Wallis, Glenn. "Specters of the Real." *A Critique of Western Buddhism: Ruins of the Buddhist Real*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. 45–56. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 25 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474283588.ch-002>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 25 April 2023, 23:18 UTC.

Copyright © Glenn Wallis 2019. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Specters of the Real

The rhetorical unconscious

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

conceive of an immaterial no-thing that persists in time and space? Or is “it” an unconditioned something that exists “outside of time and space,” whatever that old trope of the mystics might mean? The linguistic and conceptual gymnastics required for this alleged middle way to be at all coherent seem endless. Maybe that is the point. Maybe in denying eternalism and annihilationism within his ancient Brahmanical context, the Buddha was refusing to play a certain ever-looping linguistic game, as Steven Collins has suggested.⁹ In this game, the very formation of the question traps the interlocutor into a suggestive form of answer that is already predetermined by the frame of the question (e.g., “yes or no: do you still beat your dog?”). Yet all games aside, assuming, as tradition would have us do, that something of great significance is at stake in denying both eternalism and annihilationism, it is a fair question: What, in real terms, *is* this “middle,” this third way, between existence and nonexistence? Anyone who tries to get a clear view on the question, much less a satisfactorily coherent answer, will, I would bet, reach the age-old conclusion of the doggedly clear-headed thinker: *obscurum per obscurius*, one obscure matter is being explained by an even more obscure matter. Yes, you will get the common stock of Buddhist ripostes: for instance, those that resemble the “tautological imbecility” of Wisdom, such as “If we are caught in the notion of being we will also be caught in the notion of non-being”¹⁰; those that refuse to participate in the economy of shared linguistic exchange, such as the Buddhist eschewal of the law of noncontradiction¹¹; those that sing in perfect harmony with New Age pseudoscience, such as the ever-proliferating trite, spiritualized applications of quantum physics¹²; and those that are in equal proportion obscurantist and dogmatic, such as the insistence that the ontological status of an extinguished fire—an ancient Buddhist trope for *nirvāṇa*—“is indescribable, even in terms of existence or nonexistence, because words work only for things that have limits.”¹³

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

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

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

The principle of sufficient Buddhism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I want to make one final point about the principle of sufficient Buddhism before considering the concept of the Real. Laruelle argues that the principle, as it applies to philosophy, "articulates the idealist pretension of philosophy as that which is able to at least co-determine that Real which is most radical." As shrewdly adroit as philosophy is in projecting its idealist articulation of the Real as material or ontological fact, Western Buddhism is even more so. Whereas philosophies proudly proclaim their respective concepts of the Real, thereby opening themselves to interrogation, Western Buddhism's Real is that which dare not speak its name—not, in any case, *as Real*. The investigator must thus patiently knead an extra layer of "pretension." In any case, as I have already indicated, the cost to Western Buddhism of maintaining this pretension of sufficiency is considerable. In Laruelle's words²⁷:

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

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

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