

# **BUDDHISM, RADICAL CRITIQUE AND REVOLUTIONARY PRAXIS**

John Clark

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What does it mean to entitle our presentation “Buddhism, Radical Critique and Revolutionary Praxis”? One possible answer is that it implies that we want know how Buddhism might help those of us who are present today engage in the processes of radical critique and revolutionary transformation. If this is our goal, we need to pose at least three other questions: First, what does “Buddhism” or perhaps more pertinently, “Buddha,” mean? Second, what does “radical critique” mean? And finally, what does “revolution” mean? Of course, there’s also the question of what “mean” means. In the present context, it means that we need to consider the senses in which all three of these terms, taken together, can be practically significant to us, here and now.

## **BUDDHA**

The term “Buddha” refers, traditionally, to one of the “Three Jewels” that are considered the core of Buddhist theory and practice. These are “Buddha,” “Dharma,” and “Sangha”—the awakened mind, the teachings (truth, nature) and the compassionate community.

If “Buddha” refers to the “awakened mind,” we must ask, obviously, what it is to which it becomes awakened. The paradigmatic narrative of the life of Shakyamuni Buddha tells us that awakening begins with a traumatic recognition of the Real. This is the message of the story of “The Four Signs.” According to the legend, the young Prince Gautama lived within a Palace of Delusion, a world of ideological fantasy in which the King, his Father (The Patriarch, the Big Other) shielded him from all knowledge of the evils of human existence, and was thus his protection from the Real. This myth depicts our ordinary civilized state of delusion, in which the Real does not register. As long as we live in the ideological world of everydayness, we live a life of denial and disavowal.

In the story, Gautama finally looks beyond the confines of the Palace of Delusion and encounters a sick person, an old person, a dead person, and an ascetic. This means that he takes the risk of encountering the traumatic force of realities such as sickness, ageing, death, and the real possibility of an alternative mode of existence. His confrontation with death is crucial since it means that he that he recognizes that he has not been truly alive; he has been among the Undead. And his confrontation with the ascetic is crucial since it means that he recognizes a radical change in his mode of being as a real existential possibility. This shock of recognition is the beginning of his long struggle for full awakening.

The story continues, and after six years of wandering and seeking, Gautama finally ends up in Bodh Gaya, where, mythologically, he sits under the Bodhi tree and experiences the fully

awakened mind. He now assumes the name Shakyamuni Buddha, Sage of the Shakya Clan with the Awakened Mind. According to the story, after having further adventures, he touches the earth to testify to the experience of awakening. This act, one of the most emblematic images in the entire Buddhist tradition, symbolizes that awakening is rooted in experience of the Real: above all, the Real of the Earth; the Real of the natural world.

This theme is echoed much later in the Buddhist tradition in the story of the Flower Sermon, in which a large multitude assembles in order to hear some words of wisdom from the Buddha. Instead, he shocks them (actually all but one) by merely holding up a flower before them and smiling. One of the core messages of this story is the primacy of the Real, which cannot be replaced by our mental constructs, illusions, or fantasies, including the fantasy that we can somehow absorb enlightenment or liberation from some wise teacher or leader.

To get back to the earlier story, Shakyamuni Buddha's awakening is immediately followed by a trip to the Holy City of Varansi. On the outskirts of the city, at the Deer Park of Sarnath, he first teaches the Four Noble Truths, in which the dominant values of civilization and of the egoic self founded in these values are demolished, and the Eightfold Path, in which the practice of personal and social transformation is described. As we will see, this sequence means in effect that after "Buddhahood," the awakening of the mind, comes radical critique and revolutionary praxis.

All this, when examined in detail, relates very much to the view of these topics that I recently developed in a book called *The Impossible Community*. There I argue that liberatory social transformation requires a radical break in both theory and practice with the dominant social institutional structure, the dominant social ideology, the dominant social imaginary, and the dominant social ethos, and that, further, the crucial step toward achieving this goal is the creation of communities of solidarity and liberation. I see Buddhism as offering the most valuable lessons about how such radical critique and transformative, revolutionary practice might be carried out.

## **RADICAL CRITIQUE**

Buddhist radical critique might be described in one sense as the movement from the ruthless critique of all things existing to the ruthlessly compassionate critique of all things existing. One can get a good idea of the radical nature of this critique from three sources that I would like to mention briefly. The first is the Heart Sutra, which is sometimes identified as the best-known scripture in the history of Buddhism. It reads in part

“. . . form does not differ from emptiness; emptiness does not differ from form. . . . Therefore in emptiness: no form, no feelings, no perceptions, no formations, no consciousness [note: this is a denial of the five aggregates or fundamental constituents of all things]; no eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind [note: this is a denial of the basic sources of knowledge] ; no color, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, no object of mind [note: this is a denial of that which is known] . . . no suffering, no origination, no stopping, no path, . . . no attainment with nothing to attain [note: this is a denial of the Four Noble Truths, the Way, and its goal].”

In short, the Heart Sutra negates all the fundamental principles of Buddhism. We could in fact call it the Anarchy Sutra, since its basic message is the negation of every principle or *arche*. It warns that there are no ideas, beliefs, propositions or supposed objects of knowledge that can be taken dogmatically, ideologically, or as abstract universals having any reality beyond the limits of experience. The fundamental and anti-foundationalist Buddhist teaching of sunyata, that all things are empty of inherent existence, is a radical critique of all substantialism and essentialism and thus means death to all ideology.

Moreover, the Dharma, the Teaching, the “Law,” the Way of Truth itself, is described as a “Yana,” by which is meant a vehicle. It is depicted particularly as a raft or boat that is used to take one to the “farther shore,” or “other side of the river.” It turns out that this farther shore is a destination that is a non-destination. One reaches it by merely continuing on the way, but now with an awakened mind, having accepted of the experience of the traumatic Real. On such journey, only a fool would carry a heavy raft along. As Zen states it:

“Before Enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.”

Would you try chopping wood with a canoe on your back? In fact, we do it all the time.

A second notable text that relates to radical critique is the most famous passage from Linji, the founder of the Rinzai tradition of Ch’an or Zen Buddhism. Linji says:

“Followers of the Way, if you want to understand the Dharma, do not be fooled by others. Whether you turn inward or outward, whatever you encounter, kill it! If you meet a Buddha, kill the Buddha; if you meet a Patriarch, kill the Patriarch; if you meet an enlightened being, kill the enlightened being; if you meet your parents, kill your parents; if you meet your relatives, kill your relatives. Only then will you find emancipation, and by not clinging to anything, you will be free wherever you go.”

[Note: Kill me, please. This is precisely why we have a discussion period scheduled.]

Linji’s renowned rant is another attack on sick attachments and abstract idealist views of reality. In fact, it is not unusual for Zen masters to attack mastery, master discourses, and master signifiers. Zen texts are tireless in heaping abuse on those who would substitute some concept or fantasy of “a Buddha” for the Awakened Mind that is the true Buddha Nature. For “Buddha” one might substitute “Party,” “Vanguard,” “Movement,” “Leader,” etc. I must admit that one could even substitute “Community,” or “Affinity Group.” Delusion has no limits. The great obstacle to communism is communism, The great obstacle to democracy is democracy. And to mention the most notorious of all such travesties, the greatest obstacle to freedom is freedom.

A third notable point of reference for Buddhist radical critique is the negative dialectic of Nagarjuna and the Madhyamaka Prasanghika school of Buddhist philosophy. Nagarjuna’s tetralemma (A, not-A, both A and not-A, neither A nor not-A) challenges us to overcome all naïvely and dogmatically dualistic thinking. Thus, when we are tempted to affirm some proposition as true, we will consider the ways in which it is true, false, both true and false, and neither true nor false. When we are tempted to affirm the proposition that x is y, we will consider

the ways in which x is not y, x both is and is not y, and x neither is nor is not y. The final, double-negation step of the tetralemma requires us to question our categorical scheme itself.

The result will be that in each case we will refrain from confusing conventional truth, which is an obvious necessity for its pragmatic value, with ultimate truth, which recognizes the dependent (or interdependent) origination and the emptiness or non-substantiality of all things. A consideration of the meaning of the term “Madhyamaka” or “Middle Way” helps one understand the force of this critique. Buddhism was first called the Middle Way as an expression of the path that Shakyamuni Buddha took between the one extreme of destructive self-indulgence and the other extreme of debilitating self-denial. However, in the philosophical sense of Nagarjuna’s school, it means the Middle Way between Dogmatism (alias “Eternalism”) and Nihilism. Dogmatism is the error of seeking absolute truth by imposing rigid, static, or reifying categories on a dynamic and non-objectifiable reality. Nihilism is the opposite error of falling into a relativistic or solipsistic collapse of meaning in which one loses faith in the world, in that reality itself.

These aspects of Buddhist radical critique may seem abstract (as they must until translated into concrete diagnosis and practice), but its core is expressed in something quite experiential: the analysis of suffering and craving presented by the Four Noble Truths. These state that there is suffering, a cause of suffering, a cure for suffering, and a way to effect this cure. Though its revolutionary implications are seldom drawn out, this analysis is an implicit critique of the civilized ego and of the entire history of civilization and its project of domination. According to the Buddhist analysis of anatman or no self, and trishna or craving, this history has from the outset been the story of an insubstantial subject on an impossible quest for an unattainable object. As long as we remain trapped in this project we are perpetually haunted by two unanswerable questions: “Who am I?” and “What do I want?”

This means, in psychoanalytic terms, that as long as we live in world history (what in Marxian terms is called “pre-history”), we are plagued by obsession and hysteria. This is precisely what Buddhism pointed out 2500 years ago: we are a civilization of obsessive hysterics and hysterical obsessives. The project of the ego is to give substance to its own inherent insubstantiality. It is, ironically, a ghost that is haunted by its own intrinsic lack. The project of the ego is to find an object that will fill up an ontological void, but its expedition is necessarily doomed from the start. It is trapped in the Ontic Circle.

This ego, since the beginning of civilization, has been the primary imaginary object for the subject, so that even the most seemingly privileged objects of desire gain their power only as projections of that ego. Nevertheless, the ego has always appeared as a object that defies every project of definition and every attempt at objectification. Thus, the problem of civilization and of domination is not merely objectification, but the *project* of objectification, the project of necessary failure that drives on the quest for domination.

In other words, under civilization, “there is suffering” and this suffering is inherent to the kind of ego that it generates and which in turn regenerates it. History is indeed a nightmare, a terrifying and suicidal fundamental fantasy, from which we are trying, if only unconsciously, and neurotically, to awake. The problem, as Buddhism has always pointed out, is that we are trying

to “awake” by not awakening. This strategy of the Undead just doesn’t work. You don’t actually get brains by eating brains.

As Hegel shows, in part despite himself, the egoic project of self-recognition has been fundamental to civilization, and its origins are rooted in turn in its material basis, the historical processes of conquest and domination. Though his primary model for the dialectic of Lordship and Bondage is Feudal, he traces the roots of the phenomenon back to the beginning of conquest in the ancient world: the foundation of the imperial state and the system of patriarchal and class domination. The history of domination is founded on the social project of subjection, and on the dialectically identical spiritual project of subjectification. The latter reveals its impossibility almost immediately, at least on some level, while the former has required the entire tragedy of World History to do so. To say that these projects have spanned the history of civilization is not to underestimate the achievements of capitalism. Capitalism has succeeded in perfecting these world-historical processes, and late capitalism, the society of consumption, the society of the spectacle, has only perfected that perfection.

These projects of domination are the processes that are questioned in the Buddhist analysis of anatman or no self, the denial of separate or egoic selfhood. What is the Buddhist non-self? It is the self that is not a self. It is the empty, indeterminate subject opening itself, or its non-self, to a determinate, or endlessly self-determining infinity of being. In other words, the Buddhist empty subject presupposes the idea of the transcendence (*Aufhebung*) of the ego. This is what Dogen meant when he said that

“the Buddha way is to study the self . . . to study the self is to forget the self, and to find realization in the Ten Thousand Things.”

As part of this critique, Buddhism, the quest for awakened mind, proposes a revolution in values. Awakened mind, which is mind open to the being and value of other beings, requires the absolute rejection of an abstract, objectified world based on exchange value, and the full recognition of the real, living world of intrinsic value. However, the cliché that exchange value must be replaced by use value is at best a partial truth and to remain fixated on this level of analysis is uncritical and counter-revolutionary. In fact, it’s even counter-*evolutionary*. Use value is a form of instrumental value that necessarily implies the question: “use for what end?” The awakened mind recognizes the ontological and axiological primacy of the world of intrinsic value.

This is what is implied in the Buddhist affirmation that all sentient beings have a Buddha nature and in the Bodhisattva vow to save all sentient beings. In a sense, the most important question that we can ask of any person and of any community is the question of what they hold sacred, what they hold to have intrinsic value. The worlds of both exchange value and of use value as we have known them historically are based on the ultimate sacredness of the voracious, all-consuming ego. The Buddha world, the world of awakened mind, discovers a world of full of wild, self-generating value (though the self-generation is systemic and “interdependently arising,” and takes place on a level that goes beyond what we ordinarily think of as selves). This world is the world of sacred places, and of the sacred Earth. As Hakuin states in his famous “Song of Meditation”:

“this very ground on which you stand is the Pure Lotus Land. This very body is the Body of the Buddha.”

Hakuin is thinking here about what we call “the Earth and its inhabitants.” He challenges us to think about our way of being and acting in such a world. How do we care for sacred ground? How do we care for the body of the Buddha? We might ask further: How do we respond to those who trample on sacred ground? How do we respond to those who trample on the body of the Buddha? These same ideas have been said in many different ways. The Dharma only states for the civilized mind what Our Ancestors knew before the beginning of time.

Paradoxically, it is also what we all always continue to know and to tell ourselves constantly, though we usually have limited awareness of doing so. As Buddhism recognizes, there is a powerful critical and transformative power of the personal and communal unconscious that has radically transformative power if brought to the surface. Buddhism is certainly not alone in affirming this, and it has been explored extensively by both radical psychoanalysis and by surrealism. But Buddhism, and especially Zen, carries further in many ways this inquiry into the dialectical truth of the body, the dialectical truth of the communal body, and the dialectical truth of the body of the earth.

There is a recognition that the expressions of the unconscious are not only “the discourse of the other” but the discourse of the whole (the whole that is never whole). This means also that they are the discourse between the parts of that whole that have been cut off from one another. This is what is expressed in Zen koan practice and in the non-empty empty mind of meditation. As this practice teaches us, we need to allow ourselves to tell ourselves the truth every day, even every moment. If we do not do this, we will either remain entirely oblivious to what we know, or we will certainly forget it quite quickly.

To return to what Buddhism takes as “Noble Truth,” the “desire” that it sees at the root of suffering is obviously not simple desire, such as mere indeterminate hunger for mere indeterminate food (which in any case never appears in any such simple form). Rather it is “craving,” that is, compulsive and ego-self-regarding desire that is deeply rooted in the social imaginary. Craving is aimed at satisfying an insatiable ego through a fundamentally unattainable object (what Lacan calls the *objet petit a*). Ironically, despite the egocentrism of the society and culture of domination, the ego despite all its striving does not itself do. Rather, It, the Other, does, while It’s activity is misperceived as the self-activity of the ego. “Je est” indeed “un autre.” Buddhist liberation means deliverance from this self-affirming and ultimately self-defeating striving, this tragic charade.

The ultimate attainment of liberation, the annihilation (or, more precisely, the dialectical transcendence) of this domineering ego is called “nirvana.” Nirvana is a state in which reality no longer appears in its egoic, reified, instrumentalized state. Put another way, nirvana means going beyond the symbolic order, the order of domination, the order of having and accumulating, and returning to the wild anarchic order, the order of being and flourishing. We are delivered to the world.

“Nirvana is samsara” (the world of incessant change and appearance).

The Buddhist critique of insatiable craving is not equivalent to the Stoic injunction to “be satisfied with what you can have.” Rather, it is a recognition that satisfaction can never result from a quest for possession and having. It promises freedom from the fruitless quest for domination and from the suffering that results from it and a reconciliation with the wildness of the world:

“Just as the sea has one taste, which is salt, the Dharma has one taste, which is freedom.”

Buddhist radical critique relates obviously to the Marxist critique of capitalism, exploitation, and the fetishism of commodities, but it is closer in its overall implications to the larger anarchist critique of civilization and all forms of domination. The history of domination is longer than the history of capitalism and longer even than the history of class struggle as usually conceptualized, though it encompasses all of that history. It is essential to understand the ways that economic domination takes a more central place in the dominant economist society and the ways in which it pervades even the deepest levels of subjectivity. But there is dialectic of domination beginning with the origin of patriarchy, the state, and economic class society, and the ego is a product of this history of domination. The idea of having “power over” and of “accumulating power” is rooted in patriarchal domination, statist conquest, and the accumulation of private property, in addition to other forms of domination.

A given phenomenon contains within itself the entire history of that phenomenon, though it incorporates that history in very complex ways. All forms of domination are deeply conditioned by one another and their mutual conditioning is reflected in the complex and ever-transmuting structure of the ego. How it is reflected is a long story. However, a crucial part of the story is that the Buddhist analysis of the ego, suffering, craving, and liberation takes on much more critical force in today’s economic society as commodity fetishism develops and as consumptionist institutions, the consumptionist ideology, the consumptionist imaginary, and a consumptionist ethos all take hold in an unprecedented manner.

## **REVOLUTION**

As the preceding discussion should have implied, radical critique is an integral part of the process of revolution against the system of domination. However, the quest for the awakened mind has more specific implications concerning the processes of personal and social transformation. Buddhism has a very radical idea of practice, though in a sense it is merely the most obvious concept imaginable: “Everything is practice.”

Everything is practice. It exists at all times and in all places, including what are conventionally thought of as both “internal” and “external” times and places. Joshu (Zhao Zhou), the great Chinese Ch’an (Zen) master and inspiration for Rinzai Zen, was once asked, “Where is the practice hall?” He replied:

“Everything everywhere is the practice hall. There is no other place,”

A few days ago as I was thinking about these issues I happened to see a quote that someone sent out that helped me focus on what is most central to this issue.

“The Buddha’s attendant, Ananda, once asked about the importance of having wholesome companions. Ananda asked the Buddha whether having noble friends and companions wasn’t half of the holy life. The Buddha replied:

“Do not say so, Ananda. Noble friends and companions are the whole of the holy life.”

It's very helpful to reflect on this crucial, if initially perplexing, quote. Buddhism emphasizes the importance of the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, but this passage seems to say that the last of these, the compassionate community, is everything. However this makes perfect sense, if we approach the matter dialectically. The whole, we then realize, is in each of the parts, which mutually determine one another. One cannot really have an awakened mind or really have the authentic teachings and truth without having the compassionate community. As Western dialectic would say, they are identical. Of course, at the same time, as Daoism and Zen would say, one cannot "have" any of them, only have without having them.

The compassionate community practices the Eightfold Path, which epitomizes the Buddhist practice of personal and social transformation. It would be useful to consider the revolutionary implications of all eight elements of the path, but we might just note at this point that it includes not only wisdom and spiritual disciplines, but such practical precepts as Right Livelihood, which means engaging in a wise and compassionate mode of production. It is significant that the community also practices the Six Paramitas, or Perfections. One of these Paramitas is Dana, which means gift-giving or generosity. Though Dana is traditionally considered to be part of sila or morality, it is classed separately among the Paramitas to stress its fundamental importance.

I think that we should see this emphasis as an affirmation that the compassionate community is a community of the Gift. Shakamuni Buddha, like other Axial Sages, looked back to the gift economy as an inspiration for the future liberated society. He did so just as Laozi, the great Daoist philosopher looked back to the mythical Dynasty of the Yellow Emperor, when communal ties and relations of generosity prevailed. This Daoist tradition, with its proto-eco-feminist ethics of care, passed into the heritage of Zen. According to this perspective, the role of the sage, the awakened person, and ultimately, of every member of the community, is to defy the patriarchal order and to adopt a maternal model of care and responsiveness:

To give birth and to nourish,  
to give birth without taking possession,  
to act without obligation,  
to lead without dominating

The adoption of this model, dialectical maternalism, would mean the destruction of patriarchal authoritarian culture: a revolution in sensibility and a revolution in social ontology. Buddhist ontology asks us to consider how beings appear to us. Do we experience them as resources, as instruments, as actual or potential property, as extensions of our own supposed ego, as sources of



power and domination? Or do we experience them, especially in the case of the myriad forms of life, with a sense of wonder and gratitude for the goodness and beauty of being and beings, in the spirit of Laozi, who said:

“Heaven and Earth combine to drip sweet dew. Without the command of men it drips evenly over all.”

Zen Buddhism in particular, expressing its Daoist heritage, encourages us to respect the way, the unfolding of potentiality, the striving for full flourishing, of each thing and of the multitude of beings, the Ten Thousand Things, as they were called traditionally. All these manifestations of being are manifestations of value, free gifts to the world.

The Buddhist ontology and axiology of the gift and of intrinsic value are dialectically identical with a Buddhist economics that is an economics of the gift and of intrinsic value. As Zen texts state it, when we free ourselves from delusion we find a reality that is “beyond profit and loss.” We find that nothing is “owed” and nothing is “deserved.” We find that nothing can be “possessed.” We find that there can be no “accumulation.” We realize that to pursue any of these delusions leads to ruin. In short, we recognize that property is the theft of being.

So, as Laozi might have phrased, it “What is to be done without doing it?” For final thoughts on the meaning of awakened revolution, we might contemplate the implications of the Bodhisattva Vow, which says, in part, that:

“sentient beings are infinite, I vow to save them all.”

In a world of material abundance in which over a billion sentient human beings live in absolute poverty, the practical implications of having an awakened and engaged mind become ever more obvious.

In the midst of the sixth great mass extinction of life on earth, the ongoing holocaust of sentient beings, the practical implications of having an awakened and engaged mind become ever more obvious.

The Sword of Dharma cuts through delusion and cuts the world in one.