In Escape from Evil, Ernest Becker famously declared that “evil comes from man’s urge to heroic victory over evil.” He argues that it is our vain attempt — driven by hope, fear and ignorance — to forge unchanging personal and social identities that ends up making “the earth an even more eager graveyard than it naturally is.” Indian Buddhist thought similarly suggests that it is our attempt to turn reality on its head (viparyāsa) — to find satisfaction, permanence, and personal identity in a world characterized by its opposites — that ends up making more, not less, suffering and unhappiness. Buddhist thought, though, has not typically directed its trenchant analysis toward the dreadful dynamics of social and political life, leaving modern Buddhists bereft of a critical social theory. This talk suggests such an approach by interweaving ideas from traditional Buddhism, Ernest Becker and the natural and social sciences.

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