

# Meditation and the Post-Secular Condition

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*Abstract* This paper looks at the links between meditation practice and the post-secular turn in the wider domain of culture. The latter is a multi-faceted phenomenon, and the article focuses on one of these – namely the assertion of immanence over transcendence. This calls for a re-interpretation of the habitual opposition between secularism and religion. Meditation is often embedded in either a religious or secular framework, with contemporary forms increasingly of the latter kind. A third way is suggested, in favour of a meditation practice that acknowledges the post-secular turn. This is particularly called for at a time when secularist forms of meditation such as mindfulness have been decontextualized to the extent of undermining the ethical context of meditation.

The approach championed here builds on the phenomenological experience of meditation and on some aspects of the teachings of Dōgen Zenji in 13<sup>th</sup> century Japan.

Key words: post-secular, meditation, immanence.

## Introduction

As a relatively new phenomenon, the post-secular turn (Braidotti, 2008; Braeckman, 2009; McLennan, 2010; Habermas, 2010; Staudigl & Alvis, 2017) generally denotes a variety of theories that explore the reappearance of religious ideas in an cultural milieu that has been dominated, particularly in the west, by secularism. Its emergence is partly due to the increasing recognition that there is something missing in the secular societies many of us live and, more generally that there is something missing within the secularist worldview (Habermas, 2010). Yet there is more to the post-secular turn than a pure and simple return to religion. Among the various theories that attempt to define the post-secular, this article will focus on one perspective that presents interesting and potentially innovative implications for the practice of meditation. Often overlooked, this perspective has itself a long and intricate genealogy. Its name is *immanence* (Deleuze, 1990; Barber, 2014), a term stepped in theology and whose Latin origin means *remaining within*, i.e. within this world, denoting the presence

of God in all things. Immanence is opposed to *transcendence*, whose meaning is to climb (*scandere*) over (*trans*), denoting in theology a ‘creator’ standing outside this world. For transcendental thinkers like Thomas Aquinas, in whose reflections Aristotle, Plato and Christianity all converged, the world is good and true not in essence, but only *indirectly*, by “analogical participation” (Barber, 2010, p. 431) in a transcendent God. For transcendentalists of all persuasions, this world is not good enough: too imperfect and samsaric; an unfair world of blood, sweat and tears.

When applied to the practice of meditation, the immanentist stance discussed below can potentially circumvent the limitations of both religious and secularist understandings of meditation, while at the same time fully respecting the deep insights generated by both ‘traditions’. The immanentist perspective builds on the critique of secularism implicit in the post-secular turn, delving into some of the more dubious aspects of secularist meditation that have been recently popularized and applied to areas whose associations present ethical challenges and concerns. Inspired by a pivotal figure in the history of Zen Buddhism – the thirteenth century Japanese monk and founder of the Soto school Dōgen Zenji – as well as on a phenomenological understanding of meditation – the article attempts to spell out a new perspective.

### **Skin, Flesh, Bone and Marrow**

Before leaving China for his native India and wanting to nominate a successor, the legendary Buddhist monk Bodhidharma assembled four of his disciples. He asked them to convey their understanding of the Dharma. Each of them gave a different answer.

Dao-fu said: ‘One should not cling to words and letters nor abandon words and letters’. Bodhidharma said: ‘You conveyed my skin’. Then Nun Zongchi said: ‘To me, the Dharma is the joy of seeing the land of Akshobhya Buddha once and never again’. Bodhidharma said: ‘You conveyed my flesh’. Daoyu said: ‘At their origin, air, earth, water and fire are empty. The five aggregates do not exist. Thus, there is nothing to attain’. Bodhidharma said: ‘You conveyed my bones’. Finally, Huike

came forward, bowed deeply, and went back to his seat. Bodhidharma said: 'You conveyed my marrow'. Then he transmitted the Dharma, the bowl, and the robe to Huike (Bazzano, 2017a, p. 116).

Until a commentary by Dōgen appeared, some seventeen hundred years later, it was a given that only the fourth disciple, Huike, 'got it'. Dōgen, points at something more subtle. In his commentary to a famous passage in Zen literature, commonly known as *Bodhidharma's Skin, Flesh, Bone and Marrow* (Heine, 2008), he debunks the notion that there is a set of hierarchical values in relation to the depth of meditative absorption.

For Dōgen, the four disciples' responses were *equally valid*. If one takes them as superior or inferior to each other, one fails to see Bodhidharma's objective. Each student, in his or her own way, contains the teacher's all being (Loori, 2003). Evading hierarchical notions of depth and surface, Dōgen provided a welcome antidote to status-centred notions of spiritual awakening and accomplishment.

Like a language learned, a habit acquired over years, a set of deeds that over time makes and unmakes us, Zen is a kind of sickness, a blissful thorn used to dislodge the aching thorn, the poison that reveals the nectar deep in the heart of our existential affliction. To say that the Dharma is not learned academically through memorizing or imbibing this or that doctrine but through incarnate, somatic practice, is probably a truism: it is a given in Zen that meditation practice has to be inhabited in one's body, that one has to translate the doctrine into skin, bone, flesh and marrow. The tradition is inherited only when it becomes alive in this body. This body finds in turns a speech that reason alone is unable to articulate or fathom. Incarnate practice retrieves a voice or a host of voices, according to one's power to receive. And all voices are but the voices of Shakyamuni Buddha.

This is arguably the heart of 'meditation'. How can anyone seriously claim that by simply assuming the zazen posture, a flawed human being will host within his/her body the very essence of the Dharma? How can a tormented, stumbling sentient being retrieve in his/her

own flesh the voice and presence of the great ancestors? Yet this is precisely what Dōgen's above commentary seems to be saying.

There is more: this seeming emphasis on incarnate expression of the Dharma through zazen does not entail preference for an instinctual, wordless realm of communion with living things in a hierarchy that places intellect on the lowest rang, followed, on the way up, by feelings and then 'pure silence' on the snowy peaks.

It may be useful to note how, by sitting in zazen, one enters a living stream and instinctively inherits the skin or flesh or bone or marrow of the great ancestors. Beginners too are already endowed with the fundamental prerequisite for becoming a Buddha, i.e. we are alive, sentient and manifest an intention to look for something that that has already found us.

### **On mainstream secular meditation**

It is now the norm to speak of meditation without referring to its enduring and inextricable links to ethics, anthropology, spirituality and religion. We have come to ascribe to meditation the functional role of technique and performance, as means to an end: altered states or relaxation, or as device for decreasing the pressure of modern living. While it is true that both religious and secular approaches to meditation are, to a certain extent, functional, their functions differ greatly. In my understanding, secular approaches to meditation by and large try to formulate a response to modernity; in so doing, they roughly reproduce classical modernity's customary focus on (a) *rationalization* in relation to culture, (b) *individualization* in relation to human societies, and (c) *subordination* (to the discontents of civilization) in relation to 'nature' and 'instinct'.

In critiquing the pervasive *rationalization* typical of western societies influenced by Protestantism, Max Weber (2004) noted how rationalism was heavily applied not only to economics, scientific research, technology, administration, law and military training but

peculiarly extended to spiritual and religious contemplation, divesting the latter from formerly magical and mysteric element (e.g. transubstantiation in the Catholic mass) in favour of a more utilitarian as well as more ascetic stance centred on work and personal salvation. For Weber (2004) “the man who, *par excellence*, lived a rational life in the religious sense was, and remained, alone the monk” (p. 74). Thus rationalization fostered *individualization*, a personal route to salvation that, emphasized by Luther, was later perfected in Calvinism and transmuted into the emphasis on productivity and work, introducing, as it were, a double-entry book-keeping attitude to the religious and spiritual life. This stance may be implicit but rather pervasive and akin to what David Smail called *magic voluntarism* (Smail, 2015): de-contextualized individuals alone are held responsible for their stress and anguish, regardless of the social and economic milieu in which their lives are embedded. This particular facet is important: we now tend to speak, for instance, of mindfulness in isolation, and not only in terms of something that an isolated individual can perform in order to cope with the challenges of modernity.

The third element, *subordination*, partly refers to the historical dependence of “national or religious minorities ... in relation to a group of rulers” (Weber, *ibid*, p. 6) and could be extended in our times to the general subordination of meditative practices to the dominant scientific and cultural views – something evident, as we shall see in a moment, in relation to the coveted domain called ‘mainstream’

As a consequence of this threefold focus sketched above, the complex culture(s) out of which Buddhist meditation emerged – with its animistic, shamanic, existential and theistic components – becomes, in secularist approaches, thoroughly rationalized and expediently downsized to a string of techniques aimed at achieving ‘happiness’, reducing cholesterol levels, or soothing work-related strain. Equally, the existential burden of societal malaise, ethico-political unfairness and injustice is transferred onto the shoulder of isolated individuals

who, divested of their dignity as citizens, are explicitly or subliminally deemed responsible for their fate. I have addressed elsewhere (e.g., Bazzano, 2014, 2015) the political naivety that is often intrinsically linked to the general culture of meditation, particularly in relation to the widely spread phenomenon of ‘mindfulness’, part and parcel of a neo-positivist take over of the humanities (Bazzano, 2014).

Improvement of our lot (whether facing illness or redundancy) will come about, according to this cheerfully coercive narrative, through meditation, positive thinking and by smiling more often (Ehrenreich, 2010). Finally, by chastising the instinctual and sensuous life and looking down on the ‘ruminative’, naturally meandering aspects of psyche, secularist approaches to meditation (e.g. mindfulness programmes) echo more or less the ‘civilizing’ work of modernity, endorsing human types able to rise above ‘the passions’ and the inherently creative contradictions of their condition with the aim of becoming efficient employees, keen consumers and, some would say, “excellent sheep” (Deresiewicz, 2014). A winning subordination of the allegedly unruly life of the affects often goes hand in hand with conformity, whose complementary flipside is an unbridled, equally conformist and desublimated hedonism (Marcuse, 1964).

The threefold process outlined above draws largely from Max Weber’s take on some of the effects of modernity (Weber, 2004). With the advent of post-modernity, a new feature has become central: technical acceleration. It is not a coincidence that avowedly secular approaches to meditation are hugely popular in our age of late modernity characterized by the “self-propelling circular process” (Rosa, 2013, p. 23) of *social acceleration* that is at the heart of current collective permutations. The *mindfulness app* is one of many gadgets now available that promise to take the user “to a more relaxed and healthier state of mind” (Apple Inc., 2017, Internet file). I have met people who use it before going to bed: it helps them fall asleep after a long working day. Increased technical acceleration requires continuous

technological innovation, the creation of new gadgets that help lighten the pressures of a faster tempo and the time shortage it engenders and renew the cycle of acceleration. It is hardly controversial to suggest that the mindfulness app constitute one of the smartest outcomes of a secular approach to meditation. The trend described above has been developed for some time and has on the whole succeeded in bringing the once marginal practice of meditation into the *mainstream*, a term praised by Jon Kabat-Zinn (2015) as a more desirable goal for the mindfulness movement than the outdated secularist paradigm. The problem with ‘going mainstream’ is that dominant practices are no longer critiqued but taken at face values. Some of the ethical implications of this are far-reaching and worrisome. Mainstream applications of secular meditation include mindfulness in the military as well as corporate mindfulness. The hybrid of positive psychology and mindfulness in the US military and the CIA gave birth to obnoxious re-interpretations of *resilience* as well as the gruesome promotion of *adaptive killing* and torture (Shaw, 2016). Moments of difficulty and crisis arguably require a threefold movement of (a) recognition of human fragility; (b) attending to the problem at hand; (c) moving forward. But the increasingly popular notion of resilience, from the Latin *resilire*, to rebound, only describes the third movement, the bouncing back and moving forward; there is no recognition or attending. There is more to this than semantic inaccuracy, and the question may be asked as to whether what looks like shorthand may in fact be avoidance, plain and simple: avoidance of our inherent vulnerability as human beings (often revealed to us by a crisis), and of the need to attend compassionately to the difficulties we experience. Has ‘resilience’ in other words been hijacked, its meaning distorted by an altogether different worldview that regards vulnerability as weakness?

Positive psychology has been at the forefront of the popularisation of the concept of resilience. The mission of its founder and chief protagonist, US psychologist Martin Seligman, is to put an end to what he calls “victimology” – the “passive view of the human

being” that has, he argues, contaminated the social sciences (Seligman, 1999). Another of Positive Psychology’s leitmotifs is ‘learned helplessness’. This is based on Seligman’s finding that dogs can be brought to a state of passivity when subjected to repeated, painful electric shocks. *From this he deduced that humans, when faced with unmanageable situations, “experience disruptions in motivation, emotion, and learning that amount to a sense of helplessness”* (Seligman, *ibid*). He applied this theory to depression in relation to social problems, which he re-presented in terms of “helpless cognitions” among “demoralized women on welfare” and Asian-Americans, and as “defeatism” among black Americans (Shaw, 2016, p. 39). It is a stance that disregards the socio-political context that discourages and humiliates those women, Asian-American and black Americans in the first place.

The rhetoric of resilience is echoed by Linley, founding director of the Centre of Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP) in the UK, who spoke enthusiastically of Martin Seligman’s Comprehensive Soldier Fitness program in the United States “[as a] superb example of how you can take some of the principles of positive psychology and apply those in a way that makes a real and lasting difference to people’s lives” (Jarden, 2012, p. 83).

The Comprehensive Soldier Fitness program, established in 2009, was aimed at “creating more resilient soldiers by helping them with the necessary psychological adjustments” (Shaw, 2016, p. 40). To this purpose, Seligman devised a method for measuring resilience, the Global Assessment Tool. The notion of resilience was met with great enthusiasm by other psychologists who came up with creative variations on the theme. Professor Michael Matthews promptly supplied the notion of ‘adaptive killing’: a set of cognitive and behavioral techniques “focus[ed] on eliminating irrational thoughts and beliefs ... on changing a soldier’s belief structure regarding killing”. As he sees it, “these interventions could be integrated into immersive simulations to promote the conviction that adaptive killing is permissible” (Matthews, 2014, p. 187).

Resilience has effectively become a new fetish in contemporary psychology useful in fostering the neoliberal agenda at a time of heightened security and financial austerity. Unsurprisingly, it has found applications in several areas. The International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s website has over two thousand documents discussing the topic and similar emphasis is found within the World Bank (which has created a 'Social Resilience' group) and the World Economic Forum with its focus on 'systemic financial resilience'. A newly founded academic journal, *Resilience*, is entirely dedicated to the topic (Neocleous, 2013).

The above examples illustrate how psychology, a complex science designed to help human beings and alleviate suffering can be made to serve agendas that oppose its original ethos. Something similar is beginning to take place with mindfulness when the latter is reduced to a mere set of techniques divested of the ethical context.

Corporate mindfulness is equally representative of this generalized tendency to capsize the Buddha's teachings of spiritual awakening for purposes that are uncoupled from the former's fundamental ethical context, as Ron Purser and Edwin Ng (2015) explain:

Instead of cultivating awareness of the contingencies of present reality that cause suffering, and thereby developing the capacity to intervene in those conditions of suffering, corporate mindfulness goes no further than encouraging individuals to manage stress so as to optimize performance within existing conditions of precarity (Internet File).

It is still 'business as usual', the authors argue: political corruption, the underfunding of education, the concentration of wealth and an overall sociopathic work culture all go on undeterred. What is also overlooked is that the Buddha's mention of mindfulness was invariably contextual: mindfulness *of*, and in particular mindfulness of impermanence. Rather than the trumpeted 'stress reduction', paying heed to the Buddha's prompting may in fact bring about stress *induction* – an altogether natural response for anyone who wakes up to the stark reality of our certain demise and the uncertain hour of its occurrence. As many

practitioners will attest, this voluntarily-sought form of stress-induction often does not result in discouragement but works as antidote against complacency. It makes us cherish our being in the world; it engenders compassion and self-compassion for our common predicament; it affords greater meaning to our existence. It is also wholly compatible with a socially engaged, politically astute approach to meditative practice that has built its own honourable and rich tradition (e.g., Jones, 2003)

### **Existentialist secular meditation**

A secular understanding of meditation is not limited to the examples highlighted above. There are arguably deeper manifestations trying to link practice to a more generalized, *existential* human anguish that goes beyond the circumstantial concerns associated with modern living. Rather than offering consolation to a self buffeted by stress so that it can eventually step back into the ring rejuvenated, these existential accounts of secular meditation are thoroughgoing; their modes of enquiry do address our intrinsic human dread of impermanence. They invite us to face with greater honesty the anxiety of uncertainty latent within our agitated striving. It remains to be seen whether this process is genuinely liberating or whether it in fact engenders its own 'Protestant' congregations of secular meditators with their own secular preachers and hierarchical systems that replicate all aspects of religious Buddhism with only a few doctrinal differences. Secularization itself is, after all, a thoroughly religious process historically associated with Luther and Protestantism.

It remains to be seen whether this approach to meditation still provides valid responses to the challenges of the post-secular turn. In order to proceed on our investigation, it will be useful to define the post-secular.

### **What is the post-secular?**

The practice of ‘just sitting’, mentioned at the beginning has its origins within the Hindu and later Buddhist religious practice of *dhyāna*. Opinions may differ on how to correctly translate this Sanskrit term – whether as deep concentration of the mind, refined state of absorption or, in theistic versions, communion with the divine. But one thing *dhyāna* is *not* – at least in the anthropological and mythico-religious context in which it originally emerged: it is not a technique or a skilful ruse one learns in order to *achieve* a coveted state of mind. It appears to belong instead to the sphere of the *sacred*. Secular meditation has arguably discarded the domain of the *sacred*, a sphere normally but not exclusively associated with religion and closely linked to spirituality.

But what is the sacred? Does it coincide with the religious? Does it coincide with spirituality? Can it be equated with the religious dimension even when the latter reifies a specific goal (e.g., enlightenment, spiritual awakening) for its practice? Asking this type of questions places us already within a mode of thinking that is at the threshold of what some will inevitably describe as ‘post-modern’. The term is ambiguous yet it has largely come to mean a stance of detached irony with regards to ‘grand narratives’, whether metaphysical or not, that provide an explanation of reality. Despite the wide difference among cultural artefacts or modes of thinking that get labelled as ‘post-modern’, the latter could be safely assumed to be almost unanimously *post-metaphysical*. That is, they question religious or scientific systems alike (e.g. Christianity and Darwinism) because they are seen as providing ready-made answers to reality and presenting the latter as truths. The very notion of a pre-established truth is questioned in most post-modern stances in favour of a situational version of truth, one that has to be constructed every step of the way. The post-metaphysical and post-modern stance has, however, thrown away the baby with the bath water: it has discarded religion without truly understanding its depth and breadth. In so doing, it has left a void. The human thirst for the sacred did not find satisfaction in the fragmentary self-reference of post-modern

culture. The longing for the sacred in all its forms gave rise to the *post-secular turn* (Braidotti, 2008; Braeckman, 2009; McLennan, 2010; Staudigl & Alvis, 2017). But what is the post-secular? And what is the post-secular condition? ‘Post-secular’ means that secularism, including secular Buddhism, having done an egregious job in questioning religious dogmas, it has itself created its own set of doctrines and, more importantly, has not responded adequately to the human thirst for the sacred. ‘Post-secular’ means we have reached a point where the rational and empirical tenets of secularism, useful at first in freeing us from the shackles of superstitious beliefs, are no longer enough, no longer satisfying. This dissatisfaction manifests itself as a new feeling of restlessness that prompts some to go back to the tenets of religion, while it encourages others to find new avenues for the sacred, for a practice of meditation that values religious teachings but re-interprets them in a new immanent form – that is, in a form that is deeply connected to the world rather than resorting to a transcendental explanation of reality.

At its most superficial level, the term post-secularism simply describes a return to religion and religious values. This is partly an understandable backlash against fundamentalist forms of secularism that in the liberal west speak of liberty but in actual fact hate otherness with a vengeance and moreover regard religious beliefs, especially those of foreigners, with suspicion and a good degree of prejudice (Riemer, 2016; Hasan, 2016) . This version of post-secularism as return to religion would also describe, more generally, search for certainties in an era of ‘post-truths’ and increasing levels of manipulation in civic life. A religious approach to meditation would in this case provide a map as well as a grand narrative that can be comforting at times of personal and societal uncertainty.

To know that one’s meditation practice is not just sitting but that it belongs to a purposeful spiritual and religious programme variously aimed at raising one’s level of consciousness,

improving oneself morally, communicating with the divine and so forth, will provide some with a rationale and a sense of direction. This point is crucial in our discussion of post-secularism and it will help redress the conventional opposition between the secular and the religious in a fundamental way.

### **Immanence and Transcendence**

From a post-secular perspective, the real antithesis is not secularism vs. religion but *immanence* vs. *transcendence* – ‘remaining within’ vs. ‘climbing over’ as the Latin etymology of the two terms suggests; either remaining within our everyday, imperfect world or climbing over it. Religion (as well as theology and spirituality in general) has long been associated with transcendence: God (or the divine, enlightened and awakened beings) has long been linked with otherworldliness, a dimension beyond the everyday, separate from the impermanent world of phenomena. This categorization (Weber, 2004) may well be a little too simplistic: it does not allow for a religious discourse uncoupled from transcendence. It also assumes that a secular worldview – at times characterized, for instance, by excessive trust in science – would be automatically free of metaphysics.

Above all, a simplistic polarization of secular vs. religious summarily excludes the existence of *immanent spirituality* – that is, of a thoroughly *mundane* (this-worldly) rather than otherworldly form of spirituality.

### **Immanence and Spiritual Transformation**

When I speak of a ‘post-secular perspective’ I have specific reference points in mind, above all the work of a philosopher of immanence par excellence: Gilles Deleuze. In re-visioning the work of Spinoza, Deleuze (1990) helped problematize the conventional opposition, enunciating in the process three fundamental levels of investigation:

(a) *Can one speak of God and of immanence in the same breath?*

Could, for instance, meditation practice embrace the secular *and* the religious, and in so doing leave aside this obsolete division? Adapting Deleuze's stance to the domain of meditation, two other questions arise:

(b) *Is spiritual or existential transformation thinkable without a transcendent dimension?*

Don't we need to imagine and believe in a divine, eternal, blissful and enlightened realm to pit against our world of delusion, impermanence and suffering? Could a merely secular understanding of meditation encourage the status quo, our complacent, self-congratulatory belief that we are fine as we are and all is well with the world? Also, could a process of transformation be ignited within an immanent dimension?

(c) *Can we speak of the new* – of a more compassionate society – without positing an otherworldly ideal? In putting forward a new, 'post-secular' understanding of meditation, our challenge is to move away from notions of temporality and of a new model of humanity. It has been and still is tempting to link the practice of meditation – particularly communal meditation – to the creation of a new society based on wisdom, compassion and so forth.

Perhaps meditation may bring the practitioner closer to a threshold where the immanent 'outside' (rather than the 'new') is perceived. It is this experience, rather than belief in an otherworldly dimension, that brings about transformation and a break with the "given form of the present" (Barber, 2014, pp. 9-10). This experience is immanent: it is *of this world* and can bring about a sense of mystery, of an outside that enriches one's experience while at the same time making one aware of the inherent limitations of subjectivity. Does immanent spirituality imply passive acceptance of the world? It does not. Transformation is possible without having to resort to transcendence. Transformation in this context occurs not solely via of transcendental representations but from a worldly concrete perception of an *outside* that

challenges and disrupts what Deleuze calls *diagram*, our “fixed set of relations that determine the world” (Barber, 2014, p. 47): our bounded self-concept or self-construct.

Common understanding also sees religion and spirituality as the chosen domains for the exploration of the unknown and the mysterious, of what remains outside computable experience. But is it enough to be satisfied with this conventional perspective? Or do we need instead to question it? This is precisely what a post-secular perspective can do.

Inherent in the secular sensibility is the rationalist belief that reality can be fully apprehended, measured and quantified. Similarly, conventional religiosity provides us a set of ready-made metaphysical remedies to the vagaries and vicissitudes of experience. To speak of immanence may then be a way of addressing more effectively a point of ambivalence, a crossroads from which an entry into a new landscape may be found.

### **Within the sensory**

When meditating, I may be focusing on the breath, on something closely linked with being alive. I attempt to stay with a simple but wondrous activity, one that is so easy to forget. My eyes are half- closed, gazing softly. I listen to my breath, just the way it is this moment. Inevitably, I get sidetracked. I accept it; I follow for a while the mind’s trajectory before deciding to go back to the breath, renewing my intent and also noticing the body posture: an act of remembrance – of the task at hand, of the facticity of living. I begin to notice more clearly thoughts, sensations, feelings and emotions. At times there is a sense of spaciousness and freedom. There are sounds all around: I try not to label them, or speculate about them. They emerge, dwell for a while, and then fade. There are sounds in the room, sounds in the street, even in the sky above and far away. When it’s really quiet, early in the morning, say, or late at night, I think I can hear the blood murmuring in my veins. I am inside a vast phenomenal world whose wide contours I can only imagine. There are sounds and subtle

movements I know nothing about – the shift in the Earth’s tectonic plates; I can read about them and know that they are pieces of the Earth’s crust, 62 miles long, made up of oceanic crust and continental crust. Their activities are imperceptible to me as I sit here, a participant in the very same place of immanence – not a being who is ‘having’ sensations but a situated being, a being within the sensory. This seemingly simple, straightforward moment in time has such richness and complexity that to call it the present moment does not do it justice in the least. I don’t know what it is, yet welcome the experience. It is sumptuous and I’m tempted to call it *chaos*. It is also rhythmic and wave-like; it has an order, a word whose ancient name was *cosmos*. It is then, to borrow Joyce’s famous coinage, a *chaosmos*. Being alive at this moment – something I usually take for granted – can be as mystifying, as wonderful and unbearable as any unresolved mystery.

The experience described above can be aligned with religion. For all intents and purposes, I have given an account of me ‘practicing Buddhist meditation’. Buddhism is, after all, a religion. So why is it that I don’t feel satisfied with the label? Because ‘religion’ normally gestured towards certainty, and the meditative experience described above is rooted in *uncertainty*. Because religion commonly deals with transcendental claims while meditation as I understand is wholly embedded within a *plateau* or plane of immanence. Unless of course one begins to accept that there can be a religion and a spirituality that appreciate the mystery of immanence. This is an example of the ‘post-secular *condition*’: not a mere revival of religion but a seismic shift that compels us to problematize our understanding of secularism and religion altogether.

### **Are we all Christians?**

I called the above shift ‘seismic’ and I cannot stress enough how a sweeping a break from the past this truly represents. A post-secular, immanentist perspective virtually suspends and

interrupts transcendental narratives. On the other hand, western secularism's historic preoccupation has always been to *preserve* and *develop* what it sees as the great theological and religious tradition. In his introduction to Rorty and Vattimo's stimulating dialogue published as *The Future of Religion*, Santiago Zabala (2004) writes:

The rebirth of religion in the third millennium is to be located in the secularization of the sacred that has been at the center of the process by which the civilization of the western world developed (p 2).

Zabala sees secularization as a suitable way to bear witness to the "attachment of modern European civilization to its own religious past", a relationship that would consist "not of surpassing and emancipation alone, but *conservation*, too" (Zabala, 2004, *ibid*, my emphasis). The context here is Europe and the religion in question is Christianity, but a similar argument can be applied to the Dharma and Buddhist meditation. Secularization then "becomes a way of inheriting and working through Christianity [which is] the very process of "western civilization's development" (Barber, 2014, p. 24). What is possibly happening here is, on the other hand, a process of *decolonization* from transcendental narratives. In the case of the western philosophical/religious tradition, this means that rather than having to expound it by bringing Christian theology to its logical conclusion one rejects transcendence at its very roots.

The implications of the above stance are momentous, particularly for western practitioners of the Dharma. A meditation practice that draws on Buddhism without *cutting through* both religious and secularist frames of reference is, strictly speaking, Christian. In this sense, Croce (2008) was right: "we cannot help calling ourselves Christians" (p. 37). The very fabric of western being, thinking and feeling is steeped in Christian transcendence, and that is true for avowed secularists as well. No matter how thorough and assiduous our meditation practice may be, it is bound to be shaped by two thousand years of Christian psychic encrustation. To move away from this frame and favour a philosophy of immanence is a

mighty task. For those of us who feel the urgency of the task, great encouragement comes from realizing that western culture has long harboured in its midst a thoroughgoing heretical counter-tradition that has consistently articulated and treasured immanence.

### **Like water in water: sketches of modern immanence**

Since antiquity, both the philosophical and the religious counter-tradition wove several threads leading to immanence. Their proponents have often been considered either ‘obscure’ (Heraclitus), or exiled and excommunicated (Spinoza), or burned at the stake (Bruno). It appears that upholding immanence over transcendence in various ways (whether as privileging becoming over being or speaking of the existence of a God within nature rather than outside of it) and suggesting that God is another name for nature are statements that far exceed both religious and secularist claims. Leaving antiquity aside, it may be useful at this juncture to cast a cursory glance at how some key twentieth century thinkers regarded immanence. At the start of *The Theory of Religion*, Bataille (1989) gives so stark an account of immanence to offset any bucolic image one might harbour. He writes of the “immanence of the eater and the eaten” (p. 17), of the animal that devours and the one who is being devoured. Fierce poetry is found in this harsh terrain: “every animal is *in the world like water in water*” (p. 19). For Bataille, this world of pure immanence is mostly closed to humans, except for those moments of tears and ecstasy, intense joy or sorrow – detours and derailments from the linear, all too neat path of logical reason. Rather than an appeal to unreason, this can be understood to be a powerful indicator of the limits of reason, of the dangers of human hubris and as an invitation to explore the wholly uncharted terrain of experience.

### **Conclusion**

To speak of immanence does not imply enclosure – least of all foreclosure of change and transformation. This is often an argument posed by transcendentalists: without the positing of a transcendent world, no spiritual transformation is possible at either a personal or societal level. We must be able to transcend this imperfect, samsaric, unjust world of blood, sweat and tears. We must be able to hold a spiritual vision, they say, in our hearts and minds. This position certainly has appeal. In some exceptional cases, the spindrift gaze towards heaven comes with formidable flights of the imagination: many a great poet endorsed it, from Dante to Milton to William Blake. Moreover, I also believe, with Levinas (2003), in the profound human need for escape. What is objectionable is not the flight *per se* but the looking down on the world from on high, its categorization as *evil*. For a transcendental thinker like Thomas Aquinas, in whose reflections Aristotle, Plato and Christianity all converged, the world is good and true not in essence, but only *indirectly*, by “analogical participation” (Barber, 2010, p. 431) in a transcendent God. The equivalent in meditation practice is to posit a wide gap between delusion and enlightenment, the world of samsara populated by ordinary sentient beings and the ‘pure land’ of the Buddhas. The person who can see the world as good and true only indirectly, as *emanation* of a transcendental and eternal reality, effectively steps aside the living stream of living-and-dying in which he or she cannot but participate and plays at being arbitrator and judge.

The world, because it has not rendered itself amenable to the truth, is evil – it must be judged by the truthful man (Deleuze, 1989, *ibid*).

The above stance is often motivated by an understandable need for consolation, and by the very real sense that the world is too much for us: “too powerful, or too unjust, but sometimes also too beautiful” (Deleuze, 1989, p. 18). But to look away, step aside from the living stream and, at times, deliberately minimize our level of experiencing is also a doorway to great mental distress (Goldstein, 1995) and incongruence.

There is a concrete alternative to this impasse: embracing *immanent spirituality*: for instance, through a meditation practice that rather than averting its gaze from the unbearable suffering and excruciating beauty of the world and seeking inspiration in a transcendent realm, intensifies instead our inherent connection to the world. True, the world is intolerable, immeasurable, and inassimilable. Its sheer intensity gives us anguish. But in averting this intensity, we deny ourselves the possibility for healing. It is here that Dharma teachings, several other spiritual traditions and the counter-traditional philosophy of immanence find common ground.

The first noble truth taught by the historical Buddha invites us to consider deeply and take to heart the suffering that is inherent in all living things. This is what often arises when just sitting in zazen: the beauty and anguish of the world seizes us unaware and affects us deeply.

A post-secular philosophy of immanence equally invites us to go beyond facile divisions of religious vs. secular. It invites us to take an important spiritual decision whose implications are primarily *affective*. Rather than averting our gaze from the world in the name of either rationalist/secular explanations or metaphysical/transcendental justifications, it dares us to deepen our affective involvement with immanent reality.

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