

“Unmaking Zombies”: Buddhism and Political Subjectivity in the Capitalocene*

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Abstract: “Carbon-fueled capitalism is a zombie system, voracious but sterile,” writes Roy Scranton in his book, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*. This essay places Buddhism in dialogue with western Marxist and feminist thinkers to consider how Buddhist philosophy as embodied mindfulness and ethics can help resolve the problem of the political subject confronting the “end-times” of global climate change. While western social theory on its own presents a clear diagnosis of the structural dimensions of the problem and offers critiques on the nature of the capitalist and neoliberal political subject, it often undertheorizes the new forms of subjectivity that are necessary to transform the human relationship to nature in the Anthropocene (or, what Jason Moore terms the Capitalocene). This essay draws on the work of both Buddhist practitioners and contemporary Buddhist philosophers to theorize a different notion of subjectivity, constructed on a foundation of embodied mindfulness and compassion, that could be both emotionally and materially more satisfying than neoliberal consumerism.

Keywords: climate change, Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Buddhism

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In this essay, I sort through a number of puzzles in the relationship between climate change, capitalism, and concepts of the “self,” in particular considering how tools from both Marxist theory and Buddhist practice can help us comprehend how the problem of climate change is in large part a problem of what it means to be human at this time, and how both Marxism and Buddhism can be used to imagine new forms of “selfhood.” While my use of “zombies” in the title is primarily an attempt to grab attention, there are still reasons why zombies are relevant to my discussion. The most obvious is the popularity of various versions of the zombie apocalypse in popular culture these days and the predictable rise in “Zombie Theory.”¹ My initial use of the term, however, was inspired by Roy Scranton’s 2015 book, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, in which he writes “carbon-fuelled capitalism is a zombie system, voracious but sterile.”² This characterisation connects to zombie culture as a critique of consumer capitalism, but Scranton also goes beyond this to assert how the system of capitalism and our very civilisation need to “die” if we are to move beyond the climate crisis. In his view, such a death is inevitable due to the sheer scale and “wicked” nature of the climate problem, unsolvable by any of the technological, political, or economic fixes that we may seek to throw at it. We are thus indeed at some sort of “end-times” for our civilisation.

At a time of cutbacks in the humanities and critiques of their practical relevance, Scranton makes a case that immersion in the humanities, particularly philosophy, is necessary for our civilisation to come to terms with its inevitable death. I would like to extend this into a discussion of how we may think about why our civilisation may be in its end stages, but also how we can think about building something new, first asserting why I believe “Capitalocene” is a better term for our current conjuncture than “Anthropocene” in terms of its diagnostic accuracy, and how this relates fundamentally to our notions of “selfhood.” I then use both Marxist and Buddhist theory to consider how a new concept of political subjectivity may be formulated, one that is more equipped to address the climate crisis. Finally, I briefly examine a few examples of praxes pointing to how such subjectivity may already be in the process of being generated within our world today, as well as how such subjectivities may prove

¹ E.g., Lauro, *Zombie Theory*.

² Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, 23.

more meaningful at the individual level and more effective at transcending our “zombie” neoliberal capitalist system.

I. The “Capitalocene” and the “Self”

I begin by discussing my use of the term “Capitalocene” rather than “anthropocene.” The latter was popularised by Paul Crutzen in the early 2000s, and there has subsequently been extensive discussion in the humanities and social sciences regarding the term’s suitability in comprehending the nature of our climatological circumstances, their causes, and their effects.³ For instance, historian Dipesh Chakrabarty favours “Anthropocene” over a term more centred on capitalism because, in many respects, he rightfully regards climate change as a species-level event, connected to the totality of human life and how this intersects with other species.⁴ Writer Amitav Ghosh acknowledges the centrality of capitalism in comprehending climate change, but also links it in foundational ways to both imperialist histories and contemporary global power politics.⁵ There is also debate among Marxist thinkers regarding the question of the Anthropocene, with Jason Moore especially proposing and advocating for the “Capitalocene,” while other Marxists such as McKenzie Wark remain skeptical of Moore’s neologism.⁶

I favour “Capitalocene” for four major reasons. I discuss the first three here and return to the final one in this paper’s conclusion. The first is that, while all of humanity alongside non-human species are gravely affected by climate change, only *certain* humans bear responsibility for its processes and for the lack of action to reverse or even mitigate it. Evidence is abundant regarding the overwhelming percentage of carbon emissions being thus far produced by wealthy countries, and even more so by the wealthiest people in those wealthy countries. I will speak more of this in my second point. Addition-

³ Crutzen, “Geology of Mankind.”

⁴ Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses.”

⁵ Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*.

⁶ E.g., Moore, “The Capitalocene, Part I: On the Nature and Origins of our Ecological Crisis” and “The Capitalocene, Part II: Accumulation by Appropriation and the Centrality of Unpaid Work/ Energy.”

ally, Moore argues that capitalism *as a system* is a “way of organising nature,” a “world-ecology,” one that rests on an “ontological praxis” of “Cheap Nature.”⁷ Moore also regards this ontology as dependent on what he terms the “Four Cheaps” of labour, food, energy, and raw materials. Thus, the very nature of capitalist being necessitates the exploitation of human beings and of “nature.”

Second, there is a compelling case that capitalism is a major reason why humanity has been in denial for decades regarding the extent of the peril of climate change, and has been thus far unable to confront it in any sort of meaningful way. As noted, Ghosh is a skeptic regarding capitalism as the fundamental cause of climate change, looking also at imperialism and contemporary power politics among nation-states, and in particular how the contemporary major powers of China, India, and the United States all have their own reasons and interests in not more insistently confronting the climate crisis.⁸ Yet, the system creating these power dynamics is fundamentally capitalist in nature. Roy Scranton writes of how both the power and the identity of nation-states are inseparable from the size and competitiveness of their economies.⁹ Moreover, historian of science Naomi Oreskes shows how corporate influence has been central to political stasis on the question of climate change, and so we must consider how capitalist interests and values are crucial to shaping state identities and interests. In this sense, culpability for the climate crisis belongs to the affluent not just as an accidental artifact of their lifestyles, but as a strategic and political choice made and enabled by corporate interests.¹⁰ However, the systemic-level origins of the problem are often obscured in favour of an emphasis on moralistic pleas for individuals and families to work on reducing their “carbon footprint,” which is itself a concept with corporate origins.¹¹

This leads to my third point regarding the Capitalocene, more relevant to considering relations between Marxist theory and Buddhist philosophy, which is how capitalist economic and social relations profoundly constitute the nature of human subjectivity, all the more so in the current era of neoliberal capitalism.

⁷ Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*; Moore, “The Capitalocene, Part I,” 7.

⁸ Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 135–49.

⁹ Scranton, *Learning to Die*, 53.

¹⁰ E.g., Oreskes and Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*.

¹¹ Solnit, “Big Oil Coined ‘Carbon Footprints’.”

Marxist thinkers have written poignantly not just regarding the nature of the capitalist system but also of its effects on its human protagonists. Marx, of course, writes about the effects of capitalist exchange and labour processes on our “species-being,” as well as how this system produces various forms of “alienation” not just from the products of our own labour but from each other, for instance, through the inexorable “objectification” of our relationships. Marx states,

Each of us sees in his own product only his own selfish needs objectified, and thus in the product of another he only sees the objectification of another selfish need independent and alien to him.¹²

These ideas were further developed in the 20th century, for instance, by the Frankfurt School,¹³ and have been even further refined through 21st century discussions of neoliberal subjectivity. For instance, Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval write of “neo-liberal rationality” as producing particular kinds of subjects, ones who are entrepreneurial, competitive, rationalised, self-governing, and isolated. They quote Margaret Thatcher on how the origins of such subjects can be found in her marketising logic: “Economics are the method. The object is to change the soul.”¹⁴

I thus assert that what is significant about the “Capitalocene” is not just that the principal causes of climate change can be found in our modes of production and consumption, but that capitalism itself generates a particular type of human “soul” that makes confronting climate change even more unachievable.¹⁵ “Homo economicus” is a *product* of capitalism, not its predestined forebear as advocates of neoclassical economics would claim. And neoliberalism in the past four decades has ironically, if not accidentally, given citizens of market economics no option but to act as “homo economicus,” as recounted by critics of neoliberalism such as Dardot and Laval. At the same time, the competitive self-interested human that we all need to be to survive under neo-

¹² Marx, *Selected Writings*, 130.

¹³ E.g., Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*.

¹⁴ Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*, 263. The argument about neoliberal subjectivity is particularly developed in Chapter 9.

¹⁵ It also seems relevant to note here that my MS Word spell-checker wanted to correct “Capitalocene” to “CapitalOne,” which is an American bank specializing in credit cards.

liberalism lacks both the affective and the imaginative capacities to develop the social and political resources needed to confront climate change. While blame for the stasis regarding climate change should primarily be laid at the feet of our economic and political leaders, movement on the question requires radical change not just in our systems, but also in how well-off individuals, especially those living in high consumption economies most responsible for creating the climate crisis, understand their own “selves.”

If we can regard neoliberal capitalism as both a cause and a manifestation of the rise of the unencumbered individual as an economic and political subject, then we should also consider how the expansion of neoliberal modes of governance, for both self and society, leads to what Dardot and Laval in their more recent work term the “tragedy of the non-common.”¹⁶ Such hyper-individualism manifests in numerous ways. Ghosh notes the “uniformitarianism” of contemporary life, where technology is used to reassure us that the major existential risks faced by humanity are in the past, and where “moderation” is the central norm of the “bourgeois order.”¹⁷ It leads to a continued focus on forms of romantic love and the nuclear family, which privatise social need and support.¹⁸ It also leads to the primacy of identity politics in various forms as the premier form of political expression in our contemporary moment. While this may seem to include some measure of group solidarity, it may actually be more usefully regarded as individualism par excellence. In many of its both left-wing and right-wing manifestations, the narrow-casting of identity into particular categories displaces the political onto identitarian concerns and, as Ghosh notes, turns politics into “a search for personal authenticity, a journey of self-discovery.”¹⁹ This manifests, as noted above, in the politics of the “carbon footprint,” even as Ghosh notes that the climate crisis is utterly unsolvable through any version of a “politics of sincerity.”²⁰ An identity-focused politics also displaces the atten-

¹⁶ Dardot and Laval, *Common: On Revolution in the 21st Century*.

¹⁷ Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 25, 21–22.

¹⁸ Hardt, “Red Love.”

¹⁹ Consider, for instance, the phenomenon of right-wing populist politicians like Donald Trump. His supporters often sport t-shirts and banners on their homes proclaiming their support, concluding with “F**k Your Feelings.” I find Buddhist teacher Ralph De La Rosa’s interpretation of this phenomenon quite insightful, where the emphasis should be on *your* rather than *feelings*. Their feelings matter; anyone else’s do not. In De La Rosa, *Don’t Tell Me to Relax*, 28.

²⁰ Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 126–27, 134–35.

tion of both citizens and politicians away from the existential nature of climate change towards issues such as immigration and sexual politics.

And yet, in a world characterised by imaginative as well as literal forms of poverty, what else is a concerned human to do? How many of us try to eat low on the food chain, drive the right car, buy carbon credits when we fly, donate to the right causes? I am not here to condemn these choices in any way—in fact, as I will write below, they can be part of a “prefigurative politics” that imagine and perform new ways forward. Such politics, however, require a wider critique of the version of modern society that centres the economic market as the locus of both political and personal purpose. In the words of political theorist Farah Godrej, this means “dislocating the hegemony of Eurocentrism”;²¹ “critical reflexivity” about our “Western-centredness” has significance for how we consider the varied modes through which political subjectivities are formed.²²

Ghosh also makes the case that Western tendencies to emphasise personal emancipation “function as blinders that restrict our range of vision,” and that we may even need to consider “*abandoning* the emancipatory ideas that have come to undergird our thinking” to truly confront the climate crisis.²³ This turns us to an examination of zombies and how this can relate to the notion of “Capitalocene.” The popularity of zombies in recent popular culture nods to disillusionment not just with capitalism, evident in the early zombie films of George Romero, but also with how social and political institutions have been shown to be “incompetent if not completely impotent” in dealing with the threats they face.²⁴ At the same time, this also shows the increasing prevalence of “states of exception” as theorised by Giorgio Agamben, where states claim emergency powers for themselves while the overall “rules for society are not working.”²⁵ The zombie apocalypse also reflects very real social fears regarding such political failures and a corresponding “crisis of worldview” that some theorists claim “has no precedent in modern Western civilisation,” grounded in the “loss of the sacred canopy traditionally provided by Christianity,” but also evi-

²¹ Godrej, “Response to ‘What is Comparative Political Theory?’,” 582.

²² Williams and Warren, “A Democratic Case for Comparative Political Theory,” 204, 217–18.

²³ Thomas, Parthasarathi et al., “JAS Round Table,” 951, 953.

²⁴ Aiossa, *The Subversive Zombie: Social Protest and Gender in Undead Cinema and Television*, 12.

²⁵ Pielak and Cohen, *Living with Zombies: Society in Apocalypse in Film*, 3–4.

dent in cynicism and disillusionment with the ability of existing political systems to solve the problems they face.²⁶ The zombie phenomenon demonstrates how market capitalism and institutional formations of political liberalism emphasise individualism and value-neutrality and so lead to a loss of human ability to “make and sustain meaning in our lives.”²⁷ Marxist and Buddhist perspectives can both help us understand these institutional and ontological crises as well as to imagine alternatives.

II. Marxist and Buddhist Visions of Self and Society in the Capitalocene and Beyond

The ways that zombies are a dominant cultural expression of the apocalypse in today’s world can perhaps also show how humanity is simultaneously aware yet helpless as it stumbles toward ecological catastrophe. Indeed, Ghosh wonders if “this era, which so congratulates itself on its self-awareness, will come to be known the time of the Great Derangement.”²⁸ He writes of this in particular with respect to the absence of literary imagination on the question of climate change, but also examines economics and politics, focusing in multiple domains on the supremacy of individual-oriented thinking at a time of “collective predicament.”²⁹ The egoistic human who advanced within (neo)liberalism and manifested at both individual and state levels is clearly inimical to meaningful action on climate change. In this section, I show how ideas drawn from Marxist and Buddhist traditions can be usefully joined to theorise as well as practice new forms of political subjectivity.

In theorising “species-being,” Karl Marx writes of the ways that capitalism estranges humans on various levels of their existence from their nature as fundamentally social, feeling, creative, productive beings; that humans exist through and for creative production, which is essentially itself a social process. He writes,

²⁶ Vervaeke, Mastropietro, and Miscevic, *Zombies in Western Culture: A Twenty-First Century Crisis*, 4–5.

²⁷ Vervaeke, Mastropietro, and Miscevic, *Zombies in Western Culture*, 7.

²⁸ Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 11.

²⁹ Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 80.

Supposing that we had produced in a human manner; each of us would in his production have doubly affirmed himself and his fellow men.... In my expression of my life I would have fashioned your expression of your life, and thus in my own activity have realised my own essence, my human, my communal essence.³⁰

In Marx's view, the alienation that capitalism produces is itself individualising and separates humans from other humans as well as from the wider world. An approach that would restore humanity's "species-being" would allow an acknowledgement not only of humans' connection to one another, but also their interdependence with the natural world.³¹ To this end, Marxian subjectivity is inherently social while also containing promise for comradeship with the non-human world.

Such a view of the contingent nature of subjectivity is also evident in much contemporary Marxist thought, introducing both theoretical and real-world examples of new economic forms beyond capitalism and offering potentialities for confronting the climate crisis. One well-known example of this is the work of J.K. Gibson-Graham, two women writing under one name and thus challenging conventional notions of intellectual property and ownership. Together and with numerous co-authors, they offer theoretical accounts of what post-capitalism may look like alongside many fieldwork-based accounts of what they term the "diverse economy."³² As part of their detailed studies of forms of economic and social organisation outside of the capitalist market, this work also pays close attention to questions of identity and subjectivity, and how these shape and are shaped in and through distinct economic formations. For instance, they examine how the "community economy" generates distinct "ethics of conduct" as well as a "shift of subjectivity" that does not "cover over inherent antagonisms" but is instead a "commitment to a continual process of 'becoming in common' through refusing the homogenisation of identities and harmonisation of community."³³

³⁰ Marx, *Selected Writings*, 132.

³¹ Roelvink, "Rethinking Species-Being in the Anthropocene," 58.

³² E.g., Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*.

³³ Özselçuk, Erdem, and Gibson-Graham, "Thinking with Marx for a Feminist Postcapitalist Politics."

In other work, Gibson-Graham, with various collaborators, incorporate poststructuralist insights on the contingency of subjectivity to refigure notions of “class” and “development.” Utilising Louis Althusser’s notion of “overdetermination” to make a case for the “openness and incompleteness of identity/being,” they note that this sort of work demands a “provisional ontology” distinct from the typical Western “essentialist ontology,” allowing for politics itself to become a much more fluid and contingent project.³⁴ Such widening of notions of identity relates to how they think about concepts like “development,” seeking to overturn what they regard to be the ongoing “capitalocentrism” in development discourses to formulate new concepts of subjectivity that facilitate wider, more community-oriented notions of who constitutes economic “stakeholders.”³⁵ To this end, concepts from the Marxist tradition are congruent with Buddhist notions of how the self is empty of self-existence and instead exists in interdependence with innumerable causes and conditions.

Along other lines, contemporary Marxist theorist Michael Hardt recently makes the case for a “political concept of love” using Marx’s own work as well as that of Bolshevik thinker and activist Alexandra Kollontai. Hardt examines how the meaning of love has been repressed by capitalist hegemony, which emphasises personal property relationships—what Kollontai termed “property love.”³⁶ This means that love is radically individualised and privatised within capitalism, with Marx in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* noting how money corrupts love relationships along with everything else by “displaces *being* with *having*.”³⁷ Kollontai also emphasises how romantic love stresses “the bourgeois ideal of the sovereign individual, internally unified and self-sufficient, acting according to extended egotism.”³⁸ This view is commensurate with how contemporary feminists critique mainstream views of the nuclear family as a “haven in a heartless world,” and also demonstrates how particular forms of “love” underpin the capitalist order.

For Hardt, a “properly political concept of love”³⁹ would erase the divide

³⁴ Gibson-Graham, Resnick, and Wolff, “Toward a Poststructuralist Political Economy,” 4, 18.

³⁵ Gibson-Graham and Ruccio, “‘After’ Development: Re-Imagining Economy and Class,” 161, 177.

³⁶ Hardt, “Red Love,” 781.

³⁷ Hardt, “For Love or Money,” 678.

³⁸ Hardt, “Red Love,” 784.

³⁹ Hardt, “Red Love,” 676.

between private and public that is so essential to the forms of political liberalism that manifest alongside the neoliberal market, permitting new ways of engaging with the reality of multiplicity and diversity in the contemporary world. Just as Gibson-Graham theorise economic forms that promote “becoming in common” even across difference, Hardt believes that a political form of love would enable political subjects to transform their relations to each other, as well as with their own selfhood, in several ways. Hardt’s version of love would allow, and in fact encourage, the acknowledgment that “our affective lives” are central to how we conceive of our political interests; it would also, “in our encounter with others,” change our own identities.⁴⁰ Additionally, love “enacts a process of transformation and is also a power to create lasting bonds with each other and our world.”⁴¹ Love is thus an engine of “radical social transformation.”⁴² The problem with this view of love is that Marx and Hardt seem to regard it more as a *product of* rather than producing communism, although the causal direction is not always clear. Like “nirvana” in much Buddhist thought, the nature of “communism” is tantalizing but vague in most of Marx’s work. Hardt notes that “Marx proposes that communism (and the abolition of private property) requires or implies a new sensorium,” and that “we must also gain a new power to love,” a power that can be likened to “social ‘muscles’.”⁴³ But he also says, “communism can thus be conceived as the creation of a new love,” which seems to indicate that new forms of love will come to be after the creation of new economic and political forms.⁴⁴

It is here that a Buddhist perspective can be of use, for certain forms and practices in Buddhism *presuppose* love, having love at their foundation rather than as a result of social or political action. This thus reverses the causality of the Marxist argument. Rather than love being a product of communism, Buddhist love may be used to bring about the subjectivities needed to create a “social love” and “social institutions that encourage us to love and care for others in the widest possible frame.”⁴⁵ It may seem strange to advocate for the

⁴⁰ Hardt, “For Love or Money,” 676, 678.

⁴¹ Hardt, “For Love or Money,” 681.

⁴² Hardt, “Red Love,” 781.

⁴³ Hardt, “For Love or Money,” 680.

⁴⁴ Hardt, “For Love or Money,” 681.

⁴⁵ Hardt, “Red Love,” 789.

use of a religious/spiritual framework to realise Marxist ideals; secularism, or at least a firm line between religion and the state, is also an essential part of modern liberalism.⁴⁶ And yet recent work on the various crises in the West often point to the need for a “post-secular” approach to incorporate wider cultural and historical experience, as well as to address some of the crises of meaning to be found in contemporary liberal democracies. Jurgen Habermas, who was once affiliated with the Frankfurt School, looks at how “our possible Western biases” have also led thinkers to reject aspects of tradition, including religious ones, rather than seeing how they might be helpful to “confront the challenges of societal modernisation.”⁴⁷ With respect to climate change, Ghosh interestingly wonders if religious organisations and discourses might provide the sort of transcendent aims necessary to counter the particularistic interests of the nation-state, that some notion of the “sacred” might enable people to accept “limits and limitations” in ways that thus far they have been unable to countenance.⁴⁸ Such views are compatible with what Buddhist thinker David Loy identifies as a sense of “lack” in human selfhood, a spiritual problem that the West has largely sought to resolve through secular concepts and forms, including the culminating formation of “the market [as] the first truly world religion.”⁴⁹

I can here only begin to address some of the ways that Buddhist thought and practice can provide resources and technologies to develop such concepts of love, the sacred, and the transcendent. There is some debate among those studying the popularity of secular mindfulness regarding whether it alone is adequate to truly alter subjectivities; Matthew Moore is a skeptic, while recent work by Will Leggett looks at mindfulness’ potential at both “micro” and “macro” levels for changing subjectivity, identity, and habits.⁵⁰ *Buddhist prac-*

⁴⁶ E.g., Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*, 2011.

⁴⁷ Mendieta, “A Postsecular World Society? An interview with Jürgen Haberman.”

⁴⁸ Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 159–61.

⁴⁹ Loy, *A Buddhist History of the West: Studies in Lack*, 197.

⁵⁰ See Moore, “Buddhism, Mindfulness, and Transformative Politics” and Leggett, “Can Mindfulness Really Change the World?” Other work on the political potentiality of Buddhist and/or meditative practice, and particularly how it can alter political subjectivities, include Werner, “Performing Economics of Care,” which is a case study of a Buddhist community and its economic and interpersonal relations, and Chari, “The Political Potential of Mindful Embodiment,” which features theoretical argument as well as a consideration of how practices of mindful embodiment shaped the Occupy Wall Street movement.

tice, however, does provide techniques that extend “love” to those beyond our immediate surroundings as well as consider the very nature of our “self”—it is a “prefigurative politics” *par excellence*. The late anarchist, anthropologist David Graeber, describes prefigurative politics as having revolutionary potential, not through “a cataclysmic seizure of power” but rather via “the continual creation and elaboration of new institutions, based on new, non-alienating modes of interaction.”⁵¹ Considering Buddhist practice as one such form of interaction, I here introduce how I imagine the utility of Buddhist thought in comprehending forms of political subjectivity that connect to the climate crisis, focusing on two dimensions—ideas of “non-self” and the four *brahmavihārās*⁵²—and how they may intersect with my discussion so far of capitalism.

The Buddhist view of “non-self” as one of the fundamental characteristics of human existence is a useful counterpoint to the self-interested individualism and egoism of (neo)liberalism. Jay Garfield writes of the ways that “the illusion that we are selves undermines ethical cultivation and moral vision.”⁵³ The core truth in Buddhist doctrine—namely, that a particular fixed notion of “self” causes suffering—is especially evident in its Western modernist manifestation, as thinkers such as David Loy have noted.⁵⁴ Loy has also written of how the three Buddhist “poisons” of greed, anger, and ignorance have institutional manifestations in modern capitalism, militarism, and mass media.⁵⁵ The significant aspect of Buddhist philosophy, with respect to my discussion so far, is that it offers a very clear *alternative* to the reification of the “self,” as well as practices to achieve that alternative. While Marxist philosophy is often vague about the processes to achieve any sort of ideal communist society, Buddhist practice is fundamentally oriented toward the deconstruction of fixed selfhood, in a way that demonstrates that greater fulfilment and happiness can actually come from *not* being attached to a particular “self.” It centres our nature as social, connected, affective beings and is thus more consistent with Marxist notions of “species-being.”

⁵¹ Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography*, 235.

⁵² Other dimensions that may be relevant include how Buddhist precepts would shape behaviour in ways favourable to the “environment,” how the four *pāramitās* encourage ethical action, and how meditation practice itself reshapes the “self.”

⁵³ Garfield, *Losing Ourselves: Learning to Live Without a Self*, xii.

⁵⁴ Loy, *A Buddhist History of the West*.

⁵⁵ Loy, *Money, Sex, War, Karma: Notes for a Buddhist Revolution*.

Additionally, Buddhist practice has the potential to instantiate Hardt's need for a "properly political concept of love," not just through wisdom in understanding the emptiness of the self, but also through practices that support the cultivation of compassion. This can provide the sort of "imaginative dislocation" that "challenge[s] self-understandings" for which Farah Godrej advocates in her model of cosmopolitan political theory.⁵⁶ Such imaginative dislocation can take place, for instance, through practicing the four *brahmavihārās* of lovingkindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*). I will here just briefly contemplate how these may help us work through the dilemmas of climate action.

Mettā can be directly connected to Hardt's view of the need for a political concept of love. Garfield translates *mettā* as "disinterested benevolence," or "friendliness," noting that "it is characterised as wishing well toward others, or as a commitment to benefit others."⁵⁷ Thinking of "love" in terms of "friendliness" is a more expansive view than the highly personalised, privatised version of the concept prevalent in neoliberal society, and indeed holds the potential for Alexandra Kollontai's desired "love-comradeship and love-solidarity."⁵⁸ "Friendliness" is also an antidote to the pervasive loneliness that many see as characterising contemporary society and contributing to the rise of right-wing populism. *Mettā* meditation practices, for instance, offer ways for individuals to cultivate lovingkindness for not just themselves and people they care about, but also for neutral individuals and even the "enemy." This goes together with compassion. Garfield usefully translates *karuṇā* as "care," which points to how compassion is not only the ability to witness the suffering of others but also the wish to relieve it.⁵⁹ *Karuṇā* means *acting* on the sorrow we share with others, which "requires and reinforces a non-egocentric view of the world."⁶⁰

The third *brahmavihārā* of "sympathetic joy" is diametrically opposed to the competitive nature of the capitalist self. Garfield, quoting Buddhaghosa, states that the function of *muditā* "is getting rid of envy," and that "delight

⁵⁶ Godrej, "Towards a Cosmopolitan Political Thought: The Hermeneutics of Interpreting the Other," 158.

⁵⁷ Garfield, *Losing Ourselves*, 122; Garfield, *Buddhist Ethics: A Philosophical Exploration*, 132.

⁵⁸ Hardt, "Red Love," 792.

⁵⁹ Garfield, *Buddhist Ethics*, 137.

⁶⁰ Garfield, *Losing Ourselves*, 123.

based on worldly life” is *muditā*’s “near enemy.” Such worldly delight can be manifested in patriotism or nationalism, favouring a particular sports team, and other aspects of “partiality” that are ultimately “egocentric.”⁶¹ Such a perspective also may be seen as pointing to the inadequacies of a consumer-oriented lifestyle. The fourth *brahmavihārā*, “equanimity,” is translated by Garfield as “impartiality,” noting that “an attitude of *upekkhā* is one in which one does not take oneself to be the centre of one’s moral universe, but simply one of many moral agents and patients in a vast and interconnected moral universe.”⁶² This is significant in relation to questions of praxis regarding the environmental crisis, as I will now discuss.

III. Praxes of the Postcapitalist “Self”

While an approach emphasising an “ethic of love” allows us to consider ontological means of transcending the neoliberal “self,” this still of course raises the question of how such selfhood may be realised in ways impactful to transcending capitalist forms of existence. Discussions of environmental Buddhism tend to focus on forms of activism, though sometimes they also examine how Buddhist practices of varying forms can contribute to changes in selfhood.⁶³ I will here briefly examine two recent social trends that demonstrate the potential of changed selfhoods for wider social and cultural transformations. The first is mindfulness practice, which can be seen as a change that begins at the individual level but can impact wider social processes. The second is notions of “engaged Buddhism” and the turn toward the “local” in various forms. I examine the ways individual subjects situate themselves in relation to their lifestyle and values, how they think about the proper scale of the “political,” and how this relates to Buddhist-inspired environmental activism and contemporary Marxist thinking on the environmental crisis.

⁶¹ Garfield, *Buddhist Ethics*, 139–40.

⁶² Garfield, *Buddhist Ethics*, 141.

⁶³ There is a vast and ever-growing literature on the connection between Buddhism and environmentalism. See Kaza, “To Save All Beings: Buddhist Environmental Activism”; King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism*. Stanley, et al., *A Buddhist Response to the Climate Emergency* is a collection of writings by globally eminent Buddhist leaders on the climate crisis.

“Mindfulness” in various forms has become part of the cultural surround in the West in recent years. A quick google search reveals various discussions: is mindfulness just a fad—like “McMindfulness” as a form of “capitalist spirituality”—or is it something more deeply significant?⁶⁴ Does mindfulness inherently or potentially allow for deeper and wider changes in selfhood? While critiques of the commodification and even the deployment of mindfulness are no doubt warranted, it is also possible to examine ways that mindfulness practices can allow for the cultivation of more critical and compassionate states of awareness.

This more ethically-grounded notion of mindfulness is evident in both empirical and philosophical work. For instance, Buddhist scholar and Theravāda monk Bhikkhu Analayo has written that while critiques of “McMindfulness” tend to see mindfulness as a “mere absence of thoughts,” it can in fact provide resources such as resilience and a capacity for “critical reflection,” which are vital as we face the climate crisis.⁶⁵ Buddhist environmentalist and scholar Stephanie Kaza notes that “in Buddhism, we say that the presence of one mindful person can have great influence on society and is thus very important.”⁶⁶ However, there are also debates within Buddhism about whether spiritual action alone is sufficient to benefit society.⁶⁷ Is individual “mindfulness” enough to change subjectivities in ways that have political significance? Meta-analyses of research on mindfulness demonstrate that secular mindfulness programs, such as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), have effects on practitioners’ personal traits, such as “psychological well-being,” though sometimes these are on a small scale.⁶⁸ Other meta-studies have shown that mindfulness practices can promote “prosocial behaviours” and “helping behaviours” among adults.⁶⁹ Mindfulness practices have also been shown to increase self-reported measures of compassion, self-compassion, mindfulness,

⁶⁴ Purser, *McMindfulness*; Žižek, “From Western Marxism to Western Buddhism.” Following Žižek, in a 2013 article Chris Goto-Jones finds parallels between the cultural popularity of zombies and of mindfulness as a primarily conservative movement. Goto-Jones, “Zombie Apocalypse as Mindfulness Manifesto.”

⁶⁵ Analayo, “The Myth of McMindfulness,” 472, 477–78.

⁶⁶ Kaza, “To Save All Beings,” 161.

⁶⁷ Queen, Keown, Prebish, eds., *Action Dharma: New Studies in Engaged Buddhism*, 3.

⁶⁸ Eberth and Sedlmeier, “The Effects of Mindfulness Meditation: A Meta-Analysis,” 87.

⁶⁹ Donald, Baljinder et al., “Does Your Mindfulness Benefit Others?,” 117.

and well-being.⁷⁰ In other words, trends in secular mindfulness can change individual psychological states as well as how individuals relate to others.

Considering the wider political significance of such changes is a different question. In examining the “McMindfulness” discourse, scholar Edwin Ng finds that mindfulness can serve as a “disruptive technology of the self.”⁷¹ This can lead to alternative forms of self-governance within neoliberalism related to Foucauldian notions of “the resistive or transformative potential immanent in the process of subject formation.”⁷² He even notes that Foucault regarded Zen meditation as one such “technology of the self which might actualise such a resistive and transformative potential.”⁷³ In this sense, notions of “self-care” may “become part of an ethical project” that may open up possibilities for what Foucault termed “political spirituality”; Ng sees in such notions the possibility for a “civically and critically oriented mindfulness.”⁷⁴

At the same time, Ng cautions that “the potential of mindfulness (or other practices of the self) as a disruptive technology *within and against* prevailing systems has to co-dependently arise with interventions into the political ontology of the present milieu.”⁷⁵ Such notions of transformation of the political ontology are evident in some forms of engaged Buddhism, an “immanentist soteriology” and thus a form of “prefigurative politics.”⁷⁶ For engaged Buddhists, this may mean mindfulness practice that goes beyond immediate sensory or emotional experience to find various ways of situating oneself in an interdependent reality, e.g., awareness of how the food I am eating or the land I am sitting on are the result of processes of capitalist exploitation, imperialist expansionism, or racist political economies.⁷⁷ Other modes of engagement can

⁷⁰ Kirby, Tellegen, and Steindl, “A Meta-Analysis of Compassion-Based Interventions: Current State of Knowledge and Future Directions,” 778.

⁷¹ Ng, “The Critique of Mindfulness and the Mindfulness of Critique: Paying Attention to the Politics of Our Selves with Foucault’s Analytic of Governmentality,” 135.

⁷² Ng, “The Critique of Mindfulness and the Mindfulness of Critique,” 141.

⁷³ Ng, “The Critique of Mindfulness and the Mindfulness of Critique,” 145.

⁷⁴ Ng, “The Critique of Mindfulness and the Mindfulness of Critique,” 150.

⁷⁵ Ng, “The Critique of Mindfulness and the Mindfulness of Critique,” 147.

⁷⁶ Queen et al., *Action Dharma*, 27.

⁷⁷ Queen et al., *Action Dharma*, 28. It is important to note that socialism and Buddhism have been discussed in conjunction in the Asian context, perhaps most notably by the Thai monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, but I will here focus on connections between capitalist critique and

include “the practice of detachment from the ego-generating self” which may occasion changes in daily life practices, such as food consumption, consumerism, and work-life activities.⁷⁸ In this context, we might also note the importance of the environmentally-relevant concept of “interbeing,” which is central to Thich Nhat Hanh’s vision of engaged Buddhism.

One important aspect of engaged Buddhism is re-engagement with local economies and cultures, or what Gary Snyder terms “reinhabitation” through “bioregional thinking.”⁷⁹ Of particular significance is how this aligns with new interest among non-Buddhist circles in aspects of the “local,” whether that be “slow food,” Community Supported Agriculture programs, or an increased interest in how locally-oriented politics may be a counterweight to populist exclusionary tendencies. On the latter point, initiatives in some American cities show the possibility for inclusion and progressiveness, including incorporating carbon-reducing strategies that both change city transportation models and build community.⁸⁰ The extensive action research of J.K. Gibson-Graham and their many collaborators demonstrates how community economies are themselves “a politics of the subject”; that is, how subjects are constituted through participation in community economy activities that also reframe their notions of what it means to be an economic and political actor.⁸¹ In other words, a focus on the “local” can create inclusive and mindful subjects as much as it can create hostile and polarised ones.

Engaged Buddhism can also manifest in political activism, as in the case of “Extinction Rebellion Buddhists” in the United Kingdom, who engage in often dramatic forms of direct action alongside other XR groups, but with a distinctly Buddhist approach. XR Buddhists emphasise meditation “as the vehicle by which Buddhist principles become inculcated in both the bodies and minds of practitioners,” as well as a method to “formulate an embodied ethic of care.”⁸²

Buddhism that are more relevant to the Western context. See Buddhadasa, *Dhammic Socialism*.

⁷⁸ Kaza, “To Save All Beings,” 176, 173.

⁷⁹ Kaza, “To Save All Beings,” 176–177.

⁸⁰ In the United States, see Katz and Nowak, *The New Localism: How Cities Can Thrive in the Age of Populism*; for Great Britain, see Wills, *Locating Localism: Statecraft, Citizenship, and Democracy*.

⁸¹ Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*, 127–63.

⁸² Zielke, “Contesting Religious Boundaries with Care: Engaged Buddhism and Eco-Activism

They thus “actively shape their own subjectivities,” while also stressing awareness of how the Buddhist concept of dependent origination can foster “a more responsible and compassionate approach to environmental stewardship.”⁸³ It is also important to note in the case of XR that there it is an unmistakable manifestation of the Buddhist notion of moving “against the stream”: XR Buddhists have been laughed at by onlookers while engaging in meditative activism, and XR activists more generally can face criminal sentencing for their direct actions.⁸⁴ Transcending dominant individualist notions of selfhood would seem to be prerequisite for enduring such ridicule and risk.

At the same time, such changed selfhood can be essential to a transformed social order, and Buddhism can cultivate “contentment with what one has, compassion for all sentient beings, and community with others,” which in turn can “quell the drivers of climate change.”⁸⁵ Such an approach connects with recent work by the Japanese Marxist Kohei Saito, who in an excavation of Marx’s own writings finds support for “degrowth communism,” which emphasises “development of human capacities and creative potentialities” rather than the endless accumulation of commodities.⁸⁶ He also notes that such an approach “needs to invent different value-standards and social behaviours, and a new sense of sufficiency and well-being needs to replace the widespread aspiration to become upper-middle class.... People will have different wants.”⁸⁷ In other words, for individuals to become more solidaristic and community-oriented a change in system must go hand in hand with a change in subjectivity.

IV. Concluding Thoughts

In conclusion, I return to concepts of zombies, the Capitalocene, and the “self.” A fourth and final reason I advocate for the “Capitalocene” as the most useful label for our current crisis relates to the Mahāyāna Buddhist view of humans

in the UK,” 18.

⁸³ Zielke, “Contesting Religious Boundaries with Care,” 21, 16.

⁸⁴ Zielke, “Contesting Religious Boundaries with Care,” 4.

⁸⁵ Javanaud, “The World on Fire: A Buddhist Response to the Environmental Crisis,” 2.

⁸⁶ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism*, 222.

⁸⁷ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 235.

as fundamentally characterized by Buddha-nature. Capitalism engenders a society full of individuals influenced by a vast advertising industry as well as by algorithmic stimuli to consume in ways that are contrary to their own individual satisfaction as well as to ecological well-being. This “dissatisfied” self epitomizes *dukkha* (suffering), and in fact encourages the sort of delusive, compulsive behaviour that may be reasonably categorised as zombie-like. Such behaviour is also *not* indicative of the broken nature of “humanity” *in toto*, but only of the capitalist or neoliberal human. This is another reason why a Buddhist approach should reject the label “Anthropocene” because, by blaming humanity for the climate crisis, it goes against the notion of “Buddha-nature” in what underpins the meaning of being human. Instead, we should think through the lens of the “Capitalocene” to consider how Buddhist philosophy, practice, and activism can be a vital part both of diagnosing the ailments of the capitalist “self,” and of transcending this “zombie” system to create societies of affective, affected beings who have the capacity to cultivate new forms of care and common existence.

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