

On Buddhist Anti-Intellectualism and the Limits of Conceptual Thought

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For several years now I have been puzzled, sometimes troubled, by the determined and occasionally virulent anti-intellectualism of Western Buddhism. The pervasive hostility to philosophical thought, at Buddhist retreats, in popular Buddhist books and magazines, and sometimes even in scholarly works, is particularly puzzling in light of the long tradition of sophisticated and rigorous Buddhist philosophy. In the last couple thousand years, there has been enormous intellectual work in many different schools of Buddhism, but American Buddhists are adamant that any such efforts be labeled “clinging to views” or “ego.” Why, I have often wondered, adopt Buddhism at all if one is so opposed to rigorous thought? Of course, there are some easy answers about the myth of the exotic east and spiritual snobbery; however, I have come to think that there is a more subtle, and less dismissive, answer to this puzzle. Perhaps instead of just putting this down to the general American stupidity, we can explore why this anti-intellectualism is so compelling, and what, exactly, is so terribly anxiety-producing about thought?

I will briefly adumbrate my conclusion here, although it will likely be unconvincing at this point: I would suggest that the particular kind of anti-intellectualism found among Buddhists (who are often more educated and intelligent than average) is a reaction to the desolate landscape of post-modern thought; it is, I will suggest, not the only possible reaction, and there is another alternative, which I think is more in line with the history of Buddhist thought. That alternative is not a retreat from thought into pure experience, but the willingness to think our way out of this bleak intellectual wasteland. In short, while many Buddhists have been trying to escape the trap of post-modernity by retreating down into the thought-free depths of the body, a more useful (and, I will argue, more Buddhist) response is to escape up, into the limits of philosophical rigor.

To begin, I want to delineate the particular kind of anti-intellectualism that has permeated popular forms of Western Buddhism. Now, in mentioning only a handful of Buddhist teachers, I don't want to suggest that they are solely responsible for this anti-intellectualism, or that this represents the entire function of their work as a whole. I am simply picking a few examples, to clarify the kind of resistance to thought I see as being most prevalent; these examples are certainly not exhaustive, nor are they the entire story of Western Buddhism. There are some Buddhist thinkers today (I will mention only a few of them, as well) who are very explicitly not in the anti-intellectual camp. My goal here is simply to account for one reason why anti-intellectualism is so popular a position for a group of people who are, more often than not, well-educated, intelligent, and politically progressive—all descriptors with which the term “anti-intellectual” would not seem to pair well.

I have often heard it suggested that the suspicion of thought results from the influence of Zen being the first form of Buddhism widely introduced to Western audiences. I wonder, however, if it might have been the other way around—that Zen was attractive because it is so easy to

portray it as eschewing thought. In fact, it is also possible to see the practice of koans as exactly demanding that the practitioner take his conceptual framework to the limits and transcend it, not escaping to pure thoughtless sensation but advancing the possibilities of thought. I'll come back to this suggestion later. For now, I want to start with some popular presentations of Zen, and their rejection of conceptual or philosophical thought.

D.T. Suzuki, in *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, declared that "Zen has nothing to teach us in the way of intellectual analysis," and that the sutras are "mere waste paper whose utility consist in wiping off the dirt of the intellect and nothing more" (8-9). The goal is "absolute peace of mind," and this is only attained by eliminating the "reasoning faculty," which only "hinders the mind from coming into the directest communication with itself" (14). We must seek a state in which we eliminate logic and even words from our minds, and live in direct, sensory experience, understood to be the deepest truth. On this understanding, our senses are a pure apprehension of a primal reality, which have been screened from us by thought; now, I'll set aside critiquing this position for the time being, and simply note that it would strike most philosophers today, and I believe many Buddhists throughout history, as startlingly naive to think that our sense perceptions aren't always already structured by culture and language.

More recently, Thich Nhat Hanh has followed a similar approach. One could almost open any of his books and find a statement about the futility of thought, or the vanity of "philosophy," or a statement that true enlightenment is full enjoyment of a cup of tea or the beauty of a flower. We must never examine the history of imperialism that is the condition of our enjoying this cup of tea, or the cultural privileging of the temporary, of the extravagant ability to devote resources to the useless, which are the cause of our pleasure in the flower. That would be thought, and so delusion: enlightenment is just insisting that the culturally produced experiences we enjoy the most are a contact with the timeless reality of "interbeing." In *Understanding Our Mind*, perhaps Thich Nhat Hanh's most explicitly anti-intellectual book, he explains that in the first stage of the bodhisattva path, the bodhisattva must remove the "obstacles of knowledge and affliction," and then "experience" reality directly as a "state of being refreshed" (117). Note that these are not obstacles to knowledge—knowledge itself is the obstacle to experiencing reality: "Before ideation, before the mind begins to construct, the mind touches the ultimate dimension, the realm of suchness" (128). The only way back to this mystical suchness is eliminating thought and fully enjoying our sensory present.

It is not only the Zen Buddhists in the West who have embraced this belief in an experiential truth to be found beneath the layers of conceptual thought. Stephen Batchelor is but one example of a Buddhist trained in the Tibetan tradition who has become quite popular by teaching this understanding of Buddhism. Nearly thirty years ago, in his book *Alone With Others*, he presented his "existential approach to Buddhism" as a rejection of the Mahayana "preoccupation with speculative metaphysics" (125), which led, in his view, to a neglect of the "existential experience," which is alone what can lead us to see through the attachments produced in reaction to our primal anxiety in the face of emptiness. In *Confessions of a Buddhist Atheist*, he explains how he became dissatisfied with his Buddhist teachers once he discovered Heidegger, as a reaction to the abstraction of philosophical thought: "Heidegger

believed that the entire project of Western thought that began with Plato had come to an end. It was necessary to start all over again, to embark on a new way of thinking, which he called *besinnliches Denken*: contemplative thinking” (51). This “contemplative thinking,” according to a common reading of Heidegger which Batchelor seems to have accepted, is a form of access to the autochthonous, the primitive and primal experience before rational and scientific thought separated us from this deep reality, and is, for Heidegger, accessible in the authentic purity of the true German language, and in the timeless greatness of the true German poets. The alienation of modernity is seen as the result, not of capitalism, industrialism, fascism, but of too much abstract thought and too much scientific progress. The return to the primitive experience of Dasein can restore us to “authenticity.” Among self-styled “secular Buddhists,” this justification for rejecting the demands of rigorous thought seems to be very appealing; it might be worth remembering where it led Heidegger.

In the period between the two World Wars, in the great capitalist crisis of the twentieth century, when the bourgeoisie was stuck in its attempt to throw off the yoke of the *ancien régime* without accidentally launching a world-wide communist revolution, this Heideggerian retreat from thought perhaps makes some sense. Modernity was sapping the meaning from the world, and it was either make a bid for the imaginary plenitude of Dasein while sitting on a cushion, or goose-step in line. Or, of course, to do the unthinkable: turn Red. In our time, the meaninglessness of the world is supplemented by the meaninglessness of thought, with philosophy reduced to a post-modern language game. Accepting the radical division between the meaningless material world accessible to science and the thoroughly relativist world of humanity which no scientific thought can reach, a view most commonly going by the name of Rorty, the postmodern world is left with only two choices: accept the absolute reduction of all human experience to the working of the neurons in the brain, or retreat into a mystical ideal of pure experience, with the (misguided) belief that we can access perceptions that are not tainted by the world of language and conceptual thought. Thought becomes “fixed views” or “intellectualizing” because in the present tyranny of absolute freedom of opinion, no position can be argued for; to make an argument is to deny that all opinions are equally valid in the purely relativist world of human thought. In this extreme relativism, we have reached the absurd state in which at least one popular Buddhist teacher, with the proper credentials of years spent in the exotic East, can quite seriously suggest that we could even walk up wall if we just believed that we could!

The anti-intellectualism is perhaps understandable, then, as a retreat from the arrant nonsense of so much popular postmodernism. One way of understanding the history of philosophy is as a series of containments of radicalism. There is a sense in which Kantian transcendental idealism contains the radical potential of the enlightenment, and a sense in which Heideggerian phenomenology contains the radical potential of Nietzsche, Marx and Freud, and today the postmodern “linguistic turn” can contain any potential for radical thought by simply insisting that all thought is a language game that constructs the reality it purports to describe. In the current state of Western culture, it is perhaps understandable that when people are dissatisfied, when they have a felt sense that there are things excluded, left unthinkable in the language games of philosophy and the tyranny of free opinion, they look to find that excluded

something in an experience that they are told is “purified” of all thought, a return to the primal unity with “suchness.” That they don’t find it there is perhaps the reason that so many Western Buddhists move on, after a year or two, to the next New Age fad.

There is however, an alternative to this defeat of thought. And, what is most important, it is one that is more compatible with the history of Buddhist philosophy than the attempt to retreat into mindless experience of a cup of tea or a flower. For if Buddhism has always insisted on the limitations of conceptual thought, it has also always insisted that our experience is never free of those very same limitations. Every gut-level intuition is shot through with the structure of ideology; our very sensory perceptions are active structuring of the world, not passive reception of stimuli. When we stop thinking, we do not escape ideology, but become fully enslaved by it at the level of the body.

We can seek the limitations of thought not by sinking down into the realm of the purely physical, but by accepting the challenge of rigorous thought. In the words of Alain Badiou:

in order to think, always take as your starting point the restrictive exception of truths and not the freedom of opinion. This is a worker’s principle in the sense that thought is here a matter of labour and not of self-expression. Process, production, constraint and discipline are what it seeks; not nonchalant consent to what a world proposes. (25)

Badiou is only one example, but I think a very good one, of what thought could do if we accept realism, instead of either a relativist idealism in which consciousness creates the world or a reductive materialism in which thought becomes a useless epiphenomenon. For Badiou, as I understand him, there is a truth external to anything we may think, a reality which is true whether we know of it or not—Badiou makes a distinction, then, between truth and knowledge. Our thought will always run up against the limits of what our conceptual system cannot include, what is unthinkable. This aporia produces the potential for rigorous thought, for the insistence on including what we can think as true but which cannot be proven or formalized in any existing paradigm of knowledge. And it is in this excess of truth over knowledge that the subject arises, as the embodiment of an idea that is produced by the network of causes and conditions having pushed the current paradigm of thought to its limits; it is not the subject, as individual genius, that produces the idea, but the new idea that produces a subject. Badiou’s term for this is “ideation:” “that which, in the individual undergoing incorporation within the process of a truth, is responsible for binding together the component of this trajectory... it is that through which a human life is universalized” (115-116). For Badiou, thought does not endlessly reach the same inevitable impasse, because the subject is not an autonomous, atomistic self in dualistic relation to an objective world; instead, the subject is purely an effect of a structure, of a set of discourses and knowledge practices that are an endless dialectical process of excess and containment. This structure is not fixed and limited, but can endlessly gain more and better knowledge, can endlessly decrease the realm of what must be excluded from the symbolic order.

It can do so, for Badiou, because of his theory of the subject—a theory that has interesting affinities with the Buddhist concept of *anatman*. The subject is not to be located in the concrete individual, but in the socially produced structure that individual inhabits. As a result, the true subject, like the Bodhisattva, cannot reach full enlightenment until all sentient beings do—until the entire conceptual system does. Moreover, this is not even a matter of choice: we could not choose to ignore the symbolic network which constructs us, and leave the rest of humanity behind in the dust of ignorance, because we are all part of the same network of thought. We must (on my understanding of Badiou) insist on a transformation of the existing state of Being, and extension of the existing limits to the possibility of thought, because no individual subject can increase its freedom unless the entire network of thought transforms—because no individual subject exists, only the structure of which it is an effect is real, in the sense of having causal powers.

To try to clarify this, let's consider Zizek's critique of Badiou. Zizek argues, following Lacan, that "the ultimate authentic experience" is "nothing more than that of fully confronting the fundamental impasse of the symbolic order" (171). There is always, for Lacan, an *aporia* in language and thought, a "leftover of the Real," which can be confronted, but never overcome—any attempt to change the symbolic system to include this obscene and terrifying leftover simply shifts it to another location. For Zizek, Badiou is stuck in his inability to recognize that this traumatic kernel of the Real will always exist, and must be accepted, never subsumed. However, in Badiou's theory of the subject, the Lacanian leftover of the Real can be increasingly subsumed, because the subject is ultimately not an atomistic individual separated by an unbridgeable gap from the noumenal, and so endlessly coming up against the exact same (biological/natural) limit of thought. The *a priori* (for Badiou, mathematical) truth that the subject already contains is not in the "transcendental" mind, but is in the socially constructed symbolic system itself; and because it is socially constructed, the content of *a priori* knowledge can expand. To use a mathematical example, then, Fermat's last theorem was not finally proven because of one genius's ability, but because the *a priori* content of the entire structure producing subjects has undergone profound expansion and transformation. We can transcend the limits of thought, but not by some force of individual intellectual genius; instead, it is the participation in a socially constructed practice of demanding, rigorous thought that can take us beyond the Lacanian terror of the Real.

To return, then, to the world of Buddhism: I would like to simply suggest that there is a long tradition in Buddhism of attempting to transcend thought in this way. That enlightenment demands that we pursue thought to its (upward) limits is at least one possible reading of Nagarjuna. Instead of seeing Nagarjuna as a sophist, as Richard Hayes does, who conflates two meanings of the term *svabhava* and so produces an illogical argument, we can see him as a thinker who pushes to the limit the conceptual network of his time, a conceptual system in which it is not yet possible to think the distinctions between the two meanings of *svabhava* that Hayes argues are conflated ("identity" and "causal independence"). We can see Nagarjuna as a philosopher who, in the words of Jay Garfield and Graham Priest, "does not try to avoid the contradiction at the limit of thought" (4), and whose "extirpation of the myth of the deep" may turn out to be his "greatest contribution to Western philosophy" (16). Similarly, on one way of

understanding Vasubandhu's Yogacarīn thought, what is most important is that it is not a form of idealism in which the mind creates reality, but an attempt to understand the causes and conditions of the mind itself. As Dan Lusthaus puts it, for Yogacara "mind is not the solution but the problem," and every attempt to escape consciousness is itself "nothing but a projection of consciousness" (5-6). Vasubandhu's way of practicing Buddhism is to discover, in rigorous philosophical thought, in what way and to what ends our mind produces phenomena from an actually existing reality external to it. Like Spinoza (but unlike many phenomenologists) the Yogacarīns believed this knowledge was obtainable, and could enable better and more complete ideas of reality. In Spinozist terms, we are only as free as our ideas of reality are correct and complete; if our ideas are inherently incomplete, we can only pursue liberation if we pursue liberation of all sentient beings—because each individual subject is no more than an effect of the entirety of sentience

My argument, then, is that Western Buddhist anti-intellectualism is perhaps understandable, given the current state of the situation. If thought demands of us hard work, a kind of faithful labor, but we are constantly told that there is no point in it because there is no "correct" thought, there is just the majority opinion, well, then of course we may be reluctant to put in the effort. This rejection of the rigors of thought has not been the response of Buddhism for most of its history, and is not the only possible response to the dismal failure of Western intellectual activity. If we find that the work of intellectuals is beating a reactionary retreat at a time of crisis, and giving us no help at all, we don't need to return to our teacups and flower gardens. We can find what the present limits of thought leaves as unthinkable, not in our pure experience, but in thinking the limits of emptiness.

This need not be as terrifying as many Western Buddhists might think. It does not necessarily mean that Buddhism would be reserved for those with the greatest capacity for abstract or philosophical thought. Anyone can make the attempt to transcend the limits of their own conceptual framework. Indeed, until everyone does, there will be no single subject capable of moving forward beyond an outer limit, because every subject is an effect of the structure of all subject positions. To put this somewhat more concretely, when the calculus was discovered, very few could grasp it; to reach the stage at which the subject had sufficient a priori knowledge for Fermat's last theorem to be solved, we had to reach the stage at which an understanding of calculus could be expected of school children. For any of us to make progress toward awakening, the entire structure which produces our subjective "mind" must move beyond the current limitations of conceptual thought. There is no elite, there is only a structure, so there is no value in leaving anybody behind. In what is perhaps one of the most radical transformations of Buddhism in its history, Shinran Shonin brought Buddhism to the uneducated masses. His method, as explained by Dennis Hirota in his book *Asura's Harp*, was to meet his students where they were: "For Shinran truth might be characterized as a fundamental shift in stance, a transformative event in which the self is dislodged from an absolute standpoint and made aware of its conditionedness" (63). By his strategy in responding to questions, Shinran attempted to have his followers realize the social construction and conceptual limits of their thought, to open up the possibility of a greater understanding of Truth that exceeds present forms of knowledge. Shinran's movement was, of course, first

forbidden and then contained, eventually transformed into a worship of the Japanese state. But for that moment, in the transition from the Heian to the Kamakura period, there appeared one of the radical excesses of Buddhism: the attempt to allow all people to think the limits of their thought.

My argument is that if Buddhism would follow this line of the tradition, it would never become a site of the production of ideology, and would never need a non-Buddhism to break it free. In the current conjuncture, however, it seems to me that this retreat from thought is a kind of “mindful” reveling in pure ideology. If we want to escape the limitations of conceptual thought, as so many Western Buddhists say they do, we cannot accomplish this by retreating into an experiential realm that is always completely constructed exactly by the current structure of thought. Our very sense perceptions are informed by the constructions of language, whether we choose to become aware of this or not; there is no escape to be found in the world of pure Being.

I would suggest we think again.

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