Wallis, Glenn. "Introduction: Raise the Curtain on the Theater of Western Buddhism!." *A Critique of Western Buddhism: Ruins of the Buddhist Real*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. 3–20. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474283588-005>>.

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Introduction: Raise the Curtain on the Theater of Western Buddhism!

What are we to make of Western Buddhism? It presents itself as the treasure house of ideas and practices that were formulated by an enlightened teacher who lived in India 2,500 years ago. Followers of Western Buddhism tell us that this man's teachings accurately identify the real conditions of human existence. If true, that is quite a remarkable achievement. It would mean that an ancient diagnosis of human experience still pertains in our hyper-accelerated, ultra-technological modern society. Is such a correspondence possible? Western Buddhism might, conversely, be made out to be less of an unchanging universal account of human reality and more of a contemporary ideology. In its basic sense, an ideology is a strategy that "represents the *imaginary* relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence."¹ To recognize Western Buddhism as an ideology is not to view it as an instance of false consciousness or nefarious deception. It is rather to acknowledge it as being uniquely productive of a quite particular subject, one that imagines his or her relation to the world in quite particular ways. If we view Western Buddhism as an ideology, as, that is, a form of life, an apparently natural way of being within any given social formation, we could certainly better explain the incredible diversity among its forms throughout time and place. For, unlike an idealist timeless teaching, "ideology has a material existence."² Its dictates are always enacted within the presently existing social arena and realized as a practice by real people therein. Invoking the prospect of an imaginary relation to one's world suggests a third, altogether different, possibility. Western Buddhism might be understood as a strategy for *engaging* with the dominant ideology of a society. In this case, it would be a practice of critiquing and possibly even improving the social formation in which its practitioners find themselves currently embedded.

My observation of Western Buddhism leads me to the conclusion that it itself is unsure which of these three characterizations best describes it. By "it,"

I mean, of course, the combined effect of the people—the formulators, teachers, and practitioners—who act in the name of “Western Buddhism,” or really of “Buddhism” in the West today. Their accumulated record is an expression of adamant faith in the universal veracity of their teachings. Somewhat paradoxically, they are equally willing to perform operations on those same teachings, to adjust and alter them, in ways that suggest that they are aware of the time- and place-dependent ideological nature of the teachings. More puzzling, these same people regularly invoke concepts that caution, *watch your head! radical critique of self and society underway!*

One contention driving this book is that Western Buddhism functions in all three of these modes, but to varying degrees of explicitness. I see Western Buddhism as a critique subsumed within an ideology subsumed within a faith. I am almost tempted to apply to Western Buddhism, along with a grain of salt, Freud’s famous topography. *Faith* is Western Buddhism’s superego. It internalizes and echoes back society’s sense of morality, righteousness, and goodness. It aims to produce the ideal subject, one who spontaneously conforms to the social law. The superego-faith of this subject compels him or her to eschew expression of aggressions that are forbidden by decorum. The faithful Western Buddhist subject is thus adept at channeling aggression into affirmation. *Critique* is Western Buddhism’s id. The critical drive bound up in certain Western Buddhist postulates (e.g., emptiness, no-self, impermanence) are primitive and instinctual. This drive impels the subject’s visceral desire to be un beholden to subjugating norms, to be free of society’s (and of faith’s) self-serving moralistic constraints. It thus tends to produce a subject who takes up conceptual arms against the deceptively polite policing of those norms and thrusts them into a controverting chaos. The critical Western Buddhist subject is adept at flushing out repressive sleeper cells within the doctrinal and communal compound. *Ideology* is Western Buddhism’s ego. It is the “I” of the subject, the “we” of the community. It is motivated by the demands of society (and of faith) and is thus acutely sensitive and responsive to “reality,” to, that is to say, society’s status quo. The ideological Western Buddhist subject seeks, above all, some form of wellbeing. Happiness would be optimal; but, short of that eternally elusive goal, certainly the reduction of stress and tension isn’t too much to ask for. After all, Western Buddhist ideology, as Freud says of the ego, “serves three severe masters and does what it can to bring their claims and demands into harmony with one another.”³ Ideology-ego’s “tyrannical masters” are, of course, reality, faith, and critique. Western Buddhist ideology thus paradoxically produces an *anxious* Western Buddhist subject, one who is able to minimize conflicts with

the pious demands of faith only by repressing and shoring up against the primal aggressive force circulating within the concepts of that very faith.

As the title suggests, one aim of this book is to give voice to the critical unconscious, to stay with our psychoanalytic metaphor, of Western Buddhist discourse. I will give the details of my approach later. Here, just a brief word about the general purpose of critique. Marjorie Gracieuse sums up this purpose when she speaks of “wresting vital potentialities of humans from the artificial forms and static norms that subjugate them.”⁴ That is a generous definition of the task. It allows at the outset that the object of critique has something of value to offer us. At the same time it suspects that this value comes embedded in a system of thought and practice that has superfluous, and problematic, elements. These elements constitute a symbolic surplus value that functions to capture the desire of the practitioner. It is reasonable to think that it is in this surplus that we discover features that limit and coerce the subject’s agency. Advertising gives us the most obvious examples of the value/surplus differential. It pitches item after item that relates to the fulfilment of some basic human need—food, clothing, hygiene, mating, transportation, security, relaxation, and so on. Yet it should not be difficult to discern how an ad for, say, a Prius SUV or a pair of Aéropostale ripped skinny jeans elicits desires that far exceed fulfillment of basic transportation and clothing needs. In addition, advertisement is produced by, and further reproduces, quite particular social relations (economic, gender, racial, political). Symbolic surplus value is easily discernible when it comes to such goods as a pair of pants that, beyond the basic need of covering the flesh in cold weather, inscribe their young female wearer into “consumer society’s colonization of youth and sexuality through [selling her] ‘freedom’ ... to do whatever she wants with her body.”⁵ It becomes more difficult to discern in the cases of the “vital potentialities” that Gracieuse alludes to. At what point, for example, does education cross over from being the practice of developing the human potential for thinking and knowing into a means of social inculcation? Paulo Freire, for instance, holds that all people possess the potential to become aware of the forces (social, political, cultural, linguistic, psychological, etc.) that constitute “the logic of the present.”⁶ An educational program can facilitate that end, he says, by training students in “the practice of freedom,” whereby they learn to discern the operations of these forces on their own sense of identity, as well as on the ways in which these forces serve to replicate and perpetuate “the logic of the present.” An educational program can just as likely be put in the service of a political agenda that precisely wants to hinder such awareness of that logic. To do so, it does not deny “the vital potentiality of the human” that is the capacity

for creative critical inquiry. Rather, it perversely directs this potential into a stultifying framework (forms and norms) of preordained outcomes. Another example, one familiar to readers of the present book, is meditation. Let's assume for a moment that sitting still, silently, and attentively serves, like education, the vital potentiality of the human for a certain type of creative critical self-inquiry. At what point does this ostensibly neutral, natural inquiry become a node in an ideological system? Is it not curious that meditators virtually always happen to discover in their meditation the very claims of their community's doctrine? What does such "validation" tell us about the relationship between the vital human potential affixed (possibly) to silent sitting and the apparently overdetermining forms and norms that frame such a practice?

I leave those questions hanging for now. The point here is that critique is a practice that attempts to "wrest" vital value from subjugating surplus. It is a practice that allows us to make explicit the operations of a system of thought and practice that the system itself, in order to remain whole, keeps implicit—its unstated assumptions; its unspoken values; its relationship to existing social, economic, and political formations; and, perhaps most importantly, its tacit formation of individual actors in the world. Without a practice of critique, we cannot distinguish a catalyst for a vital human potentiality from a self-serving prescription of a covertly ideological program, however well-meaning that program may be. The wager of this book is that, in distinguishing between the two types of practice, we are dealing with a difference that makes a world of difference. But what might that difference be? I will deal with this question in depth later. For now, just to give the reader some initial orientation, we can consider the purpose of the "wresting" that Gracieuse recommends. In brief, it has to do with something that will sound familiar to readers of Buddhism, namely, a certain unbinding from violence, delusion, and fugitive desire. We might call this unbinding *freedom*, *liberation*, or even *nirvana*. If these terms sound grandiose in the present context, they may nonetheless name a genuine vital potentiality of human beings. If so, this unbinding will require, like the Buddha besieged beneath the *bodhi* tree, a ferocious struggle against "the world under the sway of death."⁷ For, in naming coercive structures, in speaking of subjugation, stasis, and dissemblance, Gracieuse is giving voice to nothing if not the necessity of a kind of human insurrection against the existing world. I believe that Western Buddhism understands this struggle. The crucial question is whether it provides arms in solidarity with the struggling human or whether it performs a kind of spiritualized *Dolchstoß* in the very heat of battle. Or perhaps we will discover another potent image to characterize Western Buddhism in

our time. First, however, we must explore many criticisms and refutations and propose many new ideas, concepts, and claims.

Why Western Buddhism?

Why *Western* Buddhism? The title of this book surely suggests that I am treating a quite specific variety of Buddhism: that which exists in the West. It would follow that this western variety has *something*—texts, doctrines, teachers, practices, beliefs, communities—that differs significantly from its eastern relatives. Otherwise, why would it be necessary to add the modifier? At the same time, though, the reader will notice that I often use “Buddhism” interchangeably with the modified form “Western Buddhism” and, indeed, rarely differentiate between the two usages. I will have more to say about this matter later. Here, I would like to highlight what I mean by the term “Western Buddhism.”

Western Buddhism originated in the East, in Asia. I am not referring to the obvious fact that Asia, specifically India, is the wellspring of all subsequent international forms of Buddhism. Rather, from its core values to its high aspirations, Western Buddhism is the result of an articulation and self-understanding that initially took shape in Asia. According to the German Indologist Heinz Bechert, the lineaments of what we now think of as Western Buddhism were first drawn in Sri Lanka. This origin should not be surprising. As Bechert points out, since 1517 the coastal areas of the island had been occupied by, first Portuguese, then Dutch, and finally British, forces of merchants, militaries, and missionaries. At that time, too, the Buddhist Kingdom of Kandy (1521–1818) was rising in the land’s interior, preserving the ancient domination of Buddhism in daily affairs. This hotbed of East–West proximity led to encounters such as the spirited public debates between Buddhist monks and Christian missionaries, where opposing worldviews could be aired, evaluated, critiqued, and defended. It is thus also not surprising that Asian Buddhists were subjected to a long and ultimately far-reaching exposure to “European ways of thinking.”⁸ The movement of the arrow, though, was turning in the other direction as well: the colonizing Westerners were showing a sustained interest in Buddhism. However scheming and skeptical this newfound interest may have been on the side of the colonizers, it created, in turn, an equally new self-consciousness among Buddhists concerning their own tradition. “Thus,” writes Bechert, “an essential presupposition for the development” of what would become Western Buddhism was this “intensive encounter between western and Buddhist thinking.”⁹

By the early nineteenth century, under British rule, Buddhism in Sri Lanka was, Bechert writes, “exhibiting serious signs of decay.”¹⁰ Significantly, at the same time “the influence of Christian schools and missionaries on the country’s educated classes was rapidly increasing.”¹¹ By mid-century, members of this new Anglophile elite feared that Buddhism would disappear altogether from the island by the end of the century. Precisely the opposite occurred: Buddhism underwent radical reforms, eventually strengthening its standing on the island and beyond. From a traditionalist’s perspective, however, this preservation of Buddhism must have seemed a deal with the devil. The Westernized Sri Lankan leaders of this Buddhist “renewal,” writes Bechert,

used, for the most part and without being fully aware of the fact, methods and arguments copied from their opponents. It benefited these reformers, moreover, that, at that time, there were several highly educated Buddhist monks who possessed the ability to formulate the reformers’ concerns in modern terms, and to bring these concerns closer to their contemporaries whose ways of thinking had been strongly influenced by the European mindset. They recognized the necessity of compromising with modern civilization in order to secure the survival of the Buddhist tradition.¹²

Following the designation for similar compromising tendencies unfolding within the Catholic Church at the same time, Bechert employed the term “Buddhist modernism” to capture the basic character of this emerging form of Buddhism.¹³ He adds that this modernizing tendency would “eventually gain a foothold in every Buddhist country,”¹⁴ from where, of course, it would eventually be exported to the West. Perhaps the most striking claim made by Bechert here is that the Westernized Sri Lankan instigators of the reform had so internalized their former opponents’ values that these values were introduced imperceptibly back into the reformed Buddhism *as preeminently Buddhist*.

What, then, were these epoch-changing values? What were the decisive features of this “European mindset” that so altered Asian Buddhists’ self-understanding? A comment by Gunapala Malalasekera (1899–1973), an eminent product of the English-educated Sri Lankan elite and one of the leading figures behind the modern conceptualization and internationalization of Buddhism, provides several hints.

Asia, after having lain dormant for nearly five centuries, is once more taking its due place in the world and bids fair to be the leader of the new age. It is significant that Buddhism, which, more than any other force, was responsible for the great civilisations and great cultural influences of that continent, should

also be coming back to its rightful place. The Buddha was the first great scientist to appear among men. That Buddha discovered what scientists have only now discovered, that there is nothing called matter or mind existing separately in this world but they are the result of forces which continually cause them to come into operation and that they dissolved and came into operation again. Buddhism seeks the meaning of life in life itself. In this search, life is ennobled. Life becomes an external and a fulfilled Now. Truth is not a revelation but a discovery. The human person has to realise itself as the subject of knowledge, as socially responsible and as artistically creative.

This passage reads like the endorsement of Enlightenment values, Romantic sentiments, and Protestant ethos that it in fact is. It also tacitly repudiates much of what Buddhism had been traditionally understood to represent. For example, Buddhism is no longer the world-denying vehicle that provides refuge from the poisonous, painful lure of civilization. It is now celebrated, retrospectively, as a positive impetus behind the very cultural formations that traditional Buddhists were admonished to renounce. The Buddha, the shamanic superman (*mahāpuruṣa*) who descended from heaven at birth, possessed supernatural power, performed miracles, and attained transcendental cosmic wisdom, was now converted into a rational, empirically minded scientist. Buddhism consequently no longer had on offer the cosmological vision—gods, heavens, hells, rebirth, karmic retribution, and all—that grounded its “total cure, opening to the unconditional beyond space and time.”¹⁵ Rather, it now offers “optimism and activity”¹⁶ on behalf of society and society’s engaged, creatively expressive, if neurotically divided, individual. The practice of Buddhism itself is now seen as predominantly lay rather than monastic. Even here, though, it is no longer realized in the community celebrations and ritual participation that marked superstitious “folk” Buddhism, but rather in the “privatized and internalized” psychological sphere of “one’s mind or soul.”¹⁷ It should be obvious by now that the terms I used earlier—Enlightenment, Romantic, and Protestant—are fitting monikers for this new articulation of Buddhism; and indeed they have been from time to time suggested in place of “modernist.” Thus, we can summarize as follows. Western Buddhism is a progeny of the Enlightenment: it implicitly values, for instance, reason and rationality, progress, equality, empiricism, and the primacy of science. It is the spiritual kin of Romanticism: it valorizes personal emotions, creative imagination, intuition, nature, the exemplar of the heroic figure, and the primacy of the subject. It is a guardian of Protestantism: it reflexively values laicization, individual effort and personal achievement, psychologized internalization, ritual simplification or outright elimination,

return to scriptural sources, and the primacy of “self-culture.”¹⁸ Finally, this modernized and Westernized Buddhism, far from being confined to the West, is international in scope, transcending as it does “cultural and national boundaries, creating ... a cosmopolitan network of intellectuals, writing most often in English.”¹⁹

What I have sketched here is, of course, an idealized type of Buddhism. No single instantiation of Buddhism, East or West, fulfills the ambitions of its modernist reformers. And, for that matter, neither do the most fervent devotees of the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and Protestantism live up to their cults’ lofty expectations. If we were to sift carefully through the values I just mentioned and compare them to how people behave historically in real life, would we not find self-delusion, contradiction, and outright dishonesty at every turn? So, let’s bear in mind Max Weber’s warning that “to speak in terms of ideal types” is “in a certain sense doing violence to historical reality.”²⁰ As Weber further reminds us, however, without this little act of violence we will not get very far in our investigations. So there it is. Whether in Tokyo or Toledo, you now know how to spot a Western Buddhist.

Some readers may still wonder why I am limiting my critique to this *Western*, albeit internationalized, Buddhism. Isn’t Western Buddhism too easy of a target, with its facile prescriptions for happiness and its Pollyannish affirmationism? Wouldn’t this be a much more substantive critique if it addressed Buddhism as a whole, taking into account, for instance, the serious ancient and medieval philosophical traditions? If we dwell on the first point for a moment, we will discover an additional characteristic of Western Buddhism. It is, in fact, a feature that is to a great extent *definitive* of Western Buddhism. I should also admit that it is a feature that strengthens my imaginary interlocutor’s argument against making Western Buddhism the sole target of my critique. I am thinking here of the widespread application of the “Easy-Easy Principle” in Western Buddhist discourse. This principle is a concept of the logician and argumentation theorist John Woods. In brief, the principle states that if a human activity is easy, so is, or so should be, the theory informing that activity. In *The Death of Argument*, Woods offers these definitions:

A task is easy when a human being can perform it competently without formal tutelage, and without noticeable effort ... An easy theory is similarly one that can be understood by an arbitrarily selected competent individual without tutelage and without noticeable effort. Easy theories include common sense theories, but are not restricted to them.²¹

Elsewhere, Woods says that the theory of such a practice “must likewise be free of technical or theoretically abstruse content.”²² Western Buddhist rhetoric, of course, is more prone to speaking of the “simple” nature of Buddhism, its practices, and its corresponding theories. The principle, however, still holds, as does the condition that Western Buddhist thought and practice is, according to its rhetoric and unlike “hard” theories and techniques, largely available “without formal tutelage, and without noticeable effort.” As a prominent figure sums up this feature of Western Buddhism: “Practice: you can’t do it wrong.”²³ In fact, simplicity is a trope burrowed within the very marrow of the tradition. Alexander Wynne provides some insight into this trope in *The Origins of Buddhist Meditation*. His intent and context are admittedly different from mine; but what he says is nonetheless instructive. Wynne argues that the simplicity of a particular canonical account of the Buddha’s awakening “likely” proves that account to have greater veracity over another, more complex, variant. Wynne acknowledges that “simplicity is not necessarily an unambiguous sign of the historical authenticity of any Buddhist text,” and yet his acceptance of the simpler account in this case exceeds the old-text critical principle of *lectio brevior*.²⁴ As is all-too-common in Buddhist studies scholarship, Wynne the scholar is indistinguishable from a devout practitioner when he argues that the “simplicity in the account [of the Buddha’s first encounter with a passer-by after his awakening] suggest the possibility that it is a description of liberating insight, i.e. ‘an immediate verbalisation of (a conceptualisation of) an actual experience,’ rather than a theory.” Wynne, perhaps unintentionally, broadcasts his faith-driven assumptions at work here:

We can assume that the Buddha’s own accounts of his awakening would have been “immediate verbalisations of an actual experience,” rather than secondary theories. If any trace of the original account of the Buddha’s awakening is to be found in the early Buddhist sources, we should expect to find it in a simple description, and not a complex theory; the simpler the description the better.²⁵

Unless we subscribe to such values in advance, why we would assume that a “description of liberating insight” would necessarily be simple and untheoretical? In any case, Wynne is giving voice to a widespread rhetorical premise of Buddhism, East and West; and that premise is perfectly congruent with the Easy-Easy—or, in this case, the Simple-Simple—Principle. Another leading figure of Western Buddhism offers a somewhat cruder version of this principle: “*sūtras* and *sastras* are treated by Zen as mere waste paper whose utility consist in wiping off the dirt of the intellect and nothing more.”²⁶ *Sūtras*

and, particularly, *śāstras* are, of course, the repositories of the theoretical “intellectual analysis” of ostensibly untheoretical liberating insights. Such rhetoric, typical of Western Buddhism, assumes that to attach a complex theory to a natural, hence “easy” or simple, human task is to burden it with unnecessary, indeed counterproductive, intellectualization. Worse even, it is to woefully mischaracterize that activity. There is, however, a serious problem with this Easy-Easy Principle: it is “a hopelessly mistaken maxim.”²⁷ Riding a bike, Woods points out, is easy; but “plotting the underlying kinesiology is not.” Dogen (1200–1253) might consider meditation to be “the *dharma* gate of enjoyment and ease,” but plotting the hidden value system, much less the neurology, of such an activity involves neither.²⁸ The latter, difficult, project is the theoretically complex working out of what is occurring in the former, ostensibly easy, activity. Western Buddhist figures eschew the supposed overcomplication of its theoretical project because it holds its (superior) practical application to be necessarily of utmost simplicity.

The ubiquity of the Easy-Easy Principle in Western Buddhist discourse—rising quite often to a pronounced anti-intellectualism—might be a cause for turning our critical attention to the supposedly more philosophically sophisticated eastern varieties. The error in that move would be in assuming that the same principle does not hold for the more traditional forms of Buddhist thought and practice. That point is too complex to flesh out here. However, Tom Tillemans’s work on the influential Indian Buddhist philosopher Candrakīrti (flourished around 600–650) suggests a line of inquiry in this direction. Tillemans speaks, for instance, of the fact that for Candrakīrti our everyday “conventional truth is very much a *dumbed-down truth*” requiring, if at all, a theoretical explanation in which “*sophistication itself is to be ruled out*.”²⁹ To be fair, Tillemans suspects that Candrakīrti sits as high as he does in the Buddhist philosophical firmament only because later Tibetan thinkers, such as Tsongkhapa (1357–1419), wrestled mightily with his “pedestrian world picture,” transforming the Indian thinker into “a significantly better philosopher than he actually was.”³⁰ This line of inquiry, however, just might reveal that the most sophisticated goods that traditional Buddhism has to offer rarely, if ever, actually rise above faith-bound philosophical theology.

With the neologism “x-buddhism,” which I will explain in Chapter 4 (under the subheading “Decision”), I argue that all forms of Buddhism, East and West, share an identity that is reducible to a common factor. For that reason, a critique of Western Buddhism is a critique of Buddhism *tout court*.

Theaters comforting, theaters cruel

With that description in mind, it will be useful to revisit the question: what are we to make of Western Buddhism? Is it the serious form of thought and practice that its adherents would have us believe? It certainly speaks in the idiom of seriousness. Buddhist teachings invite us to entertain possibilities that should make even the most impulsive of the proverbial rushing fools balk: emptiness, selflessness, freedom, rebirth, the multiverse, enlightenment, abiding happiness. Topics like these, of course, have occupied some of the brightest minds that humanity has produced since the dawn of recorded human thought, thinkers from Parmenides and Plato to David Hume, Hannah Arendt, and Stephen Hawking, to just barely get the list going. Now, we're hearing about Buddhism's ability to address the most vexing issues confronting the twenty-first century, issues such as the domination of technology, environmental degradation, the intricacies of trauma and addiction, and the mysteries of the human brain. Western Buddhist teachers suffer no loss for words when it comes to any of these topics. Academics, too—principally in Buddhist studies, but also in fields like neuroscience, psychology, and philosophy—laud Buddhism's contributions to interminable debates on epistemology, ontology, logic, language, perception, and consciousness. The accumulated result is that Buddhism enjoys a blue-ribbon reputation in the West as a profound all-encompassing system of thought, or at least, to those less inclined toward intractable conundrums, as a self-help remedy par excellence.

Is this reputation deserved? Perhaps the most obvious approach to investigating the viability of Buddhists' claims for their ostensibly pansophic teaching would be to systematically present and analyze these teachings. Such an approach, however, would be tedious beyond belief and ultimately unproductive. Why do I say this? It would be tedious because "Buddhism" is the name of a two-and-a-half millennia amassing of ideas, beliefs, rituals, worldviews, texts, theories, art, architecture, music, fashion, practices, universities, monasteries, lay communities, virtually *ad infinitum*. And all of this in the cauldron of cultures spanning Beijing and Boston. Although this baroque assortment bears the shared name of "Buddhism," the commonalities across time and space are mostly of the family resemblance variety, wherein the self-identity of each lies in its difference from the others. Like the proud factions of a venerable and extremely large clan, Buddhists seem to be particularly sensitive to this matter of difference. This sensitivity, furthermore, informs the reason that a doctrinal analysis of

Buddhism would be as unproductive as it would be tedious. Contemporary Western Buddhists commonly respond to criticism with an appeal to exception. This tendency parallels what I call a *detail fetish* among Western Buddhists, a kind of exemplification reflex.³¹ Providing a particular example in order to make a finely calibrated point is, indeed, not unusual in complex systems of thought. Heidegger has his hammer; Wittgenstein, his slabs. Spinoza has his hatchet, and Descartes, his wax.³² If you have ever read even the first page of a book on classical Buddhist philosophy, you will almost certainly have come across “the pot.” Buddhists, in the written word and in dialogue, have always been quick at the draw with their own mechanism of ideological damage control: the hyper-specific doctrinal detail. Apparently, there is no criticism of a given Buddhist concept that cannot be decisively dismissed with an added detail, an overlooked facet, an ever-so-slight shifting of the dharmic goalpost. The detail is taken from this teacher’s meticulous interpretation, from that pinpointed textual passage; or, failing its intended effect, from the hidden sphere of wisdom known as personal experience. The detail corrects, alters, refines, and reshapes. And along the way, it inevitably derails any criticism, rendering it irrelevant.

If Buddhism is in equal measure elusive and unassailable, how is an evaluation of it possible? If the term “Buddhism,” or for that matter “Western Buddhism,” is a catchall for such a wide diversity of phenomena, what is it exactly that is being critiqued? And even if we can say, if every particular instance that is offered up for critical analysis is countered by a supposedly more salient yet resistant instance, on what foundation can a critique be raised? To indicate more about my approach to these matters in *A Critique of Western Buddhism*, and to convey a sense of the book’s spirit, I would like momentarily to band together the Buddha and the bearer of such *ad rem* wisdom as “Where there is a stink of shit/there is a smell of being.”³³

The Buddha did not write books, but if he had, I can imagine him thinking, along with his scatological comrade, Antonin Artaud: “I would like to write a Book that would drive people mad, that would be like an open door leading them where they would never have consented to go; in short, a door that opens to reality.”³⁴ In the terms that I introduce in Chapter 2, what Artaud calls “reality” is better understood as “the Real.”³⁵ In one of its uses, the concept of the Real gives us a way to talk about disavowed features of reality that threaten to sunder our constructions of order, sense, and meaning. In another usage, the Real names a facet of existence presupposed, yet unaffected, by human symbolic systems, such as language and ideology. So, I will accordingly adjust Artaud’s terminology here. The Real, in Artaud’s charged and idiosyncratic idiom, is

marked by “cruelty.” It is, in fact, the definitive cruelty. The very purpose of theater, Artaud believed, is to refract this cruelty: theater should be coextensive with the Real. It should ensue *from* the Real, thus operate alongside it. And yet the theater of his day aspired to be little more than a melodramatic retreat from the threats of modern life. It sought to *protect* its audience from the cruel. Artaud had a different vision. He saw in theater a practice that “inspires us with the fiery magnetism of its images and acts upon us like a spiritual therapeutics whose touch can never be forgotten.”³⁶ With this aspiration, he was up against no less than a popular institution that served, like the church and the police, the creation of a public submissive to an oppressive status quo. Artaud thus made it his mission to transmute this theater of complacency into an “immediate and violent”³⁷ maelstrom, one that exposed its viewers to the primal truths of *their* lives. Only a theater that wakes up its audience’s “nerves and heart,”³⁸ he believed, is worthy of the name. Such a theater must be built on the cruelty that is the Real, on those eschewed features of reality that, to evoke Artaud’s wise words from above, stink. Such a theater must not shrink from the possibility that “extreme action, pushed beyond all limits”³⁹ must ensue from its feral process. For, if not pushed with such intentional zeal, the machinations of delusion and self-satisfaction will overwhelm the vitality that is catalyzed by the lucid acknowledgment of the cruel Real.

What do the fiery dreams of a bona fide madman like Artaud have to do with the cool and eminently sane Buddha? To suggest a parallel, let’s turn to the primal scene of their respective spheres of action. We see demented revels of the Dionysian *maenad* dancing and drinking themselves into orgiastic frenzy, shredding, with their phallic *thyrsos*, then ecstatically devouring, the raw flesh of the sacrificial beast. Out of this appetite, the theater is born. Buddhism’s myth of origin is hardly less dramatic. Revisiting the locus of its founding scene, the seat of the Buddha’s awakening, we are in the presence of overwhelming elemental power: trees, water, sky, fire, earth, bodies beautiful and decaying, lust, passion, storms, death, swirling cosmos, occult powers, animals, sprites, spirits, gods. Sitting against the trunk of a massive *figus*, the Buddha, as Gilles Deleuze says of writers, uses all the resources of his athleticism to “dip into a chaos, into a movement that goes to the infinite.”⁴⁰ By engaging in extreme contemplative experimentation, the Buddha enters into a “Dionysian space of undoing” within which he enacts “not a system of demonstration, but an ordeal in which the mind is given new eyes.”⁴¹

Each of these spheres represents a literal theater, a *theatron*, a space of violent, if perhaps cathartic, seeing.⁴² And yet from a catalyst for the crushing ordeal

of human awakening, the Theater of Buddhism, like that of Artaud's France, lapses into a refuge of comfort, into an institution of sleepy, complacent social conformity, into thought so sluggish as to mope its way into the desert of the Western New Age. That, at least, is one of two major premises of this book. What creates this breach is that the progenitors of Buddhism and of the Theater of Cruelty presuppose a "Real" of which their particular forms are crucial recoveries. This fact, the positing of a relationship to the Real—indeed, the very evocation of the notion—permits a corollary to the premise. In the case of Buddhism, this corollary is that its conceptual materials may, despite its lapses, offer valuable resources for radical reformations of thought and practice and of self and society in the contemporary West. But now a shadow of this first premise appears; namely, the noun "Buddhism" indexes an historical failure to unleash the force of its very own thought. "Buddhism," that is, names an obstinate *containment* of potentially vital human goods. The end result is that Buddhism everywhere functions as a conservative protector of the social status quo, however toxic, and as an ideological fortress spawning subjects whose treasured goal certainly appears to be to remain unscathed—in some sense or another—by life's vicissitudes. Paradoxically, therefore, we cannot look to Buddhism—to its teachers and defenders, to its commentaries and explications, to its communities and organizations—to assist us in removing its auto-erected bulwark of resistance.

The second major premise of this book derives from this paradox. It holds that certain critical procedures must be performed on and with the Buddhist material if Buddhism is to avoid complete absorption into the Western self-help industry. The question twice posed in this introduction—What are we to make of Buddhism?—is thus intended in the most literal of senses. What, if anything, might we do with Buddhism, with Buddhist materials, in our present circumstances? Committed Western Buddhists will be perplexed by the very question. It entails an assumption that, I doubt, would ever occur to them, much less be acceptable. For, to its adherents, Buddhism is nothing if not an exemplary inventory of *what we should do in our present circumstances*. This inventory is, furthermore, nothing if not wholly sufficient. It encompasses the entire cosmos, in fact, including, for instance, what we should do with our minds, our bodies, our speech, and in comportment to others and to the environment. It makes pronouncements on the workings of causality, past, present, and future. It holds the codes to the cosmic vault of meaning and value. So, first, perhaps, among a host of other difficulties that I discuss in this book is that a critique will have to avoid the snares of *the principle of sufficient Buddhism*. Echoing

Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason (all things, according to reason, have a reason) as well as François Laruelle's critical principle of sufficient philosophy (all things, according to philosophy, are philosophizable), this principle holds that Buddhism can be universally applied to its object. Given that Buddhism's overt object is reality, or indeed, the Real, Buddhism's sufficiency knows virtually no bounds. That being the case, any critique of Buddhism that uses Buddhist materials is setting itself up to be absorbed back into the fold as yet one more iteration of Buddhism. A critique will thus have to be nimble and will have to hit hard.

Here, I would like to mention four basic features informing my critique. The details will be found in the chapters that follow. First, I am borrowing elements from the prodigious theoretical apparatus of the contemporary French thinker François Laruelle. The most succinct definition of the aim of Laruelle's critique is that it is "the simplification of transcendence."⁴³ Laruelle holds that philosophy—the topic of his own critique, which he terms "non-philosophy" or "non-standard philosophy"—suffers a condition whereby it is "intended by necessity to remain empty but which necessarily evades this void with objects and foreign goals provided by experience, culture, history, language, etc."⁴⁴ Philosophy must remain empty because of its "intention" of filling the role of an *explicator* of immanent reality or indeed of a kind of science of the Real. That means that philosophy identifies itself as an organon, as an unmediated instrument of knowledge, rather than as *co-author* of the reality it explicates. Instead, what we find is that philosophy habitually affixes its own postulates concerning reality and the Real onto the very instrument of its ostensible science, thereby inevitably mixing these with the object to be known. Through this mixture, philosophy "evades" the immanent Real that it endeavors to think and know, and instead erects a transcendental mirror reflecting philosophy's mixture back onto the world, and into the Real. This circularity entails the failure of philosophy to function as the rigorous organon it so aspires to be. It thus becomes instead a "rumor . . . which is transmitted by hearsay, imitation, specularity, and repetition."⁴⁵ As I will show, Laruelle's recognition of philosophy's identity transfers uncannily well to that of Buddhism. In part, this shows the protean nature of his theory. Indeed, he holds that "'non-philosophy' is the generic term for the enterprise which takes on other names locally according to the materials to which it relates."⁴⁶ It is a theory that is simultaneously a practice, whereby the practitioner *uses* it to *do something* with the local material. I will say more about this facet in Part 3. In any case, I know of no theory more capable of resisting the reappropriating sufficiency that marks totalizing systems such as Buddhism than Laruelle's non-philosophy.

Second, it should be clear by now that a conviction running throughout my critique will be that an orientation toward immanence is a vital human value. I would hope to convince my readers that thinkers of immanence—whether in the sciences, medicine, economics, psychology, philosophy, even the arts—offer the most promising models for social and personal clarification and, where desired, transformation. This is because, like Heidegger’s “hardness of fate” premise, their promise is rooted precisely in a transcendently minimized assessment of human experience, one that moreover opens up the possibility for “authentic action” in our world.⁴⁷ This conviction has a corollary: systems of transcendence, namely, those that posit autonomous yet immanently absent orders of truth and reality, must be forcefully countered. If for no other reason, they must be countered because they are alienating to human beings. Buddhism is a fascinating and rare instance of a system of thought that adamantly posits a version of radical, non-alienating immanence yet aggressively staves off the consequences of its own productive insights via transcendental mixtures of its own making. My critique thus takes seriously those insights of Buddhism (e.g., subjective destitution, phenomenal dissolution, contingency, nihilism, etc.) concerning reality in relation to the Real. My hypothesis is that Buddhist materials *might* contribute to serious, immanental models of human transformation, but only in ways that would be unrecognizable to Buddhists. Put in apt if somewhat dramatic terms: we might, after all is said and done, discern the afterglow of liberating human thought in the ruins of “Buddhism’s” destruction.

Third, this critique serves as both a theory and a performance. I don’t mean only that a text like this one is “performative,” that it *does*, or at least aims to effect, something. I am more interested in the performance associated with the *reading* of the text. I hope to stimulate a reading, thinking, living subject, one who regards the Buddhist conceptual material alongside of, hence profoundly affected by, what Laruelle calls “radical immanence.”⁴⁸ *Theory-practice* therefore seems like a fitting term here. Theory, like its etymological relative, *theater*, positions us to gaze on the spectacle of Western Buddhism. As Sruti Bala writes, the two closely related terms “deal with orders of perception and meaning-making of reality.” Performance, however, in contrast to theory, “foregrounds action as opposed to perception.” It is thus “connected to the legal act of executing a will or promise, as opposed to the emphasis in the terms ‘theater’ and ‘theory,’ on considering and speculating.” So, one implicit claim made for *A Critique of Western Buddhism* is that it at least endeavors to execute the promise of Buddhist emancipatory materials within some register of thought and action.

“Placed together,” to paraphrase Bala, theory and performance “span a range of investments, from aesthetic and formal to the political and social.”⁴⁹

Finally, I want to reiterate that I am not critiquing Western Buddhism as a flawed deviation from a pure “original” Buddhism or as a corruption of traditional eastern forms of Buddhism. Neither am I putting Buddhism on trial and conducting an inquest into the truthfulness of its claims. The fact is that it is impossible to evaluate “Buddhism’s claims” because, as I have already mentioned, “Buddhism” is too slippery a term. Its very fluidity, however, is a richly instructive fact, one that provides a clue to its identity and thus to how to construct a consequential critique. In brief, I am employing a method that bears no resemblance to approaches such as the history of ideas, the philosophy of religion, or doxography. While readers might excuse me from following either of the first two methods, I can imagine they will be disappointed if I don’t base my critique on the evaluation of actual doctrines. I am following Laruelle here. He writes, “There is a frivolity of doxography from which ‘the history of philosophy’ does not always escape. It is not a matter here of objects, authors, themes, positions or texts; it is solely the matter of a problematic and of the *reconstruction* of this problematic.”⁵⁰ I will work out later what I think this problematic is for Western Buddhism. The point that I wish to make here—and it is a crucial point overall—is that whatever Western Buddhist “objects, authors, themes, positions or texts” I could name would amount to little more than indices. That is, names of specific texts, doctrines, teachers, etc., are but “indications of problems that we are striving to demonstrate and analyze in their coherence and functioning; guiding threads for penetrating into a [buddhistic] environment that exceeds them, but the extent, the possibilities and also the limitations of which they have made perceptible.”⁵¹ I am interested in the “environment” that both exceeds *and* precedes any Buddhist text, figure, and so on, that we might name. This environment constitutes the problematic because *it*, and not specific doctrinal details, is the incubator of the countless phenomena that comprise “Western Buddhism.” The general, Laruellean, term for this problematic is “decision.” Very briefly, decision involves cutting knowledge off from its immanent-material-empirical given in order to ground that knowledge in a transcendent-ideal-hallucinated supplement. Such a move is, of course, not a problem for avowedly transcendental forms of thought, such as theistic religion. Decision is, however, a problem for self-declared phenomenologically verifiable systems like biology and Buddhism. I argue that, given its specific practice of decision, Western Buddhism exposes itself as a visionary form of knowledge. In any case, this is not to say that you will not encounter named examples in this critique. Rather,

it means that these instances will only be viewed—to use a famous Buddhist trope—as fingers pointing to the moon of buddhistic decision. The purpose of this approach, indeed of this entire critique, is, once again, not to annihilate the finely wrought edifice of Western Buddhism, but to view that edifice in the glow of a stranger, more creaturely, light.