

*A Critique of Western Buddhism: Ruins of the Buddhist Real*, by Glenn Wallis. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019. 232 pp., Hb. £90.00, ISBN-13: 9781474283557; Pb. £26.99, ISBN-13: 9781350155213.

Reviewed by Jonathan C. Gold, Princeton University, jcgold@princeton.edu

Glenn Wallis here provides a serious and sophisticated philosophical critique of Buddhism as propounded and understood by practitioners and academics today. The argument is not attempting to thoroughly defeat and discard Buddhism, but instead to identify its flaws in the hopes of carving out useful salvage. The resulting toolset, however, will not—on this Wallis is insistent—be Buddhism. Rather, what is needed, both as a counter to Buddhism’s dangerous deceptions and as a means to draw something potentially worthy of appropriation from the (hoped-for) “ruins” of Buddhism, is what he calls “Non-Buddhism.” The latter term is based in the notion of “Non-Philosophy” advocated famously by François Laruelle, upon whose critique of philosophy Wallis draws to shape his critique of Buddhism. The problem with hoping for a new or better Buddhism is that to do so encourages the very problem, which is an unfounded faith that Buddhism itself is “sufficient” to meet the tasks before us.

Readers will have reason to expect a critique of Western Buddhism to delve into the self-help industry’s emphasis on the selfish concerns of elites and the usurpation of mindfulness by military and corporate powers. Wallis is indeed attentive to these powerful, if widely known, political criticisms of modern Buddhism. A repeating theme of the book is the spectacle of Matthieu Ricard giving teachings on compassion to a gathering of neoliberal agents at the World Economic Forum at Davos in 2014, evidence of Buddhism’s self-betrayal. Wallis approves of the insights of Ronald Purser on “the interface between the corporate world and mindfulness/meditation” (180 n. 42) and provides an admirably clear exposition of Slavoj Žižek’s critique of Buddhism, wherein Buddhist teachings generate passive neoliberal subjects who blame themselves for any and all work-life stress.

Wallis follows Žižek in castigating the literature of “wisdom” for its “tautological imbecility,” and explicates paradoxes in Buddhist critiques of concepts with apparently willful naïveté (25). By affirming that it is foolish to spout contradictions, Wallis’s intention may be to identify a discursive moment where Western Buddhism encourages the suspension of intellectual responsibility and critical acumen. This seems to me like a valid point; surely there are many modern teachers who are as hermeneutically uncareful here as Wallis is in his playful role as a mocking outsider. But given that his critique proposes to extend itself to *all* forms of Buddhism, this moment of foolishness and others like it open up space for a likely counter-critique from Buddhist traditions, to which I will return.

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Disgusted as he is by Buddhists' abjection in the face of economic power, Wallis locates the problem not in opportunistic accommodation to the market but in a more precise conceptual move, which he dubs "the parapraxis of misturning." Ironically, among the exemplary performers of this move Wallis names David Loy, co-author with Purser of the famous HuffPost article, "Beyond McMindfulness." Loy serves Wallis as a "limit case" because he is an Engaged Buddhist, concerned that Buddhism be deployed to transform society and not, precisely, to accommodate practitioners to it (60-63). Wallis sides with Loy as long as he is using Buddhist concepts to interrogate society's forms and norms, and as long as he questions whether even Buddhism is capable of solving society's problems. What Wallis identifies as the rub, then, is a wishful, vague reassertion of the "principle of sufficient Buddhism"—the idea, that is, that Buddhism just might be able to solve our problems after all. Wallis detects the "misturning" when Loy concludes his discussion of the emptiness at the core of the self (*anātman*) by affirming that, since by seeing through the *ātman* one discovers better ways to go, this emptiness is also a kind of "fullness." Such language is also found in Thich Nhat Hanh and Ken Jones, and in each of these cases, Wallis identifies a refusal to accept the "obvious" conclusion that the constructed "self" is made of *social* stuff that is immanent to the material world. This is apparently unacceptable to Buddhists because it would countermand their faith in "spiritual" work. They cannot accept that change will not, necessarily, come from within.

As Wallis puts it, *anātman*, like *dukkha*, *pratīyasamutpāda* and *sūnyatā*, provide Buddhist "first names for the Real," where the Real is the world as it is, *not* a discursive construction. Buddhism claims to adopt a stance of "radical immanence," and its key terms are asserted to block all conceptual impositions on reality. The "misturning" undermines the effectively destructive force of these "names"—their ability to indicate the Real—by wishfully reasserting the power of the "Buddhist" system that the terms represent. Consequently, in order to preserve the appearance of its own "sufficiency," Buddhism participates in the construction of a "transcendental illusion," an activity that counters what appear to be its core tenets. This is the basic error that may lie beneath, and authorize, the accommodation to power.

While the title of the book might make one think that Wallis seeks to blame a modern consumerist orientation, or some other degradation, for transforming Buddhism's critical analytical tools into "spiritual" self-help magic (or something), instead Wallis generalizes the critique and asserts that it applies to Buddhism *tout court*. This is so because even terms in Buddhism that express "radical immanence" (*tatthatā*, *yathābhūta*, *dharmakāya*, etc.) are always also justified and elevated, always made into "grist for the mill" of some ontology or phenomenology. Wallis points out that even passages in traditional Buddhist literature that are explicitly designed to express the "emptiness" of Buddhist doctrine are elevated and transformed into objects of faith. He cites the *Heart Sutra*, whose performance of the emptiness of the core teachings (no form, no feeling, etc.) is coopted for the empowerment of a mantra (198 n. 63). He reads the Zen *kōan* where the master equates "Buddha" with "dried shitstick" to be an instantiation of the attempt to cut through the "thicket

of views” and “enable the real to be ‘given-without-giveness’”—yet tradition does not “permit the reversal to hold”; commentators glorify the master’s reply (125). “Emptiness” becomes “fullness.”

At one moment in the argument, though, Wallis expresses admiration for the notion of a Buddhist teacher who speaks of the “emptiness of emptiness” (134). When “emptiness” is acknowledged to be a mere “axiom” for thought, with no content of its own, it can serve a Laruelian purpose. Wallis considers this idea to be a kind of missed opportunity within Buddhism, since “emptiness” so readily becomes “fullness.” As a reader familiar with the “emptiness of emptiness” concept as the definitive expression of the most influential interpretation of Madhyamaka philosophy, which in turn reads emptiness in this mode as the central meaning of Mahāyāna doctrine overall (and which some of us see in Yogācāra as well), Wallis’ characterization appears to be a rather unfair representation of Buddhist traditions—perhaps a “misturning” of its own. If the point is just that we need to remain serious about “the emptiness of emptiness,” is Buddhism after Laruelle just Madhyamaka?

As the history of Tibetan philosophy shows, many kinds of conceptual moves can be ungenerously misread as appealing to a discursive reification (a “transcendental illusion”). Consider the reality that Wallis likes Laruelle’s work. He uses the term “Laruelian” as a positive adjective to name admirable conceptual moves that fit the methods he is promoting. He deploys Laruelle’s ideas and terms (replacing “Non-Philosophy” with “Non-Buddhism,” “x-philosophy” with “x-buddhism,” and so on), and shares them in his writings. It’s not a stretch to imagine that he might have bought a friend or colleague a copy of one of Laruelle’s books, in the hopes of discussing the ideas with them. Suppose, then, he even *wrapped that book* in wrapping paper. If he did so, we might use Wallis’ critique against him. Wallis, for shame, are you hoping to make Laruelle into a magical mantra for the dissolution of false concepts? Surely Laruelle does not want his work made into a system, and his system recommended, elevated, and gussied up as a gift! Laruelle is not a saint; he does not even want to be a philosopher!

Now, the reason this would be an unfair critique of Wallis (apart from the fact that he may never have wrapped a Laruelle book) is that to do so would be in bad faith. It is ungenerous not to assume that, even though Wallis wrapped up the book beautifully, he was not attempting to subvert the “radical immanence” available through Laruelle’s terminology in favor of a grand faith in Laruelianism. On the contrary, the purpose of the neat wrapping was to draw the reader’s attention to the language and the ideas within, and through those ideas, to the Real. To think otherwise would be to read Wallis’ apparent argumentation as disingenuous rhetoric. Why assume that the Buddhist traditions that speak of “emptiness” and even “emptiness of emptiness” do so only to “misturn” away from the Real, contravening their explicit statements? Why not allow that the mantra is declared to be powerful because of its proximity to the unadorned truth of emptiness? Why not accept that the “dried shitstick” is, actually, the recommended signifier? Why isn’t the

Zen tradition's praise of it simply a way of wrapping the book, to focus attention on the (still) important point?

The same may be asked of Wallis' uncharitable reading of Buddhist paradoxes, as mentioned above. If the purpose behind paradoxical language is practical and designed to direct one toward a particular meditative state, then the fact that it is illogical to the point of "stupidity" is irrelevant. If my tennis coach tells me to swing "through the ball," I don't point out that we live in a physical world where solid objects resist other solid objects—and only a stupid, unnatural, "mystical" belief would make someone think that racquets go through balls. The question may be raised whether paradoxes *work* to represent and effect, for instance, suspension of attachment to concepts, and it may be asked whether, and for what purposes, suspension of attachment to concepts is beneficial. There may be reason, furthermore, to worry when suspension of thought is proposed as a solution to all things for individuals and society. Suspension of conceptual thought may not be a good tool to transform brutal neoliberal capitalism into an economy of beneficence—it may not be a political strategy at all.

Yet *that* critique targets not Buddhism or even Western Buddhism, but a specific set of claims adopted and advocated by specific people in the name of Buddhism. It is also, inevitably, a Buddhist argument rather than a non-Buddhist one. Only Buddhists have a say in deciding whether Buddhism is *supposed to* transform society. Žižek and Purser may be right that Buddhist mindfulness practices are not evidently helping to subvert the system, and may be faulted with aiding and abetting. But some Buddhists will notice that Žižek, too, is more observer than agent of change. The Buddhist's social proposal is, furthermore, not necessarily magical; the practice is intended to alter one's actions in a way that benefits oneself and others. If that doesn't seem to happen, that is where the criticism ought to be leveled, not at the fact that global capitalism survives and coopts; it does so even in the face of Žižek's impressive Amazon.com rankings.

Wallis claims that Buddhism *must* betray its own self-undermining rhetoric because such betrayal is in its nature as a "sufficient" system—and this is so even if it claims *not to claim to be* a "sufficient" system. It would benefit the reader to know that the Buddhist tradition has long argued over this very problematic. To call what's needed in such a circumstance a "non-Buddhist" resolution is fine, as long as the pursuit of "non-Buddhism" is recognized to be one of the central concerns of many historic Buddhist traditions. Perhaps the place where critique is needed is in "Western Buddhism" of a kind that "misturns" to avoid its own discursive self-limitation. In such contexts, Wallis' points are very well taken. But are they generalizable?

I hope that this is a fair representation of the main thread of Wallis's argument. Although Wallis is far more readable than Žižek or Laruelle (or Foucault), his work is sometimes dense and technical. Wallis' ideal interlocutors, the broad community of Buddhist practitioners and their teachers and advocates, may also have difficulty working through the argument. But the work is as compelling and rewarding as it is challenging. The "principle of sufficient Buddhism" and the "parapraxis of misturn-

ing” are to me quite forceful conceptual tools that deserve fuller consideration. Let us be on the lookout for circularity and speculative hypotheticals used in Buddhist discourse to mask and divert an honest acceptance of fearsome truths that challenge the validity of Buddhist practices. And there are many other engaging claims that I do not have space to review. I look forward to thinking further on all of it.