Reply to the Critics of My Critique of Buddhism

The Buddhist edifice is necessarily inconsistent; there is no neutral universal Buddhist theory

Slavoj Žižek

Jan 10, 2026

Kim Murphy's critique of my reading of Buddhism is the last in the long series of Buddhist replies to my work, and since he brings together many of these other reproaches in a very systematic way, I think it deserves an answer. The only part of his critique that I really don't like is how he, after quite correctly stating that my account of Buddhism "has, for more than two decades, been widely criticized by scholars of religion and comparative Eastern and Western philosophy," specifies that I was criticized for my "persistent oversimplification of a diverse and internally complex tradition consisting of at least eleven strands within Buddhism."

This is something you can always say about any critique: there are always other approaches; you always have to ignore something. Let's take an extreme case: if I criticize Nazism, I can always be accused of oversimplifying a complex ideological space, that Hitler's Nazism was not the same as Rosenberg's, that Speer's was not the same as that of Goebbels... (And these differences are real: Hitler himself said about Rosenberg's The Myth of the Twentieth Century, the main and most systematic deployment of the Nazi vision of the world, that it is not worth the paper it was printed on.)

In contrast to this approach, I will try to prove that not only do I not ignore the different strands in Buddhism, but that these differences form the very basis of my critique – the Buddhist edifice is necessarily inconsistent; there is no neutral universal Buddhist theory (and practice). So I am tempted to say that Murphy is doing exactly what he is reproaching me for: ridiculously oversimplifying my presentation and critique of Buddhism. Already the summary of his text perfectly renders the gist of his argumentation: in my Quantum History I conceive of Buddhism:

"as a quietist pursuit of 'inner peace' incompatible with human finitude and negativity. I argue that Žižek inherits this caricature from Alexandre Kojève's flawed or misconceived reading of Early and Mahayana Zen Buddhism, collapsing certain extraordinarily diverse traditions into a monolithic ideology of retreat and emotional pacification. Such portrayals not only ignore the ethical, metaphysical, and socially engaged dimensions of Buddhist thought—from early Theravāda analyses of suffering to Mahāyāna accounts of relationality and modern movements for anti-war and anti-colonial resistance—but also misrepresent the very concepts of nirvāṇa, non-self, and return to the unconditioned states, and equanimity seen in early Buddhism. Rather than denying negativity, Buddhist traditions confront suffering through insight, ethical discernment, and transformative practice. Far from promoting withdrawal, they cultivate socially embedded forms of attention, compassion, and ethical behavior."[1]

I totally agree with the last sentence in this quote – yes, Buddhism doesn't deny or ignore or eliminate negativity; it "confronts suffering through insight, ethical discernment, and transformative practice." But the aim of this confrontation is to contain the

[1] Wanyoung Kim Murphy,« Beyond Inner Peace: »Žižek's MisInterpretation of Buddhism Based On Kojevian Hegelianism« (manuscript).

destructive aspect of negativity (by way of diminishing suffering), not to elevate it into the founding principle of reality. Murphy goes on elaborating this reproach:

"By presuming from the outset that Buddhism seeks a transcendence of negativity, he cannot perceive the tradition's rich discourse on the transformation – not the elimination – of the forces that generate suffering. The non-self doctrine is not a metaphysics of dissolution but a phenomenological claim about the instability and conditioned nature of the aggregates of experience. Likewise, nirvāṇa is not the annihilation of subjectivity but its reconfiguration: a mode of perceiving and acting unbound by the compulsive tendencies that give rise to suffering. Far from aiming at a state of unworldly calm, major Buddhist traditions ... situate liberation precisely in the thick of worldly contingency."

Murphy then goes on to substantiate his reproach by providing a series of particular cases that confirm his reading of Buddhism. In the encounters and dialogues of the early Chan monks, "there are riddles and paradoxes, frustrations, and rhetorical violence, which signal not a flight from contradiction but rather an intense purification in its depths. This, I argue, is Buddhist equanimity, which is not the same as detachment or inner peace. Similarly, tantric forms of Vajrayāna Buddhism elevate the most intense traumatic, emotional, and perceptual states—fear, desire, aversion—into opportunities for realization, precisely because they reveal the mind's capacity to transmute negativity rather than evade it. In these traditions, therefore, finitude is not overcome; it is inhabited more fully."

Things get problematic (for me, at least) when Murphy refers to the Fire Sermon (Ādittapariyāya Sutta), in which nirvāṇa is described as "the extinguishment or 'cooling' of greed, hatred, and delusion, a metaphor for ending reactive behaviors rather than achieving emotional numbness." Murphy then goes a step further and mentions the Pali Canon, which claims that "the Awakened, Enlightened being only experiences suffering on the level of the body, but not a mental form of emotional suffering attached to ego-derived suffering in Freud." With this last claim I emphatically disagree: no, the ultimate suffering is spiritual. Incidentally, I never even mention Kojève in this context, and Kojève's reading of Hegel is totally incompatible with mine, plus Heideggerian finitude is for me not the ultimate horizon of our thinking. I repeatedly point out that finitude is necessarily, in its very notion, supplemented by immortality in the sense of undeadness – negativity (the Freudian "death drive") is Freud's name for its opposite, for immortality.

...But instead of directly replying to this series of reproaches, I have chosen to do something different. In what follows, I combine a series of passages from my published works where I deal with Buddhism, and I leave it to the reader to decide whether what follows fits Murphy's description of my stance towards Buddhism or whether (as I think) I deal in detail with the aspects of Buddhism that I am supposed to ignore. Let me begin by unequivocally pointing out my deep respect for Buddhism, which is, as far as I can see, the only other school of thought (apart from the Hegelo-Lacanian tradition) that fully accepts the inexistence of the big Other.

Is then the solution to the deadlock of desire to be found also in Buddhist ethics? There are reasons to consider this option. Does not Buddhism lead us to "traverse the fantasy," overcoming the illusions on which our desires are based and confronting the void beneath each object of desire? Furthermore, psychoanalysis shares with Buddhism the insistence that there is no Self as a substantive agent of psychic life: no wonder Mark Epstein, in his book on Buddhism and psychoanalysis, refers positively to Lacan's early essay on the "mirror stage," with its notion of the Ego as an object, the result of the subject's identification with the idealized fixed image of itself[2]; the Self is the fetishized illusion of a substantial core of subjectivity where, in reality, there is nothing. This is why, for Buddhism, the point is not to discover one's "true Self," but to accept that there is no such thing, that the "Self" as such is an illusion, an imposture.

In more psychoanalytic terms: not only should one analyze resistances, but, ultimately, "there is really nothing but resistance to be analyzed; there is no true self waiting in the wings to be released."[3] The self is a disruptive, false, and, as such, unnecessary metaphor for the process of awareness and knowing: when we awaken to knowing, we realize that all that goes on in us is a flow of "thoughts without a thinker." The impossibility of figuring out who or what we really are is inherent, since there is nothing that we "really are," just a void at the core of our being. Consequently, in the process of Buddhist Enlightenment, we do not quit this terrestrial world for another, truer reality—we just accept its non-substantial, fleeting, illusory character; we embrace the process of "going to pieces without falling apart."

Crucial to Buddhism is the reflexive change from the object to the thinker himself: first, we isolate the thing that bothers us, the cause of our suffering; then we change not the object but ourselves, the way we relate to (what appears to us as) the cause of our suffering. "What was extinguished was only the false view of self. What had always been illusory was understood as such. Nothing was changed but the perspective of the observer."[4] This shift involves great pain; it is not merely a liberation, a step into the incestuous bliss of the infamous "oceanic feeling"; it is also the violent experience of losing the ground under one's feet, of being deprived of the most familiar stage of one's being.

This is why the path towards Buddhist Enlightenment begins by focusing on the most elementary feelings of "injured innocence," of suffering an injustice without cause (the preferred topic of narcissistic, masochistic thoughts: "How could she do this to me? I don't deserve to be treated that way."[5]). The next step is to make the shift to the Ego itself, the subject of these painful emotions, rendering clear and palpable its own fleeting and irrelevant status—the aggression directed against the object causing the suffering should be turned against the Self itself. We do not repair the damage; rather, we gain insight into the illusory nature of that which appears to need repair.

[2] Mark Epstein, *Thoughts Without a Thinker*, New York: Basic Books 1996, p. 152.
[3] Op.cit., p. 121.
[4] Op.cit., p. 83.
[5] Op.cit., p. 211.

Here we first encounter the fundamental ambiguity in the Buddhist edifice: is the goal of Buddhist meditation nirvāṇa as the shift in the subject's stance towards reality, or is this goal the fundamental transformation of reality itself, so that all suffering disappears and all living beings are relieved of their suffering? That is to say, is not the effort to enter nirvāṇa caught between two radically opposed extremes, the minimalist and the maximalist? On the one side, reality remains as it is, nothing changes; it is just fully perceived as what it is, a mere insubstantial flow of phenomena that does not really affect the void at the core of our being. On the other side, the goal is to transform reality itself so that there will be no suffering in it, so that all living beings will enter nirvāṇa.

This tension brings us to the main split within Buddhism, which is between Hinayana ("the small wheel") and Mahayana ("the great wheel"). The first is elitist and demanding, trying to maintain fidelity to Buddha's teaching, focusing on the individual's effort to get rid of the illusion of the Self and attain Enlightenment. The practice of meditation is here "primarily focused on solitary, introspective methods, where stages of insight unfold within a climate of extreme mental seclusion and interpersonal isolation." The second, which arose through the split from the first, subtly shifts the accent onto compassion for others: its central figure is the bodhisattva, the individual who, after achieving Enlightenment, decides out of compassion to return to the world of material illusions in order to help others to achieve Enlightenment, i.e., to work to end the suffering of all sentient beings.

The split here is irreducible: working for one's own Enlightenment only reasserts the centrality of the Self in the very act of striving for its overcoming, while the "great wheel" route out of this predicament just displaces the deadlock. Egotism is overcome, but at the price of universal Enlightenment itself turning into an object of the instrumental activity of the Self.

It is easy to identify the inconsistency of the Mahayana move, which cannot but have fateful consequences: when the Mahayana reinterpretation focuses on the figure of the bodhisattva—the one who, after achieving Enlightenment and entering nirvana, returns to the life of illusory passions out of compassion for all those still caught in the Wheel of Craving—a simple question arises. If, as radical Buddhists emphatically point out, entering nirvana does not mean that we leave this world and enter another higher reality—in other words, if reality remains as it is and all that changes is the individual's attitude towards it—why, then, in order to help other suffering beings, must we return to our ordinary reality? Why can we not continue to dwell in the state of Enlightenment in which, as we are taught, we remain living in this world? There is thus no need for Mahayana, for the "larger wheel": the small (Hinayana) wheel is itself large enough to allow the Enlightened one to help others achieve Enlightenment. In other words, is not the very concept of the bodhisattva based on a theologico-metaphysical misunderstanding of the nature of nirvana? Does it not, in an underhand way, turn nirvana into a higher metaphysical reality? No wonder that Mahayana Buddhists were

the first to give a religious twist to Buddhism, abandoning the Buddha's original agnostic materialism, his explicit indifference towards the religious topic.

To clarify this tension somewhat, one should note how far authentic Buddhism is from our usual notion of compassion for the suffering of others. Recall the story about a disciple who once asked Buddha: "Master, should we be compassionate to others?" After a few moments of contemplation, Buddha answered: "There are no others." This is the only consequential answer from the Buddhist standpoint of denying any substantial reality of human Selves: we suffer insofar as we perceive ourselves as substantial Selves, so the true overcoming of our suffering resides not in getting rid of what our Self perceives as an obstacle to its happiness but in getting rid of the Self itself. No wonder that Buddhism quickly abandoned this radical stance: it all began to go wrong with the Mahayana turn.paste.txt

Things get even more complicated when we turn to the social domain: Buddhist social thought imagines a society in which desire is divested of its constitutive excess and is satisfied by its self-limitation. As the partisans of Buddhist economics repeat tirelessly, Buddhism does not advocate ascetic renunciation of worldly pleasures but the proper measure between wealth and poverty, between individualism and communal spirit: wealth is good if it serves our collective well-being. The Buddhist notion of the right measure, of "just the right amount," does not refer only to individuals; it aims at not harming oneself or others, where others are not only other human beings but all that lives. In contrast to Western individualism, Buddhism advocates a holistic approach: my well-being depends on the well-being of all others around me, but also on the balanced exchange with nature.

Consequently, Buddhist economics advocates a constrained, limited desire, a desire controlled by spirit, deprived of its excessive nature: it relies on the distinction between true desires and false desires. False desires are desires for pleasure attained through the consummation of sensual objects or through their possession, and they are by definition insatiable, never fully satisfied, always striving for more. True desires are desires for well-being, and to arrive at well-being, a rational mind has to regulate and contain sensual desires. We thus arrive at the opposition between limitless sensual desires and the spiritual desire for well-being: "Consumption may satisfy sensual desires, but its true purpose is to provide well-being. For example, our body depends on food for nourishment. Consumption of food is thus a requirement for well-being. For most people, however, eating food is also a means to experience pleasure. If in consuming food one receives the experience of a delicious flavor, one is said to have satisfied one's desires."[6]

From my Lacanian standpoint, it is here that problems arise: what Buddhism aims at is a desire deprived of its excess, which is precisely what makes it a human desire, enjoyment deprived of its constitutive surplus. When we eat, we almost never do it just for our long-term spiritual well-being; we do it for the pleasure of eating, and it is this

[6] Buddhist_Economics.pdf (urbandharma.org).

pleasure, not its subordination to some higher goal, that makes us human. Recall here Lacan's example of breastfeeding: a child sucks the breast to get food (milk), but the repeated act of sucking soon turns into the true source of pleasure, so that the child is pushed beyond the satisfaction of its needs. The same holds even more obviously for sex: we almost never engage in sex to fulfil its natural goal (procreation) but for the enjoyment it provides—we became human exactly when sex left behind its "natural" goal of procreation and turned into an end in itself. It is totally wrong to characterize this shift as an abandonment to limitless sensual desires: intense sex as an end in itself, separated from its natural goal, is arguably our most elementary metaphysical experience; our sensual pleasure is "transubstantiated" into an experience of another dimension, a dimension beyond direct physical reality.

We should thus invert the opposition between false limitless desires, which only bring suffering, and the authentic spiritual desire for well-being: sensual desires are in themselves moderate, constrained to their direct goals; they become infinite and self-destructive only when they are infected by a spiritual dimension. Is this nonetheless not a form of Evil? Maybe, but, as F. W. J. Schelling already knew, only spirituality is self-destructive in its longing for infinity, which is why Evil is much more spiritual than our sensual reality. In other words, the root of Evil is not our egotism but, on the contrary, a perverted self-destructive spirituality that can also bring us to sacrifice our lives. This dimension is missing in Buddhist economics, which is why its declared goal of the proper measure, when one attempts to practice it, tends to end up in some form of (not always) soft fascism.

It is against this background that I argue against my critics who, while generally sympathetic to my approach, claim that I miss the point when I target Buddhism. Representative of these critics is "Nagarjuna and ecophilosophy" by Adrian J. Ivakhiv,[7] who also relies on John Clark's "On Being None With Nature: Nagarjuna and the Ecology of Emptiness."[8] Ivakhiv's starting point is the core Buddhist concept of "dependent origination": every identity is a process-relational position, which means that, say, a tree's existence as a unitary object, as opposed to a collection of cells, is conventional: "Removing its properties leaves no core bearer behind." In other words, "the thing we call a 'tree' is, as Buddhists say, empty of inherent self-existence; its essence is nothing other than the properties and conditions of its self-manifesting."[9] (No wonder that Carlo Rovelli's relational quantum mechanics directly refers to Nagarjuna.) This goes against Graham Harman's (and others') argument that there is something more to any object than its properties, relations, and conditions. For Buddhism, there is nothing (no-thing) left over. "But that is not to say that there is, in fact, nothing... There is the process-relational flux of what Clark calls 'nature naturing,' the continual coming into

[7] See Adrian J. Ivakhiv, Nagarjuna, ecophilosophy, & the practice of liberation (uvm.edu), and Nagarjuna, ecophilosophy, pt. 2 (uvm.edu).

[8] See "On Being None With Nature: Nagarjuna and the Ecology of Emptiness" | John Clark - Academia.edu.

[9] Ivakhiv, op.cit.

existence and passing away of the experiential bits of the world, all of which is quite real."[10] What this implies is that the "negative" and "deconstructive" project that Nagarjuna is best known for "goes hand in hand with an affirmative, 'reality-based' project of the sort that, in current continental philosophy, is best represented by Deleuze" – or, to quote Clark: "For Buddhism the negative path of the destruction of illusion is inseparably linked to the positive path of an open, awakened, and compassionate response to a living, non-objectifiable reality, the 'nature that is no nature.'''

This brings us to what is, in my view, the central challenge for Buddhism: how do we humans get caught in "a dream world of illusory, deceptively permanent objects and egos, and a futile quest to defend the ego and dominate reality"? Is it enough to say that this is a "fundamental human predicament," i.e., a trans-historical invariant? John Clark makes here a surprising move into a Marxist-historicist direction: "Where most analyses (including most Buddhist analyses) of egocentric consciousness and the egoic flight from the trauma of lack stop short is in failing to investigate the social and historical roots of these phenomena. We must understand that the ego is not only a psychological and epistemological construct, but also a historical one. Its roots are to be found in the development of large-scale agrarian society and regimented labour, the rise of the state and ancient despotism, the emergence of economic class and acquisitive values, the triumph of patriarchy and warrior mentality – in short, in the evolution of the ancient system of social domination and the domination of nature. To put it in Buddhist terms, our true karmic burden, both personally and collectively, is our profound historicity and our deep materiality."[11] But the question remains: how far can we go in this direction of historicity? Were individuals in pre-class societies dwelling in a "living, non-objectifiable reality, the 'nature that is no nature'", and should the possible post-capitalist society also be conceived as a liberation from the "wheel of desire"? Another question lurks beneath this one: "Why should the destruction of illusion lead to compassion rather than to cynicism as it often seems to in everyday life, or to social conservatism as it has in the case of Humean and other forms of philosophical scepticism?"[12] In spite of all desperate attempts to demonstrate that the way to Buddhist enlightenment goes through modesty and compassion, the only honest answer is that of D. T. Suzuki: Zen is a technique of meditation that is compatible with any political orientation, liberalism, fascism, Communism.

Or, to put it in yet another way, Buddhism accepts the common view that the purpose of life is happiness (to quote the Dalai Lama, "the purpose of our lives is to be happy"), it just defines this term differently. "Happiness is not something readymade. It comes from your own actions." "When we feel love and kindness toward others, it not only makes others feel loved and cared for, but it helps us also to develop inner happiness and peace." "We don't need more money, we don't need greater success or

[10] Op.cit.

[11] Clark, op.cit., p. 28.

[12] Ivakhiv, op.cit.

fame, we don't need the perfect body or even the perfect mate. Right now, at this very moment, we have a mind, which is all the basic equipment we need to achieve complete happiness." "Human happiness and human satisfaction most ultimately come from within oneself."[13] Following Freud, Lacan, on the contrary, asserts death drive as the basic component of our libidinal lives, which operates beyond the pleasure-principle: what Lacan calls enjoyment (jouissance) emerges out of a self-sabotage of pleasure; it is an enjoyment in displeasure itself.

A Lacanian view is much closer to Dr House who, in one of the episodes of the series, when he tries to diagnose a patient with his group and one of his collaborators mentions that the patient radiates happiness, immediately adds "happiness" to the list of the patient's symptoms of illness to be explained and abolished. The feeling of happiness is a dangerous symptom, not something we should strive for. And the same goes for what is also considered the most spontaneous parental feeling: the immense love of one's own small child. Small children are horror embodied: stupid, annoying, smelling bad, breaking our sleep... so the feeling of love for them is a clear case of what is called the "Stockholm syndrome": a coping mechanism in a captive or abusive situation, when people develop positive feelings toward their captors or abusers over time. Is this not exactly the mechanism of how we cope with small children?

So what about the Lacano-Buddhist attempt to read what Buddhism calls nirvana as grounded in what Lacan calls "traversing the fantasy"? We cannot simply dismiss it as a gross misunderstanding of Lacan because there is a grain of truth in it: desire is metonymic – every empirical positive object that we desire is a trap (in the sense that, if we get it, our desire is not fully satisfied but disappointed; we experience a "ce n'est pas ça," this is not what we really desired), so let us drop our attachment to particular objects and just persist surfing along from one object to another. In other words, a true betrayal of our desire is precisely our full attachment to a particular object as its true object: if we renounce this, if we maintain a distance towards every object, we attain peace, we are faithful to our desire, i.e., to the void in its heart that cannot be abolished by any object. But this logic ultimately fails: for Lacan, desire in its "purity" (considered without an empirical object of desire) cannot be transformed into something that is peacefully integrated into a non-substantial changing multiplicity of our reality, because desire is as such a gesture of breaking up the balance of reality. If we subtract particular objects, we get the gesture of breaking-up, of disturbing the balance, as such. What any particular empirical object of desire obfuscates is not the balance of a void but this negative gesture as such: any particular object particularises this rupture as such, transforming it into a desire for something that positively exists as a particular object.

But where is here the dimension of intersubjectivity? In her *Relational Dharma*, Jeannine A. Davies deploys a "liberating model of intersubjectivity" – her starting point is the basic goal of practising dharma, which is "to discern the distinction between

[13] Inspirational Quotes About Happiness From Dalai Lama - Lifehack.

conventional and ultimate realities through direct experience. A simple example of the distinction between conventional and ultimate reality is the difference between the concept of water and the physical sensation of water. Its salient characteristics are of wetness and of a cool, warm, or hot temperature. As awareness discriminates between the concept of water and water's physical sensations, an insightful penetration into the nature of conceptual ideation occurs. Concepts are then seen as abstractions within consciousness, mental overlays born through prior conditioning."[14] Davies, of course, has to concede that the practice of meditation is primarily focused on solitary, introspective methods, where stages of insight unfold within a climate of extreme mental seclusion and interpersonal isolation – her aim is to demonstrate how dharma can also be achieved through new practices of social interaction.

In order to deploy this claim, she has to engage with the opposition between two main orientations of Buddhism, Mahayana and Theravada. Theravada concentrates on achieving dharma by means of individual practice of introspection, while Mahayana emphasizes dharma achieved by social interaction. When an individual is afflicted by a trauma that threatens to destroy their psychic balance and ability to interact with others, Mahayana employs the Relational Dharma approach, which "mediates and attunes within an environment of empathic union, nourishing an atmosphere that assuages anxiety and facilitates the generation of trust and safety to flow in the in-between. This process allows for the possibility of transforming negative or life-diminishing 'filters' into associations that widen and deepen identity. In this experience, the appearance of something 'foreign,' 'not part of,' or 'too much,' is relaxed, so that one's sense of what constitutes a 'whole person' naturally broadens and evolves, and a deeper understanding of oneself and the relationship between oneself and others emerges."[15]

In such an approach, one achieves "the inner liberty to feel another's suffering as inseparable from one's own and the compassion to seek to alleviate it, thus respecting the freedom of others as inseparable from one's own freedom," a freedom to "forgive others for their transgressions. In order to forgive, the ability to 'step back' and recognize the conditions that gave rise to his or her actions versus reacting from a place of personalizing these actions must be developed. As awareness into the causal relationships that led this individual to be wounded and act in harmful ways becomes recognized, relational objectivity emerges and compassion becomes possible."[16] Such a stance opens up a path to peacefully revolutionise our world beset by violence and non-sustainable action: "insight into the conscious engagement of interrelatedness may be one of the most important in terms of its spiritual, social, and political implications. It is only when we see with greater clarity the intimate causation of how 'we,' citizens of the Whole, affect totality that we find the inspiration to take personal responsibility

[14] Relational Dharma: a Modern Paradigm of Transformation—A Liberating Model of Intersubjectivity - DocsLib.

[15] Op.cit.

[16] Op.cit.

for our presence and fine-tune our physiological, emotional, and physical resonance within the Whole."[17]

Suffering and obstacles to freedom do not simply vanish; they are not simply left behind. In an almost Hegelian way, they are re-experienced as vehicles for growth and freedom. They are deprived of their substantial identity and placed in the relational context in which they arise and disappear in co-dependence, resonating within the Whole. However, to maintain such a stance of universal interrelatedness, the Mahayana tradition has to introduce a distinction between two different notions of a bodhisattva's relationship to nirvana. The basic goal is to become an arhat ("the one who is worthy"), a perfected person, one who has gained insight into the true nature of existence and has achieved nirvana (spiritual enlightenment): the arhat, having freed himself from the bonds of desire, will not be reborn. While the state of an arhat is considered in the Theravada tradition to be the proper goal of a Buddhist, Mahayana adds to it an even higher level, "a kind of non-dual state in which one is neither limited to samsara nor nirvana. A being who has reached this kind of nirvana is not restricted from manifesting in the samsaric realms, and yet they remain fully detached from the defilements found in these realms (and thus they can help others)."[18]

We thus obtain the distinction between two kinds of nirvāṇa: the nirvāṇa of an arhat and a superior type of nirvāṇa called *apratiṣṭhita* (non-abiding) that allows a Buddha to remain engaged in the samsaric realms without being affected by them. However, the predominant Mahayana notion of the bodhisattva silently concedes that to arrive at such a non-dual state is practically impossible, so he heroically sacrifices his own dharma and postpones his awakening until all living beings have been liberated – bodhisattvas take the following vow: "I shall not enter into final nirvana before all beings have been liberated," or "I must lead all beings to Liberation. I will stay here till the end, even for the sake of one living soul." The bodhisattva who wants to reach Buddhahood for the sake of all beings is more loving and compassionate than the *śrāvaka* (who only wishes to end their own suffering): he practises the path for the good of others (*par-ārtha*) while the *śrāvakas* do so for their own good (*sv-ārtha*). I find this distinction between *par-ārtha* and *sv-ārtha* potentially very dangerous: although Mahayana appears more "democratic," allowing everyone to attain dharma, does its notion of the bodhisattva who refuses to enter nirvana not conceal a new form of elitism? A selected few who remain caught in our ordinary reality (in the wheel of desire) legitimise their specially privileged position by the fact that they could have reached nirvana but postponed it to help all others reach it. In a radical sense nirvana thus becomes impossible: if I reach it, I act as an egotist, caring only for my own good; if I act for the good of others, I postpone my entry into nirvana. This privileged position remains caught in a dualism that authentic Buddhism promises to leave behind: the realm of nirvana becomes a Beyond we strive to reach.

[17] Op.cit.

[18] Bodhisattva - Wikipedia.

The paradoxical conclusion is that, with all its emphasis on complex social relatedness of every Self, Buddhism ignores the radical intersubjectivity of desire, the fact that desire is always reflexive (a desire for desire, a desire for being desired), and that the primordial lacking object of desire is myself, the enigma of what I am for others. This is why, for Lacan, desire is as such "reactive." What this means is that, as Hegel clearly saw, domination of others and violence towards them is a key moment of the painful process of intersubjective recognition. This violence is not an expression of my egotist self-interest; it relies on an "evil" for which I am ready to put at risk my own welfare and even my life. Relational dharma is not enough to account for this "evil," since this dimension of "evil" is constitutive of how I experience an Other: as an impenetrable abyss that cannot be dissolved in a fluid network of appearances. At its most basic, "evil" has nothing to do with my egotist interests: it is more spiritual than simple self-interest – the Buddhist notion of samsara ("the wheel of desire") ignores this spiritual aspect of "evil." To take an extreme example: the Nazis went on with the Holocaust even more fanatically when it was clear that they were losing the war – why? Certainly not for their own good, out of their own egotist interest. In a perverted case of total ethical commitment, they were ready to endure much more suffering just to fulfil their mission to rid Europe of the Jews.

This is where the already-quoted passage about the "key difference between Freud/Lacan/Zizek/et al. and Nagarjuna" – "the former presuppose that this rise of dominating ego is unavoidable, the best we can do is to come to terms with the ego (etc.) process and try not to get too caught up in the delusional tricks it plays on us"[19] – totally misses the point. Buddhism describes how we can gradually get rid of the egotist stance of domination over others and of being enslaved to our desires, which both cause suffering; our goal is to reach dharma in which our ego dissolves in the flux of appearances and loses its substantial identity. Within this space, Freud and Lacan can only appear as going halfway: they clearly see the self-destructive nature of the dominating Ego, but they ignore that there is a domain beyond the ego and its paradoxes, the domain of inner peace and happiness, so their ultimate reach is to describe the paradoxes of the ego. For Freud and Lacan, on the contrary, there is nothing beyond the antagonisms of our reality, nothing but a gap of impossibility that thwarts it from within: everything that we perceive as its Beyond we project there. This does not mean that what Buddhists describe as nirvana or dharma is an illusion or a fake: it is a profound experience of subjective destitution, but it nonetheless functions as the obfuscation of a more radical experience of a gap out of which our reality appears.

Both Hinayana and Mahayana exclude a shattering proto-conservative insight: what if truth does not alleviate our suffering? What if truth hurts? What if the only peace attainable comes from immersing oneself in illusion? Is this conclusion not the hidden underlying premise of the third major school, the Vajrayana, which predominates in Tibet and Mongolia? Vajrayana is clearly regressive, involving the reinscription of

[19] Ivakhiv, op.cit.

traditional ritualistic and magical practices into Buddhism: the opposition between Self and others is here overcome, but through its "reification" in ritualised practices that are indifferent to this distinction. It is an interesting fact of historical dialectic that Buddhism, which originally dispensed with all institutional ritual and dogma to focus solely on the individual's Enlightenment and overcoming of suffering, ended up clinging to the most mechanical and firmly entrenched institutional hierarchical framework.

The point here is not to make fun of the "superstitious" features of Tibetan Buddhism, but to become aware of how this total externalisation does the job, "delivers the goods." Is not the use of the prayer-wheel – and of ritual more generally – also a means to achieve "mindlessness," to empty one's mind and repose in peace? So, in a way, Tibetan Buddhism is wholly faithful to the Buddha's pragmatic orientation (ignore theological niceties, focus on helping people): sometimes, following blind ritual and immersing oneself in theologico-dogmatic hair-splitting is pragmatically the most effective way to achieve the goal of inner peace. The same holds for sexuality, where sometimes the best cure for impotence is not just to "relax and let go" (the moment one formulates this as an injunction, it has the opposite of the intended effect), but to approach sex as a bureaucratic procedure, establishing in detail what one is planning to do. This logic is also that of intelligent utilitarians who are well aware that moral acts cannot be directly grounded in utilitarian considerations ("I will do this because, in the long run, it is the best strategy for bringing me the most happiness and pleasure..."); but the conclusion they draw is that the Kantian "absolutist" morality ("do your duty for the sake of duty") can and should be defended precisely on utilitarian grounds – it is also the one that works best in real life.

What, then, is the Buddhist answer to the Hegelian question: if we suffering humans need to be awakened into Enlightenment, how did we fall asleep in the first place? How did the Wheel of Desire emerge out of the eternal Void? There are three main answers, which strangely echo the triad of Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. The first, standard answer invokes the Buddha's practico-ethical attitude: instead of dwelling on metaphysical enigmas, begin with the fact of suffering and the task of helping people out of it. The next answer draws our attention to the obvious cognitive paradox implied in the question itself: our very state of ignorance makes it impossible for us to answer it – it can only be answered (or even posed in a proper way) once one reaches full Enlightenment. (Why, then, do we not receive an answer from those who claim to have reached Enlightenment?) Finally, there are some Tibetan Buddhist hints at dark demonic forces that disturb the balance of nirvana from within – this is where a possible link with the Buddhist tradition appears. The tension between the void in the sense of the Buddhist *śūnyatā* (the primordial void as the background of all ephemeral appearances that exist only in their interrelations) and the void in the sense of self-relating negativity, a singularity that excludes and threatens to destroy all positive content, this tension between the all-encompassing Void of eternal peace and the void of negativity, a point of pure singularity, is the ultimate identity of op-

posites, a new version of the first couple of Hegel's Logic, Being and Nothingness, a pre-dialectical tension that sustains all dialectical process.

When Buddhism turns around the standard Hindu formula of "being One with the Absolute" and posits as the goal of Enlightenment "Being None with Nature" (nature which is in itself already Nothingness), it obfuscates the radical gap that separates the two Nothingnesses. As we have just seen, "nature" is the all-encompassing Void as the substanceless ultimate reality, while the subject is the punctual void that introduces an infinite tension into this all-encompassing Void. Contemporary Buddhist talk a lot about "deconstructing the Self," but from the Lacanian standpoint this confuses the Self (the imaginary content of my inner life) with the subject ($: the barred subject, the void, the vanishing point of absolute self-negativity). Hegel should here be clearly distinguished from Fichte: for Fichte, subject (the pure I) is the absolute beginning, and its first act is that the I posits the non-I (objectivity). For Hegel, subject presupposes (posits retroactively as its presupposition) substantial objectivity: subject stands for the disturbance of bliss, imbalance, partiality; it is by definition not "absolute" but the moment of inequity, so that every figure of objective order that the subject (which emerges from substantial chaos) retroactively imposes on this chaos is already marked by its singularity.

Slavoj Žižek
Reply to the Critics of My Critique of Buddhism
The Buddhist edifice is necessarily inconsistent; there is no neutral universal Buddhist theory
Jan 10, 2026

<www.slavoj.substack.com/p/reply-to-the-critics-of-my-critique>