CHAPTER 11
PROLEGOMENA TO A BUDDHIST(IC) CRITIQUE OF CAPITALISM

James Mark Shields

Introduction

Not even three decades removed from Francis Fukuyama's post-Cold War proclamation of the "End of History," many in the Western world are now undergoing buyer's remorse—at the very least—with respect to both capitalism as an economic system and neoliberalism as its less-recognized but ever-present ideological foundation. The financial crisis of 2008 and subsequent Great Recession, the Occupy movement(s) of 2011, the 2016 and 2020 challenges of Senator Bernie Sanders for the Democratic nomination, and growing anxiety about the fate of the planet, particularly among the young, have opened up new avenues of critique and brought "socialism" back to the table as a topic of conversation.[1] But socialism is not the only voice in the new wave of anti-capitalist critique; Buddhism, as well, might play a role. A Buddhist critique of industrial capitalism can be traced back at least to the late nineteenth century, when Western economic forms began to make itself felt in South, Southeast, and East Asian countries in which Buddhism held some measure of influence. Indeed, Buddhism was an important player in the making of East Asian modernity. Now, however, the circumstances are quite different; for one, the classical (Marxist) critique of capitalism, for all its strengths, does not necessarily apply to either the conditions of postindustrial capitalism or—more crucially—the ideological and discursive forms of contemporary neoliberalism, which, despite recent countercurrents, continue to hold remarkable sway in Western capitalist societies.[2] In this chapter, drawing on the work of contemporary anti-capitalist critics as well as those of earlier progressive Buddhists, I outline a basic framework for Buddhist anti-capitalism, one that directly addresses neoliberalism as a set of ideas and habits of mind and body.

Defining Capitalism

Despite being all around us—or perhaps because of its very ubiquity—capitalism is difficult to define. Perhaps, like the famous adage by US Supreme Court justice Potter Stewart on pornography—or better, St. Augustine on time—we know it when we see it, but when someone asks, we have a hard time putting it into words. One of the problems is the (inevitable) slippage between capitalism as an economic "system" and as a set of political, social, and even psychological assumptions and practices. Another is the fact

that capitalism has shown a remarkable ability to transform (often under pressure), such that it has in the past century alone shown tremendous variation, even within a single society such as the United States. And finally, as progressive critics often highlight, capitalism has become "naturalized" such that it is extremely difficult to pull apart from contemporary social *reality*, at least in the West and other industrialized or postindustrial societies.[3] Sociologist Erik Olin Wright suggests that capitalism in all forms be best understood in terms of *a commitment to both a market economy and a particular kind of class structure:*

> One way of thinking about this combination is that the market dimension identifies the basic mechanism of coordination of economic activities in an economic system—coordination through decentralized voluntary exchanges, supply and demand, and prices—and the class structure identifies the central power relations within the economic system—between private owners of capital and workers.[4]

According to Bhaskar Sunkara, capitalism is best described as "a social system based on private ownership of the means of production and wage labor. It relies on multiple markets: markets for goods and services, the labor market, and the capital market" (Sunkara 2019: 16). Vivek Chibber suggests that we identify capitalism as a system based not simply on the fact of markets but rather on the *condition* of "market dependence." Since the vast majority of people within a capitalist society at virtually all levels of the economic food chain "depend on the market to make a living . . . what this means is that when people try to acquire the basic necessities for their well-being—such as food, clothing, and shelter—they have to buy or rent them from someone else. They don't have the option of making the essentials themselves." There are three significant implications to draw from this: (i) all production is carried out for selling on the market, not for self-consumption; (ii) the labor that goes into production is by people working for a wage; (iii) productive establishments are privately owned (Chibber 2018: 9). Also important here, for all of what we often hear about capitalism and "freedom," is the reliance of such a system upon *precarity*.[5] Correctly understood, capitalism "not only depends on the creation of mass insecurity, but reproduces that very insecurity as part of its lifeblood" (Chibber 2018: 28). Indeed, "[a] baseline level of insecurity is forced onto workers by capitalism, all the time, everywhere, regardless of country or region" (Chibber 2018: 30). While precarity was to some degree ameliorated by worker's movements (and unions) in the early-mid-twentieth century, it is important to understand that these gains were implemented very much *against* the spirit of the system, which always pushes in the opposite direction. And indeed, since the 1980s, the United States in particular but arguably the West as a whole has seen a dramatic reversal, such that "institutions that had temporarily acted to decrease that insecurity are being taken apart. They are being dismantled by forces that seek to restore the status quo, because they benefit from it. Their actions are motivated by the logic of capitalism itself" (Chibber 2018: 30). Not coincidentally, this period coincides with the rise of neoliberalism as an ideology that sharpens, justifies, and further "naturalizes" capitalist conditions.

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With regard to the question of intention, always germane to Buddhist ethics (and even, I suggest, Buddhist soteriology), one of the complicating factors of capitalism is that it operates as a vast and complex system that extends far beyond any one individual (despite neoliberal rhetoric involving small-scale "entrepreneurs"). Thus, Chibber cautions anti-capitalists to recall the following three key points about contemporary capitalism: (i) Capitalism is not just a collection of individuals, but individuals grouped as social classes; (ii) Capitalists and workers have very different interests; (iii) Capitalists aren't motivated by greed but by market pressures. That said, of course, contemporary neoliberal rhetoric informs us that the "vast and complex" nature of global capitalism is a key reason why we cannot possibly get rid of it, which is going too far in the other direction.[6]

After all, on one level the "system" relies entirely on the work of people, that is, as "complex" as it may appear, it does not and cannot exist "out there" as some Platonic form. Indeed, John Holloway has argued that it may be of value to think less of "destroying" capitalism as a system (with attendant concerns associated with revolution, violence, etc.), and rather consider whether we might simply "stop making it" in our everyday lives (Holloway 2011: n.p.). Rather than thinking of capitalism as a huge and powerful monster that we created but is now out of our control (i.e., Frankenstein's Creature), we should think of capitalism as an "illusion" that we create and maintain by our everyday individual and collective actions, but that otherwise has no "reality" (i.e., the dreamed man in Borges's story "The Circular Ruins"). Holloway's provocation is that we consider what it might mean to simply stop *doing* capitalism. In other words, not to *destroy* but to *cease to create*. To this end, Holloway poses "a different grammar, a different logic of revolutionary thought . . ." which may lead to what he felicitously calls "the emancipation of doing":

> Any revolution that is not centred in the emancipation of doing is condemned to failure (because it is not a revolution). The emancipation of doing leads us into a different time, a different grammar, a different intensity of life. The emancipation of doing is the movement of anti-fetishisation, the recovery of creativity. Only in this way can the fissures become poles of attraction instead of ghettos, and only if they are poles of attraction can they extend and multiply. (Holloway 2011 n.p.)

Ultimately, what is at stake here is a certain type of *power* (and its flipside, *alienation*), a point to which I will return later.

Anti-capitalism

While there are various reasons and causes behind anti-capitalist movements, one of the earliest and still one of the most prominent is the recognition of *injustice*. This critique has deep roots within socialism, which arose in Europe as a direct response to the

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conditions of insecurity brought on by the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Of course, in this period the logic of capitalist industrialization rarely even attempted to placate the "negative externalities" created by rapid and large-scale movement of persons from rural to urban areas, with the consequent loss of the ability of many people to subsist outside of a wage system. And yet, however dire the everyday existence of the new "working class" in Manchester or Paris, it was clearly not "slavery" or even "serfdom." After all, in theory, these workers were always "free" to leave their jobs at any time. Eventually, this premise—as absurd as it may have seemed at the time—would become one of the foundations of capitalist (and later, neoliberal) ideology: despite the differences in wealth (and power) accrued by various players in the economic game, *if one works hard and plays by the rules, one can always make it to the top*.

Of course, this assumes, among other things, a level playing field—which there has never been. But more importantly, it shifts responsibility for a person's livelihood ("success") entirely onto the individual, and away from families, communities, and nation-states. As a consequence, one's "failure" (understood in relative, but nearly always economic terms) is taken as a sign of lack: ignorance or, more commonly, *laziness*—the greatest of all capitalist sins. The psychological effects of this can be devastating, unless one is able to see through the hypocrisy and recognize that

> the secret to capitalism is that *there is no reliable connection between effort and reward*. The people who work in nursing homes, or fast food, or Amazon warehouses, or in hotel kitchens—they create massive profits for their employers. But they not only see very little of it in their wages, they also have to deal with chronic job insecurity and terrible hours. . . . What determines people's economic fate in capitalism is not their effort, but their *power*. (Chibber 2018: 35)

In short, capitalism *systematically generates injustice*. Here the sources of the critique move beyond socialism to potentially include mainstream liberalism and democratic theory. After all, by consigning the majority of workers to both material insecurity and arbitrary authority, capitalism confronts basic "liberal" and "democratic" principles of autonomy and integrity. In this sense, it is and has always been a system that is fundamentally opposed to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In its article on "Millennial Socialism," *The Economist* notes the genealogical link of ideas connecting Enlightenment thinkers Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, and Thomas Jefferson—all of whom were wary of the dangers of unchecked capitalism—and the views of contemporary Left writers such as Mark Fisher (author of *Capitalist Realism*) and David Graeber (author of *The Utopia of Rules* and *Bullshit Jobs*), for whom globalization "is less an engine for prosperity and more a generator of insecurity, unfreedom and unfairness" (*Economist* 2/14/2019: 20).

By focusing the analysis of contemporary capitalism on issues of power, freedom, security, integrity, and human flourishing—which are material but also imbricate emotional, mental, moral, and even "spiritual" conditions—the conversation opens toward some of the fundamental concerns of Buddhism. Of course, there was nothing like modern or contemporary capitalism in Asia for most of Buddhist history, but this

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very fact is what, I believe, allows for the possibility of creative reinterpretation, in line with the way that contemporary Engaged Buddhists *redescribe*—to invoke a Rortyan term—the tradition to address contemporary political concerns that either did not exist (e.g., climate change) or had very different forms (e.g., poverty) in premodern, precapitalist periods.

A Few Words on Buddhism and "Engagement"

Before going further, perhaps a few words need to be said about "Buddhism"—a word that, even more than "capitalism," is fraught with definitional ambiguities. First and foremost, there is not, and has never been, a single "thing"—whether we want to call it a "religion," "philosophy," "ritual tradition," or "institution"—called Buddhism.[7] Even setting aside the fact that "Buddhism" is a Western term of relatively recent coinage, the significant cultural, linguistic, and sectarian variations among those who followed some version of the dharma render it foolhardy to suggest an "essence" (at any rate, many of the early texts push against the search for "essence"). But again, as noted earlier, I see this less as a limiting factor than as an opportunity, though one we must approach with the cautionary tales of a century or more of Western orientalism (both negative and more recently, idealizing). At any rate, while there can be no single "definition" of a set of rituals, practices, values, and ideas as diverse as those which are labeled "Buddhist," it is undeniable that, whatever else may be involved, the Dharmic traditions provide *methods for the amelioration if not elimination of "suffering" among and between sentient beings.*[8]

A recent article by Amod Lele calls the question on Socially Engaged (often shortened to Engaged) Buddhism by challenging Engaged Buddhists to address the fact that most of classical Buddhism was *not* socially engaged—and indeed, in Lele's view, Buddhist texts and practices were largely *opposed* to involvement in social or political concerns (Lele 2019: 239–90). Lele is quite right that contemporary Engaged Buddhism fails to adequately address the ways that their movement breaks with past precedent. That said, I believe there is a (modernist? orientalist?) risk in assuming that categories such as the "religious," "spiritual," "social," "economic," and "political" have tried and true resonance in premodern, non-Western cultures and traditions. Second, while assuredly some classical Buddhists were focused on concerns that today we might classify as "mental" or "internal," it is also true that, as Bernard Faure has noted, the assumption that these concerns were purely individual and (thereby) disconnected from the community belies the centrality of the sangha in traditional Buddhist ideas and practice (Faure 2009: 17, 69; see also Schmidt-Leukel 2010: 47–8). Third, while it may be too much to suggest that the Buddhist dharma *is* an ethics or politics, the central role of ethics in Buddhist thought and practice renders it "social" (and, as I have argued elsewhere [Shields 2016], "economic" and "political") almost by definition. And finally, given the interplay between the sangha and political leaders in various regions of Asia, to suggest that Buddhism has ever really been apolitical is to ignore history in favor of some idealized version of Buddhist teaching.[9]

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Another way of framing this is to consider Erik Olin Wright's distinction between *passive* and *active* forms of social reproduction, both of which play a significant role in sustaining and perpetuating capitalist society. Whereas active social reproduction comes about by institutions and structures such as the police, courts, education, media, religion, and so on, passive reproduction refers to

> those aspects of social reproduction that are anchored in the mundane routines and activities of everyday life. [. . .] [It] is simply a by-product of the ways in which the daily activities of people mesh in a kind of self-sustaining equilibrium in which the dispositions and choices of actors generate a set of interactions that reinforces those dispositions and choices. (Wright 2010: 274–6)

While Buddhist thought can have a role in a critique of political institutions and social structures, the sharper edge of Dharmic critique would seem to lie with the everyday "habits of mind and body" that are less obviously supportive of structures of suffering and alienation.[10] In this sense, truly, the *personal is political.*[11]

Is Buddhism anti-capitalist? No. But given what I have just written this question, in its generality, doesn't make sense. Today, Buddhism in parts of Asia and the West is certainly imbricated in capitalist economies and neoliberal ideological forms. Moreover, there are Buddhists, both monastic and lay, who have argued for the compatibility of Buddhism and capitalism. That said, there are also significant resources for anti-capitalism within a variety of Buddhist traditions, classical and modern. And there have been not a few Buddhists—priests, scholars, and lay activists—who have developed forms of anti-capitalism inspired by Buddhist teachings.[12] So the more appropriate questions are: *Can we imagine a Buddhist anti-capitalism? On what would it be based, and what might it look like?* These are the questions I attempt to answer in this chapter.[13]

"This One Goes to Eleven . . ."

Erik Olin Wright has usefully summarized what he envisions as eleven "basic propositions" of a contemporary critique of capitalism.[14] In what follows, I examine these in relation to Buddhist teachings, in order to develop a foundation for a contemporary Buddhist anti-capitalism.

(1) Capitalist class relations perpetuate eliminable forms of human suffering.

(2) Capitalism blocks the universalization of conditions for expansive human flourishing.

(3) Capitalism perpetuates eliminable deficits in individual freedom and autonomy.

(4) Capitalism violates liberal egalitarian principles of social justice.

(5) Capitalism is inefficient in certain crucial respects.

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(6) Capitalism has a systemic bias toward consumerism.

(7) Capitalism is environmentally destructive.

(8) Capitalist commodification threatens important broadly held values.

(9) Capitalism, in a world of nation-states, fuels militarism and imperialism.

(10) Capitalism corrodes community.

(11) Capitalism limits democracy.

It is worth noting at the outset that, as Wright admits, some of these criticisms also apply—perhaps even more so—to so-called "actually existing" socialist regimes of the twentieth century, especially the move away from democracy, autonomy, and concern for the environment. Also, different "capitalist" societies will manifest varying degrees of each of these. And yet, they remain inescapable lines of critique that any defender of capitalism must address. The question for us is which of the eleven concerns have the greatest resonance with Buddhism, in its classical or modern forms? While a case might be made for all of these as valid concerns for a contemporary Dharmic anti-capitalist critique, I focus here on #1, #2, #3, and #10 as particularly germane.

Exploitation

At first glance, Critique #1 appears to be the most salient to Buddhism, given that the primary purpose of dharma in all its various manifestations is *the amelioration, if not elimination, of suffering.* The issue is whether "class" is a category with much or any resonance in classical Buddhism—or whether this point must be generalized, without thereby losing the emphasis on material (including economic) conditions and relations of power.[15] Before entering into that question, note that Wright further divides this first critique into three subsections, of which the most relevant for our purposes is the first: *exploitation*.[16] The end goal of capitalist economics is *profit*. Importantly, for most anti-capitalists critics including Marx, this has little to do with the personal greed of individual capitalists ("mean ol' Pennybags!"). That said, the *culture* that is encouraged by constant pressures toward profit-maximizing surely reinforces the "value" of self-interest in a way that resembles what traditional religions would call the "sin" or "poison" of greed. In order to ensure profit, the capitalist is compelled to "extract" as much labor as possible from her workers at as little cost as possible—which is the very definition of "exploitation." For related reasons, capitalists have a vested interest in maintaining high levels of unemployment, weak unions, and a large labor pool. Taken together, this goes well beyond the problem of poverty; the problem rather is increasing *vulnerability* and *marginalization* (Wright 2010: 44). Again, this situation is dictated by capitalist "logic"; that is, it is the essence of capitalism, rather than simply a "negative externality."[17]

It is not hard to find Buddhist resonances here, given the classical Dharmic understanding that greed is one of the three salient "poisons" that generate suffering (and is closely interrelated with hatred and delusion). Moreover, the exploitation of human beings—understood in the specific sense of the extraction of "surplus value" from labor

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for profit—seems to work against the foundational principle of "loving compassion," which arguably forms a basis for a Dharmic principle of human dignity. Also key here is that these forms of suffering are clearly "eliminable"; that is, they are not baked into the human condition in the way of, say, the physical sufferings of disease and death.

Restricting Human Flourishing

"Human flourishing" is a term that is often used to describe the goals of many of the world's philosophical traditions, including those of classical Greece, India, and China. While there are of course substantial variations on the theme, I propose that Aristotle's *eudaemonia* works as the best general representation of this idea, as it highlights a connection to happiness (without a perfect equivalence), an emphasis on the "this world" (without a firm denial of the possibility of the "spiritual" or "transcendent"), and an attempt to balance individual satisfactions with communal or social well-being.[18] While *eudaemonia* is not a perfect fit with the classical Buddhist goal (or goals) of *awakening*, there are certainly resonances—perhaps even stronger in the Mahāyāna and East Asian traditions.[19] Wright's second critique of contemporary global capitalism stems from an *eudaemonistic* perspective. Here he calls the question as to what "human flourishing" means in the twenty-first century. When socialists (or anarchists, as well as nineteenth-century romantics and some old-school conservatives) list the harms of capitalism, the alternative image "is not simply that of a consumer paradise without poverty or material deprivation, but rather a social order in which individuals thrive, where their talents and creative potentials are nurtured and freely exercised to the fullest extent" (Wright 2010: 48–9).[20] In short, anti-capitalist critiques, though frequently stereotyped and disparaged as "materialist" in nature, almost always point toward a broader and more fulfilled "humanity"—what we might even call a "spiritual" but at any rate certainly a "humanist" ideal.

Wright parses this second critique into the following more specific concerns: (i) inequalities generated by capitalism limit access to material conditions for flourishing (e.g., health and education) (ii) as well as access to interesting and challenging work; (iii) the ethic of hyper-competition "trickles down" to infect aspects of everyday life and relations. (Wright 2010: 45–6). The problem of access to material conditions will be discussed later, in relation to solidarity and community. The problem of competition is somewhat more speculative and is, I suggest, less germane than the issue of greed as a cultural ideal. Here, then, I would like to focus briefly on the issue of "work" and how it might be understood from a Dharmic perspective.

Under capitalism, as noted earlier, employers are incentivized to extract maximum effort from workers for as little costs as they can achieve. Advances in technologies and "managerial" techniques and forms of oversight have substantially increased worker productivity in industrialized nations since the Second World War (and especially since the 1970s) without significant gains in remuneration. In short, as long as "efficiency" remains the goal of capitalist work, there is little to no incentive to create jobs that are "meaningful, interesting, and challenging"—in fact, efficiency dictates that jobs of this

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sort must be routinized to save costs (Wright 2010: 48–9). This point is supported by David Graeber's recent analysis of *Bullshit Jobs* (though Graeber's thesis challenges the argument for capitalist "efficiency"—at least in purely economic terms). Somewhat surprisingly, despite their attention to the economics of labor, socialist critiques of capitalism have not paid much attention to the issue of work in terms of "creativity," "challenge," and "meaning," perhaps out of fear that this would lead them down the paths of "utopians" such as Fourier.[21] What can Buddhism add to this, if anything? Is there or can there be a Dharmic theory of labor?

A Buddhist Theory of Property and Labor

In terms of a classical Buddhist theory of labor, textual sources are slight. However, at least one source may provide a glimpse of the relation of work to property. According to the *Milindapañha*, "It is when a man clears away the jungle and sets free a piece of land and the people say 'that is his land'. Not that the land is made by him. It is because he has brought the land into use that he is called the owner of the land" (cited in Chakravarti 1987: 23). For Chakravarti, "This statement represents a very important principle in relation to private property and associates it with that of labour. It suggests that a person becomes entitled to the land *primarily* because he has put labour into it" (Chakravarti 1987: 23). Indeed, this is strikingly reminiscent of the "labor theory of property" put forth by John Locke (with possibly Spinozan roots) and accepted by US founding fathers like Thomas Jefferson. We will return to this later in our discussion of Marxist labor theory of value and its relation to a contemporary Buddhist theory of labor.

So what is the Buddhist approach toward private property? Again, we are confounded to some degree by simple anachronism: there was no "private property" per se prior to the institution of modern legal systems and subsequent "rights" in the West. That said, we can, as always, draw analogies and allow for some flexing of categories (otherwise, to borrow from Donald Davidson, cross-cultural and temporal "translation" would be impossible). Here the *Agañña Sutta* provides a classical source which seems to indicate, along Rousseauian lines, that the institution of private property, kingship, and state institutions is seen as a "fall" from an early "golden age" of harmony and community (what Chinese Buddhist modernist Kang Youwei would call the *Datong* or "Great Unity" in his utopian vision published in 1904).[22]

Beyond the *Agañña Sutta*, however, are the clear stipulations in the *vinaya* that enforce a minimal set of possessions for *bhikku*s and *bhikkuni*s, if not, specifically, for lay followers. Here the problem with private possessions is simply that they complicate one's life, acting as distractions from the path toward liberation (including, of course, both meditative practice and ethics). Though Buddhists throughout the centuries have at times veered toward a moralistic anti-materialism, arguably the concern is more pragmatic than moral or metaphysical—that is, *appropriate usage* is at issue, not anything particularly "tainted" or "fallen" about matter or the material objects that are purchased, consumed, or owned.[23]

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At the same time, there are also Buddhist precedents for communal land ownership, though the evidence here is less textual than sociological. Chakravarti notes that, at least in some cases, "land in the *gaṇa-saṅghas* [i.e., the 'republics' of the time of the Buddha] was commonly owned by the entire clan," pointing to the story of the dispute between the Sakyas and Koliyas regarding shared access to the water of the Rohini River. Furthermore,

> The existence of the notion of common property among the *gaṇa-saṅghas* is more definitely stated in the *Vinaya* passage regarding the *bhikkhu* Sudima Kalandaka, who was a *seṭṭhi-putta* [i.e., merchant or banker] before his entry into the *saṅgha.* His family is described as possessing immense wealth, which led Sudinna's mother to plead with him to provide the family an heir so that the entire property would not pass to the Lichchhavis, who were treated as a collective entity. (Chakravarti 1987: 88–9)[24]

On the basis of the classical sources, we might conclude, with Chakravarti and Harvey, that while early Buddhist texts and teachings did not envisage "the complete eradication of inequalities in society," they certainly sought to contain these inequalities, as far as possible.[25] As such, early Buddhism was ameliorative or "reformist" in its economic and political vision, rather than radical. This, I suggest, is beyond dispute—and if I felt that a contemporary Buddhist economics needed to rely entirely on classical Pāli sources, I would be compelled to give up here.[26] But, of course, I do not feel that way in the least. I do not mean to suggest that we should dismiss or ignore the classical sources, but we should also for ideas (both classical and "belated") that we can utilize—and, if necessary, *stretch*—to suit our current understanding, conditions, and experiences.

When it comes to the laity, it is also clear that their economic activities were expected to follow certain guidelines, ostensibly set forth by the Buddha himself (e.g., *Aṅguttara Nikāya* III.45, IV.281; *Digha Nikāya* III.188). These are, on the whole (and bereft of the cosmological and soteriological superstructure in which they are embedded), rather commonsensical instructions, such as would not be out of place in, say, Victorian England: *wealth should be made without causing violence; products should be shared with others rather than hoarded for oneself; greed is bad*, and so on. In short,

> in his or her work, a Buddhist should be energetic, industrious, diligent, skillful, proficient, and prudent. People should protect their earnings, keep good company, and live within their means. Wealth, he taught, provided that it is lawfully obtained, brings four kinds of happiness: economic security; having enough to spend generously on oneself and others; the peace of mind that accompanies freedom from debt; and the leading of a blameless life. (Batchelor 2002: 65)

As reasonable as this may sound at first glance, I contend that there is very little to be gleaned from such blandishments to upright wealth generation for lay Buddhists, not least because they assume a relatively simple economic system, one that barely extends

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beyond the individual and her immediate environs, and—as a natural consequence—are focused entirely upon individual decision making (and karma) rather than social or systemic issues; that is, with the mode of acquisition and use of wealth rather than the justice of its distribution.[27] Rather, we would do well to look elsewhere to find Buddhist resources for contemporary economic ethics, extrapolating from more general teachings and ideas, including, perhaps most centrally, the notion of "Right Livelihood."[28]

That said, beyond the classical canon there may be other sources within Buddhist tradition that can help us here. For instance, in his work on material culture in Japan, Rambelli has drawn attention to the various ways that "ritual labor" has been understood throughout Japanese history. Whereas in the premodern period it was generally thought since "any construction is a violation of the cosmic order (the sacredness of space and time) . . . atonement must be performed to restore the broken harmony" (Rambelli 2007: 190). While this is a specific instance of collective "work," of course, it belies an assumption about human activity as being somehow "out of joint" with nature and the cosmos—an ineluctable irruption of harmony, however necessary. However, Rambelli argues, the early modern (i.e., Edo) period of Japan witnessed a shift to a very different understanding—and one consonant with the "modernist" progressivism of utopian socialists and many liberals. Now, human labor was capable of *producing* cosmic harmony, albeit "in collaboration with the deities of the Buddhist pantheon" (Rambelli 2007: 207). Again, I will not belabor this point, but it is suggestive of alternative modes of "work" in a Dhammic framework—some of which might confront the "secular" understanding (and rhetoric) of "wage labor" under capitalist auspices.[29]

(Real) Freedom, Agency, Autonomy

In thinking through limits to human flourishing, beyond the "material" question of conditions of work under global capitalism, we must also address the problem of freedom—and related concepts of autonomy and agency. While advocates routinely connect capitalism and freedom (and, as an extension, to liberal or representational democracy), most contemporary anti-capitalists argue against the easy correlation between capitalism economics—the "free market"—and an expansive vision of human freedom. Indeed, one of the strongest arguments against capitalism under neoliberal auspices is precisely its anti-democratic tenor.[30]

Against those who claim capitalism on the side of "freedom" as a moral virtue (e.g., Hayek and Friedman et al.), the freedom promised and delivered by capitalism is heavily attenuated, limited largely to a consumerist vision of *freedom to choose, given one's means, what to buy*. Wright cites two reasons why capitalism significantly obstructs, rather than fully realizes, ideals of freedom and autonomy: (i) capitalist workplaces rely on forms of hierarchy and "relations of domination" that constitute "pervasive restrictions on individual autonomy and self-direction," that is, another element of *alienation*; (ii) capitalism generates "massive inequalities of wealth and income," which add severe constraints to individual freedom and autonomy for a significant number of people

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across the globe. While the "right to vote" is—at least in theory—a feature of capitalist liberal democracies, what Philippe Van Parijs has called "real freedom" is lacking for most. "Real freedom" implies "the effective capacity of individuals to act on their life plans, to be in a position to actually make the choices which matter to them" (Wright 2010: 50). Again, to reiterate a point made by Marx, while it is certainly true that modern capitalism provides relatively more freedom and autonomy than, say, medieval serfdom, it also erects distinct and not always easily identifiable barriers to "real freedom."

Assuming that "real freedom" is an individual and social good, and that it does not flourish under conditions of neoliberal capitalism, what does this mean for Buddhism? Let's begin with *agency*, which is the aspect of individualism and "freedom" that, I argue, resonates most strongly with classical Buddhist understandings.[31] Agency is best understood as the capacity of people to act as "conscious[ly] reflecting initiators of acts in a structured, meaningful world"—in other words, as a manifestation of *power* (Therborn 1980). Here agency is intrinsically connected to creativity and improvisation but does not deny the reality of various constraints, "both those generated by social structures within which people act and the internalized constraints embodied in beliefs and habits" (Wright 2019: 122–3). Rather than seeing these constraints as negatives, working against "freedom," a Dharmic view of agency would recognize the value of at least certain forms of constraint, particularly those imposed upon oneself as part of a commitment to ameliorating suffering (i.e., "entering the stream"). Of course, Buddhist tradition also clearly recognizes and warns against the forces of habits that stem from addiction or from unreflective passivity. This is precisely why agency is foundational: Buddhist awakening *requires* a recognition of the capacity for the free determination and active realization of "better" forms of living as an individual and in community. And yet, to move onto the term "autonomy," the Dharmic path, like that of Aristotle, highlights the inextricable interdependence of self and other beings, such that agency does not imply a complete separation of the individual, but rather a balance of sorts between personal responsibility (and liberation) and the movement toward others (via the virtues of loving-kindness, compassion, and the bodhisattva ideal).[32]

Another aspect of "real freedom"—and one that connects back to the discussion of work—is the capacity for leisure, or simply "free time." Admittedly, Asian Buddhists texts give little place to the category of activities we might call "leisure" (including entertainment and play), though part of this is due to the fact that for most of human history this was not a category that was clearly demarcated (which is of course not to say that it did not exist). Leisure is arguably a "modern" invention—and one that may well have arisen as a by-product of capitalism itself, though not always one that always fit well with the capitalist discourse on the necessity of work. For our purposes, it is important to note that capitalism contains "a systematic bias towards turning increases in productivity into increased consumption rather than increased 'free time.'" We see this in particular with the way that GDP and GNP are calculated, where leisure or "free time" that does not involve market forces has precisely a value of zero, and thus a nation or society in which increased productivity was translated into (non-market) forms of leisure would be in capitalist terms an economic failure—a country moving in this direction would

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be, against common sense, getting “poorer” (Wright 2010: 66). Along similar lines, the recent movement toward a Zero Waste lifestyle, premised on a measure of “dropping out” of consumerist society, poses a potential threat to economic “well-being”—at least if the numbers engaged in this lifestyle were to grow to a significant amount, at which point these people would certainly face resistance (Wright 2010: 66–7). Again, while it is difficult to find unambiguous links between a contemporary Zero Waste or a minimalist lifestyle of “voluntary simplicity” and classical Buddhist doctrines (though here the model of the sangha rooted in the teachings of the *vinaya* seem *à propos*), we can posit that the Buddhist ideal of “liberation” includes a sense of being that is “well-rounded”—that is, not confined to participation in forces beyond our control. Once again, this tracks back to a Buddhist sense of “agency” and an evocation of “power” in Spinoza’s sense: “the *capacity* of actors to accomplish things [or ‘produce effects’] in the world” (Wright 2010: 111).

This discussion of “power” reminds us of D. T. Suzuki’s infamous claim that Buddhism—or, at any rate, Zen, which he believed was the “essence” of Buddhism—was a tradition of thought and practice that can fit seamlessly with any modern economic or political system or ideology (Suzuki 1938: 36–7). Suzuki meant this, of course, as a tribute to the “tolerance” and “adaptability” of Buddhism/Zen, as well as to highlight its extra-mundane, “intuitive teaching.” Historically speaking, Suzuki is no doubt correct, but one does not have to be a “radical” Buddhist to wonder whether this adaptability is a strength or weakness—and whether it is actually true in ideal or doctrinal terms. As examples of “dogmatisms” that might be wedded with Buddhism/Zen, Suzuki cites “anarchism, fascism, communism . . . democracy, atheism . . . [and] idealism” before going on to note, paradoxically, that Buddhism/Zen is also animated with a “revolutionary spirit” that confounds all such “isms.” Setting aside the revolutionary aspect, however, Suzuki does not seem to recognize that each of these respective “isms” is rooted in a set of fundamental values, assumptions, and “logics”—each or all of which may *not* be compatible with incontrovertible Dharmic principles (such as, for example, the goal of ameliorating suffering of sentient beings). The question I would like to pose here is: Assuming that we now disagree with Suzuki that Buddhism/Zen *should* be “wedded to” fascism—on the basis of the indisputable fact that fascism, in theory as well as practice, promotes forms of power, hierarchy, and dehumanization that cannot possibly be reconciled with Dharmic principles—how do we deal with the other “isms” on this list, including, for the purposes of this chapter, the one that is by far the most powerful in the twenty-first century: *capitalism*?

Community and Solidarity

Let us move down to the tenth charge on Wright’s list: *Capitalism corrodes community*. As discussed earlier, whatever else it may imply in metaphysical or soteriological terms, the classical Buddhist teaching of “no self” (*anātman*) must involve at bare minimum a recognition of the limits of what we might call excessive or selfish individualism. Although

Buddhist teachings highlight the responsibility (i.e., agency) of each person as a conscious ethical actor in a world of other sentient beings—all of whom have the capacity to suffer from our actions—it is precisely this agential responsibility ("power" or "freedom") that provides a foundation for community. While the ideal of the solitary, meditating, forest monk is not without precedent, the sangha—traditionally understood as the monastic community but broadened by most Buddhist modernists to refer to any voluntary community of would-be dharma practitioners—implies a commitment to *solidarity* or, to borrow from the (gendered) rhetoric of the French Revolutionaries, *fraternity.*

But solidarity or fraternity is more than simply "fellow feeling"—like all else, it must be grounded in material conditions. Here then, we must return to the vexed issue of private property, and what that means for capitalism and Buddhism. Wright raises the familiar problem of "public goods" under capitalist regimes:

> Capitalist markets do not do well in providing for public goods, since it is hard to capture profits when you cannot easily exclude people from consuming the thing you have produced. And, since many public goods are important both for the quality of life and for economic productivity, it is inefficient to rely on markets to produce them. (Wright 2010: 56–7)

Related to the so-called tragedy of the commons,[33] there is little to no (capitalist) incentive for companies to provide public goods, and whereas this lacuna might in theory be picked up by not-for-profit organizations (such as universities) or governments, the neoliberal consensus means that even organizations *not* bound to the profit motive will mimic capitalist methods and logics of "efficiency." Again, what we are faced with here are competing understandings of "rationality" and "efficiency"—one that is frankly shortsighted and purely economic; another long-sighted and holistic (though not, by virtue of such, necessarily "utopian").[34] After all, public goods produce numerous "positive externalities"; public transportation, for instance, conserves energy, reduces traffic (and thus increases productivity), and lowers pollution. Moreover, societies which provide public goods and services have a higher level of public trust—which is, by definition, a measure of solidarity. This is also true, of course, of societies with relative economic equality. "[E]ven apart from the costs of social disorder, high levels of inequality erode social solidarity, a sense that 'we are all in the same boat together.' Solidarity is an important source of efficient cooperation—cooperation that does not require large payments and surveillance to elicit effort and responsibility" (Wright 2010: 65). Again, in this sense, any system that does not enhance solidarity is prima facie *inefficient.*

Here G. A. Cohen's description of "community" in terms of "anti-market principles" resonates remarkably well with classical Buddhist ideals, particularly his emphasis on the combination of "greed and fear" as a root for market-based activity, as well as the creeping "naturalization" of such motives:

> I mean here by "community" the anti-market principle according to which I serve you not because of what I can get out of doing so but because you need service.

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> This is anti-market because the market motivates productive contribution not on the basis of commitment to one's fellow beings and a desire to serve them while being served *by* them, but on the basis of impersonal cash reward. The immediate motive to productive activity in a market society is typically some mixture of greed and fear. . . . In greed, other people are seen as possible sources of enrichment, and in fear they are seen as threats. These are horrible ways of seeing other people, however much we have become habituated and inured to them, as a result of centuries of capitalist development. (Cohen 1994: n.p.)

While there are clear precedents for community in Asian Dharmic traditions, *solidarity* is a term that has less obvious resonance, given its modernist and revolutionary nuance. And yet, here, too, classical Buddhism may have something to add to the discussion. Marx believed that capitalism would increase solidarity within the exploited class(es), and while the initial growth of worker's movements in Europe and even the United States shows that this was not completely wrong, the later twentieth century shows that over time the dynamics of capitalism in the West "have instead . . . generated ever narrower circles of niche solidarity among people with unequal, segmented opportunities in the market." In short, modern capitalism has been adept at manipulating the discourse and power of individual and group "identity" as both a selling point of the current system and a way of blocking broader forms of solidarity. As a result, "[c]ommunity is . . . narrowed and fractured both because of the inherent principles of greed and fear that drive competition, and because of the structure of inequality which results from that competition" (Wright 2010: 81).

Buddhist Utopia? Sangha and/as Worker's Cooperatives

I have already suggested that classical Buddhism has elements in common with certain streams of utopian socialism—specifically an understanding of the (moral) "perfectibility" of human beings directed toward a (arguably) this-worldly form of flourishing in community. That said, unlike some utopian socialist programs, Buddhists texts never established specific plans for a future awakened "Buddha land in this world"—they did not, then, in Marx's derisory terms, engage in working out "cookshops for the future." This lack can be read as a disdain for "politics," but it might equally be interpreted as a (quasi-Marxian) understanding that a postrevolutionary or post-awakened community should not be constrained by the limited imaginations of those living in pre-revolutionary or samsaric conditions.

This does not mean that we cannot speculate on what such a society might look like, particularly in terms of labor and political organization. And here we are led back again to the sangha as a model or archetype—even if one that is not meant to replace secular forms but rather to provide a glimpse of what might be possible for humans to work and flourish in communal solidarity.[35] Despite the tradition's close relationship with secular monarchs, and setting aside the *Aggañña Sutta*'s fairly clear critique of kingship

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as a "fallen" state of social order, the early sangha was, as far as we can tell, remarkably "democratic" in form—arguably as much as the classical Athenian *polis*, which famously excluded 90 percent or more of the population. The early sangha was not, of course, entirely egalitarian and was beset with sexism, if not outright misogyny, from the get go—elements which seem to have gotten worse over time. Perhaps the more radical aspect was the economic one: while the sangha "opts out" of the secular economic order, it instituted what we might call a "mutualist worker's cooperative" model of labor, whose function (or "logic") was the sustenance of the community. Worker's cooperatives are often associated with utopian socialism and certain branches of anarchism in the modern West, including the work of Proudhon, though the principles have deeper and more global roots. Marx, though usually critical of Proudhon, waxed laudatory on his mutualist worker's co-ops:

The value of these great social experiments cannot be overstated. By deed instead of by argument, they have shown that production on a large scale, and in accord with the behests of modern science, may be carried on without the existence of a class of masters employing a class of hands; that to bear fruit, the means of labor need not be monopolized as a means of dominion over, and of extortion against, the laboring man himself; and that, like slave labor, like serf labor, hired labor is but a transitory and inferior form, destined to disappear before associated labor plying its toil with a willing hand, a ready mind, and a joyous heart (Cited in Wright 2010: 236–7).

When considering the implications and significance of Buddhist utopia, it is useful to keep in mind that the Dharmic traditions of thought and practice contribute less to an analysis and evaluation of *social order* than to *social reproduction*. While theories of social order and theories of social reproduction both seek to explain social conditions, including integration and stability, theories of social order tend to assume "Hobbesian" predation as a counterfactual, building up laws, civic structures and states as a bulwark against ("natural") disorder. Theories of social reproduction, on the other hand, see in many of the structures of "social order" precisely the roots of despair and suffering: "The problem of social reproduction is grounded in the latent potential for people collectively to challenge structures of domination, oppression, and exploitation. The theory attempts to explain the mechanisms that generate sufficiently stable forms of cooperation and system integration to mute such collective tendencies for transformation" (Wright 2010: 278).[36] And of course, "social reproduction" can take many forms beyond capitalism or neoliberalism—religion, as well, is often complicit and thus a legitimate target of critique. It is important to recall, once again, that this may have little to do with the deliberate (i.e., malicious) intentions and actions of powerful actors. Rather, the correspondence of "ideology" and a particular culture is often—and more assiduously—generated by the "micro-processes of the formation of beliefs and dispositions," which include various institutions of socialization that enable young people to function and (for the fortunate few) "succeed" in that society. While these micro-processes do not always work, of course, they are powerful, and over time function collectively as serious anti-utopian limitations on the horizons of possibility.[37]

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Conclusions

Erik Olin Wright suggests that in thinking about the future of anti-capitalism we give up the restrictive metaphor of a "road map" in favor of "compass," which allows for more flexibility and acknowledges the limitations of our knowledge about what is actually possible, without falling prey to the "realist" view that denies all possibility of constructing a "radical democratic [and] egalitarian alternative" to neoliberal capitalism (Wright 2010: 108–9). For Wright, an effective and inspiring *socialist compass* remains in the offing. How about a *Dharmic compass?*

Without reiterating the entire argument, I suggest that the Dharmic texts and practices that make up what we call "Buddhism" provide unique and fruitful insights into fundamental concepts such as agency, autonomy, freedom, and power—all of which can contribute to an anti-capitalist, "realistic utopian" compass for the twenty-first century.[38] Focusing here on the last of these key terms, power is too often understood by progressives in a purely negative sense as a zero-sum phenomenon ("power over") whereby an increase in one's power means a decrease of limit in the power or agency of another being. But if power is understood in relation to integrity, agency, and "freedom," as noted earlier, it need not imply "domination" (in fact, domination would indicate a *lack* of power or freedom). In particular, Buddhism might contribute to a better understanding of *social power*—that is, "the capacity to mobilize people for cooperative, voluntary collective actions of various sorts in civil society"—in hopes that this can replace or ameliorate our current reliance under neoliberal capitalism on *economic power.*[39] As such, in Wright's terms, Buddhism can be a voice in the construction of "countervailing power" and eventually a truer democracy rooted in empowered participatory governance.[40]

Another way of understanding this contribution is to consider the various "logics" at stake in understanding what it means to meet human "needs"—without which, at some basic level, suffering must ensue. Under capitalism, "meeting needs" is indeed a priority, but one that is inexorably tied to the profit motive (a fact which helps explain among other things why current technology, for all the talk of unending progress, has not fulfilled the promise of early twentieth-century expectations).[41] "I help you because it's good for me"—or, more abstractly, for "the economy." By contrast, under a "social economy" the logic for meeting needs is "other directed": "I help you because it is good for you"—though one might indeed extend this in the line of utopian socialists to suggest that such "altruism" is ultimately beneficial for the individual, at least in the long term, as such behaviors and attitudes manifest "positive externalities" such as increased public trust. In this sense, it is not so much that capitalist logic is "immoral," but rather that it is shortsighted and *inefficient* even in its own (economistic) terms (see Wright 2010: 210–1; see also Cohen 1994). I suggest that Buddhism, again, contains a logic that is much closer to that of the "social economy" than we find within contemporary capitalism.

In this chapter I have shown that there are unique resources within Dharmic traditions of thought and practice for twenty-first-century anti-capitalism, but before concluding we must address the issue of the *mechanism* for "system transformation." Despite the valiant efforts of early twentieth-century Buddhist radicals such as Uchiyama Gudō (1874–1911),

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Taixu (1890–1947), and Senoo Girō (1890–1961), it is difficult to make a case for Buddhist "revolution"—if such entails a violent overthrow of the current economic and political systems. And yet, this is where the connection with certain anarchist forms of resistance becomes most apparent (a link clearly recognized by the above figures). While some anarchists have joined with Marxists and communists to promote *ruptural* change, that is, the creation of new forms of social empowerment through a sharp break with existing structures and institutions, many others have opted for *interstitial metamorphosis*, whereby new forms of social empowerment are sought and developed in the "niches and margins of capitalist society, often where they do not seem to pose any immediate threat to dominant classes and elites."[42] Although such an approach is scorned by most Marxists and left revolutionaries as being "utopian" (i.e., speculative, palliative or merely symbolic), when we begin to envision transformation in a broader fashion, "cumulatively, such developments can not only make a real difference in the lives of people, but potentially constitute a key component of enlarging the transformative scope for social empowerment in the society as a whole" (Wright 2010: 304). Moreover, Wright presents the interstitial approach as a "middle way" between absolute rupture and the sort of *symbiotic metamorphosis* favored by most liberals and social democrats, which, while it may solve some practical issues in the short term, ultimately serve to reinforce social reproduction and support the hegemony of dominant classes and elites (Wright 2010: 304).

While premodern forms of Buddhism either eschewed political engagement or supported the status quo (which may amount to the same thing), modern Engaged Buddhism has tended toward the third option, favoring ameliorative reform over both revolutionary rupture or interstitial metamorphosis. While both interstitial and symbiotic modes of transformation are disinclined toward the "shock" of rupture, they differ primarily on their relationship to the state or powers that be. Whereas symbiotic forms work with or often within existing structures of power, interstitial forms seek to enlarge capacities for social empowerment without engaging directly with state forms (Wright 2010: 322). This seems the most optimal method for anti-capitalist Buddhists to pursue.

To close, a new or revised Four Noble Truths humbly submitted:

(1) Suffering and alienation are real, and distressingly common, conditions of contemporary existence for humans and other sentient beings under global, neoliberal capitalism;

(2) Much of this suffering is poorly understood, or misattributed to "nature"; when, in fact, it has clear if complex social and economic causes;

(3) These causes manifest in active (structural) and passive (individual) forms of social reproduction, both of which must face rigorous and sustained examination and critique;

(4) Emancipation from suffering requires not only "understanding the specific mechanisms that generate obstacles to such processes of oppression-reducing social transformation" but also engaging in the development of civic structures that expand capacities for social empowerment. (Wright 2010: 277–8)

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