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**BUDDHISM,**  
**MYTHOLOGY,**  
**AND**  
**THE**  
**MATRIX**

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*Is Neo the Buddha? Is there really no spoon? And can it be a coincidence that Keanu*

*Reeves once played Prince Siddhārtha in Little Buddha?*

*Professor and Buddhist scholar James*

*Ford explores the complex relationship between Buddhism and The Matrix.*

Humans are mythologizing and, one might say, "world building" creatures. We fashion epic narratives to express our self-understanding and contribute to a structure of meaning for our lives. Myth in this sense is not a "fairy tale" or forged history—it is rather the deepest expression of our fears, aspirations, and symbolic understanding of life and the world around us. Stories from the Bible, creation accounts from any number of ancient cultures, biographies of nation founders, and even contemporary movies such as *Star Wars* qualify as myth. Part historical fact, part imaginary fiction, or sometimes complete imaginary fiction, such accounts inform to various degrees the way we see the world and interpret our experience within the world. But myths are highly fluid and interrelated. The author(s) of

a new myth does not generally create a narrative out of a vacuum. He or she will often borrow from the mythological symbols or narrative motifs from the surrounding context and transform their meaning in some new and creative way. For example, we know from scholarly research that the flood narrative found in Genesis borrows considerably from the Babylonian tale of Utnapishtim within the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. But the Biblical authors radically transformed the story by integrating the Hebrew god Yahweh into the narrative. And George Lucas readily admits that he borrowed heavily from the paradigmatic hero journey delineated by the famous mythologist Joseph Campbell. But he also placed the narrative in a futuristic setting and highlighted the potential threat of technology to human compassion and existence.

*The Matrix* can be seen as a modern example of this myth-making process as well. In an interview with *Time* magazine, the Wachowski brothers stated their mythological intent directly:

"We're interested in mythology, theology and, to a certain extent, higher-level mathematics. All are ways human beings try to answer bigger questions, as well as The Big Question. If you're going to do epic stories, you should concern yourself with those issues. People might not understand all the allusions in the movie, but they understand the important ideas. We wanted to make people think, engage their minds a bit."<sup>1</sup>

Mixing metaphors from Christianity, Buddhism, Greek mythology, and even cyber technology, *The Matrix* offers a mythological account of the human existential condition. In this essay, I will approach this classic movie from a Buddhist perspective. How does *The Matrix* reflect a Buddhist "worldview" and analysis of the most fundamental human problems? I am assuming no prior knowledge of Buddhism and will begin with a basic introduction to Buddhism and important historical and doctrinal developments within the tradition that are relevant to my interpretation of *The Matrix*.

<sup>1</sup> Corliss

## LIFE AND CONTEXT OF THE BUDDHA

The founder of Buddhism is known by several different names. Born Siddhārtha Gautama, a given family name, he is often referred to as Śākyamuni, literally "Sage of the Śākya clan." Upon achieving enlightenment, he earned the title of Buddha or the "awakened one." As with "Christ" or "Messiah" in relation to the historical figure Jesus, "Buddha" is actually a title rather than a personal name. Siddhārtha lived and taught in northern India around the middle of the first millennium B.C.E. The most common dates for his life are 566–486 B.C.E. According to the traditional sources, he renounced the life of a wealthy prince sometime around the age of thirty and embarked on a spiritual quest for a way to overcome suffering and death.

This renouncement of the "world" and his privileged life was not entirely novel for the time. Siddhārtha was born into an era of great social tension and transition in northern India. Sacred literature such as the *Upanishads* voiced a challenge to the established priest-centered religion (sometimes known as Brahminism), which emphasized purity, class distinctions, and ritual efficacy. Most important, time was (and is) understood cyclically within Indian religion. Just as seasons and years come and go, so also does the world itself. Concealed in cycles measured by inconceivable blocks of time, a world comes into being, evolves, devolves, and is finally destroyed only to be followed by another world. The process has virtually no beginning and no end. Similarly, sentient beings pass endlessly through various incarnations (e.g., animal, human, god, and so forth).

This general cycle of life after life is known as *samsāra*. *Ātman*, analogous in many ways to the soul in Western religious terms, is the essence of sentient beings that passes from one life to the next. And one's *karma* determines the status of one's life and rebirth. *Karma*, literally "action," is the moral law of cause and effect based on one's actions. Thus, virtuous actions lead to happiness and favorable rebirth, and nonvirtuous actions lead to suffering. The ultimate goal known as *mokṣha* (liberation) within this conceptual worldview is to escape from *samsāra* and the endless cycle of life and suffering. By Siddhārtha's time, perhaps the most effective

means of achieving *moksha* was to the renounce the world and pursue the path of a ~~wanderer~~ (wandering ascetic). Through severe denial of the body (i.e., the material self) and demanding meditative and yogic discipline, it was thought that one could realize liberation from *samsāra*.

According to tradition, Siddhārtha pursued this path of a *sannyasin* for some six years after leaving his luxurious life as a prince, and studied under two prominent gurus. He lived an extremely ascetic life, meditating most hours of the day and consuming a barely sustainable amount of food—the goal being to identify with one's spiritual essence (i.e., *ātman*), not the material body that is but a temporary vessel. In the end, Siddhārtha found this path too extreme and abandoned his colleagues to search for another way. Upon regaining his physical strength, he determined to sit beneath a particular tree until he discovered the true nature of reality and the way to overcome suffering. As he breached the threshold of realization, he encountered Mara, the demon god that rules *samsāra*. Mara attempted to distract Siddhārtha through temptation, fear, and doubt, but in the end Siddhārtha prevailed. Upon achieving ultimate enlightenment, the Buddha went on to teach others the content of his realization. In fact, he traveled through northern India for some forty-five years building a Buddhist monastic community (*sangha*) and teaching the monks, nuns, and laypersons that gathered wherever he went.

### “DR. BUDDHA” AND THE DHARMA

The content of the Buddha's enlightenment is found in the Four Noble Truths, his most basic teaching. As we will see, these truths constitute a prescriptive analysis of the fundamental human problem and the way to overcome this problem. Or, put another way, the format of the truths is analogous to a doctor's diagnosis of a sick patient. The first truth defines the sickness; the second analyzes the cause of the sickness; the third reveals what it looks like to be cured; and the fourth is the remedy. They are titled “noble” truths because they are self-evident “truths” to someone who is truly enlightened and wise (i.e., “noble”).

So what are these Four Noble Truths? They can be listed quite succinctly, but understanding them takes a bit more explication and reflection. They are:

1. The truth of suffering (*dukkha*)
2. The truth of the arising of suffering
3. The truth of the cessation of suffering (*Nirvāna*)
4. The truth of the path that leads to the cessation of suffering (eightfold path)

Some say that all of these truths are contained in the first truth of suffering. In other words, if you truly understand the truth of suffering, you will naturally grasp the truths that follow.

“All is suffering” is another way the first truth is often stated. The Pali term that is translated as “suffering” here is *dukkha*. In fact, “suffering” may be a somewhat misleading translation. Consequently, some teachers feel that something like “~~disatisfactoriness~~” better conveys the gist of *dukkha*. The idea here is that there is a universal feeling of dissatisfaction that characterizes all of human experience. It is not difficult to accept that life is indeed filled with suffering of one degree or another. But the Buddha emphasized that this is indeed the fundamental character of life in general. Even in our happiest moments—when we fall in love, have a child, or reach a long-pursued goal—there often is a deep level of angst still present. We know that the moment will not last forever and there may even be an underlying fear that something terrible will undercut our joy. This is, perhaps, much like the feeling of discontent Neo feels, the “splinter in his mind” telling him of the wrongness of the universe around him.

While this might appear to be a rather depressing starting point for a religion, Buddhism would argue that it is “realistic” as opposed to “pessimistic.” In fact, I would contend that this deep sense of angst that characterizes the “human condition” is the root of all religion and philosophy. While various religious and philosophical systems may articulate the fundamental human problem in different ways, all endeavor to lead us beyond the difficult and mundane human experience that most fundamentally defines our existence. And while we might expect Buddhists to appear rather dour, angry, or

even downright depressed given this starting point, the reality is quite different. Anyone who has seen the Dalai Lama speak immediately senses a buoyant lightness and humor that is anything but sorrowful. Statues of the Buddha himself are often depicted with a slight smile of contentment. So whatever one might say about the starting point of Buddhism in this first noble truth, it does not necessarily lead to a negative or morose view of the world.

The Second Noble Truth reveals the causal process that leads to suffering and, more existentially, the perpetual cycle of transmigration known as *samsāra*. First of all, Buddhism asserts that because we are ignorant of the true nature of reality, we perceive and experience the world in a distorted way. "Ignorance" may be misleading here because it is not precisely a lack of knowing that is the problem—it is rather a mis-knowing. In other words, we think we understand to one degree or another the nature of the world around us—but in reality, our perception is quite distorted. For example, one of the "three marks of existence" (truisms about the nature of reality) is that all things are impermanent (*anitya*). Everything is forever changing—nothing stays the same. At a superficial level, we can easily comprehend this dictum. A simple examination of the physical world around us would confirm that indeed nothing remains static. But if one honestly examines the way we live our lives, it is apparent that despite this evident truth of impermanence, we often act as though we are surprised when things do not stay the same. We get angry or upset when something we value disappears, dies, or breaks down. Indeed, we are constantly searching for something of permanence, and when we find something that seems to yield "happiness," we cling to it as if we can keep it from changing. This is where desire comes in. Our encounters with the things of the world lead to positive, negative, and neutral feelings. Where there is something positive, we want more of it; and when it is negative, we do our utmost to avoid it (hatred and aversion are the flip side of desire and attachment). So our desire propels us forward and we become attached, even addicted, to the pleasurable experiences of life. It does not take much to see that if our happiness is dependent on things staying the same, we will forever be discontent. We are like the drug addict,

demanding more and more. From this perspective, life is a perpetual experience of loss, loss, loss, . . . because those things we desire and cling to invariably change or disappear altogether.

Another aspect of impermanence is interdependence. Everything arises and exists dependent on any number of other factors. Something as simple as a piece of paper is dependent upon a seedling, a tree, rain, soil, sunlight, a lumberjack, paper mill, etc. And each of those things is dependent on infinitely more things for its own existence. If we move to something as complex as a human, the web of dependence grows ever more complex. Each of us is dependent on our father and mother for birth and sustenance, along with food, shelter, education, protection, etc. In other words, as much as we might like to think that we are independently existing creatures, in reality we are deeply dependent on the web of life surrounding us. In fact, the Buddha asserted via the doctrine of no-self (*anātman*) that it is the illusion that we are somehow distinct, independent "selves" that leads us to act egotistically. And it is this egotistic tendency that perpetuates suffering both for ourselves and others.

If Buddhism stopped here, it would indeed be a rather pessimistic religion (just as *The Matrix* would be a rather pessimistic film if it concluded with all humans trapped within the Matrix). But the third noble truth asserts that there is a way out of this quagmire. There is a way of experiencing reality that is somehow NOT characterized by *dukkha*. This is Nirvāna. Nirvāna literally means "going out" as in the going out of a flame. The analogy of fire is often evoked in Buddhism. Desire is like a fire that propels us forward constantly demanding new fuel (i.e., attachments), while Nirvāna is described as "cool." Nirvāna is not a heavenly realm, a perpetual state of bliss, or even nonexistence. The Buddha seemed to imply that Nirvāna lies beyond the dualistic distinctions of language. We only need to recall that Śākyamuni realized Nirvāna under the Bo tree and proceeded to travel and preach around northern India for some forty years before dying a natural death. From everything we can gather, he interacted with many people, ate, taught, and so forth, so he clearly did not disappear into some transcendent realm. Therefore, Nirvāna is not necessarily the cessation of life, but the cessation of a life characterized by suffering. Moreover, the Buddha's countenance radiated any

number of positive attributes—he is described as peaceful, wise, unattached, selfless, authentic, spontaneous and compassionate. So it is not as though he was a blank slate either. At his death, the Buddha achieved what is known as Pari-Nirvāna or “final” Nirvāna, defined as a complete escape from rebirth in the realm of *samsāra*. Beyond this, it transcends the scope of language. The central point I want to make here is that Buddhism claims that there is a way of experiencing the world that is not characterized by suffering, desire, ignorance, and so forth. This is what it looks like to be cured of the disease of *dukkha*.

So what is the therapy that leads to this cure? The answer is the fourth noble truth—the eightfold path leading to Nirvāna. The categories that constitute this path are:

Right Understanding Right Thought	} Wisdom ( <i>prajñā</i> )
Right Speech Right Action Right Livelihood	} Morality ( <i>śīla</i> )
Right Effort Right Mindfulness Right Concentration	} Mental discipline ( <i>samādhi</i> )

Not a sequential path of training, one develops all of these dimensions simultaneously. As reflected by this chart, Buddhism has generally broken these eight dimensions of practice into what is called the threefold learning. Wisdom is attained through developing right understanding and thought. In other words, by truly comprehending the four noble truths and other Buddhist learnings, we can begin to transform our deluded understanding of reality and conceptions of “self,” the world, and so forth. One must also develop proper morality through regulating one’s speech, behavior, and work. This means controlling words or actions that may cause suffering for others and avoiding occupations that cause harm to other sentient beings (e.g., butcher, arms dealer, etc.). Finally, since

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the fundamental problem is one of the mind (i.e., ignorance and delusion), Buddhism asserts that there is a mental discipline necessary to intentionally transform one’s consciousness. It is as though our minds are computers that have been programmed incorrectly. Indeed, our “software,” the product of many lifetimes of karmic conditioning, must be reprogrammed to conform to the true nature of reality. This is the purpose of meditation within Buddhism. It is not a means of escaping, but a means of transforming one’s consciousness so that when one is “in the world,” one is able to act, think, and respond wisely and compassionately.

### EMERGENCE OF MAHĀYĀNA BUDDHISM

After the death of the Buddha, the tradition carried on and grew significantly around the monastic community. To be sure, there was from the beginning a strong lay movement that centered on popular pilgrimage sites. But the center of Buddhism was the monastic community itself, which represented as it were the ideal Buddhist life. And the ideal of the monastic community was an *arhat*—a fully enlightened disciple of the Buddha who enters Pari-Nirvāna upon death. As with many other religious communities, disputes arose over time that resulted in what we might call denominational splits. These divisions resulted from disputes over doctrine and practice, but the various schools that resulted tended not to be very exclusive. By the first century of the Common Era, a new movement emerged that came to be known as Mahāyāna Buddhism. Followers of Mahāyāna (“Great Vehicle”) distinguished themselves from the more traditional schools, which they labeled Hīnayāna (“Small Vehicle”). Scholars prefer the term Nikāya for early Buddhism because it does not carry the obvious pejorative connotation of Hīnayāna. By the very title of their movement, Mahāyānists claimed that this new vehicle was more universalistic than the old tradition that carried a relative few to the other shore of Nirvāna. A number of fundamental characteristics distinguished Mahāyāna from the earlier tradition, most noteworthy is the ideal of the bodhisattva. In contrast to the *arhat* ideal of Nikāya Buddhism, Mahāyāna favored the bodhisattva—one who is on the path to Buddhahood. According to Mahāyāna rhetoric at least, the bodhisattva is motivated not by a desire to achieve Nirvāna

for him or herself, but to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all beings. Thus, a bodhisattva intentionally comes back to the world of *samsāra* in order to alleviate suffering and help lead others on the same path. A bodhisattva, frequently defined as one who "turns back" from Nirvāna, is more accurately pursuing a different goal (i.e., full buddahood) altogether. Some Mahāyāna texts even claim that Nirvāna does not exist and was simply a conceptual tool used by the Buddha to motivate people onto the path.

At any rate, a bodhisattva is motivated by a compassion for all suffering beings and a pursuit of wisdom that facilitates wise action. As a bird requires two wings, a bodhisattva relies on the mutual development of wisdom and compassion. Various delineations of the bodhisattva path emerged, the most popular being a ten-stage progression over many lifetimes in which the bodhisattva perfects the necessary virtues (e.g., generosity, patience, perseverance, etc.) to realize Buddhahood. As one progresses along this path, one gains extraordinary, even miraculous powers. As a result, there developed within the Mahāyāna tradition a growing assembly of what may be called "celestial bodhisattvas"—advanced bodhisattvas who may reside in heavenly realms from whence they can descend to teach and assist suffering beings. Maitreya in particular is noteworthy because he appears very much like a messianic figure within the Buddhist tradition. At various times and places, there have been significant movements centered around the expected "descent" of Maitreya as the next Buddha.

Before moving onto the significant parallels between Buddhism and *The Matrix*, allow me to introduce one prominent philosophical school of Mahāyāna Buddhism that is particularly noteworthy for reasons that will become obvious. It should be evident by now that Buddhism is in many ways a philosophy of the mind. The fundamental problem is not "of the world," as it clearly is for those that perceive the world as a battleground between good and evil forces. Rather, the problem is in the (deluded) way we perceive the world. Thus, the solution is rooted in a transformation of one's consciousness and the way one processes reality. Buddhism does emphasize certain moral imperatives to minimize worldly suffering. But even here, conscious intention is the most important ingredient. Unlike

Jainism, for example, Buddhism contends that there are no negative karmic consequences if we unintentionally kill an animal. What is most important is one's conscious intent, not simply the actions that result. Aside from avoiding hurting others, good moral behavior is emphasized because of the interdependent relationship between one's actions and one's mind. Practicing generosity helps one become more mindful of being generous, and vice versa.

This Buddhist analysis of "consciousness" reached its climax in the fourth-century Mahāyāna school known as Yogācāra. Yogācāra, also known as the "Consciousness Only" school (Vijñānavāda), asserts that the objective world we perceive to be real is ultimately a product of our minds.<sup>2</sup> It is as though one's mind is a movie projector and the world that one experiences is the "projection" of one's consciousness. Because we perceive the "objects" of consciousness to be independently existing, we ceaselessly pursue them or avoid them, depending on feelings of desire or hatred. Yogācāra does not assert that the objective world does not exist, though many observers have drawn this conclusion.<sup>3</sup> Rather, this is more accurately an *epistemological* insight. The point is that every "object" is significantly altered by our conscious perception; we know it secondhand as idea and we cannot know it before it is so transformed. Everything that one experiences is filtered through one's consciousness, which invariably distorts the experience in some way. Yogācāra claims that once we realize that the objects of consciousness are, in this sense, illusory, then desire, attachment, and suffering cease. At this point the underlying flow of consciousness is transformed into the wisdom of a Buddha.

In order to attain this realization about the nature of consciousness, Yogācāra emphasized various meditative and visualization practices—hence, the name of the school ("practitioners of yoga"). Meditation techniques were developed to deconstruct, in a sense, one's conditioned way of seeing the world and help one awaken to the ultimately interdependent and non-dualistic nature of reality. The manner in which one is able to create and control images in the

<sup>2</sup> For a coherent overview of Yogācāra thought, see Williams, pp. 77–95.

<sup>3</sup> For representative examples of this debate with respect to Yogācāra Buddhism, see Keenan, pp. 169 and 209; and Paul Griffiths, p. 83.

mind through various visualization practices served to reinforce the notion that everyday conscious perceptions, like dreams, are no less "created." The practitioner comes to realize the illusory nature of the self and the external constituents of reality. Ultimately, one endeavors to overcome the subject-object dualism that informs our deluded view that we (and all "objects") are somehow distinct and independently existing entities. The content of this realization of non-duality is beyond verbal description. This realization is the ultimate goal of a Yogācāra practitioner.

### BUDDHISM AND THE MATRIX

Every religion offers an analysis of the human condition. Most also have foundation myths that convey the basic existential problem of human existence. Confucian accounts of the idealized Chou dynasty, for example, reflect that tradition's understanding of the fundamental problem—social disharmony due to the human tendency to neglect ritual and social propriety. Sacred Hindu texts such as the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Upanishads* present the human condition as one of perpetual bondage in the endless cycle of *samsāra*, life after life. For Christianity and Judaism, the fundamental problem is humanity's alienation from God due to our sinful nature and egoistic tendency to try to be like God. This of course is symbolized in the Genesis creation narrative of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. A core of Christian belief is that God offered his own son, the *messiah*, as a means to overcome that alienation.

While *The Matrix* echoes the messianic motifs of the Christian narrative, the "human problem" is clearly not alienation from God since God is nowhere present in the story—or at least not a personal creator God.<sup>4</sup> Conrad Ostrwalt sees this omission of the divine and the rejection of the supernatural as agent for the apocalypse as symptomatic of "the contemporary apocalyptic imagination."<sup>5</sup> God will not bring about the apocalypse—something else will. But *The Ma-*

<sup>4</sup> For an alternative perspective, see Paul Fontana's essay "Finding God in The Matrix" in this volume. —Ed.

<sup>5</sup> Ostrwalt

*rix* need not be understood only as a "contemporary" adaptation of the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic view; there are other ancient mythological perspectives that also omit the "divine" entirely. It is here, I think, that Buddhism offers an illuminating mythological parallel.

The Buddhist parallels in *The Matrix* are numerous. Clearly, the fundamental problem is one of the mind. The Matrix itself is analogous to *samsāra*, the illusory world that is not the reality it appears to be. Morpheus tells Neo that the "Matrix is everywhere, it's all around us, here even in this very room. You can see it out your window or on your television. You feel it when you go to work, or go to church or pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth." In other words, the fundamental problem is ignorance of the true nature of reality. Morpheus later adds that it is our conditioned "attachment" to this delusional reality that prevents most beyond a certain age from breaking away from it. There is the suggestion of reincarnation as when the oracle informs Neo that he is not The One, but adds, "Maybe next life." There is another suggestion of reincarnation in Morpheus's claim that the man who first transcended the Matrix would return as "The One."

There is also a dimension of karma evident in the film in the sense that humans are basically in a condition of their own making. As Morpheus notes, humans have always been dependent on tools for existence. The artificial intelligence that runs the Matrix and controls humanity is of humanity's own making. Moreover, it was humanity that destroyed the world in an effort to defeat the AI by depriving it of the sunlight needed for energy. The point is that the AI did not appear on its own nor is it some "evil force" that has existed from the beginning of the time. It is the (karmic) result of past actions.

Another important parallel between *The Matrix* and Buddhism relates to the realm of discipline and practice. Recall that an important dimension of the eightfold path of Buddhism is meditation and mental concentration. One must learn to discipline and control the mind that so fundamentally distorts reality and imputes permanence and selfhood onto things that are ultimately empty. Meditation is a means of "reprogramming" the mind, as it were, so that our perception of reality conforms to the way the world really is. The process of Neo's own training is a wonderful analogy of this decidedly "men-

tal" transformation process. His mind is literally reprogrammed so that, like a bodhisattva, he is able to enter the Matrix (i.e., *samsāra*) with increasing powers of perception and control. In other words, the very process of Neo's training is a techno-cyber version of meditation. The filmmakers also adopt the motif of martial arts training, which has historically close ties with Buddhist monastic training in China and Japan. I might also note that the vital moment for one embarking on the bodhisattva path is the arousal of the aspiration for enlightenment known as *bodhicitta*. A crucial episode for a monk within Mahāyāna Buddhism is the declaration of his intent to pursue enlightenment for the benefit of all beings. Through a formal ritual of declaring vows, one intentionally commits to the path. It strikes me that Neo's decision to take the red pill is a kind of ritualistic expression of his own intent before embarking on the adventure "down the rabbit hole." Along these same lines, the lifestyle of the rebels is strikingly monastic in flavor. Their food, clothing, and living quarters are quite austere. Indeed, Cypher revolts in part because he would rather live the deluded life of desire than endure the frugal and disciplined "monastic" life of the rebels.

While we do not find explicit discussions of impermanence, interdependence, or emptiness in the dialogue of *The Matrix*, there is the clear message that the world humans experience is a complete distortion. It is literally a computer program input into our minds to keep us entertained. In other words, it is "empty" of any substantive "reality." We are not the "selves" we perceive ourselves to be. We are in fact "slaves," as Morpheus says to Neo: "... like everyone else, you were born into bondage ... kept inside a prison that you cannot smell, taste, or touch. A prison for your mind." It is here that the parallels with Yogācāra philosophy seem quite apropos. As noted above, Yogācāra emphasizes that our *only* access to reality is through our conscious minds. We must first realize that the "projected" image of the world that we experience is not the "reality" we perceive it to be. It is distorted by our individual and collective karma that conditions us to impute a degree of permanence and independence upon things of the world that is not there. In the same way, the Matrix is quite clearly a delusional reality. "What is real?" Morpheus asks Neo. "How do you define real? If you're talk-

ing about what you feel, taste, smell, or see, then real is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain. This is the world that you know. The world as it was at the end of the twentieth century. It exists now only as part of a neural-interactive simulation that we call the Matrix. You have been living in a dreamworld, Neo." What is needed is an extraordinary being who can penetrate the maze of this "cinematic prison" and reveal the nature of our plight to us. This is precisely what bodhisattvas and Buddhas do ... and so with Neo. It remains to be seen exactly how Neo will proceed from here.

According to the Mahāyāna tradition, as one progresses along the path to Buddhahood, one procures powers to manipulate the perceived "objective" world. Buddhas and advanced bodhisattvas can transform and manipulate objects at will. They can also manifest themselves at different places, even at the same time. Recall the young "Potentials" in the living room of the Oracle's apartment. Some appear to be practicing meditation while others manipulate wooden blocks, spoons, and so forth. We might consider these Potentials the equivalent to young bodhisattvas learning to transform elements of the "objective" world through powers of consciousness. A Buddha actually possesses the power to create his/her own cosmic realm.<sup>6</sup> However, Śākyamuni Buddha did not transform the world in such a radical way. People continued to suffer, live illusory existences, and die. But he did offer a new path and way of overcoming our distorted perception of the world. Thus, there remains a strong sense of free will and responsibility. In the same way, it does not appear as though Neo is going to radically transform the world or destroy the Matrix created by AI, despite the fact that this is what Morpheus is expecting.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it is not clear what he is going to

<sup>6</sup> The most famous example here is Amitābha (Japan: Amida), the central Buddha of the Pure Land tradition of Buddhism in East Asia. Amitābha, while a bodhisattva, vowed to create his own Pure Land upon achieving Buddhahood. All who invoke the name of Amitābha with a sincere heart can be reborn in that majestic realm where enlightenment is more easily attained.

<sup>7</sup> At one point, Morpheus explains to Neo the origin of the rebels and the prophecy of the Oracle concerning the coming One: "When the Matrix was first built, there was a man born inside who had the ability to change whatever he wanted, to remake the Matrix as he saw fit. It was he who freed the first of us, taught us the truth: 'As long as the Matrix exists the human race will never be free.' After he died the Oracle prophesied his return and that his coming would hail the destruction of the Matrix, end the war, bring freedom to our people."

do with the Matrix. But it is apparent that he, like the prior One, is going to reveal the truth to those willing to listen. At the conclusion of the film, Neo offers what might be described as a rather compassionate warning to AI:

"I know you're out there. I can feel you now. I know that you're afraid. You're afraid of us. You're afraid of change. I don't know the future. I didn't come here to tell you how this is going to end. I came here to tell you how it's going to begin. I'm going to hang up this phone and then I'm going to show these people what you don't want them to see. I'm going to show them a world without you, a world without rules and controls, without borders or boundaries, a world where anything is possible. Where we go from here is a choice I will leave to you."

We might imagine the Buddha having the same conversation with Mara, the demon-god that lords over *samsāra*. He did not destroy Mara. Mara, symbolizing the power that keeps us in *samsāra*, lives on. We can imagine, however, that Mara proceeds with a sense of fear knowing that Śākyamuni has escaped and may indeed show others the way out of *samsāra*.

Recall that in the Yogācāra vision of enlightenment, it is not as though the substratum of flowing consciousness disappears or is destroyed. Rather it is transformed and a Buddha sees it for the interdependent web that it is without the afflictive emotions of desire and hatred that lead to attachment and suffering. And by so doing, he is able to move through the interdependent web of *samsāra* spontaneously, without fear, doubt, or temptation. He is not constrained by the conventional laws of cause and effect (i.e., *karma*) that govern *samsāra*. Now recall the moment when Neo is resurrected (i.e., reborn). He is able to glide through the Matrix, turning bullets into suspended debris and exploding "Mara" (i.e., Agent Smith) into white light. No longer constrained by fear, doubt, or ignorance, Neo, like a Buddha, has transcended all dualities, even the ultimate duality of life and death.

## THE MATRIX AS MYTH

As with any myth, *The Matrix* is metaphorical and begs for some kind of interpretation. Myths are ultimately symbolic and operate on many different levels. For example, humans have created all kinds of "systems" (i.e., constructed ways of conceptualizing and understanding the world). There are political systems (e.g., democratic, socialist, communist, dictatorial, monarchical, etc.). Similarly, there are various social, economic, and religious "systems" adopted by various societies that structure the way people brought up in these systems see and even experience the world. Moreover, these "systems," once established, tend to have a life of their own and even act back on humans in ways that their creators probably did not anticipate. In short, the Matrix and *samsāra* can be seen as metaphors for the "systems" that impose themselves upon us. And Neo and the Buddha are analogous to those unique "saviors" that reveal to us the sometimes perverted and destructive nature of such "systems."

So we could also understand the Matrix to be a metaphor for the various "systems" that sometimes compel us to act in ways that are not in our best collective or even individual interest. For example, some might say that our dependence on and attachment to technology is out of control. Of course, there are innumerable benefits from technology. But one perhaps negative result is that it sometimes undermines or impedes genuine human interaction. Others might argue that industrialization and capitalism, two interrelated "systems," can be destructive to the environment or undermine genuine human compassion, respectively. For example, capitalism, when not balanced with other ethical imperatives, can lead to an inequitable distribution of suffering or an imbalance between the haves and have-nots. Without always being fully aware of it, we are conditioned socially and otherwise, by growing up within such "systems," so that we can no longer see their constructed nature. We are "blind," as Morpheus might say, to the degree to which the "system" controls us. In short, with respect to the Matrix, one need not understand the issues of delusion, attachment, control, and so forth, only in reference to one "ultimate reality." And this is also the case for

the Buddhist analysis of the human condition; *samsāra* also can be seen as a metaphor for any of the various dimensions of our perceived reality.

From this more mundane perspective, *The Matrix* challenges our conditioned way of seeing the world. How are WE "programmed," it seems to ask? What aspect of OUR reality is artificially constructed and enslaving us within a conceptual prison? Is technology liberating or imprisoning us? Is materialistic capitalism leading to true happiness or unrequited addiction? Do our cherished religious views bring us together or divide us? These are fruitful questions for stimulating one's own interpretation of this modern myth and its relevance to *our* social reality. In addition to the mesmerizing action scenes, it may well be that this implicit skepticism toward "institutional" control explains the popularity of this film among young adults.

Beyond the noted parallels to the Buddhist and Christian worldviews, it is also important to note how this "myth" diverges from some of the core values of these traditions. For example, in many respects *The Matrix* is a glorification of violence and patriarchal dominance. The one token female is, on the surface, notably androgynous or even masculine. And the graphic violence merited an "R" rating for the film. One might argue that the killings are not actual but analogues to killing the demons of one's mind or destroying the symbolic manifestations of hatred, greed, and delusion (i.e., Śakyamuni's encounter with Mara beneath the Bo tree on the eve of his enlightenment). The fact is, however, that each person killed within the Matrix is the death of a "real" person within the human battery chambers. I would contend that the mesmerizing process of destruction, amplified by the technology of VFX or "bullet time" photography, transcends metaphorical license and clearly cultivates a more literal form of violence. The moral dimension of the Buddhist eightfold path or the moral imperatives of Christianity are basically absent from the film narrative. It is here, as with all mythology, that we must pay due attention to the context of this myth and especially its commercial aims. The glorification of violence has clear commercial appeal to one of the primary target audiences of Hollywood producers—young teenage boys. So while on an abstract level, *The Matrix* indeed evokes many "religious" parallels to Christianity,

uses violence to reach its audience  
the ends justify the means  
BUDDHISM, MYTHOLOGY, AND THE MATRIX 143  
the Oracle?

Buddhism, and other mythological traditions, it also integrates arguably contradictory values of violence and male dominance for commercial (or other) ends. One might say that it glorifies some of the "social matrices" it purports to challenge.

This evident tension between the "religious" dimension of this myth, on the one hand, and the "Hollywood" and cultural elements of the film, on the other, speaks directly to the contextual nature of the mythologizing process. Myths are not the product of an individual author but a collective representation developed over time. Myths are always produced in "institutional" contexts. Thus, they are the by-product of a dialectical process that often yields internally conflictive elements.

With all that said, the parallels between *The Matrix* and Buddhism make it a useful tool for comprehending some of the most insightful teachings of the latter. The Matrix is a metaphor for many of the culturally programmed "realities" that our consciousness tells us are ultimately real. They constitute "the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth."

From a Buddhist perspective, we often fail to see the interdependent web that links each and every sentient being. We impute a false degree of permanence onto things of the world—objects, our claims of truth, our conceptual systems, even the independent status of our "selves"—that leads to egotism, desire, attachment, and suffering. We must first open our eyes and wake up to the "matrix" that may indeed be imprisoning each of us. Given the chance, which pill would you take . . . blue or red? Every moment, the choice is yours.

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