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Fragments of a Buddhist Anarchism

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Ichikawa Hakugen's critique and reconstructive vision for Buddhism indicates the possibility of a practice, or a program of Buddhist Anarchism, but it raises far more questions than it answers. If, indeed, the root of the problem of Buddhist politics lies in the interpretation of Buddhist ideology rather than its basic philosophical identity, what can be done to salvage Buddhism for the cause of worldly liberation?

In his written work, Hakugen offers some ideas for reinterpreting key Buddhist and Zen doctrines, but suggests little in the way of strategy or tactics. Of course, strategy and tactics can be (d)educed from ideology, but they are highly dependent upon their social and historical contexts, and cannot easily find their full expression without a situation to apply them to. It is my aim in this section to present some of Hakugen's suggestions for a Buddhist "liberation theology", and from there to draw out their implications for political practice in a variety of contexts modern Buddhists may find themselves in.

Hakugen identified Buddhist doctrines which he thought would be amenable to reinterpretation through an anarchist

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lens. Dependent origination, interdependence, or “production-by-causation”, in his words, plays a vital role, as it is the foundation of Buddhist ontology, metaphysics, ethics, and forms the core of the Buddha’s philosophical explanation of enlightenment; it is also closely related to the Mahayana concept of *sunya* and to Buddhist dialectical logic. It is said that only a Buddha can fully comprehend dependent origination, but that has not prevented nearly every Buddhist philosopher since from attempting to explain and interpret it.

Dependent origination and emptiness are two of the most fundamental, as well as most difficult to understand concepts in Buddhism. Because of this, interpretations vary widely. However, this also affords us a greater measure of freedom in examining their implications and drawing liberatory conclusions from them. Hakugen explains that the radical contingency of phenomena totally denies the reification of ideas, systems, and beliefs (including those of the Buddha), and promotes a “flexible ideology” that “grows and breaks from convention” through mutual study and critique of other religions and ideologies. In other words, their application to revolutionary ideology supports the practice of permanent revolution, or the constant evolution of a revolution within the revolution. Buddhism’s own philosophy can be the means by which Buddhism itself is overcome and given new life.

Dependent origination further negates essentialisms of race, gender, nationality, or any other static identity, and instead suggests that people’s conditions are brought about by the distinct historical situations which have shaped individuals and groups. It further negates a determinist view of history, in which human agency is denied in favor of impersonal factors such as technology or the environment. Instead, it affirms that human will drives human history as much as material conditions do. This points to the “necessity and possibility of historical practice that establishes subjective and objective conditions for material and mental phenomena.” Every

get from here to there, and how might this transformation influence/be influenced by Buddhism?”

phenomena is caused *and conditioned* by phenomena that precede it, including enlightenment. What kind of phenomena those are matters; we have some degree of choice in them. Knowing this, we can apply whatever wisdom we have gained to discerning which actions are likely to produce good results, both in our minds, and within society and history.

Hakugen also points out how an interpretation of interdependence which produces an ideology of merit and debt can be turned into an ideology of gratitude and non-possessiveness. We are sustained through the sacrifices of other beings, nature, and history, and so “must be ashamed of possessing any material or spiritual fortunes, because all fortunes belong to the people and the spirit of the three worlds (*sanze* — three temporal states of existence).” However, he also points out that this should not be applied as a moral lecture, in favor of “non-attainment”, or voluntary poverty and mere ethical-consumption under capitalism. Instead, we should use the lens of dependent origination to examine the systemic causes of subjective suffering in our own lives and the world, to discern “the dialectic operation and connection between optimism and pessimism in history to the point where the horizontal axis and the vertical axis of production by causation in our actual life cross each other dynamically.” By using origin humanism, informed by dependent origination, we can begin to see through the various illusions which obscure the true causes of suffering in the world and in our own lives at the very point at which they intersect. Thus origin humanism is not merely a subjective state of mind with which we can cope with contradiction, but a standpoint from which we can criticize, understand and act upon ourselves and the world simultaneously.

Applied to the world, interdependence reveals the multifaceted nature of systemic and interpersonal oppressions, as well as how diverse our strategies for resisting them may be. It becomes clear, for example, how inextricably connected racial

and caste oppression are to the hierarchical division of labor, and thus to the birth of capitalism, which relied on the hyper-exploited labor of slaves, women and indigenous peoples to produce the raw materials of the industrial revolution, which in turn lead to the creation of a proletarian working class, deprived of land they had once held and worked as peasants under feudalism, now forced to toil in factories and mines. It also complements theories of interpersonal oppression, such as the popular theory of “intersectionality”, developed by Black American feminists in the 20th century, to explain how multi-faceted forms of oppression based on different identity categories held by the same people compound and multiply, denying the possibility of centering revolutionary praxis around a single axis of oppression, a revolutionary subject such as the proletariat. Instead, we find dependently-originated oppression expressed differently everywhere, at each origin of intersection, which also becomes the most effective site of struggle for each person, a place of contradictory weakness and strength from which we can then come together and fight based on our common interests, in diverse solidarity rather than a false or forced unity.

Also intimately linked to dependent origination and emptiness is the Buddhist dialectic of “identity”, or *soku-hi*, criticized by Hakugen earlier for its immobile and reductive nature. But identity it is not merely a static unity, but an identity of opposites, which “implies the meaning of negation”, and therefore movement, generation, development. With this new understanding, in light of the critique Hakugen brings from European dialectical philosophy, “it must investigate and prove itself that it is also the logic of dynamics which has the power to reform history.”

Next, Hakugen turns to the idea of the transmigration of sentient beings, or *samsara*, popularly known as reincarnation, or rebirth, a Buddhist metaphysical belief which he previously criticized for providing an otherworldly justification for social

Hakugen and Gary Snyder until it becomes common sense everywhere.

Next, and more provocatively, we might ask, “Can there be a non-anarchist buddhism? Or even a non-anarchist religion?” This is one of those rhetorical questions which compels us to answer seriously. If indeed religion is about attaining freedom on the vertical plane, can it be truly practiced without concern for the horizontal? Is all religious hierarchy and dogma a perversion of this human desire for existential freedom? If religion wants to remain relevant to future generations, it needs to move in support of a less hierarchical, less divided, less unequal world. Buddhism is quickly losing relevance, reduced to the status of a dull sort of funeral cult in many Asian nations like Japan, and as an ally to “compassionate” capitalism (and thus the enemy of most workers) in the rest of the world. Could this lack of relevance be caused by a lack of substance, of dynamism, or engagement? Religious hierarchy, and indeed all social hierarchies, are detrimental to the development of compassion, virtue, concentration, and wisdom, which together form the very pith of Buddhism. Modern psychological studies now provide ample evidence for how hierarchy reduces empathetic behavior, understanding, and even basic recognition of other humans at the unconscious level; being on the boot-end of hierarchy similarly has serious negative health outcomes for entire populations, increasing stress, anger, and the desire for conspicuous consumption. Buddha made “the dharma” his successor, not any one person. I suspect that he must have known something about the negative influence of personal power on consciousness. This did not stop later generations of Buddhists from establishing elaborate clerical hierarchies and competing for status in class societies, of course.

If we agree that hierarchy and power are a problem for Buddhists, as much so if not more than everyone else, we also have to answer the question, “what would a society without hierarchy, an anarchist-communist society, look like, how could we

S.A.C.? What kind of society does this praxis aim to bring about? What kind of person does it need to actualize itself?

First we need to ask “could (or should) there be a buddhist anarchism?” Religious anarchisms in the past which have founded new sects have enjoyed little success. Despite the best efforts of Tolstoy and the Catholic Workers, Christianity remains relentlessly reactionary. Why should we expect anything different from Buddhism? Peter Kropotkin once commented on European variants of religious communism, primarily in the Tolstoyan tradition, “When speaking of Communism, most people think of the more or less Christian and monastic and always authoritarian Communism advocated in the first half of this century and practised in certain communities. These communities took the family as a model and tried to constitute “the great Communist family” to “reform man.”. To this end, in addition to working in common, they imposed the living closely together like a family, as well as the isolation or separation of the colony from present civilisation. This amounted to nothing less than the total interference of all “brothers” and “sisters” with the entire private life of each member.”

Religious institutions are notoriously resistant to reform; in places where they are hegemonic and overwhelmingly conservative, creating alternatives may be the best course of action. In other cases, working within established communities would be preferable, Buddhism seems a viable social vector for political thought. There could be a constant anarchist intervention in buddhist discourses, and specific organizations of buddhist anarchists dedicated to practicing and studying within other spaces. Militants in this mode could disseminate anti-authoritarian practices in religious communities without requiring ideological conformity or conversion. This activity would cultivate the seed of buddhist anti-authoritarianism planted in the 20th century, with thinkers like Ichikawa

inequality. Instead, we can also observe that throughout history, Buddhists have interpreted rebirth in a way which establishes a familial, historical bond between humans and nature; Its literal validity aside, as a metaphor, rebirth creates a metaphysical basis for the ethical precepts of non-harming and mutual aid, and paves the way for the possibility of compassion for other species of life, seeing in them our own ancestors, our departed loved ones, and our future selves. Additionally, it satisfies a desire for natural justice, in which the virtuous are rewarded and the wicked punished, in the next life if not this one. Hakugen suggests that as long as belief in an afterlife is common, this interpretation should be supported, insofar as it allows for the possibility of real justice being won in this life and this world first., a real utopia, or Pure Land on Earth, where, ultimately, “no Buddhistic charity is needed”.

Hakugen finally identifies the doctrine of Buddha nature, or the innate, immanent enlightenment of all sentient beings, as something which provides the metaphysical foundation for equality in Buddhism, or the communistic equality of unequals, as we have discussed previously. This principle of basic Buddha-nature-communism can then be extended to the entire universe, including the potentiality of even non-sentient existences, from plants to planets. From this view, a fully free humanity carries within itself the possibility not only of acting as an extension of nature made self-conscious, but as nature made self-compassionate. As far as teleological schemes go, I couldn’t think of a more worthwhile destination. Would such an end really be an end, or is it properly thought of as a means, a way towards something vastly more expansive and unimaginable from our current perspective?

Further, within his own Zen sectarian tradition, Hakugen found currents of rebellion, free-thought and communism to draw upon. Something he identified has also caused later generations to see in Zen an anti-authoritarian sensibility was Zen’s use of iconoclasm and playful subversion of authority in its

literary traditions, particularly its dialogues and koan curriculum. This is the Zen which encourages us to kill the Buddhas on the road, should we meet them. This same Zen developed a worldview which disregarded symbolic authority, minimized the distinction between work and play, or the division of labor between skilled and unskilled, seeing all as fertile ground for mental cultivation. It became independent, autonomous, free to create, to “self-negate”, and to “self-extricate”. By doing so, it spawned a distinctly timeless artistic language across mediums and cultures, and supported its continuity by enabling creators to engage in a “radical, uninterrupted self-reformation” which connected each artist to the same self-uprooting root, describing the same self-fulfilling void. Hakugen pointed out the famous Zen monks Bankei and Ikkyu as figures who embodied this libertarian tendency of the Zen spirit in Japanese history. Bankei preached his method of awakening to the masses, regardless of wealth, sect, caste, or gender, the simple message that “all things are resolved in the Unborn”, the basic Buddha-mind which we all share. Ikkyu famously broke monastic precepts, living an outrageously bohemian lifestyle for a monk at the time, and in folk-tales used his “crazy wisdom” to chastise authority figures for their stupidity. Like Uchiyama Gudo before him, he saw the communal property relations and shared labor between Zen monks as a template for communistic relations in society as a whole. Should Zen shed its accumulated feudal characteristics, and instead return to the Buddha’s basic communism, it might become relevant to social revolution in Japan and beyond.

Ichikawa Hakugen’s thought has a lot to teach us about interpretation of religion and philosophy in light of material and political actuality. In philosophy and theology, this is known as the study of hermeneutics. In Buddhism, and religion more generally, hermeneutics are typically employed to decide which doctrines or practices are authentic. For Hakugen, authenticity is not the issue at stake. He accepts that perfectly “authentic”

countless millenarian revolts of the middle ages, all precursors to the modern era’s secular revolutions. That utopianism is still alive, but feeble. It lacks grounding in the heart, the kind of certainty which breaks with all tradition and discards the received rules of the world, substituting its own logic; a mycelial contagion propagating itself in the hot dark compost of the heart, connecting mind to mind and hand to hand, decomposing the shell of the old world to give birth to the new.

Prophecy is itself just another name for heresy; the difference is again a matter of interpretation. Buddhists, and by extension, every one of us, must learn to embrace the practice of heresy. The freedom of the heretic is the realization of the religious life. The realization of the religious life is the purest critique of religion. Religion can only actualize itself when it critiques itself. “Criticism alone is Buddhism.” In Christian terms, God’s willingness to die and be humiliated on the cross— and man’s choice to kill him — redeems humanity by freeing us from the original “sin” of disobedience — negated, reaffirmed, and transformed by God’s decision to participate in rebellion against himself, or his symbolic authority. The throne of heaven is vacant and broken by God’s solidarity with man, but its authority still holds sway over our minds; The commune of heaven is yet to be won, despite the battle being over. The struggle is immanent, as the bread and the body in our gut, as our latent Buddha nature in grass and trees, as my You within your Me. In the impurity and untruth of the word is its cause of liberating insight. Humanity as nature made self conscious to itself. God as nature made self conscious to humanity. The selfless love of the bodhisattva, the sensual, desirous love of the human being.

Ok, bring it back a little

Chill out

So, one has to ask, what can we make from these interpretive fragments of a Buddhist anarchism Hakugen and others have left us with? What activities constitute the praxis of

tivity. By way of emptiness we can measure change between two points, thus the ability to perceive distance in space and flow in time. This is an emptiness which is the source of potential, the medium of motion, and the common ground (of absolute unity-in-diversity) we share. In other words, our “Buddha nature”.

Another way of looking at the “vertical” dimension of freedom, and its value to the horizontal dimension, comes in the form of moral prophecy. Religious awakening might not be inherently ethical, but it may at least have some use in gaining a prophetic vantage point from which to guide and inspire ourselves and others. For Hakugen the Origin was the site of praxis, of movement, but a purely “vertical” experience may have other advantages. To think of something vertical, one may imagine a mountain, or another high vantage point. Above all the everyday concerns, a new perspective is gained. It may not reveal the details found at ground level, but it gives the observer a better sense for the territory, its contours and hazards, the shapes of its rivers, the colors of its fields and forests. A truly prophetic voice is something which modern Buddhism needs to find if it is to become meaningfully engaged and radical. Something which sees above the clouds and points to a light on the horizon; some utopian river valley of milk and honey, off beyond the storm. The Christian radical tradition is ripe with such vertical prophetic visions. Martin Luther King Jr’s last speech is one of the finest examples of this perspective: “We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t matter with me now. Because I’ve been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind...I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land.” Such prophetic moral visions, from the coming of the kingdom of God to the advent of the future Buddha Maitreya’s Pure Land on Earth, are surely what motivated the

interpretations may in fact lead to unethical actions. Instead, he proposes that we interpret doctrine through an external ethical lens, adopted self-consciously, according to the best ability of our faculty of reason. I would further suggest that this is what we always do. There is no pure, unmediated doctrine out there waiting to be discovered. If there is, it is beyond the ability of language to capture. To describe it with words, concepts, and images only paints around it. Each angle it is examined from reveals new facets and reflections of the observer to themselves. As an object of philosophy, we can approach it, but cannot fully grasp it without fully abandoning grasping. So, knowing this, we self-consciously flavor the truth, filtering it through the accumulated strata of thought we have built up. Hakugen is not concerned, as were many philosophers, with stripping away the strata to get at the unconditioned, naked truth of the mind. Rather, through his criticism, he incites us to accept and to take responsibility for our biases, and to not seek the truth outside them, or at least not to take it as the final word on what to do. In this he echoes Hegel’s opinion that the mediated, conditioned, truth, is more true than the absolute, unconditioned truth, in that it has definite content, despite its illusory, changing, conditional existence. Zen, with its emphasis on the unconditioned mind, tells us “how to feel” but not “how to act”.

Hakugen’s mundane wisdom, while it may be disappointing to the orthodox, or to those still fixated on attaining an ultimate, trans-historical, apolitical, transcendent, psychedelic, or mystical gnosis, is a much needed medicine for those of us ultimately still concerned with the world and our place in it. By freeing ourselves to interpret Buddhist philosophy, we instill it with life. By recognizing its limits, and restraining naive interpretations by criticism, we allow Buddhism to interact freely and organically within the symbiotic, symbolic swamp of the mind, a teeming, fecund ecosystem of ideas which forms our thoughts and fills out the concrete content of history. By actualizing the religious life within the confines of our thought,

we negate the oppression of Religion as an absolute, totalizing force for colonizing and tranquilizing the mind. From this negation, the religious attitude becomes a vector for spreading anarchist praxis, and for infusing anarchism with philosophies of embodied meaning-making which speak to concerns beyond the limits of our material existence. Hakugen makes a point to quote Russian author Nikolai Berdyaev, from his book *The Origins of Russian Communism*, where Beryadaev writes, “The question of bread for myself is a material question, but the question of bread for my neighbours, for everybody, is a spiritual and religious question..... Society should be so organized that there is bread for all, and then it is that the spiritual question will present itself before men in all its depth.” Without the breadth of this “spiritual” concern, movements for social justice may become narrow-minded and egoistic. Anarchist communism certainly contains within itself this spiritual concern, as evidenced in the eloquent prose of many of its most famous advocates, but in practice often leaves it neglected, as a matter of secondary importance to the mechanics of an abstract revolution. In Hakugen’s *Origin*, bread for oneself and bread for others are intimately interrelated. The dynamic contradiction of the two drives the engine of this individual militant, which then connects concretely, as an engine would with its gears, in the material and spiritual circumstances of that person’s life.

With the freedom to make new interpretations, many more Buddhist ideas come into focus as areas ripe for revolutionary thought. For example, from this perspective, a Buddhist freedom from attachment and craving does not mean to be without feeling or care, but instead means entering wholeheartedly into all activities and being completely present in any situation. Equanimity similarly does not mean indifference, but facing the facts of our sensational experience, observing the intricacies of thought and feeling without becoming consumed by them. Even the controversial negation of the self, once appropriated for subordination of the individual to society, can

return from its transformation by emptiness as an expression of individual freedom, in which, according to the Kyoto school philosopher Ueda Shizuteru, “I, not being I, am I”, a realization of self affirmation through self-negation “in the ceaseless movement by which the identity of the self is constituted—is the “ecstatic space” wherein an open encounter with another person is possible.” In this view, the communal nature of emptiness, being the “nothing” which we all share in common, affirms the equality of all people, a sky-like field or open space (in many ways resembling an actual Commons in the material world) which negates determinism, contains infinite degrees of freedom for movement and thought without reifying any of them, and affirms the possibility of movement along the axes of imagination and life together as sentient beings in history. A free, anarchist practice of selflessness uses the engine of original contradiction to radicalize a “practice of living both completely unattached and completely engaged in the world of ‘true emptiness, marvelous being.’” Moreover, we do not have to search for a world anywhere else. There is no realer reality to which we must penetrate. This is it. Emptiness is exactly identical to and none other than Form.

Despite its dark and gloomy connotations in English, for Hakugen and many Zen thinkers, emptiness is bright, creative, compassionate and free. Ogasawara Hidemi, Hakugen’s close friend and mentor, musing on the Heart Sutra, encourages readers to let their heart “abandon its shape” in emptiness, allowing ourselves to grow and die fearlessly — after all, what once terrified us about life and death turns out to be “endless fun” — “The lightness of selflessness / Cheerful empty heart / Warm, dripping sky light”. In Japanese and Chinese thought emptiness is likened to the sky, making use of the same character for both words. Much like the sky, and the underlying non-substantial substance of space-time, emptiness allows matter and energy to experience absence, presence, formation and dissolution, change and development of conscious subject-