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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 so attractive—and effective, of course—because its “approach to awakening is so simple and free of adherence to any kind of ideology.”¹ 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.² 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 (*pratītyasamutpāda*), 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 nihility 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.³ 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.”⁴ 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.”⁵ 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.”⁶ 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.”⁷ 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].’”⁸ 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.”⁹

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.¹⁰

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.”¹¹ 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*.¹² 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."¹³ 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*.¹⁴ 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 2011.¹⁵ 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."¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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?”¹⁸ The World Economic Forum is principally concerned, in other words, with “how to get the old show back on the road.”¹⁹ 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.”²⁰) 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.’”²¹ 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.”²² 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.²³

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."²⁴ 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"²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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."²⁷ 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."²⁸ 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."²⁹ The goal of SIY's inward-turning techniques, namely, "to grow in self-mastery,"³⁰ is, of course, consistent with Western Buddhism's. The contemporary twist in this "unexpected path to success and happiness"³¹ 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."³² 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*.”³³ 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,³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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.³⁶ 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.”³⁷ 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.”³⁸ 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.³⁹

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."⁴⁰ 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."⁴¹ 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.⁴²

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.⁴³ 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.”⁴⁴ 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).”⁴⁵ 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.”⁴⁶ 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.”⁴⁷ 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).⁴⁸

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.⁴⁹

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.”⁵⁰

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.”⁵¹ 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.⁵²

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.”⁵³

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?”⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵

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.”⁵⁶ 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.”⁵⁷ 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 2007.⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰ 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.⁶¹ 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.⁶²

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.⁶³ 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.⁶⁴

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)⁶⁵

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.⁶⁶ 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."⁶⁷ 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."⁶⁸ 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.⁶⁹

[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.⁷⁰

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.