

Glenn Wallis

IMAGE OF THOUGHT

Trash Theory 2

SNB Magazin 8

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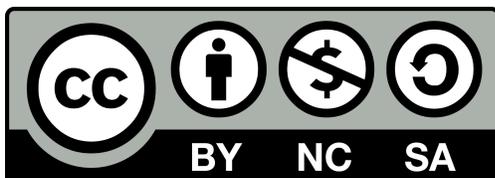
First published 2019 at www.speculativenonbuddhism.com

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Image of Thought: Trash Theory 2*

What is the prevailing "image of practice" in contemporary x-buddhism? More importantly, what might come next?

The image of thought

First, a review of the basic concept of "image." In Chapter 3 of *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze lays out eight postulates on the "dogmatic image of thought." Briefly, "image of thought" indicates the structure provided by a discipline or community to determine the contours that thinking is permitted to take therein (hence, "dogmatic"). In the preface to the English edition of *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze says:

By this I mean not only that we think according to a given method, but also that there is a more or less implicit, tacit or presupposed image of thought which determines our goals when we try to think. (xiv)

An image of thought has the basic form of "Everybody knows..." (*DR*, 129). In an x-buddhist community, for example, everybody knows that "suffering" is the primary human problematic, and everybody knows that craving is its cause. Everybody knows, furthermore, that there is an end to suffering, and everybody knows that The Dharma prescribes the way to that end. Such explicit propositions determine the basic lines of what, within an x-buddhist community, may legitimately be thought about and discussed.

Deleuze, however, says that images of thought contain elements that, unlike these x-buddhist postulates, are not explicitly stated. Such elements remain socially and doctrinally functional, yet personally unconscious. For example, the very assumption that "the four noble truths" are coherent, even practicable, is simply *given* in the

x-buddhist image of thought. The assumption is thus operative within the community, but in a way that functions “all the more effectively in silence” (*DR*, 167). No committed “sangha member” questions the assumptions underlying the basic premises of x-buddhist thought. No x-buddhist has ever applied sustained thought to the prospect that, for example, eliminating craving is impossible or even undesirable, and, given our biology, an outright ludicrous notion—indeed, yet another desperate human attempt to overcome the irrevocably human. In other words, as Joshua Ramey says in *The Hermetic Deleuze*, “Under the auspices of the image of thought, what remains unasked are the truly critical questions...[U]nder this aegis, thought can never truly break with opinion (*doxa*)” (114).

Deleuze holds that the reinvigoration of thinking in western philosophy can “be reached only by putting into question the traditional image of thought” (*DR*, xiv). That image of thought, received, paradigmatically, from Plato and Descartes, naively takes for granted that the person doing the thinking (and by extension, legitimate thought itself) is possessed of such qualities as “good sense,” “common sense” (*DR*, 168), a “talent for the true and an affinity for the true” (*DR*, 166). What is thus required for thinking to be something other than the mere mimicry of received opinion (*doxa*, doctrine) is “to overturn Platonism” (*DR*, 71). Duly turned over—thinking untethered from the constraints and predetermined goals of tradition-opinion—critical and creative force is restored to thought.

The conditions of a true critique and a true creation are one and the same: the destruction of the image of thought which presupposes itself and the genesis of the act of thinking in thought itself. (*DR*, 139)

You can read more of my take on the x-buddhist image of thought in "[Witch's Flight](#)." Now, I'd like to take this basic concept and turn it toward the x-buddhist image of *practice*.

The x-buddhist image of practice

We just read that what is thus required for Western philosophical thinking to be something other than the mere mimicry of received opinion (*doxa*, doctrine) is “to overturn Platonism” (*DR*, 71). Before we can begin to articulate a non-buddhist practice, we have to tease out similar assumptions and values burrowed within the current x-buddhist image. So, what is it, exactly, that *every x-buddhist knows*? I'll begin with some basic postulates; hopefully, you will offer your own pieces of trash theory in the comment section.

X-Postulate 1 Every x-buddhist knows that humanism is true.

Dictionary Definition: "Humanism is an outlook or system of thought attaching prime importance to human rather than divine or supernatural matters. Humanist beliefs stress the potential value and goodness of human beings, emphasize common human needs, and seek solely rational ways of solving human problems."

X-Postulate 2 Every x-buddhist knows that idealism is true.

As The Protagonist in *Dhammapada* 1.1: "Preceded by mind are phenomena/led by mind/formed by mind." More broadly, I mean idealism in Kant's sense in *Critique of Pure Reason*: "if I remove the thinking subject, the whole material world must at once vanish because it is nothing but a phenomenal appearance in the sensibility of ourselves as a subject, and a manner or species of representation."

X-Postulate 3 Every x-buddhist knows that the New Age Apocalypse is true.

This entails a cluster of beliefs about the end of the current world and the coming of a new world. Decisive to this formulation is the fact that the new world comes into being *not* through collective social action or through radical (i.e., non-reformist) operations on material structures, but rather through some sort of “shift in consciousness” or through collective “cosmic awareness.” In the most basic sense, it means that

the way to change the world is to change one's attitude, consciousness, viewpoint, etc., etc.

X-Postulate 4 Every x-buddhist knows that *yogic* practice is essential.

This postulate follows from the previous one. By "*yogic* practice" I mean a discipline that entails "inner contemplation" of some sort. Although the x-buddhist canonical record is has instances where people became awakened in conversation with The Protagonist, the Western-Buddhism image of practice dogmatically holds meditation as the sole means of ultimate attainment.

What should we add to this collection of assumed and largely unconscious, hence dogmatic, x-buddhist postulates on practice? This post at The Failed Buddhist, "[Ideological Injustice in Social Justice Ideologies](#)," should also stimulate you to some thoughts (for instance, what values are at work in the obscured image of practice?).

***Trash Theory: Preliminary Materials for a Non-Buddhist Image of Practice**

The concept of "trash theory" is borrowed from Tiqqun's *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young Girl*.

So as not to give a false impression — which could well be our intention — the jumble of fragments that follows does not in any way constitute a theory. These are materials accumulated by chance encounter, by frequenting and observing Young-Girls: pearls extracted from magazines, expressions gleaned out of order under sometimes dubious circumstances...The choice to expose these elements in all their incompleteness, in their contingent original state, in their ordinary excess, knowing that if polished, hollowed out, and given a good trim they might together constitute an

altogether presentable doctrine, we have chosen—just this once—**trash theory**. The cardinal ruse of theoreticians resides, generally, in the presentation of the result of their deliberations such that the process of deliberation is no longer apparent. We figure that, faced with Bloomesque fragmentation of attention, this ruse no longer works. We have chosen a different one. In these scattered fragments, spirits attracted to moral comfort or vice in need of condemning will find only roads leading nowhere. It is less a question of converting [x-buddhists] than of mapping out the dark corners of the fractalized frontline of [the x-buddhist World]. And it is a question of furnishing arms for a struggle, step-by-step, blow-by-blow, wherever you may find yourself. (20-21)

How do we conceive of practice after the death of the big Other?

Contemporary German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk argues that “anyone who takes part in a program for de-passivizing himself, and crosses from the side of the merely formed to that of the forming, becomes [an agent].” The colloquial word for such a program is *practice*. The more technical term, *praxis*, aims to approach the question consciously, with an *a priori* awareness of theoretical considerations. Yet, at the title of the series indicates, the “theory” arising out of whatever collective and chaotic deliberations may be the case.

More formally, it proceeds from three questions. First, what does it mean to “practice”? What, for instance, distinguishes practice from things like routine, habit, or simply a way of life? And when is a practice one of healthy self-formation as opposed to one of ideological subjugation or romantic fantasy? This question may presuppose a new image of practice, akin to Deleuze’s image of thought. Second, how can we conceive of practice in an age of profound skepticism toward the transcendental orientations of our so-called spiritual traditions? What might a materialist or, in the language of Pope Francis, an “incarnational” practice look like? Third, rather than adapt the

practitioner to the existing social formation, how can we ensure that a practice develops competent, courageous agents for *changing* their formations in closer conformity to their moral ideals?

If you have any thoughts on this matter, please send them along. You can write an original text or share an existing piece of writing or mash the two together. Keep it short, and include a commentary and a question or two for discussion. The purpose of this exercise is to *stimulate* thinking, not to dominate it. Maybe some of you will eventually use these trashy fragments to create a new theoretical whole. Even better, maybe some of you will put them to the test in actual communal practice. Let us know how we can help.

Author

Glenn Wallis holds a Ph.D. in Buddhist studies from Harvard University. He is the author of *A Critique of Western Buddhism* and several other books and articles on Buddhism. For more information, visit: www.glennwallis.com.

Online Discussion

