“Fate, it seems, is not without a sense of irony,” says Morpheus. So it is also with history. It is instructive that the Buddha named his son “Rahula,” meaning “chain” or “hindrance.” Accordingly, prince Siddhartha Gautama, who later became known as “the Buddha,” meaning the “awakened one,” chose to leave his comfortable lifestyle at the age of twenty-nine in order to resolve the question that had been burning inside of him, “the question that drives us,” the feeling that there is something radically wrong with existence. After he attained his enlightenment and was “awakened” to the truth, Rahula became one of his disciples. In one passage of the classic Buddhist text Majjhima-nikaya, the “awakened one” instructs his son, the “chained one,” using the image of a mirror.

What do you think about this, Rahula? What is the purpose of a mirror?

   Its purpose is reflection, reverend sir.
   Even so, Rahula, a deed is to be done with the body [only] after repeated reflection; a deed is to be done with speech . . . with the mind [only] after repeated reflection [italics mine].

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Reflecting

Note the Buddha’s deliberate double entendre with the mirror’s reflection. To begin with, the mirror simply reflects. It embodies clarity, revealing what is before it. For this reason, the mirror is a common metaphor in Taoist and Buddhist teachings, particularly in Zen Buddhism. These teachings urge us to be like a mirror, to have a clear mind, a “mirror-mind,” one that is uncluttered, free, and therefore empty. Just like the mirror, a mirror-mind simply reflects what comes before it. It does not discriminate. Nor does it cling to its images.

We see significant uses of this mirror-reflection in The Matrix. As Mr. Rhineheart reprimands Neo, the window washers clear away the dripping suds that resemble the Matrix code. Whereas Agent Smith’s sunglasses darkly reflect the two identities of Thomas Anderson and Neo, Morpheus’s mirrored glasses reflect them more clearly. Note that these glasses are worn in the Matrix and in the Construct, but not in the real world. And Morpheus turns the mirrored pill box over in his hands before he offers Neo the choice of red pill or blue pill.

The film’s most dramatic use of mirror imagery occurs soon after Neo swallows the red pill. Fascinated by the dripping mirror, he touches it, and the wet mirror creeps its way up his arm and body. And just before his journey deep down into the “rabbit hole” to discover the truth, he becomes the mirror. Literally thrown into the Matrix, he awakens from his illusion in complete nakedness as he finds himself immersed in the pod. The Greek word for truth, alethia, also refers to “nakedness,” suggesting the notion of naked truth. His mirror-metamorphosis thus brings about his first real awakening: to the truth that what he thought was real is actually a programmed illusion, a “computer generated dream world built to keep us under control . . .”

The most profound use of mirror-reflection takes place in the Oracle’s apartment. A boy who sits in a full lotus posture, garbed as a Buddhist monk, telekinetically bends spoons. As he holds a spoon up to Neo we see Neo’s reflection in the spoon. This represents clarity and truth as the boy shares with Neo, in four words, Neo’s most important lesson: “There is no spoon.”

The parallel here with Buddhism is striking. There is a well-known Zen Buddhist parable, or mondo, about three monks
observing a flag waving in the wind. One monk points out how the flag moves. The second monk responds that it is not really the flag, but the wind that moves. The third monk rebukes both of them. He claims that neither the flag nor the wind moves. “It is your mind that moves.” The Buddhist message is clear. The spoon does not move, since there is no spoon. There is only mind.

Furthermore, because there is no spoon, the mirror-reflection reminds us that we need to be careful not to place too much importance on the images that are reflected. The images are simply images, nothing more, nothing less. In a sense, just as there is no spoon, there is no mirror in that the world that is reflected in the mirror is simply an image, an illusion. In this light, the Buddha teaches us that the world as we know it is an illusion, is maya. Now Buddhist scholars have debated about the nature of this illusion. Does this mean that the world we see and touch does not actually exist? This metaphysical interpretation is what the Matrix is all about.

On the other hand, many Buddhists, particularly of the Mayhayana school, have claimed that the illusory nature of the world consists in our knowledge of the world. That is, the concrete world does exist, but our views and perception of this reality do not match the reality itself. The image in the mirror is not the reality that is in front of the mirror, just as my photo of the Eiffel Tower is not the Eiffel Tower. As Zen Buddhists claim, the finger that points to the moon is not the moon. Our most insidious confusion is to mistake the image for the reality. Yet it is our mind that interprets and defines what is real for us. It is this epistemological illusion that Buddhist teachings seek to deliver us from. 2 In order to do this, we must free the mind.

Most importantly, we need to free the mind from the illusion of an independent, fixed self. Even though we stand before the mirror and see ourselves, our image conveys nothing about what we really are. This reaches into the core of Buddhist teachings, namely, that there is no self, just as “there is no spoon.”

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2 James Ford insightfully points out that this is the conclusion of the Yogacara school of Mahayana Buddhism in his “Buddhism, Christianity, and The Matrix,” *Journal of Religion and Film* 4:2 (October 2000).
And if there is no spoon, there is no Neo. For Buddhists, there is no self, no independent and separate entity. This idea of no-self is called *anatman*, literally meaning “no self.” Therefore, we can use the mirror in the wrong way. We can use it to reinforce the illusion of self, a self that is to us so all-consuming that the absence of a mirror can be unnerving, even anguishing. In our inauthentic world, we need mirrors to reaffirm the illusion of self and separateness.

Let us now return to the Buddha’s instruction to his son and consider the second meaning he attaches to the mirror, as symbolizing the mental act of reflection, examination, thinking things through. He instructs his son that careful reflection ought to precede action. More importantly, he cautions Rahula against acting without being aware of the impact of his action upon all other things.

If you, Rahula, reflecting thus, should find, “That deed which I am desirous of doing with the body is a deed of my body that would conduce to the harm of myself and to the harm of others and to the harm of both; this deed of body is unskilled, its yield is anguish, its result is anguish”—a deed of body like this, Rahula, is certainly not to be done by you.³

This reaches into Buddhism’s most vital undercurrent, the idea of dependent origination, or *pratityasamutpada*. Dependent origination essentially means that all things in existence are intricately interwoven with each other, so that there is a natural interconnection among all things. Therefore, nothing is independent and separate.

This being so, nothing is permanent since, according to the Buddhist doctrine of *anicca*, all things change. Nothing is independent and permanent, not even a “self.” Nevertheless, we still tend to cling to the ideas of permanence and self, and this produces suffering, or *dukkha*. *Dukkha* literally means “dislocation.” Here we have the Buddhist Three Signs: *anicca* (everything changes), *anatman* (there is no self), and *dukkha* (suffering is universal). In any case, the Buddha reminds his son that, in view of the interconnectedness of all things, our actions have an impact upon others, and we need to reflect upon this before we act.

No-Reflecting

Yet this kind of reflection, this mental activity, is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, careful reflection and questioning is necessary. Throughout his life, Neo has not accepted things solely at face value. He suspects that things are not quite right. He asks Choi, “You ever have that feeling where you’re not sure if you’re awake or still dreaming?” Trinity can identify with this sense of dislocation. “I know why you hardly sleep, why you live alone, and why night after night you sit at your computer. You’re looking for him. I know, because I was once looking for the same thing.” And before Neo is debugged, she reminds him, “You know that road. You know exactly where it ends. And I know that’s not where you want to be.” In their first encounter, Morpheus tells Neo, “You have the look of a man who accepts what he sees because he is expecting to wake up . . . You’re here because you know something . . . You’ve felt it your entire life. That there’s something wrong with the world. You don’t know what it is but it’s there, like a splinter in your mind driving you mad.”

On the other hand, Buddhist teachings never tire of warning us that it is the mind that creates “splinters.” It can lead us through all kinds of detours. The mind can be our worst enemy. Consider the sparring match (or kumite in Japanese) between Neo and Morpheus. This scene clearly demonstrates the all-powerful role of mind in the martial arts. As skillful as Neo has been conditioned to become, Morpheus at first still defeats him. Why? Morpheus tells him “your weakness is not your technique.” Neo’s weakness, his enemy, does not lie in the strength and quickness of Morpheus. After all, the kumite takes place within the Construct. Morpheus challenges Neo, “Do you believe that my being stronger or faster has anything to do with my muscles in this place? You think that’s air you’re breathing now?” It is clearly Neo’s mind that defeats Neo.

It is all a matter of freeing the mind. Freeing the mind means not allowing the mind to “stop” anywhere. The celebrated Zen monk Takuan Soho (1573–1645) calls the unfree mind the “detained mind.” Takuan Soho instructed Japan’s two most renowned swordsmen, Miyamoto Musashi and Yagyu Munenori. In his “Mysterious Record of Immovable Wisdom” (Fudochishinmyoroku), he warns Yagyu that detaining the mind would result in disaster:
[W]hen you first notice the sword that is moving to strike you, if you think of meeting that sword just as it is, your mind will stop at the sword in just that position, your own movements will be undone, and you will be cut down by your opponent. This is what stopping means.\(^4\)

The mind “stops” when it thinks instead of knows, when it tries instead of letting-go. Morpheus thus prods Neo to “Stop trying to hit me and hit me” [italics mine]. The mind stops when it places itself at a distance from the body. As long as the mind stops, it is not one with the body. In the martial arts, freeing the mind means bridging the distance between oneself and one’s opponent. For there is no opponent, just as there is no spoon.

In this respect, Neo’s meeting with the Oracle shows Neo’s inability to free his mind. Despite his perfecting the techniques involved in his training, which is essentially spiritual training, he still possesses doubts and fears about his true nature. Keep in mind that the Oracle never actually states that Neo is not the One. It is Neo who says this. The Oracle acts as the mirror for Neo’s doubting, detained mind.

Freeing the mind means having an undetained mind, a mind that is not “fixed.” Freeing the mind therefore means acquiring the state of “no-mind,” what Zen Buddhists refers to as mushin. This no-mind is also no-reflecting. This is the other edge of the sword. The Buddha urges us to reflect, but also instructs us to free ourselves from reflection. This no-reflecting ultimately frees the mind. Morpheus constantly reminds Neo that he needs to “free the mind.” Neo’s life as well as the lives of all in the Matrix has become a “prison for the mind.” Freeing the mind comes about when we break through the barrier of rationalization and reflection, when we recognize the limits of reason and realize that all reason and logic inevitably hits a brick wall. This is the true “sound of inevitability.”

The barrier of reflection is shattered when Neo experiences no-mind, or no-reflecting. When Neo is shot through the heart by Agent Smith and “dies,” Trinity immediately lets go of her

fear and reveals her love for him. This resuscitates him. Her letting-go of her own fear, a product of her reflection, is a spark that empowers him to let go of his former doubts and to reawaken, because he now truly believes for himself that he is the One. This scene is a powerful example of pratityasamutpada, the interconnectedness that exists especially with the redemptive, indeed saving, power of love. Trinity’s belief in herself affects Neo’s belief in himself. Moreover, their beliefs are a letting-go of the fear and doubt that accompany their minds detained by reflection. Only by letting go of the mind, can we free the mind. And only when we free the mind can we free ourselves. Within the Buddhist mirror, the mind is the ultimate Matrix. The mind enslaves us when we become attached to illusion, when we convince ourselves that the world we see and reflect on is the real world.

The Matrix underscores these two sides of the mirror—reflecting and no-reflecting—through its numerous Buddhist allusions: the world as we know it as illusion, the continuing emphasis upon the role of mind and freeing the mind, distinctions between the dream world and the real world, direct experience as opposed to being held captive of the mind, and the need for constant vigilance and training.

Indeed, Neo’s first meeting with Morpheus acts as a symphonic overture in that it touches upon all of the film’s major themes and movements, especially when Morpheus reveals the human condition and predicament—that the world as we know it is a “prison for the mind.” Note that Morpheus states “prison for the mind,” and not “prison of the mind.” This is clearly a sign of hope. If Neo’s life is a prison of the mind, then liberation seems less likely. But, his life has become a prison for the mind. This means that liberation from this prison is possible. And it is possible precisely through the mind, by freeing the mind.

This reminds us of the Four Noble Truths in Buddhism, particularly the often understated Third Truth. The First Truth consists of dukkha, that all of life is filled with suffering. The Second Truth is that the definitive source of suffering comes from tanha, which means “craving” and clinging. It is basically the mind that craves. This craving is expressed through various forms of attachment, especially attachment to permanence and
self. The Third Truth tells us that we can free ourselves from suffering. This message of hope makes logical sense. Since the cause of our suffering comes from within us, from mind, then the source of redemption comes from within us as well. It is precisely this Third Truth that Morpheus suggests. The Fourth Truth lies in following the difficult and demanding path that will free us from suffering, known as the Eightfold Path. Ultimately, the secret to following the Eightfold Path lies in freeing the mind.

**Is The Matrix a Buddhist Film?**

Just how Buddhist is *The Matrix*? Despite its Buddhist flair, there are at least four ingredients in the film that appear incongruous with Buddhist teachings. First, there is an overall dualistic, good versus evil, Zoroastrian character to the film. In the agent training program, Morpheus singles out the system as an “enemy.” But he also includes as enemies those who are part of the system, either out of ignorance or choice. This dualism clearly goes against the supreme Buddhist virtues of compassion (*karuna*) and lovingkindness (*metta*). These virtues apply to all sentient beings and require that we treat friends and enemies alike without discrimination, surely one of the most difficult challenges in Buddhist morality.

Second, scenes of excessive violence seem to contradict Buddhist teachings regarding nonviolence, or *ahimsa*. Indeed, the film glorifies violence with Neo requesting “guns, lots of guns,” leading to Neo and Trinity’s outright slaughter of the security guards when they both enter the building to rescue Morpheus. All of this no doubt demonstrates the film’s commercial aim in appealing to our culture’s audience. In selling out in this fashion, the film contradicts some fundamental Buddhist principles.

According to Buddhism, a *bodhisattva* is a being who has reached awakening and chooses, out of compassion, to guide others. The *bodhisattva*’s vow to save all creatures, this commitment to eliminating suffering, is essentially what Buddhist ethics is all about. The seventh-century Buddhist Shantideva describes the *bodhisattva* as one who “will not lay down his arms of enlightenment” because of the corrupt generations of
men, nor does he waver in his resolution to save the world because of their wretched quarrels.”

Then again, one could view these violent scenes as surreal. That is, one might think of these scenes as more symbolic in that they symbolize the destruction of the demons in our mind that represent what Buddhists call the three poisons: delusion, greed, and hatred. One famous bodhisattva is Manjusri, who is depicted as carrying a sword in one hand in order to slash away these poisons.

Third, the language in the movie is at times rather crass. This certainly violates the Buddhist teaching of “right speech.” “Right speech” is one of the Eightfold Path that we need to undergo in order to free ourselves from suffering. To have the potential One flick the “finger” at Smith may score points with the audience, but the film’s overt attempt to appeal to vulgar folkways can dilute its more serious messages.

One can downplay these flaws by pointing out Buddhism’s inherent adaptability. Buddhism is like a chameleon in that it tends to adapt itself to its environment. This is why Chinese Buddhism is somewhat distinct from its original Indian Buddhist source. This is why we also tend to qualify a specific culture’s form of Buddhism, such as Japanese Buddhism and even American Buddhism. Given American culture’s fascination with violence, one may therefore call the film’s use of it as signifying American Buddhism.

With this I disagree. Regardless of how various cultures have adapted Buddhist teachings, these teachings are Buddhist only to the extent that they remain faithful to the core of Buddhist teachings. And the core of Buddhism does, and will always, abhor violence and the deliberate perpetration of unnecessary suffering. Instead, Buddhism’s driving force lies in making every effort to relieve suffering.

Finally, the film understandably conveys the impression that humans are somewhat special and certainly different from the artificial intelligence that humans created, particularly “sentient

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programs.” We are consoled knowing that we are different from machines. Yet, are we different from all other sentient beings? Buddhists teach that all sentient beings deserve respect and that all sentient beings possess the Buddha-nature. The film’s clever depiction of the Agents as “sentient programs” raises the interesting distinction between “beings” and “programs.” But the Buddhist mirror involves all sentient creatures, not just humans.

The Matrix is not strictly a Buddhist film, nor was it intended to be. Despite the above incongruities, the talent of The Matrix lies in its syncretic use of philosophical and religious elements from various Western and Eastern traditions. In a masterful way, it mixes metaphors with rich references to Christianity, Platonism, and Buddhism within a context of contemporary cybertechnology and is already a classic in the sci-fi genre. Its genius consists in richly combining penetrating script and superb images in a way that creatively conveys the profound though oftentimes impenetrable Buddhist message of liberation. In doing so, The Matrix awakens the viewer and challenges us to reflect (and not reflect) on where we habitually live—in our minds. It compels us to ask, the next time we look into the mirror: Who or what is it that we see?