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Buddhofiction

The deliverance of fiction

Buddhism has a fascination with fiction. Arguably, fiction is the reigning trope of x-buddhist thought. The solid world before us is like a “magical illusion” conjured up by our perceptual apparatus, that “charmer of the childlike.” Or it is like a dream woven “in the mind of one drunk with sleep.” Or it is a feature of all of reality—of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* alike, of appearance and emptiness—wherein all things “arise as the illusory display of unobstructed relativity.”¹ Why is everything so tremulously like a dream? The classical Buddhist answer is *saṃskāra*—fabrication, formulation, construction. When the *saṃskāra* that is our perceptual apparatus meets the *saṃskāra* that is the world of form, how could there *not* ensue the fabrications of fiction? The Buddha is the Buddha and not, say, the Christ or the Professor, precisely because he was aware of this fabulation to such an extreme degree that he *awakened* from the hypnotic dreamy ignorance of seeing things as they seem as opposed to as they are. Of course, that story, too, is a fabulation. And by “that story,” I mean not only the tale of Prince Siddhārtha, but the entire glorious World that was, continues to be, and will in the future be fashioned in his name. I don’t just mean the phantasmagoric weaving of fictions within fictions, wherein even that simple tale itself unfolds repeatedly not in earthly India but in “as many worlds as there are atoms” in the paradisiacal galaxies called *Buddha fields* and *pure lands* or where the teaching originates in “the most sensitive, delicate, adamant matrix of life and bliss” known as the “Victorious Vagina of the Diamond Female Buddhas.” Even if we left it at such dime-a-dozen examples, the story that Buddhism tells would be so rich in fictional exuberance that to enumerate its variations, subtle and gross, across time and space would be tedious beyond the imagination of anyone but “the Buddha called Pure Knowledge of All Things” abiding in the Array of Jewel

Flames galaxy.² But there are much more telling, if less obvious, fictions turning and turning in the widening gyre of this fabulation called Buddhism.

To say that “Buddhism,” in the singular, tells this tale, is to acknowledge the equally singular *identity* enfolded within this term. And yet, to use it responsibly, to actually have the word say something, we must apply plural modifications. And to do so, to modify “Buddhism” as the occasion demands, belies even deeper, because less apparent, fictions. While speaking of “Zen Buddhism,” for instance, creates some restraint within the possibility of “Buddhism,” it still harbors highly consequential ambiguities. For example, whose Zen? Dogen’s? Eisai’s? Thich Nhat Hanh’s? Robert Pirsig’s? Zenify 100% Natural Stress Relief drink’s?³ Even if we say “Dogen’s,” now: which text, which period, for whom, to what end, where and when—on Eiheiiji in the thirteenth century for elite monks abiding in the mind of the Buddha; in Tokyo in the nineteenth, for upper-class laymen cultivating Samurai sangfroid; in Toledo in the twenty-first, for middle-class women uncoupling from the stresses of the daily grind? Every additional element entails literally exponential reconfigurations generated by the algorithm “Buddhism.” Indeed, the *x* in “x-buddhism” is nothing if not a sign of the staggering fictional exuberance erupting out of “Buddhism.”

With such considerations, I hope to impress several points on the reader. The first is the possibility that the most consequential x-buddhist fictions are also the most invisible. They are invisible because they appear to be the very stuff from which a bona fide tradition is woven. They are precisely the features that give each x-buddhism its air of (nonfictional) legitimacy. As Laruelle says about the fictions of Christianity:

So many [Buddhas] have been imagined, so many [*sūtras*] written, plagiarized, copied, canonized or kept secret, unfolded in the light of exegesis or buried in the desert; so many [buddhologies] and hermeneutics, so much literature elevated to the dignity of [“sacred”] and sometimes “canonical” texts.

So many permutations wrought by time, place, culture, class, gender, politics, desire; so much fragmentation, schismatization, disputation, argumentation, secularization, naturalization, that—and this is my second point—the question becomes: what possible grounds might one offer for *not* fictionalizing Buddhism yet again, but this time out from “under the punctilious gaze” of some putative x-buddhist standard? For, given that it is fiction through and through, given that Buddhism *already* is of the genre *fabulation*, then there can certainly be “nothing excessive” in proposing a *buddhofiction*, a new form of fiction that “openly declares and advocates itself as such and that consists in a controlled

conjugation of renewed scientific-type procedures and old philosophical-type theological models.”⁴ I imagine that the committed x-buddhist reader objects that such a thing as a *buddhofiction* is wholly unnecessary since his or her tradition *already* is a scientific-type procedure coupled to an old philosophical/religious/contemplative-type model. My claim throughout this book, by contrast, has been that something like a non-buddhism is required if Buddhism is to uphold its self-proclaimed identity as such. I have offered ample reasons and examples for this claim. Perhaps the most consequential aspect of this critique is the pivot around which the various arguments turn. I am referring to the principle of sufficient Buddhism. Recall what happens when acute articulations of the Real are placed in the service of this principle: the requirement to maintain x-buddhist sufficiency—its authority, completeness, mastery—converts even *emptiness* into the ideological game piece called *śūnyatā*. “Emptiness” as an element within the vast network of Western Buddhist postulates is not the Real of emptiness. Even Buddhism teaches us this fact (e.g., “the emptiness of emptiness”). Until, of course, it teaches us something different (e.g., emptiness as “a spectral, shifting presence of absence: shimmering substantiality” or whatever). Ultimately, the x-buddhist, as Laruelle says of the philosopher, plays with loaded dice. And he must! A unitary system of thought such as Buddhism *must* be protected from the elements within its semiotic system “whose function,” as Terry Eagleton pointed out earlier, “is to indicate the truth that it cannot be totalised.” My critique will be useful or not to the reader depending on whether I have been convincing on this point concerning the function and consequences of the principle of sufficient Buddhism.

One of those consequences is the necessity, *but not sufficiency*, of a non-buddhist supplement, or, what amounts to the same thing, of a “buddhofiction.” Every x-buddhism *must* maintain its authority at the Great Feast of Knowledge. It must project *its* colors onto the black universe. It must drive *its* World-dominating *axis mundi* into the heart of the earth. But *the stranger* must engage in none of this. And with this point we come to a central operating premise of Laruelle’s notion of “philo-fiction,” from which I am deriving my concept of “buddhofiction.” The term:

may be understood as referring primarily to the “fictionalist” school of mathematics, where the warring ontological commitments of traditional debates are eliminated by taking up a stance of hypothetical “acceptance” with regard to the implications of the various objects they propose.⁵

A non-buddhism would in this manner “introduce peace into [x-buddhist] thought by means of democracy.”⁶ In the spirit of the Great Feast of Knowledge,

which, when the *polemos* ceases, is after all, a shared banquet; without ever losing sight of the black universe; and with feet pressed snugly against the earth, non-buddhism “is content to allow all [x-buddhist] knowledges equal validity or partial models of the Real that determines them in the last instance.” As we have seen, what renders them so is the “unilateralizing force of generic thought.” All thought equally, that is, is material cloned from the Real. As *thought-system* it crashes against the One on its way to unitary transcendence-decision-sufficiency, but only to be knocked level to lie prostrate on the earth, to appear in “the universe that is the human’s true habitat.”⁷ All thought really only ever remains in-One, forever available for thought renewed.

To a convicted x-buddhist, and many other readers besides, I imagine that non-buddhism appears to be yet another x-buddhism. After all, reconfiguring the materials that properly constitute “Buddhism” is a practice as old as Buddhism itself. That is not the case here. If the reader is not yet convinced of, or not yet even open to, that claim, I offer the following considerations before turning to a more sustained effort at creating a buddhofiction. First of all, let us be clear: non-buddhism, too, is a practice. In fact, it is nothing if not a practice. It is, moreover, a practice that entails *experience*, a practice in theory or, better, practice-in-theory, equally in thought and “in-person.” It is crucial to understand, however, that it is a practice unfolding under the auspices of the stranger subject. That is, it is the practice (of) radical immanence, practice (from) the Real (remember that the Laruelen graphics collapse the misleading distance between terms). In x-buddhist terms we might say that it is, for instance, emptiness-practice, force (of) thusness, vision-in-just-that, (non-)things-as-they-are, shitstick-without-shitstickness. If, yet again, this sounds like just more Buddhism, bear in mind that “Buddhism” is a term for a quite particular hallucination of the Real. “Buddhism” is a material *product* of the Real that it, as some x-buddhism, so longs to possess. It names its object of desire in the most intimate fashion: emptiness, thusness, womb of the Buddha, Victorious Vagina, gateless gate, shitstick. But in doing so, Buddhism forgets the very a priori that has excited its labor in the first place, and thus causes its subject to confuse Buddhism’s production for that a priori itself. It is different for the non-buddhist subject, for whom “there is a transcendental illusion that is already more consistent” precisely because its practice remains “immanent in its principle, and penetrates and encompasses the [x-buddhist] system, finding subtle support in each of its parts, brushing up against them where necessary without lingering, settling, or becoming attached.” Yet again, I imagine that this point sounds quintessentially “Buddhist” to many readers. For, isn’t Buddhist practice all about not becoming attached, nonabiding, letting

go? The crucial difference, I have been arguing, is that the non-buddhist subject engages the x-buddhist material in a manner “that is no longer nodal but unilateral.” The subject is disinterested in the interminable postulates connected to, say, thusness. But this not an arbitrary disinterest. It derives from remaining faithful to the immanent principle of unilaterality (thusness $\leftarrow$ x-buddhism $\leftarrow$ Real) rather than to the principle of sufficient Buddhism (x-buddhism $\rightarrow$ The Real thusness). So, for the non-buddhist subject, “the [x-buddhistizable] a priori constantly threatens to reclaim its sufficiency and to ‘recharge’ from its [x-buddhist] pretenses; it hides the Real a priori and confirms spontaneous [x-buddhism].”⁸ The stranger, precisely, depotentializes this threat.

As the mention of “a transcendental illusion” above indicates, non-buddhism comes in the name of honesty as much as of peace. It proclaims itself to be a fiction. Because it, like Buddhism, is a material that is merely *modeled on* or cloned from the Real, it, too, is marked with “certain characteristics of the spectre” that is the x-buddhist form of thought. It is, after all, x-buddhist material that it is “brushing up against,” though not adhering to. These characteristics include a transcendently posited subject (i.e., posited in-thought), if “transcendently radicalized” (as force [of] thought) subject, as well as further forms of what can only be termed hallucination and illusion. This fact may well give rise to jubilation among unsympathetic readers that non-buddhism is indeed just, and necessarily, another (mini-)version of the grand system of thought called Buddhism—so grand, indeed, that even a non-buddhist critique cannot refrain from circling back to its refuge in the end. Laruelle has something to say about the seemingly inescapable fact that Buddhism will lay claim to any usage of its materials:

Philosophy perpetually wants to claim the philo-fiction as just more philosophy. But all bets are off; the Lived-life is resilient, the inalienable Real cannot be forgotten, for it does not cease to resist any more than the subject (transcendently radicalized) is able to forget itself in the struggle. The outcome of non-philosophy is a *radical* Lived-life of hallucination and illusion. The immanent Lived-life is unforgettable . . . It is the real condition of salvation such that it engages a task and maintains the subject, head above the world.⁹

The real condition of . . . salvation? Perhaps our initial acceptance or rejection of a practice of thought comes down to whether we desire the World thus entailed. And perhaps this desire, in turn, comes down to whether we feel that the entailed World is ultimately one of victimization or salvation. Historically, both of these outcomes have followed from the materials of The One True Dharma.

It is a Buddhist World that produces allies in the Burmese military's slaughter of Rohingya Muslims. And it was from Buddhist materials that Ambedkar fashioned a World resisting, with courage and revolutionary zeal, the savage bigotry that perennially crushed the dreams of Indian *dalits*. Similarly, today, in North America, it is a Buddhist World that coeffects the comfortable middle class numbness necessary for the unchallenged perpetuation of our current neoliberal catastrophe. And it is a Buddhist World that offers succor to sufferers of soul-crushing anxiety. This exercise has no end. That is because, to paraphrase the popular Western-Zen-Buddhist vow, *hallucinations are inexhaustible*. Hallucinations appear real to the person living them, and so they produce real-world effects. If we could survey these effects like "the Buddha called Pure Knowledge of All Things" does, would we not see that Western Buddhist materials are essentially no different from any other in that their potential usage virtually spans the spectrum of human possibility?

Who is the subject, what is the World, that I desire to see woven from x-buddhist material? That is a question to be posed by every "non-buddhist," by anyone, that is to say, who wishes to create new forms of thought-practice-experience—and perhaps even knowledge—using x-buddhist materials. My own desire has been in evidence throughout this book, particularly in the micro-buddhofictions or non-buddhist conjunctions that run throughout it. For example, I have indicated in so many ways that practice must "render thought adequate to the *jouissance* of an ... immanent 'life.'"¹⁰ The subject of this thought-practice unites in one life the quickening duality of enduring enjoyment and pain. The thought-practice is adequate to the continuing horror/excess/superabundant vitality that is concomitant with merely being "one of them, even on the lowest rung," that is a human life within the community of humans.¹¹ It must, furthermore, enable the individual to fare well "in its inevitable struggle with the Authorities of the world."¹² As Anthony Paul Smith says in this regard, the practice functions as a "kind of counter-creation" to that which has been unleashed in the service of human "harassment"; and so it must function as a "force of insurrection that disempowers the world and operates without concern for its parameters."¹³ As this point indicates, an essential element of this non-buddhist performance is the battery of x-buddhist concepts that enable an awakened perspective on the "hardness of fate," on, that is to say, the a prioris that form the primitive conditions of our existence and thus must constitute the elements of a human "awakening": emptiness, materiality, interdependent phenomenality, radical contingency, non-self, and the ensuing imperative of compassion. Buddhism, Western Buddhism, x-buddhism, does indeed *think*. It is a thinking machine.

It thinks at the micro level of the discrete momentary thought-object-events that entail the fluid psychophysical organism known as the “person.” It thinks at the macro level of human organization, earthly care, and cosmic destiny. It is itself a brilliant speculative fiction wherein a World of justice, equality, kindness, and peace is imagined. It is, however, a fiction that has been programmed for decision and sufficiency, and thereby arrogated to the ornamental palace of aristocratic Wisdom. As I said in the Introduction, the purpose of this critique is not to annihilate this finely wrought edifice of Western Buddhism. The purpose is to view that edifice in the glow of a stranger, more creaturely, light. It is to one final glimpse from this view that we now turn.

A Buddhism without a past

A buddhofiction is not a rendering of Buddhism. It is a usage of Buddhist materials. It is not a contemplation of Buddhism. It is Buddhism practiced otherwise. Its practice will be both unrecognizable and unacceptable to an x-buddhist. That is because a buddhofiction depotentializes the very mechanisms that ensure x-buddhism its aristocratic status. A buddhofiction, more concretely, is an ideology constructed out of x-material run through anti-decisional machinery and slapped with the warrant of *insufficient*. Buddhism is a compromised practice of thought because it is performed under the “punctilious gaze” of Buddhist mastery. In the end, its subject’s thought must always yield to x-buddhism. It is for this reason that x-buddhism is an unrigorous practice of thought. A buddhofiction is thought rising in the eternal swell of the One. If that statement sounds grandiose, recall that it is this fact which has determined the methodology employed in this critique. All forms of thought, equally, rise and fall in this swell. The subject who approaches practice in this manner does so under the decidedly unpunctilious, because wholly indifferent, gaze of the One. In the end, thought must thus yield to this interminably “defestishizing experience,” no matter how strange and estranging it becomes.¹⁴ It is for this reason that non-buddhism is a rigorous practice of thought.

How does one even begin such an exercise? In general, Laruelle proposes a peaceful if firm strategy:

*We begin by supposing that [x-buddhism] does not exist or no longer exists, at least in the sufficient and authoritative mode and manner in which it presents itself, i.e., as a rational yet transcendental fact that teleologically controls the possible operations on it.*¹⁵

For the more insurrection-minded readers, the following strategy might bring a fuller measure of heat to the act. Laruelle proposes taking this approach in relation to Alain Badiou, a “great” thinker, a thinker “entirely apart,” someone who has not merely attained mastery of his epoch’s wisdom traditions but endeavors forcefully to “re-educate” that very dispensation. Surely, “the Buddha” is such a consequential a figure. For such a thinker (and his or her acolytes) a remonstrance against the Master’s overbearingness will merely be brushed aside. What is required is a “defensive ultimatum ... the defense of a certain human universality against an individual spokesperson of a tradition that is believed to place it in danger.”

To really place [x-buddhism] in question, even if we are obliged to make use of [x-buddhist] procedures, we must invalidate it in one blow and without remainder. We must presuppose every conceptual term to be already divested of all power. We must presuppose that the generic matrix is already given in the virtual state, and thus that [x-buddhist] objects are already reduced to the status of symptoms or mere occasions.¹⁶

The “generic matrix” that I develop is the practice-theory of meditation. Why that? It would be difficult to convince serious observers of the contemporary scene that anything other than meditation occupies the pride of place in Western Buddhism. This was true from the very beginning—of *Western* Buddhism, that is. In fact, the proliferation of meditation teaching among the laity is a primary identity marker of *Western* Buddhism. Like Western Buddhism itself, this phenomenon originated in Asia, becoming an essential feature by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. “Traditional” Buddhists, those “Eastern” Buddhists who had always placed their hopes in the salvation of a better future birth, would continue their rituals of merit-making and devotion in monk-administered temples. The new Western Buddhist, whether in Mandalay or Madison, would flock to lay-run meditation centers in search for the salvation of self-awakening. As Heinz Bechert and Jens-Uwe Hartmann write concerning the efforts to reform Buddhism in Nepal:

One of the most striking features of Buddhist modernism is the rebirth and popularisation of meditational techniques. In contrast to the traditional teaching of meditation—provided in each case by one teacher for individual students—the modernists have made a kind of mass movement out of meditating. Renowned teachers found meditation centers, which usually draw a large response. Apart from preaching, there is probably nothing that has so furthered the spread of Theravada Buddhism as the possibility of taking part in these meditational practices.¹⁷

The reasons for this emphasis have to do with the issues I raised in the Introduction concerning Western Buddhism's absorption of Enlightenment values, Romantic sentiments, and the Protestant ethos. Particularly concerning meditation, we can add scientism, medicalism, and psychologism to that mix. As David McMahan points out, meditation is typically presented "as a mode of internal observation and analysis akin to empirical science and not bound by authority and tradition." As the notion of "analysis" suggests, it is difficult to conceive of contemporary Western Buddhist meditation devoid of the values, models, assumptions, and even language of American psychology. As McMahan further observes, meditation is typically advertised as:

a psychological method for accessing deeper, unconscious recesses of the mind in order to expose unconscious constraints and negative dispositions so that they may be transformed or released to allow creative and compassionate forces naturally residing in the mind to flow forth unimpeded.¹⁸

McMahan's description here highlights several decisive features of Western Buddhist meditation. First, it is thoroughly idealist. Abandoning the nonnegotiable revolutionary principle of *anātman*, Western Buddhist meditation teachers assume the primacy of an integral agent possessing an internal mind, or in other words, an *atman*. Second, meditation is wholly "detachable from the tradition itself."¹⁹ Never mind the arduous treading of the eightfold path, of the stages of the path, or even of the pathless path; never mind the taxing ethical demands of *sīla*, *dāna*, and all of those annoyingly impossible *pāramitās*: we can simply plop down on our \$100 chakra-purple organic buckwheat-filled cushion, or better yet, our couch, and meditate away. Third, meditation is not merely detachable from the network of postulates that constitutes any given *x-buddhism*, it is detachable from the material structures that constitute society as a whole. We saw this idea at work earlier in Matthieu Ricard's instructions to the Davos billionaires: "You are not the slave of your thoughts—just gaze at them, like a shepherd sitting above a meadow watching his sheep go by." Thoughts, this thinking goes, might indeed be noxious seepage spewing from the social world into the mind, but with meditation you can become adept at rising above them, and remain unscathed. To repeat Žižek's conclusion to this proposition: "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." Fourth, meditation is reattached to particular *x-buddhist* postulates in order to add conceptual ballast to the reconfigured usage. Mindfulness maven Jon Kabat-Zinn, for instance, is notorious for his opportunistic equivocation on

this matter, whereby he simultaneously distances himself from the apparently unacceptable truth that Mindfulness is bound up in Buddhism in absolutely determinate ways and yet adamantly insists that the implicit benefits derived from that relationship obtain for his Mindfulness program.²⁰ But Kabat-Zinn is not alone. We see some version of this complex collusion even with figures we should expect to be allergic to certain Buddhist values and skeptical of Buddhist claims, such as Daniel Goleman and Richard Davidson in their neuroscientific study of meditation.²¹ Finally, while emptiness is the heart of Buddhist doctrine, meditation is the heart of Buddhist practice. In a grand gathering of leading x-buddhist teachers in the Boston Park Plaza Hotel at the end of the last century to discuss the future of “Buddhism in America” (the title of the conference), the American Dzogchen teacher Surya Das (born Jeffrey Miller), offered several “Emergent Trends in Western Dharma.”²² These trends represented the crucial features that were informing “the transplantation of Asian Buddhism into the fertile fields of the Western world.” Trend number one is that the coming Buddhism will be “Meditation-Based and Experientially Oriented.” It is curious that Surya Das had not noticed that this feature was not a trend at all. It was a fait accompli.²³