

Chaim Wigder

THE BUDDHIST CONSPIRACY AGAINST THE HUMAN PERSON

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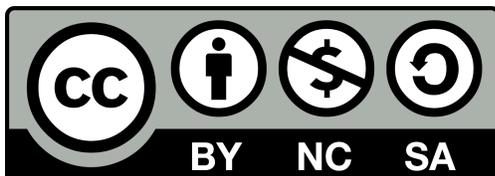
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The Buddhist Conspiracy Against the Human Person

“The pessimist’s credo, or one of them, is that nonexistence never hurt anyone and existence hurts everyone.” —Thomas Ligotti, *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*

I. The First Turning: A Worthy Question

“I know, too, that death is the only god who comes when you call.”
—Roger Zelazny, *Frost and Fire*

It’s true, Camus probably never actually said “Should I commit suicide or have a cup of coffee?” But you can imagine that he might have, had he thought of it and not Schwartz. According to Camus, in any case, the question of whether one should commit suicide is the only one worthy of philosophy’s attention. The ancient Indians would have, of course, rejected suicide as an option. Not because they thought human life to be particularly worth its existence, but because they had constructed a World in which death was not the end of life. To kill oneself is to make no progress toward achieving the intended aim—that aim being, presumably, a total departure from the wheel of causal contingency, the complete cessation of the horror and absurdity of human existence. This is indeed, as it appears, pessimism at its very finest.

Though the Hindus flinched, of course. There is in fact some light at the end of the tunnel. For synonymous with getting off the wheel is the unification of the atman with brahman. All is not lost in this (pseudo)extinction; all is gained... somehow.

The Protagonist (*aka.* the Buddha) wouldn't stand for such a flinch...at least not in theory. No, there is no *atman* whatsoever. Extinction really does mean just that; the lights are out in the most utter sense of the term. To get off the wheel is not to emerge elsewhere on the road in some heroic spiritual triumph. *There is only the wheel.* And there is no triumph in any part of it, only *dukkha*. The Protagonist, of course, would find himself being forced to passionately defend his reputation against those ascetics and brahmins who “baselessly, vainly, falsely and wrongly accused” him of being “a nihilist . . . [one who] teaches the annihilation, the destruction, the non-being of an existing individual.” (An *existing individual*—a cleverly careful choice of words there, don't you think? A tangential point, however.) To reiterate, the Protagonist only teaches of suffering and the cessation of suffering. Is that not to say: the Protagonist teaches suffering—a necessary link in the twelve-link chain of dependent origination—and the cessation, one by one, of every link in that chain, including consciousness itself? Again, there is no *atman* with which to make a run for it. There are only empty phenomena, kept aflame by their respective enabling conditions. They must all be extinguished. All phenomena must die.

And so the Protagonist spent decades discovering and teaching a path by which to arrive at this extinction. How much time the poor fool wasted! Despite his alleged omniscience, we know something which our beloved Protagonist did not. In what is arguably the most important discovery for Buddhism since the one made by The Protagonist himself under that mythical tree, we've come to be able to say with a fair degree of certainty that death is in fact the end. It is not a transition into some new phase of a karmic cycle. It is in fact that ultimate freedom—freedom from it all, complete extinction.

Does it not then follow that suicide is an equally valid path to the one with those eight tedious folds? This onefold path surely leads to the cessation of becoming, to the same freedom from existence strived for by countless beings throughout history.

Should I kill myself or have a cup of coffee? Is this not now the only question worthy of Buddhism's attention? And by Buddhism's own tenets, why shouldn't the answer be immediately obvious?

II. Mahayana: A Questionable Answer

“Consciousness is not yours. Give it up!” —*Majjhima Nikaya*, 22:40

The Hankering Image

The mother of disenchantment has left it for dead. It was, of course, the Enlightenment which birthed what has culminated into the cultural catastrophe of our own era: our utter inability to accept what we, ourselves, have revealed to ourselves through the undermining of our manifest image. Like the tragic mother who looks upon her deformed newborn infant with an incommensurable juxtaposition of biologically sanctioned joy and shameful horror, so too did the two great forces of the Enlightenment, science and reason, look upon the monster to which they had given birth with a derision disguised as a celebratory humanism. The task, it must have been decided soon after, was to use those very forces which led to what is known as disenchantment to resist its unbearable existential implications. The very tools that had revealed humanity's pathetic finitude were quickly put to work to free us *homo sapien* apes of that humanity. Where before we were humans made in the image of God, suddenly we recognized ourselves as immature pseudo-gods, made in the image of Beast.

This is what happens when the manifest image is threatened by the scientific image. The instinct is to subsume the latter within the former, to view the scientific image as existing only *as a product of, and in the service of,* the manifest:

[The] instrumentalist conception of science is the inevitable corollary of any philosophy that insists on the irrecusable primacy of man's manifest self-understanding. Thus,

although they are the totems of two otherwise divergent philosophical traditions, the two “canonical” twentieth-century philosophers, Heidegger and Wittgenstein, share the conviction that the manifest image enjoys a philosophical privilege *vis-à-vis* the scientific image, and that the sorts of entities and processes postulated by scientific theory are in some way founded upon, or derivative of, our more ‘originary’, pre-scientific understanding, whether this be construed in terms of our “being-in-the-world,” or our practical engagement in “language-games.” From there, one may or may not decide to take the short additional step which consists in denouncing the scientific image as a cancerous excrescence of the manifest image. (Brassier, 2007)

Are we incapable of accepting the inevitability of the extinction of the manifest image, and of our species more literally? Buddhist thought may offer tools that would allow us to accept this fate full stop. To do so, the disenchantment brought about by the advent of the scientific image must be felt not as an abstract entertainment of an “alternative perspective” but as a visceral, flesh-blood-and-bones disenchantment with every fiber of one’s being. A new kind of “image” thus emerges: **“a painted image, a mass of heaped up sores, infirm, full of hankering—of which nothing is lasting or stable!”** We come to the understanding that if we truly wish for the cessation of suffering, then what we wish for is the cessation of our very being.

The Ironic Heroism of the Bodhisattva

I have claimed that the discovery of death is the most important thing to happen to Buddhism in all of its history. If we accept this, then we can’t help but become suspicious of the fact that Buddhism has almost entirely ignored it. Certainly, it has failed to deeply consider its implications. I say Buddhism has *almost* entirely ignored the discovery of death. It did, nonetheless, respond to it in some sense, with the introduction of the concept of the *bodhisattva* by the Mahayanists.

If the only way to eradicate human suffering is to eradicate human being itself, then we are left face-to-face with Camus' dilemma, but with the obligation to accept suicide as the answer. The *bodhisattva* is the attempt to avoid this problem, a way to flinch through the introduction of a kind of existential irony. It is the very same ironic flinch to which even the greatest nihilist thinkers inevitably succumbed, each in their own way, but all with a self-imposed heroism carved out of their own ostensibly nihilistic premises. For Kierkegaard, this meant finding solace from despair by positing a true self that can be found through God, as he could not help but remain committed to the Christian faith which sanctions a belief in human superiority and significance:

The possibility of this sickness is man's advantage over the beast, and it is an advantage which characterizes him quite otherwise than the upright posture, for it bespeaks the infinite erectness or loftiness of his being spirit. The possibility of this sickness is man's advantage over the beast; to be aware of this sickness is the Christian's advantage over natural man; to be cured of this sickness is the Christian's blessedness. (Kierkegaard, 1849).

Sarte, too, couldn't help but hold on to some kind of anchor, though for him it wasn't religious faith but some hallucinated notion of individuality and authenticity. Schopenhauer posited meaninglessness as a fundamental aspect of The Will, and yet fantasized about finding some escape through asceticism (though he never actually attempted to commit to such a project, for which Kierkegaard openly criticized him). Nietzsche famously had his "banks full of roses under [his] cypresses". Even Camus, who would repudiate precisely this feature of existentialism, criticizing what he saw as the tendency for existentialist thinkers to "deify what crushes them and find reason to hope in what impoverishes them," and who hesitated to call himself an existentialist—let alone a philosopher—ultimately turned nihilistic absurdity into an ironic, Sisyphean heroism.

What is the *bodhisattva* if not the courageously ironic Sisyphean hero? She vows to save all sentient beings even though they are numberless,

to overcome all delusions even though they are infinite, to put an end to all desires even though they are endless. The *bodhisattva*, like the existentialists, rejects true liberation—that is, suicide—and she does so in favor of self-admitted fantasies of eradicating suffering while keeping existence in this flesh, on this earth, intact.

We may ask what the construction of the *bodhisattva* opens up for us, and what it closes off to us. For surely its primary ideological product—“compassion”—has bored itself into a capitalist *reductio*, diluted into no more than a cynical meme, a buzzword tossed around by the technocrat elite as they muster up their hearts’ boundless benevolence to declare their compassion for those they exploit, while they recline on the beach, sip their kombucha, and design the digital tools of mass social deterioration. Sure, it’s easy to choose to be a *bodhisattva* if you are privileged enough to do so. But to what extent can we grant ourselves an image of striving to reduce suffering while participating in and being a product of the very systems that lead to so much of it, all without falling into delusion? Where do we find the balance between the manifest image and the scientific image? The latter forces us to confront our real situation—the one in which we are actively and needlessly suffering and contributing to suffering—and to abandon our imagined situation, the one in which it all cashes out through some given or self-created system of meaning or another. Is there even such a balance, or are we doomed to choose between extinction and ironic compassionate self-delusion?

III: Western Buddhism: The Triumphant Manifest

“Give the man a land, he’ll bury himself in it.” —Ljupka Cvetanova, *The New Land*

Buddhist Apocalypse Now

In the film *Apocalypse Now*, Colonel Kurtz says that “we train young men to drop fire on people, but their commanders won’t allow them to write ‘fuck’ on their airplanes because it’s obscene!”

What an apt metaphor for the ideological temperament that drives Western Buddhism today. I can only imagine the astonished look, the gaping mouth one would witness were one to suggest to any Western Buddhist teacher that extinction might be the best conceivable method for dealing with suffering. Extinction is rarely ever used as a concept by Western Buddhist teachers—save, perhaps, when referring to the negation (that is, repression) of unpleasant thoughts or emotions. In *Tragic Perception*, Max Finkel reflected on the end of the Applied Meditation Studies program in Philadelphia as a symptom of “the societal tendency to turn our eyes away from tragedy in tandem with the tendency for educational institutions to evade and resist pessimistic theories of the human condition.” If this tendency to turn a blind eye to pessimistic conceptions of human existence (a category for which, relative to the manifest image, the scientific image surely qualifies) is one deeply ingrained within our society, then it is Buddhist communities and institutions which manifest that tendency in the most flagrant, un-self-aware manner. Recall the ever-helpful *Humophobia* heuristic:

X-buddhist typology cynically belies fear of the human of flesh and blood, and thus fashions in its place fantastic constructions of enlightened mutants. The only way the x-buddhist typology can function is both to subsume and to overcome the human. That is, x-buddhism first determines what “the uninstructed worldling” is (lustful, deluded, hostile, unskilled, etc.), and then instructs him on how to surpass himself. (Wallis, 2018)

Strangely, Buddhism seems to aim at once to “overcome the human” as well as to remain human, the latter applying insofar as the attachment to particularly *human* ideological social practices remains constitutive of the wish for the possibility of “enlightened [mutation]”. Indeed, to actually escape the human condition is quite an elementary objective: one need only extinguish oneself through suicide. The irony is that the attainment *par excellence* of Buddhist religious practice is indeed to overcome the human—though not via enlightened mutation,

but rather through extinction of the human *tout court*. Thus the Buddhistic *Humophobia* we see manifesting in Buddhist formations in this world is a phobia of humanity rooted in an underlying desire to maintain humanity; but, specifically and crucially, to maintain the *manifest image* of humanity. Buddhism has thus committed to a self-destruction apparent of a self-affirmation. It is through this reversive self-destruction that Buddhism is allowed to perform a multitude of ideological inversions upon itself, such as the transference of the canonical “uprooting” of its spiritual enemies into “planting” instead.

From Uprooting to Planting: Greed, Hatred, and Delusion

It is well-known that most Buddhists are dualists, despite their nearly invariable insistence to the contrary. They are dualists on more explanatory strata than one, and in several senses of the term “dualism.” Relevant for our purposes is the way in which Western Buddhism has created a dualism between so-called internal mind-states and the collective actions and consequences associated with them. What would it mean to “uproot” the fetters and poisons such as greed, hatred, and ignorance? One would think that this would require a cessation of any actions that are bound up with these things (an utter impossibility within our current social structure, we might add). And yet Buddhist hegemony sees no contradiction in a greedy banker practicing mindfulness to make him function better, and to feel less “stressed” (perhaps less guilty?) as a result of his exploitative economic practices. There appears to exist an impression that the immoral thing about greed is its instantiation as some internal state within the individual’s mind, as opposed to its dynamic relational existence in terms of actions and consequences between multiple human beings. One can act greedily (i.e. consume or hoard more natural resources than one absolutely needs at the expense of others’ basic survival), in variably broad or narrow senses of the word, as long as one does so with the right intention of mindful compassion or some such meaningless construct. There seems to be no problem, similarly, with committing to a functional aversion (hatred) of particular human

realities, be they in the form of thoughts, emotions, and so on, and to practice with an intention of getting rid of “negativity” and fostering personal well-being—again, even if that necessarily occurs at the expense of other sentient beings as a result of the actions necessary or supplementary pursuant of said well-being (e.g. the direction of material resources toward building a meditation center, the purchase of consumer goods such as incense or Buddha statues, etc). Ignorance, furthermore, is proudly pursued through the avoidance of engagement with critical thought. Yet the state of mind that this avoidance results in is keenly embraced as enlightened wisdom and knowledge.

Let's note that this kind of inversion is not necessarily a conscious undertaking. That is, it is unlikely to result from any sort of inherent malice on the part of Buddhist practitioners. Indeed, it is precisely because they are unaware of the ideological nature of their practices that Buddhists are functionally incapable of grasping such critiques, as simple as they are, or to display any real comprehension or self-awareness in their responses to them.

To restate, in short: instead of uprooting acts of greed, aversion, and ignorance, an encouragement of these actions is planted. It is only the negative mind-states associated with these concepts that are to be uprooted, but only so that the actions themselves are able to be carried out with greater affective ease. The ignorance piece is most crucial, for the lack of critical thinking which is celebrated as trans-intellectual/trans-linguistic wisdom is what makes this practice opaque to those engaging in them.

The scientific image is, in one sense, repressed from collective consciousness. This repression is obviously not uniquely Buddhist; it can explain every one of our reflexive aversions to a true confrontation with the possibility—ideally, the inevitability—of extinction. The scientific image depicts what our species *actually is*, partly as a function of *what we actually do*. The manifest image hallucinates that which best serves to keep our collective ego from dissolving. To sustain the manifest image, we must not even consider the possibility of extinction, neither as a material future nor as a moral imperative. For

any level of acknowledgment of extinction is the greatest threat to our image as infinite beings who stand a chance against our own ever-accelerating crawl toward self-destruction.

IV: A Magnificent Self-Defeat?

“It is evident that we are hurrying onward to some exciting knowledge—some never-to-be-imparted secret, whose attainment is destruction.” –Edgar Allan Poe, *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*

Buddhist Accelerationism

Slavoj Žižek has pointed out, as have many others, that Western Buddhism is the ideological soul-mate of neoliberalism. I see no reason to reiterate this argument, given how obviously true it is, but I wonder if there is a way in which the acceleration of the Buddhism’s triumphant manifest, which will surely eventuate its own ruin, might parallel hypothesized accelerationisms *vis-à-vis* capitalism. Accelerationism is generally served in two flavors, each being palatably differentiated by its driving intention. On the one hand, some accelerationists’ goading for the exponentially rapid acceleration of the (techno-)capitalist program is guided by their belief that that is the only way it can be defeated; that is, capitalism threatens our humanity, but it is too powerful to be resisted, and must therefore self-destruct—it must implode from the inside under the crushing weight of the virtual infinity of human social forms which it has subsumed in its global imperial expedition. On the other side are those whose externally identical goading of such an acceleration is guided by the opinion that capitalism and technology ultimately *improve* human social relations, and thus our task is to accelerate its progression indefinitely. I haven’t found myself capable of committing to any position regarding accelerationism in general. Needless to say, regardless of the reasoning behind any particular accelerationist ideology, the material implications of such a strategy will be the same independent of the ideological commitments its adorers spew as they

watch and cheer on the magnificent catastrophe which, were it to occur, would transcend their philosophical impositions on it.

Like a manic patient who refuses to swallow his medication because he flinches at the prospect of sanity—which is to say, at the prospect of the submission of agency which sanity obliges—Buddhism has chosen to reject its own prescriptive declaration of extinction as the only comprehensive cure for human suffering out of fear of leaving behind that which gives it its own life: human life. Resonant with its characteristically double-edged *Humophobia*, Buddhism intensifies in its commitment to invert its ideological material—the ideas, concepts, and practices designed to engender a confrontation with the necessity of extinction—into a panicked plea for immortality. In franker terms, Buddhism contains within its premises the implication of literally committing suicide, but Buddhists (we all!) are simply too cowardly to do so. The greatest defender of our fear of death, as Becker pointed out, is the ego: “[Our] repression of the idea of [our] own death is made easy for [us] because [we are] fortified against it in [our] very narcissistic vitality.” With this in mind, the “robes and rokusus and bows and dharma names and oryoki, and . . . those horrendous fake Japanese chants. . .,” as Wallis recently put it, make perfect sense. Despite endless ventriloquizing about the dangers of the ego and the necessity of its dissolution, the cultural artifacts of the spiritual circus are to the ego as the opiate is to the addict: the knowledge of the inadequacy of the quick-serve, short-lasting cure is there, but the terrifying prospect of the actual final and eternal cure is too harrowing to fully confront, and its repression must therefore be an ongoing process, a “way of life”, as the Secular Buddhists might call what they are too embarrassed to call religious superstition.

The Buddhist accelerationist project can thus be stated: We must pursue egoic vanity to levels of spiritual infantilism hitherto unseen by even the greatest organised religions, and carry out the magnification of enlightened narcissism to the point of a parodied, self-undermining absurdity. Listen to any talk given by the Dalai Lama, or read today’s “Daily Dharma” in *Tricycle*. Is this clearly not precisely what is

occurring already? Is Buddhism in the West not increasingly headed toward a total loss of intellectual and moral credibility?

Extinction

Death, wastage, or expenditure is the only end, the only definitive terminus. —Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*

Buddhism takes as its aim the end of suffering, an affliction necessitated by consciousness itself—indeed, the very first phenomenon every conscious creature is forced to confront at birth. Birth results from becoming, becoming from craving, and so on. To break the chain of conditions with which suffering is co-dependent is to break the chain of existence. But most of our suffering is not personal; it is collectively co-created and shared. Buddhist accelerationism, despite its overt ugliness at all registers of its manifestation, offers something that individual liberation, which is to say the death of the particular individual suffering *homo sapiens* ape, cannot. It rejects suicide as a viable option for the individual practitioner; that is seemingly too difficult a bullet to bite. But it does, if unknowingly, pacify and numb the individual in preparation for something much more dramatic and consequential: the extinction of the human *in toto*, which is to say the extinction of the human race. For if one were to come to a recognition that suicide is the way to end one's suffering, along with the recognition that suffering is collectively constituted, then the only logically viable step is species-wide extinction.

It is precisely because of this that Buddhism and capitalism are so compatible. There are, of course, many ways in which Buddhism takes advantage of capitalism in pursuit of its own interests, and they are all ways in which Buddhism's ostensibly primary agenda, the end of suffering, is entirely sacrificed to the rat race of global capital. And there are even more ways in which Buddhism serves the interests of capitalism, by producing the precise kinds of subjects needed in order to make resistance to capitalism impossible. In the end however, unbeknownst to either party, it will be Buddhism's primary agenda,

thus far obscured from site by its outward performative pretensions, that wins the day, for the only possible outcome of this collusion, if allowed to exhaust itself, will be the end of the human race, and with it, the end of human suffering.

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SPECULATIVE NON-BUDDHISM

RUINS OF THE BUDDHIST REAL