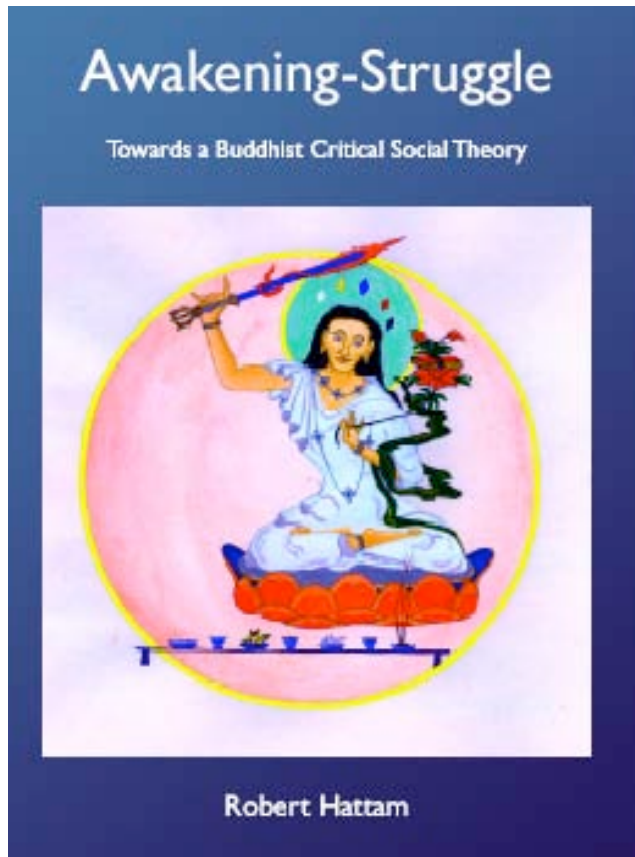


## Review of *Awakening-Struggle: Towards A Buddhist Critical Social Theory* by Robert Hattam

Reviewer: Heesoon Bai  
Simon Fraser University, Canada



What do critical social theory and Buddhism have in common? How could they mutually illuminate and strengthen each other theoretically and practice-wise? If you are interested in these questions, Robert Hattam's recent book *Awakening-Struggle: Towards a Buddhist Critical Social Theory* is a must read. That there are no major publications to date that address these questions make Hattam's book a ground-breaking work. And I am happy to report that, unlike many ground-breaking, cutting-edge works that tend to lack the depth and maturity of scholarship that the more established academic works tend to embody, Hattam's work displays both virtues. Indeed, his work presents excellent scholarship in critical social theory and Buddhism. Also, the reader is, most likely for the first time, introduced to the not too well-known Lam-rim teaching from the Gelugpa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.

The common ground on which critical social theory (or, more accurately, a cluster of critical social theories) and Buddhism stand is a commitment to human liberation, although we are looking at rather different pictures of liberation. Hattam summarizes the difference as follows: "Liberation, for Buddhism, is about awakening the mind to its nondual nature, whilst liberation for critical theory is about struggling over the social arrangements." Roughly put, Buddhism is about enlightenment (another name for liberation) within, while critical theory is about enlightenment without. That the inner and outer liberation should come together and complement each other to form a more complete Enlightenment Project for humankind makes total sense! Why have not more people engaged in this kind of undertaking? In reading Hattam's work, we come to see why this is the case.

Critical social theory, like many other theories that are taken up in academic discourse, has been increasingly mired in intellectual wrangles and debates, thus becoming less of a political action call and more of a theoretical inquiry. In the words of Hattam, "the criticalist discourse community has become inward looking and somewhat disconnected from the

concerns of everyday life” (p. 82). But what precipitated this apathetic reaction of the criticalist community is its encounter with the postmodern deconstructivist critique of the modernist subjectivity. Hattam explains that despite its intellectual criticism of the modernist worldview, critical social theory has not been able to let go of the modernist subjectivity because of its inability to conceive of the ethical and political agency outside the modernist subjectivity. As Hattam puts it: “[a] key problem is how a theory of decentered subjectivity [of postmodernism] can be linked to a notion of human agency in which self-reflexive, politically capable (rather than merely discursive) selves become possible” (pp. 91-92). While some may dismiss the above problem as merely a theoretical conundrum (and likewise altogether dismiss deconstructivism), those who do take it seriously find it a challenging koan. And the same can be a formidable challenge for Buddhism as well in that the latter, with its foundational view of *annata* (egolessness), similar to the deconstructivist notion of the decentered subjectivity, may easily succumb to the same agentic malaise. But, as Hattam sees it, and rightly so, Buddhism has a resource that postmodern deconstructivism does not: meditation.

Hattam states: “I propose that Buddhism, and especially its meditation practices, be read as ‘technologies of self’ (Foucault 1988a) that deconstructs a reified self, and enables the development of an altruistic mind as a basis for living an ethico-political life in an unjust world” (p. 110). Can meditation be a technology of self that resists technologies of domination and power? With a positive answer to this question, we enter the heart of Buddhist psychology: understanding, not just intellectually but existentially and experientially, the origin or source of human aggression/violence and exploitation that has been turning life on earth into a literal hell experience for all too many beings for the past few millennia. Locating this source and liberating oneself from its tenacious grip is Buddhism’s supreme and singular practice that, when understood properly, coincides with the fundamental objective of critical social theory. Buddhist meditation is nothing other than the practice of uncovering the source of human existential malaise and exposing it so unambiguously and compellingly to oneself that one has but to change one’s whole outlook and consciousness, which is known as Enlightenment or Great Liberation.

The historical Buddha taught people that what lies behind the whole façade of human malaise is human suffering. It is the suffering, afflicted mind, not an at-ease, loving and compassionate mind, that manifests greed, anger, hatred, jealousy, violence, domination, exploitation, and so on. But we can go one step further and ask what causes the suffering mind. Again, according to Buddha’s teaching, it is the dualistic, egoic consciousness that oppositionally separates self from other, the subject from the object, the seer from the seen, and that is the ultimate cause of the whole phenomenology of human suffering. Buddhist meditation is the tool and process for seeing in oneself the operations of the dualistic consciousness, and, simultaneously, for the undoing of these intractable operations. While Buddhist meditation has been traditionally practiced by individuals for the sole purpose of individual spiritual liberation, its fundamental aim being the deconstruction of the ego-consciousness that gives rise to all forms and degrees of dominance, violence and exploitation, it is in fact a perfect tool for the social transformation that critical theory also seeks. Hence Hattam’s suggestion that “socially-engaged Buddhism can be considered as a resistance narrative for critical theory and, as such, provides a conceptual bridge between critical theory and Buddhism” (p. 164). Hattam quotes Kraft’s (1999, p. 10) working definition of engaged Buddhism that perfectly captures the essence: “Engaged Buddhism entails both inner and outer work. We must change the world, we must change ourselves, and we must change ourselves in order to change the world” (p. 165). Thus the engaged Buddhist simultaneously works with meditation and activism.



But is socially engaged Buddhism something new in our post/modern times? While it can justifiably be argued that the need for it is greater today, Buddhism has been from its historical beginning socially engaged. Down through the centuries, there has been no lack of strong examples of socially engaged Buddhist practitioners and practices. In fact, the whole Mahayana tradition with its Bodhisattva vow is a clear example. The Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Sulak Sivaraksa are three outstanding contemporary examples, and Hattam explores and discusses each one in some detail. Specific social, political, and cultural contexts of different times and places give rise to specific challenges and needs, to which engaged Buddhism must respond with apropos sensibility, priorities, methods, and practices. The Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Sulak Sivarakso, have each initiated a unique social movement.

Just what are today's intractable social conditions that we have to struggle against and work with in order to fully realize our humanity, which is the ultimate goal of enlightenment, east and west? Drawing on Marx's analysis of capitalism, critical social theory shows the human condition in modernity to be irrevocably alienated due to the production-oriented mode of life. Individuals participating in the capitalist production oriented life face two-fold alienation: alienation from one's inner life and alienation from fellow human beings and nature. The result of this two-fold alienation is a society that "defines life in terms of greed and collapses the human being to passive consumer, a cog in the machine, to cliché thinking and conformity, a 'new obedience'" (p. 229). Hattam sees that the aim of Buddhist critical theory would be to equip us with a clear intellectual understanding of the social process of alienation and, at the same time, ways to psychologically deconstruct the alienated psyche. It is a theory that addresses both the inner, psychological work and outer socio-political work. In Erich Fromm's work that triangulates psychoanalysis, Marxism, and Zen Buddhism, Hattam finds a rare and accomplished example of this kind of dialectical inner-outer work. However, he also finds weaknesses in Fromm's work. He criticizes Fromm's failure to discuss in detail the Zen meditation that Fromm adopted for his own practice. Ironically, Hattam himself neglects to discuss the details of meditation in his work, which I find somewhat unfathomable, given his impassioned argument for the need for a discursive theory of social activism to be experientially supported by such "technologies of self" as meditation.

As a whole, Hattam's book, *Awakening-Struggle*, is a worthwhile read for anyone interested in contemporary critical social theory. Of particular note is his struggle to go beyond discursive social critique and work out the self-society dialectic through a process of personal transformation. It should also be an eye-opening read for students of Buddhism, and more generally anyone following a spiritual path, who wants an articulation of the inter-connected possibilities of spirituality, social activism, and social revitalization.

## Reference

Hattam, Robert. (2004). *Awakening-Struggle: Towards a Buddhist Critical Social Theory*. Flaxton: PostPressed.

## Reviewer

Heesoon Bai is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada. Her current research interests include 'psycho-ontology', perception and attention, pedagogy of mindfulness, ecological philosophy and education, moral and spiritual education, ethic of care, and democracy and education. She also researches Buddhist and Daoist philosophy and applies their insights to education.

Correspondence: [heesoon\\_bai@sfu.ca](mailto:heesoon_bai@sfu.ca)

