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First Names of the Buddhist Real

In this chapter, I present more specific examples of what I take to be a practice and style that is not only characteristic of Western Buddhism but is both definitive and constitutive of its very identity. A word of warning: I say “Western Buddhism,” but that term is, of course, a synecdoche for the many people, past and present, Asian, European, and North American, who inflect Buddhist teachings in the distinctive accent that we call “Western.” Occasionally reminding ourselves of the fact that we are dealing with the ideas of *people* will be of help in several regards. It enables us to see through the veneer of inevitability that overlays presentations of Western Buddhist teachings. After all, what hope for innovation is there for a teaching that is irreversibly “universal, eternal, and unchanging”?¹ Being but the voicings of mere mortals, the signification of Western Buddhist concepts and practices is *not* inevitable; it can be, or can actively be made to be, something quite different from what it currently is. This fact throws wide open the door of possibility. It also explains, however, why a certain chaos of contestation reigns throughout the world of Buddhism. It reigns because, contrary to the claims of any given Buddhist community, the door has *always* been wide open. That is why we have “the bubbling and apparently amorphous dynamism of [Buddhist] proliferation.”² I will say more about this proliferation later, when I discuss what I call “x-buddhism.” The point here is that the prolific nature of Buddhism renders any given instance of Buddhism suspect to all those who hold dear some other instance. I am reiterating the point I made in the Introduction about the common Western Buddhist strategy for deflecting criticism, namely, the appeal to exception. Perhaps that claim, made fresh to the reader’s mind, will serve as an antidote to the reflexive dismissal endemic to Western Buddhist engagement with criticism. Having said that, I provide examples from what I take to be a representative selection of contemporary Western Buddhist sources bearing on the Real.

First names

Among the concepts that Western Buddhist figures routinely invoke as essential to the Buddha's teachings, I consider the following to be indicative of the Real: no-self (*anātman*); suffering-desire (*dukkha-taṇhā*); emptiness (*śūnyatā*); dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). The English terms, translated from the Pali or Sanskrit in parentheses, are commonplace renderings in Western Buddhist writing. I will eventually offer different translations. These terms constitute what François Laruelle calls first terms or first names. In brief, Laruelle defines these as:

Fundamental terms which symbolize the Real and its modes according to its radical immanence or its identity. They are deprived of their philosophical sense and become, via axiomatized abstraction, the terms—axioms and theorems—of non-philosophy.³

This difficult statement contains not only a definition of “first name,” but essential elements of my critique as a whole. So, before proceeding, let me unpack it a bit.

I doubt that many Western Buddhists would contest the claim that emptiness (*śūnyatā*), in whatever version they may understand it, “remains at the heart of the Buddhist system.” As a teacher who bridges traditional Buddhism and Western Buddhism tells us, emptiness is not only “the most important subject of philosophical study for its soteriological, doctrinal, ontological and hermeneutic significance, but is also the pivotal topic of meditation.”⁴ What makes emptiness so important is that it is held to index (that is, to name or to point to) a feature of reality so fundamental to human existence, so determinate of human experience, that ignorance of it constitutes a debilitating delusion, one that causes us to violate our most essential interest. Because it eludes capture by speculative thought (philosophical, buddhistic, etc.) *yet* inexorably affects thought, we can—in a different register from Eagleton's definition above—call this feature “the Real,” and describe it as being “radically immanent” *to* that experience. It is this brute, unadorned approximation of the term “emptiness” to the instance or principle that it indexes that marks it as a “first name” of the Real. The crucial question for us is whether the Western Buddhist first term remains content to serve as such a symbol of the Real, or whether it instead attempts *to determine* the constitution of the Real. To enable “emptiness” to function in the latter sense is to overwrite the radically immanent import of the first term *emptiness* with the buddhistically, or, in Laruelle's case, philosophically, self-referential representation *of* the Real that also goes by the name *emptiness* (or, in philosophy, *truth*, *difference*, *Being*, etc.).

It is in the latter case that Laruelle believes we are dealing with “hallucinated” and “illusory” forms of knowledge. He goes further. He terms such knowledge “violent.” The violence done to the human is precisely the usurpation of his or her interest in the name of a speculative, visionary form of knowledge that poses as a science of the Real. A discussion about what might constitute our “interest” as human beings will be taken up later. As usual, it is easier to say what it is not. So, by way of introduction, we can cite Katerina Kolozova writing about Marx’s notion of workers’ interest: It “is not an idea in the sense of ‘*causa finalis*.’ It is not a purpose. It does not have a ‘meaning’ *per se*. It does not require ‘wisdom,’ ‘superior knowledge,’ or education to know what one’s interest is.”⁵ We can add, with Laruelle, that determining our interest does not require philosophical or buddhistic systems of thought. Finally, it is when such systems endeavor to reclaim the Real, via precisely their penchant for wise meaning-making, that “axiomatized abstraction”—a practice that eliminates the “intuitiveness and naïveté” of sufficiency—becomes necessary.⁶ Since I am employing his method, this and many other Laruellean terms become increasingly clear as we proceed.⁷ Parallel to Laruelle’s “non-philosophy,” in the case of Western Buddhism, such a practice may, when all is said and done, entail a “non-buddhism.”

Self-void (*anātman*)

I stated in Chapter 1 that while *anātman* can be shown to point in one direction, toward what we might think of as socially constructed selfhood, or subjectivity, Western Buddhist teachers ultimately point it in the opposite direction, toward what, in the history of ideas, is considered essentialized selfhood (*ātman*). Which direction it takes has real-life consequences for thought and action. The latter leads to an idealism in which what ultimately matters is the recuperation and preservation of our “innermost kernel of being.”⁸ The former leads to a materialism in which the idealist’s “non-substantial proliferation of semblances”⁹ are, on the contrary, recognized as the paramount sphere of activity operating on the self-void (*anātman*). Given that Western Buddhism prides itself on nothing so much as its anti-essentialism, my claim must sound outright wrongheaded to many readers. It is true that Western Buddhist figures argue something like the former. They speak of *anātman* as indicating, for instance, a “lack of inherent existence,” or an “unfindability.” They further argue that this lack nonetheless has force as a “moral agent.”¹⁰ In speaking like this, these figures are indeed invoking *anātman* as a first name of the Real. That is, they are suggesting that

what we think of as an integral person is, to recall Terry Eagleton's words, merely a "cipher," a "void at the heart of the symbolic order."¹¹ It is, furthermore, a cipher whose existence *must* be postulated if we are to account for what actually occurs in reality, such as a continuity of subjective experience and the apparent force of personal agency. (Perhaps we can think of dark matter as a rough parallel: it itself is invisible to the entire electromagnetic spectrum but can be inferred from its effects on the visible matter surrounding it.) As such, Western Buddhist figures do indeed present *anātman* as what Lacan calls an impossible Real.

The Real is the impossible. Not in the name of a simple obstacle we hit our heads up against, but in the name of the logical obstacle of what, in the symbolic, declares itself to be impossible. This is where the Real emerges from.¹²

There is, of course, a venerable tradition of Buddhist figures invoking the impossibility of capturing this void within their own symbolic system. Being, precisely, a lack, this "non-self" can never be adequately signified. In ancient texts and contemporary Zen clichés alike, this first name is never intended as more than a "convenient designation," a "mere name," or a "finger pointing to the moon."¹³

It is, however, equally true that these same Western Buddhist figures eventually disable the consequences of this first name by reinstating, in some form or another, the essentialized selfhood that the first name was created to counter. Self-described "professor, writer, and Zen teacher" David Loy, for instance, is clear about the cipher-like quality of selfhood when he writes, "Fundamentally, Buddhism is about awakening, which means realizing something about the constructedness of the sense of self and the nothing at its core." He also alludes to the uncanny operations of this Real-void and, in so many words, suggests the impossibility of its symbolic articulation.

Deconstructing the sense of self involves directly experiencing its emptiness. Usually that void at our core is so uncomfortable that we try to evade it, by identifying with something else that might give us stability and security. Another way to say it is that we keep trying to fill up that hole, yet it's a bottomless pit. Nothing that we can ever grasp or achieve can end our sense of lack.¹⁴

As the subtitle of Loy's book suggests, *Notes for a Buddhist Revolution*, the realization of constructedness amounts to a "social awakening,"¹⁵ since, one would think, it places the awakened one nakedly "before the law," before the reality of the forces that *do* give shape to, *do* construct, our "sense of self." Such forces are, of course, always social. Loy articulates these social forces

throughout his book *Money, Sex, War, Karma*. On virtually every page we come across analytic terminology that would make Marx proud: commodification of attention; institutionalized delusion, greed, and ill-will; corporation-dominated economic system; alienation and separation; critique; deconstruction; ideology; liberation. On virtually every page we are confronted with the massive, seemingly intractable social problems that are giving shape to our current subjectivity: corporate malfeasance; war mania; the rape of the environment; deification of money; the pervasive stranglehold of advertisement; the brain-altering seduction of technology, and so on. Loy notes on several occasions that it is precisely the insubstantiality of form that not only makes change and “reconstruction” possible, but “allows and indeed obliges this adaptability.”¹⁶ As we should expect, then, his analysis points out the ways in which the empty, hence malleable subject is currently being constituted by these considerable social forces (we are attention starved, we are seduced by wealth and fame, we love war, and so on). The crucial question is *what happens next?* Does Loy work through the implications of our “social awakening” into the constructedness of the self, among other things, for robust social change? Since the subtitle invokes revolution, we might expect so. Or does Loy instead suggest an eventual retreat into our “innermost kernel of being”? Has he, perhaps, somehow found a true “middle way” between these two poles?

As an “engaged Buddhist,” Loy represents an interesting limit case. Like most varieties of Western Buddhism, engaged Buddhism begins with the teachings on phenomenal and self insubstantiality. However, unlike the numerous Western Buddhist traditions that hastily start reciting some version of the idealist’s world-surrendering *mantra*—“you can’t stop the waves but you can learn to surf”—engaged Buddhism tarries in material reality, in, that is, the decisive point where “Social systems impinge on our lives and relate us to our fellow beings.”¹⁷ Perhaps it is this engaged Buddhist reflex that permits Loy to express doubts, rhetorically if not genuinely, about the ultimate efficacy of Buddhist teachings to formulate solutions to the vexing social issues that his book addresses. At one point, for instance, he responds to his own litany of intractable social conundrums by admitting, “I do not think that Buddhism has the answer to these questions.” At another point he offers this piqued assessment: “If [Buddhist teachings] do not work for understanding and addressing the global crises we face today, so much the worse for those teachings; maybe it’s time to replace them.” In several instances, he even poses some version of the potentially destructive critical question, “what is distinctively Buddhist about socially engaged Buddhism?”¹⁸ So, is this what comes next: a risky, clear-eyed pivot toward the social, even at

the expense of Buddhism itself? Will considerable Western Buddhist resources such as *anātman* be placed in the service of ideological formation or, as Loy's analytic categories might encourage us to believe, in the service of an organon of formation?

In what I would like to call a Western Buddhist parapraxis, Loy, after convincingly explicating "the constructedness of the sense of self and the nothing at its core," informs us out of the blue that "Some Buddhist sutras talk about *paravritti*, a 'turning around.'" Why is this a parapraxis? A parapraxis is, recall, saying one thing but meaning a mother ... or, no, I mean, *another*. More precisely, it is "the product of mutual interference between two different intentions, of which one may be called the disturbed intention and the other the disturbing one."¹⁹ (In the joke above, "another" is the disturbed intention and "mother" is the disturbing one.) Loy's engaged Buddhist analysis, generally as well as specifically of *anātman*, is taking him into dangerous territory. It is a territory that is arguably wholly bereft of the very need for, much less relevance of, the Buddha's Wisdom. One intention of Loy's, indeed of all of engaged Buddhism's, analysis, is to bring Buddhist teachings to bear consequently on real-world problems. Another intention is to uphold, in no uncertain terms, the relevance of these teachings to our current catastrophe. As Loy's book exemplifies, no Buddhist argument, *qua* Buddhist argument, can bear this tension. Haunting Loy's expressions of doubt, real or feigned, is the suspicion that the history of ideas has ample and robust tools enough *without* Buddhism. All such *Buddhist* arguments thus progress only up to a point before "fleeing, taking flight, recoiling, not taking effect, reversing judgement." These are all meanings of the Sanskrit term that Loy employs, namely, *paravritti* (*parāvṛtti*).²⁰ This is not intended as a display of philological braggadocio. I cite these meanings as evidence that we are dealing with a form of conceptual parapraxis that is definitive of Western Buddhism as an authoritative system of thought. Specifically, Loy invokes *paravritti* to indicate a:

"turning around" that transforms the festering hole at my core into a life-healing flow which springs up spontaneously from I-know-not-where. Instead of being experienced as a sense of lack, the empty core becomes a place where there is now awareness of something other than, something more than, my usual sense of self. I can never grasp that "more than," I can never understand what it is—and I do not need to, because "I" am an expression of it. My role is to become a better manifestation of it, with less interference from the delusion of the ego-self. So, our emptiness has two sides: the negative, problematic aspect is a sense of lack. The other aspect is ... fullness.²¹

We can dub this “turning around” a misturning.²² The “disturbed intention” is the establishment of Buddhist resources as “transformative, razor-sharp insights into the causes behind worldwide troubles.”²³ The “disturbing intention” is the ultimately debilitating reassertion of the principle of sufficient Buddhism. In turning our conception of self-void back into the mystical effusion from “I-know-not-where,” Loy is “essentially switching emptiness to fullness” as Tom Pepper says regarding a similar move by Thich Nhat Hanh:

He is guarding against the dangerous awareness that our practices, right down to the content of our minds, our perceptions, might be socially constructed. Instead, they become a part of the seamless web of the entire universe, so that we couldn't possibly hope to change them—it would require altering the cosmos!²⁴

Loy is turning us from thinking through the consequences of what he himself calls a “social awakening,” back toward the only real contribution that Buddhism ostensibly makes, namely, “the liberation of our collective attention” from the places it has become “trapped.”²⁵ Whatever that may mean, it has the effect of performing a “reversal of judgement” (*paravritti/parāvṛtti*) concerning the social-revolutionary consequences of self-emptiness. Loy's reversal functions as a parapraxis because it “adds a second sense to the one intended.”²⁶ He wants to argue that Western Buddhist concepts like *anātman* can influence Western social thought in decisive ways. Yet, he must ultimately admit that:

The basic limitations of all such arguments is that Buddhism is really about awakening and liberating our awareness, rather than prescribing new institutional structures for that awareness . . . [S]olutions to our collective *dukkha* cannot be derived from any ideology.²⁷

In Loy's hands, Western Buddhist *anātman*, having faltered on the slippery surface of the social, is now returned to the firm dry ground of that ideology-free socially unconstructed sphere known as “the spiritual.” It turns out that since “the root of the problem is spiritual, the solution must also have a spiritual dimension.” Fortunately, Buddhism is the perfect supplement to this now, suddenly, spiritualized project, for “the Buddhist path involves understanding how our minds work.”²⁸ Loy has completed his *paravritti*. Having unleashed *anātman* as a terrifying social-revolutionary consequential self-void, he calls it back, pats it on the head, and releases it into the service of a spiritually pure “life-healing flow” inscribed, of course, with the principle of sufficient Buddhism.

In *The New Social Face of Buddhism*, fellow engaged Buddhist Ken Jones is explicit about the reasoning behind such a turn. Following a section titled,

“The Social Construction of the Self,” is one titled, “The Social Fallacy.” Jones invokes the social fallacy to repudiate Marx’s famous contention that “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.”²⁹ Marx’s intention here is, of course, to turn Hegel’s idealism on its head and assert the primacy of material productive forces in shaping what Hegel, invoking his own *anātman*, famously called “this Night, this empty nothing” that is the human being.³⁰ Eschewing idealist accounts of human subjectivity, Marx instead offers this materialist explanation:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.³¹

A book that aims to turn Buddhism’s face away from its claustrophobic, quasi-ascetic “personal and private” concerns, in order to stare directly at “modernity’s humanistic project of social emancipation,” will, one would think, find common cause with Marx’s analysis.³² Yet, Jones does not permit such a sustained encounter. Like Loy, he eventually shores up against the full implication of the fact that once we awaken to “the social construction of self,” we see that it is the social all the way down. Jones writes:

The *social fallacy*, as I call it, is the belief that human well-being is to be achieved primarily or solely through social development. It is deeply ingrained in social theory, and seeks to explain social phenomena (and remedy its ills) exclusively in social terms—particularly economic and political terms . . . It is the belief that most afflictions can sooner or later be fixed “out there.”³³

Jones’s own parapraxis is on display here. He intends to turn us toward (what he wants us to view as) the indispensable contribution of Buddhism to social transformation, namely, its role in enabling the “inner work of radical personal change [that is] essential for creating [favorable] social conditions.”³⁴ Jones’s social fallacy premise has, of course, rendered such inner work “essential” because, *pace* Marx, “No social system can by itself create a revolution in human consciousness.” So, how do we pursue this path to ending social injustice and political oppression? How do we make our “mark on samsara”? By, of course, unifying under the banner of an idealized engaged Buddhism, for it is “firmly

based on the core tenets of the Dharma.”³⁵ Jones’s attempt to turn us from the socially awakened “Dharma” back toward the spiritualized “Dharma” is a misturning. Jones does not turn us toward the ostensibly natural conclusion that his Buddhism is an inevitable feature of today’s pressing “call to action.” He turns us toward the fact that the new social face of Buddhism is identical to the old social face of the very state of affairs that requires changing. In Marx’s language, it is just another attempt to alienate the human through abstraction. In Laruelle’s even stronger language, it is just another attempt to persecute the human-in-human via a subjugating hallucination.

I will say more about this aspect of Western Buddhist teaching later. The point here is that the “turns” performed by Loy and Jones depotentialize the force of no-self (*anātman*) as a first name, as, recall, one of the “Fundamental terms which symbolize the Real and its modes according to its radical immanence or its identity.” In this instance, the Real’s radically immanent identity, as articulated by our two Western Buddhist thinkers themselves, is that of self-void, that of, to paraphrase Loy, the uncomfortable bottomless pit of lack that enables the social constructedness of self.³⁶ An obvious consequence of this Western Buddhist no-self premise is, to turn Jones’s comment back around, not only that *social* “afflictions can sooner or later be fixed ‘out there,’” but that *the self itself* is equally to be found and operated on “out there.” This consequence is obvious, but it is also apparently unacceptable. Loy and Jones must in the end reassert the principle of sufficient Buddhism. In doing so, they are paying the price that Laruelle warned us about earlier: “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.” Let us consider another example.

Suffering-desire (*dukkha-taṇhā*)

The Buddhist understanding of suffering (*dukkha*; also pain, unpleasantness, distress, unease, etc.) is that it is inextricably bound up with desire (*taṇhā*; also grasping, attachment, craving, thirst, etc.). So, I think it will be of help to consider these two concepts as one: suffering-desire. Where there is suffering, there is desire. Where there is desire, there is suffering. We do not merely desire, we *suffer* desire. We do not merely suffer, we suffer (*from*) *desire*. How might this two-fold Buddhist concept be a first name for the Real? As “dynamic lecturer, progressive scholar [and practitioner], and one of the most prolific writers and

translators of Tibetan Buddhism,” B. Alan Wallace reminds us, suffering is Buddhism’s very point of departure. This point, in fact, represents a significant deviation from theistic traditions, which, he says, “all begin with the declaration of an article of faith based on divine revelation.” Instead, Buddhism embarks from “a pragmatic and empirical analysis of the reality of suffering.”

Rather than presenting a worldview with a metaphysical belief in a supernatural creator, the Buddha encouraged his followers to explore their own experience, with a primary emphasis on something that is a major concern for everyone: the reality of suffering and how we might be free of it.³⁷

We have here, then, an authoritative statement about both the Real expressed by *dukkha* and the conditions that would degrade this “truth” to the status of an ideological article of faith. That is, we are told that since pain is verifiably endemic to human experience, no revelation from on high is required. Wallace’s traditional threefold elaboration on types of pain increases our confidence that pain is indeed a pervasive feature of human experience. The first type is the “suffering of suffering,” which is simply the presence of physical or mental pain. Because this type of suffering operates on a spectrum from “subliminal malaise to searing pain,” it is, to some degree, ever-present. The second type is the “suffering of change.” We seek stability and permanence, homeostasis and wholeness, yet all things invariably follow the trajectory of *arising, lingering, dissolving, and disappearance*. Given the relentlessness of flux, this type of pain is also unavoidable. The third type is the “ubiquitous suffering of conditioned existence.” In a sense, this type of pain is the internal corollary to the previous, external, type. Not only is the world undergoing perpetual change, grating against our tendency toward secure attachment, but so are we. Thus, “egoistic identification with our bodies and minds as being truly ‘I’ and ‘mine’ makes us fundamentally vulnerable.”³⁸ This deluded self-identification is, in fact, the “taproot of all suffering.” The delusion of a reified self creates a “radical separation of subject and object” whereby all objects are experienced as potential sources of either pleasure or displeasure. Thus, from delusion springs the other two “root mental afflictions,” craving and aversion.³⁹ It should not be difficult to see these three afflictions or “poisons” as the spawn of insatiable *desire*. For, even wanting-not is a form of wanting, and its animus toward the unwanted is inflamed in defense of the desire of deluded “egoistic identification.” And with this, pain’s primary accomplice, desire, makes its inevitable appearance in the Buddhist scheme.

Wallace’s explication, which is standard fare for a Western Buddhist teacher, leaves little room to doubt the inevitable existence of a “painful negativity

immanent in the fold of material being.”⁴⁰ Suffering-desire is thus sounding increasingly like an autonomous “lust for life or will to live” secreting its noxious poison from deep within the very “core of existence.”⁴¹ This “intense cluster of reactive feelings” (i.e., delusional self-reification, object attachment, object antipathy), being, as it is, “locked in the body” and forming our “energetic core,” is, moreover, a most worthy candidate for an originary trauma.⁴² Let us consider this possibility for a moment. As psychoanalytic theorist Ellie Ragland reminds us, “Trauma does not automatically mean literal abuse or incest, but the confrontation of the body ... with the internal excitations that Freud called drives.”⁴³ Surely, suffering-desire in the Western Buddhist presentation is nothing if not a “drive” in this basic, classical sense. As Wallace reminds us, the features that constitute the complex of suffering “lie at the root of all other mental imbalances” and “endlessly perpetuate dissatisfaction and misery in all the vicissitudes of life and death.”⁴⁴ This is the language of drive as trauma in at least two regards. First, as a “root,” it is that which generates further (imbalanced) mental states, thereby continually reproducing the complex. (Western Buddhism’s notion of *karma*, in fact, can be understood as a theory of personal continuity that is grounded precisely in this repetition compulsion.) Second, as the instigator of endless *dissatisfaction*, it is that which “enacts the *failure*” of the very drive; for the drive, recall, is an impulsion toward *satisfaction*. The complex that Wallace outlines is constituted as “structurally traumatic” precisely because of this failure.⁴⁵ The trauma of suffering-desire in this Western Buddhist presentation is thus a first name for the Real. That is, what we have here is “the subject’s point of failure and impasse ... which persists as a kind of horrific hard core within the subject ... a disfiguring medium into which we are plunged at birth ... and from which desire flows unstaunchably.”⁴⁶ Desire also flows eternally ungratified, for, as we saw in the previous section on *anātman*, this core (or root) is grounded in the abyss of delusional “egoistic identification.” Another way of saying the same thing is that the core/root suffering-desire is pure *self-grounding*; it itself, and not some other desired object, is the only possible terminus of its longing. We are, moreover, dealing here with a Real in that all of this remains unconscious to the subject. For, the Western Buddhist subject, recall, is constituted precisely through the primordial *delusion* of self-reification. It is this delusion which generated the suffering-desire effusing “radical separation of subject and object” in the first place.⁴⁷ We are dealing here with a Real in one final, crucial, sense: its very unconsciousness or “repression constructs reality around the misrecognition of its own basis in fantasy.”⁴⁸ That is, like the unacknowledged void that enables the formation of a socially

constructed selfhood, the repressed Real of suffering-desire is as unremittingly *productive* of our experience as it is delusional.

The Western Buddhist concept of suffering-desire is thus clearly a first name for the Real. Let's review. It constitutes a serious, far-reaching analysis of subjective human formation and experience. It identifies a "register closely allied with our bodily drives" yet simultaneously alienating us from the fulfillment of our deepest yearnings. It reveals a "stain of senseless material contingency" that is as trenchant and efficient as it is symbolically inarticulable.⁴⁹ And with this, we have arrived at the inevitable "divided pathway to cultivation and decline"⁵⁰: does Western Buddhism permit this Real to faithfully serve its function through to the end or does it cancel its warrant in the very midst of things? We can pose the question in Wallace's own terms: is suffering pain permitted to hew closely to our "own experience" or does it get co-opted into a "worldview" as a mere article of faith? Suggesting the former in both cases, Wallace gestures toward the same psychoanalytic tradition that I have been referring to here. He cites the "giant of twentieth-century science," Sigmund Freud himself, whose "insights on the nature of consciousness are consonant with the most advanced contemporary neuroscience views."⁵¹ The passage from Freud that Wallace quotes articulates the psychoanalytic view of the Real of suffering-desire:

We are threatened with suffering from three directions: from our own body, which is doomed to decay and dissolution and which cannot even do without pain and anxiety as warning signals; from the external world, which may rage against us with overwhelming and merciless forces of destruction; and finally from our relations to other men. The suffering which comes from this last source is perhaps more painful to us than any other.⁵²

The final source, which Freud calls "the social source of suffering," is so painful because it is alterable. That is, we can come to terms with the natural and bodily sources of suffering precisely because they are immutable: we recognize, if begrudgingly, that nature is always too powerful against our desire for happiness (security, satisfaction, etc.) and the body is ultimately too weak. Social relations are different. We observe that they change over time. And yet we cannot deny that we remain unsuccessful at eliminating these relations as a source of dissatisfaction. Recognizing this situation, Freud expresses his "astonishment" at a certain, indeed astonishing, fact:

in whatever way we may define the concept of civilization, it is a certain fact that all the things with which we seek to protect ourselves against the threats that emanate from the sources of suffering are part of that very civilization.

Part of that very civilization! Schelling's "veil of despondency that spreads itself over nature" is spread even farther by Freud, over even that continent of human security called civilization. And so, with Freud, "a suspicion dawns on us that here, too, a piece of unconquerable nature may lie behind—this time a piece of our own psychical constitution."⁵³ There is hardly a better characterization of the psychoanalytic Real than as a *piece of unconquerable nature*. And there is hardly a better example of protecting the integrity of *Real* thought. What about Wallace and the tradition in whose authority he speaks?

The *paravritti*, the refusal of the identified Real and the concomitant reversal of judgement, the conceptual parapraxis that, I am arguing, is constitutive of Western Buddhist discourse as a whole, is already present in Wallace's statement concerning "the reality of suffering," namely, the part about "how we might be free of it." The parallel to trends in psychoanalysis is instructive here. Freud decried the influence of the "American way of life" on psychoanalysis. He saw the development of American psychology as "a child of its time . . . designed to accelerate the tempo of analytic therapy and suit the rush of American life." This, despite the fact that all evidence shows that "psychoanalytic therapy—the liberation of a human being from his neurotic symptoms, inhibitions, and abnormalities of character—is a lengthy business."⁵⁴ In this regard, Freud's criticism is echoed by Žižek's claim that Western Buddhism, whatever bright light it might throw on human existence, functions to accommodate its Westerner practitioner to the hyper-accelerated technological pace of modern life. If, in doing so, it effectively functions as a fetish—as "an embodiment of the Lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth"—so much the better in terms of its "working."⁵⁵ The Western Buddhist "Lie" here, in Wallace's own terms, is twofold. It involves the usurpation of one's "own experience" (the intractable pervasiveness of suffering-desire) by "worldview" (the doctrinal claim of ultimate transcendence of the merely human).⁵⁶ Implicit in that move is the further "Lie" that worldview is not worldview: it is rather precisely one's very "own experience." The "unbearable truth" that is sustained in assuming this embodiment is, of course, the ineradicable fact of suffering-desire *in* one's "own experience." If, for Lacan, psychoanalysis is the theory and practice of bringing to articulation the very "essence of the human being"—desire—and if, as Terry Eagleton tells us, psychoanalysis is "the science of that which fails to find satisfaction," then what are we to call Western Buddhism?⁵⁷ What is the name of a system of thought that, like a theory or science, ruthlessly identifies a Real aspect of human being only to perform a reversal that offers up a strategy for *disavowing* that very aspect, a strategy for fortifying ourselves

emotionally and cognitively against the full implications of its very own self-articulated Real?

We will return to this question in Chapter 4. In anticipation of that discussion, we can consider Anthony Paul Smith's contention that "what is most immanent to us is also most alien precisely because of the hallucinatory transcendent structures of thought developed in philosophy and theology."⁵⁸ Should we add to that couple "Western Buddhism"? It might be too soon to say. But what is being suggested here is a crucial distinction between something like a *science* and something like an *hallucination*. The former pinpoints what Wallace calls "own experience." This is precisely the feature of Western Buddhism that allows its promotion as an immanent practice. The latter hoists what Wallace calls "worldview." This is what constitutes it, on the other hand, as an hallucinatory imposition on an individually lived life or, indeed, as "own experience." Put in Smith's terms, the question darkens: what do we call a system of thought that, via its authoritative construction of a world, alienates us from that which *it itself tells us* is in fact most immanent, and thus most intimate, about that world?

Nihilism (*śūnyatā*)

As I suggested in Chapter 2, where emptiness is treated in some detail, *śūnyatā* is perhaps the Buddhist master signifier par excellence. From Buddhism's earliest days, to brook no delusions about the empty quality of phenomena is extolled as extraordinarily consequential.⁵⁹ In a canonical Pali text, for instance, the Buddha teaches us how to view all phenomena, whether objective (form) or subjective (sensation, perception, conceptions, and consciousness), namely, as "empty, hollow, and insubstantial." We are told, moreover, that to view phenomena in this manner is not an end in itself. Crucially, it sets in motion a sort of Buddhist subjective destitution, passing through disenchantment and dispassion and culminating in the clear awareness of the "superlative practitioner" that "what had to be done was done": *nirvanic* liberation is realized.⁶⁰ This dual aspect of the ontological-perceptual and the soteriological-cognitive accompanies the concept of emptiness throughout Buddhist history. Candrakīrti (600–c. 650), for instance, tells us that:

The thorough extinguishment of attachment is the cause of attaining nirvāṇa, and, except for the view of the lack of inherent existence, there is no other doctrine which is a cause of thoroughly extinguishing such attachment.⁶¹

The basic equation here between emptiness and liberation is important. It is richly suggestive of what Laruelle means when he reminds us that “Man really exists and he is really distinct from the World.” That is, the human being embodies a radically immanent lived experience that is inaccessible to the authoritative demands and machinations of any intervening system of representation, or of what Laruelle calls a “World.” Such immunity implies a human capacity to struggle against such Worlds and an attendant capacity for liberation. Similarly, the Buddhist coupling of emptiness with a conception of liberation offers a powerful instrument for clearing a pathway that, being historically encumbered by endless configurations of “the World,” obscures our vision and infects our thinking in relation to our “real existence.” This feature is, in part, what makes emptiness a candidate for a Buddhist Real. Yet, as I said earlier, a crucial question always appears at this juncture: does this Western Buddhist first term remain faithful to the Real, or does it instead maneuver to usurp and determine the constitution of the Real? Another way of asking this question is whether the Buddhist concept serves the “generic” human or whether it serves the self-referential form of human representation called “Buddhism.” More will be said about these Laruellean ideas below. Here, let us simply reflect on the seemingly nonnegotiable requirement that “emptiness,” of all conceivable notions, remain empty.

As we saw in Chapter 2, if, throughout Buddhist history, emptiness as lack is emphasized, so, too, is emptiness as plenitude. The Pali *sutta* cited above concludes with a verse exhorting the practitioner that, although “no substance is found here,” he should nonetheless “live . . . yearning for the way that is never-vanishing,” that latter term being synonymous with *nirvāṇa*. In fact, positive terms for *nirvāṇa* as the soteriological fruit of “concentration on emptiness” include such apparent idealist absolutes as the unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*), the deathless (*amata*), the permanent (*dhuvā*), and the truth (*sacca*).⁶² Contemporary Western Buddhist figures protect this positive inheritance by insisting, as we saw above, that 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,” and that “emptiness has two sides . . . lack . . . and fullness,” or in simply declaring “the fullness of emptiness,” and so on.

What are we to make of such a turn regarding emptiness? Is it performed as a compassionate, skillful Buddhist effort to allay our fears in the face of this terrifying Real, this infinite void coldly named *zeroness*, cruelly named *nihilicity*?⁶³ Does this name not announce, like Nick Land, the fact that “If there is a conclusion it is zero”? Must Western Buddhism, like Land, go even further and

remind us of the drastic consequences of this conclusion that there is no such thing as stabilizing inherent existence?: “particles decay, molecules disintegrate, cells die, organisms perish, species become extinct, planets are destroyed and stars burn out, galaxies explode ... until the unfathomable thirst of the entire universe collapses into darkness and ruin.”

We are made sick by our avidity to survive, and in our sickness is the thread that leads back and nowhere, because we belong to the end of the universe. The convulsion of dying stars is our syphilitic inheritance ... Matter signals to its lost voyagers, telling them that their quest is vain, and that their homeland already lies in ashes behind them. If there is a conclusion it is zero. Silence.⁶⁴

This unpleasant Nietzschean vision is a clear-eyed reminder that in the end, after nature draws just a few more breaths, when our sun has finally cooled and collapsed into a bloodless husk, after all of us “clever beasts” have died, emptiness will take its rightful place in the cosmic whole and ... “nothing will have happened.”⁶⁵ Yet, in the face of such dark talk about “the ultimate heat death of the universe,” Anthony Paul Smith reminds us of an equally crucial truth: “We are here, fragile creatures that we are, and, regardless of any future death, that fact of existing matters in both the physical and moral sense, regardless of how finite or limited that mattering is.”⁶⁶ Is it for reasons along this compassionate line that, in “The Fullness of Emptiness,” Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh takes pains to reassure us that “The word ‘emptiness’ should not scare us”? “It is,” in fact, he cheers us to recognize, “a wonderful word.” For, while it is undeniably the case that form is empty of essence, “it is full of everything else.” He goes on to speak about “the cloud floating in this sheet of paper,” and challenge us to “point out one thing that is not here, not in this paper—time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat.” Indeed: “Everything coexists with this sheet of paper.” And so all of us “have always been here,” transcending birth and death—mere empty forms themselves—and will be here again after we die: “I will be a flower, or a leaf. I will be in these forms and I will say hello to you. If you are attentive enough, you will recognize me, and you may greet me. I will be very happy.”⁶⁷ So, what is there to fear?

In a decisively less consoling and more philosophical vein, Timothy Morton, too, addresses our supposed fear of emptiness. For him, by contrast, this fear appears to be justified. Morton points out that in today’s West we are consumed by fear. But Morton is not speaking of the fears that are stoked on the nightly news, such as those related to terrorism, storms, immigrants, Muslims, African

bees, and various food products. He speaks of easily disavowed, because more subtly present, fears. We fear physicality, we fear consumerism, we fear narcissism, passivity, intimacy, ambiguity, inwardness, subjectivity. If this book is giving you the heebie jeebies, it's because we even fear theory. We fear recursive loops, Morton argues, and we fear the uncanny gaze of spiritualized statues and the very status of *things* in general. But most of all, today in the West, Morton informs us, we fear *Buddhism*. Why? Because Buddhism is the bugaboo of nothingness, the spooky avatar of emptiness. Our contemporary anxieties about emptiness or nothingness find their ideal object of projection in Buddhism, prompting Morton's neologism "Buddhaphobia."⁶⁸ Like Thich Nhat Hanh, Morton asks "What is to be feared?" Absolute nothingness is simply nonexistent, so there is literally nothing to fear. What frightens us is a nothingness that is "not absolutely nothing," but rather a something-or-other. And Buddhist nothingness is just such a nonabsolute nothingness. The frightful truth, Morton tells us, is that "Substantiality underlies nothingness." Where Thich Nhat Hanh asks us to look past emptiness to see sky and sunshine, Morton suggests we would see "a spectral, shifting presence of absence: shimmering substantiality," a "flickering" something that "is unlocatable yet real and palpable." It is this palpable quality that renders buddhistic nothingness so "disturbing" to us.⁶⁹

In many ways, Morton's discussion seems to lend support to *śūnyatā* as a faithful first name for the Real. His nothing as an unfindable yet consequential physicality sounds similar to the Real as a symbolically inarticulable yet profoundly productive "stain of senseless material contingency" affecting the human, as we saw earlier. Yet, there is something more to Morton's buddhistic nothingness than the substantiality underlying it. "Shimmering agency," namely, "underlies substantiality."⁷⁰ With the particular notion of agency that Morton invokes, we arrive yet again at the classic Buddhist conceptual parapraxis, the "turning around" and away from the full force of emptiness toward a productive fullness that, however inconstant and "shimmering," is somehow even fuller, or more persistently full, than the veiled superabundance of Thich Nhat Hanh's empty forms.

It is not total opaque inertia that Buddhaphobia fears . . . It is something more like what Freud calls *the nirvāṇa principle*, otherwise known as the death drive: the way in which a lifeform, down to a single-celled organism (for Freud) and quite possibly below that, is an inconsistent entity that is trying to wipe out that inconsistency. This attempt at self-cancellation (*nirvāṇa* means *extinction*) ironically creates a loop, in which the lifeform produces more of itself.⁷¹

As Morton alerts us, it appears that we have come up against the law of noncontradiction, whereby the aim of life, driven as it is toward brute reproduction of itself, is yet a near-death stilling of internal tension. “Unless, of course,” Morton adds, “there is an object-like entity at the core of human being, an entity felt as an object precisely because it is inhuman, a-human: what is called *Buddha nature*.” The Mahāyāna idea of “Buddha nature” is glossed in the index of *Nothing* as “the inherent identity of each living being as a *buddha*; a fully awakened state as the basis of ordinary mind.” It is, as Morton tells us, “a not-me that is in me.” Like God, I suppose, who is closer to me than my own breath, this “not-me is more ‘me’ than myself, which is only a confused perception.” Thus, like the devout seeker of the face of God, progress on the spiritual path of Buddhism is “a matter of faith in an entity.” Eventually, this “not-me (confused, sentient being) realizes that it is also a not-me (totally enlightened Buddha).”⁷²

What are we to make of this move? Do we have here anything other than yet another tautology of Wisdom? Do Morton’s and Thich Nhat Hanh’s emptiness talk indicate anything other than the fact that such master discourse is “excluded from the economy of symbolic exchange”? Whatever might result from bringing Wisdom to bear on such an understanding of emptiness, we are once again confronted with a misturning. The pivotal point of the turning really amounts to a repulsion. Having bored perhaps too far into emptiness for ideological comfort, our teachers bound too quickly and too easily in the opposite direction, toward the fullness of some-thing along with its incumbent idealist cure. The cure is this: The no-thing that so disturbs us is not in itself an object to be feared. Fear of it arises only at that point where it, this object at our “core,” is met with resistance by the “narcissistically wounded subject” that each of us is. If only, like Thich Nhat Hanh’s flowers and clouds, we could stop clinging to that which we never were in the first place, we might finally come to know the freedom and happiness of the earth and the sky.

Of all ideas, one would think, emptiness must surely remain empty; nothingness must remain nothing; zero must remain zero; lack, lack; void, void. Yet, in the hands of Wisdom, buddhistic emptiness somehow perpetually “evades this void by its repopulation with objects and foreign goals provided by experience, culture, history, language, etc.,” as Laruelle says of philosophy. In permitting, indeed in aiding and abetting, this evasion, Western Buddhism abdicates its function as an organon of awakening—awakening to the Real of no-self, of suffering and desire, of emptiness—and instead assumes the “shape of the World” fashioned in its own image.⁷³

I could examine several additional candidates for a Buddhist Real. In doing so, I could be mercifully brief. The reason is that I have no further task than to reveal at what point in some Western Buddhist concept, text, or teaching the turn occurs. Many readers, no doubt, find my assertion preposterous. After all, you may be thinking, Buddhism is a venerable and complex tradition, and arguments like Loy's, Morton's, Wallace's, and every other figure's I have referred to up to now, are nuanced and thorough. However, I make the assertion based on several convictions. For instance, I hold that what I am highlighting here amounts to a *discovery*, one that, moreover, will be replicated by readers of Western Buddhist material who employ this heuristic of the turn (or, really, this parapraxis of the misturning). To be clear, I hold that the reader will make this discovery himself or herself with *every single Western Buddhist instantiation*. No author writing under the signifier *Buddhism*, including its numerous subsignifiers, such as *Western Buddhism*, *Zen Buddhism*, *Secular Buddhism*, *Mindfulness*, and so on, is exempt from my assertion. The reason, which I will detail later, is that the misturning is, it turns out, endemic to the very *identity* of "Buddhism." Along with the principle of sufficient Buddhism and what Laruelle calls "decision" (also discussed later), the parapraxis of misturning is a *sine qua non* of Buddhist teaching, thought, and practice. Speaking of practice, I mentioned in the Introduction that this critique should serve as both a theory and a performance or practice. The theoretical aspect in the present case is the analysis of the contradiction, the report on the discovery. The performance unfolds around one's *reading* of the text. Confronted by the discovery, the reader is challenged to no longer read as a subject of liberal humanism, who reads the Western Buddhist text with an eye to the timeless truths contained therein, and who seeks therein the unchanging answer to the mysteries of our unchanging human nature.⁷⁴ Confronted in this manner, the reader is challenged to no longer read as a subject of neoliberalism, a *Gelassenheit*-yearning consumer of Wisdom, a well-behaved auto-governed connoisseur of the self. I said that I am hoping to stimulate a reading, thinking, living subject who regards Buddhist material alongside what Laruelle calls "radical immanence." More, too, will be said about this point later. For now, the reader has only to pose a stark and simple question: at what point does a Western Buddhist first name recoil from functioning as a *theory* (of subjectivity, of desire, or whatever) and lapse back into the auto-referential question-begging that constitutes the principle of sufficient Buddhism? For, in identifying the presence of such a turn, the reader is recognizing that the first name ceases to "symbolize the Real and its modes"

and instead attempts to usurp the Real by determining its (always Buddhist) constitution and then importing it back into Buddhism.

What kind of vital human practice, Buddhist or otherwise, might we wrest from such a refusal? Can such a practice, in thought and action, really be a party to the timeless human quest for liberation? Part 2 addresses these questions.