various forms of inequality. The social liberal solution to such ills is precisely the opposite of the neoliberal dream of unregulated market capitalism; it is, namely, state intervention. Most readers, for instance, will associate the many social service and public funding programs of contemporary Europe and North America with liberalism.

Significantly, however, social service remedies and the like are now considered the province of progressives and leftists. One long-term consequence of the economic stagnation of the 1970s was an inexorable shift toward so-called pragmatism of the once genuinely liberal Democratic party in the United States. Under Tony Blair, even the British Labour party officially reneged on its commitment to “common ownership of the means of production.”<sup>57</sup> It may be true that “neoliberalism has been discredited as the global economy built on its principles has been shaken to its core” by the financial meltdown of 2007.<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless, neoliberal “reasoning” has exerted a ubiquitous totalizing effect on the lives of everyone reading this book, not exempting, of course, those who fashion and consume Western Buddhism today. And with this I come to my main point. In a crucial sense that is rarely if ever addressed, Western Buddhists stand before the law of neoliberal subjectivity believing it to be the law of “the dharma”—of timeless Buddhist teachings. Or, stated slightly differently, they stand before a dharmic law that has been mercilessly contorted by its neoliberal master, operating from the shadows. I want to stress yet again that it has never *not* been the case that Buddhism is refracted through the ideological prisms of its time and place. My point is that, for us today, the refracting master prism is neoliberalism.

Several recent studies even make an explicit connection between neoliberal governmentality and contemporary self-development discourse.<sup>59</sup> Western Buddhism is, of course, just such a discourse. These works are particularly relevant for our purposes in this section because they extend the scope of the neoliberal matrix beyond that of politics and economics to include human subject formation. Since these works typically draw from Michel Foucault’s foundational lectures at the Collège de France in the 1970s and early 1980s, it is useful to quote him at length at the outset.<sup>60</sup> In short, Foucault argues that the very notion of governmentality, of controlling people, presupposes an all-encompassing homology between “techniques of domination”—for instance, the apparatus of state and the economic market—and “techniques of the self,” including subjectivity.<sup>61</sup> To be an effective medium of control, there must be a single rationale or logic determining the convergence of these techniques. This form of reasoning, moreover, must be embodied by the subjects being controlled such that the forms of domination are *voluntarily* enacted in their lives (hence, Foucault’s terms “biopolitics” and “biopower”).

I think that if one wants to analyze the genealogy of the subject in Western civilization, he has to take into account not only techniques of domination

but also techniques of the self. Let's say: he has to take into account the interaction between those two types of techniques—techniques of domination and techniques of the self. He has to take into account the points where the technologies of domination of individuals over one another have recourse to processes by which the individual acts upon himself. And conversely, he has to take into account the points where the techniques of the self are integrated into structures of coercion and domination. The contact point, where the individuals are driven by others is tied to the way they conduct themselves, is what we can call, I think, government. Governing people, in the broad meaning of the word, governing people is not a way to force people to do what the governor wants; it is always a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts between techniques which assure coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by himself.<sup>62</sup>

Neoliberalism's ability to function as a global enterprise cannot be separated from the manner in which we conceive of ourselves today. What do we believe our capacities as human agents to be? Do we feel capable of effectively influencing the political sphere? Do we even feel capable of carrying out meaningful dialogues for change in the more immediate public sphere? A common lament on the left today is that Margaret Thatcher's TINA—"there is no alternative"—has decisively won the day.<sup>63</sup> Not only does there appear to be no alternative to a market economy, there also appears to be no alternative to conceiving of ourselves as a "resilient, humble, and disempowered being that lives a life of permanent ignorance and insecurity" as a result of that Golem-like economy:

The account of the world envisioned and constituted by neoliberalism is one that presupposes the unknowability of the world, and likewise one that interpellates a subject that is permanently called upon to live in accordance with this unknowability.<sup>64</sup>

What about Western Buddhism? Does it enable its practitioners somehow to counter this subjectivity? It would be too easy to collect Western Buddhist material that, in fact, not only countenances this useless, powerless, and ignorant neoliberal subject, but even recommends these qualities. Take these recent "Daily Dharma" entries from *Tricycle*, a popular Western Buddhist magazine:

The Zen I know ... blissfully blows away dangerous moments of intelligence and understanding. (Thomas Moore)

I had thought the point was to pursue happiness and flee misery ... But now I saw a new way of looking at things. What if the point was to start by accepting suffering? (Henry Shukman)

In the very act of sitting, we actualize the completeness of the act itself and we actualize our own full completeness as a useless human being, another name for which is Buddha. (Barry Magid)<sup>65</sup>

Contemporary Western Buddhist discourse is, of course, bound to a tradition that, sensing the futility of trying to control or find security in an inflamed world, opted for a quasi-ascetic retreat from that world. For some Buddhists, that retreat was, and is, literal. For many, however, it also was, and is, figurative or virtual, involving precisely the mental retreat that Žižek describes. Perhaps the popularity of Buddhism in the West from the 1960s onward can be ascribed in part to the shared sense of deluge that our world has with the various worlds that gave shape to classical and later Buddhism. Now, as then, the solution that Buddhism offers us drowning creatures is a retreat into the mind's refuge. The ancient version went something like: It is not possible/To control all external events/But, if I simply control my mind/What need is there to control other things? Modern versions are inevitably along the lines of: When we cultivate an equanimous mind, even the most extreme external circumstances do not hold sway.<sup>66</sup> The most crucial of all neoliberal operations is in play here, namely, the emphasis on what Foucault calls "technologies of self." Western Buddhist figures, like their neoliberal masters, agree that change for the better can and must occur. So, we might ask, do they recommend far-reaching reformation of our social institutions? Do they propose direct action against patriarchy, racism, inequality, and predatory capitalism? Rarely. Both Western Buddhism and neoliberalism typically propose that we *change ourselves*. Ultimately, this reasoning goes, the world is simply as it is; that being the case, the crucial issue becomes the manner in which each of us governs himself or herself within that world. Such self-development reasoning thus "instills stronger individualism in society, while constraining collective identity" by invoking personal rather than social culpability, "and thus provides social control and contributes to preserving the status quo of neoliberal societies."<sup>67</sup> Western Buddhist teachers typically express the same idea along the lines of: "This is the key point. You must have your own body and mind. Everything should exist in the right place, in the right way . . . When we have our body and mind in order, everything else will exist in the right place, in the right way."<sup>68</sup> Western Buddhism and neoliberalism agree, furthermore, that the surest means to such "stronger individualism"/ "having our body and mind in order" is a strategy of self-development. Whether self-development is conceived in general terms, such as improving self-esteem, practicing self-care, increasing personal responsibility for life's outcomes, or becoming increasingly resilient and adaptive, or more specifically as a practice

of meditation or mindfulness, the reasoning is the same. This reasoning holds, in brief, that the only domain of effective change available to our influence is “the inner life”; hence, it is there that we must direct our efforts.<sup>69</sup>

[In neoliberal societies] the area of the individual’s transformative activity is essentially reduced to a disciplining of the inner self . . . The psychic inner life of the subject, and the social milieus through which it is seen to be constructed and influenced, become the sphere of transformation in order to develop the faculties of resilience and adaptive efficiency held to be necessary to respond to external environments more securely. In this way, neoliberal frameworks reduce the cognitive and psychic life to a domain of insecurity. In effect, human subjectivity itself, the ideational, cognitive, and practical contexts of its reproduction and the psychic life of the subject especially, become problematized as dangerous.<sup>70</sup>

A critique of Western Buddhism that attempted to trace its complicity with current neoliberal reasoning would find an abundance of corroborating evidence. Standing on its own—as the quoted material in this section hints at—this evidence likely sounds like the universal Wisdom that it is intended to be. Juxtaposed to neoliberal ideology, however, a facet of Wisdom is drawn out that is most surely at odds with the intentions of the dispensers of that Wisdom. Yet, given the influence of neoliberalism on Western Buddhism’s current formation, this result should not be surprising to anyone.

As intriguing as detailed investigations of Western Buddhist Wisdom, wellbeing, and subjectivity may be, I think that these approaches always fall short of constituting a decisive critique. I do find it necessary to mention these features because they comprise a significant area of the current “environment” of Western Buddhism that I evoked in the Introduction. Ultimately, I am asserting that it is its vexed relationship to the “Real” that makes possible the correspondence between Western Buddhism and contemporary self-development discourse or, more broadly, between Buddhism and “Wisdom,” in the minds of present-day observers. So, it is now toward the concept of the Real that I turn.



## Specters of the Real

### The rhetorical unconscious

The most consequential reason for establishing that Western Buddhism contains concepts of the Real is that it permits us to consider Western Buddhism as a viable form of thought. That is to say, doing so eliminates the need to take account of the arguably facile self-help, Wisdom-oriented character that has come to define Western Buddhist ideas and practices under neoliberalism in contemporary popular culture. Simultaneously, it positions Western Buddhism as a contributor to a human concern—namely, the identification of an ultimate determinant of human existence—that has persisted from the very dawn of Western thought in ancient Greece to the present. So positioned, we can fruitfully ask whether Western Buddhism offers us material for giving thought to our contemporary situation. Specifically, we can ask whether Western Buddhism, true to its rhetoric, does indeed offer potent resources for imagining radical reformations of self and society in the contemporary West.<sup>1</sup> Human liberation (*mokṣa*, *nirvāṇa*)—whatever that means—is, after all, Buddhism’s very reason for being. And yet, whatever positive qualities we might want to claim for it, there is a strong case to be made that the noun “Buddhism” indexes a historical failure to unleash the force of demanding thought, much less of emancipatory thought. Currently, “Buddhism,” from its superstitious metaphysical traditionalism to its myopic self-help modernism, names an obstinate *containment* of potentially vital human goods. I am making a generous assessment of potential here, derived as that assessment is from Western Buddhism’s own self-understanding. Considering whether or not the claim has merit beyond New Age platitudes and spiritualized relaxation exercises is a goal of this critique. And for that, I believe, we need an investigation into the Buddhist Real.

There are, however, difficulties with this approach. Not least of all is the fact that there exists no *explicit* concept of “the Real” in Buddhism. And yet, as I argue,



Western Buddhism is obviously haunted by the *threat* of something like a Real lodged in its teachings. It is a specter that, from all evidence, repulses Western Buddhists to the very extent that it animates their creation, Western Buddhism. In order to explore this contention further, we can take Terry Eagleton's gloss as but one, and preliminary at that, working definition of the Real:

The Real is . . . the pure meta-sign or empty element in any semiotic system whose function is to indicate the truth that it cannot be totalised. From one perspective, this cipher is the human subject itself, the void at the heart of the symbolic order. This void is the precondition for the order's effective functioning, but can never fully be represented there.<sup>2</sup>

This definition will have to be supplemented later on. It will be of help here, however, because it captures a basic function of what I argue are Western Buddhist "first names," as Laruelle calls them, for the Real.<sup>3</sup> I mentioned these terms at the beginning of Chapter 1: no-self, suffering and desire, contingency, and so on. These terms could hardly express more directly the importance of the empty element for Western Buddhist thought. Indeed, *śūnyatā*, which literally denotes *zerness* or *nihility*, is a major Buddhist signifier, one that resounds like heavy metal thunder rolling through the peaks and valleys of Buddhist doctrinal history. Yet, true to its function as a pure meta-sign, in Buddhist exegeses *śūnyatā* never means quite what it means. Sometimes it means something obscurely mystical, like *tathāgatagarbha*, the "Buddha embryo" embedded in all sentient beings. Sometimes it means something that is, one would think, self-evident, like *svabhāva*, the lack of an atomistic "own being," of, that is, intrinsic nature or essence of entities. Sometimes it means something painfully obvious, like *pratīyasamutpāda*, the interdependence of phenomena. Sometimes, it is the main attraction of a naïve phenomenology, "a mode of perception" that "adds nothing to and takes nothing away from the raw data of physical and mental events," as one prominent Western Buddhist figure puts it.<sup>4</sup> We could go on and on. The reason that we could go on and on is precisely that we are dealing with a cipher, one that, *qua* cipher, enables the production of numerous "emptiness" postulates while simultaneously preventing the full consequences of *actual* or *generic* emptiness for the system of postulates itself. More will be said about this point in Chapter 3. Here, we can, finally, note that the Western Buddhist "emptiness" signifier extends, as in Eagleton's gloss, to "the human subject itself."

It is said that the world is empty, the world is empty, Lord. In what respect is it said that the world is empty?" The Buddha replied, "Insofar as it is empty of a

self or of anything pertaining to a self. Thus it is said, Ānanda, that the world is empty.<sup>5</sup>

What clearer account of the self as a cipher, as a void at the heart of the world, can we get? As a first name for the Real, as Eagleton reminds us, “emptiness” also points to the potentially devastating conclusion that the “semiotic system” that constitutes Buddhism contains a conceptual black hole. Buddhism presents us with a (w)hole. The totalizing network of meaning that Buddhism claims for itself contains the very element that cancels out that totality. Indeed, not only does that element cancel out totality, it *announces* the cancellation. The Buddha’s pronouncement about the emptiness of the world is intended, of course, as an assertive truth statement. In what sense would it not then also point to a truth about the humanly configured semiotic system called “Buddhism” itself? “Emptiness” is thus simultaneously a Buddhist master signifier and a Buddhist name for the Real. As a master signifier, it gathers into itself numerous other Buddhist signifiers in order to announce an ultimate truth about our human situation. As a name for the Real, it announces the incompleteness of its Buddhist signification, and thereby signals an even more pertinent and penetrating human truth.

What does Western Buddhism do with such an account? When I said above that the concept of emptiness points to a potentially devastating conclusion, I meant that it is devastating to the integrity of the system itself. But I also mean to suggest that it is devastating to the subject of Western Buddhism, to the implied believer inscribed within the system and to the empirical person who subscribes to such an integral system. Responses to this potentiality, of course, extend over the entire span of Western Buddhism, from the secular left, with its roots in humanistic psychology and globalism, to the traditional right, with its roots in canonical scripture and nationalistic affiliations. So it should not be surprising that their responses can be jointly summarized by a figure who was at home in both of these worlds:

Emptiness . . . is not a nihilistic emptiness but rather a fullness of particular things and individual persons functioning in their full capacity and without mutual impediment. In Emptiness everything is realized as it is, in its total dynamic reality. This radical realism involves . . . the overcoming of an active nihilism.<sup>6</sup>

Emptiness, in short, gathers within it other signifiers, such as *nirvāṇa*, that point “beyond nihilism” to unqualified freedom and abundance. The trope of emptiness as fullness is as old as Buddhism itself.<sup>7</sup> But my purpose here is, again, not to debate the wisdom of Buddhist emptiness. It is rather to ask the reader to

give thought to the possibility that what we have here is—whatever else it might be—Buddhist repulsion toward the full articulation of its own self-intimated Real (at least in the sense that Eagleton gives the term above).

The roots of the intimated Real as well as the repulsion toward it run long and deep in Western Buddhism's history. We catch our first glimpse of it at the very moment of Buddhism's scriptural blossoming. In the Pali canon we find numerous references to what are held to be two "extreme views," dubbed "eternalism" and "annihilationism."<sup>8</sup> The first view holds that entities persist interminably. The second view holds that entities eventually break up and dissolve. Western Buddhists will eventually apply these analytical terms to all entities, from subatomic particles to the universe itself. In the early texts, though, the subject under investigation is typically "the self" or "a being." We are told to avoid the view that the person or an essential aspect of the person (soul, consciousness, integral self, subtle body, etc.) persists in some form after death. But we are also told to avoid the opposite view, namely, that the person is completely nullified at death. Famously, the Buddha refuses to answer pointed questions concerning the actual postmortem status of beings, particularly of someone like himself, a *tathāgata*, one who has arrived at thusness/the Real. He does so, we are told, because he finds such questions irrelevant to his goal of enabling dispassion, cessation, calming, and *nirvāṇa*. Presumably, the problem is that both positions presuppose the existence of a self-contained entity; and this is a premise that the Buddha is determined to disallow at all costs. What he wished to posit in the place of such an integral being was, of course, a kind of "non-self" (*anātman*), a perpetually changing psycho-physical or mental-material *process*, a process, crucially, devoid of any inhering determinate structure or agent.

The Buddha's self-described "middle way" here, his pointed avoidance of the two extremes of eternalism and annihilationism, obviously raises countless questions, even the simplest of which entangle us in a proverbial "thicket of views." What, to take an easy example, could disembodied postmortem survival of a *process*, or of some minute element of a process, possibly mean in real terms? It is presumably no longer contained in a bodily vessel; so where in space would this process occur? Since it no longer makes sense to speak of faculties such as will, desire, and intention, and since it obtains in a cosmos devoid of God, who or what would direct it? In short, what kind of inventive science-fictional counterintuitive features of cosmic reality must we conjure up for it to appear plausible? And what is this "it" anyway? It could not be a material phenomenon or event since, according to Buddhist teachings, being so would subject it, as a compounded object, to ultimate cessation. Is "it" then immaterial? How can we

conceive of an immaterial no-thing that persists in time and space? Or is “it” an unconditioned something that exists “outside of time and space,” whatever that old trope of the mystics might mean? The linguistic and conceptual gymnastics required for this alleged middle way to be at all coherent seem endless. Maybe that is the point. Maybe in denying eternalism and annihilationism within his ancient Brahmanical context, the Buddha was refusing to play a certain ever-looping linguistic game, as Steven Collins has suggested.<sup>9</sup> In this game, the very formation of the question traps the interlocutor into a suggestive form of answer that is already predetermined by the frame of the question (e.g., “yes or no: do you still beat your dog?”). Yet all games aside, assuming, as tradition would have us do, that something of great significance is at stake in denying both eternalism and annihilationism, it is a fair question: What, in real terms, *is* this “middle,” this third way, between existence and nonexistence? Anyone who tries to get a clear view on the question, much less a satisfactorily coherent answer, will, I would bet, reach the age-old conclusion of the doggedly clear-headed thinker: *obscurum per obscurius*, one obscure matter is being explained by an even more obscure matter. Yes, you will get the common stock of Buddhist ripostes: for instance, those that resemble the “tautological imbecility” of Wisdom, such as “If we are caught in the notion of being we will also be caught in the notion of non-being”<sup>10</sup>; those that refuse to participate in the economy of shared linguistic exchange, such as the Buddhist eschewal of the law of noncontradiction<sup>11</sup>; those that sing in perfect harmony with New Age pseudoscience, such as the ever-proliferating trite, spiritualized applications of quantum physics<sup>12</sup>; and those that are in equal proportion obscurantist and dogmatic, such as the insistence that the ontological status of an extinguished fire—an ancient Buddhist trope for *nirvāṇa*—“is indescribable, even in terms of existence or nonexistence, because words work only for things that have limits.”<sup>13</sup>

One thing is clear: the protagonist of the Pali canon, the literary figure we call the Buddha, is made to show a great deal of anxiety in being accused of annihilationism.<sup>14</sup> He protests too much, I think. For instance: “As I am not, as I do not proclaim, so have I been baselessly, vainly, falsely, and wrongly misrepresented by some ascetics and Brahmins thus: ‘[the Buddha] is one who leads astray; he teaches the annihilation, the destruction, the extermination of an existing being.’”<sup>15</sup> That a wrong has been done the Buddha is hardly as obvious as he makes it out to be. The accusation of these ascetics and Brahmins is really not surprising. After all, with perhaps a few exceptions, such as the ethical force of intentionality in the interplay of action and result (*karma* and *phala*), arguably the only original contribution that the Buddha made to existing

Indian thought was his battery of concepts which, I contend, indicate precisely a Real, whether as the specter of a void at the heart not only of reality or as a foreclosed a priori, as I will discuss later. Apart from the typical “eel-wriggling” of the kinds of responses above, it is difficult to see how the Buddha, armed with such a teaching, could have avoided the charge of annihilationism.<sup>16</sup>

My purpose is certainly not to sort all of this out. If the history of Buddhist exegesis is any indication, it cannot be sorted out. My point is that we are observing here a genetic inheritance of Western Buddhism. To evoke our earlier psychoanalytic metaphor: burrowed within the celebratory life-affirming discourse of contemporary Western Buddhism is the destabilizing presence of “the rhetorical unconscious.”<sup>17</sup> Like Freud’s unconscious, this term can be understood to name an action rather than a place, as the topographical image might suggest. It names an act of repression or disavowal. What gets repressed is some articulation of meaning that, to the disinterested observer, appears as a viable, if not outright obvious, alternative to the officially articulated meaning. It is a sense that “withdraws from immediate promises of transparency or meaning.”<sup>18</sup> An example would be that, along with the traditional Buddhist attributions of emptiness as ultimate plenitude, “emptiness” also must be allowed to mean, or at least be allowed to approach, emptiness per se, actual, generic, emptiness or nullity. Although disavowed, repressed significations nonetheless have real effects. We might, for instance, read in the labyrinthine maneuverings of *Wisdom* an active symptom of this repression. We might begin to see tradition’s anxious denials of anything approaching nihilism, put in the mouth of the calm, confident Buddha, as the same. We might even begin to suspect that the seeming innocence of contemporary Western Buddhism, an innocence that makes all-too-easy bedfellows of facile positive psychology, gullible New Age self-help, and optimistic American-style consumerism, masks a serious intimation of a less celebratory, if more vital, human truth. In this chapter, I hope to at least raise that suspicion. The question remains, though: why would Western Buddhists eschew such a vital element of their tradition? What apparently unthinkable aspect of Western Buddhism is at risk such that this abandonment is deemed justified? The following section addresses this issue.

### The principle of sufficient Buddhism

Western Buddhism presents an extravagant, seemingly endless, inventory of items bearing on human existence. From its kinship to traditional and canonical

Buddhisms it inherits intimate knowledge of the human being. The inventory of this inheritance includes such intricate and consequential matters as the machinic flows of mind, thought, and consciousness; the interior moral physics of mental, corporal, and verbal action; the rhizomatic movement of desire; the dark dissembling of self-delusion; the mirage-like being of the subject; the flammable bundled constituents of subjective experience; the bountiful void at the heart of phenomena; the quantum unspooling of space and time; and the accursed interdependence of all that is. Its modernist benefactors have added to this prodigious inheritance by bequeathing Western Buddhism expertise that encompasses the most prosaic of concerns, like love and relationships, work and career, exercise and health, nutrition and diet, even sleeping and dreaming. A reader of a contemporary book on Buddhism can but wonder: is there any aspect of human existence that confounds Western Buddhism?

This is but a current version of a question that has vexed Buddhists from the earliest days. That question—*is the Buddha omniscient?*—was answered in a variety of ways. At one point the Buddha denies such a possibility outright: there exists no person “who knows all, who sees all, simultaneously; that is not possible.” At another point, in the well-known parable of the leaves, the Buddha is sitting in a forest grove thick with fallen leaves. He picks up a handful, rhetorically asks his gathered disciples which is more, the leaves in his hand or the leaves in the grove, and then draws a parallel: “the things I have directly known but have not taught you are numerous, while the things I have taught you are few.” What he has taught is that which is necessary for the path of liberation, that’s all. Given the magnitude and abundance of what he did teach, in the image of a forest blanketed with remaining leaves, this parable suggests that the Buddha is knowledgeable far beyond ordinary comprehension, if not quite omniscient. Finally, as if tired of the tedious hemming and hawing around the issue, Buddhists composed a text at the end of the early canonical period in which “the Buddha’s omniscience is extremely far ranging and includes knowledge of all conditioned and unconditioned things; knowledge of everything past, present, and future; and knowledge of everything that has been seen, heard, sensed or thought by gods or humans.” Sarah McClintock argues that the notion of “capacity omniscience” eventually gained acceptance in Buddhist circles. Here, the Buddha is capable of knowing whatever he wants to know simply by directing his attention to the matter or object at hand. The Buddha thus becomes “all-knowing” in the same way that a fire may be “all-consuming.”<sup>19</sup> Even stronger versions of the Buddha’s omniscience would be posited in time, such as “nothing exists that the Buddha did not teach.”<sup>20</sup>

This fixation on totality is in Western Buddhism's DNA. No form of Buddhism of which I am aware has ever claimed for itself a mere regional or limited knowledge, such as, say, culinary arts and evolutionary psychology do. Rather, Buddhisms claim for themselves a shared oracle-like apparatus with which to divine any feature of crucial human knowledge. This oracle is known as "the *dharma*." I will come back to this term in more detail later. Here, it suffices to note that Western Buddhism, as inheritor of "the *dharma*," is the guarantor of "capacity omniscience" in the absence of an actually existing all-knowing Buddha. Such capacity eliminates the requirement that all things be known simultaneously—that Western Buddhism represent a fully recorded catalogue of knowledge. The production of critical knowledge requires, rather, only that "the *dharma*" be directed toward the issue at hand. As with their ancient and medieval ancestors, contemporary Western Buddhists posit both a weak and a strong version of this capacity omniscience and its outcome. The weak version is that the knowledge produced has always to do with some aspect of "overcoming suffering." The strong version is that "the *dharma*" is, in the words of two leading lights of contemporary Western Buddhism, a "translation of a universal understanding" and a "universal set of values" applicable to all things under the sun.<sup>21</sup>

We are encountering here the crux of the problem that this critique intends to address. In Chapter 1 I mentioned the premises driving my argument. It may be useful to repeat those here: like other nontrivial forms of thought, Western Buddhism contains materials that posit a concept of "the Real"; but the history of Western Buddhism, like that of Buddhism generally, is one of evading the consequences of its own thought (hence, the drift toward either quasi-magical ritualism or pseudo-scientific medicalism, to coin a term, in both the East and the West); to recover the autonomy of the Real is to recover the organon, the rigorously scientific instrument of thought, that certain Buddhist concepts entail; simultaneously, however, to do so depotentializes Western Buddhism *as* Western Buddhism, *as* that is, an integral and oracular network of postulates, and renders it instead a mere contributor to a democratized—plainly human—variety of thought. This depotentializing of Western Buddhism begins with a challenge to its sufficiency.

The first critical observation we make about Western Buddhism to this end is thus that it is "regulated in accordance with a principle higher than that of Reason."<sup>22</sup> Following François Laruelle's investigation into philosophy's identity, we call this regulatory function *the principle of sufficient Buddhism*. This principle is higher than that of "Reason" not primarily because its scope exceeds the maxim

that all that is or occurs must have an explanation (the principle of sufficient reason), but because it determines the nature, function, and boundaries of what *constitutes* a reason, or even of “reason” per se. If reason, as it is ordinarily understood, had priority over Western Buddhism, then Western Buddhism would be a quite different species of practice than it is; it would be, for instance, more akin to something like a phenomenological science, a psychological theory, or a rigorous (thus nonsufficient) philosophy. As it is, the principle of sufficient Buddhism ensures Western Buddhism’s “absolute autonomy, its essence as *self-positing/donating/naming/deciding/grounding*, etc.”<sup>23</sup> Among other things, this autonomy provides an explanation for Western Buddhism’s insistent trajectory toward Wisdom, even in the face of reasonable objections. For, the principle dictates that Western Buddhism, in every inquiry into or contestation of knowledge, intractably posit *itself*, its own premises, values, recommendations, conclusions, and so on. Such self-positing disqualifies Western Buddhism as the kind of “naturalism” and “empiricism” that its Buddhism-as-Science proponents so ardently claim for it.<sup>24</sup> The principle, however, has even more scope and force than this perpetual, circular self-grounding. It establishes, namely, the primacy of Western Buddhism over all *regional* knowledges. That is, Western Buddhism can not only provide superior insight into the subject matter of non-Buddhist disciplines such as psychology or ethics, it commands knowledge of such disciplines overall. Indeed, Laruelle’s claim for the principle of sufficient philosophy is remarkably similar to the Buddhist proposition of capacity omniscience. Laruelle’s principle yields the theorem: “Everything is virtually philosophizable.” He circumscribes this theorem, however, as follows: “Not ‘everything’ is philosophizable, but *if* one or some phenomena present themselves, they necessarily do so through and within philosophy.”<sup>25</sup> Unlike merely regional forms of knowledge, various philosophies are “fundamental forms of knowing,” whose task is “to realize a more or less open encyclopedic form” of knowledge. The principle of sufficient Buddhism conforms to this description. It, too, yields the theorem that “everything is virtually buddhistizable,” to coin an ungainly but apt term. In other words, Buddhist knowledge can be uniformly applied to its field. Buddhism, that is, possesses postulates and concepts that may be applied to virtually any other domain of inquiry, thereby bringing that domain into Buddhism’s own field of vision. Twelve-step addiction recovery, for instance, is fully convertible into Buddhist practices and principles because the Buddha was “a radical psychologist and a spiritual revolutionary” who discovered that the very source of human suffering was “uncontrollable thirst or repetitive craving,” or, in a word, addiction.<sup>26</sup> Never mind the extraordinarily complex



interweaving of factors stemming from physiological, chemical, genetic, interpersonal, and social realities that stump our most highly skilled and well-funded researchers: the ancient teachings of Buddhism provide a sufficient, indeed, superior, account of the matter. Such sufficiency should not surprise us since ultimately, of course, Buddhism's overt "field" is the whole of reality itself; and its covert field is nothing less than the Real. It is this facet of command over regional disciplines that raises the suspicion that Western Buddhism, contrary to more rigorous modes of knowledge, labors under a principle of sufficiency.

I want to make one final point about the principle of sufficient Buddhism before considering the concept of the Real. Laruelle argues that the principle, as it applies to philosophy, "articulates the idealist pretension of philosophy as that which is able to at least co-determine that Real which is most radical." As shrewdly adroit as philosophy is in projecting its idealist articulation of the Real as material or ontological fact, Western Buddhism is even more so. Whereas philosophies proudly proclaim their respective concepts of the Real, thereby opening themselves to interrogation, Western Buddhism's Real is that which dare not speak its name—not, in any case, *as Real*. The investigator must thus patiently knead an extra layer of "pretension." In any case, as I have already indicated, the cost to Western Buddhism of maintaining this pretension of sufficiency is considerable. In Laruelle's words<sup>27</sup>:

The counterpoise for this pretension, the price of this sufficiency, is the impossibility for [Western Buddhism] to constitute a rigorous, non-circular thinking of itself, one which would not beg the question, that is to say, a theory. [Western Buddhism] is self-reflection, self-consciousness; it thinks, or in the best of cases, feels that it thinks when it thinks; this is its *cogito*. [Western Buddhism] never goes beyond a widened *cogito*, an immanence limited to self-reflection or to self-affection. It is a practice of thought, or a feeling and an affect. [Western Buddhism] thereby manifests through this nothing more than its own *existence* and does not demonstrate that it is the Real to which it lays claim, nor that it knows itself as this *pretension*. Implicit in its existence is a transcendental hallucination of the Real, and in [buddhistic] 'self-knowledge', a transcendental illusion.<sup>28</sup>

A rigorous account of its Real *might* permit a conversion of Western Buddhist materials from those of an unacknowledged productive ideology of human existence into a *theory* of such production. This conversion will depend on whether or not that account can be uncoupled from the principle of sufficient Buddhism. As it is, Western Buddhism remains firmly regulated according to

this principle and is therefore unable to “think” beyond its own self-reflection. Laruelle’s claim that the principle ensures that we are dealing with “hallucinated” and “illusory” forms of knowledge will no doubt strike many readers as strange and excessive. We will revisit such claims throughout this text. Now, we turn to a discussion of that to which Western Buddhism only dimly, if at all, “lays claim”: the Real.



## First Names of the Buddhist Real

In this chapter, I present more specific examples of what I take to be a practice and style that is not only characteristic of Western Buddhism but is both definitive and constitutive of its very identity. A word of warning: I say “Western Buddhism,” but that term is, of course, a synecdoche for the many people, past and present, Asian, European, and North American, who inflect Buddhist teachings in the distinctive accent that we call “Western.” Occasionally reminding ourselves of the fact that we are dealing with the ideas of *people* will be of help in several regards. It enables us to see through the veneer of inevitability that overlays presentations of Western Buddhist teachings. After all, what hope for innovation is there for a teaching that is irreversibly “universal, eternal, and unchanging”?<sup>1</sup> Being but the voicings of mere mortals, the signification of Western Buddhist concepts and practices is *not* inevitable; it can be, or can actively be made to be, something quite different from what it currently is. This fact throws wide open the door of possibility. It also explains, however, why a certain chaos of contestation reigns throughout the world of Buddhism. It reigns because, contrary to the claims of any given Buddhist community, the door has *always* been wide open. That is why we have “the bubbling and apparently amorphous dynamism of [Buddhist] proliferation.”<sup>2</sup> I will say more about this proliferation later, when I discuss what I call “x-buddhism.” The point here is that the prolific nature of Buddhism renders any given instance of Buddhism suspect to all those who hold dear some other instance. I am reiterating the point I made in the Introduction about the common Western Buddhist strategy for deflecting criticism, namely, the appeal to exception. Perhaps that claim, made fresh to the reader’s mind, will serve as an antidote to the reflexive dismissal endemic to Western Buddhist engagement with criticism. Having said that, I provide examples from what I take to be a representative selection of contemporary Western Buddhist sources bearing on the Real.

## First names

Among the concepts that Western Buddhist figures routinely invoke as essential to the Buddha's teachings, I consider the following to be indicative of the Real: no-self (*anātman*); suffering-desire (*dukkha-taṇhā*); emptiness (*śūnyatā*); dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). The English terms, translated from the Pali or Sanskrit in parentheses, are commonplace renderings in Western Buddhist writing. I will eventually offer different translations. These terms constitute what François Laruelle calls first terms or first names. In brief, Laruelle defines these as:

Fundamental terms which symbolize the Real and its modes according to its radical immanence or its identity. They are deprived of their philosophical sense and become, via axiomatized abstraction, the terms—axioms and theorems—of non-philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

This difficult statement contains not only a definition of “first name,” but essential elements of my critique as a whole. So, before proceeding, let me unpack it a bit.

I doubt that many Western Buddhists would contest the claim that emptiness (*śūnyatā*), in whatever version they may understand it, “remains at the heart of the Buddhist system.” As a teacher who bridges traditional Buddhism and Western Buddhism tells us, emptiness is not only “the most important subject of philosophical study for its soteriological, doctrinal, ontological and hermeneutic significance, but is also the pivotal topic of meditation.”<sup>4</sup> What makes emptiness so important is that it is held to index (that is, to name or to point to) a feature of reality so fundamental to human existence, so determinate of human experience, that ignorance of it constitutes a debilitating delusion, one that causes us to violate our most essential interest. Because it eludes capture by speculative thought (philosophical, buddhistic, etc.) *yet* inexorably affects thought, we can—in a different register from Eagleton's definition above—call this feature “the Real,” and describe it as being “radically immanent” *to* that experience. It is this brute, unadorned approximation of the term “emptiness” to the instance or principle that it indexes that marks it as a “first name” of the Real. The crucial question for us is whether the Western Buddhist first term remains content to serve as such a symbol of the Real, or whether it instead attempts *to determine* the constitution of the Real. To enable “emptiness” to function in the latter sense is to overwrite the radically immanent import of the first term *emptiness* with the buddhistically, or, in Laruelle's case, philosophically, self-referential representation of the Real that also goes by the name *emptiness* (or, in philosophy, *truth*, *difference*, *Being*, etc.).

It is in the latter case that Laruelle believes we are dealing with “hallucinated” and “illusory” forms of knowledge. He goes further. He terms such knowledge “violent.” The violence done to the human is precisely the usurpation of his or her interest in the name of a speculative, visionary form of knowledge that poses as a science of the Real. A discussion about what might constitute our “interest” as human beings will be taken up later. As usual, it is easier to say what it is not. So, by way of introduction, we can cite Katerina Kolozova writing about Marx’s notion of workers’ interest: It “is not an idea in the sense of ‘*causa finalis*.’ It is not a purpose. It does not have a ‘meaning’ *per se*. It does not require ‘wisdom,’ ‘superior knowledge,’ or education to know what one’s interest is.”<sup>5</sup> We can add, with Laruelle, that determining our interest does not require philosophical or buddhistic systems of thought. Finally, it is when such systems endeavor to reclaim the Real, via precisely their penchant for wise meaning-making, that “axiomatized abstraction”—a practice that eliminates the “intuitiveness and naïveté” of sufficiency—becomes necessary.<sup>6</sup> Since I am employing his method, this and many other Laruellean terms become increasingly clear as we proceed.<sup>7</sup> Parallel to Laruelle’s “non-philosophy,” in the case of Western Buddhism, such a practice may, when all is said and done, entail a “non-buddhism.”

### Self-void (*anātman*)

I stated in Chapter 1 that while *anātman* can be shown to point in one direction, toward what we might think of as socially constructed selfhood, or subjectivity, Western Buddhist teachers ultimately point it in the opposite direction, toward what, in the history of ideas, is considered essentialized selfhood (*ātman*). Which direction it takes has real-life consequences for thought and action. The latter leads to an idealism in which what ultimately matters is the recuperation and preservation of our “innermost kernel of being.”<sup>8</sup> The former leads to a materialism in which the idealist’s “non-substantial proliferation of semblances”<sup>9</sup> are, on the contrary, recognized as the paramount sphere of activity operating on the self-void (*anātman*). Given that Western Buddhism prides itself on nothing so much as its anti-essentialism, my claim must sound outright wrongheaded to many readers. It is true that Western Buddhist figures argue something like the former. They speak of *anātman* as indicating, for instance, a “lack of inherent existence,” or an “unfindability.” They further argue that this lack nonetheless has force as a “moral agent.”<sup>10</sup> In speaking like this, these figures are indeed invoking *anātman* as a first name of the Real. That is, they are suggesting that

what we think of as an integral person is, to recall Terry Eagleton's words, merely a "cipher," a "void at the heart of the symbolic order."<sup>11</sup> It is, furthermore, a cipher whose existence *must* be postulated if we are to account for what actually occurs in reality, such as a continuity of subjective experience and the apparent force of personal agency. (Perhaps we can think of dark matter as a rough parallel: it itself is invisible to the entire electromagnetic spectrum but can be inferred from its effects on the visible matter surrounding it.) As such, Western Buddhist figures do indeed present *anātman* as what Lacan calls an impossible Real.

The Real is the impossible. Not in the name of a simple obstacle we hit our heads up against, but in the name of the logical obstacle of what, in the symbolic, declares itself to be impossible. This is where the Real emerges from.<sup>12</sup>

There is, of course, a venerable tradition of Buddhist figures invoking the impossibility of capturing this void within their own symbolic system. Being, precisely, a lack, this "non-self" can never be adequately signified. In ancient texts and contemporary Zen clichés alike, this first name is never intended as more than a "convenient designation," a "mere name," or a "finger pointing to the moon."<sup>13</sup>

It is, however, equally true that these same Western Buddhist figures eventually disable the consequences of this first name by reinstating, in some form or another, the essentialized selfhood that the first name was created to counter. Self-described "professor, writer, and Zen teacher" David Loy, for instance, is clear about the cipher-like quality of selfhood when he writes, "Fundamentally, Buddhism is about awakening, which means realizing something about the constructedness of the sense of self and the nothing at its core." He also alludes to the uncanny operations of this Real-void and, in so many words, suggests the impossibility of its symbolic articulation.

*Deconstructing the sense of self involves directly experiencing its emptiness. Usually that void at our core is so uncomfortable that we try to evade it, by identifying with something else that might give us stability and security. Another way to say it is that we keep trying to fill up that hole, yet it's a bottomless pit. Nothing that we can ever grasp or achieve can end our sense of lack.*<sup>14</sup>

As the subtitle of Loy's book suggests, *Notes for a Buddhist Revolution*, the realization of constructedness amounts to a "social awakening,"<sup>15</sup> since, one would think, it places the awakened one nakedly "before the law," before the reality of the forces that *do* give shape to, *do* construct, our "sense of self." Such forces are, of course, always social. Loy articulates these social forces

throughout his book *Money, Sex, War, Karma*. On virtually every page we come across analytic terminology that would make Marx proud: commodification of attention; institutionalized delusion, greed, and ill-will; corporation-dominated economic system; alienation and separation; critique; deconstruction; ideology; liberation. On virtually every page we are confronted with the massive, seemingly intractable social problems that are giving shape to our current subjectivity: corporate malfeasance; war mania; the rape of the environment; deification of money; the pervasive stranglehold of advertisement; the brain-altering seduction of technology, and so on. Loy notes on several occasions that it is precisely the insubstantiality of form that not only makes change and “reconstruction” possible, but “allows and indeed obliges this adaptability.”<sup>16</sup> As we should expect, then, his analysis points out the ways in which the empty, hence malleable subject is currently being constituted by these considerable social forces (we are attention starved, we are seduced by wealth and fame, we love war, and so on). The crucial question is *what happens next?* Does Loy work through the implications of our “social awakening” into the constructedness of the self, among other things, for robust social change? Since the subtitle invokes revolution, we might expect so. Or does Loy instead suggest an eventual retreat into our “innermost kernel of being”? Has he, perhaps, somehow found a true “middle way” between these two poles?

As an “engaged Buddhist,” Loy represents an interesting limit case. Like most varieties of Western Buddhism, engaged Buddhism begins with the teachings on phenomenal and self insubstantiality. However, unlike the numerous Western Buddhist traditions that hastily start reciting some version of the idealist’s world-surrendering *mantra*—“you can’t stop the waves but you can learn to surf”—engaged Buddhism tarries in material reality, in, that is, the decisive point where “Social systems impinge on our lives and relate us to our fellow beings.”<sup>17</sup> Perhaps it is this engaged Buddhist reflex that permits Loy to express doubts, rhetorically if not genuinely, about the ultimate efficacy of Buddhist teachings to formulate solutions to the vexing social issues that his book addresses. At one point, for instance, he responds to his own litany of intractable social conundrums by admitting, “I do not think that Buddhism has the answer to these questions.” At another point he offers this piqued assessment: “If [Buddhist teachings] do not work for understanding and addressing the global crises we face today, so much the worse for those teachings; maybe it’s time to replace them.” In several instances, he even poses some version of the potentially destructive critical question, “what is distinctively Buddhist about socially engaged Buddhism?”<sup>18</sup> So, is this what comes next: a risky, clear-eyed pivot toward the social, even at



the expense of Buddhism itself? Will considerable Western Buddhist resources such as *anātman* be placed in the service of ideological formation or, as Loy's analytic categories might encourage us to believe, in the service of an organon of formation?

In what I would like to call a Western Buddhist parapraxis, Loy, after convincingly explicating "the constructedness of the sense of self and the nothing at its core," informs us out of the blue that "Some Buddhist sutras talk about *paravritti*, a 'turning around.'" Why is this a parapraxis? A parapraxis is, recall, saying one thing but meaning a mother ... or, no, I mean, *another*. More precisely, it is "the product of mutual interference between two different intentions, of which one may be called the disturbed intention and the other the disturbing one."<sup>19</sup> (In the joke above, "another" is the disturbed intention and "mother" is the disturbing one.) Loy's engaged Buddhist analysis, generally as well as specifically of *anātman*, is taking him into dangerous territory. It is a territory that is arguably wholly bereft of the very need for, much less relevance of, the Buddha's Wisdom. One intention of Loy's, indeed of all of engaged Buddhism's, analysis, is to bring Buddhist teachings to bear consequently on real-world problems. Another intention is to uphold, in no uncertain terms, the relevance of these teachings to our current catastrophe. As Loy's book exemplifies, no Buddhist argument, *qua* Buddhist argument, can bear this tension. Haunting Loy's expressions of doubt, real or feigned, is the suspicion that the history of ideas has ample and robust tools enough *without* Buddhism. All such *Buddhist* arguments thus progress only up to a point before "fleeing, taking flight, recoiling, not taking effect, reversing judgement." These are all meanings of the Sanskrit term that Loy employs, namely, *paravritti* (*parāvṛtti*).<sup>20</sup> This is not intended as a display of philological braggadocio. I cite these meanings as evidence that we are dealing with a form of conceptual parapraxis that is definitive of Western Buddhism as an authoritative system of thought. Specifically, Loy invokes *paravritti* to indicate a:

"turning around" that transforms the festering hole at my core into a life-healing flow which springs up spontaneously from I-know-not-where. Instead of being experienced as a sense of lack, the empty core becomes a place where there is now awareness of something other than, something more than, my usual sense of self. I can never grasp that "more than," I can never understand what it is—and I do not need to, because "I" am an expression of it. My role is to become a better manifestation of it, with less interference from the delusion of the ego-self. So, our emptiness has two sides: the negative, problematic aspect is a sense of lack. The other aspect is ... fullness.<sup>21</sup>

We can dub this “turning around” a misturning.<sup>22</sup> The “disturbed intention” is the establishment of Buddhist resources as “transformative, razor-sharp insights into the causes behind worldwide troubles.”<sup>23</sup> The “disturbing intention” is the ultimately debilitating reassertion of the principle of sufficient Buddhism. In turning our conception of self-void back into the mystical effusion from “I-know-not-where,” Loy is “essentially switching emptiness to fullness” as Tom Pepper says regarding a similar move by Thich Nhat Hanh:

He is guarding against the dangerous awareness that our practices, right down to the content of our minds, our perceptions, might be socially constructed. Instead, they become a part of the seamless web of the entire universe, so that we couldn't possibly hope to change them—it would require altering the cosmos!<sup>24</sup>

Loy is turning us from thinking through the consequences of what he himself calls a “social awakening,” back toward the only real contribution that Buddhism ostensibly makes, namely, “the liberation of our collective attention” from the places it has become “trapped.”<sup>25</sup> Whatever that may mean, it has the effect of performing a “reversal of judgement” (*paravritti/parāvṛtti*) concerning the social-revolutionary consequences of self-emptiness. Loy's reversal functions as a parapraxis because it “adds a second sense to the one intended.”<sup>26</sup> He wants to argue that Western Buddhist concepts like *anātman* can influence Western social thought in decisive ways. Yet, he must ultimately admit that:

The basic limitations of all such arguments is that Buddhism is really about awakening and liberating our awareness, rather than prescribing new institutional structures for that awareness . . . [S]olutions to our collective *dukkha* cannot be derived from any ideology.<sup>27</sup>

In Loy's hands, Western Buddhist *anātman*, having faltered on the slippery surface of the social, is now returned to the firm dry ground of that ideology-free socially unconstructed sphere known as “the spiritual.” It turns out that since “the root of the problem is spiritual, the solution must also have a spiritual dimension.” Fortunately, Buddhism is the perfect supplement to this now, suddenly, spiritualized project, for “the Buddhist path involves understanding how our minds work.”<sup>28</sup> Loy has completed his *paravritti*. Having unleashed *anātman* as a terrifying social-revolutionary consequential self-void, he calls it back, pats it on the head, and releases it into the service of a spiritually pure “life-healing flow” inscribed, of course, with the principle of sufficient Buddhism.

In *The New Social Face of Buddhism*, fellow engaged Buddhist Ken Jones is explicit about the reasoning behind such a turn. Following a section titled,

“The Social Construction of the Self,” is one titled, “The Social Fallacy.” Jones invokes the social fallacy to repudiate Marx’s famous contention that “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.”<sup>29</sup> Marx’s intention here is, of course, to turn Hegel’s idealism on its head and assert the primacy of material productive forces in shaping what Hegel, invoking his own *anātman*, famously called “this Night, this empty nothing” that is the human being.<sup>30</sup> Eschewing idealist accounts of human subjectivity, Marx instead offers this materialist explanation:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.<sup>31</sup>

A book that aims to turn Buddhism’s face away from its claustrophobic, quasi-ascetic “personal and private” concerns, in order to stare directly at “modernity’s humanistic project of social emancipation,” will, one would think, find common cause with Marx’s analysis.<sup>32</sup> Yet, Jones does not permit such a sustained encounter. Like Loy, he eventually shores up against the full implication of the fact that once we awaken to “the social construction of self,” we see that it is the social all the way down. Jones writes:

The *social fallacy*, as I call it, is the belief that human well-being is to be achieved primarily or solely through social development. It is deeply ingrained in social theory, and seeks to explain social phenomena (and remedy its ills) exclusively in social terms—particularly economic and political terms . . . It is the belief that most afflictions can sooner or later be fixed “out there.”<sup>33</sup>

Jones’s own parapraxis is on display here. He intends to turn us toward (what he wants us to view as) the indispensable contribution of Buddhism to social transformation, namely, its role in enabling the “inner work of radical personal change [that is] essential for creating [favorable] social conditions.”<sup>34</sup> Jones’s social fallacy premise has, of course, rendered such inner work “essential” because, *pace* Marx, “No social system can by itself create a revolution in human consciousness.” So, how do we pursue this path to ending social injustice and political oppression? How do we make our “mark on samsara”? By, of course, unifying under the banner of an idealized engaged Buddhism, for it is “firmly

based on the core tenets of the Dharma.”<sup>35</sup> Jones’s attempt to turn us from the socially awakened “Dharma” back toward the spiritualized “Dharma” is a misturning. Jones does not turn us toward the ostensibly natural conclusion that his Buddhism is an inevitable feature of today’s pressing “call to action.” He turns us toward the fact that the new social face of Buddhism is identical to the old social face of the very state of affairs that requires changing. In Marx’s language, it is just another attempt to alienate the human through abstraction. In Laruelle’s even stronger language, it is just another attempt to persecute the human-in-human via a subjugating hallucination.

I will say more about this aspect of Western Buddhist teaching later. The point here is that the “turns” performed by Loy and Jones depotentialize the force of no-self (*anātman*) as a first name, as, recall, one of the “Fundamental terms which symbolize the Real and its modes according to its radical immanence or its identity.” In this instance, the Real’s radically immanent identity, as articulated by our two Western Buddhist thinkers themselves, is that of self-void, that of, to paraphrase Loy, the uncomfortable bottomless pit of lack that enables the social constructedness of self.<sup>36</sup> An obvious consequence of this Western Buddhist no-self premise is, to turn Jones’s comment back around, not only that *social* “afflictions can sooner or later be fixed ‘out there,’” but that *the self itself* is equally to be found and operated on “out there.” This consequence is obvious, but it is also apparently unacceptable. Loy and Jones must in the end reassert the principle of sufficient Buddhism. In doing so, they are paying the price that Laruelle warned us about earlier: “the price of this sufficiency is the impossibility for [Western Buddhism] to constitute a rigorous, non-circular thinking of itself, one which would not beg the question, that is to say, a theory.” Let us consider another example.

### Suffering-desire (*dukkha-taṇhā*)

The Buddhist understanding of suffering (*dukkha*; also pain, unpleasantness, distress, unease, etc.) is that it is inextricably bound up with desire (*taṇhā*; also grasping, attachment, craving, thirst, etc.). So, I think it will be of help to consider these two concepts as one: suffering-desire. Where there is suffering, there is desire. Where there is desire, there is suffering. We do not merely desire, we *suffer* desire. We do not merely suffer, we suffer (*from*) *desire*. How might this two-fold Buddhist concept be a first name for the Real? As “dynamic lecturer, progressive scholar [and practitioner], and one of the most prolific writers and

translators of Tibetan Buddhism,” B. Alan Wallace reminds us, suffering is Buddhism’s very point of departure. This point, in fact, represents a significant deviation from theistic traditions, which, he says, “all begin with the declaration of an article of faith based on divine revelation.” Instead, Buddhism embarks from “a pragmatic and empirical analysis of the reality of suffering.”

Rather than presenting a worldview with a metaphysical belief in a supernatural creator, the Buddha encouraged his followers to explore their own experience, with a primary emphasis on something that is a major concern for everyone: the reality of suffering and how we might be free of it.<sup>37</sup>

We have here, then, an authoritative statement about both the Real expressed by *dukkha* and the conditions that would degrade this “truth” to the status of an ideological article of faith. That is, we are told that since pain is verifiably endemic to human experience, no revelation from on high is required. Wallace’s traditional threefold elaboration on types of pain increases our confidence that pain is indeed a pervasive feature of human experience. The first type is the “suffering of suffering,” which is simply the presence of physical or mental pain. Because this type of suffering operates on a spectrum from “subliminal malaise to searing pain,” it is, to some degree, ever-present. The second type is the “suffering of change.” We seek stability and permanence, homeostasis and wholeness, yet all things invariably follow the trajectory of *arising, lingering, dissolving, and disappearance*. Given the relentlessness of flux, this type of pain is also unavoidable. The third type is the “ubiquitous suffering of conditioned existence.” In a sense, this type of pain is the internal corollary to the previous, external, type. Not only is the world undergoing perpetual change, grating against our tendency toward secure attachment, but so are we. Thus, “egoistic identification with our bodies and minds as being truly ‘I’ and ‘mine’ makes us fundamentally vulnerable.”<sup>38</sup> This deluded self-identification is, in fact, the “taproot of all suffering.” The delusion of a reified self creates a “radical separation of subject and object” whereby all objects are experienced as potential sources of either pleasure or displeasure. Thus, from delusion springs the other two “root mental afflictions,” craving and aversion.<sup>39</sup> It should not be difficult to see these three afflictions or “poisons” as the spawn of insatiable *desire*. For, even wanting-not is a form of wanting, and its animus toward the unwanted is inflamed in defense of the desire of deluded “egoistic identification.” And with this, pain’s primary accomplice, desire, makes its inevitable appearance in the Buddhist scheme.

Wallace’s explication, which is standard fare for a Western Buddhist teacher, leaves little room to doubt the inevitable existence of a “painful negativity

immanent in the fold of material being.”<sup>40</sup> Suffering-desire is thus sounding increasingly like an autonomous “lust for life or will to live” secreting its noxious poison from deep within the very “core of existence.”<sup>41</sup> This “intense cluster of reactive feelings” (i.e., delusional self-reification, object attachment, object antipathy), being, as it is, “locked in the body” and forming our “energetic core,” is, moreover, a most worthy candidate for an originary trauma.<sup>42</sup> Let us consider this possibility for a moment. As psychoanalytic theorist Ellie Ragland reminds us, “Trauma does not automatically mean literal abuse or incest, but the confrontation of the body ... with the internal excitations that Freud called drives.”<sup>43</sup> Surely, suffering-desire in the Western Buddhist presentation is nothing if not a “drive” in this basic, classical sense. As Wallace reminds us, the features that constitute the complex of suffering “lie at the root of all other mental imbalances” and “endlessly perpetuate dissatisfaction and misery in all the vicissitudes of life and death.”<sup>44</sup> This is the language of drive as trauma in at least two regards. First, as a “root,” it is that which generates further (imbalanced) mental states, thereby continually reproducing the complex. (Western Buddhism’s notion of *karma*, in fact, can be understood as a theory of personal continuity that is grounded precisely in this repetition compulsion.) Second, as the instigator of endless *dissatisfaction*, it is that which “enacts the *failure*” of the very drive; for the drive, recall, is an impulsion toward *satisfaction*. The complex that Wallace outlines is constituted as “structurally traumatic” precisely because of this failure.<sup>45</sup> The trauma of suffering-desire in this Western Buddhist presentation is thus a first name for the Real. That is, what we have here is “the subject’s point of failure and impasse ... which persists as a kind of horrific hard core within the subject ... a disfiguring medium into which we are plunged at birth ... and from which desire flows unshakably.”<sup>46</sup> Desire also flows eternally ungratified, for, as we saw in the previous section on *anātman*, this core (or root) is grounded in the abyss of delusional “egoistic identification.” Another way of saying the same thing is that the core/root suffering-desire is pure *self-grounding*; it itself, and not some other desired object, is the only possible terminus of its longing. We are, moreover, dealing here with a Real in that all of this remains unconscious to the subject. For, the Western Buddhist subject, recall, is constituted precisely through the primordial *delusion* of self-reification. It is this delusion which generated the suffering-desire effusing “radical separation of subject and object” in the first place.<sup>47</sup> We are dealing here with a Real in one final, crucial, sense: its very unconsciousness or “repression constructs reality around the misrecognition of its own basis in fantasy.”<sup>48</sup> That is, like the unacknowledged void that enables the formation of a socially

constructed selfhood, the repressed Real of suffering-desire is as unremittingly *productive* of our experience as it is delusional.

The Western Buddhist concept of suffering-desire is thus clearly a first name for the Real. Let's review. It constitutes a serious, far-reaching analysis of subjective human formation and experience. It identifies a "register closely allied with our bodily drives" yet simultaneously alienating us from the fulfillment of our deepest yearnings. It reveals a "stain of senseless material contingency" that is as trenchant and efficient as it is symbolically inarticulable.<sup>49</sup> And with this, we have arrived at the inevitable "divided pathway to cultivation and decline"<sup>50</sup>: does Western Buddhism permit this Real to faithfully serve its function through to the end or does it cancel its warrant in the very midst of things? We can pose the question in Wallace's own terms: is suffering pain permitted to hew closely to our "own experience" or does it get co-opted into a "worldview" as a mere article of faith? Suggesting the former in both cases, Wallace gestures toward the same psychoanalytic tradition that I have been referring to here. He cites the "giant of twentieth-century science," Sigmund Freud himself, whose "insights on the nature of consciousness are consonant with the most advanced contemporary neuroscience views."<sup>51</sup> The passage from Freud that Wallace quotes articulates the psychoanalytic view of the Real of suffering-desire:

We are threatened with suffering from three directions: from our own body, which is doomed to decay and dissolution and which cannot even do without pain and anxiety as warning signals; from the external world, which may rage against us with overwhelming and merciless forces of destruction; and finally from our relations to other men. The suffering which comes from this last source is perhaps more painful to us than any other.<sup>52</sup>

The final source, which Freud calls "the social source of suffering," is so painful because it is alterable. That is, we can come to terms with the natural and bodily sources of suffering precisely because they are immutable: we recognize, if begrudgingly, that nature is always too powerful against our desire for happiness (security, satisfaction, etc.) and the body is ultimately too weak. Social relations are different. We observe that they change over time. And yet we cannot deny that we remain unsuccessful at eliminating these relations as a source of dissatisfaction. Recognizing this situation, Freud expresses his "astonishment" at a certain, indeed astonishing, fact:

in whatever way we may define the concept of civilization, it is a certain fact that all the things with which we seek to protect ourselves against the threats that emanate from the sources of suffering are part of that very civilization.

*Part of that very civilization!* Schelling's "veil of despondency that spreads itself over nature" is spread even farther by Freud, over even that continent of human security called civilization. And so, with Freud, "a suspicion dawns on us that here, too, a piece of unconquerable nature may lie behind—this time a piece of our own psychical constitution."<sup>53</sup> There is hardly a better characterization of the psychoanalytic Real than as *a piece of unconquerable nature*. And there is hardly a better example of protecting the integrity of *Real* thought. What about Wallace and the tradition in whose authority he speaks?

The *paravritti*, the refusal of the identified Real and the concomitant reversal of judgement, the conceptual parapraxis that, I am arguing, is constitutive of Western Buddhist discourse as a whole, is already present in Wallace's statement concerning "the reality of suffering," namely, the part about "how we might be free of it." The parallel to trends in psychoanalysis is instructive here. Freud decried the influence of the "American way of life" on psychoanalysis. He saw the development of American psychology as "a child of its time . . . designed to accelerate the tempo of analytic therapy and suit the rush of American life." This, despite the fact that all evidence shows that "psychoanalytic therapy—the liberation of a human being from his neurotic symptoms, inhibitions, and abnormalities of character—is a lengthy business."<sup>54</sup> In this regard, Freud's criticism is echoed by Žižek's claim that Western Buddhism, whatever bright light it might throw on human existence, functions to accommodate its Westerner practitioner to the hyper-accelerated technological pace of modern life. If, in doing so, it effectively functions as a fetish—as "an embodiment of the Lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth"—so much the better in terms of its "working."<sup>55</sup> The Western Buddhist "Lie" here, in Wallace's own terms, is twofold. It involves the usurpation of one's "own experience" (the intractable pervasiveness of suffering-desire) by "worldview" (the doctrinal claim of ultimate transcendence of the merely human).<sup>56</sup> Implicit in that move is the further "Lie" that worldview is not worldview: it is rather precisely one's very "own experience." The "unbearable truth" that is sustained in assuming this embodiment is, of course, the ineradicable fact of suffering-desire *in* one's "own experience." If, for Lacan, psychoanalysis is the theory and practice of bringing to articulation the very "essence of the human being"—desire—and if, as Terry Eagleton tells us, psychoanalysis is "the science of that which fails to find satisfaction," then what are we to call Western Buddhism?<sup>57</sup> What is the name of a system of thought that, like a theory or science, ruthlessly identifies a Real aspect of human being only to perform a reversal that offers up a strategy for *disavowing* that very aspect, a strategy for fortifying ourselves



emotionally and cognitively against the full implications of its very own self-articulated Real?

We will return to this question in Chapter 4. In anticipation of that discussion, we can consider Anthony Paul Smith's contention that "what is most immanent to us is also most alien precisely because of the hallucinatory transcendent structures of thought developed in philosophy and theology."<sup>58</sup> Should we add to that couple "Western Buddhism"? It might be too soon to say. But what is being suggested here is a crucial distinction between something like a *science* and something like an *hallucination*. The former pinpoints what Wallace calls "own experience." This is precisely the feature of Western Buddhism that allows its promotion as an immanent practice. The latter hoists what Wallace calls "worldview." This is what constitutes it, on the other hand, as an hallucinatory imposition on an individually lived life or, indeed, as "own experience." Put in Smith's terms, the question darkens: what do we call a system of thought that, via its authoritative construction of a world, alienates us from that which *it itself tells us* is in fact most immanent, and thus most intimate, about that world?

### Nihility (*śūnyatā*)

As I suggested in Chapter 2, where emptiness is treated in some detail, *śūnyatā* is perhaps the Buddhist master signifier par excellence. From Buddhism's earliest days, to brook no delusions about the empty quality of phenomena is extolled as extraordinarily consequential.<sup>59</sup> In a canonical Pali text, for instance, the Buddha teaches us how to view all phenomena, whether objective (form) or subjective (sensation, perception, conceptions, and consciousness), namely, as "empty, hollow, and insubstantial." We are told, moreover, that to view phenomena in this manner is not an end in itself. Crucially, it sets in motion a sort of Buddhist subjective destitution, passing through disenchantment and dispassion and culminating in the clear awareness of the "superlative practitioner" that "what had to be done was done": *nirvanic* liberation is realized.<sup>60</sup> This dual aspect of the ontological-perceptual and the soteriological-cognitive accompanies the concept of emptiness throughout Buddhist history. Candrakīrti (600–c. 650), for instance, tells us that:

The thorough extinguishment of attachment is the cause of attaining nirvāna, and, except for the view of the lack of inherent existence, there is no other doctrine which is a cause of thoroughly extinguishing such attachment.<sup>61</sup>

The basic equation here between emptiness and liberation is important. It is richly suggestive of what Laruelle means when he reminds us that “Man really exists and he is really distinct from the World.” That is, the human being embodies a radically immanent lived experience that is inaccessible to the authoritative demands and machinations of any intervening system of representation, or of what Laruelle calls a “World.” Such immunity implies a human capacity to struggle against such Worlds and an attendant capacity for liberation. Similarly, the Buddhist coupling of emptiness with a conception of liberation offers a powerful instrument for clearing a pathway that, being historically encumbered by endless configurations of “the World,” obscures our vision and infects our thinking in relation to our “real existence.” This feature is, in part, what makes emptiness a candidate for a Buddhist Real. Yet, as I said earlier, a crucial question always appears at this juncture: does this Western Buddhist first term remain faithful to the Real, or does it instead maneuver to usurp and determine the constitution of the Real? Another way of asking this question is whether the Buddhist concept serves the “generic” human or whether it serves the self-referential form of human representation called “Buddhism.” More will be said about these Laruellean ideas below. Here, let us simply reflect on the seemingly nonnegotiable requirement that “emptiness,” of all conceivable notions, remain empty.

As we saw in Chapter 2, if, throughout Buddhist history, emptiness as lack is emphasized, so, too, is emptiness as plenitude. The Pali *sutta* cited above concludes with a verse exhorting the practitioner that, although “no substance is found here,” he should nonetheless “live . . . yearning for the way that is never-vanishing,” that latter term being synonymous with *nirvāṇa*. In fact, positive terms for *nirvāṇa* as the soteriological fruit of “concentration on emptiness” include such apparent idealist absolutes as the unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*), the deathless (*amata*), the permanent (*dhuva*), and the truth (*sacca*).<sup>62</sup> Contemporary Western Buddhist figures protect this positive inheritance by insisting, as we saw above, that emptiness is “not a nihilistic emptiness but rather a fullness of particular things and individual persons functioning in their full capacity and without mutual impediment,” and that “emptiness has two sides . . . lack . . . and fullness,” or in simply declaring “the fullness of emptiness,” and so on.

What are we to make of such a turn regarding emptiness? Is it performed as a compassionate, skillful Buddhist effort to allay our fears in the face of this terrifying Real, this infinite void coldly named *zeroness*, cruelly named *nihilicity*?<sup>63</sup> Does this name not announce, like Nick Land, the fact that “If there is a conclusion it is zero”? Must Western Buddhism, like Land, go even further and

remind us of the drastic consequences of this conclusion that there is no such thing as stabilizing inherent existence?: “particles decay, molecules disintegrate, cells die, organisms perish, species become extinct, planets are destroyed and stars burn out, galaxies explode . . . until the unfathomable thirst of the entire universe collapses into darkness and ruin.”

We are made sick by our avidity to survive, and in our sickness is the thread that leads back and nowhere, because we belong to the end of the universe. The convulsion of dying stars is our syphilitic inheritance . . . Matter signals to its lost voyagers, telling them that their quest is vain, and that their homeland already lies in ashes behind them. If there is a conclusion it is zero. Silence.<sup>64</sup>

This unpleasant Nietzschean vision is a clear-eyed reminder that in the end, after nature draws just a few more breaths, when our sun has finally cooled and collapsed into a bloodless husk, after all of us “clever beasts” have died, emptiness will take its rightful place in the cosmic whole and . . . “nothing will have happened.”<sup>65</sup> Yet, in the face of such dark talk about “the ultimate heat death of the universe,” Anthony Paul Smith reminds us of an equally crucial truth: “We are here, fragile creatures that we are, and, regardless of any future death, that fact of existing matters in both the physical and moral sense, regardless of how finite or limited that mattering is.”<sup>66</sup> Is it for reasons along this compassionate line that, in “The Fullness of Emptiness,” Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh takes pains to reassure us that “The word ‘emptiness’ should not scare us”? “It is,” in fact, he cheers us to recognize, “a wonderful word.” For, while it is undeniably the case that form is empty of essence, “it is full of everything else.” He goes on to speak about “the cloud floating in this sheet of paper,” and challenge us to “point out one thing that is not here, not in this paper—time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat.” Indeed: “Everything coexists with this sheet of paper.” And so all of us “have always been here,” transcending birth and death—mere empty forms themselves—and will be here again after we die: “I will be a flower, or a leaf. I will be in these forms and I will say hello to you. If you are attentive enough, you will recognize me, and you may greet me. I will be very happy.”<sup>67</sup> So, what is there to fear?

In a decisively less consoling and more philosophical vein, Timothy Morton, too, addresses our supposed fear of emptiness. For him, by contrast, this fear appears to be justified. Morton points out that in today’s West we are consumed by fear. But Morton is not speaking of the fears that are stoked on the nightly news, such as those related to terrorism, storms, immigrants, Muslims, African

bees, and various food products. He speaks of easily disavowed, because more subtly present, fears. We fear physicality, we fear consumerism, we fear narcissism, passivity, intimacy, ambiguity, inwardness, subjectivity. If this book is giving you the heebie jeebies, it's because we even fear theory. We fear recursive loops, Morton argues, and we fear the uncanny gaze of spiritualized statues and the very status of *things* in general. But most of all, today in the West, Morton informs us, we fear *Buddhism*. Why? Because Buddhism is the bugaboo of nothingness, the spooky avatar of emptiness. Our contemporary anxieties about emptiness or nothingness find their ideal object of projection in Buddhism, prompting Morton's neologism "Buddhaphobia."<sup>68</sup> Like Thich Nhat Hanh, Morton asks "What is to be feared?" Absolute nothingness is simply nonexistent, so there is literally nothing to fear. What frightens us is a nothingness that is "not absolutely nothing," but rather a something-or-other. And Buddhist nothingness is just such a nonabsolute nothingness. The frightful truth, Morton tells us, is that "Substantiality underlies nothingness." Where Thich Nhat Hanh asks us to look past emptiness to see sky and sunshine, Morton suggests we would see "a spectral, shifting presence of absence: shimmering substantiality," a "flickering" something that "is unlocatable yet real and palpable." It is this palpable quality that renders buddhistic nothingness so "disturbing" to us.<sup>69</sup>

In many ways, Morton's discussion seems to lend support to *śūnyatā* as a faithful first name for the Real. His nothing as an unfindable yet consequential physicality sounds similar to the Real as a symbolically inarticulable yet profoundly productive "stain of senseless material contingency" affecting the human, as we saw earlier. Yet, there is something more to Morton's buddhistic nothingness than the substantiality underlying it. "Shimmering agency," namely, "underlies substantiality."<sup>70</sup> With the particular notion of agency that Morton invokes, we arrive yet again at the classic Buddhist conceptual parapraxis, the "turning around" and away from the full force of emptiness toward a productive fullness that, however inconstant and "shimmering," is somehow even fuller, or more persistently full, than the veiled superabundance of Thich Nhat Hanh's empty forms.

It is not total opaque inertia that Buddhaphobia fears . . . It is something more like what Freud calls *the nirvāṇa principle*, otherwise known as the death drive: the way in which a lifeform, down to a single-celled organism (for Freud) and quite possibly below that, is an inconsistent entity that is trying to wipe out that inconsistency. This attempt at self-cancellation (*nirvāṇa* means *extinction*) ironically creates a loop, in which the lifeform produces more of itself.<sup>71</sup>

As Morton alerts us, it appears that we have come up against the law of noncontradiction, whereby the aim of life, driven as it is toward brute reproduction of itself, is yet a near-death stilling of internal tension. “Unless, of course,” Morton adds, “there is an object-like entity at the core of human being, an entity felt as an object precisely because it is inhuman, a-human: what is called *Buddha nature*.” The Mahāyāna idea of “Buddha nature” is glossed in the index of *Nothing* as “the inherent identity of each living being as a *buddha*; a fully awakened state as the basis of ordinary mind.” It is, as Morton tells us, “a not-me that is in me.” Like God, I suppose, who is closer to me than my own breath, this “not-me is more ‘me’ than myself, which is only a confused perception.” Thus, like the devout seeker of the face of God, progress on the spiritual path of Buddhism is “a matter of faith in an entity.” Eventually, this “not-me (confused, sentient being) realizes that it is also a not-me (totally enlightened Buddha).”<sup>72</sup>

What are we to make of this move? Do we have here anything other than yet another tautology of Wisdom? Do Morton’s and Thich Nhat Hanh’s emptiness talk indicate anything other than the fact that such master discourse is “excluded from the economy of symbolic exchange”? Whatever might result from bringing Wisdom to bear on such an understanding of emptiness, we are once again confronted with a misturning. The pivotal point of the turning really amounts to a repulsion. Having bored perhaps too far into emptiness for ideological comfort, our teachers bound too quickly and too easily in the opposite direction, toward the fullness of some-thing along with its incumbent idealist cure. The cure is this: The no-thing that so disturbs us is not in itself an object to be feared. Fear of it arises only at that point where it, this object at our “core,” is met with resistance by the “narcissistically wounded subject” that each of us is. If only, like Thich Nhat Hanh’s flowers and clouds, we could stop clinging to that which we never were in the first place, we might finally come to know the freedom and happiness of the earth and the sky.

Of all ideas, one would think, emptiness must surely remain empty; nothingness must remain nothing; zero must remain zero; lack, lack; void, void. Yet, in the hands of Wisdom, buddhistic emptiness somehow perpetually “evades this void by its repopulation with objects and foreign goals provided by experience, culture, history, language, etc.,” as Laruelle says of philosophy. In permitting, indeed in aiding and abetting, this evasion, Western Buddhism abdicates its function as an organon of awakening—awakening to the Real of no-self, of suffering and desire, of emptiness—and instead assumes the “shape of the World” fashioned in its own image.<sup>73</sup>

I could examine several additional candidates for a Buddhist Real. In doing so, I could be mercifully brief. The reason is that I have no further task than to reveal at what point in some Western Buddhist concept, text, or teaching the turn occurs. Many readers, no doubt, find my assertion preposterous. After all, you may be thinking, Buddhism is a venerable and complex tradition, and arguments like Loy's, Morton's, Wallace's, and every other figure's I have referred to up to now, are nuanced and thorough. However, I make the assertion based on several convictions. For instance, I hold that what I am highlighting here amounts to a *discovery*, one that, moreover, will be replicated by readers of Western Buddhist material who employ this heuristic of the turn (or, really, this parapraxis of the misturning). To be clear, I hold that the reader will make this discovery himself or herself with *every single Western Buddhist instantiation*. No author writing under the signifier *Buddhism*, including its numerous subsignifiers, such as *Western Buddhism*, *Zen Buddhism*, *Secular Buddhism*, *Mindfulness*, and so on, is exempt from my assertion. The reason, which I will detail later, is that the misturning is, it turns out, endemic to the very *identity* of "Buddhism." Along with the principle of sufficient Buddhism and what Laruelle calls "decision" (also discussed later), the parapraxis of misturning is a sine qua non of Buddhist teaching, thought, and practice. Speaking of practice, I mentioned in the Introduction that this critique should serve as both a theory and a performance or practice. The theoretical aspect in the present case is the analysis of the contradiction, the report on the discovery. The performance unfolds around one's *reading* of the text. Confronted by the discovery, the reader is challenged to no longer read as a subject of liberal humanism, who reads the Western Buddhist text with an eye to the timeless truths contained therein, and who seeks therein the unchanging answer to the mysteries of our unchanging human nature.<sup>74</sup> Confronted in this manner, the reader is challenged to no longer read as a subject of neoliberalism, a *Gelassenheit*-yearning consumer of Wisdom, a well-behaved auto-governed connoisseur of the self. I said that I am hoping to stimulate a reading, thinking, living subject who regards Buddhist material alongside what Laruelle calls "radical immanence." More, too, will be said about this point later. For now, the reader has only to pose a stark and simple question: at what point does a Western Buddhist first name recoil from functioning as a *theory* (of subjectivity, of desire, or whatever) and lapse back into the auto-referential question-begging that constitutes the principle of sufficient Buddhism? For, in identifying the presence of such a turn, the reader is recognizing that the first name ceases to "symbolize the Real and its modes"

and instead attempts to usurp the Real by determining its (always Buddhist) constitution and then importing it back into Buddhism.

What kind of vital human practice, Buddhist or otherwise, might we wrest from such a refusal? Can such a practice, in thought and action, really be a party to the timeless human quest for liberation? Part 2 addresses these questions.

Part Two

Negation





# Non-Buddhism

## Preface

Buddhism is a magnificent creation. It is truly (to say it in a Buddhist idiom) a brilliant *mandala* wrought of the most precious jewels, exuding a healing fragrance, distilling a pain-dispelling nectar. Buddhism is a juggernaut of compassion, thundering throughout the world, crushing the endless sorrows that consume sentient beings. Ever since the Buddha set it in motion two-and-a-half millennia ago, Buddhism has been trumpeting the warning that our world, like our minds, is an inferno. It has never ceased to marshal its considerable apparatus of concepts and practices in the human struggle to quench that fire. More recently and closer to home, Western Buddhism has continued this grand project, skillfully calibrating its firehose to target more effectively our lives and our times.

And yet, as we have seen, something is amiss. Something is at work within Western Buddhism not only to hinder but to *pervert* its course. In Part I, I made several points about this perversion or reversal: (i) it occurs at the micro level of foundational Buddhist concepts; (ii) it is intrinsic in that it is constituted (as reversal) by values posited from within Buddhism itself; (iii) it alters Buddhism's identity as a science or theory of immanent and materialist "own experience" to that of a conjurer of a transcendent and idealist "worldview"; (iv) it transforms Buddhism from a bold bearer of the good (?) news about the human Real into an apostle of a New Age apocalypse<sup>1</sup>; (v) as such, the reversal constitutes a misturning, a maneuver performed in the spirit of enlightenment, of, that is to say, a deeper and fuller clarification of its ostensible discoveries about human being, only in the end to have us stand face to face with a contradiction or a platitude posing as wisdom.

I called this reversal a conceptual parapraxis for reasons that bear on the next step toward my critique of Western Buddhism. The term itself belongs to

psychoanalysis. Why not just use a Buddhist term, such as *paravritti* (*parāvṛtti*), as David Loy did earlier? After all, the two terms, connoting as they do something like the reversion of an action, are similar enough. The reason that I use the psychoanalytic term should be clear with a quick review of how the Buddhist term functioned within Loy's argument. Recall that he employed it to mark the transformational reversion from no-self as "the festering hole at my core" toward "a life-healing flow which springs up spontaneously." From where might it spring? Bear in mind, too, that Loy is illuminating the Buddhist Real of subjectivity without essence, substance, or any other stabilizing basis; so, unlike Morton, he is cautious not to posit some Thing, however shimmering and ephemeral, as the source of the life-healing flow. Thus, all he can really offer is that it springs from "I-know-not-where."

While such language of an unknowable-x-that-the-teacher-nonetheless-knows is a standard authoritarian move in obscurantist mystical rhetoric, it does not in itself disqualify the move. From Plotinus to Freud, from Hegel to Beckett, the discourse of the Real is permeated by a mood of impossibility. Lacan, for instance, speaks of the Real as "the essential object that isn't an object any longer, but this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail."<sup>2</sup> Does a statement like this differ all that much from Nansen's famous teaching to the wandering Joshu that while "not knowing is most intimate," ultimately "the way is not a matter of knowing or not knowing"?<sup>3</sup> Alenka Zupančič refers to this seemingly "inherent impossibility" of either *knowing* or *not-knowing* (which is still dualistically coupled to *knowing*) the Real/way as "immanent inaccessibility." She continues:

The point of Lacan's identification of the Real with the impossible is not simply that the Real is some Thing that is impossible to happen. On the contrary, the whole point of the Lacanian concept of the Real is that *the impossible happens*. This is what is so traumatic, disturbing, shattering—or *funny*—about the Real. The Real happens precisely as the impossible.<sup>4</sup>

With the examples I gave of Western Buddhist treatments of no-self, suffering-desire, and emptiness, I tried to show that there, too, *the impossible happens*. The decisive difference, however, is that in Western Buddhism it happens through the banishment of the Real—the very Buddhist-appointed Real—itsself. The Real-concept once installed is ordered to about face, to double back, to reverse course and retreat *posthaste*. In its place is installed a more consoling, cooperative, affirmative—if even more *impossible*—happening, such as "a life-healing flow," real pleasure and happiness, or an infinite plenitude. With psychoanalysis, to

draw a contrast, the Real as productive non-object, the Real as that “lacking any possible mediation,” is “the object of anxiety *par excellence*.”<sup>5</sup> The difference is consequential. Where Western Buddhism flinches and shores up against the full implications of its thought, psychoanalysis follows the evidence farther into its murky circuit. For Western Buddhism, the flinch entails a healthy adaptation to reality, the alleviation of stress, and even the end of suffering. Of course, it also means collusion with a political and economic status quo that, like it, places the blame for success or failure, happiness or misery, on the degree to which the individual is able to recognize his or her vulnerability, adapt to the circumstances, and master resilience through an internalized practice of mindful letting go. For psychoanalysis this means the perpetuation of the disease. For our capacity for enlightened living is forged not within the furnace of an individual consciousness, but within the severe circuitry of the social nexus. Whereas Western Buddhism shares with psychoanalytic practice the belief that it is “a search for truth,” only the latter admits: “and the truth is not always beneficial.”<sup>6</sup>

As Loy highlighted, the Western Buddhist result does indeed follow from a *paravritti*, from a reversion or a turning around. The turning, along with its result, however, is of the nature of a *parapraxis* because it constitutes a *recoiling* that concludes in a *reversal of judgement* such that the original state of affairs *does not take effect*.<sup>7</sup> What does take effect is that the critical reader, like the astute psychoanalyst and, perhaps, the attentive meditator, suspects that a second, undesired, sense is being added to the intended one.

To explain the purpose of Part 2, I would like to emphasize several points here. These points will be elaborated on in Chapter 5.

1. Western Buddhism *thinks*. Western Buddhism represents a momentous effort, sustained over centuries and in multiple cultural contexts, to understand and improve our human condition.
2. Its thinking, however, is *not sufficient*. It is not merely the case that Western Buddhist thought exhibits the kinds of contradictions, aporia, *parapraxes*, and so on, that I have been attempting to demonstrate. All grand systems of thought arguably do so; and that is not in itself invalidating. The fact of insufficiency, however, in the case of a unitary authoritarian form of thought like Western Buddhism, is, in a quite particular sense, seriously disabling.
3. This is good news! Not only does this fact not spell the doom of Western Buddhism, it *augurs a form of thought* that corresponds more closely to the “vital potentialities of humans” that Buddhism itself labors to articulate.

4. It is crucial to bear in mind, however, that this new form of thought is *not a new iteration of Buddhism*. It involves, rather, an attempt to answer the question posed at the very outset of this book: What are we to make of Western Buddhism? Toward this end, we leave Western Buddhism as it is and take it seriously, but in both cases treat it as raw human cultural material rather than on the (sufficient) terms that it itself demands.
5. As Marjorie Gracieuse warned us, such an endeavor is not easy. Like forcefully unarming a hostage-taker, it requires a “wresting.” As my usage, however cursory, of ideas from philosophy, psychoanalysis, literature, and so on, were intended to demonstrate, what is required for our wresting is an extra-Buddhist *supplement*, a form of thought outside the sphere of Buddhism’s overly determinate, self-positing, influence.

As I mentioned in the Introduction, I have found that the work of the contemporary French thinker François Laruelle offers unusually effective tools for dismantling authoritative forms of thought, excising their motherlodes of sufficiency, and depotentializing their subjugating force. Equally, however, Laruelle offers tools for reconstituting humanly useful “fictions” or “fabulations” from this dismantled material. It is to those tools that I now turn to.

### François Laruelle and non-philosophy

I think it is safe to say that anyone who has read him will agree: François Laruelle (born 1937) is exceedingly difficult. Starting with its enigmatic name—for “non-philosophy” means neither *not philosophy* nor *everything but philosophy* nor *anti-philosophy*—Laruelle’s thought “sticks out, like an unwanted tangled root or an unmovable stone waiting for philosophers and theorists to trip up on.”<sup>8</sup> His general strangeness is a stump well enough for this tumble. If that doesn’t get them, his audacious experimentation in formal and methodological invention and conceptual innovation probably will.<sup>9</sup> But what trips them up without fail is the unclassifiable nature of his thought—unclassifiable, that is, “within the now familiar and moribund debates.”<sup>10</sup> Laruelle is not interested in dethroning prior philosophical systems and installing his own, superior version. He is not maneuvering to outflank the generals of philosophy arrayed on the battlefield of contested thought. Neither is he a guru, enrapturing us with gnomic utterances on the meaning of life or compassionately pointing out the mysterious presence of primordial consciousness. This is disorienting because the normal procedure for figures like Laruelle—ostensible paragons of Wisdom—is precisely to do these

kinds of things. Fortunately, Laruelle is also exceptionally insightful and, pardon the pun, inciteful. Certainly, for anyone struggling to defuse the hidden munitions ticking beneath authoritative systems of thought, his work proves to be a toolbox of surgical concepts and practices. And it is to that end I employ them here.

It is futile if not outright absurd to offer a summation of Laruelle's massive, complex, and ever-mutating oeuvre; and it is well beyond the scope of this book to present the substantive introduction that his thought deserves.<sup>11</sup> Instead, beginning in this chapter and culminating in the final section of Part 3, I use certain Laruellean concepts in conjunction with the problematic of Western Buddhism (I already did this to a degree in the previous three sections). To say this in a Laruellean idiom, I conjugate the two forms of thought, Western Buddhism and non-philosophy, but do so "outside their disciplinary incarceration as terms in themselves."<sup>12</sup> Or, even more descriptively, I crash these two disciplines together as in a quantum particle collider for knowledge. The first, somewhat staid, image suggests the emergence of a new, enriched grammar, one that enhances thought and enables fresh resonances, metaphors, sounds, and utterances. As we progress, the neologism "non-buddhism" will prove a useful term for this new syntax. The second image also suggests that some new, previously inconceivable, material appears in the world. This image works in ways that are instructive for further understanding Laruelle's, and my, basic objective. First, we must admit that this is a violent image: two objects colliding with such savage force that a hitherto unmanifest entity emerges from the opaqueness of space into our world. It is not incidental or a mere tic of style that Laruelle's work is permeated by such a vocabulary of violence and power: collision, insurrection, victims, the philosophical arsenal, one blow without remainder, vengeance, resistance, weapons of last defense, amputation, defensive ultimatum, invalidation in a single blow, the persecuted heretic, the Murdered, the hypothesis of murdered men, eye for an eye, wholly burnt humans, ideal cadavers, black universe, the black substance that flows through the veins of history, the end of the world. The reader may be muttering to herself: for God's sake, man, could any language be *less* applicable to Buddhism? Is employing such ideas not, well, overkill? For readers acculturated to the benign countenance of Western Buddhism it must indeed appear so. Yet, bear in mind that Laruelle himself derives this language *not* from an investigation into world history or radical politics, but from one into *philosophy*, a fairly docile subject. So, what is it about philosophy—and Buddhism—that justifies such language? We can turn again to Marjorie Gracieuse for the short answer. Recall her image of *wresting vital potentialities of humans from the artificial forms and static norms that subjugate them*. Buddhism may indeed be a magnificent human construction; yet

it is never anything *but* a human construction. This fact should be obvious. And it is obvious to anyone who does not subscribe to its unitary program. The point here is that Buddhism does not offer itself as yet another option in the crowded supermarket of human knowledge. It offers itself as a singularly enlightening presentation of preeminent human knowledge per se. It is therefore as a matter of necessity that Western Buddhism institute its “artificial forms and static norms” as sufficient to that end of preeminent knowing. A central task of such institutions, as discussed earlier, is the formation of particular kinds of subjects who interact with the world in quite particular ways. The task, in other words, is ideological interpellation, capture, *subjugation*. This is not to suggest bad faith or foul play. In the case of Western Buddhism, it is typically a matter of being interpellated into a supposedly natural, empirical, phenomenologically verifiable cure: “The teaching of Buddhism is nothing special. It is just our human way.”<sup>13</sup> It is this seductive lure of a natural remedy, this conjuring of a curative fantasy, that prompts Laruelle to declare that his practice of non-philosophy is “an act of defense, not of intolerance; the defense of a certain human universality against ... a tradition that is believed to place it in danger.”<sup>14</sup> The danger, as we will see, involves the shrouding of a transcendental hallucination over the inalienable in-human, as Laruelle names the person without adventitious metaphysical representations—a concept that is, one would think, mightily appealing to Western Buddhists. A project of suspending the authority of dangerous, subjugating thought, of unmasking it as but an alluring hallucination, of acting always from the side of the generic human and against that of worldly authority—is this not equally the project of Western Buddhism? Western Buddhism is nothing if not a practice for human liberation. It is, moreover, always performed, as Laruelle says of non-philosophy, *ad hominos*, with its sight set on humans. The Buddha himself said that he attained emancipation not in some transcendent state or realm but “in this six-foot body, with its mind and its conceptions.”<sup>15</sup> And next to its vocabulary of violence, non-philosophy, like Buddhism, speaks of liberation, freedom, and emancipation. At times, in fact, it speaks with an almost embarrassingly religious exuberance: resurrection, salvation, justice, grace, gnosis, the Future Christ, peace, and utopia.

On this incongruous note, I now affix the harmonious airs of Western Buddhism to the atonal clash of non-philosophy.

### A science of Buddhism

I mentioned in the Introduction that I see Western Buddhism as *a critique subsumed within an ideology subsumed within a faith*. In viewing it in this

manner, I am in line with a certain strain of Western Buddhist rhetoric, if not intention. We saw, for instance, that B. Alan Wallace distinguishes between “a worldview with a metaphysical belief” and the exploration of one’s “own experience.” This is a distinction between forms of knowledge and practice that encourage a (rationally) ungrounded faith in transcendent efficacy, and forms that offer an *organon*, an immanent means or instrument, for arriving at knowledge. Classically, an organon consists of, individually or in combination, a set of mathematical or logical principles, rigorously rational inquiry, or properly scientific investigation. Laruelle, who seeks to establish with his method “a universal organon of thought, more than a simple hypothesis,” insists that this device possess a “double fecundity: theoretical and practical.” As a theoretical device, the organon of non-philosophy, for instance, enables knowledge of “the functioning and the dynamic of a philosophy or the philosophical tradition.” Crucially, it does so only after having paid the “ransom” of abandoning what Laruelle calls “decision” (discussed below). This simple payment ensures that non-philosophy never confuses its *description* of philosophy for philosophy itself. As this prohibition suggests, the organon “is in a perpetual state of producing novelty; of opening and rectifying a specific space of knowing.” This, the practical function of the organon, means that the organon becomes an instrument for the transformation of philosophy’s *usage*. So, an organon is an instrument of thought that enables a critical intervention into an object, event, reality, etc., yet leaves that object *as it is*. As a theoretical device an organon exposes the workings of the object. As a practical device it modifies the ways in which the object might be used.<sup>16</sup>

Although it does not use this nomenclature, Western Buddhism clearly views itself as an organon. In fact, an argument with ample textual evidence could be made that a *defining feature* of Western Buddhism is precisely this self-identification as an organon par excellence. Interestingly, however, it sees itself as an organon that rejects each of the senses just given. The *locus classicus* of this identity for Western Buddhists is the *Kesamutti Sutta*, better known in contemporary Western Buddhist circles as the *Kālāma Sutta* after the Buddha’s interlocutors in the text, the people known as the Kalamas. The oft-cited passage reads:

I have advised you as I have not to go by unconfirmed reports, by tradition, by hearsay, by scriptures, by logical reasoning, by inferential reasoning, by reflection on superficial appearances, by delighting in opinions and speculation, by the appearance of plausibility, or because you think *This person is our teacher*. Kalamas, when you know for yourselves [then you should reject or embrace those teachings].<sup>17</sup>



On the face of it, this statement can be understood as a radical rejection of what Laruelle calls the World. That is, the Buddha calls for a refusal of “a tradition that is believed to place [the human] in danger” because of its delusory seduction and affective capture.<sup>18</sup> The Buddha calls, moreover, for a refusal at the very root of this danger, namely the coercive views of the community, the consoling ruminations on one’s own self-serving interests, authoritative influence, or the various doctrinal presentations in which the danger is encoded. The text’s refusal goes even further, rejecting the tools that define the great organon of Western thought, Aristotle’s own *Organon*: logical and inferential reasoning. What, then, remains as a means, as an organon, of arriving at valid knowledge of the human condition? The answer, of course, is *to know for yourself*.

Nourished by the Enlightenment, Romantic, and Protestant values that I mentioned in the Introduction, the admonishment *to know for yourself* has become for Western Buddhists “the Buddha’s Charter of Free Inquiry.”<sup>19</sup> Most significantly, it is a charter that warrants the correspondence of Buddhism and science. A recent article in *Scientific American* illustrates the easy logic of this relationship. The title of the article asks “Is Buddhism the Most Science-Friendly Religion?” (Its answer is *yes*.)

This teaching [the quote above from the *Kālāma Sutta*] is widely (and appropriately) seen as supporting free inquiry and an absence of rigid dogma, an attitude entirely open to empirical verification and thus, consistent with science. Moreover, the Kalama Sutra fits quite comfortably into the Western scientific tradition: The Royal Society of London, whose full name was the Royal Society of London for the Improvement of Natural Knowledge, and which was the world’s first and for a long time the foremost scientific society, has as its credo, *Nullius in verba*: “On the words of no one.”<sup>20</sup>

*Nullius in verba*, reject dogma, embrace empirical investigation, *attanā jāneyyātha*, and know for yourselves. As theology once did, science currently serves as the supreme pontiff of the master discourse on knowledge. In assuming Buddhism’s close kinship with modern science, the Western Buddhist logic on display here, of course, rejects its affinity to theology.<sup>21</sup> My contention that Western Buddhism is *a critique subsumed within an ideology subsumed within a faith*, assumes a somewhat more complex situation. Consider, for example, that scientific methodology, in fact, *embraces* nearly all of the strategies rejected by the *Kālāma Sutta*, including the accumulated trials of tradition and experimental speculation. Consider also that the *Kālāma Sutta* glosses *knowing for yourself* as *being accepted by the wise*. Consider that the Western Buddhist correlation of

*knowing for yourself* with meditation or mindfulness is supplanted in the text by ethical and affective trainings. Finally, consider that ultimately what you know when you *know for yourself* is precisely the contents of the Buddha's teachings. Considering all of this, how can we avoid the conclusion that what we have here is indistinguishable from an over-determining subject-forming ideology founded on a faith? Yet, as Donald Lopez observes, the fact remains: "There is clearly something about *Buddhism* that has sustained its long conjunction with the word *science*."<sup>22</sup>

What might this "something" be? I have been arguing throughout this book that Western Buddhism possesses consequential *Real* concepts for critiquing "own experience," or, in a Buddhist idiom, for *seeing things as they are*. I have also attempted to demonstrate, on the basis of several concrete examples, how Western Buddhist figures exhibit a curious habit of evading the full consequences of these concepts. I am arguing that this habit is not merely an occasional lapse. It is, rather, a defining feature of Western Buddhist identity. The outcome of this habitual evasion is effectively to nullify the concepts' theoretical or critical function, rendering Western Buddhism as little more than a one-dimensional self-help fix. This critical function can, I believe, be recovered (if that is the right word). But a nonnegotiable requirement of this attempt is that we avoid the creation of yet another iteration of Buddhism. To fulfill this essential condition we must perform operations on Buddhism that render it unrecognizable to Buddhists of any and all varieties. We must, for instance, depotentialize Buddhism's sufficiency as a unitary system of thought, as that is, the integral, self-relating network of premises, postulates, and practices called *Buddhism*. As Laruelle says:

*We begin by supposing that [Buddhism] does not exist or no longer exists, at least in the sufficient and authoritative mode and manner in which it presents itself, i.e., as a rational yet transcendental fact that teleologically controls the possible operations on it.*<sup>23</sup>

In Part 3 we will explore what happens to Western Buddhist materials once we have cancelled this mode and disabled this control. The point here is that taking this attitude serves the crucial function of suspending the principle of sufficient Buddhism. This suspension, in turn, creates the basic condition for treating Buddhism as "a whatever material,"<sup>24</sup> to treat it as Buddhism-without-sufficiency, or, in other words, as *non-buddhism*.

In taking this attitude we are producing an effect that Western Buddhism itself constantly gestures toward yet, being fixated on preserving its sufficiency,

repeatedly fails to realize. (Western Buddhism itself, to repeat, offers concepts that tend toward immanence before they mysteriously misturn toward metaphysics and transcendence.) Following Laruelle, it is precisely this effect that I am equating with “science.” It is crucial to recognize, however, that the science that Laruelle has in mind is not that of, say, biology or physics, per se. Nor is it the application of the iterative process of scientific method (observation, hypothesis, experiment, etc.). “Science” names for Laruelle, rather, a quite particular *attitude*, both in the sense of a manner or disposition of thought and a position, cognitive and affective, in relation to the Real. More specifically, science is “a practice of *thought*,” an experimental practice that operates, like Occam’s razor, “in the name of a real simplicity and of a real poverty of thought.”<sup>25</sup> I imagine that many people who have attempted to follow the tedious tessellation of the Western Buddhist dispensation appreciate such an experiment. The necessity of such a paring practice is, after all, a familiar theme of that teaching itself. We find a pronounced rhetoric of simplification in, for instance, both traditionally oriented Zen forms and contemporary secularized meditation and mindfulness forms. We will return to this similarity in a moment. I mention it here to provide the reader with some contextual footing for Laruelle’s further statement about the function of poverty in his concept of science:

Science is in essence a simple and minimal thought. This is not the result of a philosophical reduction or a metaphysical ascesis: a simplicity of essence but not of structure, which holds in suspense the complexity of division, of abyss, and of autoreflexion that is [Buddhism’s].<sup>26</sup>

Science, as a manner of thinking, as a “science-thought,” is valuable to my critique in its (science’s) very “essence” rather than in its comprehensive procedural particulars. What is this essence? First of all, it is important to note that this essence lies within science itself—it is not the result of operations performed on science by some ostensibly superior external discipline. Laruelle has in mind the numerous “philosophy of science” iterations, in which philosophy and philosophy alone possesses the means to think for a mechanically unthinking science.<sup>27</sup> For our purposes, we might want to bear in mind Western Buddhism’s attempts, going back to its formative days in Asia, to reduce science to a servant of Western Buddhism’s own need for sufficiency. This need usually revolves around a “science of mind” trope in which Buddhism supplies the supplement that enables science to think in the manner necessary for a true and truly holistic science, namely, “contemplatively.”<sup>28</sup> By contrast, Laruelle insists that science’s essence already lies within science. Specifically, it lies in the fact that not only

does science think, but it “thinks the Real all-at-once, without dividing it and without dividing itself.”<sup>29</sup> Science-thought is the means to thinking *emptiness*, for example, all the way through to that for which it but serves as a first name, the Real. Such thinking, *as practice*, moreover, has real-world effects in terms of, for instance, subject formation and ideology construction. The far-reaching claim being made here is that science-thought is “the pragmatico-theoretical thought adequate to the One such as it is *according to the One*.”<sup>30</sup> Most readers recognize that this simple essence is in sharp contrast to Western Buddhism’s complex essence as *Buddhist-thought*, to, that is, its interminable dividing of its One (or emptiness, no-self, things-as-they-are, the Dharma, etc.) into categories and phenomena that inject *Buddhism itself* back into the Real. So injected, a Western Buddhist looks into the One and sees reflected back none other than *Western Buddhism*. This complex mixing of the Real or One with Western Buddhist postulates creates the “abyss” and “autoreflexion” that Laruelle refers to. We will consider this matter in more detail later. The point here is that, like an abyss, there is virtually no bottom to this self-reflecting proliferation of Buddhist claims on the Real, or indeed on the person and on the world. The result is, again, what Laruelle refers to as “the World,” the empirical world seen through the “artificial forms and static norms” that constitute Western Buddhism. A “science-thought” is thus “at bare minimum the refusal of thinking *in accordance with the World*.”<sup>31</sup>

A Western Buddhist practitioner is by definition a person who thinks *in accordance with* Western Buddhism. That may sound like a truism. Recall, however, that this same figure claims to speak in the final instance *in accordance with* emptiness, with the self-void, with radical contingency, with the Real. We could sum up the manner in which the Western Buddhist thinkers, in the previous chapter, failed to fulfill the promise of the first names they cited by pointing out that they insisted on thinking *about* the Real rather than *from* the Real. We know from their examples—examples which I am arguing are symptomatic of the principle of sufficient Buddhism—what it is like to think *about* the Real: it is to decide always, and in advance, on *Buddhism*. The significant contrast between *Buddhist-thought* and *science-thought*, as well as the formidable stakes that both share, should be clear. It should also be clear that the latter, unlike the former, is “a thought that moves beyond itself, beyond the vicious circle of deciding upon itself to the thought that practices vision-in-One.”<sup>32</sup>

I said earlier that this scientific attitude, in suspending the principle of sufficient Buddhism enables a Buddhism-without-sufficiency. Following Laruelle, we can now simply refer to this form of thought-practice as non-buddhism. From this point forward I employ this neologism to refer to a *science of Buddhism*. The

value of such a term is integral to this critique: it enables us to leave Buddhism as it is, hence, not pretending to create yet another new, improved product; it abrogates the “teleological controls” of the Buddhist masters, who reflexively steer Buddhism toward a transcendent World-making; it enables us to reverse that trajectory back toward a generic human immanence; and it frees us to imagine and formulate new usages for the mutated Buddhist material.

I can imagine that many readers are thinking that the spirit of what I am suggesting *already* animates Western Buddhism. Clearly, hints of a non-buddhism in the sense I am articulating can be spotted throughout Buddhist traditions from the earliest days. The Buddha himself might be viewed as a figure who mutated rather than abolished Vedic material, thereby inaugurating a *non-vedic* precursor to a possible non-buddhism. A few pieces of evidence that suggest such a line of reasoning might be that he reconfigured Vedic cosmogony as a twelve-fold chain of dependently originating phenomena; he made figurative the literal power of the *devas*, and transferred its domain from the earthly, atmospheric, and heavenly spheres to the consciousness of the meditating human; he internalized the sacrificial fire as a potential quality of the mind; he bestowed radically new meanings on crucial concepts such as *tevijja*, *karma*, *dharma*, *brahmin*, *ārya*, *satya*, and many more. The canonical Buddha even inscribes the basic spirit of this *non* into his own teachings. In the most famous instance, he cautions his followers not to attach the raft of the teachings onto their backs once they have “attained the other shore,” or realized those teachings in their own lives. Doing so, they would merely burden themselves with the superfluous weight of *Buddhism*.<sup>33</sup> Zen thought is perhaps the best example of the continuation of this *non* spirit at the root of Buddhism’s founding. Most readers may be familiar with the basic tropes, such as *if you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him; true meditation is non-meditation; a finger pointing to the moon; [the Buddha’s teaching is] vast emptiness, nothing holy*. Regardless of what Linji, Dogen, Huineng, and Bodhidharma/Shenhui, respectively, intended by their utterances, in contemporary circles they are offered as proof of a kind of self-deconstructing non-buddhism, in the sense that I have indicated. This view is not uncommon in Western Buddhism. It typically serves an attempt to present Buddhism as something wholly other than a sufficient (read: a religious or philosophical) system, and as something that can only be understood as “universal.” Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of the Mindfulness movement, offers the paradigmatic example of this rhetorical move when he explains that in shifting out of an explicit Buddhist framework, he “wanted to offer instead [of Buddhism] a kind of translation of a universal understanding or approach that

was never really about Buddhism.”<sup>34</sup> It would be too cumbersome to offer a more detailed evaluation of the merits of this general claim. In place of that, I suggest that a ready-to-hand litmus test for readers to apply in all instances of a claim to Buddhist self-deconstruction is to ask whether Buddhism thereby forfeits its principle of sufficiency. Recall that the price of *not* doing so, of preserving sufficiency, is “the impossibility for [Western Buddhism] to constitute a rigorous, non-circular thinking of itself, one which would not beg the question, that is to say, a theory.”<sup>35</sup>

“Theory,” here, is synonymous with “science.” With the rudiments of a science of Buddhism in place, we can return to the crucial question of the Real. I hope to have demonstrated that Western Buddhism does not permit the full force of each Real articulation to which it itself lays claim. I have further suggested that while this refusal enables Western Buddhism to maintain its integrity as a sufficient system of thought and practice, it simultaneously compromises that very integrity by condemning Western Buddhism to a recursive circularity. Yes, *Buddhism thinks*. But in what manner? Based on its treatment of emptiness and no-self in the hands of its human representatives, for example, it appears incapable of thinking beyond its own self-articulation. Based on the confidence of these representatives, “Buddhism” appears unaware that it confuses the Real with what Laruelle terms its *pretension*, with its own concocted mixtures (premises, postulates, beliefs, etc.), mixtures, moreover, that Western Buddhism is bound, as sufficient thought, to infuse with the Real. Laruelle further argues that such thinking ultimately constitutes “a transcendental hallucination of the Real.”<sup>36</sup> What would it take to avoid this result? Would this not be a result that Buddhism, that self-proclaimed organon of *things as they are*, itself aspires to? The first task toward this end is to interrupt the circular and iterative process that, following Laruelle, we call “buddhistic decision.”

## Decision

In *Twilight of the Idols*, Friedrich Nietzsche famously, if enigmatically, declares: “I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar.”<sup>37</sup> He apparently means that when we adopt the World-weaving language of a form of thought such as Western Buddhism, “we immediately find ourselves in the midst of a system of fetishism.” The fetishism involves the embrace of seductive concepts that have metaphysical explanatory power. What they explain, however, is an ostensible “true world,” proffered always at the cost of the “apparent world.”

Speaking to a readership that holds dear a “stupendous concept of ‘God’”—itself a fetishistic explanatory concept—Nietzsche implicates “unity, identity, permanence, substance, cause, materiality, and being” in the seduction. That is, if we hold these terms to name qualities pertaining to actual or potential objects in the world, then the Christian notion of “God” becomes rational, and thus follows unproblematically. In his theatrical fashion, Nietzsche declares that in a future world, “a thousand times more enlightened” than ours, people will resist the seduction of the fetish, concluding instead that “these categories could not be derived from experience—on the contrary, the whole of experience rather contradicts them.” In an even less enlightened world than ours, people believed that the sun revolved around the earth. And why should they not have held such a view? After all, they saw it with their very own eyes. Similarly, in the matter of metaphysical concepts, “it is our language itself that pleads most constantly in their favor.” The “error and deceptiveness of things” is thus a result of grammar because it follows from being “under an invisible spell” whereby the positing of a noun together with a predicate engenders belief in the reality of the object thus named as the compelling force, the subject, of that predicate.<sup>38</sup> Much like the Buddha, Nietzsche attacks this linguistic bewitchment even at the level of the “I.” For example, in positing *I think, therefore I am* as an unassailable bulwark against doubt, Descartes’s “belief in grammar,” Nietzsche tells us, forces him into the error of taking the subject of the sentence, *I*, as the true and necessary condition of that which is conditioned, *think*.<sup>39</sup> Nietzsche, ever the exemplary psychologist, notes that we may indeed *feel* as though we have willed a thought (and hence established the certitude of the *I*/soul), but this feeling only occurs in retrospect. It follows from our “habit of ignoring and deceiving ourselves about this duality by means of the synthetic concept of the ‘I.’” This subjective feeling and the habit it engenders unleashes “a whole chain of erroneous conclusions, and, consequently, false evaluations” about the very nature of “thinking,” such that it is compelled by a substance (the subject *I*) endowed with certain properties of agency (the predicate *think*).<sup>40</sup> If an analysis of the mere grammatical function of *I* reveals such serious fissures in the construction of what Nietzsche calls a “moral-optical delusion”<sup>41</sup> and Laruelle, “a transcendental hallucination,” or simply a “World,” how much more destabilizing will a rigorous investigation into the rules and patterns—the general “syntax”—that comprise that World’s system be? Note that Nietzsche is not required to investigate the ontological status of the concepts that he names (identity, permanence, etc.). He is able to raise the specter of implausibility at the very level of “the first conditions of the metaphysics of language,” or at that point where such explanatory concepts

burrow into the roots of grammatical reasoning. In providing the example that he does (God), Nietzsche signals the enormity of what is at stake. In approaching the matter grammatically rather than conceptually, he, furthermore, is able to reveal that “the ‘true world’” has been erected on a contradiction of the “real world.” This, he says, is “a symptom of *degenerating* life” because it unveils our refusal to confront what Althusser called, nearly a century later, “the real conditions” of our existence. Nietzsche continues:

There is no sense in spinning yarns about another world, provided, of course, that we do not possess a mighty instinct which urges us to slander, belittle, and cast suspicion on this life: in this case we should be avenging ourselves on this life with a phantasmagoria of “another,” of a “better” life.<sup>42</sup>

The problem, of course, is that we *do* possess such a mighty instinct. What makes this drive toward the phantasmagoric so delusive is that its trigger is concealed in the very structure of our language. In similar fashion, when Laruelle speaks of the “transcendental hallucination of the Real” he is not making an ontological statement. He is, rather, pointing to a “grammatical” confusion. Like Nietzsche, he therefore employs a linguistic concept to capture this confusion: “amphiboly” or “amphibology.” This term denotes an ambiguity of meaning arising from an uncertain grammatical construction rather than from the import of words themselves. A famous example of an amphiboly is no less than the Second Amendment to the United States *Constitution*, which states: “A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.” We know from subsequent commentary that that the right to bears arms does not pertain exclusively to state militias; it is in fact extended to private citizens. But the grammatical formation of the statement arguably invites such a conclusion. A more humorous example comes from Groucho Marx: “One morning, I shot an elephant in my pajamas.” The amphiboly, the unclear referent of “in my pajamas,” sets up the punchline: “How he got into my pajamas I’ll never know.” We saw instances of Western Buddhist amphibology earlier, where, for example, the Buddhist concept of “no-self” is confused, and thereby seamlessly substituted, for the Real self-void. This substitution is a decisive operation in the positing of the specific Buddhist World. It is the operation “by which the Real is substituted by the transcendental or by thought.” Later, the ubiquitous term *The Dharma* will be nominated as the transcendental pivot on which this syntactical operation turns in Western Buddhism. My purpose here is to introduce the amphibology that we term “buddhistic decision” as “endless circular intersubstitution,” as an “unstoppable



movement of circularity.” As we have seen in our Western Buddhist examples, this circularity “is not marked by reciprocity but rather radical asymmetry.” The superior term is invariably the Buddhist postulate while the “inferior term in this asymmetry is the Real.”<sup>43</sup>

The simplest sense of buddhistic decision can be gleaned from that last statement. In this sense, decision is simply *choosing* Western Buddhism’s term over the Real term. An interpellated Western Buddhist is thus a person who always, perhaps even reflexively, decides on the Buddhist term. Again, while this statement may appear tautological, it is not at all self-evident from Buddhist rhetoric, whereby a Western Buddhist must necessarily decide *for the Real* (as emptiness, no-self, suffering, etc.), of which her tradition’s term is, at best, but an inferior first name. We all know the rudiment of decision in this sense. The economist H. A. Simon defines it as: “the process at the end of which each moment one chooses one [option among] alternatives.” The simplicity of that formulation, of course, masks the complexity of decision making, involving as it does psychological, economic, and numerous other factors. Yet, this is a process in which we all continually engage, and an endpoint at which we continually arrive. We know, too, how consequential a choice is both collectively, in the continuation or dissolution of a World, and individually, in the creation of a life. Simon thus adds that “The series of decisions that determine behavior during a given amount of time can be called a strategy.”<sup>44</sup> Deciding on Western Buddhism is a strategy. It involves desiring the promise of the Western Buddhist term, choosing the Western Buddhist resolution of the amphiboly, and speaking and acting—living—in accord with that syntax.

We can understand this process as the psychological or affective aspect of decision. The personal reasons that drive people to choose the Western Buddhism strategy are of course infinitely varied and complex. I just mean to suggest that among these reasons is the shared one of an emotionally charged *desire*. Ironically, given its rhetoric of desire, Western Buddhism elicits many desires in its subjects. It is in fact a veritable desiring-machine. Some objects of its desire-production are explicit, such as enlightenment, awakening, happiness, non-judgmentalism, equanimity, and the plethora of neuroscientific promises of reduced stress, a healthier brain, increased wellbeing, and so on. Some are implicit, covert, or unacknowledged, such as consummate plenitude, unscathed transmigration, spiritual superiority, cosmic embrace, and so forth. Psychologist Nietzsche, of course, already hinted at this desirous-emotional charge behind the masking of “the real world” with his choice of the term “fetishism.”

The role of personal desire in deciding on the specific terms and overall strategy of Western Buddhism is certainly an interesting and important element in considering the nature of buddhistic decision. We have to leave it behind, however, in order to discuss an aspect that, being less subjective, is more consequential for the present critique. Following Laruelle, we consider this aspect to be an “operation” internal to the very workings of Western Buddhism. The term “workings,” of course, like its synonyms “structure” and “system,” conceals the infinite details that comprise the system. I address this point in a moment. I make it here in order to throw light, once again, on the fact that “Western Buddhism” names a matrix of *production*. Yes, Western Buddhism *works*. But how does it work? It works to effectively produce exactly whatever it is programmed to produce,<sup>45</sup> for example, concepts that articulate a World; anthropotechnical practices that enact and inculcate that World; institutions that preserve these concepts and practices and generate a charismatic aura around them; interpersonal relations that elicit and sustain desire for the lived effect of the World’s promised charism; subjects who embody, fashion, and reproduce that World. Decision is the operation that enables all such production necessary to erect and preserve the specific World called *Western Buddhism*. We can therefore consider this internal operation to be Western Buddhism’s “Principal and formalized invariant or structure.”<sup>46</sup> As we will see in Part 3, without this invariant “Western Buddhism” will name not, as it in fact currently does, an integral system of thought and practice, but a chaos of mere *chôra*, or of human cultural material rendered ideologically inert (and hence interpretively up for grabs). Significantly, Western Buddhism itself is unconscious of this operation; it could “not indicate it without also simultaneously . . . affecting its own identity.”<sup>47</sup> This is why I claimed in the Introduction that Buddhism *necessarily* lacks a consequential self-critique. A Buddhism that is aware of its decisional operation, is no longer a *Buddhism*. Such a Buddhism would be a *non-buddhism*, possessing an altogether other identity. This point is important to mention here because it gives a sense of the definitive function served by buddhistic decision. Now, with these introductory remarks, we can look at one of Laruelle’s technical definitions of decision:

The philosophical Decision, variable according to the philosophers, corresponds to a certain invariant, explicit, or repressed distribution of transcendental and empirical functions. Compared to an ensemble of facts known as “empirical,” or a “technico-experimental” work, etc., the philosopher reactivates the decision of the question of the essence of phenomena, which he considers fundamental. He makes a double distinction, that of the empirical

and the *a priori*, whatever it be; then that of the *a priori* and the transcendental, which is an ascent such that he calls it beginning, origin, substance, Being, etc., but which is always presumably authentic reality, equipped with transcendental functions (in a broad sense) . . . Decision is an operation of transcendence which believes (in a naïve and hallucinatory way) in the possibility of a unitary discourse on reality.

As I mentioned earlier, the term *x-buddhism* serves to account for that which is “variable according to the [Buddhists],” to, that is, those representatives of the extraordinarily divergent forms of thought and practice that are burrowed within the term “Buddhism.” In order to explicate Laruelle’s definition, it is necessary to say more about the meaning of this term.<sup>48</sup> The nomenclature that I have been using in this book, *Buddhism* and its major subcategory *Western Buddhism*, denotes an abstract, and abstractly static, whole. An analysis of this whole would reveal it to be an assemblage of cultural-doctrinal systems (doctrine, religion, philosophy, ritual, mythology, fashion, aesthetics, architecture, politics, etc.) that claim an overarching authority concerning human knowledge. The term *x-buddhism* aims to capture two crucial and incontrovertible facts about this abstract whole: (i) it splinters into innumerable variables (as some *x*), and yet, somewhat counterintuitively (ii) it repeats itself incessantly (as *Buddhism*). Concerning the first point, we could study each variable *x*. Such a study would be both diachronic and synchronic, historical and comparative. It would enable us to compile an exhaustive descriptive catalogue of Buddhist communities, graphing their relations and tracing their divergences. In so doing, we would discover differences concerning, for instance, each *x*’s version of the means and end of the whole’s, of *Buddhism*’s, grand authority, in all of its minute detail. From such a study we would begin to see that the whole, Buddhism, breeds virtually interminable interpretation not only of the world, but of *itself*. Thus, Buddhism fractures into unending modifiers while simultaneously retaining its identity. Laruelle terms this enclosed recursive quality “auto-position,” and highlights its importance by dubbing it “the highest formal act of the philosophical Decision.” The act is “formal” because it concerns the “objectification of [*x*-buddhism] itself”<sup>49</sup>—the result of the fracture is always some *form*. Buddhism posits Buddhism. (In a recurring theme of this book, this sentence appears self-evident until we recall that Buddhism claims to posit not the World but the world, not itself but *the Real*, *reality as it is*, *things as they are*, *thusness*.) This self-positing conceit of some given form of Buddhism, some *x*-buddhism, also carries a spatial sense. Here, auto-position means that the *x*-buddhism occupies “the dimension of ideal transcendence” over all other forms of thought. This

position ensures that Buddhism remains external to, over and above, the realms of knowledge—the nature of consciousness, phenomena, causality, personhood, science, etc.—over which it inevitably prevails. Such transcendence, of course, also further ensures the force of the principle of sufficient Buddhism. As our second point articulates, the obligation to maintain sufficiency means that auto-position entails “repetition of a more or less differentiated Same.” This “Same” results from the “certain invariant” that Laruelle refers to in the definition above. That is, a study of the  $x$ -variables would generate clues as to the very function that is producing such difference-of-the-same. After all, each modifier indicates membership in the single set, *Buddhism*. “Decision” is the cut in each  $x$  that determines its identity as a member of the set. At the same time, it is that which constitutes the identity of the set as a whole as “an operation of transcendence which believes (in a naïve and hallucinatory way) in the possibility of a unitary discourse on reality.”

It is this “operation of transcendence” that establishes Western Buddhism as a form of faith rather than of “first-science” or even of knowledge. In Laruelle’s trenchant formulation, one that should ring true to Buddhist ears, this operation marks each  $x$ -buddhism as “a faith, with the sufficiency of faith, intended by necessity to remain empty but which necessarily evades this void by its repopulation with objects and foreign goals provided by experience, culture, history, language, etc.”<sup>50</sup> As such, if Western Buddhism currently comprises knowledge, it is necessarily a visionary form of knowledge. If it comprises a science (even in Laruelle’s denuded sense) it is a visionary form of science. If Western Buddhism is to contribute otherwise to human knowledge, the repudiation of the principle of sufficient Buddhism is unavoidable. This repudiation, in turn, requires the annulment of buddhistic decision. Our task now is then to investigate that which instigates this vision, or, as Laruelle calls it, this hallucination, in the first place, namely, the “repressed distribution of transcendental and empirical functions.”

I said that each  $x$  is marked by a cut that determines its identity as a member of the *Buddhism* set. In keeping with this fractal imagery, we can now view the entire edifice of Buddhism as possessing this same cut. “Decision” thus indicates a *scission* between Buddhism’s “transcendental and empirical functions.” So, in order to discern Buddhism’s identity, we need to perform not an *analysis*, based on its self-imagined unitary nature, but rather what Laruelle calls a *dualysis*, based on its unacknowledged, because unconscious, split nature. It is this scission that creates the gap we saw at work earlier, when, for instance, the Real first name “self-void” became confused for the Buddhist vision of “no-self.”

It is within this gap, in other words that the amphiboly occurs, permitting the frictionless (mis)turn from the Real to the hallucinated material. I think the clearest way to see this function in Buddhism is to consider the role played by the concept of *The Dharma*.

An ubiquitous term from the founding of Buddhism, The Dharma is “the sum total of the ways in which the Buddha and his disciples after him tried to communicate . . . the experience of Enlightenment to others.” To the uninitiated observer this totality is extraordinarily complex. To the practitioner, however, “it is really very simple.” For, “the Dharma is nothing other than the means to this experience.” It is, in other words, “*the way to Enlightenment*.”<sup>51</sup> As its very root meaning denotes, The Dharma literally *establishes, supports, sustains, and preserves* the decisional operation that defines Buddhism.<sup>52</sup> In the several instances that we have come across it in the present text, additional meanings of this extremely multivalent term are apparent. When Kabat-Zinn speaks of his Mindfulness doctrine as a “translation of a universal understanding,” he is invoking the ancient Indian sense of The Dharma as the cosmic principle of truth and order, somewhat comparable to the Christian idea of *logos*. Buddhist teacher Stephen Batchelor echoes this meaning when he speaks of “the dharma” as comprising a “universal set of values” that is impervious to the endless bickering of those (non-Buddhist) practitioners who deal in mere “truth-claims.” Unlike such claims, “which will inevitably conflict with other truth-claims . . . dharma practice is not about being ‘right’ or ‘wrong.’”<sup>53</sup> The reason, of course, is that The Dharma is also the fundamental force animating *proper conduct, duty, right, justice*. It is, in short, the Universal Law, the obeying or flouting of which determines the ultimate character of one’s life, life after life. When Batchelor calls for “a *praxis-based*, post-metaphysical vision of the dharma,” furthermore, he is invoking an additional meaning of The Dharma, namely, as signifying *the Buddha’s teaching*. We saw earlier that Ken Jones means the same thing when he insists that his socially conscious engaged Buddhism is “firmly based on the core tenets of the Dharma.” In Buddhist discourse, however, this sense of the term as *teaching* carries with it the former sense; hence, the Buddha’s teaching is *that which is grounded in the cosmic order*. Buddhist teachers, from the Buddha on, can thus speak grandly of “the eternal and timeless dharma,” which infuses with the lifeblood of enlightenment the dharma-gates, dharma-lineages, dharma-transmissions, dharma-talks, dharma-heirs, dharma-names, dharma-friends, dharma-body, dharma-protectors, dharma-realms, in short, the treasury of the true dharma eye, of the universal Buddhist dispensation. (Note that our terms are

singular—*The Dharma, the teaching, the dispensation*—further indicating the unitary nucleus active within Buddhism’s plural *x* forms.)

In terms unintended by Sangharakshita’s conventional presentation above, I, too, view the function of The Dharma as being “very simple.” The Dharma is, namely, simply the pivot on which the empirical-transcendental axis turns. It is simultaneously the warden of reality’s inventory and the guarantor of that inventory’s warranty. This dual function means that The Dharma must necessarily split reality. The totality of minute elements that comprise some *x*-buddhist teaching is intended, of course, to constitute a perspicuous, indeed an “enlightened,” description of the immanent world. (Additional meanings of *dharma* as *atomic constituents of reality* and *elemental properties of experience*, are apparent here.<sup>54</sup>) These features are thus held to be empirically verifiable. As such, the *x*-buddhist teaching assumes the attitude of a science: it faithfully tracks phenomena. It does so, moreover, at the risk of its own sufficiency since a science-thought is perpetually testing, adjusting, eliminating, reformulating, etc., even its most fundamental hypotheses and conclusions. This gesture, finally, requires that the teaching hover unfailingly near the Real, looking out toward the world. We know, however, that this last requirement is not met. The misturnings that we witnessed are the result of a reflexive, specifically *Buddhist*, impulse to turn back toward the origin of the concept, toward precisely The Dharma. The Dharma is thus the “a priori” that Laruelle mentions in our definition. It is the prior “authentic reality” that ensures the verity of the posited empirical claims of *x*-buddhism. Significantly, however, unlike the presumably immanent, thus empirically verifiable, features of that teaching (suffering-desire, self-void, nihilism, etc.), the guarantor is posited ideally, and thus “equipped with transcendental functions.” One of these functions is, as I have already said, that of cosmic underwriter for the teaching. This function, however, is fulfilled at the cost of other, further debilitating, ones. In order to guarantee the necessary warrant of sufficiency, The Dharma must mix its transcendental idealism into its ostensibly immanent materialism. *Mixture*, being “characteristic of specifically [buddhistic] unitary syntaxes,” is, in fact, a “first name for the [buddhistic] Decision.”<sup>55</sup> This intermixture of immanent and transcendent features is responsible for the unscientific “visionary” nature of Buddhist knowledge. *Śūnyatā* as “pure meta-sign and empty element” constituting “the precondition for [some given *x*-buddhism’s] effective functioning,” to return to Eagleton’s formulation, must not be permitted to remain immanently empty. Mixed with the tessellation of postulates that constitute it as a properly *dharmic*, hence transcendental, term, *x*-buddhist *emptiness* becomes, as Timothy Morton

informed us above, a near-miraculously, if inconstant and “shimmering,” productive *fullness*. It is in this manner that decision implicates Western Buddhism in perpetual auto-position and auto-donation: Buddhism is that which posits *Buddhism* and gives *Buddhism*. If it fashioned itself as “a faith, with the sufficiency of faith,” we would not have to bother with a critique since a faith requires no justification for positing and giving itself: it requires only faith. Western Buddhism, however, as the progeny of the “Knower of the World” (*lokavidū*), fashions itself as a rigorous organon of *things as they are*, and so requires the scrutiny that only a science-thought enables.<sup>56</sup> Laruelle thus offers a key to further “dualysis” with the following description of decision.

We will say that Philosophical Decision is the Idea of a *relative-absolute whole*. Its most encompassing and least detailed mechanism can in effect be described ... as a structure in 2/3 terms, as a Dyad + One.<sup>57</sup> ... First, an identity of 2/3 (insofar as the third term, synthesis, is immanent to the dyad, philosophy being in need of itself). Second, a 3/2 identity (insofar as the term of synthesis is transcendent to the dyad, philosophy being in excess to itself).<sup>58</sup>

This “fractional matrix in 2/3 terms” (read as “two three,” not “two thirds”) is the “most universal invariant trait” of Buddhism. In the most general terms, we can therefore say that it constitutes the *absolute* aspect of the buddhistic decisional whole. At the same time it produces the algorithmic function within Buddhism that initiates the recursive procedure out of which a virtually infinite sequence of x-buddhisms might be generated. As such, it also constitutes decision’s *relative* aspect. We can consider this *relative-absolute whole* in more specific terms, whereby the “matrix” might operate as follows. I nominate *saṃsāra* (*S*) and *pratīyasamutpāda* (*P*) as the most viable Buddhist candidates for the dyad because of their role as succinct and acute descriptors of the Buddhist World.<sup>59</sup> *S* means “the world,” empirical reality as a circular maelstrom of being. The individual beings who inhabit the world are driven into potentially endless transmigration by the forces of desire and ignorance. As such, *S*, as the popular Buddhist trope has it, is an ocean of suffering. *P* means “contingency,” the causal, or better, conditioning, mechanism that determines both the being’s perpetuation in *S* (rebirth and suffering) and, potentially, its cessation (*nirvāṇa*).<sup>60</sup> As “the heart of the Buddha’s doctrine,” *P* is “the central principle of the Buddha’s teaching, constituting both the objective content of its liberating insight and the germinative source for its vast network of doctrines and disciplines.”<sup>61</sup> The canonical formula for this mechanism goes: “When this is, that is; this arising, that arises. When this is not, that is not; this ceasing, that ceases.” In its Western

Buddhist usage, *P* thus denotes the interdependent, mutually conditioned, nature of all phenomena.<sup>62</sup> As conditioned being (*S*) and conditioning Being (*P*), this dyad can be seen as the definitive (absolute) Buddhist scaffolding on which the minute (relative) *x* particulars are mounted. *S* is the world given to our senses. It is the unimaginable agglomeration of beings, from infinitesimal subatomic particles to oceans and mountains and planets and galaxies, and to the teeming crush of bacterial, animal, and human organisms that populate them to the immense multiversal receptacle that contains it all, from brute matter to enlightened sentience, swirling and undulating eternally, each element arising, persisting, conjugating with interminable other forms, dissolving, then disappearing. Why is this “whole mass of suffering” the way that it is? *P* is both the explanation and the solution, for “Who sees interdependent origination (*P*) sees The Dharma; who sees The Dharma sees interdependent origination.” Whatever “the Buddha” might have meant here, I suggest *we* understand it in all of its multivalent glory.

Let’s just note in passing that within the articulation of a unitary discourse like Buddhism, “the world” transmutes into “the World.” The world, immanent and material, empirically given, is, within the very articulation, transformed into the World, transcendent and ideal, buddhistically given. Since, however, a committed Western Buddhist would deny this distinction—for he or she has, by definition, made the decision that the World *is* precisely the world—we have to take a different tack. A more substantial critique requires that we identify the *internal* operation that renders this decision cause for conceptual hallucination rather than for a generically “liberating insight.” The *S-P* combination is, in Laruelle’s formulation, “a Dyad of contrasted terms and a divided Unity, immanent and transcendent to the Dyad.”<sup>63</sup> In our definition, this “immanent” state of affairs is represented as “a structure in  $2/3$  terms, as a Dyad+One.” The Dharma (*D*), as the lawful function that synthesizes the dyad of *S* and *P*, is the +one that, moreover, transforms the empirical 2 into a rational 3. In order to serve as the dyad’s synthesizing (and necessary) guarantor within the empirical world that the *S-P* dyad aims to lend liberating intelligibility, however, *D* must simultaneously be *extrinsic* to the world given as the dyad. Thus, the “matrix” may also be understood as a “ $3/2$  identity.” The unity of the ostensibly empirical and thus phenomenologically verifiable 2 is divided and then subsumed within a transcendently grounded 3 (the 2 plus the 1). The base assumption here is so crucial that it bears repeating: the structure, the dyad+one, obtains nowhere, bears no sense, outside of this decisional act.



Again, the believer will object. And she must! The operation, however, constitutes an inescapable circularity, whereby the premise (*D*) is contained in the conclusion (*S-P*), and the conclusion, in the premise. In other words, the entire decisional structure of Buddhism amounts to an *explanans* (*D*: the teaching, cosmic structure), that is already present in every instance of the very *explanandum* (*S-P*: phenomenal manifestation), and an *explanandum*, every instance of which already attests to the truth of the *explanans*.<sup>64</sup> In x-buddhistic terms: The *saṃsāra-pratītyasamutpāda* nexus is visible through The Dharma, and The Dharma is visible in the contingent swirl of the world that it, The Dharma, minutely indexes. Indeed, it is true: whoever sees interdependent origination operating in the world sees The Dharma; and whoever sees The Dharma operating in the world sees interdependent origination. Decision constitutes the specifically x-buddhist vision of the world. It is in embodying this vision that the practitioner becomes “the shape of the World.”<sup>65</sup>

It may help to clarify this somewhat technical explanation of decision by returning briefly to the “real world/true world” distinction discussed earlier. In synthesizing the two terms of the dyad, The Dharma ensures the dyad’s unity, verity, and sufficiency. However, being necessarily *external* to the dyad, The Dharma also creates the division between the “real world” of the (immanent) dyad and the “true world” of its (transcendental) grounding. “Real” has a valuable resonance for us since it is the term that lies at the heart of this critique. We will return to this point in the following chapter. Ultimately, however, “apparent world” is more salient than “real world.”<sup>66</sup> Nietzsche’s ultimate goal in introducing this distinction was, after all, to abolish “the greatest error that has ever been committed.” That error is generated in the metaphysical pretense that we possess “a criterion of reality in the forms of reason” on which we erect the “true world,” and, along with it, the very notion of the *mere* appearance of the “apparent” world. For the x-buddhist, The Dharma constitutes such a criterion. Nietzsche’s fuller statement is instructive for our purposes.

This is the greatest error that has ever been committed, the essential fatality of error on earth: one believed one possessed a criterion of reality in the forms of reason—while in fact one possessed them in order to become master of reality, in order to misunderstand reality in a shrewd manner—

And behold: now the world became false, and precisely on account of the properties that constitute its reality: change, becoming, multiplicity, opposition, contradiction, war.

Nietzsche, recall, wants us to see the reality-constituting terms that institute this error—change, becoming, ultimate truth, The Dharma, etc.—as fetishistic explanatory concepts plucked from the tree of reason rather than gathered along “the road to science.” We are involved here in a “fiction of a world that corresponds to our desires: [a] psychological trick,” he says.

The intention [is] to deceive oneself in a useful way; the means, the invention of formulas and signs by means of which one could reduce the confusing multiplicity to a purposive and manageable schema.<sup>67</sup>

Again, as interesting as it would be to illuminate this affective, psychological, aspect of decision, it would not get us very far. If the Western Buddhist World is for the nonbeliever but a “psychological trick” it is for the believer, as Stephen Batchelor taught us above, a “universal set of values” impervious to the “right” and “wrong” of mere “truth-claims”; and the attempt to sort out the difference leads to nothing but fruitless bickering. Uncovering the cognitive aspect is another matter entirely. In delineating the internal grammar of decision, we have a truly powerful instrument of critique. It enables us, believer and nonbeliever alike, to identify the character of Western Buddhist discourse (speech, text, argumentation, rhetoric). Most importantly, perhaps, it allows us to consider the *human* consequences of the main features of this discourse: a form of life ensnared in circularity and specularity. “Specularity” refers to the reflexive tendency within Western Buddhism to gaze into the world and see reflected back its own theories, postulates, categories, etc. Specularity ensures that the world becomes, for the Western Buddhist, the mirror of Western Buddhism. Specularity thus offers a seductive means to, in Nietzsche’s words above, “reduce the confusing multiplicity” of possible ideologies “to a purposive and manageable schema.” It is the decision to accept this image in the mirror of the world that catalyzes a person’s interpellation into the Western Buddhist thought-world. Circularity ensures Western Buddhism’s infinite capacity to interpret the world. The practitioner can rest assured that she possesses the “criterion of reality” that renders all things buddhistizable.<sup>68</sup> Finally, in giving thought to the real life effects of decision on an actual living human being, some of my readers may find that Laruelle’s occasionally violent language is not only justified but imperative. Let’s imagine you conclude that there is at least some merit to the claim that decision usurps human interests in the name of a visionary form of knowledge that, crucially, presents itself as a science of the Real. If so, is not language, however figurative, that speaks of victimhood, insurrection, the x-buddhist arsenal, amputation, and even murder, suddenly pertinent? Perhaps the

decided Western Buddhist will still say *no!* Well, I suppose there will always be bickering among incommensurable communities of thought. To the *undecided* observer, one outcome, however, seems likely: Western Buddhist figures who ignore the consequences of the decisional matrix are trading their seats at the savory, if raucous, Great Feast of Knowledge for the arid desert of the New Age apocalypse.

## Immanent Practice

### The great feast of knowledge

Picture the scene: A colossal hall packed full of massive wooden rectangular tables, around which are sitting, standing, pacing, gesticulating the motliest throng of human beings you can imagine. Wealthy and poor, well-dressed and ragged, smart and stupid, saints and monsters, the ruined and the saved; at turns pensive, polite, inflamed, and furious, merging, submerging, coalescing, colliding in excited anticipation. The hall reverberates with the raucous roar of booming voices. The Great Feast of Knowledge is at hand! The feast is a place where ideas—concepts, beliefs, myths, truths, fantasies, hopes and dreams—are subjected to a ravaging ordeal; they are: exalted, weaponized, hunted down, beaten, contested, defended, slaughtered, thrown into the fire, served up, desecrated, devoured. This feast has been unfolding since the first primitive grunts of human communication. Though refined through the centuries, the feast is still permeated by the most primeval dual need of *homo sapiens* ape: security and belonging. At the imposing entrance stands a guard. His task is to collect the weapons from the grand disciplinary forces seeking entrance to the feast. Philosophy, History, Physics, Literature, Law—everyone may enter, but first shorn of sword and insignia. Look! Buddhism is arriving, arrayed with its battery of concepts, inexhaustible treasures illuminating the darkness of the world; its *bodhisattva* field marshals armed with seductively confident arguments; its Buddha, glowing with the sovereign nimbus of the thaumaturge. Stripped down, deprived of their regency, institutionally indigent, the Buddhist agents enter the hall indistinguishable from everyone else. They take their seats amid the chaotic swarm. The struggle begins.

The Western Buddhist *no!* that I supposed, rightly or wrongly, at the end of the previous chapter, should not be passed over too quickly. I also mentioned there the endless bickering (Nietzsche's "war"?) that typically characterizes

incommensurable communities of thought. Almost invariably, what follows this bickering is the end of dialogue, each party retreating back into the secure warm bosom of its community. If my critique is to have any effect beyond a self-selected group of already critical-minded readers, it is crucial that it offer a way through this quagmire. The trick, of course, is that the way proposed be agreed on by all parties. That rarely happens in real life. The trope of The Great Feast of Knowledge, however, is intended as a way forward *in thought* at least. I will say more in a moment about that idea specifically. First, some exploration of the very idea of incommensurability and how it might, paradoxically, enable even the most recalcitrant reader's reception of this critique.

As Laruelle claims for non-philosophy, I claim for the present book, and for non-buddhism specifically, namely, that it offers "thought for [Western Buddhism], but which [Western Buddhism] does not want, and which it resists *de jure*." Of course it resists! This critique is claiming, after all that Western Buddhism currently has more in common with a "psychological trick" than with a "science." I acknowledge the necessity of this resistance even though, as I have emphasized throughout this book, Western Buddhism (Buddhism, x-buddhism, Mindfulness, Zen) *fashions itself* as something like a rigorous science. Still, to entertain the possibility that it "relies on this thought to make something other than a simple transcendental illusion which is ignorant of itself" is a lot to ask a fan of Western Buddhism. This is true even though I further claim that this thought aims to relate to Western Buddhism as a "new type of 'object,'" one which Buddhism itself has perhaps concealed from us, and "which can do so without destroying [Buddhism] through positivism."<sup>1</sup> There seems to be some element in our respective approaches that marks as adversarial this x-buddhism/non-buddhism encounter. To leave it at that, however, would be a grave mistake, one that undermines the very intent of my critique. It would be equally unproductive to leave the seemingly intractable issue of incommensurability unaddressed. The Polish microbiologist Ludwik Fleck calls these differing approaches *thought styles*. To psychoanalyze our feast participants for a moment, we might say that their respective thought style is a mere *symptom*, a manifest sign of an underlying identification; it marks the place—the "(w)hole" of discourse—that the participant has "fallen into." A person's thought style thus reveals his or her subscription to a program of knowledge. More specifically, Fleck defines a thought style as "the readiness for directed perception and appropriate assimilation of what has been perceived."<sup>2</sup> He explains that what directs perception and determines appropriate assimilation is the particular *thought collective* that produces a thought style. But first, I should mention the

role that *mood* plays in the allure of ideas. Although Fleck is taking the natural sciences as his example of the genesis and development of knowledge, anyone referring to religious material such as Buddhism should recognize the qualities of this “mood.”

[The mood] is expressed as a common *reverence* for an ideal; in the *belief* that what is being revered can be achieved only in the distant, perhaps infinitely distant future; in the *glorification* of dedicating oneself to its service; in a definite *hero worship* and a distinct *tradition*.<sup>3</sup>

Significantly, the symptomatic nature of a thought style ensures that the interlocutor employs it reflexively. This reflexivity, in fact, marks the successful subjectivization of the person within a particular ideological apparatus; or, in Laruelle’s terms, it is indicative of the force of decision in assuming a World. It is this apparatus that Fleck refers to as a *thought collective*. A committed Western Buddhist practitioner is called to, is made to desire, Buddhism as a system of knowledge on hearing the promise of its powers. But that practitioner must then spend time within the institutional structure that encodes the master’s knowledge, being formed as the “special ‘carrier;’” as the embodiment, of that knowledge via the thought style of the collective.

A “thought collective” [is] a community of persons mutually exchanging ideas or maintaining intellectual interaction . . . The individual within the collective is never, or hardly ever, conscious of the prevailing thought style, which almost always exerts an absolutely compulsive force upon his thinking and with which it is not possible to be at variance.<sup>4</sup>

It is this tendency toward style invariance combined with institutionally reinforced personal identity formation that foreshadows incommensurability. An *astronomer* might listen “with respect” (as we like to believe) as her *astrologer* interlocutor explains the impact of Venus’s rising in Gemini on the love life of earthlings, but she won’t be buying any of it. Conversely, the astrologer, on hearing from the astronomer that Venus’s atmosphere consists of 96 percent carbon dioxide, 3.5 percent nitrogen, and less than 1 percent of carbon monoxide, argon, sulfur dioxide, and water vapor, might, while feigning interest, secretly believe his interlocutor to be “trapped in the intellect,” and thus wholly missing the point. Both interlocutors are “experts on Venus.” But to each, the other’s thought style, and by extension institutional thought collective, is deeply misguided, even foolish. The institutional inculcation that is necessary for the formation of the practitioner simultaneously limits the possibility of his or her thought style.

Because it belongs to a community, the thought style of the collective undergoes social reinforcement ... It constrains the individual by determining "what can be thought in no other way."<sup>5</sup>

At The Great Feast of Knowledge, Western Buddhism must enter into dialogue with disparate thought collectives. Imagine, for example, the conversation between agents of, say, Biology and Buddhism on the necessity of lust/*lobha* for human existence, for reproduction and perpetuation of the species, for instance. Such an encounter, such a fusion, creates a new thought collective, however fleeting and begrudged. For, a nonnegotiable premise of The Great Feast of Knowledge is that all disciplines *think*. At the feast, *thought circulates freely*. Among other consequences, this feature accounts for the possibility of what we all know to be true of systems of thought, even the most sacrosanct: they change. Hence, as Fleck says, a "fundamental phenomenon of epistemology is the *fact* that the circulation of thought is always related, in principle to its transformation."<sup>6</sup>

So, our reflection on incommensurability has a hint of promise. But, as the rowdy medieval image of the feast is meant to convey, it is a promise that carries with it a certain threat of conceptual anarchy. For who can say what might be bred in the dregs of thought's circulation? Who can say whether the trajectory of "transformation" might not be mutilation, defacement, undesired mutation, perversion? Yet, as the great champion of the unbridled anarchy of thought, Paul Feyerabend, insists, perhaps knowledge absolutely *depends on* the communal sounding of discordant local knowledges:

Knowledge ... is not a series of self-consistent theories that converges toward an ideal view; it is not a gradual approach to the truth. It is rather an ever increasing *ocean of mutually incompatible (and perhaps even incommensurable) alternatives*, each single theory, each fairy tale, each myth that is part of the collection forcing others into greater articulation and all of them contributing, via this process of competition, to the development of our consciousness.<sup>7</sup>

But before we celebrate our escape from the morass of incommensurability, Feyerabend reminds us that this turbulent ocean of knowledge is populated not only by the "lucubrations of experts" but also by "ancient and modern prejudices ... and the fantasies of cranks."<sup>8</sup> How can we determine the difference? By what criterion can we judge?

To answer this question, we have to turn once again to the idea of the Real.

## Thinking from the Real-One

Recall Kafka's figure standing before the law. The law is nowhere to be seen or heard or otherwise apprehended by the senses. Neither is it an invisible mystical force available only to nonsensorial intuition. Neither is it the product of reason or the concoction of superstition. The law is real but it does not exist. The man from the country is evidence of that conundrum because he is its effect; he is a lived instance of the law's real authority. Seeking entrance to the law, the man is compelled by the law to stand before the law. With the devotion of a saint, he endures in order to behold the face *of* the law, to gain liberating insight *into* the law. But since there never has been an outside to the law, such a relationship is simply not possible. So, he waits in vain. To stand thus is to stand *already*, it is to have *always* stood, before the face of the law.<sup>9</sup>

It is the same for the agents who submit themselves to unarming at the door to the feast. The decimation of their conceptual arsenal *was already the case*. The stripping of their power regalia *had already occurred*. The depotentializing of their charisma took effect *ab aeterno*. The Great Feast of Knowledge is where *World's* collide. The background to this struggle, though, has always been and will always be *the* world, the "black universe," itself. Seeking a secure place on which to stand, yearning for membership in a community of Wisdom, "the human gropes in the World," says Laruelle, but "the World floats in the Universe, powerless to touch its borders." Incommensurability, the ring of dissonant siren songs, the violent commotion of the multitude defending cherished views, the heart strings' refusal to be plucked by the soul's eternal vibrato—this is all evidence of the good news:

Humans toil the Earth, live in the World, think according to the Universe.

The Earth is our ground, the World our neighbor, the Universe our secret.

We already know that we, us human beings, derive our material sustenance from the earth. We have been reminded by thinkers like Marx, Althusser, Nietzsche, and Laruelle that in inhabiting a specific World we reify community and forge identity. Now, we are faced with the proposition that our thinking is somehow properly bound to "the Universe." What can this mean? In the terms of Kafka's fable, we said that "the law" is the cause of the effects we witnessed. We can now say that that is because "the law" determined, in the last instance, the man from the country's *thinking*. The two, cause and effect, the law and the thinking, are indistinguishable. And yet, the law possesses no actual content, much less



literal being (hence my use of scare quotes). Yet, as I hope to show, it still makes sense to say that “it” has force, that it exerts an influence. Its influence, moreover, is exerted unilaterally, from its side only. Most significantly, perhaps, the law is wholly foreclosed to anyone who would enter. It inheres solely within itself, unmixed with foreign objects and desires, undivided by dueling disciples and decisions, for “the Universe is not reflected in another universe.”<sup>10</sup>

These statements are from one of Laruelle’s most experimental texts, “On the Black Universe.” Elsewhere, he confesses that he is practicing a “poetry of thought.”<sup>11</sup> However obliquely and experimentally, it is clear, though, that he is speaking about his most important topic: “the One.” Synonymous with “the Real,” the One is equally the pivot on which the present critique turns. While, believe it or not, Laruelle’s strange text may, in the end, be our surest guide to the One, we will have to wind our way along a sturdier path. For, as the cosmic imagery and the whisper of a “secret” should amply warn us, we are treading perilous terrain. We have already seen how suddenly the road to science can turn toward the New Age desert; how suddenly an organon of knowledge can mutate into a weapon of ideology; how suddenly a perspicuous human insight can morph into an hallucinated vision. We must tread carefully.

Before setting out, it might be of help to mention briefly that it is precisely this danger that accounts for the character of the approach I have been employing. Some readers may be scratching their heads at Laruelle’s method, its difficulty and abstraction, its reluctance to engage specific examples from the history of philosophy, its weird vocabulary. I have been culling Laruelle with awareness of the fact that my readers are accustomed to a much more reader-friendly Western Buddhist discourse. I am even more acutely aware of the close correspondence between the spirit of this critique and that of Buddhism itself. The difficulties inherent in borrowing from Laruelle are unavoidable because they arise from the dire and absolute necessity of not instituting yet another iteration of x-buddhism, much less another idealist mirage in the New Age desert. The history of Buddhism is brimming with examples of internecine struggles for dominance. *Pace* the apostles of “One Dharma,” the history of Buddhism down to the present day has largely been the history of institutional and doctrinal competition. Although I claim that the present critique is of a fundamentally different genre than, say, reform literature, I also fully expect most readers to resist that claim. In fact, in the spirit of *The Great Feast of Knowledge* and Paul Feyerabend’s anarchy of ideas and Ludwik Fleck’s incommensurability of thought styles, I welcome such resistance. The greater danger lies in a certain kind of *acceptance*. Is it not obvious that we *do* possess the mighty, avenging instinct to spin yarns about another

world, as Nietzsche told us about earlier? The incessancy and psychological urgency of our yarn-spinning, so often to our own detriment, means that even non-philosophy or non-buddhism is ripe for insertion into the meaning void. The danger, of course, is that the reader fashions from this material new forms of decision, sufficiency, and hallucination. Hopefully, the virtue of my Laruellean borrowings, however intricate, is that they serve to limit this danger.

We can begin our journey toward the One by offering this provocative paraphrase of Anthony Paul Smith: *resistance* to the One is how x-buddhism produces itself. But this quintessentially x-buddhist “act can only be called resistance because it is always only a relative negation.” That is, it is only a precarious *resistance to* and never an accomplished *negation of* the One or the Real. Smith says further:

[Buddhism’s] attempt to negate the indifference of the Real by attempting to englobe or encompass it with transcendent names like [The Dharma or emptiness or dependent origination, etc.] never actually absolutely negates the Real or the One. It is thus only constituted as resistance to the foreclosed Real’s unrepresentability.<sup>12</sup>

This statement, of course, leaves unsaid just what this foreclosed and unrepresentable Real *is*, but it still contains essential information. There is something about engaging in this very practice of naming that implicates x-buddhism in a certain kind of operation. We saw in the previous section how this operation works. What x-buddhism names pertains to the ostensible constituents of reality (personhood, consciousness, causality, matter, etc.). The pertinence of its names is phenomenologically verifiable; for the naming, being a naming of the world, is a purely immanent practice. However, in order to establish an incontrovertible and unitary sufficiency for this naming as uniquely *x-buddhist*, it must be grounded in another name—an exclusively x-buddhist name—that is transcendent to the empirical naming. If it is not thus externally grounded, as the guests at The Great Feast of Knowledge remind our Buddhist agents, Western Buddhism must be said to be engaging in a completely different kind of operation than it says it is; namely, that of a nondecisional science-thought or of an insufficient non-buddhism. Such an operation requires no transcendently englobing operator, such as The Dharma. With the cancellation of this operator’s warrant, resistance ceases. For, it never entailed resistance *to* the Real because x-buddhism fashions itself as precisely an organon *of* the Real. Rather, it evidenced a refusal to accept the fact that the Real cannot be articulated and dominated—englobed—within x-buddhism’s system of

representation. Recall that the man from the country wholly accepts “the law.” That acceptance is what hails him to the impassable portal. Catalyzed by his idealized vision of the law, he acts and thinks as he does, vainly hoping and scheming and waiting. As long as the man holds that vision, named “the law,” to constitute the law’s reality, he is incapable of any other response. What he is thereby resisting, however, is the *foreclosure* of the law to any sort of “entry.” That which has received the name of the law is as indifferent to this naming as it is to the man’s vision and even less so to his longing. Until he realizes this facet of the law, he remains the interpellated subject of the ideological vision, and not that of what he so desires. Like the identity of an individual, the identity of a system of thought pivots on one’s response to the Real’s foreclosure. Acceptance engenders a (materialist) science-thought and science (in Laruelle’s sense) while resistance engenders (idealist) decision and a hallucinated World. It is in this manner that resistance to the One or the Real is productive.

Of what would *nonresistance* to the Real be productive? What, in other words, would it mean to think *with* the Real or *from* the One? When Buddhism expounds on emptiness, no-self, dependent origination, The Dharma, and so on, it is *thinking the Real*. It is doing so, of course, by thinking *toward* the Real:

Buddhism → the Real

Thinking in this direction is what constitutes Buddhism as the grand system of human enlightenment that it is. It, better than any other form of thought, provides us with the terms that name absolutely exigent and categorically determinate principles of existence. That, at least, is Buddhism’s major, sine qua non, postulate. Moreover, this naming, or more precisely the amphiboly ensuing from its naming, is what constitutes Buddhism’s sufficiency. With Buddhist first names in place of the non-philosophical One, the formula looks like this, for example:

Buddhism → emptiness

Buddhism → ultimate reality

Buddhism → The Dharma

Unlike art and literary fiction, Buddhism does not purport to be offering aesthetic devices or creative metaphors for understanding the Real. Like a science, it claims to give us phenomenologically exact, ideologically unencumbered, access not only to the vault of the Real, but to the Real in the last instance. Emptiness, that is to say, is *ultimately* real. This means that it is real such that all Buddhist postulates are effectively true by virtue of this Real, of emptiness, to which they

are but faithful protectors. Buddhism thus positions itself as nothing less than an organon of the Real; or, in the terms of its self-presentation, than as a means for understanding the real conditions of, and overcoming and ending, the cycle of *dukkha*. With my treatment of decision, I hope to have shown that Buddhism, contrary to this self-presentation, perpetually gives us Buddhism (auto-donation) and produces more Buddhism (auto-position). The result of these two features of Buddhism is that the very postulates that are intended to enlighten us to the truth of emptiness instead are injected *into* emptiness, mixed with emptiness, and confused for emptiness, or whatever other first name Buddhism might offer. (In a similar move in the history of ideas, if in a somewhat different register, the deaf and mute black universe becomes the space of astrological causality, the abode of heaven, the beautiful exteriorization of the soul, and so on.) We can graph this fecund circular mixing as follows:

Buddhism  $\Leftrightarrow$   $x^1$ -buddhism  $\Leftrightarrow$   $x^2$ -buddhism  $\Leftrightarrow$   $x^3$ -buddhism  $\Leftrightarrow$  the Real

The solution to cancelling this circularity is simultaneously the realization of the Buddhist desire for the Real. Again, this is good news. It requires only one modification in Buddhism's operation, namely, the removal of its sufficiency postulate. The removal of this single postulate, of course, produces a significant mutation. It metamorphosizes  $x$ -buddhism (Buddhism, Western Buddhism, Ordinary Mind Zen, Mindfulness, Vajrayana, etc.) into non-buddhism. We can see this point more clearly by considering how, in this regard, non-buddhism is akin to non-Euclidean geometry.<sup>13</sup> Briefly, the difference between Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometry lies in the behavior of a line in space. Euclid's fifth postulate axiomatically assumes parallelism. In upholding this postulate, along with the other four, Euclidean limit the field of possible forms. Rejecting this single postulate, non-Euclidean geometry enables radically different possibilities, such as elliptical and hyperbolic curvature. Significantly, non-Euclidean preserve all of Euclidean geometry except that single postulate. Similarly, by removing the postulate of sufficiency, non-buddhism radically extends the formal possibilities of Buddhism without negating it as such. (This point will be revisited in Part 3.) The first and most far-reaching result of this removal is in Buddhism's relation to the Real, which can now be graphed as:

Buddhism  $\Leftarrow$  the Real

Or, with Buddhist first names:

Buddhism  $\Leftarrow$  emptiness (dependent origination, thusness, etc.)

Rather than enabling an intervention into the Real, rather than producing knowledge *of* it, buddhistic naming and decision has “coagulated, condensed, and refolded the [buddhistic] space in on itself, encumbering it and separating it from its force.”<sup>14</sup> The removal of its encumbering necessity to provide sufficient Wisdom for humanity frees Buddhism to manifest its force as, for instance, potentially valuable human cultural material. Paradoxically, however, it can do so only by forfeiting its claim on the Real. We saw above that Buddhism does not resist the Real *per se*. What it resists is the “foreclosed Real’s unrepresentability.” As the graph indicates, the Real, like Kafka’s law, is closed (*/*) to Buddhism’s conceptual incursions (*→*). *This is precisely as Buddhism itself would have it*, for emptiness must remain empty, the self-void must remain void of self, dependent origination must remain dependently originated and originating. When so allowed, the Real is seen as the *cause*, in the last instance, *of Buddhism* (*←*). *Thusness, things as they are, emptiness, the Real*, etc., come first. The abiding human concern to know, say, *thusness*, causes the endless production of material we know as *Buddhism*. To have it otherwise, to reverse the direction of the arrow, is to confuse *x-buddhism’s representation of thusness* for generic *thusness*, and thereby to commit a parapraxis and to create an amphiboly. So, to answer our question—of what would nonresistance to the Real be productive; what would it mean to think *with* the Real or *from* the One?—we can say that, at a minimum, it would entail the genuinely, radically immanent “pragmatics” that Buddhism so confidently grants itself, as well as a human subject who is faithful to this occasion.

Before presenting Laruelle’s radical means to “thinking (from) the Real-one,” I think it will of help to offer a concrete instance of what is at stake, using an example that is universally dear to Buddhists.

### Interlude: The immanence of an actual suffering

Can anyone with a beating heart take issue with Western Buddhism’s sole purpose for being: to lessen the pain of living? As we saw in Chapter 3, the technical term *dukkha* is understood to exceed the register of our concept “suffering.” That is, it ranges from that barely conscious, unnamable disquiet that many of us experience from time to time, through all-too-common varieties of disappointment, sadness, and anxiety, to debilitating physical suffering and agonizing emotional despair. Due to the subtly corroding effect of impermanence, it is present even in moments of pleasure. This pervasiveness is the reason that the identification of *dukkha* and its ending constitutes the beginning, middle,

and end of the Buddha's teaching. If *dukkha* permeates sentient existence, that teaching is permeated by the single flavor of liberation (*vimuttirasa*) from the mental conditions that engender that *dukkha*. As Jay Garfield, a Buddhist studies scholar trained in Western philosophy, notes, however, "Siddhartha Gautama's genius was not simply to see that we suffer, or that many of us are unhappy." Indeed, we don't need a Buddha for that. Together with the themes of falling in love and the inevitable loss of those same loved ones, the theme of pain is the impetus of art, poetry, music, and much more. If Freud is right in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, we have traded much of our vivifying, if violent, animal drive for the civilizing, if inhibiting, controls of culture. Freud is quick to add, of course, that the great paradox of civilization is the fact that in circumventing the miseries ensuing from our brute animality we have created new, equally unyielding forms of pain. Along with the arts, the disciplines of philosophy and religion are attempts to account for and expiate this pain. In this sense, Freud shared with the Buddha the fact that, as Garfield says of the latter,

His genius was instead to see that *dukkha* is the fundamental structure of our lives, what Heidegger would have called our *existentiale*. To be human is to live in *dukkha*.

This equation of *dukkha* and *existential* is interesting in several regards.<sup>15</sup> Garfield is a leading proponent of cross-cultural studies. He is particularly prominent in the effort to establish parity between Buddhist philosophy and its Western counterpart. So, it is not surprising that he employs a behemoth of German thought to corroborate his point here. His aim, of course, is to underscore not only the inseparability of *dukkha* from life itself, but the universality of the very notion that lived existence (as opposed to object presence) possesses particular qualities as such. For, an *Existenzial* (henceforth, *existential*), as Garfield intimates, is not merely one of many possibilities present in human experience, such as, say, blueness *might be* the property of a coffee cup. An *existential* is rather a structuring element of worldly being per se. Heidegger, for instance, names as such elements the "mood" of fear or anxiety that helps to disclose the further *existentials* of being "thrown" into the world, of "finding" oneself in the world, of potential understanding, etc. As an *existential*, therefore, *dukkha* is not just either present or not present in the world, as the case may be, in the way that, say, a concrete slab either is or is not lying on the road. Rather, it is *constitutive* of lived being, in the way that concrete *in* the road *is* precisely *the road*. The genius of Heidegger, Freud, and the Buddha was thus to see that some *dukkha*-like quality not only permeates but structures human existence. The Buddha's

genius, Garfield tells us, further enabled him “to see that this is a *problem*, indeed *the* problem of human life.”

For *dukkha* is universally undesirable, or at least it is undesirable to most of us. And this means that our lives and the worlds we inhabit, which are the most desirable of all things, are in fact, as they are lived, undesirable. If our lives are to be worth living, and if they are to be sources of happiness and legitimate motivation, this puzzle demands solution. This is the absolute foundation of the Buddhist view of the nature of human life.<sup>16</sup>

The key term in Garfield’s statement is “solution.” Is it an exaggeration to claim that our entire history as *Homo sapiens* has been driven by a desire to *solve* the problem of the disease that flows through experience? From the constant deluge of labor-saving appliances and pleasure-giving gadgets, to the multibillion dollar effort to cure cancer, to totalitarian politics and perpetual warfare, we are apes with a flair for the fix, quick or otherwise. Thus, as anyone who has read them knows, each of our geniuses has an awful lot to say about, to put it in the Buddhist idiom, *pain and its ending*. We have already seen how Freud extends Schelling’s “veil of despondency that spreads itself over nature” to envelop the massive refuge of human security wishfully named “civilization.” Freud asks us to factor into our calculations for happiness the real possibility that there will always remain some “unconquerable” *thing* driving us inexorably toward pain, dissolution, and death. We have also seen that Heidegger wants to counter Cassirer’s hopeful affirmation of the human capacity to craft symbolic meaning by disclosing instead “the nothingness” of our existence. Being thus thrust back into this “hardness of fate,” we just might discover some capacity for “authentic activity.” Is that a desirable solution? What about Freud’s ultimate tradeoff of “hysterical misery” for “common unhappiness”? Does the notion of mental health as being “better armed against that unhappiness” offer anything worthy of the term “solution”? Is minimally neurotic unhappiness the “cathartic absolution” we so desire?<sup>17</sup> We can throw into this melancholy mix Lacan’s unassuming contention that “An analysis should not be pushed too far. When the analysand feels that he is happy to be alive, that is enough.”<sup>18</sup> If the typical reception of such “solutions” is any indication, the reader will feel these statements to be negative, pessimistic, somber, or perhaps darkly humorous, rather than modest and bracingly honest. Yet, given that we began with the shared premise that *dukkha*, like a Real or an *existential* or an *unconquerable thing*, is not only existentially pervasive but structurally determinate, we have to ask: what is the alternative? Yes, pain is a “puzzle [that] demands solution.” But is a “solution” worthy of the name even

possible? Garfield reminds us that the shared Buddhist position holds, among others, the following postulates:

The origin of *dukkha* is in primal confusion about the fundamental nature of reality, and so its cure is at bottom a reorientation towards ontology and an awakening (*bodhi*) to the actual nature of existence.

The elimination (*nirvāṇa*), or at least the substantial reduction of *dukkha* through such reorientation, is possible.<sup>19</sup>

Echoing the second and third noble truths respectively, these two postulates do offer a robust solution. Garfield's Western Buddhist "reduction" is less emphatic than the canonical "cessation" (*nirodha*) insists; but this is, I imagine, a result that will satisfy most Western seekers today. It certainly lacks the putative moroseness of Freud. But before we can certify it as a bona fide solution, we have to ask some questions: Is *dukkha*, then, not an *existential* after all? Can a "fundamental structure of our lives" really be *solved* by seeing things otherwise? Does such a "reorientation" entail, then, an idealism in which the "hardness of our fate" really is entirely compliant to the meaning-making "works of the spirit"? Or might such a reorientation be, yet again, a conceptual parapraxis, a misturning from the Real of pain as an existential structure of human experience to the Buddhist "rumor" of *dukkha* "transmitted by hearsay, imitation, specularly, and repetition"?<sup>20</sup> Might such a misturning give rise, yet again, to an amphiboly whereby the Buddhist concept *dukkha* is confused for the Real of human pain? A couple more questions: Is the pain that is "caused by a cognitive superimposition of permanence, independence and intrinsic nature on things that lack it" even the pain that we desire to relieve? Is the pain that "can be alleviated by, and only by, the cessation of this superimposition" even worthy of the name "pain"?<sup>21</sup> Finally, might there then be a world (or should we say "a World") of difference between eliminating *dukkha* and eliminating human pain?

When Garfield hedges Buddhism's wager of *dukkha's* nirvanic elimination by adding "or at least [its] substantial reduction," he is performing a quintessentially Western Buddhist move. Canonical Buddhism, indeed, traditional Buddhism in contemporary Asia and North America, ultimately pursues nothing less than the virtuosic cataclysm of a "total cure, opening to the unconditional beyond space and time."<sup>22</sup> I thus see Garfield's hedge as an expression of an adamant, if respectful and reluctant, Western Buddhist *reorientation* in its own right. The reorientation is away from Buddhist legacies that entail overtly religious forms of transcendence and mysticism and toward forms of immanence and anthropotechnics. I say "overtly" because, as should be clear from my discussion



of the misturnings of meaning, conceptual amphibologies, and the role that The Dharma plays in decision, I think that the more “atheist” or “secular” or “naturalized” Western Buddhism becomes, the more it remains, in fact, deeply implicated in transcendence. Grumblings from certain outposts of Western Buddhism, online in particular, can be heard concerning the embarrassingly (to some) asocial and apolitical implications of this idealist inheritance of Western Buddhism. Or perhaps Garfield’s qualification is simply an effort to stem the flow of a genetic feature of Buddhism. For, this bifurcation is nothing new. The tension between an orientation toward otherworldly transcendence (gods, rebirth, heavens and hells, supermundane *nirvāṇa*, luminous consciousness, a cosmic Buddha, etc.) and an orientation toward this-worldly immanence (materialist psychological analysis of subjective experience, emphasis on empirical data, a human Buddha, etc.) is at least as old as the extant redactions of the Pali and Sanskrit canons. Obviously, I have no intention—or hope—of extracting this gene from the *corpus* of Western Buddhism. And why would I even want to? Throughout history, this genetic trait has spawned extraordinarily creative, if multiple and occasionally schizophrenic, tradition-personalities. When we consider the thought-world of Siddhārtha Gautama’s India, the gene was probably present at Buddhism’s inception. And as far as I can make out, from those earliest days to the present, its Janus-faced progeny appear completely normal to most Buddhists, Western or otherwise. As a passionate participant at The Great Feast of Knowledge, however, I have to mention two facts: In India as in the West the struggle between the royal agents of transcendence and the peasant partisans of immanence is as old as the hills. And never has an attempt at rapprochement been coherent.<sup>23</sup> It is, as the Buddha says of practice generally, a divided pathway, one leading to cultivation, and the other to decline.<sup>24</sup> Which is which, not even the brilliance of a Heidegger and a Cassirer can determine. For, as yet another luminary, Emmanuel Lévinas, who was present at the crisis-driven dispute at Davos said, “a young student could have had the impression that he was witness to the creation and the end of the world.”<sup>25</sup> Creation and end. Cultivation and decline. In the terms of this critique, though, the direction is clear. For, following Laruelle, it is rather a matter of sufficiency or insufficiency, decision or the “Undecided (of the) Real,”<sup>26</sup> the aristocratic or the democratic, a World or the black universe. Graphically, we can boil the choice down to

Buddhism → pain

or

Buddhism ←/ pain

To arrive at a good-faith, good-subject understanding of Buddhism's incursions into human pain ( $\rightarrow$ ) we must, first of all, decide on *Buddhism*. That project would begin, of course, with our comprehension of the first term *dukkha*. In that sense, Garfield's statements are unimpeachable. For them to be so, however, we have to read his statements with the understanding of *dukkha* as a buddhistically sufficient first term for human pain. Read *dukkha*, in other words, as the overdetermining bearer of numerous Buddhist postulates *about* human pain, suffering, disease, etc.

The origin of *dukkha* is in primal confusion about the fundamental nature of reality, and so its cure is at bottom a reorientation towards ontology and an awakening (*bodhi*) to the actual nature of existence.

The elimination (*nirvāṇa*), or at least the substantial reduction of *dukkha* through such reorientation, is possible.

Graphically, what Garfield is saying, in the terms of our rereading, is this:

*dukkha*  $\leftarrow$  x-buddhism  $\leftarrow$  / pain

The origin of the Buddhist concept *dukkha* lies in Buddhist thinkers' confusing the doctrinal concept of *dukkha* with the actual suffering experienced by sentient beings. Because this amphibology resolves into numerous Buddhist grammars of pain ( $\rightarrow$ *dukkha*), we must add the variable *x*. The human Real of suffering itself is ultimately foreclosed (*/*) to the x-buddhist incursion. Being, as Garfield says, an *existential*, or, in his other words, a fundamental nature of reality, suffering has caused ( $\leftarrow$ ) x-buddhism. That a reorientation toward the ontological fact of pain can eliminate or substantially reduce "*dukkha*" is not only possible, but probable. The reduction, of course concerns the force of a *representation* of pain, not pain itself. In doing so, the x-buddhist subject will be transformed into what Laruelle terms "the stranger subject." We will revisit this idea in the next chapter; but, by way of contrast, it might be useful to mention here that this type of subjectivity refers to "The identity of the Real [as] lived, experienced, consumed while remaining in itself without the need to alienate itself through representation."<sup>27</sup> Such a reorientation serves as the occasion of awakening. However, as with elimination/*nirvāṇa*, we would have to perform similar operations on the first term *bodhi* to arrive at a generic, rather than x-buddhist, "awakening."

What might a "stranger-subject" version of Garfield's rendition of the x-buddhist statement on suffering look like? It would have to be one performed, thought, and lived from this side ( $\leftarrow$ /*/*) of the Real of pain. I know of no better candidate than, for my money, the greatest genius of them all, Emily Dickinson<sup>28</sup>:

They say that “Time assuages”—  
 Time never did assuage—  
 An actual suffering strengthens  
 As Sinews do, with age—  
 Time is a Test of Trouble—  
 But not a Remedy  
 If such it prove, it prove too  
 There was no Malady—

To understand how we might perform such a strange “reorientation towards ontology and an awakening to the actual nature of existence,” we now turn, first, to a reflection on the concept of immanence, and then to Laruelle’s move to “axiomatize” the Real.

### Radical immanence

I imagine that for many readers the contour of radical immanence is slowly coming into view by now. Much of the work done in this critique has been precisely to expose operations in Buddhism that, in one moment, assert something like radical immanence and, in the next, compromise that principle. With concepts like *anātman*, *dukkha*, and *sūnyatā*, Buddhism does think the immanent Real. For instance, such terms allow it to articulate features of reality that our non-Buddhist symbolic system disavows since those features threaten our finely wrought constructions of order and meaning, not to mention the integrity and completeness of the symbolic system itself. Buddhism wants to convince us that it—as The Dharma—illuminates the way things are prior to or independent of language, representation, ideology, and so on, such that its articulations are necessary and sufficient explanations of our human situation. Thus, with concepts like *saṃsāra* and *pratītyasamutpāda*, Buddhism, furthermore, thinks that which in the history of ideas has been called “the One” and “the Real.” That is to say, Buddhism sets itself the task of classical metaphysics; namely, to identify the ultimate unity, and if possible, the unitary source, that underlies the seemingly infinite multiformity of phenomenal proliferation. Buddhism, in short, teaches us how it all hangs together. That is fine and understandable. If the history of ideas is any indication, discovering such a principle is a timeless human desire. It is the desire to know, to intimately embrace or even to be consumed by that which is *fundamentally* real. It is a desire born, perhaps, from the lived human

experience that involvement with the things of this world—objects, people, events—does not produce abiding pleasure, and, indeed, is too often the very source of pain. Indeed, Buddhism teaches us nothing if not that material, worldly entities and events are more painful because somehow less real than some prior, and ostensibly immanent, principle, such as emptiness, the unconditioned, primordial awareness, Buddha nature, *dharmadhatu*, innate goodness, and so on. That Western Buddhism both streamlines and doubles down on tradition's ancient task of articulating a version of radical immanence by extolling its ability to, in common contemporary terms, "reclaim" the "wonder" and "power" and "magic" and "miracle" of "the gift of the present moment," is not being contested here. Rather, using Laruelle's concept of decision, I have aimed to show that Buddhism's immanent Real-One, however precisely conceived, invariably metamorphoses into a transcendent representational-2/3. This alteration is the inevitable result of the scission required to maintain Buddhism's sufficiency. Buddhism establishes its dharmic foundation at the exorbitant cost of dividing the Real-One, that is to say its very principle of radical immanence, against itself.

Before turning directly to Laruelle's solution to this transcendentalizing function of buddhistic decision, it may be useful to step back and say more about what I mean generally by "immanence," as well as why it is being viewed here as necessarily a good. Rocco Gangle offers this helpful definition: "Immanence,' roughly, names any metaphysical position or method rejecting the notion that the ultimate structure of reality may be investigated independently of its real content." It is, moreover, a position that "disallows 'one-way' arrows from metaphysics to ontology, or from logical grammar to real semantics."<sup>29</sup> In the examples I have been providing, including the one in the previous section, what proves problematic in each case is precisely the allowance of this one-way arrow. The diagram *Buddhism*→*pain* means that our knowledge of the ontological Real of pain necessarily and sufficiently flows from the direction of the metaphysical system that articulates it. Historically, the fecund nature of this articulation is such that it has produced out of this (singular) "real semantics" numerous (plural) "logical grammars"; thus the diagram is properly given as *x-buddhism*→*dukkha*. It should be clear by now that a crucial move of this critique is to posit, following Laruelle, the foreclosed nature of "real semantics" (an actual suffering) to any "logical grammar" (*dukkha* as the articulation of this suffering). Now, the reader may have observed that we still have a "one-way arrow": ←/. It is, however, *from* the Real and *to* the form of thought that is subsequently engendered by that thought's very endeavor to think that Real. As should also be clear, a central thesis of this critique is that this reversal, from metaphysics to

ontology, in Gangle's language, produces a consequentially different relationship to the Real. This is a relationship, I have been arguing, to which Western Buddhism itself aspires, yet, trapped in decision, perpetually fails to realize. One of the immanent functions of "foreclosure" is to disable the circular and sufficient forces of decision, and thereby to cut off recourse to any "exterior." We saw that The Dharma is such an exterior since, as the transcendental vault to the "ultimate structure of reality," it reveals *how things are*, crucially including how they ultimately hang together. With the path to absolute transcendence thus cut off, all forms of thought are shown to be interior or immanent to human existence, even those that persist in thinking this immanence, this "real content," in terms of some transcendent differential. Some readers may have observed that "immanence" itself offers a view of *how things are* and, as such, is still indeed a "metaphysical position." As Gangle points out, however, "its claim about how things hang together is in part that they do not hang together in any way that is illuminated finally by differentiating between what is and how what is is structured."<sup>30</sup> Laruelle thus wants to speak of any "radical" concept as being *minimally* or *relatively* transcendental. So, "radical immanence" claims to be merely a "clone" of immanence rather than "absolute immanence" itself. Because we cannot circumvent the involvement of conceptualization, language, and representation, for instance, we must admit that in claiming "immanence," we are, to whatever limited degree, making a metaphysical move.<sup>31</sup> This admission that "metaphysics" operates on our thinking of "ontology" and toward the Real at such an early moment of consideration does not diminish the value of immanence as a concept. On the contrary, this creeper-like quality of metaphysics, this relentless threat of alienating ideation, provides us with the most compelling reason we require for mobilizing the concept at all.

This last point raises the question: *Why is immanence necessarily a good?* This question has a corollary: *Why is transcendence necessarily a bad?* An obvious if perhaps too precious answer presents itself. Imagine a beast in the wild inquiring into the Being of the Life it is about to snuff out for supper. The only thing that matters to it is the rabbit scampering away. It would be ridiculous to raise the question of what grander principles ultimately undergird this event. Concepts like Being and Life are superfluous. There is only a living rabbit. And then, after the deed is done, there is neither Death nor non-Being; only a particular dead rabbit. Here, an immanent focus is a good because in orienting the beast to the actual features of its environment it facilitates survival. But such an answer is too easy. For, us *humans* in the wild, having caught and cooked and eaten the rabbit, do reflect on such first principles. This difference is captured by a cartoon

that shows beastly creatures emerging out of the ocean on to the land. The first creature is fish-like, followed by progressively evolved mammal-like ones, ending with a human male dressed for a day at the office. Above each creature is a thought bubble that says, “Eat. Survive. Reproduce.” The man, however, glances wistfully toward the heavens, wondering, “What’s it all about?” Cassirer names us humans *animal symbolicum*, the symbolizing animal, precisely because we have developed into this earthly creature whose most significant characteristic is the creation of meaning-bestowing, World-making, signifiers.<sup>32</sup> Aided by reason, there is virtually no limit to our speculations. And so richly complex cultures arise with their myths, religions, philosophies, ad infinitum, explaining precisely what it’s all about. The Enlightenment founder of the very binary immanent/transcendent, Immanuel Kant, suggests what “bad” may be lurking herein.<sup>33</sup>

We will call the principles whose application stays wholly and completely within the limits of possible experience *immanent*, but those that would fly beyond those boundaries *transcendent* principles ... [By the latter] I mean principles that actually incite us to tear down all those boundary posts and to lay claim to a wholly new territory that recognises no demarcations anywhere.<sup>34</sup>

Such unchecked speculation morphs imperceptibly into a “transcendental illusion,” the human penchant for taking “a subjective necessity of a connection of our concepts ... for an objective necessity in the determination of things in themselves.”<sup>35</sup> Or, as Nietzsche put it, our propensity to fall for psychological trickery—we mistake our subjective wishes, interests, needs, etc., for the way things objectively are, or might be: unity, permanence, substance; primordial awareness, The Dharma, *dukkha*. Like Nietzsche, Kant recognizes the fetishistic power of such explanatory concepts when he points out that “Transcendental illusion ... does not cease even though it is uncovered and its nullity is clearly seen into by” a critique. What lies behind our intransigence is that the same mechanisms of thinking that produce valid reasoning (concepts that are “wholly and completely within the limits of possible experience”) also produce metaphysical fantasies (concepts “that would fly beyond those boundaries”). I imagine that many readers, nonetheless, want to argue for the whole or partial good of transcendent, metaphysical concepts: they give consolation in times of hardship; they offer hope in the face of cosmic meaninglessness; they soothe fears related to inevitable death; they help to create cohesive communities; we do not really know what lies beyond, anyway, and so on. To these kinds of responses, I would remind the reader that the purpose of critique is not to expose the ridiculousness of an idea so that we may be done with it once and

for all. The purpose is, rather, to expose how that idea functions in thought and in the formation of a subject within a World, and to make determinations about the desirability of the idea in light of its consequences. As this point reminds us, “immanence” itself is already veering, however reluctantly, toward metaphysics. The inescapable suction of the metaphysical vortex should be reason enough to see the good in the concept of immanence. In times of peril, say, during surgery or while flying through heavy turbulence, wouldn’t we all fervently hope that the surgeon’s or pilot’s attention remain “wholly and completely within the limits of possible experience”? Some readers may still disagree. But even the Pope says: “You pray for the hungry. Then you feed them. That’s how prayer works.”<sup>36</sup> So much for that which flies beyond the boundaries of the immanent world in times of real need.

The primacy of the immanent principle is, as I mentioned at the start of this section, a principle conceit of Western Buddhism. The representation of even the most traditional forms of Buddhism as, at heart, empirical, naturalistic, pragmatic, phenomenologically oriented, and so forth, is, indeed, a *definitive* feature of Western Buddhism. Western Buddhist teachers often illustrate the good of immanence with the famous parable of the arrow. In this parable, a man has been wounded by a poisoned arrow, shot at him by some unknown assailant. When the physician arrives to remove the arrow, and thus save his life, the man proves to be a recalcitrant metaphysician. He will not permit the arrow to be removed until he has attained knowledge of the transcendent organizing principles at work: Who shot the arrow? Was he low class? Middle class? What kind of bow did he use? Was it a longbow? A crossbow? Was the bowstring that was used to shoot the arrow made of swallowwort plant? From some sort of hemp? Were the feathers on the shaft from a vulture? A peacock? A stork? What about the sinew that was used to wrap the shaft? Was it from a cattle, water buffalo, deer, or monkey? And the arrow itself, was it razor-tipped, curved, tubular, calf-toothed, oleander? And so on and so forth.<sup>37</sup> This tedious and somewhat slapstick scene certainly drives home both the endlessness and absurdity of untimely speculation. By the time our injured metaphysician has gathered all the data required to reveal how it all hangs together, the arrow, smeared thick with poison, will have rendered moot his unitary model of reality, however accurate. Even though our victim is actually asking for empirically verifiable evidence, the parable simultaneously serves Western Buddhism’s denunciation of transcendence and metaphysical speculation and valorization of immanence and immediacy. As Stephen Batchelor tells us:

The purpose of the Buddha's teaching is not to resolve doubts about the nature of "reality" by providing answers to such conundrums [as who shot the poisoned arrow] but to offer practice that will remove the "arrow" of reactivity, thereby restoring practitioners' health and enabling them to flourish here on earth.<sup>38</sup>

This critique has presented numerous arguments that contest the success of Western Buddhist "practice" for accomplishing such a result. Speaking of arrows, in fact, I have argued that x-buddhist auto-donation, auto-position, decision and so on (→) does precisely what Batchelor says it does not (resolve doubts and provide answers), and does not do precisely what he says it does (restore health and enable flourishing). I am not going to repeat those arguments here. My purpose in presenting the parable is to offer an example of the immanent principle's centrality to Western Buddhism itself. The question now is how to *preserve* that principle rather than to *determine* it. It should be clear to the reader by now that implicit in this question is my contention that Western Buddhism fails at the former and succeeds at the latter. It should also be clear that this critique views such success as Pyrrhic because it transforms Western Buddhism from a viable "science according to the Real" into an ideology of the Real. It is here that Laruelle's solution of an axiomatized immanence can assist Western Buddhism in realizing its cherished goal of a restorative human practice.

## Axiomatic Real

A monk asked Yün-men, "What is Buddha?"

Yün-men said, "Dried shitstick."<sup>39</sup>

This is a *kōan* from a thirteenth-century Japanese compilation usually translated into English as *The Gateless Gate*. The collection, like the *kōan* practice it promotes, was made popular in the West by a generation of Second World War-era teachers who were instrumental in fashioning American Zen, and by extension, Western Buddhism as a whole. I present it here in order to make a sequence of connected points. To begin, I would consider this "case" to be a fine example of the Buddhist concern for the Real. The monk is asking a question that, on the face of it, concerns the Real itself, signified by the first term "Buddha." Yet, the wise Yün-men recognizes that the question is so embedded in a system of knowledge that its answer has already been largely determined. In Buddhist parlance, the question constitutes a "thicket of views": it is bound up in an inextricable tangle of assumptions, doctrines, beliefs, desires, and so



on, such that no answer but the already predetermined one will suffice. And such an answer is, of course, no answer at all; it is merely a confirmation of the program to which the questioner has already subscribed. In Laruellen parlance, in invoking the particular first term “Buddha” and apparently confusing this representation for the Real itself, the questioner has already made a *decision*. It is a decision, moreover, that, Yün-men seems to suspect, requires a redoubled transcendental splitting; initially between “the monk” and “the Buddha,” and then between the world and the World. Can you conceive of a straighter path back to the immediacy of the questioner’s situation than “dried shitstick”? I like to think that the master would have been pleased with Artaud’s “Where there is a stink of shit/there is a smell of being.” In any case, we are not, of course, speaking here of shit. “Dried shitstick” itself is but a first term for the Real. Unlike “Buddha,” however, it is one that is difficult if not impossible to shoehorn into one of the countless “artificial forms and static norms” that people devise to subjugate others’ morality. In invoking it in response to the all-too Buddhist monk who stands before him, the master intends precisely to “wrest vital potentialities” from the confusion. In Laruelle’s own *kōan*-like utterance, we can say that Yün-men wants to enable the Real to be “given-without-giveness.” The monk’s “Buddha” establishes the buddhistic auto-position that in turn constitutes the “giveness” or determination of that which *must* remain precessional. Yün-men, that is, wants to insist that the “representation of the One,” for instance “Buddha,” “*follow from* the One or be determined by *it*.”<sup>40</sup> Certain operations on “Buddha” are required to correct the grammatical confusion that has enamored and captured our monk. “Dried shitstick” represents such an effort to, in our earlier terms, reverse the direction of the arrow. As always, a decisive question now arises: does tradition permit the reversal to hold? Unfortunately, Wu-men’s comment on this “case” contains the following prognostication:

It must be said of Yün-men that he was too poor to prepare even the plainest food and too busy to make a careful draft. Probably people will bring forth this dried shitstick to shore up the gate and prop [open] the door. The Buddha Dharma is thus sure to decay.<sup>41</sup>

It is clear enough from the *kōans* ascribed to Yün-men that he was a man of few words. Aitken relates the story that when, at the ceremony honoring his appointment as master of the monastery, Yün-men ascended the teacher’s high seat to deliver his inaugural address, and proceeded to utter barely more than, “Be careful!”<sup>42</sup> As for the remainder of the commentary, Aitken himself exemplifies the manner in which Wu-men’s prophecy will be fulfilled. (And

how could he not? Aitken had obviously already quite robustly decided on Zen and Buddhism.) Conceding that Yün-men's speech must remain terse in order not to introduce extraneous and fetishizing representations ("Even the shit was dried up on his stick," he says!), Aitken adds the following (extraneous and fetishizing) remark: "Yet it [the dried shitstick] looms up and takes over, reaching to the Tushita heaven where Maitreya Buddha stirs in his deep samādhi. It won't be long now!"<sup>43</sup> Be careful, indeed! I trust that the reader is adept at recognizing the manner in which Aitken himself "bring[s] forth this dried shitstick to shore up the gate and prop [open] the door" of x-buddhist sufficiency, auto-donation, and all the rest. I only point out how ironic it is that Aitken reads Wu-men's remark as a warning to see through the "charisma" and "fakery" of "teachers who shout and wave their arms." By contrast to such snakeoil, "worthy teaching . . . will cut off speculation, and it will be faithful to the one who is taught."<sup>44</sup> Of course, where I see Aitken and the Zen commentarial tradition vis-à-vis the Real as speculation soaked in *serpens oleum*, and as being quite *unfaithful* to their students, American Zen readers see enlightened expressions of awakened consciousness. I am fairly certain, too, that these same readers see my interpretation as the expression of a dense fool who is wholly incapable of passing through the gateless gate. Yet, surely we agree that:

In fermenting night soil  
fat white maggots  
steam with buddhahood.<sup>45</sup>

Okay! But can we also agree to *Be careful!* with that "buddhahood"?

I would expect nothing less from a Western Buddhist, Zen or otherwise, than to counter my non-buddhist ruminations on Yün-men's case with grave criticism. After all, a critique like the present one is driven, and driven hard, by the very "discursive intellect" that the *kōan* is intended to "confound . . . freezing it into a single ball of doubt, and finally to trigger an awakening (Japanese *satori*) to an ineffable state beyond all 'dualistic' thinking."<sup>46</sup> And with this point, we come to a pivotal aspect of radical immanence. Taking "state beyond all 'dualistic' thinking" to be but another first term for the Real (for, otherwise—well, see the section on "Wisdom" in Chapter 1), must we not admit that, contrary to being "ineffable," this "state" is, in Nick Srnicek's memorable phrase, "infinitely effable"? That is, based on the prodigious evidence of the history of ideas, the Real or the One "provides the basis for an infinite number of names for itself."<sup>47</sup> Paraphrasing the old educational film about Hinduism, we might as well answer

the question, *how many Ones are there*, in *kōan*-like fashion: “330 million.”<sup>48</sup> Wu-men, in other words, may well conclude our case with:

A flash of lightning,  
sparks from flint;  
if you blink your eyes,  
it is already gone.

But if the history of commentarial literature, not to mention the interminable dilation of *dharma* talks, books, articles, and so on, that gush forth from x-buddhist communities are any indication, “it” will remain forever undetermined. That is not to say, of course, that it will remain *undecided*. To make a decision concerning the proper signification of “it” is precisely the act that constitutes and validates a given x-buddhism’s sufficiency. As Ray Brassier points out, however, such an act, being “inherently reflexive or specular,” means that the assemblage of x-buddhist communities that perform the act “remains a loose-knit grouping of interpretative strategies rather than a rigorous theoretical praxis.” It is worthwhile to quote Brassier at length on this point.

This fractional loop [of decision], this auto-positional and auto-donational structure, constitutes [x-buddhism’s] inherently reflexive or specular character. It guarantees that everything is potentially [buddhistizable], which is to say, possible grist for the decisional mill. Thus, if [buddhistizing] . . . remains a loose-knit grouping of interpretative strategies rather than a rigorous theoretical praxis, it is because decisional specularity ensures the world remains [x-buddhism’s] mirror. [Buddhistizing] the world becomes a pretext for [x-buddhism’s] own interminable self-interpretation. And since interpretation is a function of talent rather than rigour, the plurality of mutually incompatible yet unfalsifiable interpretations merely perpetuates the uncircumscribable ubiquity of [x-buddhism’s] auto-encompassing specularity. Absolute specularity breeds infinite interpretation—such is the norm for the [x-buddhist] practice of thought.<sup>49</sup>

What can be done? What might a step toward “a rigorous theoretical praxis” be? How might we stem the proliferation of x-buddhist interpretation of its self-articulated Real, and help to inaugurate a new norm for its practice of thought? As usual, Buddhism itself offers a potent solution. I imagine that most Western Buddhists have heard the story of Nan-in. A nineteenth-century Zen master, Nan-in, one day “received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen”:

Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor’s cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself.

“It is overfull. No more will go in!” “Like this cup,” Nan-in said, “you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?”<sup>50</sup>

Whether full of water, full of shit (sticks), or full of the Real, emptying, Laruelle would concur, is a stellar idea. In yet another *kōanic* twist, however, it will be the quintessential “university professor” who schools the Zen master in the proper mode and manner of such emptying. So, to begin, Laruelle recommends application of his threefold “discovery,” the first facet of which is that “of the autonomy of the One as Real or of its essence of radical immanence.”<sup>51</sup> As alluded to earlier, a first name for this Real-One is “given-without-giveness.” This construction, *x-without-xness* or *x-without-X*, occurs frequently in Laruelle. In brief, it indicates precisely the immanent phenomenality of some *x*. That is to say, it aims to abjure the usurpation of the transcendental signifier that inevitably lays claims to the *x*, and thereby to render the *x* “generic.” I was tacitly applying this principle earlier when I argued for *emptiness-without-Emptiness* against Buddhism’s *Emptiness*, where the capitalized *E* represents that which has been constituted through the decisional operation. As a more concrete example, consider *woman-without-womanness*. Cultures and ideologies, advertising agencies and masculine fantasies will endlessly construct notions of what properly constitutes *womanness* or *Woman*. Outside of the idealized Platonic form, this entity, *Woman*, we all know, never actually exists. Therefore, if we want to permit the concept at all, she must *be given*; “she” must be *presented* within some system of representation. Only *this woman* or *that woman*, only *a woman*, ever empirically exists. That is the reason we can say that *that woman* is *already given*, she is *present* prior to any transcendently pre- and overdetermined *giveness*. She is always and already, we could say, *woman-in-woman*. Similarly, Laruelle says of the One or the Real:

If the One is in-One, then it is so first by its essence and not as thinking the Real (from the One)—it is the suspension of every idealism at the heart even of thought. *If* there is a thought or a representation of the One, it can only follow from the One or be determined by it, but irreversibly.<sup>52</sup>

*If* we want to allow that *dukkha*, to use another of our examples, serves as an adequate first term for the Real of “suffering” or “pain,” then pain must remain *in-pain*, and *dukkha* must be determined by *it* rather than by the system of *dukkha*-postulates determined by *x*-buddhism. That is, it, pain, is “given without an operation of assumed giveness ‘behind’ it, a background of the given.”<sup>53</sup>

We have already seen that this manner of thinking disallows the reversal of the operation. It should be clear that to do so, to flip the arrow or to permit a two-way arrow, would be to rev once again the rockets of decision. It is in refraining from such an act that a new practice of x-buddhist thought might be born. This possibility, in fact, constitutes the second facet of Laruelle's discovery, namely, that the irreversibility of the operation lays bare the "causality of the Real-One as determination-in-the-last-instance."<sup>54</sup> While this operation enables a wholly positive, thus not merely critical or deconstructive, usage of x-buddhist material, it does so in a fashion that is so rigorous as to render that material buddhistically *strange*, to say the least. I will return to this point in Part 3. First, we will benefit from briefly considering the nature of this rigor in more detail.

Determination-in-the-last-instance "is not simply an immanent causality but radical immanence itself."<sup>55</sup> It may be useful to recall that "radical immanence" does *not* mean "reality." The word "reality" signifies the infinitely multifaceted and interminably mutable phantasmagoric Gestalts that we fashion from the Real. This statement, of course, falls far short of saying just what the One or the Real *is*. Historically, as many readers have already learned from x-buddhism, an aura of inscrutability surrounds "the Real." More than that even, there is a foreboding sense of a consequential miscalculation to be entailed if we say anything more about it. It is as if, for all but the most naïve, incautious, or committed among us, saying what "it is" puts us in jeopardy of dire profanation. Like the ancient Romans, for whom "*sacrum*" sufficed as the name of that which was infused with the awesome and precarious power of the gods, we halt at the first term. It is here, at the *profanum*, in front of the temple precinct, before the threshold of the gods' *terminus*, that we feel the least jeopardized. And yet, like the man from the country in Kafka's fable, we long to be granted entry into "the law," into *sacrum*. We long to possess the "universal object of desire," the "origin of reality" that "is" the *logos* of the One, the Real.<sup>56</sup> On the shadow side of this longing, of course, is the cool suspicion that it is yet another instance of what Lacan sees as a desire for imaginary plenitude. Among the crucial functions of the imaginary, recall, is to obscure the fact that our cherished symbolic system is incomplete, and, conversely, to enable us to complete that lack. The ensuing sense of plenitude permits the delusion that will avoid the "trauma" or "damage" that ensues from the Real's inevitable disruptions. Freud, too, would see the supposed subjective "source of the religious spirit" in the "oceanic feeling" as but an infantile regression into a primal sense of oneness (with the mother, with the world of objects, with the source of pleasure, etc.).<sup>57</sup> We could, of course, continue indefinitely with this exercise of enumerating notions of plenitude

and their refutations. And it is precisely this indeterminate “effing” of the Real that necessitates a concept of radical immanence. Laruelle would say that such an exercise ensues from the fact that “the One only acts in-the-last-instance, [meaning] that it does not exit itself, does not alienate itself in this act.” Since it does not exit itself, since it remains always One-*in-One* rather than One-in-the-infinite-ocean-of-Being as signified by our 330 million gods, a model or “clone” of the One is required in the form of a first term or a system of thought. It is required, I should quickly add, *not* for the sake of the One, but rather only “if it must have an act,” as, for instance, in the x-buddhist necessity to theorize pain as *dukkha*. Here we get our first glimpse of both the rigor and the strangeness of Laruelle’s method. Before I say more, it seems necessary to address questions that I imagine must be arising for many readers, questions along the lines of: Is Laruelle merely offering us yet another god in some sense? For, he himself warns that “There is always a God lying in ambush.”<sup>58</sup> Might Laruelle be blindly constructing his own imaginary plenitude, and asking us to share in his self-inflicted hallucination of the Real? Is Laruelle trying to delude us into believing that we can mystically circumvent language and ideology and enter into some sort of presymbolic *noumenon*? Does his “determination-in-the-last-instance” or “radical immanence” entail, like God, Being, or *sūnyatā*, a kind of idealist decision?

Critical questions like these are, of course, valuable. By way of addressing them, I first say that, necessary as they are, such questions miss a fundamental point. The function of “the Real” in Laruelle is purely *axiomatic*. Think of how a mathematical axiom functions to enable certain subsequent operations, and to do so regardless of the axiom’s relation to the (nonmathematical) world. I will return to this point in a moment. The point here is to address any misunderstanding that the theory exists to adjudicate between, much less make pronouncements concerning, this or that view of reality. Unlike Western Buddhism—the object of this study—non-philosophy or, as we will see, non-buddhism, has no interest in offering a specular view of *how things are*. Laruelle’s method is certainly not intended as an aid for grasping the Real. It is intended rather to help us grasp the *idealism* and the typically unacknowledged transcendence that, he claims, invariably constitutes ostensibly empirical or materialist philosophical, and I argue, buddhist, forms of thought *concerning* the Real. The axiomatic Real-function is unconcerned with “being,” “meaning,” and even “reality” precisely because it serves to disable the decisional circuitry that is required in making (unscientific) pronouncements concerning such matters in the first place. So, initially at least, it is not a question of whether, say, *anātman* is correct or

incorrect, whether or not, that is, the concept accurately tracks some feature of reality. It is rather a matter of whether we are employing a *decisional* or an *axiomatic* method in evaluating “*anātman*.” Outside of a “first science,” “correct” and “incorrect” require decision. That makes them a move in a philosophical or an *x*-buddhist game. The antinomy correct/incorrect requires a decision both in the weak version of deciding for or against some theory of *x*, and in the strong version of necessarily grounding, whether explicitly or not, that decision in criteria that are not given *in* the *x*. Like Wu-men and presumably all the other thinkers we have encountered in this text so far, Laruelle is aiming for an extreme rigor of thought. But unlike them, apparently, he believes that this rigor, if it is to depotentialize circular decision, requires an axiomatic formulation. In short, his is a method for seeing (though *not* determining) what happens to some Real first term when this term is “foreclosed” to the interminable incursions, postulations, and pronouncements that *x*-thought labors to mix in. It certainly appears to be the case that, as Althusser says, “From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the ‘last instance’ never comes.”<sup>59</sup> This appears so because we seem to only ever have the competing cacophonies of occasional or regional knowledge systems among which we are bidden to decide. “Determination-in-the-last-instance,” to put it crudely, is a massive deaf and dumb stone positioned for those systems to crash against on their way to the Ideal. This effect, however, may be more incidental than it is essential. It is called “determination-in-the-last-instance,” after all, because it is that which “*despite everything, finally or really affects,*” ultimately *causes* or *determines*, every one of our regional systems of thought. Crucially, however, it does so not as an element within the Great Chain of Being, but as an “abstraction of the axiomatic type.”<sup>60</sup>

So, what exactly does Laruelle mean by the rigor of an “axiomatic” method? It is now necessary to distinguish more emphatically between the largely psychoanalytical and philosophical notions of the Real that I have been employing in this work from the non-philosophical one. We have, for instance, enjoyed some good returns on Lacan’s coinage of the Real as that which pertains “in the name of the logical obstacle of what, in the symbolic, declares itself to be impossible,” or, on Eagleton’s definition of “the pure meta-sign or empty element in any semiotic system whose function is to indicate the truth that it cannot be totalised.” Freud, too, has offered value in his speaking of this evasive but determinate aspect of existence in terms of drives, the unconscious, the unconquerable “thing,” even the irreversible pain of social relations. We have also encountered philosophical notions of the Real as, for instance, a *noumenal* facet of existence presupposed, yet unaffected, by human symbolic systems, such

as language and ideology. Arguably, every one of the x-buddhist concepts the I have employed so far can be classed in one of these two categories: no-self and suffering-desire, for instance, as roughly psychoanalytic, emptiness; dependent origination and emptiness, as more or less philosophical. For Laruelle, *all* of these concepts are all-too philosophical. Similarly, we can say that they are all-too Buddhist. Every one of them represents not, as claimed, a rigorous practice of thought but rather, as Brassier said above, “grist for the decisional mill.” Each, that is, functions in an overall system that is “reflexive” (referring always back to x-buddhism itself), “specular” (gazes into the world and sees x-buddhism reflected back), and interpretive (perpetuating the replication of the properly subjugated x-buddhist practitioner). In Laruelle’s axiomatic notion, the One or the Real requires, and therefore receives, absolutely no further explication. So, in now moving away from earlier psychoanalytic-philosophical notions of the Real to a more generalized, all-encompassing notion, we appear to be closer to x-buddhist concepts such as *tathātā* (thusness), *yathābhutam* (things-as-they-are), *dharmakāya* (totality of reality), *paramārthasatya* (ultimate truth), and *dharma* (natural order). In, however, “breeding infinite interpretation,” such notions ultimately constitute x-buddhist *mixtures* or overly determinate interventions into the Real. The non-buddhist solution to this confusion is axiomatization.

The identity of the Real, or of whatever first name we desire to give it—the One, Idea, nature, *sabba* (the All), The Dharma, *yathābhutam*—as axiomatic function not only requires no interpretation, it is impervious to it. Thought-systems like x-buddhism that articulate some such *Real* first name are performing a profoundly valuable service for all of us: they are identifying *that which is thought fit and worthy to be assumed* (this is the Latin definition of *axiōma*). They toil, often for centuries and across continents, to create material—concepts, words, texts, teachings, rituals, practices, human subjects, physical institutions—that present and represent elemental features of human existence. But this is not to say that their performances and their material necessarily effect their desired end of routing the infidel that is (false, deluded, samsaric) reality and thereby of inaugurating the reign of the (true, enlightened, nirvanic) Real. When Laruelle insists that the One “does not exit itself,” he means that it does not split off from itself (it is One-in-One) and wade into the ontological-phenomenal battlefield precisely wherein each thought-system parades, patrols, struggles for the high ground, becomes entrenched, and flies its flag. It does not do so because it already “is” that, *all* of that, all of the forms, the ideas, concepts, thought-systems, battlefields, in short, *material*, that were mentioned above and throughout this work, including the book in



your hands and the very thoughts and energetic labor that went into producing it and now go into reading it. The fact that we have for our consideration, say, The Dharma, even as a transcendental grounding or warrant for dependent origination—for even “transcendence” is, in the last instance, material and immanent—is evidence of the causal nature of radical immanence. “The Dharma,” that is to say, is precisely a material *clone* or model of that which Buddhism considers worthy to be assumed: *thusness, just that, things-as-they-are, the unconditioned, the deathless, a dried shitstick*. But to remain faithful to the Real which it names, the *identity* of this clone must not be fashioned into “an objective, a proclamation, an object.” In other words, it must remain a “manner or style of *thinking*,” and not an item to be collected and catalogued by epistemology.<sup>61</sup> It must remain precisely an “abstraction of the axiomatic type.” As Duke physicist Robert Brown reminds us:

Axioms are *not* self-evident truths in any sort of rational system, they are *unprovable assumptions* whose truth or falsehood should always be mentally prefaced with an implicit “If we assume that . . .” . . . They are really just assertions or propositions to which we give a special primal status and exempt from the necessity of independent proof.<sup>62</sup>

As yet more evidence of Buddhism’s profound proximity to a radically immanent form of thought, some compassionate teacher once tried to shore up against our inevitable objectification of *emptiness* as a thing to be known precisely by axiomatizing it. She did so by articulating the concept of *śūnyatāśūnyatā*, the *emptiness of emptiness*, or, in Laruellen terms, *emptiness-without-Emptiness*.<sup>63</sup> *Emptiness*. When we close it off to the incursions of the competing armies of meaning (*/*) and proceed not *toward* but *from* there (*←*), we have a good, solid x-buddhist axiom. So, we may now simply assume that *emptiness* is a concept—literally a construct, a mental *thing*, a *material* abstraction—that is worthy to serve as an instrument of our thought. *Emptiness* is a fit first name for the Real because it has no content. Emptiness is empty! *Pace* the x-buddhists, the Real of emptiness is indifferent to its revalorization as “a fullness of particular things” wherein “everything is realized as it is, in its total dynamic reality,” and thus harkening the good news of the “overcoming of an active nihilism.”<sup>64</sup> To be clear, as inventions crafted from the material concept “emptiness,” those kinds of statements are heartily welcome: we can think with them, initiate a life-form out of them, experience their force, and thereby evaluate their fitness. But as proclamations of correct and sufficient decisions concerning reality, they are not welcome. As such, they require that we decide either for them, and thereby

hallucinate a World on their terms, or against them, and join the immemorial brawl for epistemological domination. Eschewing either choice, we refuse *to go looking for our donkey riding on our donkey*. For, as Zen Master Foyan (1067–1120) sternly reminds us:

I tell you that you need not mount the donkey; you *are* the donkey! The whole world is the donkey; how can you mount it? If you mount it, you can be sure the sickness will not leave! If you don't mount it, the whole universe is wide open!<sup>65</sup>

It may seem harmless that Master Foyan rewards such nonmounters with the epithet “wayfarer,” or sojourner on the path to enlightenment. But is it harmless? In order for such wisdom to auger a world devoid of doctrinal warfare we must introduce an additional *non-buddhist* condition here: If, however, in *not mounting* the donkey, you have performed a *Zen-not-mounting* or a *Buddhist-not-mounting*, then the whole universe once again shrivels up! What is at stake is nothing less than the introduction of “peace into thought by means of democracy.”<sup>66</sup> Not mounting the donkey of decision, we may begin the very task that Master Foyan ostensibly recommends, namely, “to think and create theory for human beings.”<sup>67</sup> We may finally “put the Real at the heart of the person [and] the person at the heart of the Real.”<sup>68</sup> To do so, however, is not to reinscribe onto “the person” yet another codex of subjectivity that some actual person may or may not finally realize. It is rather to free “the person” of any such compulsion. Laruelle’s “Theorem 000000: On the Suicide Disguised as Murder” offers an image whose violence provocatively posits the stakes involved, namely, a self-sacrifice perpetuated in the name of an apotheosis, of being raised up as some idealized *persona*—wayfarer, *bodhisattva*, *arhant*, mindful one, Western Buddhist, etc. We can paraphrase for our purposes what he writes in the experimental text “Theorems of the Good News”:

Buddhism has but one goal: to make the person believe that he must identify himself with Buddhism; to make the person assume this suicide, a suicide disguised as murder charged against the person.<sup>69</sup>

Perhaps the most significant consequence of thinking from the axiomatic Real is that it inaugurates a new kind of relationship between, in our case, x-buddhism and the person who uses its materials. And what is that relationship? It is one in which the material is subservient to the person, and not the other way around. Really, this is always the case, and the only possible case. The “suicide” is a delusion. There is no transfer of identity. Or, this is a transfer, but it is an

illusion. As Laruelle says in “Theorem 0 or the Transcendental Theorem: On Nontransferable Identity” (in paraphrase):

Nothing can, except through illusion, substitute itself for the person and for his or her identity. And the person cannot, except through illusion, substitute herself for x-buddhism ... The person is an inalienable reality. There is no reversibility between the person and x-buddhism.

Another word for the nonalienated figure is “stranger subject,” to which we now turn.

### The stranger subject

What makes the stranger subject so strange is that it indexes resistance to all ideological determinations of “the person.” If Master Foyan’s good student, the one who chooses not to mount the donkey, thereby attains the salutary status of “wayfarer,” the stranger subject, who similarly struggles with decision and the World, receives no such nomination. I spoke earlier of Laruelle’s use of violent language, and we saw it just now in “Theorems of the Good News”: victimhood, insurrection, suicide, murder. Why such language? For, look at how sincerely those compassionate regional knowledges—applied philosophy, positive psychology, x-buddhism—desire to mold us into exemplary beings. *A rational animal, a happy human, an enlightened Buddha*. Yet, surely anyone who has been party to the formative communities that foster such exemplars can attest to the violence, subtle or otherwise, done to their members in the name of the exalted ideal. For what is a thought-world devoid of its subject, wrenched, to whatever extent, into an actual human being?

Before further pursuing Laruelle’s idea of the stranger subject, it will be of help to create context by reflecting briefly on the Western Buddhist idea of the subject. The theme is obviously too complex to treat in depth here. Instead, I offer some broad remarks that I hope will stimulate the reader to further thought as we turn to the non-philosophical stranger subject. Consistent with what I have been arguing throughout this book, I understand Buddhism to be offering material for constructing a subject that would be faithful to the Real (to *thusness*, *emptiness*, *the all*, *no-self*, *things as they are*, and so on) but for the eventual and inevitable turn required by x-buddhist sufficiency. As is often the case with Buddhism, a certain binary appears to be operating here. In some instances, the practitioner is understood to be *shaped* into a particular (Buddhist) subject.

He may show up at the *sangha* as a reprobate good-for-nothing, but through sustained cultivation of particular qualities, such as concentration, compassion, equanimity, lovingkindness, proper speech, and so forth, he may attain to a kind of Buddhist perfection. An opposing view disparages this model of cultivation. It does so because it adamantly dismisses the very premise on which it is founded, namely, the conditionality, and hence constructability, of “Buddhahood.” In this view, our ne'er do-well practitioner has “cultivated” nothing whatsoever; he has simply become what he has always been but failed to realize: an awakened being, a Buddha. We find this latter position in, for instance, the *kōanic* “How can you hope to polish a tile to make it into a mirror?” and other such views derived from the theory that all sentient beings *already* possess an indwelling “Buddha matrix” (*tathāgatagarbha*). The former position is reflected in, for example, the Dalai Lama's Ge-luk view that awakening is “not a given that awaits our discovery, but something that must be created through discursive (textual) and nondiscursive practices.”<sup>70</sup> We see this basic binary throughout Buddhism's history. It is at work to varying degrees in, for instance, the ancient debates on practice between “village dwelling” and “forest dwelling” practitioners, medieval ones between “gradualists” and “suddenists,” and modern ones between what I'll call diurnal destressers and enlightenment virtuosos. Perhaps this bifurcation is yet another genetic inheritance of Buddhism. For we find both views represented in the Pali canon. The Buddha says there, for example, “I do not say, monks, that the attainment of wisdom happens all at once. Rather, the attainment of wisdom comes after gradual training, gradual action, gradual practice.”<sup>71</sup> However, he also says that, “This mind, monks, is luminous but is adulterated by adventitious defilements.”<sup>72</sup> Again, the former in each case suggests a “materialist” subject, one that is initially absent then *created* via a sustained and disciplined regimen while the latter suggests an “idealist” one that is already present then *discovered* as soon as the practitioner but “understands this [indwelling luminous mind] as it really is.”<sup>73</sup>

I think it is safe to say that a survey of contemporary Western Buddhist teachers will prove this two-fold heuristic roughly reliable. One caveat that I would make to that claim is that the distinction is largely rhetorical. That is, I would submit that the typical contemporary Western Buddhist teacher fails to understand this difference that has animated so much intra-Buddhist debate, between, namely, a discursive and an essentialized subject. Not only do contemporary Western Buddhist teachers woefully undertheorize subjectivity, but to the extent that they broach the topic at all they seem simply to assume the Enlightenment, Romantic, and Protestant subject discussed in the Introduction.

Many readers surely object to my characterization of an “essentialized” Western Buddhist subject. If any topic is anathema in well-instructed Buddhist company, it is “essence.” That news may come as a surprise to the student of Buddhism, who commonly comes across terms like “true self,” “Buddha nature,” “original goodness,” “primordial consciousness,” and so on. I would refer those rightfully perplexed students to Tom Pepper’s lucidly argued “Taking Anatman Full Strength and Śāntideva’s Ethics of Truth.”<sup>74</sup> Because it so deftly articulates the prevailing view of Western Buddhist subjectivity, as well as the inter-Buddhist contradictions and, hence, missed opportunities, that that view entails, it will be of use to present a few assertions from this article. Pepper writes, “I take the term *atman* to refer to the concept, common in the time of the historical Buddha, of a world-transcendent, essential, and unchanging life-force, consciousness, or soul.” The Buddha, of course, challenged this *atman* view with his concept of no-, not-, non-, *an-atman*.

The teaching of *anatman*, then, can be understood as an assertion that there is no eternal and unchanging consciousness, life force, or soul, singular or plural, nothing which can escape this dependently arisen world and continue on in eternal bliss. Rather, the only kind of self we have is a dependently arisen self, completely caused by the conditions of its existence. Full-strength *anatman*, then, does not say that we do not have a “self,” that the self is mere illusion, or that it is non-existent. Rather, we do have a self, it is real, and has real causal powers, but it is impermanent, constructed by the conditions of its existence, can be changed, will come to an end, and is completely non-dualistic, radically immanent to the material world.

As I will show in a moment, Laruelle’s stranger subject is coming into view here. The question would be, then, whether x-buddhists themselves theorize such a “full-strength *anatman*,” or whether they water it down with splashes of sufficiency and dollops of decision. Pepper offers this succinct account of Western Buddhism’s current state of affairs concerning this matter, whereby:

Everybody seems to want to assert fidelity to this central Buddhist teaching, but nobody is quite as eager to embrace all the implications . . . It is too troubling, for a multitude of reasons, to accept the possibility that the early Buddhists really meant that there is no *atman* at all, of any kind. So, we get a host of watered-down, more palatable versions of *anatman*, which turn out always to sneak some kind of *atman* in under another name. The implication of this, I will argue, is the complete elimination of any possibility that Buddhist thought and practice could function to decrease suffering in the world, the complete destruction of the *bodhisattva* path.

This compelling conclusion resonates with my own contention, stated at the very outset of this book and repeated throughout. I restate that contention here: Buddhism offers us valuable resources, both concepts and practices, for consequential reformations of self and society in the contemporary West. *However*, in light of both the past and the present, we are compelled to draw the conclusion that the term “Buddhism” indexes a deep human ambivalence toward unleashing the full force of its liberating thought. Although Pepper goes on to discuss “the *bodhisattva* path” in the specific terms laid down by Śāntideva (fl. eighth century), we can take his warning about its destruction as a generic claim concerning Western Buddhism’s unwitting function as an ally of the current, and quite possibly doomed, socioeconomic status quo. The negative side of this function is the inability of Western Buddhism to aid us in our current condition of being “addicted to suffering, to stagnation, and to the rapid destruction of the very conditions of our existence.” Again, although I say “Western Buddhism,” that is just shorthand for the many *actual people* who labor to fashion and perpetuate its particular World, a World in which neither “a dose of full-strength *anatman*” nor its faithful subject appears to be a part of the solution.

In the Pali canon, the Buddha uses two interesting terms for the subject. Again, we see a binary. The first term is “uninstructed worldling” (*assutavā puthujjana*). Although this is a technical term with a copious descriptive apparatus, an uninstructed worldling is basically someone who responds to pain, life’s vicissitudes, and general change the way I assume everyone reading this book does: he or she is averse to the first, affected by the second, and concerned with the third. This figure is contrasted with another subject: “the instructed noble disciple” (*sutavā ariyasāvaka*). Unlike the all-too-human uninstructed worldling, this subject “endures [pain] patiently, without sorrow, resentment, or distress”; takes life’s vicissitudes (gain and loss, fame and disrepute, praise and blame, pleasure and pain) with perfect equanimity; and faces inevitable change with imperturbability.<sup>75</sup> The uninstructed worldling, in other words, is a subject for *the world* while the noble disciple can only realistically be one for *a World*. Well-instructed readers surely take exception to my admittedly uninstructed opinion that the latter is a fantastical, unattainable figure, and, even if attainable, wholly undesirable. Now, we may “only” be dealing here with *subjects*, with discursive conceptions of what an actual person *should or might* be. But considering the lived effect of such subject discourses on actual people, Laruelle’s insistence that the man or woman is an “inalienable reality,” an “irreversible identity,” whose submission to such notions constitutes a figurative “suicide disguised as murder charged against the person,” begins to sound like the more liberating discourse

of the two. If nothing else, it valorizes a degree of performative honesty found lacking in idealizing (in both senses) subject discourses like Western Buddhism. In some cases, this performative impossibility *might be* understood as an integral aspect of the very practice. It is always hard to be sure. What, for example, would a *literal* effort to fulfill the *bodhisattva's* vow to save all sentient beings entail? Yet, Dainin Katagiri, an influential Zen teacher in the United States, insists in true Wisdom fashion that, yes, “to the intellect it seems impossible”:

But actually it is possible. When we say the vows in English, we say “I vow.” But bodhisattvas don’t assert the “I.” The bodhisattva’s life is completely without subject or object. This is full concentration. Thus, a bodhisattva is not a bodhisattva. This bodhisattva is really, fully alive.<sup>76</sup>

Typically, though, the performative impossibility is unacknowledged. I close these remarks about the Western Buddhist subject with an example that is quite possibly currently the most widely circulated single sentence on the topic: “Mindfulness *is awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally, to things as they are.*”<sup>77</sup> The “instructed” Mindfulness subject strives to embody such a condition, and, non-judgmentalism notwithstanding, actual practitioners really believe that they do and I, for example, don’t (otherwise, would I be questioning its viability?). Yet, if we disallow the exception that Wisdom grants such statements, how do we even begin to sort out the “thicket of views” here—the unstated assumptions about consciousness and cognition, about awareness, agency, time, the faculty of judgement, about their being a definitive “way” that things are, and much more? Even if we could do so, we are immediately met with the additional claim that “[mindfulness] is a way of shifting from *doing* to *being* so that we take in all the information that an experience offers us before we act.” Like the Buddha’s impervious, imperturbable, noble disciple, even if it were possible, would such a post-human calculating machine be desirable? Wisdom, of course, explains it all. But does it do so without lapsing into vacuous platitudes, logical absurdities, and remedial instructions? *Yes*, counters the subjugated practitioner. To which I then ask, okay, but is that assertion not just an admission that we are dealing here with an ideologically driven *rhetorical* performance rather than a generic “whole other way of living our lives”?<sup>78</sup> To repeat a familiar pattern of this book, I want to quickly add that the existence of an ideologically driven rhetorical performance is certainly *not* a target of criticism. The critical gears start cranking when an amphibology, a confusion-causing ambiguity, is detected in the “syntax” of the conceptual structure. A less gentle way of saying the same

thing is that the critique-worthy issue arises when we become suspicious about whether *sensei* does in fact do what he says and say what he does. Laruelle views this performative inconsistency as a defining characteristic of those who traffic in sufficient thought-systems.

The philosopher, legislating for reason, the life of the mind or social life, makes an exception even of the fact that he does not do what he says or does not say what he does, but, speaking the law, he makes an exception and enjoys the privilege of speaking about it and imposing it with his authority. I speak the truth, says the liar; I speak democracy, says the anti-democrat: this is the paradox of the philosopher as thinker of the Whole who is never short of expedients for presenting the paradox as if it were acceptable.<sup>79</sup>

You might think that the sickening spectacle of enlightened sexual predators, spiritual snake oil salespersons, and crazy wisdom creeps among the propounders of The Dharma would be more than enough to detect the machinations permitted by the “expedients” of Wisdom. But obviously it is not. Yet how much more difficult to discern the exceptionalism of which Laruelle speaks, masked as it typically is by kind wise eyes and a compassionate, if faintly self-righteous, affect. Consideration of the stranger should prove rewarding to anyone desiring a conception of a subject faithful to the full implications of Western Buddhism’s discerning thought. It should be obvious from the preceding remarks that one of those implications is *not* that the stranger, like some sort of secular mystic, has seen the face of the inscrutable Real and thereby attained stranger enlightenment. The Real, recall, entails a “unilateral causality,” such that:

stranger  $\leftarrow$  Real

The Real determines the stranger subject but the stranger subject does not determine the Real. “The stranger subject”—whether as concept, utterance, imagined archetype, or embodied agent—is yet another material derived *from* the Real. The same, of course, can be said of the Western Buddhist subject. So, what is the difference? The Western Buddhist subject is determined by the One *in the last instance* only. But the merits of that proposition become clear only after doing a considerable amount of work. This critique is an example of the required work. We have, for instance, seen the ways in which the Western Buddhist subject is primarily constituted through its decision to stand within the World as seen through the prism of Buddhism. We have seen how Western Buddhism gazes into the Real, projects into it its elaborate determinations, desires, and goals, and sees this complex mixture reflected back to it, not, of course, as the Real,



but as *paramārthasatya*/ultimate truth, *tathātā*/thusness, *śūnyatā*/emptiness, *pratīyasamutpāda*/dependent origination, *rigpa*/primordial consciousness, the mindful present moment, The Dharma, and so on. The Western Buddhist subject stance thus entails a form of thought and life that is adequate to the organon of *x-buddhism*. None of this describes the stranger. This stranger is constituted by the fact that it attends outwardly, toward the countless material cloned from the One, including the material labeled “Western Buddhism.” This subject, contrary to deciding on the sufficiency of this material, receives the material, engages with it, grapples with it, fights against it, appropriates elements of it, struggles further with it, creatively appropriates it some more, and maybe in the end fashions a form of life from it. The subject’s very knowledge that this is a necessary procedure for avoiding capture by sufficient x-systems is precisely that which makes possible its thought and action against the pretensions of a World and in accordance with the One.

This form of “stranger” thought, in fact, constitutes Laruelle’s third “discovery,” namely, the “force (of) thought.” As the resonance with Marx’s “labor power” (*Arbeitskraft*; typically translated into French as *force de travail*) indicates, the force (of) thought is a “capacity, or power of the living individual.” Marx continues:

Labor-power, however, becomes a reality only by its exercise; it sets itself in action only by working. But thereby a definite quantity of human muscle, nerve, brain, etc., is wasted [or exhausted, spent: *verausgabt*], and these required to be restored . . . The value of labor-power resolves itself into the value of a definite quantity of the means of subsistence. It therefore varies with the value of these means or with the quantity of labor requisite for their production.<sup>80</sup>

Similarly, the force (of) thought must be exercised if it is to constitute a “drive” with pragmatic force in the world.<sup>81</sup> And like the static potentiality of labor power it must be *continually* enacted in order to resolve this dismantling into adequate use-value. Significantly, though, unlike for labor-power, the resolution of the force (of) thought into use-value does not entail the subject’s alienation. In fact, it entails alienation *from the alienating structure itself* (hence, “the stranger subject”), that is to say, in our case, from the system of production and exchange called x-buddhism. The value derived from this estrangement is that the force (of) thought “dismantles fetishism of thought-representation” and thus becomes “adequate to the radical autonomy of the One.”<sup>82</sup> I must quickly add that this should not be understood to mean that the stranger subject is a thinking ego, one that internally conceptualizes, intuits, understands, reasons, or otherwise

thinks some content that effectively “reifies or thingifies [the One] into an ontic element or into a transcendental imagination.”<sup>83</sup> The stranger’s force (of) thought is “adequate” to the Real because it constitutes a “clone” of the Real, “rather than its production or reproduction into some material form proper to it.”<sup>84</sup> A clone, recall, is identical to but not the same as its original. In other words,  $1 + 1 = 1$ : 1 (the Real) + 1 (the stranger) = 1 (vision-in-One), and *not* 2 or the One-in-a-Second or the One-in-Another.<sup>85</sup> If this sounds obtuse or far-fetched, we can once again consider how the object of this critique approaches very near this equation. The Japanese Zen teacher Musō (1275–1351), as an illustration, is posed the question:

It is said that there are some people who practice *kufū* in all things and others who do everything with *kufū*. What is the difference between the two?

The term *kufū* (Chinese, *kung-fu*) is a first name for the Real. To practice *kufū* properly, therefore, is to live in accordance with the Real. This fact reveals the enormity at stake in the question. The German Buddhist Heinrich Dumoulin translates this idea into Buddhist language: “In everything they do, disciples of the Way should be totally devoted to the Dharma—they should practice *kufū*.” Recalling Kafka’s guardian of the law, Dumoulin has another master tell us that there is “no separation between the law of the Buddha and the law of the world.” So how else can Musō answer the question than to say that whether eating, sleeping, reciting *sūtras*, or shitting, subjects of the Way practice *kufū*? As to the question of the difference between the two: “*there is no difference* between ‘within all things’ and ‘within *kufū*.’  $1 + 1 = 1$ .”<sup>86</sup>

The Dharma subject is similar to the stranger subject in another way. For the former, too, something like the force (of) thought is deemed necessary. Indeed, Western Buddhism is nothing if not a Mayday concerning the pernicious fetishism of thought: “Thought is samsara. Being free of thought is liberation. When we are free of thinking, we are free of thought.”<sup>87</sup> More damningly, in thinking that which is foreclosed to it, namely, *thusness*, *emptiness*, *the Way*, and so on, thought obscures the very truth it both seeks and is: “Before ideation, before the mind begins to construct [representations and images], the mind touches the ultimate dimension, the realm of suchness.”<sup>88</sup> Therefore, what conclusion can we rationally draw but: “if you seek truth, you should value silent awareness and . . . consider it more important than any thought?”<sup>89</sup> Both subjects, the stranger and the x-buddhist, are being alerted to the alienating effect of mistaking a representation of the Real for the Real itself. Both subjects are being told that the exorbitant cost of this alienation is the very world in

which they live. Both subjects are being taught that it is precisely *within* the indetermination that constitutes representational thought that their respective subjectivities are to be found. Both subjects are being implored to struggle against the World and to resist the hallucination conjured by its thought. Finally, both subjects are being advised to “experience” the intimate, immanently “lived” or performed thought that follows immediately from the Real. So, again, the crucial question arises: what is the difference? And the answer is the same I have offered throughout this book. Whereas the x-buddhist is corralled *in-Buddhism*, the stranger remains *in-One*. That is, in the quotes above, x-buddhism continues to harass us. It clears the way of delusional representations only to construct a new way, an x-buddhist way. And it must! That is precisely what sufficient thought-systems do. Once again, the critical issue is that it does so in a manner that constitutes an amphiboly, a confusion engendered by its mistaken equation of *its* representations *for* the Real. It may be true that its representations—its texts, concepts, models, language—are, as D. T. Suzuki says, comprised of “mere waste paper whose utility consist in wiping off the dirt of the intellect”; but this towering figure of Western Buddhism errs profoundly when he adds, “and nothing more.”<sup>90</sup> As an example of what this decisive “more” consists in, we can look at the fuller context of one of the above quotes. Bear in mind that the “inner commentary/speech” is synonymous with “thought” and “thinking.”

Sometimes we assume it is through the inner commentary that we know the world. Actually, that inner speech does not know the world at all. It is the inner speech that spins the delusions that cause suffering. Inner speech causes us to be angry with our enemies and to form dangerous attachments to our loved ones. Inner speech causes all of life’s problems. It constructs fear and guilt, anxiety and depression. It builds these illusions as deftly as the skilful actor manipulates the audience to create terror or tears. So if you seek truth, you should value silent awareness and, when meditating, consider it more important than any thought.

This paragraph is a directory of subject determinations. It is rife with tacit assumptions about the subject, with passive-aggressive demands, hidden values and prejudices, gas-lighting manipulations, and quite a lot more. In short, the passage illustrates the fact that if x-buddhism enlightens us as to the actual indetermination burrowed within representational thought, such that its subject is grounded in emptiness, no-self, thusness, etc., things quickly turn dark with its extreme overdeterminations of the same. On this point alone we can turn toward the stranger subject and discern the decisive difference. For, if the Real is “foreclosed” to philosophical, psychological, x-buddhist or any other authority,

then *it must remain foreclosed*. If “before the mind begins to construct, [it] touches the ultimate dimension,” then the system of thought that teaches us this fact must at all costs avoid propagating constructions *about* that dimension. It is for this reason that Laruelle says that the force (of) thought is “the first possible experience of thought—after the vision-in-One, which is not itself a thought.”<sup>91</sup> Such x-buddhist constructions amount to thinking the in-One (the ultimate dimension, suchness, in x-buddhist language) as “the first possible experience of thought,” and all additional thoughts as stemming from that experience. Where the x-buddhist subject proceeds under the dependence of the sufficient system of determination known as The Dharma, the stranger subject proceeds “Under the dependence of the vision-in-One in-the-last-instance,” on, that is, the basis of its specific form of practice such that “it transforms the material of [buddhistic] statements and particularly the datum of the images of [its] thought” so as to render them coterminous with the science-thought discussed earlier.<sup>92</sup>

I hope to have made it clear, or at least plausible, that the Western Buddhist subject position entails a practice of thought that is adequate to the organon of *x-buddhism*. As with Western Buddhism and indeed all forms of thought, the force (of) thought, too, is an organon. But it is an organon that, as we have already seen, “works through hypothesis or axiomatic ‘real’ decision,” rather than through the kind of unitary and sufficient decision that explains the Western Buddhist stance. This point touches yet again on a central feature of my critique, and, as a way of rousing the spirit of Part Three, it bears repeating. The problematic of this critique is not to intervene in the World of Buddhism in order to correct its errors and render it palatable to us all-too-sophisticated twenty-first century secularists. As I suggested in the very first sentence of this book, the problematic of this critique is driven by the question *what are we to make of Western Buddhism?* As Laruelle claims for non-philosophy, I am claiming for a speculative non-buddhism that the problem is how to *use* it, how to make something from it and *for the stranger*.

The problem is how to use philosophy so as to effect a real transformation of the subject in such a way as to allow it to break the spell of its bewitchment by the world and enable it to constitute itself through a certain struggle with the latter. The goal is not to effect a specular doubling or duplication of the world, thereby reinforcing its grip, but to elaborate a new order, that of the radical subjectivity of the Stranger as subject who is in-struggle by definition.<sup>93</sup>

This is a remarkably positive statement coming from Laruelle. It nearly resembles a non-philosophical affirmation. It almost constitutes the lineaments of a

concrete program of action. It seems to suggest that practice has consequences beyond theory, beyond, that is, practice *as* theoretical reflection and theoretical reflection *as* practice. We will turn more directly to this issue in Part 3. What I want to suggest is that my explicit hedging on the stranger's positivity here is absolutely necessary. For, whatever else the stranger subject might be, it is barred from the endless determinations and representations that mark discourses like x-buddhism. Admittedly, this foreclosure produces a subject that sounds somewhat machinic, somewhat generic and anonymous. But I would argue that *anātman* does so as well. Indeed, that very fact is what makes the Buddhist term a viable first name for the Real. For, if it is to mean anything at all, the "lack of inherent existence" that characterizes the subject must remain faithful to that lack. Eschewing the Western Buddhist "rumor" concerning *anātman*, that rumor "which is transmitted by hearsay, imitation, specularity, and repetition," the concept "stranger" might just be tonic for stimulating a truly void subject, one that "does not use [x-buddhism] as if it were already constituted, [but] *is* that use."<sup>94</sup> Being, or better, performing, that use, however, does not entail that the subject *identify* with the Buddhist material. Its identity is irrevocably bound to that of the very Real that agitates this entire magnificent display and awesome labor to begin with.

Part Three

Redescription



## Buddhofiction

### The deliverance of fiction

Buddhism has a fascination with fiction. Arguably, fiction is the reigning trope of x-buddhist thought. The solid world before us is like a “magical illusion” conjured up by our perceptual apparatus, that “charmer of the childlike.” Or it is like a dream woven “in the mind of one drunk with sleep.” Or it is a feature of all of reality—of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* alike, of appearance and emptiness—wherein all things “arise as the illusory display of unobstructed relativity.”<sup>1</sup> Why is everything so tremulously like a dream? The classical Buddhist answer is *saṃskāra*—fabrication, formulation, construction. When the *saṃskāra* that is our perceptual apparatus meets the *saṃskāra* that is the world of form, how could there *not* ensue the fabrications of fiction? The Buddha is the Buddha and not, say, the Christ or the Professor, precisely because he was aware of this fabulation to such an extreme degree that he *awakened* from the hypnotic dreamy ignorance of seeing things as they seem as opposed to as they are. Of course, that story, too, is a fabulation. And by “that story,” I mean not only the tale of Prince Siddhārtha, but the entire glorious World that was, continues to be, and will in the future be fashioned in his name. I don’t just mean the phantasmagoric weaving of fictions within fictions, wherein even that simple tale itself unfolds repeatedly not in earthly India but in “as many worlds as there are atoms” in the paradisiacal galaxies called *Buddha fields* and *pure lands* or where the teaching originates in “the most sensitive, delicate, adamant matrix of life and bliss” known as the “Victorious Vagina of the Diamond Female Buddhas.” Even if we left it at such dime-a-dozen examples, the story that Buddhism tells would be so rich in fictional exuberance that to enumerate its variations, subtle and gross, across time and space would be tedious beyond the imagination of anyone but “the Buddha called Pure Knowledge of All Things” abiding in the Array of Jewel



Flames galaxy.<sup>2</sup> But there are much more telling, if less obvious, fictions turning and turning in the widening gyre of this fabulation called Buddhism.

To say that “Buddhism,” in the singular, tells this tale, is to acknowledge the equally singular *identity* enfolded within this term. And yet, to use it responsibly, to actually have the word say something, we must apply plural modifications. And to do so, to modify “Buddhism” as the occasion demands, belies even deeper, because less apparent, fictions. While speaking of “Zen Buddhism,” for instance, creates some restraint within the possibility of “Buddhism,” it still harbors highly consequential ambiguities. For example, whose Zen? Dogen’s? Eisai’s? Thich Nhat Hanh’s? Robert Pirsig’s? Zenify 100% Natural Stress Relief drink’s?<sup>3</sup> Even if we say “Dogen’s,” now: which text, which period, for whom, to what end, where and when—on Eihei-ji in the thirteenth century for elite monks abiding in the mind of the Buddha; in Tokyo in the nineteenth, for upper-class laymen cultivating Samurai sangfroid; in Toledo in the twenty-first, for middle-class women uncoupling from the stresses of the daily grind? Every additional element entails literally exponential reconfigurations generated by the algorithm “Buddhism.” Indeed, the *x* in “x-buddhism” is nothing if not a sign of the staggering fictional exuberance erupting out of “Buddhism.”

With such considerations, I hope to impress several points on the reader. The first is the possibility that the most consequential x-buddhist fictions are also the most invisible. They are invisible because they appear to be the very stuff from which a bona fide tradition is woven. They are precisely the features that give each x-buddhism its air of (nonfictional) legitimacy. As Laruelle says about the fictions of Christianity:

So many [Buddhas] have been imagined, so many [*sūtras*] written, plagiarized, copied, canonized or kept secret, unfolded in the light of exegesis or buried in the desert; so many [buddhologies] and hermeneutics, so much literature elevated to the dignity of [“sacred”] and sometimes “canonical” texts.

So many permutations wrought by time, place, culture, class, gender, politics, desire; so much fragmentation, schimatization, disputation, argumentation, secularization, naturalization, that—and this is my second point—the question becomes: what possible grounds might one offer for *not* fictionalizing Buddhism yet again, but this time out from “under the punctilious gaze” of some putative x-buddhist standard? For, given that it is fiction through and through, given that Buddhism *already* is of the genre *fabulation*, then there can certainly be “nothing excessive” in proposing a *buddhofiction*, a new form of fiction that “openly declares and advocates itself as such and that consists in a controlled

conjugation of renewed scientific-type procedures and old philosophical-type theological models.”<sup>4</sup> I imagine that the committed x-buddhist reader objects that such a thing as a *buddhofiction* is wholly unnecessary since his or her tradition *already* is a scientific-type procedure coupled to an old philosophical/religious/contemplative-type model. My claim throughout this book, by contrast, has been that something like a non-buddhism is required if Buddhism is to uphold its self-proclaimed identity as such. I have offered ample reasons and examples for this claim. Perhaps the most consequential aspect of this critique is the pivot around which the various arguments turn. I am referring to the principle of sufficient Buddhism. Recall what happens when acute articulations of the Real are placed in the service of this principle: the requirement to maintain x-buddhist sufficiency—its authority, completeness, mastery—converts even *emptiness* into the ideological game piece called *śūnyatā*. “Emptiness” as an element within the vast network of Western Buddhist postulates is not the Real of emptiness. Even Buddhism teaches us this fact (e.g., “the emptiness of emptiness”). Until, of course, it teaches us something different (e.g., emptiness as “a spectral, shifting presence of absence: shimmering substantiality” or whatever). Ultimately, the x-buddhist, as Laruelle says of the philosopher, plays with loaded dice. And he must! A unitary system of thought such as Buddhism *must* be protected from the elements within its semiotic system “whose function,” as Terry Eagleton pointed out earlier, “is to indicate the truth that it cannot be totalised.” My critique will be useful or not to the reader depending on whether I have been convincing on this point concerning the function and consequences of the principle of sufficient Buddhism.

One of those consequences is the necessity, *but not sufficiency*, of a non-buddhist supplement, or, what amounts to the same thing, of a “buddhofiction.” Every x-buddhism *must* maintain its authority at the Great Feast of Knowledge. It must project *its* colors onto the black universe. It must drive *its* World-dominating *axis mundi* into the heart of the earth. But *the stranger* must engage in none of this. And with this point we come to a central operating premise of Laruelle’s notion of “philo-fiction,” from which I am deriving my concept of “buddhofiction.” The term:

may be understood as referring primarily to the “fictionalist” school of mathematics, where the warring ontological commitments of traditional debates are eliminated by taking up a stance of hypothetical “acceptance” with regard to the implications of the various objects they propose.<sup>5</sup>

A non-buddhism would in this manner “introduce peace into [x-buddhist] thought by means of democracy.”<sup>6</sup> In the spirit of the Great Feast of Knowledge,

which, when the *polemos* ceases, is after all, a shared banquet; without ever losing sight of the black universe; and with feet pressed snugly against the earth, non-buddhism “is content to allow all [x-buddhist] knowledges equal validity or partial models of the Real that determines them in the last instance.” As we have seen, what renders them so is the “unilateralizing force of generic thought.” All thought equally, that is, is material cloned from the Real. As *thought-system* it crashes against the One on its way to unitary transcendence-decision-sufficiency, but only to be knocked level to lie prostrate on the earth, to appear in “the universe that is the human’s true habitat.”<sup>7</sup> All thought really only ever remains in-One, forever available for thought renewed.

To a convicted x-buddhist, and many other readers besides, I imagine that non-buddhism appears to be yet another x-buddhism. After all, reconfiguring the materials that properly constitute “Buddhism” is a practice as old as Buddhism itself. That is not the case here. If the reader is not yet convinced of, or not yet even open to, that claim, I offer the following considerations before turning to a more sustained effort at creating a buddhofiction. First of all, let us be clear: non-buddhism, too, is a practice. In fact, it is nothing if not a practice. It is, moreover, a practice that entails *experience*, a practice in theory or, better, practice-in-theory, equally in thought and “in-person.” It is crucial to understand, however, that it is a practice unfolding under the auspices of the stranger subject. That is, it is the practice (of) radical immanence, practice (from) the Real (remember that the Laruellen graphics collapse the misleading distance between terms). In x-buddhist terms we might say that it is, for instance, emptiness-practice, force (of) thusness, vision-in-just-that, (non-)things-as-they-are, shitstick-without-shitstickness. If, yet again, this sounds like just more Buddhism, bear in mind that “Buddhism” is a term for a quite particular hallucination of the Real. “Buddhism” is a material *product* of the Real that it, as some x-buddhism, so longs to possess. It names its object of desire in the most intimate fashion: emptiness, thusness, womb of the Buddha, Victorious Vagina, gateless gate, shitstick. But in doing so, Buddhism forgets the very a priori that has excited its labor in the first place, and thus causes its subject to confuse Buddhism’s production for that a priori itself. It is different for the non-buddhist subject, for whom “there is a transcendental illusion that is already more consistent” precisely because its practice remains “immanent in its principle, and penetrates and encompasses the [x-buddhist] system, finding subtle support in each of its parts, brushing up against them where necessary without lingering, settling, or becoming attached.” Yet again, I imagine that this point sounds quintessentially “Buddhist” to many readers. For, isn’t Buddhist practice all about not becoming attached, nonabiding, letting

go? The crucial difference, I have been arguing, is that the non-buddhist subject engages the x-buddhist material in a manner “that is no longer nodal but unilateral.” The subject is disinterested in the interminable postulates connected to, say, thusness. But this not an arbitrary disinterest. It derives from remaining faithful to the immanent principle of unilaterality (thusness  $\leftarrow$  x-buddhism  $\leftarrow$  Real) rather than to the principle of sufficient Buddhism (x-buddhism  $\rightarrow$  ~~The~~ Real thusness). So, for the non-buddhist subject, “the [x-buddhistizable] a priori constantly threatens to reclaim its sufficiency and to ‘recharge’ from its [x-buddhist] pretenses; it hides the Real a priori and confirms spontaneous [x-buddhism].”<sup>8</sup> The stranger, precisely, depotentializes this threat.

As the mention of “a transcendental illusion” above indicates, non-buddhism comes in the name of honesty as much as of peace. It proclaims itself to be a fiction. Because it, like Buddhism, is a material that is merely *modeled on* or cloned from the Real, it, too, is marked with “certain characteristics of the spectre” that is the x-buddhist form of thought. It is, after all, x-buddhist material that it is “brushing up against,” though not adhering to. These characteristics include a transcendently posited subject (i.e., posited in-thought), if “transcendentally radicalized” (as force [of] thought) subject, as well as further forms of what can only be termed hallucination and illusion. This fact may well give rise to jubilation among unsympathetic readers that non-buddhism is indeed just, and necessarily, another (mini-)version of the grand system of thought called Buddhism—so grand, indeed, that even a non-buddhist critique cannot refrain from circling back to its refuge in the end. Laruelle has something to say about the seemingly inescapable fact that Buddhism will lay claim to any usage of its materials:

Philosophy perpetually wants to claim the philo-fiction as just more philosophy. But all bets are off; the Lived-life is resilient, the inalienable Real cannot be forgotten, for it does not cease to resist any more than the subject (transcendentally radicalized) is able to forget itself in the struggle. The outcome of non-philosophy is a *radical* Lived-life of hallucination and illusion. The immanent Lived-life is unforgettable . . . It is the real condition of salvation such that it engages a task and maintains the subject, head above the world.<sup>9</sup>

The real condition of . . . salvation? Perhaps our initial acceptance or rejection of a practice of thought comes down to whether we desire the World thus entailed. And perhaps this desire, in turn, comes down to whether we feel that the entailed World is ultimately one of victimization or salvation. Historically, both of these outcomes have followed from the materials of The One True Dharma.

It is a Buddhist World that produces allies in the Burmese military's slaughter of Rohingya Muslims. And it was from Buddhist materials that Ambedkar fashioned a World resisting, with courage and revolutionary zeal, the savage bigotry that perennially crushed the dreams of Indian *dalits*. Similarly, today, in North America, it is a Buddhist World that coeffects the comfortable middle class numbness necessary for the unchallenged perpetuation of our current neoliberal catastrophe. And it is a Buddhist World that offers succor to sufferers of soul-crushing anxiety. This exercise has no end. That is because, to paraphrase the popular Western-Zen-Buddhist vow, *hallucinations are inexhaustible*. Hallucinations appear real to the person living them, and so they produce real-world effects. If we could survey these effects like "the Buddha called Pure Knowledge of All Things" does, would we not see that Western Buddhist materials are essentially no different from any other in that their potential usage virtually spans the spectrum of human possibility?

*Who is the subject, what is the World, that I desire to see woven from x-buddhist material?* That is a question to be posed by every "non-buddhist," by anyone, that is to say, who wishes to create new forms of thought-practice-experience—and perhaps even knowledge—using x-buddhist materials. My own desire has been in evidence throughout this book, particularly in the micro-buddhifictions or non-buddhist conjunctions that run throughout it. For example, I have indicated in so many ways that practice must "render thought adequate to the *jouissance* of an . . . immanent 'life.'"<sup>10</sup> The subject of this thought-practice unites in one life the quickening duality of enduring enjoyment and pain. The thought-practice is adequate to the continuing horror/excess/superabundant vitality that is concomitant with merely being "one of them, even on the lowest rung," that is a human life within the community of humans.<sup>11</sup> It must, furthermore, enable the individual to fare well "in its inevitable struggle with the Authorities of the world."<sup>12</sup> As Anthony Paul Smith says in this regard, the practice functions as a "kind of counter-creation" to that which has been unleashed in the service of human "harassment"; and so it must function as a "force of insurrection that disempowers the world and operates without concern for its parameters."<sup>13</sup> As this point indicates, an essential element of this non-buddhist performance is the battery of x-buddhist concepts that enable an awakened perspective on the "hardness of fate," on, that is to say, the a prioris that form the primitive conditions of our existence and thus must constitute the elements of a human "awakening": emptiness, materiality, interdependent phenomenality, radical contingency, non-self, and the ensuing imperative of compassion. Buddhism, Western Buddhism, x-buddhism, does indeed *think*. It is a thinking machine.

It thinks at the micro level of the discrete momentary thought-object-events that entail the fluid psychophysical organism known as the “person.” It thinks at the macro level of human organization, earthly care, and cosmic destiny. It is itself a brilliant speculative fiction wherein a World of justice, equality, kindness, and peace is imagined. It is, however, a fiction that has been programmed for decision and sufficiency, and thereby arrogated to the ornamental palace of aristocratic Wisdom. As I said in the Introduction, the purpose of this critique is not to annihilate this finely wrought edifice of Western Buddhism. The purpose is to view that edifice in the glow of a stranger, more creaturely, light. It is to one final glimpse from this view that we now turn.

### A Buddhism without a past

A buddhofiction is not a rendering of Buddhism. It is a usage of Buddhist materials. It is not a contemplation of Buddhism. It is Buddhism practiced otherwise. Its practice will be both unrecognizable and unacceptable to an x-buddhist. That is because a buddhofiction depotentializes the very mechanisms that ensure x-buddhism its aristocratic status. A buddhofiction, more concretely, is an ideology constructed out of x-material run through anti-decisional machinery and slapped with the warrant of *insufficient*. Buddhism is a compromised practice of thought because it is performed under the “punctilious gaze” of Buddhist mastery. In the end, its subject’s thought must always yield to x-buddhism. It is for this reason that x-buddhism is an unrigorous practice of thought. A buddhofiction is thought rising in the eternal swell of the One. If that statement sounds grandiose, recall that it is this fact which has determined the methodology employed in this critique. All forms of thought, equally, rise and fall in this swell. The subject who approaches practice in this manner does so under the decidedly unpunctilious, because wholly indifferent, gaze of the One. In the end, thought must thus yield to this interminably “defetishizing experience,” no matter how strange and estranging it becomes.<sup>14</sup> It is for this reason that non-buddhism is a rigorous practice of thought.

How does one even begin such an exercise? In general, Laruelle proposes a peaceful if firm strategy:

*We begin by supposing that [x-buddhism] does not exist or no longer exists, at least in the sufficient and authoritative mode and manner in which it presents itself, i.e., as a rational yet transcendental fact that teleologically controls the possible operations on it.*<sup>15</sup>

For the more insurrection-minded readers, the following strategy might bring a fuller measure of heat to the act. Laruelle proposes taking this approach in relation to Alain Badiou, a “great” thinker, a thinker “entirely apart,” someone who has not merely attained mastery of his epoch’s wisdom traditions but endeavors forcefully to “re-educate” that very dispensation. Surely, “the Buddha” is such a consequential a figure. For such a thinker (and his or her acolytes) a remonstrance against the Master’s overbearingness will merely be brushed aside. What is required is a “defensive ultimatum ... the defense of a certain human universality against an individual spokesperson of a tradition that is believed to place it in danger.”

To really place [x-buddhism] in question, even if we are obliged to make use of [x-buddhistic] procedures, we must invalidate it in one blow and without remainder. We must presuppose every conceptual term to be already divested of all power. We must presuppose that the generic matrix is already given in the virtual state, and thus that [x-buddhist] objects are already reduced to the status of symptoms or mere occasions.<sup>16</sup>

The “generic matrix” that I develop is the practice-theory of meditation. Why that? It would be difficult to convince serious observers of the contemporary scene that anything other than meditation occupies the pride of place in Western Buddhism. This was true from the very beginning—of *Western* Buddhism, that is. In fact, the proliferation of meditation teaching among the laity is a primary identity marker of *Western* Buddhism. Like Western Buddhism itself, this phenomenon originated in Asia, becoming an essential feature by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. “Traditional” Buddhists, those “Eastern” Buddhists who had always placed their hopes in the salvation of a better future birth, would continue their rituals of merit-making and devotion in monk-administered temples. The new Western Buddhist, whether in Mandalay or Madison, would flock to lay-run meditation centers in search for the salvation of self-awakening. As Heinz Bechert and Jens-Uwe Hartmann write concerning the efforts to reform Buddhism in Nepal:

One of the most striking features of Buddhist modernism is the rebirth and popularisation of meditational techniques. In contrast to the traditional teaching of meditation—provided in each case by one teacher for individual students—the modernists have made a kind of mass movement out of meditating. Renowned teachers found meditation centers, which usually draw a large response. Apart from preaching, there is probably nothing that has so furthered the spread of Theravada Buddhism as the possibility of taking part in these meditational practices.<sup>17</sup>

The reasons for this emphasis have to do with the issues I raised in the Introduction concerning Western Buddhism's absorption of Enlightenment values, Romantic sentiments, and the Protestant ethos. Particularly concerning meditation, we can add scientism, medicalism, and psychologism to that mix. As David McMahan points out, meditation is typically presented "as a mode of internal observation and analysis akin to empirical science and not bound by authority and tradition." As the notion of "analysis" suggests, it is difficult to conceive of contemporary Western Buddhist meditation devoid of the values, models, assumptions, and even language of American psychology. As McMahan further observes, meditation is typically advertised as:

a psychological method for accessing deeper, unconscious recesses of the mind in order to expose unconscious constraints and negative dispositions so that they may be transformed or released to allow creative and compassionate forces naturally residing in the mind to flow forth unimpeded.<sup>18</sup>

McMahan's description here highlights several decisive features of Western Buddhist meditation. First, it is thoroughly idealist. Abandoning the nonnegotiable revolutionary principle of *anātman*, Western Buddhist meditation teachers assume the primacy of an integral agent possessing an internal mind, or in other words, an *atman*. Second, meditation is wholly "detachable from the tradition itself."<sup>19</sup> Never mind the arduous treading of the eightfold path, of the stages of the path, or even of the pathless path; never mind the taxing ethical demands of *sīla*, *dāna*, and all of those annoyingly impossible *pāramitās*: we can simply plop down on our \$100 chakra-purple organic buckwheat-filled cushion, or better yet, our couch, and meditate away. Third, meditation is not merely detachable from the network of postulates that constitutes any given *x-buddhism*, it is detachable from the material structures that constitute society as a whole. We saw this idea at work earlier in Matthieu Ricard's instructions to the Davos billionaires: "You are not the slave of your thoughts—just gaze at them, like a shepherd sitting above a meadow watching his sheep go by." Thoughts, this thinking goes, might indeed be noxious seepage spewing from the social world into the mind, but with meditation you can become adept at rising above them, and remain unscathed. To repeat Žižek's conclusion to this proposition: "The 'Western Buddhist' meditative stance is arguably the most efficient way for us to fully participate in capitalist dynamics while retaining the appearance of mental sanity." Fourth, meditation is reattached to particular *x-buddhist* postulates in order to add conceptual ballast to the reconfigured usage. Mindfulness maven Jon Kabat-Zinn, for instance, is notorious for his opportunistic equivocation on



this matter, whereby he simultaneously distances himself from the apparently unacceptable truth that Mindfulness is bound up in Buddhism in absolutely determinate ways and yet adamantly insists that the implicit benefits derived from that relationship obtain for his Mindfulness program.<sup>20</sup> But Kabat-Zinn is not alone. We see some version of this complex collusion even with figures we should expect to be allergic to certain Buddhist values and skeptical of Buddhist claims, such as Daniel Goleman and Richard Davidson in their neuroscientific study of meditation.<sup>21</sup> Finally, while emptiness is the heart of Buddhist doctrine, meditation is the heart of Buddhist practice. In a grand gathering of leading x-buddhist teachers in the Boston Park Plaza Hotel at the end of the last century to discuss the future of “Buddhism in America” (the title of the conference), the American Dzogchen teacher Surya Das (born Jeffrey Miller), offered several “Emergent Trends in Western Dharma.”<sup>22</sup> These trends represented the crucial features that were informing “the transplantation of Asian Buddhism into the fertile fields of the Western world.” Trend number one is that the coming Buddhism will be “Meditation-Based and Experientially Oriented.” It is curious that Surya Das had not noticed that this feature was not a trend at all. It was a fait accompli.<sup>23</sup>

## Meditation in Ruin

*The ruin of the structure signifies that in the vanished and destroyed aspects of the work of art other energies and forms—those belonging to nature—grow again, so that out of the art that still lives in it, and out of nature, which already lives in it, a new whole, a characteristic unity, emerges.*

—Georg Simmel, *The Ruin*<sup>1</sup>

### 1

A black ant brings him to his senses. It's just a haze of various shades of green and brown, at first. Slowly, something—a speck of moving blackness no larger than a peppercorn—comes into focus. It is an ant. And a moving leaf. No, the ant is carrying the leaf. The leaf is perpendicular to the ant's body, rising vertically like the head sail on a reed boat. The ant is struggling to surmount a cluster of dried leaves with its leaf intact. As he observes the ant, he is vaguely aware that his left cheek is pressed hard against the forest floor. The sour stench of stale vomit fills his nose. He tastes blood on his lips. He squeezes his pulsating head. But he keeps his right eye trained on the ant, captivated by its furious determination. The ant thrusts forward; the leaf falls; the ant whips around, grabs the leaf; charges another fraction of an inch; darts, and dodges an onslaught of branches and leaves. The ant loses the leaf in the melee, clinches it, like a buccaneer, in its barbed mandibles, and charges again. This is the moment when he passes from the mental fog into self-awareness. A simple but invigorating thought bolts through his mind—*just drop the leaf, fool.*

The ground is cool on his cheek. He closes his eyes and breathes in deeply. *What happened? What the hell happened?* He remembers sitting, as usual, cross-legged, back straight, head centered on his shoulders, leaning against the tree trunk. This memory quickens him. He pushes himself back up until he is sitting on his buttocks again. The tree trunk is right there to support him. Leaning

against it with his bare legs straight out in front of him, he stares into the woods. *What happened?* He remembers hunching over like a withered reed, gazing at the ground. His head suddenly felt as if a strongman were tightening a leather strap around it as a headband. Instinctively, he grabbed it with both hands fully extended, and began massaging it, hoping, in vain, to ease the pain. He gasped with fright when he felt his scalp. It was shriveled and withered. When he rubbed his head, the hair, rotten at the roots, fell to the ground. He remembers heaving in waves. The vomit shot in a stream onto the ground and splattered on his face. He couldn't hold out. In pain and exhaustion, he finally fell on his face.

He just stares into space now. The woods are dark. He wraps his arms tightly around himself, presses his knees against his chest, and pulls the tattered cloth that was once his robe over his shivering body. Overcome by loneliness, shame and, most devastating of all, a sense of catastrophic failure, he begins to weep. After half a minute, he stops. He wipes his face with his sleeve. He sits still, then punches the ground. His gaze sharpened, he mutters to himself, *now, where's that ant?*

Sadness was his natural element. Anger was his most effective tonic. Together, they were elixir, flushing self-pity and delusion from his mind and paralysis from his body. As a child already, he had discovered the futility of struggling against anger and sadness. It was like trying to prevent rain from soaking the ground. He had tried that once. The rains were coming. With the help of a servant, he constructed elaborate hemp roofing and dug a complex drainage system to protect his herb garden. The result was the ruin of his herb garden. The plants were smothered by the collapsed roof, beaten by the rain mercilessly into the ground, and finally drowned in ditches. He observed this disaster from his window and drew the logical conclusion. Nature is supreme power. Nature is perverse. It is element: water, fire, earth, and air. I, too, am this. I am nature. I have a stark choice: I can either struggle against nature as it takes its course or learn to live *as* its force. But doing so will take precise knowledge and great skill. In the meantime, I will just let the rain permeate the ground, pervade and infuse it, saturate it with its very nature, wetness.

Like the rains, anger and sadness were for him inevitable and all-consuming forces. When sad, he felt drawn down to the ground, helpless and disoriented. He lost all sense of who he was, what he was doing, and for what reason. Anger braced him, lifted him up, turned his face squarely toward the world. When mixed, these two affects were like the gods' nectar: they simultaneously clarified and impelled. Sadness was a mirror for his self-delusion. It lay open to view his fantasies about himself and the world. Anger narrowed his view, sharpened his focus. It provoked ideas and spurred him to action.

Now, here he is, sad and angry. With patience and care he will absorb their force and harvest their seed, as he has done so many times before. That is what he determines. On elbows and knees, he crawls over to where the ant had been struggling with its leaf. *That leaf was both its food and burden*, he thinks. *Both its sustenance and its ruin.*

*Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of thinking.<sup>2</sup>*

## 2

This text shares Peter Sloterdijk's premise about practice: "anyone who takes part in a program for depassivizing himself, and crosses from the side of the merely formed to that of the forming, becomes a subject." We can characterize the buddha's struggle to awaken to the elements of the Law that determine human existence in these terms, too. In this light, practice is an exercise in "deautomatization"; it entails "liberation from infection by blindly reproducing unexamined." We saw earlier that the "dip into a chaos" entailed by the buddha's contemplative experimentation is immersion into a "Dionysian space of undoing" within which he enacts "not a system of demonstration, but an ordeal in which the mind is given new eyes." The undoing must persist and the eyes be diurnally refreshed. The stark division of subject pathways being pointed out here is between that of a World's automaton and that of a World's buddha. It is the subject awake to the a priori powering the furnace of life, or really, of a life, one at a time. "The buddha" is the name of the subject of this practice. Borrowing the term from the ancient Greeks, Sloterdijk calls such practice "anthropotechnics." It is a term that follows from a confrontation with two "massive pseudo-evidences." Sloterdijk reminds us of the first of these extraordinary facts: no such thing as "religion" exists. There are only practices of human formation. Some practices produce neo-Nazis; others produce *bodhisattvas* of great compassion. Most produce automatons, mere surfaces reflecting the reigning ideology, mirroring it for Others and so serving as agents of its replication. Engaging a belief system is no less a "practice" than the *yogic* headstand. The second of these errors was proclaimed by Siddhārtha Gautama: no such thing as an inner "self" exists. There is only an interminable psychophysical-social-symbolic work in progress wrought by *paideia*, *autopoiesis*, *ritualization*, *humanitas*, *vinaya*, *Bildung*—or automation. Contrary to the hysterical fantasies propagated by the abettors of the New Age idealist apocalypse, wherein a cataclysmic *shift in this and that consciousness* will augur the dawn of an eternally utopian World,

a sober estimation recognizes the profound limitations of “the agent that cuts itself out” from our overbearing World. Anyone who has endeavored to change a relationship of two individuals much less the multitude of a World is frustratingly aware of the “radically asymmetrical, almost self-annihilating division” between “own and non-own.” “Non-own” is the sphere of causes, conditions, and influence of every single phenomenon arising bubble-like with each tick of the earth’s turning. This is a sphere so inconceivably gargantuan that it can be contained only in the mind of God. “Own,” as the word *agent* reminds us, is that sphere wherein I may act to drive something into and through the world *in the way I desire*. In other words, a sphere of power and influence that, in relation to that of the “non-own,” amounts to “virtually zero.” We may still—just barely—speak of autogenesis, that which is “brought about by the repercussions of actions on the actor.” Another way of saying this is that an anthropotechnic occurs at the juncture of the personal and the social. The individual is making an effort to enhance his psycho-symbolic “immunological” status. But such efforts must also serve to increase the “cognitive capital of our society.” The clamor it causes in the cellar of the personal *epoché* must rise as tumult on the city’s streets. It must, that is, transubstantiate into a force of thought with bodily engagement. “Meditation in Ruin” is addressing what I think has to happen at the very outset of such a practice, what lies *in front* of practice. In a sense, the text is asking about the a priori or basic conditions that permit us to speak of “the buddha subject,” a first cousin, perhaps, of Laruelle’s “stranger subject.” This subject is deeply allergic to representations—a condition that in itself must catalyze not only an approach to practice generally, but a quite particular practice. And yet, representation is a basic requirement of a life shared with others—of language, laughter, communication, symbolization, and so much more. How might we conceive today of a practice shorn of excess transcendental representation, a practice expelled, like Adam and Eve, from the idealists’ haven?<sup>3</sup>

## 3

This text once aspired to be an exercise, an *exercitia*. It desired to say something valuable, to be of help, to show a way. But those days have long passed. Its words have soiled themselves with doubt. Here is speech pitted with disenchantment. Its paragraphs are a squall of confusion, shame, and anxiety. I am afraid that what follows is delinquent in the niceties of persuasion. Simply put: *it is too late for arguments*. For, “can anyone who has reached the limit bother with arguments?” That is not to say that this text recoils from overreach and even bombast. Or that

it banks its wings away from the sun of beauty. It burns for beauty! But for the beauty of Hölderlin: *Does the laughter of people make me sad? Of course it does. After all, I have a human heart.* Stupidly, this text still pines for meaning, goodness, hope, and all of that. As you will find, though, it knows only the blackness of a faded dream and the memories of someone with the smell of death in his nose.<sup>4</sup>

## 4

By turns worrisome and ridiculous, words like that at least exude the ruination that I wish to unbind with this text. Think of that goal as emerging from a dialectic of excremental inversion. Dialectics posits the dynamism of knowledge—it's alive, it moves. To be effective, our thinking, our analyses, must thus *keep pace*. (Hence: "To understand analysis is to understand dialectics.") We will always have, first, our *abstraction*. And whether it is a chimera of reverie or the hardened certainty of *Weltanschauung*, our abstraction always lacks consummation with the lived. We come to this conclusion through real-world trial and error. That is to say, we will always have, next, our *negation*. And in the atmosphere of the Real the abstraction corrodes. Yet in this very decomposition, something remains. It falls. We pick it up. The analysis resumes. We perceive a *concrete*—some electric x that survives the passage from plenitude toward destitution. Short of disappearing into nothingness, this x falls with a thud into the lived Real. That alluring aroma drifting off the abstract (love, equality, wisdom, etc., etc.) as it falls, is its attrition, its cut, molecule by molecule into the fetid stench of the unadorned Real. *All things turn to shit*. But is not shit itself a precious, all-too-necessary *aide-mémoire* of our status as *Homo sapiens ape*?<sup>5</sup>

## 5

This text concerns an organon that places you at the threshold to analytic ruin. You may temporarily stave off the inevitable with any number of fantastic conceptual constructions. In this case, you turn back. Another possibility: You engage the analysis, but only to palliative ends, and fall short of ruin. Still another possibility: You do not flinch from the very fact that drove you back into the warm lap of consolation. This fact is central to ruin. This fact is inexorable and inevitable. It is rendered doubtful only by virtue of the darkest human ignorance or through an act of a gargantuan will to deny. If the history of the world is any indication, this fact is portentously hideous. If the history of our cultural institutions, of

our language, of our very biology is any indication, no greater menace threatens humanity. The fact: dissolution—the vaporous effervescence haunting existence, the genetrix of *Homo narcissicus*' bastard bugbear, *nihil*. Not flinching before the presence of dissolution, you cross the threshold to ruin and don't turn back.

## 6

Dissolution is self-evident. It obtains immediately in every instance of perception, conception, and sensation. Over greater spans of time, say a lifetime, it is made evident through comparison and memory. Science traces it over eons, before the advent of human beings. Science traces it, too, into oblivion, when “the accelerating expansion of the universe will have disintegrated the fabric of matter itself, terminating the possibility of embodiment,” when “every star in the universe will have burnt out, plunging the cosmos into a state of absolute darkness and leaving behind nothing but spent husks of collapsed matter.” Dissolution is instantaneous and continuous. It is to extinction what a molecule is to mass, argon to vapor. Extinction describes more than the absolute cessation of objects and entities: it describes the condition that negates even the possibility of their being further extinguished. Extinction is patient: it waits for the final instance. Its purview is immense and vast. It sees its object after millions and millions of years. Dissolution occurs in the midst of things—in the salience of their rising, persisting, and fading away. Its view is minute and narrow. It sees its object in an instant of intimate if destructive embrace. Yet, being instantaneous and continuous, dissolution is not extinguished. Although a concept itself, dissolution is one that hovers near the fact it names, rendering it intelligible. Dissolution as concept lends lucidity to what, without it, remains a dark, foreign, and harrowing domain. The concept dissolution makes possible the thinking of the fact of dissolution. Yet, thinking is mere thinking. The facts of human being seem to necessitate no constraint to human thinking. Thinking is often contentedly at odds with phenomenality. Intelligibility and lucidity, by contrast, though characteristics of thinking, suggest thought wading into the surging sea of immanence.<sup>6</sup>

## 7

We can view it in the register of thought itself, for “What is at all familiar and cognitively understood is not really understood for the very reason that it is familiar. The most common form of self-deception and deception of others is to presuppose

something as familiar and then to drop the subject. Such knowledge, with all of its back and forth chitchat, never gets anywhere, without ever knowing why.” We do know why, of course. Thought seeks the consolations of familiar certainties, even if they are mere positive abstractions, and thus refuses to “linger, to “tarry” with the infinite negativity that constitutes both the subject and his conceptions. Such tarrying is experienced as death—ideological, subjective, and always with premonitions of the impending actual. “Death ... is the most terrifying thing of all, and to hold fast to what is dead requires the greatest strength. Powerless beauty hates the understanding because the understanding expects of her what she cannot do. However, the life of wakefulness is not a life that flinches from death and saves itself from ruin; rather, it bears death, and in death, it sustains itself.” That life, the life of wakefulness, is not found in the refuge of our abstract positives. It is found only in “absolute disruption” that is this lingering, this tarrying in the negative. “This lingering is the magical power that converts it into being ... The activity of dissolution/analysis is the force and labor of the *understanding*, the most astonishing and mightiest of powers, or rather the absolute power.”<sup>7</sup>

## 8

Is there an organon of dissolution? I believe that there is. But unlike the inflated flights of fancy roused by the ghostly shades of familiar representations (abstractions), the organon entails relentless deflation. The voiding of imaginary plenitude requires unflinching commitment to the banalities of immanence. The organon is thus rooted in our shared sensorial embodiment. Even thinking appears, in its midst, as physicality—as materially immanent fact itself. The organon is the laying-bare of phenomenal display, along with the display’s ideological matrix. The organon is to consciousness what skin is to the body: organic interface, exposure to, and coalescence with environment. Like skin, it is a tool, a means of apprehension, an organ. It is the laying bare of body to body in and of itself, of sensation to sensation in and of itself, of thought to thought in and of itself, of each to the other, of each to the whole, and of the whole to environment. This organon, like skin, is rooted in the surface of things.

## 9

The organon consists of two modes: the anthropotechnic per se and the conceptual calculus. What is this figure, the calculus of the organon? I am



using “calculus” in three distinct but related senses. A calculus purports to model change. It is concerned both with the tangent or trajectory of continuous instantaneous change and the area or space that ensues, even if only momentarily, from that change. As such, a calculus is concerned with the quantification of real-world limits. Newton’s use of the calculus allowed a mathematical description of physical phenomena. The calculus of the organon allows for a conceptually deflated, qualitative, description of a noncomponent of the nonphysical world: dissolution. What the calculus describes is precisely a “noncomponent” and is “nonphysical” because “it,” unlike the persevering bodies described by physicists, names those continuous instantaneous instants when physicality is dissolved. Dissolution—the phenomenon tracked by the calculus of the organon—is a nonexistent proxy for what *was* but *is* no longer. Glowing like phosphorescence where the “no-longer” had just been, dissolution is evanescent but immanently real. Another meaning of “calculus” is in play here. This sense is derived from the original Latin present active infinitive *calculāre*, “to account, to reckon.” It is surely clear that the calculus results in a perspicuous account and reckoning of a profoundly consequential feature of human existence. The clarity of this reckoning puts in play the third sense of “calculus.” A *calx* (of which *calculus* is the diminutive) was the pebble used for actual accounting. From this usage is derived the connotation of a hard lump produced by the concretion of minerals. Kidney stones are an example. Tartar and plaque are other examples. A calculus thus names an infinitesimally minute quantity of matter that has aggregated and hardened into a quantifiable lump. Such calculi are found in the body’s hollow organs and ducts. They are generally painful. The calculus of the organon is similarly jarring. It is unflinching, precise, and unequivocal. Most crucially, it is conspicuous, manifest, and verifiable. The logic of the calculus is unsparing.

## 10

What is this figure, the anthropotechnic of the organon? Merely taking seriously the conceptual calculus renders transparent the *imaginaires*, the salvific big Others, that we so craftily conjure—with the complicity of “the others”—out of our suffering and desire. How much more damage is done by pushing the calculus to its limit. Doing so shatters the accord that the *imaginaire* presumes to sustain, inducing quite literally chronic, incurable *disenchantment*. Application of the calculus, to any degree, renders childlike all of what is paraded before us as

idealist “spirituality” and religion. Still, subjectivity, identity, *habitus*, ideology, etc., being as inevitable as they are indispensable as features of human formation (“man produces man”), we have to ask: is not *practice*, is not a training regimen, unavoidable? “Wherever one encounters human beings, they are embedded in achievement fields and status classes.” It becomes a question, then, of whether to settle content within one’s given field and class, losing sight of the very fact of *habitus*, or to exert oneself, like Nietzsche’s acrobat, in continuous horizontal “self-forming and self-enhancing behavior.” Recognizing “the immunitary constitution of human being”—this is Sloterdijk’s *Homo immunilogicus*—we can no longer ignore the fact that we live in “symbolic immune systems and ritual shells.” Our *imaginaires*, that is to say, are erected as refuges against biological, psychological, and social contingency. This is why, as Rilke noticed, “*The creature gazes into the open with all its eyes.*” Not settling content with the merely received, with the accidents of our personal history, we seek a new sublime. And so, to that end, we employ an anthropotechnic of verticality—of upward overcoming, of self-mastery, of tension from *above*. I call it sublime because it is, of course, impossible to realize. The vertical line is tethered to nothing. It is suspended in a void. Its peak is unattainable. And yet: “*don’t give up on your desire!*” For, *jouissance*, the enlivening surge that spews forth from the erotic embrace of pain and desire satisfies to the very extent that it wounds. Even if such consummation of the sublime were possible, we are far from cause for jubilation. The sublime, recall, is monstrous. “The sublime moves us ... The expression of a person in full thrall of the sublime is serious, at times fixed and amazed ... The sublime is at times accompanied by some horror or melancholy, sometimes merely by tranquil admiration, and sometimes by the beauty of a sublime vista. The first I want to call the terrible sublime, the second the noble, and the third the magnificent. Deep loneliness is sublime, but in a terrifying way.” And yet we lace our boots, and set out for Mount Impossible.

## 11

Let us first consider some consequences of the organon’s calculus for an anthropotechnic. If, for instance, the calculus models the trajectory of dissolution, if it reveals that everything is always and perpetually dissolving-dissolved (instantaneously from the side of subjective apprehension, glacially from the side of objects themselves), are not certain possibilities that we so dearly hold to be woven into the very fabric of human existence obviated, or

at least disastrously impeded? Employing the calculus in good faith implies a willingness to replace belief with knowledge; it implies a will to know. What if this will to know, to paraphrase Ray Brassier, is driven by the traumatic reality of dissolution itself? Can the organon of the traumatic reality of dissolution “become equal to the trauma . . . whose trace it bears”? Brassier, whose concern is the relation between philosophy, which he insists is the very “organon of extinction” since extinction is the very condition of life that makes thought (of which philosophy is a concerted instance) possible, and the fact of extinction, concludes that philosophy does become equal to the trauma that it traces; and, in so doing, “achieves a binding of extinction, through which the will to know is finally rendered commensurate with the in-itself.” I likewise suggest that our organon binds with dissolution, rendering the practitioner’s knowledge commensurate with dissolution itself. The organon is the instrument, the knowledge, of ruin. The calculus is the model of what we come to apprehend (the “in-itself”).<sup>8</sup>

## 12

What do we come to know? Can we allow for a moment that “Eros alone can fulfill life; knowledge, never . . . knowledge is empty infinity”? Here, our knowledge concerns recognition and attraction; it concerns unison, carnality, and consummation. (“Adam knew Eve, his wife; and she conceived.”) Knowledge of what? Can we not permit—indeed, as decisive—into the sphere of our thinking “this thought in its most terrible form: existence as it is without meaning or aim, yet recurring inevitably without any finale, into nothingness”? Those readers who balk might prefer to place a statement like this within the circle of affirmation that so aggressively rings our Western culture of “wellbeing.” Affirmationism: the transubstantiation of even the basest, darkest, most realistic conceptions of human life into nodes of creativity, novelty, progress, and goodness. Affirmationism insists: celebrate! Even Nietzsche felt such a need: “We have created the weightiest thought—now let us create the being for whom it is light and pleasing!” Stepping outside of this intoxicating circle, we hear the stammering voices of the ruined: “What would be my—how should I call it—spontaneous attitude towards the universe? It’s a very dark one . . . There is nothing, basically. I mean it quite literally. Like, ultimately there are just some fragments, some vanishing things. If you look at the universe, it’s one big void. Ultimately, there are just . . . some vanishing things.” The buddha: she whose

*gnosis* frightens even Mara. The ruined: he who has come to terms. “To the eyes that have dwelt on [dissolution], there is no thorough repair.”<sup>9</sup>

## 13

Come to terms with what? Let’s try this out. Come to terms:

- With the human subject as the night of the world: “The human being is this night, this empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity—an unending wealth of many representations, images, of which none belongs to him—or which are not present.”
- With the fact that our loveliest ideologies, *unending riches of representations* as they are, are at odds with the spirit that haunts this night.
- That our conceptual riches toil to hold reality together as a unified whole, as an integrated totality, yet everywhere the fragmentary, contingent shrapnel of reality gashes our scalp.
- That the incantatory *vibrato* plucking the soul’s heartstrings struggles to stave off of the traumatizing threats of the looming Real.
- That the soul’s symphonies are trembling, unrhythmic, and fitful to the very extent that they are emotionally virtuosic.
- That we, the in-human, hear, and, with gnostic exhaustion, move forward in the dark.<sup>10</sup>

## 14

The components of the calculus name the contours of coming-to-terms. We take as our material ruins of the buddhist Real, cloned fragments of the barred One-in-One. Already, I feel that we are frolicking in the eternal sporting fields of our happy religions, spiritualities, and even humanist secularizations. So, to give yourself a chance, remember—*remember!*—to recast these ruins as decimated (transcendentally minimalized) first names. This *remember!* is the buddha’s practice. Hereby posited as immanent materials, these ruined clones become fit for the in-human subject: *disenchantment, ancestral anamnesis, vanishing, phenomenal identity, nihility, thinking, contingency, world, surface, lucidity, extinction*. The genealogy of the x-buddhist progenitor articulates this most

exigent human knowledge thus: *nibbida*, *sati*, *anicca*, *anattā*, *suññatā*, *papañca*, *patikkasamuppāda*, *loka*, *sabba*, *paññā*, *nirvāṇa*. I honor this genealogy of ruin. Such honor entails, initially, approbation; then, annihilation; and finally, annexation or appropriation.

## 15

Approbation: We find value in the concepts. They possess a *vibrato* that purrs so purely. Annihilation: Yet, we hear a clanking ruction alongside the whirring *vibrato*. That sound is a magisterial big Other forcefully wrenching the heartstrings of the yearning soul. So, as Laruelle says of the world-splitting specular pretensions of philosophical difference, “we must invalidate [the concepts] in one blow and without remainder. We must presuppose every conceptual term to be already divested of all power.” Appropriation: In this way, we will make use of the material, annexing it to the always, and already, in-human.<sup>11</sup>

## 16

The annihilated-annexed concepts, decimated via transcendental molting, are rendered, simply, first names: “Fundamental terms which symbolize the Real and its modes according to its radical immanence or its identity.” “The Real” we take as an axiomatized function. Let’s think of it as the *for-real!* Or the *get-real!* We all know the effects of the Real, or should. The effects are those of the “sheer lived.” The Real does not concern atoms—it is not matter. It is not an empirical plane. It is not given to phenomenological analysis. It can be symbolized and conceptualized interminably—just consider the infinity of human ideologies, those peculiar mixtures of facticity and fiction. The Real can be symbolized because it constitutes the sine qua non condition for thought. And it is constituted unilaterally, from its side only, given without being given by thinking or theory, closed to the longing phantasms of the human *imaginaire*. It can be symbolized; but it cannot be adequately represented. Though exiled due to the Real’s undying indifference, there might be some strangers among us, some who hew closely to the Real’s mute and dumb effect. The stranger, “the identity of the Real is non-reflected, lived, experienced, consumed while remaining in itself without the need to alienate itself through representation.” If an adequate (non)relation to

the Real is not the point, then we are wasting our time. Or, in another register, what if the negation were the core? To show the kind of the labor that might be required, I provide an example from the beginning of the non-buddhist dispensation.<sup>12</sup>

## 17

Disenchantment. The x-buddhist term is juiced up with the value of an ancient ascetic religious regimen: *nibbida*: revulsion, aversion, disgust. Disenchantment solemnly declares: through insight born of extensive contemplation, the mature practitioner comes to see the unsatisfactory nature of the “aggregates,” the porous self-structure that conditions individual subjective experience. So seeing, he becomes disgusted, turns away from the contents of sensory data, and achieves an apocalyptic peace, a peace outside of time and place. Disgust: the ferry of *homo religiosus*, crossing the lake of fire to the silver shore. Disgust is the vehicle to numerous spiritual way stations: degradation of the flesh; valorization of sexual abstinence; hostility toward food; deprivation of desire; antipathy toward pleasure; suspicion toward noncompliers. Catherine of Genoa claims eternal satiety in the presence of the Lord, yet licks her plate like a feral bitch. Today, too, the Young Girl, regardless of gender or age, “struck by sudden vertigo whenever the world stops revolving around her,” wills on her mystical prepubescent body the holy stigmata—self-mutilation, emaciation, protection and devotion tattooed into the flesh. It is a quest for purity and perfection. Disgust caws “withdraw and shrivel!” The non-buddhist first name quells this ascetic siren call. We hear instead the in-human a priori of disenchantment. To the buddha subject, disenchantment is *prima causa*. It beckons “enough already!” It is the base disposition that prepares the cognitive and affective apparatuses for the unflinching, “trained ruthlessness in viewing the realities of life.” Disenchantment is born of an irrefutable discovery: the fact that no system of thought and no single person, not even a phantasmagoric protagonist-as-thaumaturge, can identify an ultimate refuge. It entails banishment from the sunny climes of the human affirmation-agreement system, being, as that system is, “incompatible with the reality of the organs.” Disenchantment catalyzes aversion toward the World. It *is* disgust, it *is* aversion, but disgust and aversion cauterized by compassion. Compassion itself is the unavoidable outpouring of a buddha’s gnosis. Think of the painful, disillusioning, disenchanting compassion of the Wizard of Oz. *Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain! What*

*you are seeking already lies within you!* Here, the German word *Entzauberung* illuminates. The atmosphere is crackling with the perilous promise of a thaumaturge. Oz is a priestly healer, the one who is *supposed to know*, and so who employs, to conjure his cure, the enchanting spectacle of high ritual pageantry. And then, all of a sudden, as if utterly deflated by his clownish bombast, Oz skulks from behind the curtain, and hunches before Dorothy's retinue as plain and simple as the overalled farmer in "American Gothic." Oz's act is one of *Enlightened Entzauberung*: demagicfication, despellification, disconjuartion, disenchantment. Indeed, *there is no place like home*. There is no place like home. Disenchantment augurs passage.<sup>13</sup>

# Notes

## Preface

- 1 Georg Simmel, "Die Ruine: Eine Ästhetische Versuch," *Georg Simmel Online*, <http://socio.ch/sim/verschiedenes/1907/ruine.htm> (accessed October 3, 2017). All translations in the book are mine unless otherwise indicated; Florence M. Hetzler, "Ruin Time and Ruins," *Leonardo*, vol. 21, no. 1 (1988): 54.
- 2 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998), 235.
- 3 Max Pensky, "Three Kinds of Ruin: Heidegger, Benjamin, Sebald," *Poligrafi*, vol. 16, no. 61/62 (2011): 84.
- 4 See Afzal Iqbal, *The Life and Work of Jalal-Ud-Din Rumi* (Kuala Lumpur: The Other Press, 2014), 240.
- 5 Leonard Cohen, "Anthem," *The Future*, Columbia Records, 1992.
- 6 For the "furnace of the spirit" quote, see Jeff Burger, *Leonard Cohen on Leonard Cohen: Interviews and Encounters* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014), 81.
- 7 Leonard Cohen, "Avalanche," *Songs of Love and Hate*, Columbia Records, 1971.
- 8 The Stooges, "Search and Destroy," *Raw Power*, Columbia Records, 1973.

## Introduction

- 1 Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, [1971] 2001), 109, emphasis added. "Imaginary" should be understood in relation to the Lacanian sense of internalized images of self and "reality," which, though fundamentally "fraudulent," nonetheless have consequential effects in the Real. For the tripartite imaginary-symbolic-real as fraud-absence-impossibility, see Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 112. For the most insightful writing on the interplay between Buddhism and ideology, see Tom Pepper, *The Faithful Buddhist*, Kindle Edition.
- 2 Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 112.
- 3 Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, [1933] 1989), 96–7.



- 4 Marjorie Gracieuse, “Laruelle Facing Deleuze: Immanence, Resistance and Desire,” in *Laruelle and Non-Philosophy*, ed. John Mullarkey and Anthony Paul Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 42.
- 5 Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young Girl*, trans. Ariana Reines (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012); citation from press materials at <https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/preliminary-materials-theory-young-girl> (accessed May 13, 2016).
- 6 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Bloomsbury, [1970] 2000), 34.
- 7 This is a translation of *māradheyya*. Mara is a kind of monster or demon who harrasses the Buddha as he sits under the tree of awakening on that fateful full moon night in April. The name itself means something like “The Murderer, The Killer, The Causer of Death.” It is derived from the Sanskrit verbal root  $\sqrt{mr}$ , which is cognate with English *murder*, *mortal*, *morbid*, *moribund*, *mortify*, and so on. See Gunapala Piyasena Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names* (London: Luzac, [1937] 1960), 2: 613; and Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1899] 1988), 748, s.v. मार (māra).
- 8 Heinz Bechert, “Der moderne Theravada-Buddhismus in Sri Lanka und Südostasien,” from the lecture series “Buddhismus in Geschichte und Gegenwart” given at Hamburg University, June 18, 1997 (unpublished paper). See also Heinz Bechert, *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft in den Ländern des Theravada Buddhismus. Erster Band: Allgemeines und Ceylon* (Frankfurt: Schriften des Instituts für Asienkunde in Hamburg, 1966), particularly section 3. Readers interested in a thorough account in English of how these tendencies have influenced traditional Asian Buddhism should consult David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- 9 Bechert, *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft*, 38.
- 10 Bechert, “Der moderne Theravada-Buddhismus,” 166.
- 11 Bechert, “Der moderne Theravada-Buddhismus,” 166.
- 12 Bechert, *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft*, 37.
- 13 Bechert, *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft*, 37. In footnote 71, Bechert gives credit for this term to the Belgian-French explorer of then-closed Tibet (in 1924), Alexandra David-Néel (1868–1969), who, he says, had earlier used “Buddhist Modernism” in the same sense.
- 14 Bechert, *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft*, 37.
- 15 Thanissaro Bhikkhu, quoted in McMahan, *Buddhist Modernism*, 248. McMahan presents Thanissaro Bhikkhu, an American-born Theravadan monk (born Geoffrey DeGraff), as a figure of “retraditionalization.” “Thanissaro Bhikkhu,” he writes, “has leveled criticism at ‘Buddhist Romanticism,’ sharply contrasting the traditional teachings of the Pali canon with the contemporary Buddhism that is infused with talk of interconnectedness, wholeness, self-fulfillment, spontaneity,

- and transcendence of the ego, which he claims are derived from the influence of Romanticism, transcendentalism, and western psychology” (248).
- 16 Heinz Bechert, “Sangha, State, Society, ‘Nation’: Persistence of Traditions in ‘Post-Traditional’ Buddhist Societies,” *Daedalus*, vol. 102, no. 1 (Winter 1973): 91.
  - 17 McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 7, quoting Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere on “the influence of Protestantism” on traditional Buddhism. McMahan adds that these Protestant elements “included rejection of the clerical links between individuals and the religious goal” and “individual responsibility and self-scrutiny” (7).
  - 18 “Self-culture’ is Ralph Waldo Emerson’s term. See John T. Lysaker, *Emerson and Self-Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008). See also Stephen Prothero, “Henry Steel Olcott and ‘Protestant Buddhism,’” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 63, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 281–302. The mention in this context of Emerson, that clear-eyed prophet of self-reliant individualism, brings to mind, of course, Max Weber’s correlation between “the Protestant work ethic” and the rise of capitalism.
  - 19 Donald Lopez, quoted in McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 8.
  - 20 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner, [1905] 1958), 233, footnote 68.
  - 21 John Woods, *The Death of Argumentation: Fallacies in Agent-Based Reasoning* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2004), 22.
  - 22 John Woods, “Pragma-dialectics: A Retrospective,” in *Considering Pragm-dialectics*, ed. Peter Houtlosser and Agnes van Rees (London: Routledge, 2006), 304.
  - 23 Barry Magid, “Practice: You Can’t Do It Wrong,” *Lion’s Roar*, [www.lionsroar.com/practice-you-cant-do-it-wrong-by-barry-magid](http://www.lionsroar.com/practice-you-cant-do-it-wrong-by-barry-magid) (accessed June 7, 2016).
  - 24 That is, the shorter reading among variants is the better. The assumption behind this principle is that scribes were more likely to embellish than diminish the various accounts they came across in the texts they were copying. For some reason, Wynne seems less interested in invoking another principle of textual criticism, *lectio difficilior potior*: the more difficult reading is the stronger.
  - 25 Alexander Wynne, *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation* (London: Routledge, 2007), 20, 21.
  - 26 D. T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 8–9.
  - 27 Woods, *The Death of Argumentation*, 22.
  - 28 Cited in Magid, “Practice: You Can’t Do It Wrong.”
  - 29 Tom J. F. Tillemans, “How Far Can a Mādhyamika Buddhist Reform Conventional Truth? Dismal Relativism, Fictionalism, Easy-Easy Truth, and the Alternatives,” in *Moonshadows: Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy*, ed. The Cowherds (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 160–61, emphases in original. “Conventional truth,” or perhaps better “conventional reality,” refers to our

- immediately lived, unreflective experience of our everyday world. In Candrakīrti's philosophical tradition, Madhyamaka (Middle Way Doctrine), this conventional reality is held to stand in a particular relation to "ultimate truth," or that which remains of reality after we have eliminated our cognitive delusions.
- 30 Tillemans, "How Far," 161, 165.
- 31 See Glenn Wallis, Tom Pepper, and Matthias Steingass, *Cruel Theory/Sublime Practice: Toward a Reevaluation of Buddhism* (Roskilde: EyeCorner Press, 2013), 131.
- 32 Rocco Gangle also mentions "the cobblers and craftsmen of Socrates, the asses, whiteness, and laughter of the Scholastics," as well as Husserl's inkwell and Quine's rabbit. See François Laruelle, *Philosophies of Difference: A Critical Introduction to Non-Philosophy*, trans. Rocco Gangle (London: Continuum, 2010), "Translator's Introduction," ix.
- 33 Antonin Artaud, *To Have Done with the Judgment of God* (1947). *Surrealism-Plays*, <http://surrealism-plays.com/Artaud.html> (accessed October 9, 2015). Translation modified: *Là ou ça sent la merde/ça sent l'etre*.
- 34 Antonin Artaud, "The Umbilicus of Limbo," in *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 59.
- 35 With great reluctance, I am capitalizing "real" whenever it is intended as a technical term. I am reluctant to do so because, traditionally, capitalization of common nouns in English bestows a grandness that, with the real, is wholly unwarranted (it could not be any more common).
- 36 Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, in *The Grove Press Reader 1951–2001*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 2001), 70.
- 37 Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 70.
- 38 Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 70.
- 39 Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 70.
- 40 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 172, cited in Joshua Ramey, *The Hermetic Deleuze: Philosophy and Spiritual Ordeal* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 23.
- 41 Ramey, *The Hermetic Deleuze*, 22.
- 42 Buddhism will inscribe its mythic root into its linguistic one:  $\sqrt{\text{budh}}$ , awakened intelligence.
- 43 François Laruelle, *Anti-Badiou: The Introduction of Maoism into Philosophy*, trans. Robin Mackay (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 6.
- 44 François Laruelle, *Dictionary of Non-Philosophy*, trans. Taylor Adkins (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2013), 57–8, s.v. Philosophy.
- 45 Laruelle, *Dictionary*, 57–8.
- 46 Laruelle, *Principles*, 1.
- 47 Heidegger used this term "hardness of fate" (*Härte des Schicksals*) during his famous debate with Ernst Cassirer in Davos, Switzerland, in 1929. It stands in

opposition to what Heidegger terms “works of the spirit” (*Werke des Geistes*). The latter term was probably an oblique reference to Cassirer’s position concerning the issue around which the debate revolved: human freedom. Cassirer’s answer was to rely on consciousness’s capacity to form symbolic images. This capacity is attested in, for instance, the arts, myth, language, and science. It can thus be employed in the service of meaning, purpose, and value. In stark contrast, Heidegger argued that the task was to “make manifest” to the person, “the nothingness of his existence (*Dasein*).” “This nothingness,” he immediately adds, “is not the occasion for pessimism and melancholy.” Rather, being thus “thrown back into” the hardness of our fate, we are granted the opportunity for “authentic activity.” See Peter E. Gordon, *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 200. The German term that is typically translated as “spirit” in accounts of this debate is *Geist*, which also means *mind* or, with poetic license, *imagination*.

- 48 Peter Gordon speaks of the “mood of intellectual crisis that seized European culture in the years following World War I.” This anxiety was reflected in the proliferation of books “in almost every intellectual domain, in the arts, religion, and psychology” that contained the word “crisis” in their title. See Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 43–4 and chapter 1, “Philosophy in Crisis.” Today—in the years following yet another failure of the all-knowing Invisible Hand of the Market together with general malaise concerning liberal democracy and its globalist project as well as the rise of the resurgence of right-wing nationalism in Europe and the United States—the word of the moment appears to be “radical.” Mere action, hope, innovation, politics, thought itself, no longer suffice. The times require radical thought, radical hope, radical politics. Be that as it may, Laruelle means something different. The non-philosophical sense of “radical” implies something like *minimally transcendent* or, what amounts to the same thing, *maximally immanent*. See Katerina Kolozova, “The Figure of the Stranger: A Possibility for Transcendental Minimalism or Radical Subjectivity,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, vol. 11, no. 3 (Fall 2011). Radicality names a non-absolute “first operation” in thought concerning the Real, a mode of thought that, crucially, is nonetheless “not an operation of the Real,” but rather one “according to” the Real. As every frustrated poet who has sought in language *not the metaphor, not the symbol*, but the thing or scene *itself*, knows, language can never be absolutely immanent. Every concept, every term, has already implicated us in a measure of transcendence. See Laruelle, *Dictionary*, 5, s.v. (Epistemic, Non-Philosophical) Break. In a different yet not unrelated vein, concerning, for instance, the political pessimism of Laruelle’s thought, Anthony Paul Smith says that “non-philosophy is not a project of rootedness but of deracination.” See Anthony Paul Smith, *Laruelle: A Stranger Thought* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 95–6.

- 49 Sruti Bala, “The Entangled Vocabulary of Performance,” *The Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2013): 14.
- 50 Laruelle, *Philosophies of Difference*, xiii.
- 51 Laruelle, *Philosophies of Difference*, xiv. When quoting Laruelle, I often replace some variant of *philosophy* with some variant of *Western Buddhism* or *Buddhism*. I also introduce the adjectival and adverbial neologisms *buddhistic* and *buddhistically* and always write them in the lower case.

## Chapter 1

- 1 The book is by Gil Fronsdal, *The Buddha before Buddhism: Wisdom from the Early Teachings* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2016). The quotes are from the book’s description at Amazon, <https://tinyurl.com/yad86t3a> (accessed September 10, 2016). When I quote a Western Buddhist author, the reader can be confident that the author is respected as, well, an *authority*, if not necessarily *the* authority, generally throughout the contemporary Western Buddhist world.
- 2 What better instance of this state of affairs than the historical vicissitudes of the very concept of dependent origination itself? See McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, chapter 6, “A Brief History of Interdependence.”
- 3 “Voyeurism and Digital Identity,” [www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0L7vE7FC20](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0L7vE7FC20) (accessed January 3, 2016).
- 4 Slavoj Žižek, *The Abyss of Freedom/Ages of the World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 71.
- 5 Thich Nhat Hanh, “Long Live Impermanence,” interview with Lisa Schneider, *Dharma Gates*, [http://dharma-gates.org/long\\_live\\_impermanence.html](http://dharma-gates.org/long_live_impermanence.html) (accessed January 6, 2016).
- 6 Rajiv Mehrotra, ed., *The Essential Dalai Lama: His Important Teachings* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 119.
- 7 Sheng Yen, *Song of Mind: Wisdom from the Zen Classic Xin Ming* (Boston: Shambhala, 2004), 48. See also Koji Tanaka, “Introduction: Buddhism and Contradiction,” *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 63, no. 3 (2013): 315–21.
- 8 Žižek, *Abyss of Freedom*, 71–2. Žižek has “life” in the original.
- 9 Seung Sahn, *Wanting Enlightenment Is a Big Mistake* (Boston: Shambhala, 2006), 23.
- 10 Richard M. Jaffe, ed., *Selected Works of D. T. Suzuki*, Volume I: Zen (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 228.
- 11 Žižek, *Abyss of Freedom*, 71–2.
- 12 Thomas Bien, *The Buddha’s Way of Happiness: Healing Sorrow, Transforming Negative Emotion, and Finding Well-Being in the Present Moment* (Oakland: New Harbinger, 2011).
- 13 *Mindful Psychology*, [www.mindfulpsychology.com](http://www.mindfulpsychology.com) (accessed September 20, 2016).

- 14 William Davies, *The Happiness Industry: How the Government and Big Business Sold Us Well-Being* (London: Verso, 2015).
- 15 Henry Blodget, "The Truth about Davos," *Business Insider*, [www.businessinsider.com/costs-of-davos-2011-1](http://www.businessinsider.com/costs-of-davos-2011-1) (accessed January 30, 2016).
- 16 *World Economic Forum*, [www.weforum.org/about/world-economic-forum](http://www.weforum.org/about/world-economic-forum) (accessed January 30, 2016).
- 17 *World Economic Forum*, [www.weforum.org/agenda](http://www.weforum.org/agenda) (accessed February 16, 2016).
- 18 "The Fight for LGBT Rights Has Only Just Begun," *World Economic Forum*, [www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/02/lgbt-equality-in-workplace](http://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/02/lgbt-equality-in-workplace) (accessed February 20, 2016).
- 19 Davies, *Happiness*, 1.
- 20 Davies, *Happiness*, 2.
- 21 Davies, *Happiness*, 2.
- 22 Davies, *Happiness*, 2–3.
- 23 Davies, *Happiness*, 3–4.
- 24 For a negative view of this trend, see John Kovensky, "Chief Happiness Officer Is the Latest, Creepiest Job in Corporate America," *New Republic*, <https://newrepublic.com/article/118804/happiness-officers-are-spreading-across-america-why-its-bad> (accessed March 4, 2016).
- 25 Davies, *Happiness*, 25.
- 26 Davies, *Happiness*, 106.
- 27 Davies, *Happiness*, 9.
- 28 See, for instance, "Best Nike Find Your Greatness Commercial: The Jogger," *YouTube*, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=2JnYcuRW\\_qo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2JnYcuRW_qo) (accessed February 20, 2016).
- 29 *Search Inside Yourself*, <https://siyli.org/about> (accessed February 22, 2016).
- 30 *Search Inside Yourself*, <https://siyli.org/whysiy> (accessed February 22, 2016).
- 31 *Search Inside Yourself*, <https://siyli.org> (accessed February 22, 2016).
- 32 *Search Inside Yourself*, <https://siyli.org/whysiy> (accessed February 22, 2016).
- 33 *Search Inside Yourself*, <https://siyli.org> (accessed February 22, 2016), emphasis added.
- 34 "Jon Kabat-Zinn: Peel Back the Onion," *Mindful*, [www.mindful.org/jon-kabat-zinn-peel-back-the-onion](http://www.mindful.org/jon-kabat-zinn-peel-back-the-onion) (accessed February 20, 2016).
- 35 Jane Mayer, "New Koch," *New Yorker*, January 25, 2016, 40.
- 36 Mayer, "New Koch," 40, 38.
- 37 Mayer, "New Koch," 43.
- 38 Slavoj Žižek, "From Western Marxism to Western Buddhism," *Cabinet Magazine*, no. 2 (Spring 2001), [www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/2/western.php](http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/2/western.php) (accessed February 8, 2016).
- 39 Žižek, *From Western Marxism*, n.p.
- 40 Hsin-Hsin Ming, *Verses on the Faith-Mind by Seng-Ts'an*, trans. Richard B. Clarke (Buffalo: White Pine Press, 2001), Google Books, n.p.

- 41 Žižek, *From Western Marxism*, n.p.
- 42 The most prolific, informed, and, in my estimation, knowledgeable commenter on the interface between the corporate world and mindfulness/meditation is professor of management and ordained Zen teacher Ronald Purser. See, for instance, Ronald Purser and Edwin Ng, “Corporate Mindfulness Is Bullsh\*t: Zen or No Zen, You’re Working Harder and Being Paid Less,” *Salon*, [www.salon.com/2015/09/27/corporate\\_mindfulness\\_is\\_bullsh\\*t\\_zen\\_or\\_no\\_zen\\_youre\\_working\\_harder\\_and\\_being\\_paid\\_less](http://www.salon.com/2015/09/27/corporate_mindfulness_is_bullsh*t_zen_or_no_zen_youre_working_harder_and_being_paid_less) (accessed January 20, 2016), and Ronald Purser, Edwin Ng, and Zach Walsh, “The Promise and Peril of Corporate Mindfulness,” in *Leadership Matters: Finding Voice, Connection and Meaning in the 21st Century*, ed. C. Mabley and D. Knights (London: Routledge, forthcoming).
- 43 See, for instance, “War and Peace,” *Inquiring Mind*, vol. 30, no. 2 (Spring 2014), on Jon Kabat-Zinn’s packaging of Mindfulness for the military. On the burgeoning cadre of business-inclined Mindfulness teachers like Google’s resident “jolly good fellow” and all-around “happiness engineer,” Chade-Meng Tan, see Purser and Ng, “Corporate Mindfulness.”
- 44 See McMahan, *Buddhist Modernism*, chapter 6, “A Brief History of Interdependence.”
- 45 Stephen Batchelor, “A Secular Buddhism,” *Journal of Global Buddhism*, vol. 13 (2012): Abstract, emphasis added.
- 46 *Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute*, <https://siyli.org/publicprograms> (accessed November 1, 2016).
- 47 See, for instance, Fabrice Midal, ed., *Recalling Chogyam Trungpa* (Boston: Shambhala, 2005), 33.
- 48 On this topic, see Tom Pepper, *The Faithful Buddhist*, Kindle Edition, particularly the essay “Taking Anatman Full Strength and Śāntideva’s Ethics of Truth.”
- 49 Franz Kafka, “Vor dem Gesetz,” *Spiegel Online*, <http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/franz-kafka-erz-161/5> (accessed November 4, 2016).
- 50 Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 174.
- 51 Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 112.
- 52 Žižek, “From Western Marxism to Western Buddhism,” n.p.
- 53 Ken Mcleod, “Where the Thinking Stops,” *Tricycle*, <https://tricycle.org/magazine/where-the-thinking-stops> (accessed November 25, 2016).
- 54 Google’s resident “jolly good fellow,” Chade-Meng Tan quoted at *Mindful*, [www.mindful.org/search-inside-yourself](http://www.mindful.org/search-inside-yourself) (accessed November 25, 2016).
- 55 Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1776] 1998), 291–2.
- 56 Mcleod, “Where the Thinking Stops.”
- 57 This is Clause IV of the Labour Party’s constitution. It reads in full: “To secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most

- equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service”; “Subordinate Clause,” *Socialist Review*, <http://pubs.socialistreviewindex.org.uk/sr180/jenkins.htm> (accessed November 27, 2016).
- 58 Manfred B. Steger and Ravi K. Roy, *Neoliberalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 9. See also David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- 59 See, for instance, Salman Türken, Hilde Eileen Nafstad, Rolv Mikkel Blakar, and Katrina Roen, “Making Sense of Neoliberal Subjectivity: A Discourse Analysis of Media Language on Self-Development,” *Globalizations*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2016); David Chandler and Julian Reid, *The Neoliberal Subject: Resilience, Adaptation, and Vulnerability* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016); Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2016); Graham Burchell, “Liberal Government and Techniques of the Self,” *Economy & Society*, vol. 22, no. 3 (1993): 267–82; Barbara Cruikshank, “Revolutions Within: Self-Government and Self-Esteem,” in *Foucault and Political Reason. Liberalism, Neo-Liberalism and Rationalities of Government*, ed. Andrew Barry, Thomas Osborne, and Nikolas Rose (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 231–51.
- 60 See, in particular, Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978*, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Picador, 2009), and Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, trans. Michel Foucault (London: Picador, 2010).
- 61 See Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).
- 62 Michel Foucault, “About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Two Lectures at Dartmouth,” *Political Theory*, vol. 21, no. 2 (1993): 203–4.
- 63 See John Tosh, *Why History Matters* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 138. Alain Badiou recently echoed this sentiment in remarks he made the day after Donald Trump’s ascendancy to the American presidency: “We have today in fact the dominant idea that there exists no global choice, that there is no other solution. It was the word of Thatcher: no other solution. No other solution except, naturally, liberalism, or today generally we speak of neoliberalism”; “Alain Badiou: Reflections on the Recent Election,” *Verso*, [www.versobooks.com/blogs/2940-alain-badiou-reflections-on-the-recent-election](http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2940-alain-badiou-reflections-on-the-recent-election) (accessed November 30, 2016).
- 64 Chandler and Reid, *The Neoliberal Subject*, 3.
- 65 “Daily Dharma,” *Tricycle*, <https://tricycle.org/dailydharma> (accessed November 30, 2016). Even though this site is identified as an “archive,” it seems that only the most recent sayings are stored for viewing.



- 66 “5 Buddhist Teachings for Post-Election Healing,” *Tricycle*, <https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/5-teachings-tough-times> (accessed November 30, 2016).
- 67 Türken et al., “Making Sense”: Abstract.
- 68 Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind: Informal Talks on Zen Meditation and Practice* (Boston: Shambhala, 1973), 10–11.
- 69 Simon Critchley terms this inward move “passive nihilism.” He writes: “In the face of the increasing brutality of reality, the passive nihilist tries to achieve a mystical stillness, calm contemplation: ‘European Buddhism.’ In a world that is all too rapidly blowing itself to pieces, the passive nihilist closes his eyes and makes himself into an island”; *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007): 4–5.
- 70 Chandler and Reid, *The Neoliberal Subject*, 5.

## Chapter 2

- 1 As evidenced by a recent panel hosted by the Left Forum at John Jay College of Criminal Justice called “Buddhism, Radical Critique and Revolutionary Praxis,” some thinkers are beginning to question whether Buddhism might indeed offer us much more than mere “giving thought to.” The proceedings of that conference are available at [www.leftforum.org/content/buddhism-radical-critique-and-revolutionary-praxis-0](http://www.leftforum.org/content/buddhism-radical-critique-and-revolutionary-praxis-0) (accessed January 18, 2017).
- 2 Terry Eagleton, *Trouble with Strangers: A Study in Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 44. Eagleton’s definition here draws from the psychoanalytic notion of the Real. Laruelle’s sense, and the one that has the most far-reaching relevance for my project, is quite different, as we will see.
- 3 The concept of a “first name” will be discussed in Chapter 3.
- 4 Thanissaro Bhikkhu, “Emptiness,” *Access to Insight*, [www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/emptiness.html](http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/emptiness.html) (accessed February 25, 2016).
- 5 *Suññata Sutta, Saṃyuttanikāya, Saḷāyatanavaggo 35, Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Pāli Tipiṭaka* (Dhammagiri: Vipassana Research Institute, 1990). Pali *suññata* is equivalent to the better-known Sanskrit version *śūnyatā*.
- 6 Masao Abe, *Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue*, ed. Steven Heine (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), 79–80.
- 7 See, for instance, the Pali canon text *Culasuññata Sutta* (The Short Discourse on Emptiness) and, of course, the *Heart Sutra*. For a typical contemporary Western Buddhist use of this trope, see Thich Nhat Hanh, “The Fullness of Emptiness,” *Lion’s Roar*, [www.lionsroar.com/the-fullness-of-emptiness/#](http://www.lionsroar.com/the-fullness-of-emptiness/#) (accessed May 5, 2016); or Elizabeth Namgyel, “The Fullness of Emptiness,” *What Meditation Really Is*, <http://whatmeditationreallyis.com/index.php/home-blog/item/279-the-fullness-of-emptiness.html> (accessed May 5, 2015).

- 8 See, for instance, the *Brahmajāla Sutta*. The Pali terms for eternalism and nihilism or annihilationism are, respectively, *sassatavāda*: persisting, perpetual, eternal; and *ucchedavāda*: breaking up, disintegrating, perishing.
- 9 See Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons: Imaginary and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
- 10 Dharma talk given by Thich Nhat Hanh, December 4, 1997, in Plum Village, France, [www.purifymind.com/TheDiamondSutra.htm](http://www.purifymind.com/TheDiamondSutra.htm) (accessed March 14, 2016).
- 11 See Graham Priest, “Beyond True and False,” *Aeon*, <https://aeon.co/essays/the-logic-of-buddhist-philosophy-goes-beyond-simple-truth> (accessed March 14, 2016).
- 12 See, for instance, Matthieu Ricard and Trinh Xuan Thuan, *The Quantum and the Lotus: A Journey to the Frontiers Where Science and Buddhism Meet* (New York: Broadway Books, 2004).
- 13 Thanissaro Bhikkhu, “Nibbana,” *Access to Insight*, [www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/nibbana.html](http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/nibbana.html) (accessed March 3, 2016).
- 14 Throughout this work “the Buddha” refers to a literary protagonist. I do not doubt that this protagonist is derived from a historical person. The historical figure has, however, been irrecoverably overwritten by the literary figure. This assessment applies to the very earliest period of Buddhism in India and gains in relevance with Buddhism’s medieval and modern developments.
- 15 *Alagaddūpama Sutta* (“Simile of the Snake”), in Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom, 1995), 234.
- 16 Uncommitted readers of Buddhism might be excused for finding it equally surprising that the Buddha dodges accusations of *eternalism*. For, after all is said and done, the Buddha not only vehemently denies annihilation of an existing being, but actually posits postmortem continuation of some mysterious sort or another. While some notions of *nirvāṇa* seem to put a stop to the *eternal* recurrence of this continuation, others certainly do not. See Steven Collins, *Nirvana: Concept, Image, Metaphor* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- 17 This is literary scholar Avital Ronell’s term. See D. Diane Davis, “Confessions of an Anacoluthon: Avital Ronell on Writing, Technology, Pedagogy, Politics,” *JAC Online Journal*, no. 249, [www.jaconlinejournal.com/archives/vol20.2/davis-confessions.pdf](http://www.jaconlinejournal.com/archives/vol20.2/davis-confessions.pdf) (accessed May 5, 2016).
- 18 Davis, “Confessions of an Anacoluthon.”
- 19 See Sarah L. McClintock, *Omniscience and the Rhetoric of Reason: Śāntaraṅṣita and Kamalaśīla on Rationality, Argumentation, and Religious Authority* (Boston: Wisdom, 2010), 28–31.
- 20 See José Ignacio Cabezón, *Buddhism and Language: A Study of Indo-Tibetan Scholasticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 91.
- 21 See, respectively, “Mindfulness and the Cessation of Suffering: An Exclusive New Interview with Mindfulness Pioneer Jon Kabat-Zinn,” *Lion’s Roar*,

- www.lionsroar.com/mindfulness-and-the-cessation-of-suffering-an-exclusive-new-interview-with-mindfulness-pioneer-jon-kabat-zinn/# (accessed May 14, 2016), and Stephen Batchelor, *After Buddhism: Rethinking the Dharma for a Secular Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 48.
- 22 François Laruelle, “Summary of Non-Philosophy,” trans. Ray Brassier, *Pli*, vol. 8 (1999): ¶1.3.1, 139.
- 23 Laruelle, “Summary,” ¶1.3.1, 139.
- 24 See, for instance, B. Alan Wallace, ed., *Buddhism and Science: Breaking New Ground* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 8.
- 25 François Laruelle, *Principles of Non-Philosophy*, trans. Nicola Rubczak and Anthony Paul Smith (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 287–8.
- 26 See Noah Levine, *Refuge Recovery: A Buddhist Path to Recovering from Addiction* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), ix.
- 27 A reminder that when quoting Laruelle, I replace variations of “philosophy” with the corresponding form of “Buddhism” or “Western Buddhism.” The irritation of the brackets should be redeemed by better sense of how Laruelle’s comment relates to my critique of Western Buddhism.
- 28 Laruelle, “Summary,” ¶1.3.1, 138–9.

## Chapter 3

- 1 See, for instance, Karen Derris and Natalie Gummer, eds., *Defining Buddhism(s): A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 12, 118–19, 130, 218.
- 2 Friedhelm Hardy, *The Religious Culture of India: Power, Love, and Wisdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 546, 143. Hardy is speaking about Indian religious traditions generally. With his characteristically evocative imagery, Hardy further tells us that these traditions exhibit a variety of “uninhibited” proliferation that is wholly unlike the “fixed and ‘authentically performed’ musical compositions of our western classical tradition,” but “suggests instead a comparison with the improvisatory character of the Indian musical tradition” (p. 143).
- 3 François Laruelle, *Future Christ: A Lesson in Heresy*, trans. Anthony Paul Smith (London: Continuum, 2010), xxvi. Laruelle provides this definition under the heading “Glossary Raisonné: Rules for Writing Non-Philosophy (Vocabulary and Syntax).” Indeed, the concepts that follow constitute an invaluable master plan for unmasking and depotentializing the sufficiency that systems such as Western Buddhism grant themselves.
- 4 Karma Phuntsho, *Mipham’s Dialectics and the Debates on Emptiness: To Be, Not to Be Or Neither* (New York: Routledge/Curzon, 2005), 3. We should correct this claim to say “Western Buddhist system” since traditional Buddhists are more likely to

- place forms such as devotional practices, rather than philosophy and meditation, “at the heart.” The author is an Oxford-educated scholar who is active in Bhutanese Buddhism. He publishes in both Classical Tibetan and English.
- 5 Katerina Kolozova, *Toward a Radical Metaphysics of Socialism: Marx and Laruelle* (Brooklyn: Punctum Books, 2015), 3.
  - 6 See Laruelle, *Dictionary*, 77, s.v. Transcendental Axiomatic.
  - 7 I will discuss Laruelle’s work in more detail in Part 2.
  - 8 Slavoj Žižek, *Event: A Philosophy Journey through a Concept* (London: Melville House, 2014), 59. Western Buddhist teachers across the spectrum of secular-liberal to traditional-conservative give this kernel such names as basic goodness, Buddha nature, true nature, the good heart, Big Mind, and so on. Lama Surya Das (an American Dzogchen teacher, born Jeffrey Miller) even writes, with no apparent embarrassment, of “the little Buddha within each of us”; “the Buddhist heart” that is “alive and well in each of us”; the “luminous spiritual jewel” that is “innate, timeless, immanent,” and so on. See, for instance, his ambitiously titled *Awakening the Buddhist Heart: Integrating Love, Meaning, and Connection into Every Part of Your Life* (New York: Broadway Books, 2000).
  - 9 Žižek, *Event*, 59.
  - 10 Batchelor, “A Secular Buddhism,” 201.
  - 11 Eagleton, *Trouble with Strangers*, 44.
  - 12 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 123. A somewhat analogous idea might be Roland Barthes’s concept of the “referential illusion,” or, more commonly, the “reality effect.” See Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 141ff.
  - 13 See, for instance, the para-canonical work *Questions of King Milinda*, in *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, ed. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 284. The “finger pointing to the moon” trope is, of course, quite old itself. See Chien-hsing Ho, “The Finger Pointing toward the Moon: A Philosophical Analysis of the Chinese Buddhist Thought of Reference,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 35, no. 1 (2008): 159–77.
  - 14 David Loy, *Money, Sex, War, Karma: Notes for a Buddhist Revolution* (Boston: Wisdom, 2008), 21.
  - 15 Loy, *Money*, 94.
  - 16 Loy, *Money*, 4.
  - 17 The first quote is the title of a chapter in Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life* (New York: Hyperion, 1994). The second quote is from Joanna Macy, *Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory: The Dharma of Natural Systems* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 183.

- 18 Loy, *Money*, 141, 84, 151, respectively.
- 19 Freud, *Introductory Lectures*, 75.
- 20 See Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit English Dictionary*, 590–91, s.v. परावृत्ति (*parāvṛtti*).
- 21 Loy, *Money*, 24.
- 22 Freud's examples of *parapraxes* typically involve some form of *mis-*. For instance, to misspeak (*versprechen*, the famous “slip of the tongue”); to misread (*verlesen*); to mishear (*verhören*).
- 23 Loy, *Money*, back cover.
- 24 Tom Pepper, private correspondence, February 10, 2017.
- 25 Loy, *Money*, 152, 149.
- 26 Freud, *Introductory Lectures*, 50.
- 27 Loy, *Money*, 141.
- 28 Loy, *Money*, 130, 111.
- 29 Ken Jones, *The New Social Face of Buddhism: A Call to Action* (Boston: Wisdom, 2003), 35–41. The Marx quote is on p. 39.
- 30 Georg W. F. Hegel, *Jenaer Systementwürfe III: Naturphilosophie und Philosophie des Geistes* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1987), 172.
- 31 Karl Marx, “A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,” in *The Portable Karl Marx*, ed. Eugene Kamenka (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 159.
- 32 Jones, *Social Face*, xvi.
- 33 Jones, *Social Face*, 39–40.
- 34 Jones, *Social Face*, 181, 233, 181.
- 35 Jones, *Social Face*, 181.
- 36 Loy, *Money*, 21.
- 37 B. Alan Wallace, *Meditations of a Buddhist Skeptic: A Manifesto for the Mind Sciences and Contemplative Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 40. For that description of Wallace, see his website, [www.alanwallace.org](http://www.alanwallace.org) (accessed October 1, 2017).
- 38 Wallace, *Meditations*, 41.
- 39 Wallace, *Meditations*, 43.
- 40 Joseph Carew, *Ontological Catastrophe: Žižek and the Paradoxical Metaphysics of German Idealism* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, University of Michigan Library), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/o/ohp/12763629.0001.001/1:5/--ontological-catastrophe-zizek-and-the-paradoxical?rgn=div1;view=toc> (accessed February 12, 2017).
- 41 Nyanaponika Thera, *The Roots of Good and Evil: Buddhist Texts Translated from the Pali with Comments and Introduction* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, [1978] 2008), 12.
- 42 Tara Brach, *Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life with the Heart of a Buddha* (New York: Bantam Books, 2003), 135.

- 43 Ellie Ragland, “An Overview of the Real,” in *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan’s Return to Freud*, ed. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Maire Jaanus (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 197.
- 44 Wallace, *Meditations*, 43.
- 45 Ragland, “An Overview of the Real,” 197, emphasis added.
- 46 Eagleton, *Trouble with Strangers*, 142–3.
- 47 Wallace, *Meditations*, 43.
- 48 Ragland, “An Overview of the Real,” 197
- 49 Eagleton, *Trouble with Strangers*, 146.
- 50 This bifurcation is, incidentally, an important trope in classical Buddhism. For what may be its *locus classicus*, see Glenn Wallis, *The Dhammapada: Verses on the Way* (New York: Random House, 2004), verse 282.
- 51 Wallace, *Meditations*, 45; the second quote is by contemporary neuroscientist Antonio Damasio.
- 52 Wallace, *Meditations*, 45. The original English translation is from Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, [1930] 1989), 26.
- 53 Freud, *Civilization*, 38. Wallace quotes this sentence in part at *Meditations*, 45.
- 54 Sigmund Freud, “Analysis Terminable and Interminable,” in *Freud’s Technique Papers: A Contemporary Perspective*, ed. Steven J. Ellman (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 226.
- 55 Žižek, *From Western Marxism*, n.p.
- 56 This feature of the Western Buddhist project is succinctly stated on the hardcover sleeve on Wallace, *Meditations*: “Wallace embarks on a two-part mission: to restore human nature and to transcend it.”
- 57 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XIV: The Logic of Phantasy 1966–1967*, trans. Cormac Gallagher, from unedited French manuscripts, 7, *Jacques Lacan in Ireland*, [www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/THE-SEMINAR-OF-JACQUES-LACAN-XIV.pdf](http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/THE-SEMINAR-OF-JACQUES-LACAN-XIV.pdf) (accessed March 22, 2017). Given that Lacan believed that desire was always a result of social, rather than personal or private, production, and that it emerges only with language, he immediately amends this statement (which he derives from Spinoza) to “desire is the essence of reality.” Eagleton, *Trouble with Strangers*, 148.
- 58 Anthony Paul Smith, *A Non-Philosophical Theory of Nature: Ecologies of Thought* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 4.
- 59 In the Pali canonical tradition, the adjective *suñña*, “empty,” is much more common than the nou, *suññatā*, “emptiness,” to which Sanskrit noun *śūnyatā* corresponds. See Bhikkhu Analayo, *Excursions into the Thought-World of the Pali Discourses* (Onalaska, Pariyatti, 2012), 272ff.
- 60 See “Like a Ball of Foam”: *Phenapiṇḍūpama Sutta*; *Samyuttanikāya* 3.22.95, in Glenn Wallis, *Basic Teachings of the Buddha* (New York: Random House, 2007), 27–30.

- 61 *Prasannapadā* 166a, in Jay L. Garfield, *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy in Cross-cultural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 58.
- 62 *Suññatāsamādhī Sutta: Saṃyuttanikāya, Salayatana Vagga, Asaṅkhata Saṃyuttam* 43.4(4), *Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Pāli Tipiṭaka*. See Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom, 2000), 1373; and Paravahera Vajirañāṇa Mahāthera, *Buddhist Meditation in Theory and Practice: A General Exposition According to the Pali Canon of the Theravada School* (Kuala Lumpur: Buddhist Missionary Society, 1975), 261.
- 63 Literal meanings of *śūnyatā*.
- 64 Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (London: Routledge, 1992), 146.
- 65 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinn*, part one, first paragraph, *Projekt Gutenberg*, <http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/-3243/1> (accessed March 23, 2017).
- 66 Smith, *Laruelle*, 8.
- 67 Thich Nhat Hanh, “The Fullness of Emptiness.”
- 68 I am referring here to Morton’s contribution, “Buddhaphobia: Nothingness and the Fear of Things,” in Marcus Boon, Eric Cazdyn, and Timothy Morton, *Nothing: Three Inquiries in Buddhism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 185–266. Morton makes it clear that he is using the two terms “emptiness” and “nothingness” interchangeably. At p. 201, he explicitly equates the Mahāyāna concept of “emptiness” with what he, following the German theologian Paul Tillich (1886–1965), calls “meontic nothingness, or a nonabsolute version of nothing (nothingness is a something), in contrast to absolute or *oukontic* nothingness (nothingness is not even nothing). For Tillich’s popularized version of his thinking on being, non-being, anxiety, and nothingness, see Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952). Morton, a professor of English specializing in Romanticism, recently made a list of “The 50 Most Influential Living Philosophers”; see *The Best Schools*, <https://thebestschools.org/features/most-influential-living-philosophers> (accessed October 5, 2017). Morton also describes himself as “a proud ‘X-buddhist’ member of the [Drukpa] Kagyü sect of Tibetan Buddhism”; Boon et al., *Nothing*, 190. The term “x-buddhism” will be discussed later.
- 69 Morton, “Buddhaphobia,” 231.
- 70 Morton, “Buddhaphobia,” 229.
- 71 Morton, “Buddhaphobia,” 227.
- 72 Morton, “Buddhaphobia,” 189, 245.
- 73 Laruelle, *Dictionary*, 57–8.
- 74 For more on the liberal humanist approach to reading, see Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), particularly pp. 16–20.

## Chapter 4

- 1 By “New Age apocalypse” I mean beliefs about the end of the current world and the coming of a new world. Decisive to this formulation is the fact that this new world comes into being *not* through collective social action or through revolutionary operations on material structures, but rather through some sort of “shift in consciousness” or through collective “cosmic awareness.” See Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2011), Interlude 4, particularly 336ff.
- 2 Lacan, *Seminars II*, 164.
- 3 If my own experience is a reliable guide, this *koan* is very popular in Western Zen circles today.
- 4 Alenka Zupančič, *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche’s Philosophy of the Two* (Boston: MIT Press, 2003), 176.
- 5 Lacan, *Seminars II*, 164.
- 6 Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 55.
- 7 Terms in italics are additional meanings of Sanskrit *parāvṛtti*.
- 8 Anthony Paul Smith, “Thinking from the One: Science and the Ancient Philosophical Figure of the One,” in *Laruelle and Non-Philosophy*, ed. John Mullarkey and Anthony Paul Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 19. More recently, Laruelle has called his project “non-standard philosophy.”
- 9 See Ray Brassier, “Axiomatic Heresy: The Non-Philosophy of François Laruelle,” *Radical Philosophy* (September/October 2003): 24.
- 10 Smith, “Thinking from the One,” 19.
- 11 Anthony Paul Smith is both the preeminent translator and, to my mind, best interpreter of Laruelle. I would like to say that he is the most *faithful* explicator of Laruelle’s thought. But this should not be taken to mean that he is merely spreading the good news of the master or that he is not generally uncritical. By *most faithful*, I mean simultaneously most lucid and most creative. Smith is not only or merely an innovative practitioner of non-philosophy in his own right (see, for example, Smith, *A Non-Philosophical Theory of Nature* or “What Can Be Done with Religion?”); his every treatment of that practice, in numerous articles, prefaces to translations, reviews, and books, is uniquely thought-provoking. Certainly, the best source for an *introduction* to Laruelle is Smith’s *Laruelle: A Stranger Thought* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016). For a collection of essays on various aspects of Laruelle’s thought, see John Mullarkey and Anthony Paul Smith, eds., *Laruelle and Non-Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012). For those who prefer to take it straight, see Laruelle’s “A Summary of Non-Philosophy,” trans. Ray Brassier, *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 8, *Philosophies of Nature* (1999), 138–48. This summary is a remarkable condensation of Laruelle’s thought



- up to the period of what he terms Philosophy III. For the periodization of Laruelle's work, from Philosophy I to Philosophy III, see Laruelle, *Principles*, 33–6. From Philosophy I to Philosophy V, see Anthony Paul Smith, "Thinking from the One," in Mullarkey and Smith, *Laruelle and Non-Philosophy*, 27–30.
- 12 Laruelle, *Anti-Badiou*, xxiii.
  - 13 See Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (New York: Weatherhill, 1970), "Nothing Special."
  - 14 Laruelle, *Anti-Badiou*, xxii.
  - 15 See Wallis, *Basic Teachings*, xxxviii.
  - 16 Laruelle, *Principles*, 11–12.
  - 17 *Kesamutti Sutta; Anguttaranikāya* 3.65, *Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Pāli Tipiṭaka*; see Wallis, *Basic Teachings*, 87–93.
  - 18 Compare this with Dalai Lama's statement, speaking of certain unethical applications of social Darwinism, that "we humans have a dangerous tendency to turn the visions that we construct of ourselves into self-fulfilling prophecies," in *The Universe in a Single Atom: The Convergence of Science and Spirituality* (New York: Morgan Road Books, 2015), 115.
  - 19 For an argument against this "Charter" reading of the text, see Bhikkhu Bodhi, "A Look at the Kalama Sutta," *Access to Insight*, [www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/bps-essay\\_09.html](http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/bps-essay_09.html) (accessed April 18, 2017).
  - 20 David Barash, "Is Buddhism the Most Science-Friendly Religion?" *Scientific American*, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/is-buddhism-the-most-science-friendly-religion> (accessed April 21, 2017).
  - 21 Two canonical Western Buddhist expressions touching on this point originate with no less consequential figures than Albert Einstein and the Dalai Lama: "The religion of the future will be a cosmic religion. It will have to transcend a personal God and avoid dogma and theology. Encompassing both the natural and the spiritual, it will have to be based on a religious sense arising from the experience of all things, natural and spiritual, considered as a meaningful unity. Buddhism answers this description . . . If there is any religion that could respond to the needs of modern science, it would be Buddhism" (Einstein). "Suppose that something is definitely proven through scientific investigation, that a certain hypothesis is verified or a certain fact emerges as a result of scientific investigation. And suppose, furthermore, that that fact is incompatible with Buddhist theory. There is no doubt that we must accept the result of the scientific research" (The Dalai Lama, *A Policy of Kindness*, ed. Sidney D. Piburn [Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1990], 67). The apparent fact that the Einstein quote, though widely disseminated in New Age, spiritual self-help, and Western Buddhist writing, is apocryphal is irrelevant to its status as a canonical text marking Buddhism with the imprimatur of the iconic Science Genius.

- 22 Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 3.
- 23 Laruelle, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*, 15. Italics in original. Laruelle seems to use italics as a way of asserting the rule-like function of a statement or paragraph.
- 24 Laruelle, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*, 24.
- 25 Laruelle, *Theory of Identities*, trans. Alyosha Edlebi (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 97, 88, italics added.
- 26 Laruelle, *Theory of Identities*, 89.
- 27 The paradigmatic statement of this belief stems from Martin Heidegger: “Science does not think.” What he says offers an unambiguous example of the principle of sufficient philosophy. It also, however, echoes certain common Western Buddhist tropes on the relationship between science and Buddhism, tropes that aim to establish the principle of sufficient *Buddhism*. It should thus be instructive to quote Heidegger’s full statement: “Science does not move within the dimension of philosophy. It is, however, without being aware of it, dependent on this dimension. For example, physics moves within the bounds of space and time and movement. What movement, what space, what time is, science *as science* cannot decide. Science, therefore, does not *think*. That means, it *cannot* think, in that sense, with its methods. I cannot, for example, say, *qua* physics [*physikalisch*] or with the methods of physics what physics is, but what physics is I can only *think*, philosophizing. The statement *science does not think* is not a reproach. It is only an observation about the inner structure of science, which belongs to its essence [*Wesen*], that science, on the one hand, depends on that which philosophy thinks, but science itself forgets and ignores.” What philosophy thinks that science forgets, of course, is Being. What Buddhism realizes but science cannot know is, to name but one central instance, the primordial nature of consciousness. Science simply lacks the instrument precise enough to locate and recognize this phenomenon, much less evaluate it in scientific terms. This instrument is, of course, an extension of the Western Buddhist organon, and indeed can be said to be definitive of Western Buddhism: meditation (mindfulness, contemplative science). The double maneuver simultaneously to be validated by and to outflank science might be considered a foundational rhetorical gesture of Western Buddhism. The Buddhist modernist Chinese monk Taixu (1890–1947) insists, for instance, that “Scientific knowledge can prove and postulate the Buddhist doctrine, but it cannot ascertain the Realities of the Buddhist doctrine. Buddhism . . . holds that Science does not go far enough into the mysteries of Nature, and that if she went further the Buddhist doctrine would be even more evident. The truths contained in the Buddhist doctrine concerning the Real nature of the Universe would greatly help Science.” See Lopez, *Buddhism and Science*, 19. The most recent work on the interface of science and Buddhism, as represented by its most ardent spokesperson, B. Alan Wallace, deviates hardly,

- if at all, from such views. See, for instance, his *Contemplative Science: Where Buddhism and Neuroscience Converge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). Heidegger's original statement is in Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Grey (New York: Perennial, 1976), 8. The fuller statement presented here is from an interview with Günther Neske, "Die vollständigen Reden Heideggers aus der NESKE-Dokumentation (1975)," *YouTube*, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=6BHvdTZomK8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6BHvdTZomK8) (accessed April 27, 2017).
- 28 A paradigmatic example of this usage of science is B. Alan Wallace, "A Science of Consciousness: Buddhism (1), the Modern West (0)," *Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies*, Third Series, no. 4 (Fall 2002): 15–32.
- 29 Laruelle, *Theory of Identities*, 88.
- 30 Laruelle, *Principles*, 37. "The Real" and "the One" are synonymous in Laruelle.
- 31 Laruelle, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*, 23.
- 32 Smith, *A Non-Philosophical Theory*, 87. "Vision-in-One" is another synonym of the Real and the One. This particular term conveys the sense of the One as "in-human" or "man considered in his finitude" (Laruelle, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*, 23, for the last term). Throughout, "man" should, of course, be read as generic "human" or "person."
- 33 *Alagaddūpama Sutta* (Discourse on the Snake Simile), *Majjhima Nikaya* 22.13: "I will show you how the teaching is similar to a raft, being as it is for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of being clung to."
- 34 See Glenn Wallis, "Criticism Matters: A Response to Rick Repetti," in *Handbook of Mindfulness: Culture, Context, and Social Engagement*, ed. Ronald E. Purser, David Forbes, and Adam Burke (Basel: Springer, 2016), 502.
- 35 Laruelle, "Summary of Non-Philosophy," ¶1.3.1, 138–9.
- 36 Laruelle, "Summary of Non-Philosophy," ¶1.3.1, 138–9.
- 37 This and the following quotes are from Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2007), 19–21.
- 38 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 20.
- 39 Nietzsche: *Beyond Good and Evil*, 49.
- 40 Last two quotes, Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 19.
- 41 Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 21.
- 42 Last three quotes, Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 21. Nietzsche uses *wirkliche Welt* in this instance. Generally, however, he uses *scheinbare Welt*, the "apparent world," the world as known through our senses, and opposes it to the *wahre Welt*, or an ostensibly "true world" posited ideally, in thought. We will revisit this point later on.
- 43 Katerina Kolozova, *Cut of the Real: Subjectivity in Poststructuralist Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 60.

- 44 Laruelle, *Dictionary*, 56, s.v. Philosophical Decision.
- 45 This “whatever” is a placeholder for an enormous cache of historical, cultural, doctrinal variety and contingency. Later I introduce the neologism *x-buddhism* to capture this “whatever.”
- 46 Laruelle, *Dictionary*, 56, s.v. Philosophical Decision.
- 47 Laruelle, *Dictionary*, 56, s.v. Philosophical Decision.
- 48 In addition to the task at hand, I hope to impress on the reader that “x-buddhism” is not pejorative. Timothy Morton exemplifies this misunderstanding when he comments that the project of non-buddhism “claims to be above (and superior to) the sectarianism of what it patronizes as X-buddhism”; see Boon et al., *Nothing*, 187–8. Hopefully, the reader will come to understand the term as no more patronizing than Jay Garfield’s view that “the Buddhist tradition, although vast and diverse, is unified by a strong set of joint broad commitments that define a position as Buddhist”; see Jay L. Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism: Why It Matters to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1. This sameness-in-difference rhetoric is, in fact, endemic to Buddhism’s self-understanding. It is present from the Buddha’s “single taste” to Joseph Goldstein’s “One Dharma.” Morton himself invokes it when he refers to “Buddhisms” in the plural as comprising an essentialized singular. For instance, “The critique of mindfulness is immanent to Buddhisms. So much so that [to engage in the critique] is . . . to be a Buddhist” (189; the three dots are in the original). Morton could have just as well said “immanent to x-buddhism.” For, like his “Buddhisms,” x-buddhism is a neutral term intended as a shorthand for the proliferation of a particular type. But, I find that the “x” functions in a way that better captures the *singular* type or identity of Buddhism’s many modifications.
- 49 Laruelle, *Principles*, 235.
- 50 Laruelle, *Dictionary*, 57, s.v. Philosophy.
- 51 Sangharakshita, *What Is the Dharma? The Essential Teachings of the Buddha* (Birmingham: Windhorse, 1998), 6.
- 52 See Monier Williams, *A Sanskrit English Dictionary*, 510, s.v. धर्म (*dharma*). I write it as “The Dharma” in order to capture the absolute, nonnegotiable, universal import of the term within Buddhist discourse.
- 53 Batchelor, *After Buddhism*, 2–3.
- 54 See Williams, *A Sanskrit English Dictionary*, 510, s.v. धर्म (*dharma*).
- 55 Laruelle, *Dictionary*, 33, s.v. Mixture.
- 56 Narada Thera (1898–1983), who is in many ways a prototypical fashioner of Western Buddhism—native Sri Lankan; educated at St. Benedict’s College and Ceylon University College; ordained as a Theravadan monk at age of eighteen; writer in, and translator into, English—sums up the general Buddhist position on faith when he says, “Buddhism does not demand blind faith from its adherents. Here mere belief is dethroned and is substituted by confidence based on

- knowledge, which, in Pali, is known as *saddha*,” *Buddhanet*, [www.buddhanet.net/nutshell03.htm](http://www.buddhanet.net/nutshell03.htm) (accessed October 6, 2017). The phrase “confidence based on knowledge” is an excellent description of science-thought.
- 57 Laruelle, *Principles*, 232.
- 58 Laruelle, *Principles*, 4.
- 59 The Dalai Lama, for instance, refers to *pratīyasamutpāda* as “the entirety of Buddhist teaching.” See Jay L. Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism: Why It Matters to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 25.
- 60 See *Samyuttanikāya* 2.1.10, *Gotama Sutta*, in Wallis, *Basic Teachings*, 40–44.
- 61 See Bhikkhu Bodhi, “Transcendental Dependent Arising: A Translation and Exposition of the *Upanisa Sutta*,” *Access to Insight*, [www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/wheel277.html](http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/wheel277.html) (accessed May 20, 2017); translation slightly modified.
- 62 I say “Western Buddhist” because the more traditional understanding of *pratīyasamutpāda* seems to indicate only cognitive (including affective) conditioning. The Western Buddhist sense of its indicating the entire “flow of reality” as a mental-physical “web of mutual causality” is most apparent in Buddhist environmentalism, where it is equated, by Joanna Macy and others, with the “deep ecology of all things.” See, for instance, Daniel P. Scheid, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 154–5. For a compelling, and very interesting, theory about the traditional understanding of the term, see Eviatar Shulman, “Early Meanings of Dependent-Origination,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 36 (2008): 297–317.
- 63 Laruelle, *Dictionary*, 57–8.
- 64 See Brassier, “Axiomatic Heresy,” 26.
- 65 Laruelle, *Dictionary*, 58.
- 66 As I mentioned earlier, in the text that I have been mainly citing, Nietzsche distinguishes *die wahre* (true) *Welt* from *die wirkliche* (real) *Welt*, and glosses the latter as being *eine scheinbare* (an apparent) *Welt*. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Götzen-Dämmerung oder Wie man mit dem Hammer philosophirt*, Kapitel 6, *Spiegel Online*, <http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/-6185/1> (accessed May 20, 2017).
- 67 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, paragraph 584, [https://archive.org/stream/TheWillToPower-Nietzsche/will\\_to\\_power-nietzsche\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/TheWillToPower-Nietzsche/will_to_power-nietzsche_djvu.txt) (accessed May 21, 2017). On Nietzsche’s ambivalent but ultimately “positive” attitude toward science, see John Richardson, “Nietzsche’s Psychology,” in *Nietzsches Wissenschaftsphilosophie*, ed. H. Heit, G. Abel, and M. Brusotti (Berlin: de Gruyter-Verlag, 2011), 311–28.
- 68 This phenomenon is nowhere more apparent than in the presentation of the Western Buddhist schools organized around the moniker “Mindfulness.” Mindfulness proponents claim that the simple cognitive capacity of being

“mindful”—in, of course, the particular manner prescribed by the various Mindfulness ideologies—impacts a prodigious sphere of human and nonhuman activity, such as sex, giving birth, dying and death, parenting, cooking, eating and weight loss, creativity, sports performance, dog training, education, therapy, the environment, addiction recovery, etc. See, for example, Per Drougge, “Notes toward a Coming Backlash: Mindfulness as an Opiate of the Middle Classes,” in Purser, *Handbook of Mindfulness*, 167–79.

## Chapter 5

- 1 Laruelle, *Principles*, 12.
- 2 Ludwik Fleck, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, trans. Fred Bradley and Thaddeus J. Trenn (Chicago: Chicago University Press, [1935] 1979), 142.
- 3 Fleck, *Genesis and Development*, 142, emphases in original.
- 4 Fleck, *Genesis and Development*, 39, 41.
- 5 Fleck, *Genesis and Development*, 99.
- 6 Ludwik Fleck, “The Problem of Epistemology,” in *Cognition and Fact—Materials on Ludwik Fleck*, ed. R. S. Cohen and T. Schnelle (Dordrecht: Reidel, [1936] 1986), 85.
- 7 Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London: Verso, 1978), 30.
- 8 Feyerabend, *Against Method*, 46–7.
- 9 Like “to” and “into” and “of” and all other prepositions and genitives, “before” obscures the immediacy of our relationship to “the law” or to the Real. It is for this reason that Laruelle employs his peculiar notation, and places such terms in parentheses, with hyphens, as prefixes or suffixes, etc. For example, force (of) thought, immanent (to) itself, other (of the) void, and so forth. See Laruelle, *Anti-Badiou*, 142, and Smith, *Laruelle*, 52–4.
- 10 François Laruelle, “On the Black Universe: In the Human Foundations of Color,” 1–2, *Recess*, [www.recessart.org/wp-content/uploads/Laruelle-Black-Universe1.pdf](http://www.recessart.org/wp-content/uploads/Laruelle-Black-Universe1.pdf) (accessed June 1, 2017). This text is accompanied by the original French, “Du noir univers: dans les fondations humaines de la couleur,” first published in *La Décision philosophique*, vol. 5 (April 1988): 107–12. I have taken some minor liberties in my translation.
- 11 Laruelle in *From Decision to Heresy: Experiments in Non-Standard Thought*, ed. Robin Mackay (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2012), “Introduction: Laruelle Undivided,” 29.
- 12 Anthony Paul Smith, *François Laruelle’s Principles of Non-Philosophy: A Critical Introduction and Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 80.
- 13 On this parallel, see Laruelle, *Principles*, 207, and Smith, *François Laruelle’s Principles*, 12–13.

- 14 Laruelle, *Principles*, 208.
- 15 I am assuming that Garfield has in mind Heidegger's substantive neologism *Existenzial* rather than the adjectival form that would give us the feminine declension *existentiale*. The former is transliterated as *existential* in English translations. See, for instance, Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, [1927] 1967), 55.
- 16 Jay L. Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism: Why It Matters to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 9.
- 17 See Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*, trans. Nicola Luckhurst (New York: Penguin Press, [1895] 2004), 306.
- 18 Quoted in Bruno Bosteels, *Marx and Freud in Latin America: Politics, Psychoanalysis, and Religion in Times of Terror* (London: Verso, 2012), 244.
- 19 Garfield, *Engaging*, 2.
- 20 Laruelle, *Dictionary*, 57–8.
- 21 Garfield, *Engaging*, 11–12.
- 22 Thanissaro Bhikkhu, quoted in McMahan, *Buddhist Modernism*, 248. While it is true that modern traditional Buddhists permit themselves countless lifetimes of detours in *samsāra*, the merit they are thereby slowly accumulating must, to remain coherently *Buddhist*, have as its end this ultimate goal.
- 23 See, for instance, Wilhelm Halbfass, *Tradition and Reflection: Explorations in Indian Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), and John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, eds., *Transcendence and Beyond: A Postmodern Inquiry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007). For a historical and cross-cultural overview of the two concepts in relation to one another, see also Iveta Leitane, "Transcendence and Immanence," in *Encyclopedia of Sciences and Religions*, ed. Anne L. C. Runehov and Lluís Oviedo (Dordrecht: Springer Reference, 2013), 2275–85.
- 24 Wallis, *The Dhammapada*, verse 282.
- 25 Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 2.
- 26 Laruelle, *Dictionary*, 5, s.v. (Epistemic, Non-Philosophical) Break.
- 27 Laruelle, cited in Katerina Kolozova, "The Project of Non-Marxism: Arguing for 'Monstrously' Radical Concepts," *Cultural Logic*, vol. 10 (2007): 5.
- 28 Thomas H. Johnson, ed., *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), 339, poem #686.
- 29 Rocco Gangle, *Diagrammatic Immanence: Category Theory and Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 3.
- 30 Gangle, *Diagrammatic Immanence*, 3.
- 31 On this point, see Kolozova, "The Project of Non-Marxism," 10.
- 32 See Kai Dreschmitt, *Animal symbolicum oder Mängelwesen? Eine Annäherung an die Ansätze Ernst Cassirers und Arnold Gehlens* (Norderstedt: GRIN Verlag, 2011), 3.

- 33 On Kant's contribution to our current understanding of "immanent and transcendent" as a binary, see Johannes Zachhuber, "Transcendence and Immanence," in *The Edinburgh Critical History of Nineteenth-Century Christian Theology*, ed. Daniel Whistler (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 164–81.
- 34 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 385–6.
- 35 Kant, *Critique*, 386.
- 36 A popular internet meme attributed to Pope Francis.
- 37 *Cūḷamālukya Sutta; Majjhimanikāya* 63, in Wallis, *Basic Teachings*, 6–7.
- 38 Batchelor, *After Buddhism*, 24.
- 39 Robert Aitken, trans., *The Gateless Barrier: The Wu-Men Kuan (Mumonkan)* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), 137.
- 40 Laruelle, *Principles*, 27, emphases added.
- 41 Aitken, *The Gateless Barrier*, 137.
- 42 Aitken, *The Gateless Barrier*, 138.
- 43 Aitken, *The Gateless Barrier*, 140. The final sentence refers to the *bodhisattva* Maitreya's descent to earth as the Buddha of some future time, replacing the current "reign" of Śākyamuni Buddha.
- 44 Aitken, *The Gateless Barrier*, 140.
- 45 Aitken, *The Gateless Barrier*, 139. Aitken says he wrote this verse during the Second World War while imprisoned in a Japanese internment camp: "I was awed by the vitality of the sump of our night soil, ripening for use in the garden."
- 46 T. Griffith Foulk, "The Form and Function of *Koan* Literature: A Historical Overview," in *The Koan: Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism*, ed. Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 15.
- 47 Nick Srnicek, "François Laruelle, the One and the Non-Philosophical Tradition," *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 22 (2010): 194.
- 48 "330 Million Gods," from the BBC series on religion *The Long Search*, released 1977.
- 49 Brassier, "Axiomatic Heresy," 26–7.
- 50 Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki, eds., *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones: A Collection of Zen and Pre-Zen Writings* (Boston: Tuttle, 1988), 19.
- 51 Laruelle, *Principles*, 20.
- 52 Laruelle, *Principles*, 27.
- 53 Laruelle, *Principles*, 21.
- 54 Laruelle, *Principles*, 20.
- 55 Laruelle, *Dictionary*, 10, *s.v.* Determination-in-the-last-instance.
- 56 See John Bussanich, "Plotinus's Metaphysics of the One," in *Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 45.



- 57 Freud, *Civilization*, 1.
- 58 François Laruelle, *General Theory of Victims*, trans. Jessie Hock and Alex Dubilet (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 21.
- 59 Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, [1965] 2005), 113.
- 60 Laruelle, *Dictionary*, 4, s.v. Being-in-One.
- 61 Laruelle quoted in Smith, *A Non-Philosophical Theory of Nature*, 4, emphasis added.
- 62 Robert G. Brown's home page, <http://webhome.phy.duke.edu/~rgb/Philosophy/axioms/axioms/node27.html> (accessed January 23, 2018).
- 63 Of course, my speculative *ur-axiomatic* positing is found only in compromised or amphibological forms in actual x-buddhist materials. Nāgārjuna, for instance, employs this concept, among other reasons, to refute the charge that he is “contradicting fundamental Buddhist tenets.” For, “Only with the simultaneous realization of the emptiness, but conventional reality of phenomena and the emptiness of emptiness, argues Nāgārjuna, can suffering be wholly uprooted.” See Jay Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 313–14. In the *Heart Sutra*, too, a text much beloved by Western Zen Buddhists, the author abstains from encyclopedic evangelization *about* emptiness, and endeavors instead to think *from* emptiness, that is to say, to *perform* emptiness. In doing so, she was acting in solidarity with Laruelle's most civil and democratic approach to knowledge. But, alas, the work was once again dutifully weaponized by whomever saw fit to tack on at some point in time the all-too-Buddhist “most illuminating *mantra*, the highest *mantra*, the *mantra* beyond compare, the *mantra* that puts an end to all suffering”: *gate gate pāragate pārasamgate bodhi svāhā*.
- 64 Abe, *Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue*, 79–80.
- 65 Thomas Cleary, *Instant Zen: Waking Up in the Present* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1994), 4.
- 66 Laruelle, *Principles*, 14.
- 67 Laruelle, *Principles*, xii, in “Translators' Introduction.”
- 68 Laruelle, *Principles*, 13.
- 69 Adapted from François Laruelle, “Theorems of the Good News,” trans. Alexander R. Galloway, *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2014): “A City of Heretics: François Laruelle's Non-Philosophy and Its Variants”: 41–3.
- 70 Georges B. J. Dreyfus, *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping: The Education of a Tibetan Buddhist Monk* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 189.
- 71 See, for instance, *Majjhimanikāya* 70, *Kīṭāgiri suttaṃ*: Nāhaṃ bhikkhave ādikeneva aññārādhanaṃ vadāmi. Api ca bhikkhave anupubbasiikkhā anupubbakiriyaṃ anupubbapaṭipadā aññārādhanaṃ hoti. *Sutta Central*, <https://suttacentral.net/pi/mn70> (accessed August 22, 2017).

- 72 *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 1.6.51: Pabbassaramidaṃ, bhikkhave, cittaṃ. Tañca kho āgantukehi upakkilesehi upakkiliṭṭhaṃ. *Sutta Central*, <https://suttacentral.net/pi/an1.51-60> (accessed August 22, 2017).
- 73 *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 1.6.52: Taṃ sutavā ariyasāvako yathābhūtaṃ pajānāti. *Sutta Central*, <https://suttacentral.net/pi/an1.51-60> (accessed August 22, 2017).
- 74 Pepper, *The Faithful Buddhist*, n.p.
- 75 For references to relevant texts, see Bhikkhu Bodhi, ed., *In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon* (Somerville: Wisdom, 2005), 21–3.
- 76 Dainin Katagiri, *You Have to Say Something: Manifesting Zen Insight* (Boston: Shambhala, 1994), Google Books, n.p.
- 77 Mark G. Williams, John D. Teasdale, Zindel V. Segal, and Jon Kabat-Zinn, *The Mindful Way through Depression: Freeing Yourself from Chronic Unhappiness* (New York: Guilford Press, 2007), 54, emphasis in original.
- 78 Williams, *The Mindful Way*, 46.
- 79 François Laruelle, “Is Thinking Democratic? Or, How to Introduce Theory into Democracy,” in *Laruelle and Non-Philosophy*, ed. John Mullarkey and Anthony Paul Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 230.
- 80 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (London: Lawrence and Wishart, [1867] 2003), 167–9.
- 81 See Laruelle, *Dictionary*, 13, s.v. (Non-autopositional) Drive, where “drive” is another “name for the force (of) thought as organon of the One and for its action of a pragmatic nature on the World or philosophy-material.”
- 82 Laruelle, *Dictionary*, 59, s.v. Presentation (non-autopositional presentation), and *Principles*, 20.
- 83 Laruelle, *Dictionary*, 19, s.v. Force (of) Thought (existing-subject-Stranger).
- 84 Smith, *A Non-Philosophical Theory of Nature*, 79.
- 85 This equation can also be understood through Laruelle’s usage of the concept of “superposition.” He borrows this notion from quantum theory to indicate that “when two wave-particles are in superposition with one another . . . they do not produce a synthesis but instead their individual identities remain while a new third identity is produced that nevertheless remains those two waves.” See Anthony Paul Smith, “Laruelle and the Messiah before the Saints,” in *The Postmodern Saints of France: Refiguring “the Holy” in Contemporary French Philosophy*, ed. Colby Dickinson (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 256.
- 86 Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History, Volume 2, Japan*, trans. James W. Heisig and Paul Knitter (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005), 167, emphasis added.
- 87 Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche, *Present Fresh Wakefulness: A Meditation Manual on Nonconceptual Wisdom* (Kathmandu: Rangjung Yeshe, 2002), 132.
- 88 Thich Nhat Hanh, *Understanding Our Mind* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2006), 128.

- 89 Ajahn Brahm, *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond: A Meditator's Handbook* (Boston: Wisdom, 2006), 12.
- 90 D. T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 9.
- 91 Laruelle, *Dictionary*, 19, s.v. Force (of) Thought (existing-subject-Stranger).
- 92 Laruelle, *Dictionary*, 19, s.v. Force (of) Thought (existing-subject-Stranger).
- 93 François Laruelle, "What Can Non-Philosophy Do?," trans. Ray Brassier, *Angelaki*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2003): 179.
- 94 Laruelle, "Summary," ¶6.1.2, 146, emphasis added.

## Chapter 6

- 1 See, respectively, Wallis, *Basic Teachings*, 29–30; Glenn Mullin, *Meditations to Transform the Mind: The Seventh Dalai Lama VII* (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1999), 110; John W. Pettit, *Mipham's Beacon of Certainty: Illuminating the View of Dzogchen, the Great Perfection* (Boston: Wisdom, 1999), 301.
- 2 See, for instance, Thomas Cleary, *The Flower Ornament Scripture: A Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra* (Boston: Shambhala, 1993), and Robert Thurman, "Hail to the Vagina," *University of Idaho*, [www.lib.uidaho.edu/digital/turning/pdf/Hail%20to%20the%20Vagina.pdf](http://www.lib.uidaho.edu/digital/turning/pdf/Hail%20to%20the%20Vagina.pdf) (accessed September 20, 2017).
- 3 Not all that different from the *Shōbōgenzō*, Zenify is there to "help people achieve their optimal state of being—relaxed yet focused and alert." *Zenify*, <http://zenifydrinks.com> (accessed September 20, 2017).
- 4 François Laruelle, *Christo-Fiction: The Ruins of Athens and Jerusalem*, trans. Robin Mackay (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 8.
- 5 Robin Mackay in "Introduction," François Laruelle, *From Decision to Heresy: Experiments in Non-Standard Thought*, ed. Robin Mackay (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2012), 30.
- 6 Laruelle, *Principles*, 14.
- 7 Mackay, "Introduction," 30.
- 8 Laruelle, "Deconstruction and Non-Philosophy," §9.2, *Onscenes*, [www.onscenes.com/philosophy/deconstruction-and-non-philosophy](http://www.onscenes.com/philosophy/deconstruction-and-non-philosophy) (accessed September 27, 2017).
- 9 Laruelle, "Deconstruction and Non-Philosophy," §9.2, emphasis added.
- 10 Laruelle, *Principles*, 230.
- 11 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 237; Leonard Cohen, *Book of Longing* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2006), 36.
- 12 Laruelle, *From Decision to Heresy*, 30.
- 13 Smith, *Laruelle: A Stranger Thought*, 119–120.

- 14 Laruelle, *Dictionary*, 19, s.v. Force (of) thought (existing-subject-Stranger).
- 15 Laruelle, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*, 15. Italics in original, representing, recall, something like a rule of method.
- 16 Laruelle, *Anti-Badiou*, xxix; previous two quotes, xii, xxxii, respectively.
- 17 Heinz Bechert and Jens-Uwe Hartmann, "Observations on the Reform of Buddhism in Nepal," *Journal of the Nepal Research Society*, vol. 8 (1988): 16.
- 18 McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 184 (both quotes). See McMahan's chapter "Meditation and Modernity" for an excellent overview of the topic.
- 19 McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 185.
- 20 See, for instance, "Mindfulness and the Cessation of Suffering: An Exclusive New Interview with Mindfulness Pioneer Jon Kabat-Zinn," *Lion's Roar*, [www.lionsroar.com/mindfulness-and-the-cessation-of-suffering-an-exclusive-new-interview-with-mindfulness-pioneer-jon-kabat-zinn/#](http://www.lionsroar.com/mindfulness-and-the-cessation-of-suffering-an-exclusive-new-interview-with-mindfulness-pioneer-jon-kabat-zinn/#) (accessed October 1, 2017).
- 21 See, for instance, Daniel Goleman and Richard J. Davidson, *Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain, and Body* (New York: Avery, 2017). Such *neurosciencefictions* are, of course, entirely welcome. The question, as always, is whether the authors reinscribe x-buddhist decision and sufficiency into their usage. (They do.)
- 22 See Charles S. Prebish, *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 233ff. See also, Lama Surya Das, "Ten Emerging Trends in Western Dharma," *Sharing Space and Library*, <http://users.libero.it/seza/emergingtrends.html> (accessed October 1, 2017).
- 23 There are of course exceptions—though very few—to the primacy of meditation (or mindfulness) in Western Buddhist communities. An example is the Nichiren Buddhism promoted by the Sōka Gakkai International, where the ostensibly transformative practice is not meditating but chanting a *mantra* composed of the title (hence the term *daimoku*) of the *Lotus Sutra*. Certainly, a case could be made that it is mainly this nonmeditational approach to practice that leads to the reluctance to fully accept Nichiren Buddhism into the Western Buddhist *sangha*.

## Chapter 7

- 1 Simmel, "Die Ruine."
- 2 Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 178.
- 3 All quotes from Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 195, 405, 5, 224, 225, 10.
- 4 *Can anyone*. Emil Cioran, *On the Heights of Despair*, trans. Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 5; *Does the laughter of people*. Friedrich Hölderlin, from the fragment "In Liebliche Blaue." I took quite a bit of

- license with my translation, which is based on the “reconstruction” in Dietrich Uffhausen, *Friedrich Hölderlin: Bevestigter Gesang* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1989).
- 5 *To understand analysis*. Mao Zedong, *Long Live Mao Zedong’s Thought*, Red Guard, 1959, *Marxist*, [www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-8/mswv8\\_48.htm](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-8/mswv8_48.htm) (accessed April 4, 2015).
  - 6 *the accelerating expansion of the universe . . . every star in the universe*. Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 228.
  - 7 *What is at all familiar . . . This lingering is the magical power*. Georg W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenologie des Geistes*, Vorede, *Project Gutenberg*, [www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/6698/pg6698.html](http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/6698/pg6698.html) (accessed April 1, 2015). *Wherever one encounters human beings*. Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life*, 12; *self-forming and self-enhancing behavior*. Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life*, 4; *Man produces man*. Karl Marx, “Private Property and Communism,” *Marxist*, [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/comm.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/comm.htm) (accessed April 1, 2015); *The creature gazes*. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*; *Don’t give up*. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre VII, L’éthique de la psychanalyse* (Paris, Le Seuil, 1986); *The sublime moves us*. Immanuel Kant, *Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen*, 1764, *Project Gutenberg*, [www.gutenberg.org/files/41197/41197-h/41197-h.htm](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/41197/41197-h/41197-h.htm) (accessed March 20, 2015). All translations my own.
  - 8 *become equal to the trauma . . . achieves a binding of extinction*. Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 239.
  - 9 *Eros alone*. Emil Cioran, *The Book of Delusions*, trans. Camelia Elias, *Hyperion*, vol. V, no. 1 (May 2010): 76; *this thought in its most terrible form*. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Der Wille zur Macht*, ed. Bernd Jung, p. 47, para. 6, *Nietzsche*, [nietzsche.ralfj.de](http://nietzsche.ralfj.de) (accessed February 10, 2015); *We have created the weightiest thought*. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 14 (unpublished papers, 1882–1888); cited in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 116; *what would be my—how should I call it*. Slavoj Žižek, from the movie *Zizek!*, <https://beanhu.wordpress.com/2009/12/07/zizek> (accessed January 8, 2015); *to the eyes*. George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (New York: P. F. Collier, 1917), 565, original reads, the past.
  - 10 *The human being is this night*. Georg W. F. Hegel, *Jenaer Realphilosophie*, cited in Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), 29–30.
  - 11 *we must invalidate*. Laruelle, *Anti-Badiou*, xxix.
  - 12 *Fundamental terms*. Laruelle, *Future Christ*, xxvi. *The Stranger or the identity of the Real*. François Laruelle, *Philosophie et non-philosophie* (Liege-Bruxelles: Pierre Mardaga, 1989), 57. For fuller treatments of these terms, see Wallis et al., “Coda,” *Cruel Theory/Sublime Practice*, 145–52.

- 13 *struck by sudden vertigo*. Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young Girl*, trans. Ariana Reines (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) Intervention Series 12, 2012), 28; *trained relentlessness*. Max Weber, "Politics as Vocation," *Spiegel Online*, <http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/politik-als-beruf-8139/2> (accessed October 3, 2017). Weber is speaking to a group of students, who he finds are overly, and dangerously, idealistic in their worldview. The entire statement goes: "[What is decisive in moving toward the future is] trained ruthlessness in the Realities of life, and the ability to bear them and allow them to grow within you" (*die geschulte Rücksichtslosigkeit des Blickes in die Realitäten des Lebens, und die Fähigkeit, sie zu ertragen und ihnen innerlich gewachsen zu sein*); *incompatible with the reality of the organs*. Emil Cioran, *The Temptation to Exist*, trans. Richard Howard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 191.

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