

Naturalizing Buddhism Without Being Reductive

2012

Tom Pepper

NATURALIZING BUDDHISM WITHOUT BEING REDUCTIVE

a radical, and ridiculously arrogant, reinvention of Buddhist thought

Tom Pepper

It's almost a commonplace in academic thought that it is impossible to accept all of the core teachings of Buddhism without accepting contradiction. We cannot, it is assumed, take seriously both the teaching of non-self, and belief in rebirth; either one, taken to its logical conclusion, would necessarily preclude the other. What I am going to present here is a redefinition of the core terms of Buddhism which allows all of them to be accepted without requiring any contradiction, without the need to choose which concepts to accept and which to reject, and without any hidden acceptance of a world-transcendent *atman*.

I am writing this to ask for criticism, to ask for any response that can point out errors or blind spots. That said, I am going to insist on a few provisos. First, I am not willing to engage with disagreements which depend on the insistence that there is in fact an *atman*, soul, or world-transcendent consciousness; I will offer, here, no argument against such beliefs and do not expect to persuade anyone out of these beliefs with this essay. Second, I am not willing to engage the debate the I use too many hard words or ask to much mental effort of my audience; I intend, in this essay, to be fairly accessible and clear, but if you don't know the meanings of the terms I use go look them up. Finally, I am especially not interested, for reasons that I hope I will be able to make clear, in any citations from specific sutras which contradict my reconstrual of terms; my interest is not in the academic attempt to determine how exactly a term was used, or what exactly a concept meant, to a particular school of Buddhism at a particular time. I think this is an incredibly valuable kind of work to do, but it is not what I am doing here; instead, I am trying to construct a possible construal of Buddhist concepts which would allow them all to

cohere, and allow them to be of use for us today.

This attempt is somewhat in the vein of Laruelle's concept of non-philosophy, not as an attempt to disprove, reject, or dismiss philosophy, but to determine what kind of human practice it is, and what we might still be able to do with it. However, it will probably be clear that I have some serious objections to Laruelle's thought, that I am much more in league with Badiou in that current debate. Nevertheless, I think a non-buddhism, which enables us to step back from the realm of x-buddhist thought, can be of benefit here, so I will shamelessly use some of Laruelle's strategies while reserving the right to disagree with what seem to me to be his most fundamental conclusions. What a non-buddhism can do, I will argue, is explore what *truths* appear in the history of Buddhist thought, what can escape the insistent drive toward relativizing everything, the postmodern attempt to disable all conceptual thought through hyper-contextualizing and over historicizing and remove any means of *directing* our attempts to act in the world to change things for the better. My claim is that there is a way of understanding Buddhism, of reconstituting it from its frozen concentrate if you will, that can enable us to use Buddhist thought and practice to establish a discourse and practice capable of guiding meaningful change.

I want to be relatively brief here (for me), and so I will offer limited citations and limited debate with or warrant from other thinkers. I won't, that is, take the space here to demonstrate that my understanding of Nagarjuna, of Buddhist history, of the sutras, or of Althusser, Badiou, Lacan, etc., are correct. I feel sure that they are, and I may make a fuller presentation in some other venue. At this point my question is: Is what I am saying comprehensible, and does it seem potentially useful?

Before I can even begin to present my reconstrual of Buddhism, though, I will need to begin with a defense of the Althusserian concept of ideology. Whatever errors Althusser may have made, it seems to me that he his greatest contribution to philosophy is in his concept of ideology as the reproduction of our relations to the relations of production. It will be my claim that many of the conceptual difficulties

and apparent contradictions in Buddhist thought dissolve once we understand *samsara* as the realm of ideology. The endless wandering in circles is the blind reproduction of existing relations to relations of production, and the project of Buddhism is to escape the prison of our ideologies. Not to escape the *need for* ideologies, but to break free of the naturalizing and reifying of particular ideologies.

Ideology and Its Discontents

Althusser's most famous, most anthologized, most cited, most widely read work is, I would argue, almost never understood. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation" (hereafter, the ISA essay), has generated thousands of pages of commentary, more often than not attempting to argue against the existence of such a thing as ideology. So, despite the fact that the essay is so well known that almost any graduate of a halfway-decent college probably believes she already knows what it says, I am going to briefly recount its most important claim here.

Ideology is not an illusion, a false consciousness, or a deception. It is not a mistaken understanding of reality, because it is not primarily an understanding of reality at all. The most important insight in Althusser's essay is that ideology does not represent reality in some distorted form, in order to deceive us into accepting our oppression. Instead, ideology is that set of practices in which we reproduce our *relations to the relations of production*. Our ideological beliefs always exist in a material practice—if they do not, if our beliefs are not productive of an reproduced by some concrete behavior, then they are not our actual ideology, and we do not in fact believe them at all (although we may believe in the need to *claim* we believe in them). There is nothing necessarily false or distorting about ideology; it may include some distortions, some falsehoods, but it does not need to do so. What it must include is a set of beliefs-in-practices which function to *reproduce* the existing relations of production, the material and economic system in which we are living. These beliefs are primarily on the order of morals, values, tastes, emotions—not beliefs about mind-independent reality, although certain

conceptions of what is real may be entailed.

This seems to be tremendously difficult for most readers of Althusser to fully grasp, to *think* and not just “understand.” We do not represent our mode of production in our ideology, any more than we represent the physical universe there. Instead, what ideology does is to produce a set of beliefs and values connected to practices, all of which function to enable the reproduction of our existing social formations. The educational system serves as Althusser’s central example in the ISA essay, so perhaps we can use that example here. There is clearly a sense in which education requires a conception of the mind-independent world, a depiction of both the physical universe and human social formations. However, the specifically *ideological* function of education is in its reproduction of the existing means of production and social relations. Without education, we could not reproduce our current relations of production—we need individuals with specific technical skills to keep things running, and need to sort individuals into specific social functions, and education is the system we have produced to do this training and sorting.

Let me try to clarify this with a metaphor. What Althusser would call “scientific” knowledge functions to describe reality, both the natural world and humanly created social formations. It functions, in a sense, like a map: scientific knowledge attempts to give a useful model of the world, and can be more or less accurate. Our maps may be wrong, may be imprecise, and can be corrected and refined. Ideology does not function to map the world, but to enable us to get around in it; so, metaphorically, ideology functions more like the mode of transportation. The mode of transportation and the map are, of course, related. If our mode of transportation is an automobile, we are most interested in road maps; road maps are not “incorrect,” they are not (usually) deceptive or illusory, but they are of limited use if we decide we want to go for a hike in the forest. The difficulty of ideology is that we tend to believe that our existing mode of transportation is the only one possible, that it is natural, universal, and cannot be modified or changed, so that it becomes inconceivable to do such a thing as go for a hike. Instead, we focus on changing the map of the world, paving the forest to make it accessible.

Keep in mind that this is only a metaphor, and like all metaphors it is limited. Ideology functions to enable us to keep the world running, but it also produces much of our motivation and investment in the world. We need to educate new individuals in our existing technology, to produce new technology, and to organize the world in such a way that individuals are sorted into functional roles. In order to do this, we need to value technological change, hard work at tedious tasks, financial success, an understanding of higher education that emphasizes technical training over critical thought. Our ideologies are, for Althusser, how we reproduce the existing relations of production; they are not an image of those relations of production, not an image of the world. Education clearly enables the reproduction of relations of production, but so do other ideological practices. We believe in love, so we court, marry, reproduce, and support our families: love and the nuclear family are essential ideological formations in the reproduction of the existing relations of production, assuring that there will be new individuals interpellated into all the existing roles in society, into each socio-economic strata, in a way that appears to us fully “natural;” for an American today, what could be more “natural” than the nuclear family as the primary unit of social organization? These ideological formations are not false or delusory, are not imaginary in the ordinary sense of the term—people really do feel romantic love, really are attached to their children—but they can become problems when we mistake a socially produced practice for a natural and necessary one. We will always need some ideology, but we need to know that that is what it is, and be able to change it when it is no longer a useful way to produce human happiness. If it should become desirable or necessary to go into the forest, we need to realize that we can get out of the car.

And for Althusser, this is entirely possible: “As is well known, the accusation of being in ideology only applies to others, never to oneself (*unless one is really a Spinozist or a Marxist, which, in this matter, is to be exactly the same thing*)” (ISA, p. 175, my emphasis). We are, as Althusser puts it, an ideological animal by nature: we produce practices invested with meaning which enable us to reproduce and transform our relations to the natural world, so that we can escape the constraints

of natural history. And we do transform our ideologies all the time (metaphorically, we produce new and better modes of transportation with every passing generation); but too often we do it without conscious awareness. Our ideologies, that is, begin to reproduce themselves, and we simply go along for the ride. What must not be missed, but often is, is that we are also an animal capable of gaining conscious awareness of our ideologies.

Althusser's theory of ideology has come in for quite a bit of criticism, not least from Marxists who see it as leaving the subject completely trapped in the realm of illusion. This is, I would argue, a misunderstanding of the profound insight of Althusser's essay. The usual argument against Althusser goes something like this: on Althusser's account of ideology, only subjects can take action in the world, and subjects are always only functioning as supports for social structures (they are subjects *of* and ideology); theoretical practice can produce objective knowledge of the world, but is powerless to motivate action, since action can only be taken in an ideology by a subject. We are left, the argument goes, with the choice of knowing what changes to make but being unable to make them, or being active subjects in the world but with no objective knowledge of the effects of our actions and so blindly reproducing the existing social formation. All objections to Althusser's theory of ideology I have ever encountered ultimately boil down to this same problem. But this is a misunderstanding of Althusser, which ignores the importance to his theory of those subjects (Spinozist or Marxist) who can know their own ideology. The ISA essay does present an overwhelmingly claustrophobic picture of the pervasiveness of ideology, but this must be understood to function as Ernest Mandel has suggested Marx's third volume of *Capital* does: it is meant to explain how such a system is so often able to work at all, not to argue that it is inexorable. We have powerful attachments to our ideologies. Certain degrees of transformation are already built into the system of reproduction. We mistake our humanly created social formations for inexorable natural occurrences. And so, ideology keeps us going round in circles, reproducing our subject positions and filling the vacancies in the structure with new individuals interpellated as subjects.

For Althusser, we can escape this endless going round in circles, and there are

practices which will make it more likely that we can do so. It will be my argument that a non-buddhist practice can serve this purpose. It can do so, I will argue, because Buddhism has always operated in the register of the ideological. It can function to produce another kind of subject aware of its ideology. In order to explain how this is possible, I will want to have recourse to many of the concepts produced in the thought of Alain Badiou. So, to make the leap from the Althusserian theory of ideology to my reconstitution of Buddhist concepts, I will need to detour through a brief reading of Badiou's project, in which I will make what may seem, to those familiar with continental philosophy, an unlikely claim.

Alain Badiou's Continuation of the Althusserian Project

It is my contention that, perhaps even contrary to his own claims, Badiou's entire body of work is in fact a continuation of the project begun by Althusser's ISA Essay. In the seventies, Badiou published a book largely devoted to the rejection of Althusser's theory, entitled *De L'ideologie*. His argument there was that as an "image of an image, ideology has no referent," with the effect that "consciousness of our exploitation and revolt against exploitation are unthinkable, with no possibility of objective knowledge of class relationships having any effect" (p. 30). His concern was that "if the 'young Hegelians' struggled against the illusions of consciousness, our 'young Marxists' have gained no ground at all if they are only using their knowledge to incite the 'subjected' masses to struggle with all their hearts against the *unconscious*" (p. 21). Badiou is clearly concerned that Althusser's theory will lead to a kind of postmodern relativism, in which all we can do is blindly struggle to change our ideological cathexes, with no guarantee that the change will be for the better, and no real need to develop a practice in which to change the social formation.

This is a valid concern; there is always the danger that Althusser's theory could be misunderstood (in fact, it very often *has* been misunderstood) to suggest that we need only change our ideologies to eliminate our oppression. This is clearly not the intention of the ISA essay, however, which is motivated by the events of 1968 and is an argument that change will require a reconstruction of our material institutions.

Althusser's goal is to enable the production of a subject that *can* go out and change the social formation. This, I would argue, is what the ISA essay calls for, but does not fully realize; Badiou's theory of the subject, of "Worlds," and of the relationship these have to truth, makes enormous progress toward producing the kind of subject Althusser suggests is possible.

In *Theory of the Subject*, Badiou had suggested that the subject be understood very differently from the Althusserian's subject of an ideology. In that work, Badiou wanted to insist that the only true subject is the subject of a truth, free of the limitations of its ideology and able to force the acceptance of a truth foreclosed by the ideology of its time and place. When we get to *Logics of Worlds*, however, the role of the subject has become more complex, with multiple possible relations to truth and ideology. It is now possible for the subject of truth to be opposed by the reactionary subject, intent on denying the truth, or the obscurantist subject, intent on mystifying it. Badiou has replaced the Althusserian concept of ideology with his concept of "World," but the function is much the same. Worlds, in Badiou's theory, are the structuring of a particular appearance or construal of reality, and reality can only ever appear in a particular World. There is truth, but there it must always appear in a World, and every World, in allowing a certain reality to "appear," necessarily excludes from appearance other parts or construals of reality. Badiou's concepts of truth procedures and Worlds may be more subtle and sophisticated, may be a useful advance in thought, but it is still in line with the Althusserian division of science and ideology, which always shape and limit one another, but operate in different registers.

Worlds, for Badiou, are produced by a structuring principle which determines what appears, and what remains unthinkable. Like Nagarjuna's concept of "conventional truths," Worlds are all we have to work with, we cannot step outside of them, and they are always limiting, subjective, socially produced—but, they are nonetheless capable of presenting truths. To clarify at the risk of oversimplifying, we can think of a mind-independent truth such as the occurrence of evolution of species. This can only ever be known in a World, in a conventional construal of reality, and so, for us, will always necessarily include some value judgments functioning to shape how

we experience ourselves. In some Worlds, this truth may be completely foreclosed, but it remains a truth; in other Worlds, in which it appears, it may take on different *meanings*, different significance, different importance. We could imagine, for instance, a World in which we referred to the “adaptation” of species, without the implicit teleology and anthropomorphism of the term “evolution.” The process, however, as a mind-independent truth about reality, would still be the same.

The subject of the truth, then, is the subject which functions to force the truth into appearance in a World which forecloses it. The subject is not identical with the biological individual, cannot be mapped onto a brain, but exists in the human socially produced symbolic/imaginary system (the influence of Lacan’s thought on Badiou is quite clear). To overstate the matter somewhat, the mind is not in the brain but in systems of symbolic communication, which must always take place *between* multiple individuals. It is not that we have a mind which then attaches to a symbolic system, but that there is a symbolic system which makes use of individual biological organisms. A subject may be a political party, a couple, an entire school of thought. This subject, then, transcends the individual bodily being, and can be reborn, brought back to life, by new individuals in a new World. The actions of each individual’s life will affect the subject, of which it is part, far beyond its bodily death—because the subject can and often does continue, even “unappear” and “reappear” in Worlds, far beyond a bodily life. As Badiou puts it: “Several times in its brief existence, every human animal is granted the chance to incorporate itself into the subjective present of a truth. The grace of living for an Idea, that is of *living as such*, is accorded to everyone” (*Logics of Worlds*, p. 514, my emphasis). If we are able to become the subject of that truth, we have the chance “to live . . . as an immortal” (p. 40).

We must not forget the significance of what Badiou calls, in *Ethics*, “interest.” Our motivating cathexes, attachments, sources of pleasure, which we cannot and should not fully renounce, may at times, in ideal situations, align with the demands of the truth procedure, and “disinterested-interest might be representable as interest pure and simple” (55); this is possible, but it might always turn out that the alignment is less than perfect, and we will need some form of thought and practice which can

enable us to persevere in the truth. And pursuit of truth is always going to be a struggle, because there is a tendency for any truth in any World to produce a reactionary subject, fighting against the emergence of that truth. Worlds will tend to reproduce themselves in an endless circle of blind determination, oppression, and suffering. And a World, it seems, will always produce a degree of suffering, because despite his objections to Spinoza, Badiou is quite Spinozist on this point: the source of joy for the subject is in its ability to move towards the greater appearance of truths in its World. Depriving us of this ability, attachment to a world, blocks our *conatus* and produces suffering.

Much of Badiou's work, then, is an attempt to determine what kinds of practices are truth procedures, capable of producing subjects which will force the appearance of truths in the world. My suggestion is that, in Althusserian terms, this is an aesthetic project, because for Althusser the aesthetic is the practice of producing a distance from our ideology. In "'The Piccolo Teatro': Bertolazzi and Brecht," Althusser argues that, like Brecht's epic theatre, the production of Bertolazzi's play produces an alienation of ideology which "is really the production of a new spectator, an actor who starts where the performance ends, who only starts so as to complete it, but in life"(151). The danger is that the aesthetic object may be captured by what Althusser calls an "aesthetics of consumption," in which it produces only comforting pleasure that subtly reinforces our existing ideologies—sort of like watching *Avatar* or reading *Harry Potter*. To ensure the aesthetics of distantiating requires a certain prescriptive practice and a conceptual framework for the aesthetic experience. This theoretical apparatus would consist of a theory of ideology and the subject, and also a theory of the strategies of containment by which the distantiating effect is managed in various literary genres, according to what ideology is being distanced and what alternative ideology is being produced in its wake.

If Badiou's project is a step forward in producing the subject that is aware of its ideology, this is because it advances the theoretical knowledge of ideology, subjects, and strategies of containment. To return to my metaphor of the map, the subject of truth is more capable of choosing the best mode of transportation for any part of the map it seeks to explore. We can stop reproducing Worlds, and

start remapping them. The final section of this essay, then, will suggest that the production of this form of subjectivity has always been one possible use of Buddhist concepts; the production of the reactionary subject seeking to reproduce the existing World is perhaps the unavoidable consequence of this.

Buddhism as a Theory and Practice of Ideology

My final claim, here, is that we can thoroughly “naturalize” Buddhism, eliminating all supernatural and otherworldly notions from its profound philosophical insights, only if we see it as operating in the register of the ideological. That is, Buddhism has nothing useful to tell us about the neurological processes underlying contentment, or about ontology or the natural world. Its domain is the realm of humanly produced symbolic and imaginary systems, of Althusserian ideology, or Badiou’s “logics of Worlds.” It can teach us a great deal about how we produce Worlds, and about how we can more consciously transform them.

The historical emergence of Buddhism, what we might in Badiou’s terms call the Buddha Event, occurred at a time when the stagnation of the social system was becoming particularly difficult to maintain. The existing World of the ruling class sought to fix the social system, by insisting on the existence of a pure divine language in which truth existed, and the repetition of formal ritual. The truth that appeared in the world was the rejection of the Brahmanical ideology, the recognition of the socially produced nature of social formations, the chance to break out of stagnation and open up new possibilities for the exercise of human productive and creative potential. Buddhism, in short, is an attempt to produce a new social practice that enables a subject capable of escaping the endless circle of the reproduction of the existing relations of production—a primarily agricultural form of production and a “sacrificial” form of distribution and exchange. The history of Buddhism ever since can be seen as a struggle between the reactionary, obscurantist, and faithful subject, the dialectic of radical forcing of truth and mystical or institutional strategies of containment.

I offer here a partial glossary of naturalized Buddhist terminology, then, as an illustration of how Buddhist concepts can be coherent and useful once we reject the

reactionary denial, and the obscurantist mystification of, the truth of the Buddhist Event:

Samsara becomes simply the endless self-reproduction of a World, which always requires the closing off of the appearance of something new, the foreclosure of some truths, and so is always a source of suffering. Reproducing our existing ideologies, as if they were the goal instead of the means, is the source of the suffering of subjects.

Karma can be understood as the structures of our reality, including both ideological formations and the relations of production. *Karma* has always referred to both intentional actions and the effects of those actions. In my reconstitution, then, we can see *karma* as a thoroughly natural concept, referring to both the ideologically shaped actions we take in the world and their ongoing effects in shaping the possible actions of subjects in the future. We reproduce our world by acting with “intention” in our ideologies, and will bear the effects of these actions as subjects long after our individual bodies are gone. We can, then, escape our *karma*, not by being freed from some magical force, but by coming to see the constraints on our actions produced by our ideologies, which exist in structures that have been built up by the actions of countless generations. As Marx said, we can make our own history, but we cannot make it exactly as we choose. We escape our *karma* once we can see the constraints within which we can act, and the degree to which we can change the structures we bear instead of merely reinforcing them. Karma, then, exists and operates at multiple levels: it is the existing productive capacity of the human race, but it is also the current social construction of the form and content of our unconscious minds.

Punabbhava (rebirth) is possible, then, because there is no soul to be reborn, no world-transcendent entity that leaps from body to body. Instead, the mind, which exists only in the socially produced symbolic and imaginary system, can interpellate new concrete individuals to participate in a subject position. As Roy Bhaskar puts it in *From East to West: Odyssey of a Soul*: “If the soul is regarded as a disposition to be embodied, then traditional Buddhist objections to a realist rendition of it are

overcome” (p. 92). The reborn “soul” is nothing but a disposition or tendency in the symbolic/imaginary structure to reproduce a certain kind of subject by interpellating new bodily individuals. Our attempt to change our karma, to transform the structures we bear, can lead to better rebirth, to dispositions to produce subjects less prone to suffering.

Bodhi (enlightenment, awakening) then need not be a supernatural state we must humbly deny having reached; instead, it can be a quite real state of being the Buddhist/Spinozist/Marxist subject which is aware of its ideology and better able to change it. It is, in Badiou’s terms, the subject faithful to a truth, and engaged in changing its World to force the appearance of this truth. We can be awakened without claiming grand supernatural powers or even perfection as human beings: we can be awakened only as subjects, not as individuals, and no subject can be awakened except in relation to some truth. *Bodhi* can be far more common than the reactionary or obscurantist subject of Buddhism would have us believe, and to claim it is not to make a claim about one’s individual, personal worth but about a truth procedure to which one remains faithful.

Finally, the concepts of *sunyata*, *anatman*, *pratityasamutpada*: we can see that once we grasp these as attempts to theorize the particular immanence of a truth in a World, the mystery and incomprehensibility disappears. Nagarjuna becomes much more comprehensible once we grasp that he is arguing that there is certainly a truth, but it can always only appear in a World. There is no single form in which a truth must appear (it can potentially, if it is a truth, appear in every conceivable world, and will always take the form necessary to that World); there is no abiding self, because the subject is always only a socially constructed symbolic/imaginary system, which transcends the bodily individual but is clearly not other-worldly or immortal; everything is always dependently arisen, even a universal truth, because it can only ever exist in a particular World, and to change any subject requires a change in the entire social structure which it inhabits. To claim, in postmodern fashion, that all we can change and all we need to change is our minds, is absurd if we understand that the mind is a product of, dependently arisen from, the structures

it inhabits. To change our mind, we must change our World.

The only question, then, is: how is change possible? If our mind is the socially produced symbolic/imaginary system, where is the Archimedean vantage point from which to force a change? This is where we must reject the radical disconnection Badiou argues exists in Althusser's thought between ideology and objective truth (the argument is echoed in the Anglophone world by Althusser's major expositors, Eagleton, Elliot, and Benton). To suggest that there is no clear way out of the prison of ideology fails to see that the solution lies precisely *within* the register of ideology, not in a move into a realm of pure truth. Ultimately, Althusser remains a realist, and our ideology is not so perfectly sealed-off as it might appear to be when it is working successfully. There is a mind-independent world, which does not yield to our conceptual reconstrual of it. Occasionally, we are going to drive our car into a tree. There will be catastrophic failures of the economic system, for instance, which cannot make any sense in the current state of knowledge. Our ideologies may just break down. Eagleton suggested that Althusser has "produced an ideology of the ego, rather than one of the human subject" (*Ideology: an introduction*, p. 144), and this is true to an extent: to the degree that ideology works seamlessly and smoothly, it works like the ego—but it never does work completely seamlessly and smoothly, there is always the problem of the unconscious, of the superego. If Althusser seems to have produced an "ideology of the ego" this is only because he is trying to explain how it is ever possible that something so certain to produce error and suffering is so powerfully persistent.

There is always the possibility that, even without crashing head-on into reality, we can gain the capacity to alter our World. It is important to remember that there are always multiple Worlds, that there is no single, monolithic ideological position, that there are always multiple subjects. We need not worry about the problem of solipsism, because there is no possibility of a private, personal and untranslatable symbolic system, and we need not worry about being trapped in a single ideological vision because we can always see another person's ideology, and point it out to them, and they can, hopefully, see ours. Just as there are limits to the

possibility of psychoanalyzing oneself, there are limits on an individual's ability to escape her ideology; however, we can serve as one another's analysts, and bring to consciousness what is unconscious.

There are some difficult implications of all of this. We cannot, for instance, simply "live and let live." The current obsession with "tolerance" and "multiculturalism" would need to be rejected, because we cannot gain our own freedom from *samsara* without forcing a change in the world. Our mind is a social construction, and so I cannot change "my" mind without changing "yours." We must not accept the quietist notion of learning to accept the world as it is, because the world as it is constructs our mind; we must demand the right to change the world, to insist that others see truths they don't like, because we are not atomistic individuals.

There is also the likelihood that the "interest" of the individual, in Badiou's sense, may trump the desire to see the truth. There may be so much material benefit, so much comfort, so much attachment, that seeing the truth would require a kind of asceticism, an abandonment of individual cathexes, that is unlikely to be successful. As I mentioned earlier, Badiou suggests that in the ideal state the individual interests and the interest of the subject faithful to the truth will so coincide that there is no feeling of ascetic renunciation, no need for great effort; however, this ideal state is unlikely to often occur. What, then, can take its place?

For Althusser, the aesthetic is the practice that can produce a motivational attachment to changing our ideologies, and the world. I would argue that Buddhist practice can become such an aesthetic practice. Because the best way to produce an investment in change is to actually experience the truth that the mind is not an atomistic entity but a socially produced effect of a symbolic/imaginary system. We can become subjects faithful to a truth, even a truth that opposes the interest of our own individual bodily existence, once we experience the truth of what a subject is. To experience the existence of our mind in the trans-individual symbolic/imaginary system could motivate us to place the interest of the entire system above the interest of our individual bodily selves. The difficulty, and importance of this experience can easily be seen in many works of and on

Buddhism. To take just one particularly explicit example, Sue Hamilton, in her book *Early Buddhism: A New Approach*, attempts to reconceive Buddhist concepts in modern philosophical terms. The book is interesting, provocative, erudite and insightful; but ultimately Hamilton's understanding of Buddhism is limited by her insistence that one simply cannot "experience that one has no self . . . in any context outside of a madhouse" (p. 21). For all her knowledge of Buddhist thought, and that is quite a bit, she cannot access an experience which would allow *anatman* to make sense to her. Much like psychoanalysis, in which simply accepting the truth of the offered interpretation does nothing to alleviate our symptoms, a purely intellectual agreement with this theoretical position can do little to produce change. Perhaps only engaging in a material practice, which must involve multiple individuals, and which is designed to allow the experiencing of the constructedness of the mind, can produce subjects faithful to the truth of the Buddha event.

The history of Buddhism has been a dialectic of emergence and containments of truth, of faithful subjects being endlessly absorbed into reactionary or obscurantist subjects. When meditation seeks to stop all thought, to insist on a world-transcendent experience of pure consciousness outside of language, it is functioning to strengthen the hold of our ideological formations, to shore up the walls of our World, by insisting on the timeless universality of our purportedly "pure" perceptions. What we need, instead, is a framework for Buddhist practice that is faithful to the truths of *samsara*, *sunyata*, *anatman*, *karma*, *bhava*, and *bodhi*. We can produce subjects capable of stepping out of the car and walking.

My suggestion, though, is that we can do this only if we grasp that Buddhist concepts can be understood in a completely naturalist way, with no need to accept any world-transcendent or mystical beings or forces. Further, we need to grasp that Buddhism operates completely in the register of the ideological, its truths are transcendent truths of human ideological practices; Buddhism includes no truths of physical reality external to the existence of human social structures. We may be able to produce such truths, we may even need to do so, but we would be better able to do so as subjects aware of our own ideologies, and able to change them in

productive ways guided by rigorous thought.

The Buddha's great insight was that humans are ideological animals; in Althusser's terms, it was a production of a theory of, or truth about, "ideology in general." This insight enables us to escape *samsara*, to be freed of our karma, and to create our own World. Unfortunately, it requires us to break free of our ideology, to take responsibility for the structures we bear, and to remake our World. The price of awakening is eternal diligence.

So, I ask, is this coherent? Where are the obscurities, aporias, and just plain conceptual blunders? Does there seem any possibility of such a practice ever existing?

There is, clearly, much to be worked out. There are clearly different strata of ideology, from the construction of the structure of individual psychology to political and economic strata. It would be necessary to determine whether different practices or different theoretical frameworks would be needed to address each different strata, and to decide how extensive one's theoretical knowledge must be to produce the proper distancing aesthetic experience. What might be the role of ritual, what kind of meditation might be most useful? Most of us, I believe, still participate in some Buddhist practice, and non-buddhism need not entail walking away from this, but remaking it.

References

Althusser, L. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)." *Lenin and Philosophy*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971.

—. "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre." *Lenin and Philosophy*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971.

—. “The ‘Piccolo Teatro’: Bertolazzi and Brecht.” *For Marx*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Vantage Books, 1970.

Badiou, A. *Logics of Worlds*. Trans. Alberto Toscano. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009.

—. *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. Trans. Peter Hallward. New York: Verso, 2001.

—. *De L’ideologie*. Paris: Francois Maspero, 1976.

Bhaskar, R. *From East to West: Odyssey of a Soul*. London: Routledge, 2000.

Eagleton, T. *Ideology: An Introduction*. New York: Verso, 1991.

Hamilton, S. *Early Buddhism: A New Approach*. New York: Routledge, 2008.

AUTHOR

Tom Pepper

wtompepper@cox.net

WWW.SPECULATIVENONBUDDHISM.COM