

Marxism and Buddhism: Not Such Strange Bedfellows

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April 9, 2018

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Abstract

Buddhism and Marxism may seem unlikely bedfellows, since they come from such different times and places, and appear to address such different concerns. But the two have at least this much in common: both say that life, as we find it, is unsatisfactory; both have a diagnosis of why this is; and both offer the hope of making it better. In this paper, I argue that aspects of each complement aspects of the other. In particular, Buddhism provides a stable ethical base that Marxism always lacked; and Marxism provides a sophisticated political philosophy, which Buddhism never had. I will explain those aspects of each of the two on which I wish to draw, and then explain how they are complementary.

Keywords: Buddhism, *duḥkha*, *trṣṇa*, Marxism, capital, exploitation, ideology, the self.

‘As far as social economic theory goes, I am a Marxist.’ *Tenzin Gyatso, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama.*¹

¹<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DhvlnC-oKEw>

1 Introduction

Buddhism and Marxism may seem unlikely bedfellows. The first originated two and a half thousand years ago in an Asian and largely agricultural society. The second originated less than two hundred years ago, in a European and largely industrial society. And *prima facie*, their concerns are quite different. The aim of the first is the attainment of nirvāṇa; the aim of the second is political revolution. But the two have at least this much in common: both say that life, as we find it, is unsatisfactory; both have a diagnosis of why this is; and both offer the hope of making it better.

There is obviously a strong connection between ethics and political philosophy. Ethics has implications for the kind of society in which we live—or in which we should live; and the kind of society in which we live is very often a crucible for ethical decisions. Buddhism has always been strong on ethics and its rationale: its core principles go back to the very foundation of the subject. There are remarks of a political nature in some of the canonical texts, such as the *Aṅguttara* and *Dīgha Nikāyas*, and Nāgārjuna’s *Ratnāvalī*; and over the last 50 or so years, we have seen Buddhist thinkers such as Thich Nhat Hanh and other members of the “Engaged Buddhist Movement”, who have been concerned with ending wars and establishing more compassionate societies. (See, e.g., Queen (1995), and King (2005).) However, in general, Buddhism has clearly put more emphasis on private practice than public practice.

By contrast, Marxism has always been strong on political philosophy, and in particular the nature of capitalism and its unsatisfactory consequences. On the other hand, it has always been weak on a systematic ethics. Marx and Engels combine suggestions that ethics is part of the superstructure, and so relative, with a moral condemnation of capitalism whose tone is anything but relative. Perhaps the closest we get to a systematic account of ethics is in Marx’ *Paris Manuscripts* of 1844. The young Marx operates with a notion of human flourishing based on a certain understanding of human nature (“species being”). Whether or not he gave up these ideas is a moot point, but the notion largely disappears from his later writings—those which contain his detailed analysis of capitalism.

So, one might hope, one can combine Buddhist ethics with Marxist political philosophy to form a more comprehensive picture, drawing on the strengths of each. In this paper, I want to sketch how this may be done.

A caveat. Historically, Buddhism and Marxism both have a substan-

tial diversity of forms. There are striking differences between, for example, Theravāda Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism, and Chan (Zen) Buddhism. (For an outline of the different Buddhisms, see Mitchell (2002).) Similarly, there are striking differences between the Marxisms of Lenin, Luxemburg, Althusser, and G. A. Cohen. (For an outline of the different Marxisms, see McLellan (2007).) I do not mean to suggest that everything in one of these forms of Buddhism should be added to everything in one of these forms of Marxism. That would be incoherent. Nor do I mean to suggest that any of these positions, Buddhist or Marxist, should be endorsed in its entirety. In particular, what follows makes no mention of Buddhist views of rebirth, or—on the Marxist side of things—of the “dictatorship of the proletariat”. What I do wish to suggest is that there are central insights in Buddhism and Marxism which can be put together in a constructive and illuminating way.

I shall not assume that readers of this essay know much about Buddhism and Marxism, or even about one of these two things. So in the next section I shall give a very simple outline of the parts of Buddhism on which I wish to draw. Following that, I will do the same for Marxism. There is then a brief discussion of the Buddhist and Marxist views of “the self”, since the nature of this is relevant to a number of points of the discussion. After these matters of exegesis, I will then spell out how Marxist and Buddhist ideas may be seen as complementing each other. I will conclude with some brief remarks on whither these matters take us.²

2 The Relevant Parts of Buddhism

So let us turn to some of the core parts of Buddhism. These are the principles that the historical Buddha, Siddhārtha Gautama, enunciated in his very first talk after enlightenment. They are often referred to as the *Four Noble Truths*. (‘Noble’ in the sense of enobling. For a fuller discussion of these, see Siderits (2007), ch. 2, and Carpenter (2014), ch. 2.) These lay out what we might think of as the human condition.

The First Noble Truth is that life is constantly beset with *duḥkha*. The

²After I started to think about these issues, I discovered that Karsten Struhl had very similar views. We have had a number of illuminating conversations, and even given some joint presentations on the topic. See Struhl (2017), where he outlines views which substantially overlap those presented here.

Sanskrit word is standardly translated as *suffering*, but its compass is very much broader than this. It includes: suffering, pain, discontent, unsatisfactoriness, unhappiness, sorrow, affliction, anxiety, dissatisfaction, discomfort, anguish, stress, misery, and frustration. The thought is that everyone's life contains suffering (mental and physical), the infirmity of old age (if the person is lucky enough to get there), illness, the loss of loved ones, cherished possessions, and so on. Of course, the Buddha was not denying that good things happen, which make us happy, too; but these have an edge. The fear of losing them may induce anxiety; and, if and when we do lose them, we experience unhappiness and a sense of loss.

The Second Noble Truth is that *duḥkha* is caused by *tr̥ṣṇa* (pronounced *trishna*). This is sometimes translated as *craving*, though this is most misleading translation. Better is *attachment and aversion*: the wanting of good things to continue, and bad things to go away. Of course, many things conspire to cause *duḥkha*: the death of a loved one, war, disease, cars and stock markets crashing. But, mostly, these things are not under our control. So it makes sense to single out the thing that is: the attitude we bring to bear on the slings and arrows of (sometimes not so) outrageous fortune.

Sometimes Buddhism is thought of as a pessimistic philosophy. It is not. If you understand the situation, you can do something about it. Thus, the Third Noble Truth points out a corollary of the second: removing the cause removes the effect: get rid of the *tr̥ṣṇa*, and you will get rid of the *duḥkha*.

The Fourth Noble Truth is a set of guidelines for practices one can undertake to help reshape one's mental attitude in the appropriate way. This is often called the Eightfold Noble Path, and it falls into three groups:

- *Cognitive*: right view, right intention
- *Ethical*: right speech, right action, right livelihood
- *Mental*: right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration

I don't need to say much of these eight points here, except the first: right view.

According to Buddhism, a major cause of *tr̥ṣṇa* is the fact that we misunderstand the world in which we live (*avidyā*, ignorance). We believe (even if this is self-deception) that things can go on for ever. But the world is not like this: we live in a world of impermanence (*anitya*). Everything in the stream of causation comes into existence when causes and conditions are ripe, and

goes out of existence in the same way. All things will disappear sooner or later. Secondly, and even more importantly, each of us misunderstands our very nature, taking this to be some kind of substantial entity, some abiding *self*. This is false (*anātman*). More of this in a moment.

Before we pass on to Marxism, let me address a couple of possible misconceptions about Buddhism. It might be thought that Buddhism is very self-centred, since, given only what I have said so far, there is much about getting rid of one's own *duḥkha*, but nothing about that of others. This omits an important part of the picture, however. Compassion (*karuṇā*) has always been an important part of Buddhism. Indeed, it is promoted to *the* central ethical virtue in later (Mahāyāna) Buddhism. Why should one be compassionate? Part of the answer is that concern for others is a very good way of quieting the self-centredness that plays such a large role in *trṣṇa*. A more theoretical reason was offered by perhaps the greatest Buddhist ethicist, Śāntideva (8c, CE), in his *Bodhicāryāvatāra* (VIII: 94, 95). (The text, whose name might be translated as *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, contains many interesting discussions, including those of practices to make oneself more compassionate.) If *duḥkha* is bad, as Buddhism holds, it should be eliminated. It should be eliminated just because it is bad. Compare: Racism is bad, and so should be eliminated; and it makes no difference whether it is racism in my country or in someone else's.

Second, it might be thought to follow from what I have said so far that to get rid of *duḥkha* all one has to do is change people's headspace, not their material conditions. This is not so either. If *duḥkha* is bad, then one should strive to eliminate any of its causes. It may be that working on *trṣṇa* is, in the end, the most robust way of doing this, but this is not all that can be done. We often do have the ability to eliminate, or at least lessen, some of the *duḥkha* of others, by changing their material circumstances. Moreover, eliminating *trṣṇa* is not easy; it is deeply ingrained in us. Eliminating it requires hard work and practice. This is not possible if one is in a war zone, worrying about where the next meal for one's children is coming from, fighting off disease, and so on. Of course one should do what is possible to change these things too.

3 The Relevant Parts of Marxism

So let us turn to the relevant parts of Marxism. These concern Marx' analysis of the way that capitalism functions, and is to be found, of course, in *Capital*, especially Volume 1, and related works, such as the *Grundrisse*. (The literature on this is enormous. One might start with Robinson (1942) and Mandel (1976).)

Capitalism is a socio-economic formation driven by an objective dynamic. The fundamental player in this dynamic is capital itself, which is essentially wealth in search of more wealth. Of course, wealth does not come from nowhere. Capital must employ people to create more capital. Thus we have a social structure, that is, a set of relations, and the very rationale of those relations is to maximise capital. We see this in a very visible form in the modern business corporation: the telos of each is to increase its quantum of wealth by deriving as much profit as possible. A prime mechanism for this is competition. Enterprises which embody quanta of capital compete with each other to take over the other's capital, and so increase. Although what produces wealth is the people who work to do so, the increased wealth is not used for the benefit of people, just for making more wealth. In the process, people are manipulated, used and abused, in order to make more profit.

The uses and abuses, together with their consequences, include the following:

- One way to make as much profit as possible is to pay workers as little as possible. If someone owns no capital, they must work for someone else. (They have no choice.) Capital can therefore take advantage of this position of weakness. In other words, it can exploit them. (Note that 'exploitation' has a technical sense in Marxist economics. I use it in the more familiar sense.) Capital can keep them in a position of relative poverty (relative, that is, to the *actual* value their labour produces).
- One way to keep people in this position of weakness is to have a pool of unemployed. Capital then no longer needs any particular person. Their job may be filled by one of the unemployed. Hence, capitalism maintains a "reserve pool" of unemployed. That is, we have structural unemployment. Unemployed people are impoverished, not in a relative sense, but in an absolute sense. Such poverty, naturally, leads to crime.

- Another way to maximise profit is to produce commodities as efficiently, and so as cheaply, as possible. A major way of achieving this is with the division of labour. Someone employed by capital will then spend their whole time doing essentially one thing. Such a practice ensures that one aspect of a persons' abilities becomes highly developed, whilst the others atrophy. As a person, then, they become deformed.
- Moreover, capital can allow its workers no say in the way a business is run. For they would then do things that would damage profit (by requiring better working conditions and wages, greater health and safety conditions, etc). Since they have no say in this aspect of their life, they become alienated from it. Work is not life-affirming; it is nothing more than necessary to live.
- The social relations of capitalism involve those who own/manage capital and those who are simply employed by it. Naturally, those in the first class are a lot richer than those in the second. Hence we have social inequality. In a capitalist "democratic" structure, money means power. Hence we have political inequality. A majority of people are disempowered, relative to the few who have wealth. These will use their power, of course, to further the capital that they own/manage. The state, therefore, does not function in the interest of people, but of capital.
- A quantum of capital must try to get people to buy its products, rather than those of a competitor. To do so, it uses the techniques of advertising (thought-manipulation) to create desires, most of which are entirely spurious. People are made to desire things for which there is no rational ground.
- Of course, it is not in the interest of capital that people should understand how the system works. Capitalism therefore produces an ideology that deceives people, and covers this over. People are lead to believe that capitalism is natural, in their best interests, etc. The ideology is imposed on people's thinking by advertising, the mass media, statements made by politicians and "captains of industry", etc. People are therefore made and kept deceived.
- Capital acts in its own self-interest. Its ideology tells people that this

is perfectly fine, and so legitimises selfishness. The knock-on effect of the economic relations is therefore dysfunctional social relations.

Naturally, these negative consequences of capitalism impact those who own/manage capital less than those who are merely employed by it. However, the former are in the thrall of capital no less than the latter. Indeed, there is a much greater tendency amongst this class for people's personalities to be deformed by greed and a disregard for the humanity of others, simply because these capacities are exercised on a daily basis. Of course, this may well be denied by people in this class. They may be just as much deceived by the ideology of capitalism as anyone else.

4 The Self

In discussions of ethics and politics, the question of what it is to be human (to be a person—I shall use these phrases interchangeably) is usually not far below the surface. And so it is here. Now, it might well be thought that the Buddhist and Marxist notions of this matter are different—so different as to render Buddhist thinking and Marxist thinking incompatible. That is not so. Let us see why.

The issue is a complex one. It is a complex on the Buddhist side, since different schools of Buddhism hold somewhat different views on the matter; it is complex on the Marxist side since what Marx says—or at least, what he chooses to emphasize—changes throughout the corpus of his work. However, let me try to keep things as simple as possible.

Let us start with the Buddhist side. The first thing here is to distinguish between a *person* and a *self* (as Buddhists use that word; note that the word 'self' in English often refers to the person—as in 'he saw himself in the mirror', 'she was very self-centred'—not the self of *ātman*). A person is a psycho-biological entity. A self (*ātman*) is a part of that entity which exists while the person exists, is constant, and defines the person as that very person. All Buddhists hold that there is no such thing. A person is complex of biological and psychological parts in a constant state of flux and change. For comparison, think of your car. Its parts are put together, interact with each other and with the environment. Some wear out and are replaced; and eventually the parts fall apart. There is no one part that must remain constant to make it that very car: even the registration plates can change if you move state. You are like that.

What, then, “holds these parts together” as a single thing? First, a whole bunch of causal processes. The parts of my body/mind interact with each other more intimately than those parts interact with the parts of your body/mind. Secondly, and in virtue of these interactions, it makes sense to think of a person as a single thing, that is, to conceptualise it as a unity. Conception, then, plays a central role. For Buddhist thinking, the same is, in fact, true of all partite objects; but in the case of a person (as opposed to, e.g., a car), there is a *self*-conception. The human organism constructs a narrative of itself. It conceptualises itself in a certain way; standardly, part of that narrative is the possession of a self. That, however, is a narrative fiction. (See, further, Priest (201+).)

Matters take another twist when we move to later Buddhism, and especially to Madhyamaka (one of the two kinds of Indian Mahāyāna). The central metaphysical concept of this is *śūnyatā* (emptiness). All things are held to be empty of intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*). That is, each thing is what it is only in relation to other things, notably its parts, causes and effects, and the way it is conceptualised. In particular, then, the identity of a person is constituted by their locus in a certain set of relations of these kinds. (See, further, Priest (2014), chs. 11, 12.)

Let us now turn to Marx. First, Marx was, of course, a materialist and anti-Christian. Hence he had no truck with the soul. This is the Western equivalent of the Indian ātman. Buddhism and Marxism, then agree on the non-existence of such a thing.

But what is it to be human for Marx? In his early writings, and especially in the *Paris Manuscripts*, Marx endorses a notion of *species being* (*Gattungswesen*). To be human is to possess this. What species being is, is never clearly spelled out. However, first of all, it clearly has a biological component. People have to eat, be clothed, housed—and so have to work—to live. They are subject to all the causal, biological and physical, laws involved in these things. Secondly, species being clearly has a social component as well. People can be truly human only in as much as they are part of a community. Their social engagements are just as constitutive of their being as their biology.

Mention of species being is absent from Marx’ later writing; but much attention is paid in these to the nature of society, which is partly constitutive of it. In particular, Marx comes to see this in structural terms. (As emphasised—perhaps over-emphasised—by Althusser.) That is, it is constituted by a network of relations. Thus, in the *Grundrisse* we have (Nicolaus (1973), p.

265):

Society does not consist of individuals but expresses the sum of interrelations within which the individual stands.

Capitalists, workers, etc., are what they are in virtue of their locus in a set of such relations.

The Buddhist and Marxist views, then, have notable similarities. Both reject the existence of a self/soul; both see being human as being involved in causal processes and natural laws; and both move towards thinking of people in purely structural terms. The difference between them is that Buddhism emphasises the importance of (self-)conception in what it is to be a person. This is largely absent in Marx. Marx, on the other hand, emphasises the essentially social nature of people. This is largely absent from Buddhism. Of course, these two things are not inconsistent with each other. Indeed, they can be seen as complementing each other, each contributing to a more rounded picture.

5 Filling Out the Buddhist Picture

In the previous section, we have already seen how Buddhist and Marxist ideas can be thought of as complementing each other. Let us now turn to ways in which Buddhist ethics and Marxist political philosophy can be seen as complementing each other. Let us start by seeing how Marxism fills out the Buddhist picture.

Buddhism locates the cause of *duḥkha* in *tr̥ṣṇa*—desire, if you like. But it says nothing about the social factors which create this. Marxism says a lot about these in the present context. Advertising is a prime source of *tr̥ṣṇa*. It creates dissatisfaction with what a person already has, and a never-ending series of desires to have other things.

Next, Buddhism claims that people misunderstand the world in which they live. It says much about the natural world, but little about the social world. Marxism shows how, by the ideology of capitalism, people are engineered to misunderstand the nature of the social world in which they live as well—in Marxist terms, how they are subject to mystification.

In particular, people are taught to see everything as a commodity (commodification)—as something to be bought and sold. This includes people,

giving rise to their dehumanisation. We do not behave compassionately because we do not see people as human, but as an unemployment statistic, an illegal immigrant, a human resource surplus to requirement, etc. Buddhism, as noted, is a philosophy of compassion; but the Buddha could have had no idea of the forces that capitalism can bring to bear to undercut this.

Again, Buddhism claims that people are, in a certain sense, conceptual constructions. But concepts are social, so people construct themselves in terms of social categories. Under capitalism, people are taught to think of themselves in terms of its categories: I'm a truck driver; I'm doing ok. I'm an executive; I'm much better than him. I'm unemployed, so not a valuable person. People are not taught to see themselves as simple human beings, interacting with other simple human beings, who need to cooperate with each other so that all may flourish. Again the Buddha could have had no idea of the perniciousness of the kind of self-conception engendered by capitalism.

Finally, the ideology of capitalism takes society to be constituted by social atoms, individuals with independent rights and interests, who vie with others in the pursuit of these—though they may come together to form a state in order to keep their collective affairs ordered. Marx correctly rejected this picture. People are essentially social. No one could live at all for the first five years of their life if it were not for the help of others. Nor does this dependence disappear later. Each person can flourish only if the community in which they live, and so its members, also flourishes.³ This fact provides a reason to be concerned with the well-being of others. In other words, Marxism adds to the Buddhist imperative of compassion, providing yet another reason for it.

³As he says in the *Holy Family*: 'Speaking exactly and in the prosaic sense, the members of civil society are not atoms... The egoistic individual in civil society may in his non-sensuous imagination and lifeless abstraction inflate himself to the size of an atom, i.e. to an unrelated, self-sufficient, wantless absolutely full, blessed being. Unblessed sensuous reality does not bother about his imagination; each of his senses compels him to believe in the existence of the world and the individuals outside him and even his profane stomach reminds him every day that the world outside him is not empty, but is what really fills. Every activity and property of his being, every one of his vital urges becomes a need, a necessity, which his self-seeking transforms into seeking for other things and human beings outside him... Therefore it is natural necessity, essential human properties, however alienated they may seem to be, and interest that hold the members of civil society together... Only political superstition today imagines that social life must be held together by the state whereas in reality the state is held together by civil life.' (McLellan (2000), pp. 126-3.)

6 Filling Out the Marxist Picture

So let us turn to how the Buddhist picture may fill out the Marxist picture.

Let us start with the most obvious thing. You don't have to be a Buddhist to see the sad effects of capitalism. The litany of things I rehearsed in Section 3 makes this clear. The concern of capitalism is not the well-being of people; it is the making of profit. More: people are damaged, both physically and mentally, in the process. But why, exactly, is that bad? Buddhism answers that question. It locates capitalism in an overarching perspective of the human condition and its *duḥkha*.

Matters do not stop there, though. Marxism tells us that capitalist ideology legitimises selfishness, that is, acting solely in self-interest. But self-interest makes sense only if we conceptualise individuals as social atoms, which can be conceptualised as having rights/interests, etc., independently of others. Marxism, as just noted, rejects this as a piece of social ontology. Buddhism—at least Madhyamaka Buddhism—locates this in a much bigger picture of ontology, *simpliciter*. *Everything* is what it is only in relation to other things. The notion of self-interest is then based not just on a political illusion, but on a metaphysical illusion.

Next, capitalism engenders a particular power-structure, with those who own or manage capital exerting great power over those who merely work for it. Power can be used—and usually is—to oppress;⁴ and this power structure certainly is. Marxism is, of course, well aware of this. But there are other, and equally pernicious, power structures which Marxism has largely ignored, notably those of race and gender. (A major exception is Engel's *The Origin of the Family*, which offers a reduction of gender power-structure to class power-structure.) Now, Buddhism rejected class structure, in the form of the Indian caste system. And in one of the sūtras where the Buddha does so, the *Vāsetṭha Sutta*, he also rejects the importance of race and gender.⁵ The Four

⁴*To oppress*: to keep someone in subjection and hardship, especially by the unjust exercise of authority.

⁵'While in [various animal] births are differences, each having their own distinctive marks, among humanity such differences of species—no such marks are found. Neither in hair, nor in the head, not in the ears or eyes, neither found in mouth or nose, not in lips or brows. Neither in neck, nor shoulders found, not in belly or the back, neither in buttocks nor the breast, not in groin or sexual parts. Neither in hands nor in the feet, not in fingers or the nails, neither in knees nor in the thighs, not in their "colour", not in sound, here is no distinctive mark as in the many other sorts of birth. In human bodies as they are, such differences cannot be found: the only human differences are those in names alone.'

Noble Truths make such distinctions of no moral significance. (Can there be ethics in which this is not the case? Of course. Merely consider Aristotle on woman and slaves. See e.g., Book 1 of the *Politics*.) The Buddhist view can correct a short-sightedness in Marxism.⁶

Finally, Marxism famously notes that how people think is not a constant, since it can be changed by socio-economic practice. Buddhism adds to this, pointing out that how a person thinks of themselves is a narrative construction. Such a construction can be changed; and it can be changed so that a person comes to think of themselves as not driven by self-interest, but by compassion, and so in a way essentially inimical to capitalism.

I am sure that there are probably other ways in which our two pictures complement and reinforce each other, but that will do for the present.

7 So Where does this Take Us?

In the previous sections, I have explained certain Buddhist and Marxist views. I have not tried to defend them.⁷ That would require much more space than I have here. But by way of conclusion, let us simply assume that the views are largely correct, and ask where this takes us.

These views, as we have seen, tell us something about the unhappy “human condition” in which we find ourselves in the capitalist world at the start of the 21st Century. A consequence of both is that we should work to destroy the illusions on which capitalism is based, together with their pernicious effects—and so the destruction of the capitalist economic structure itself.

Marx, of course, predicted the imminent demise of capitalism. In this, he was wrong. Why, is an interesting question. Arguably, an important part of the explanation is the fact that global capitalism has been able to find cheap sources of labour in the “developing” countries of the world. But whatever the explanation, capitalism will end. The economic system of the year 2000 is nothing like that of 1000; it would be naive to suppose that the economic

Suttacentral (2011).

⁶There is a certain irony here, though. Unfortunately, historically, the religion of Buddhism has been just as patriarchal as other world religions.

⁷There are, of course, ways in which one may try to defend capitalism. Most notably, one might claim that, for all its vices, capitalism increases the wealth of all because of the trickle-down effects of wealth. There is much to be said about this, but this is not the place to say it.

system of 3000 (assuming that the human race manages to get there) will be anything like that of 2000.⁸

So we need to work towards a better socio-economic system. A system of humanity, compassion, tolerance, and cooperation; where wealth is used to provide the basic needs of health, education, etc, for all; where there is equality of class, race, and gender; where social decisions are not made by a minority of vested interests. In short, to a society where suffering, though it may not be eliminated, is at least minimised—and certainly not brought upon us by our own actions.

Of course, the most important question is: how? Neither Buddhism nor Marxism offers a magic bullet to achieve the end. Neither do I have a substantial answer to the question. But here, at least, are some preliminary thoughts.

History has taught us some important lessons, and so alerted us to many traps along our path. Arguably, one of the most important lessons that history has taught us is a simple one: power tends to corrupt. It feeds the ego; people who have it want to retain it and—usually—get more of it. Those who have power, then, even if they sought it for the most altruistic of reasons, soon come to exercise it to feed the beast. Change, and the power structures which this requires, must therefore be bottom-up.

Relatedly, contemporary social life requires the solution to many coordination problems, especially in the realm of economic production, distribution, and consumption. What is produced? In what way is this to be distributed? How are these decisions to be made? It is necessary to figure out how these problems may be solved in a bottom-up fashion.

Another thing that is important, as both Buddhism and Marxism stress, is that people fundamentally misunderstand the world in which they live. So education is of central importance—not the sort of “education” that simply pushes some capitalist ideology, or the ideology of some other power structure; but education that allows us to see the world aright.

A further part of the story must surely be the construction of appropriate social structures. Human dispositions to behaviour are very malleable. Penal incarceration is well known to actually promote anti-social behaviour; on the other side, working with groups who help those with particular needs

⁸What, I think, will bring about the demise of capitalism is the capital-driven environmental catastrophe that it is now looming. This, of course, was not on Marx’ agenda: the effect of capital expansion on the Earth’s environment was something about which people in his time had no clue.

promotes a more benevolent attitude. We need to develop social structures (and the practices which go with them) which promote the human tendencies to compassion and cooperation, and inhibit the tendencies to aggression and dysfunctional competition.

Even given these sketchy thoughts, one thing is clear. What is required are political practices absent from traditional monastic Buddhist orders; and which also differ in many ways from those of traditional Marxists. As I noted at the start, Buddhism has always laid stress on personal practice; Marxism has always laid stress on social (economic) practice. But the personal and the social interact dialectically. (The matter is part of a much larger issue of the relationship between what Marx called the base and the superstructure—again, an issue much too large to go into here.) Successful action requires both.⁹

8 Conclusion

I certainly do not claim that Buddhism and Marxism are the same. That would be absurd. What I have been suggesting is that there is enough commonality in their goals to see certain central aspects of each of them as part of a bigger picture. And, moreover, that when one does this, one can see each as contributing aspects of the picture which fill gaps in the other, strengthening our understanding.

Understanding is, of course, only a first step, though it is an essential step. If one does not understand the situation one is in, then it is impossible to take effective action to change it. Indeed, action taken may well be counter-productive.

But understanding is not an end in itself. As Marx said in the 11th of the *Theses on Feuerbach*: Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it. The Buddha, I am sure, would have agreed.¹⁰

⁹A referee of a previous draft of this paper asked a very pertinent question. Should one think of the overthrow of capitalism as (at least a partial) means of eliminating *tr̥ṣṇa*; or should we think of a reorientation of our attitudes as a means to undermine capitalist ideology? The answer, as I hope is now clear, is *both*.

¹⁰Many thanks go to Anna Malavisi, to the editors of this issue, and to two anonymous referees for their helpful and insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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