

# Mindfulness and the ‘Good Life’

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Dedicated to Mark Payne (1950-2013)

*How will it be  
told this evidence, our life, all the clues missing?*  
(Jorie Graham)

## Introducing Embodied Dharma Practice

There are forty things worth remembering, the Buddha says in his *Discourse on the Foundation of Mindfulness* (Thera, 2010). Top of the list are the certainty of death and the uncertainty of the time of its occurrence. What is worth remembering is that this mysterious, dazzling and tumultuous life – this life we fear and cherish – blooms right into the arms of death. Similarly, the great Tibetan poet and scholar Gendun Chöpel tells us that “the wealth of the world is mist on the mountain pass”. Our closest friends are but “guests on market day”; our “uncertain joys and sorrows” akin to “last night’s dream” (Chöpel, 2009, p. 73).

Dharma practitioners of all persuasions call this state of affairs ‘impermanence’. Mindfulness is first and foremost *mindfulness of impermanence*. It is tempting to liken this awareness to a melancholy insight, a sentiment, a *mood* even – but that would be inaccurate. Instead, we are asked to acquire a simple yet profound sensibility, and to allow this sensibility to affect us to the core. What we then may come to perceive in the heart of life is the delicate and pitiless work of death. We notice flux and transformation; we feel the very

current of ‘living-and-dying’ (*shōji* – one word in the Zen tradition, not two, denoting two sides of the same coin).

This unflinching gaze on the essentially tragic nature of human existence singles out Dharma teachings from the glistening platitudes of the *New Age*, from the otherworldly ambience of various ‘transpersonal’ approaches to psychology and spirituality, and from the remedial array of positivist techniques now in vogue. Often confused with one or all of the above, what I call *Embodied Dharma Practice* steers an altogether different course: it is a path away from consolation and towards a deeper appreciation of life.

### **Walking on Hell, Gazing at Flowers**

If the teachings of the Buddha were only a *memento mori*, solely indicating our finitude, there would be perhaps no difference between Embodied Dharma Practice and the Judaeo-Christian tradition (at least not in the way in which the latter has been assimilated in mainstream western culture). There would be no need, as Jung rather melodramatically complained (Jung, 1929), to be “misled by the devil” by going in search of “Eastern occultism and ... yoga practices” and losing oneself “in a mist of words and ideas that could never have originated in European brains” (p. 3). We would be much better off rediscovering our western tradition without ever bothering to venture east.

However, the teachings of the Buddha cannot be confused with ‘Eastern occultism’ (or even with western ‘spirituality’) because they invite us to step beyond the sad realization of life’s transience. This invitation is neatly summed up by the eighteenth century haiku poet Issa:

Never forget:  
We walk on hell,  
Gazing at flowers.

The first two lines of this haiku go over the familiar pious ground: life is suffering; ‘hell’ is all too real. The third line comes as a surprise: it throws open the gates of ‘heaven’— it does not lead us to all things pristine and everlasting, into a portentous afterlife *à la* Terence Malick (Malick, 2001) but invites us instead to a sharper perception of phenomena. It invites us to the *thusness* of things, to life as it is – as it unfolds. As it *becomes*.

### **Ordained to Praise**

I went out early this morning. It was sunny at last after many days of rain. The florist at the corner was sweeping the ground outside his kiosk. The waitress from the Cafe across the street stepped out to greet him loudly and cheerfully. He responded heartily and then resumed sweeping. I felt a surge of joy, unexpectedly moved by this average yet incomparable morning. Then joy turned to sadness. I thought of my friend Mark, who died only two weeks ago, whose funeral I attended last week, and who did not wake up to this new morning.

In the midst of life, rolling on towards death, there *are* flowers; there *is* beauty. Wayward and tentative our steps may be – our youth fleeting, our life full of mirages. By becoming an old man I may be nothing more than “a paltry thing, a tattered coat on a stick” (Yeats, 1991, p. 239). Still this evanescent world calls for our praise.

Maybe we are here to speak, to give a name to things and praise them. Like the poet, the Dharma apprentice is *ordained to praise* this ephemeral world. She is exhorted to go past the all-too-familiar resentment which is our common rejoinder to the uncertainty of life. Some have argued that therapy and religion are born out of this basic resentment. If so, one is then obliged to ask: what would a religious practice or a therapeutic orientation be like that is *not* founded on resentment? Issa’s “gazing at flowers” provides us with more than a hint: exposed

to the ever-present reality of death in the midst of life, he asks us to sing the praises of this transient and often deeply unjust world.

‘Praise’ does not necessarily mean positive thinking or positive psychology — least of all contractual or guilt-ridden obligation to gratefulness. It denotes instead contemplation and appreciation of the mystery of things and the articulation of one’s own unique response to that realization.

### **Of the Dharma as Affirmative Art**

I believe the above stance to be at variance with religions’ customary displeasure with the world, a world depicted as *samsāra* in orthodox Buddhism and *valley of tears* in Christianity. One does find in Christianity, alongside strictly devout leanings, a lyrical and passionate acceptance of the humble and sublime pleasures of earthly living. The ardent Yea-saying of John Donne’s poetry and the exaltation of earthly love in Dante (to name only two illustrious examples) are more or less easily found alongside, for instance, George Herbert’s more pious raptures. Could it be that, still in its infancy, western Buddhism has yet to reach the ripeness required for a spirited, life-affirming stance?

The Dharma practitioner gazes at the flowers. She does not berate the world for its transience and imperfection. At the same time, she does not forget that we all walk on hell: this very ground we leisurely stroll on is the roof of the underworld, a chthonic soil peopled by innumerable dead. ‘Walking mindfully’ then cannot but mean walking on the frayed bones and the scattered ashes of those who came before us. It is only a matter of time until we will join them. We need to travel – or so it seems – through the horror and the sadness of this realization, in order to find the inspiration for a meaningful existence.

Cultivation of mindfulness then implies a dynamic recollection of a “naked truth, terrifying to behold” (Chöpel, 2009, p. 47). This can work as antidote to my own penchant for self-

gratification and self-pity. These are often the trademarks of the unexamined life as a spectator in search of diversions – someone who like myself is very keen to learn by rote the vocabulary of psychology and mindfulness.

*Never forget*, Issa says: countless Buddhas across the ages invite us to remember what is worth remembering. If Dharma practice were an art (a craft), it could not be *narcotic* art, a Wagnerian call to deep slumber in the service of the nirvana principle (Freud, 1990) or indeed of the death instinct, i.e. of the wish to numb our experience in order to expunge pain (obliterating our humanity in the process). It would have to be *affirmative* art (Bazzano, 2006), part of a broad *culture of awakening* (Batchelor, 1995), encouraging us to take that primary vital step of conscious resolve – a step which may turn our passivity with regards to an inescapable *fate* into active acceptance of our pliable *destiny* (Bollas, 1987).

### **Sex, Drugs, and the Human Soul**

My client Jim is a keen meditator and a yoga practitioner who regularly attends intensive retreats. He came to therapy because he wanted to get his life “sorted out”, as he said on our very first meeting. His successful career as a free-lance designer allowed him the freedom to be creative and gained him the respect of his clients and colleagues. He is in his mid-thirties, and married an old friend from his University days.

His reason for coming to therapy was that he had felt his commitment to married life dwindle. He missed his former life of parties and brief romances, and a couple of times since his marriage, two and a half years ago, he had what he called ‘a fling’. These episodes were accompanied by what he described as his ‘old habits’: drinking coffee and alcohol, and occasionally smoking marijuana. Although the amount he drank and smoked was small, he felt this was a problem because it ushered in what he called the ‘wild guy’. He was also concerned that the ‘wild guy’ was fighting a battle with the ‘good guy’ in him. The latter

would come to the fore during periods of meditation and yoga. He found it hard to meditate and do yoga regularly, but tended to go through intensive bouts which he described as “cleansing”. At these times his body felt stronger, his mind clearer, and he would then renew his objective to be faithful to his wife, especially in view of the fact that they were planning to have children, given that, as his wife had said to him, “the clock was ticking”. The desire to have children was more hers than his, though he felt he went along with it in the hope that becoming a father would help him acquire greater stability.

My own familiarity with meditation had been a deciding factor in him seeking me out. He expressed the hope that therapy would help tighten his “control over unruly behaviour” which meditation and yoga had intermittently initiated. He also anticipated that I could give him advice in terms of meditation techniques. I wanted to honour his aspirations yet felt ambivalent, and told him so. As a therapist, I see my task as separate from that of a meditation facilitator. If someone comes to me for therapy, I respond as a therapist and refrain from being caught up in a dual role. The very notion of a ‘Buddhist therapist’ or even a ‘mindfulness therapist’ strikes me as odd. My aspiration is to be present and receptive enough to the therapeutic encounter to allow a meditative quality to be there unaided (and even undetected) for the benefit of the client. Were I to do anything more, it would strike me as prescriptive and even patronising, as a dramatic shift from the delicate responsibility as therapist to the role of ‘secular priest’ and ‘spiritual advisor’.

For these reasons, I did not feel compelled to interfere with Jim’s meditation practice (although we did compare notes on a couple of occasions). Instead, I focused on exploring his dilemma with him. I also wanted somehow to honour, in spite of my perplexity in the matter, his aspiration to live a “good life”, as he put it, and to become more of a “good guy”.

The mutual affection with his wife had taken on brother-sister characteristics. He felt that his relationship with her lacked the intensity and freedom he had experienced during the last

of his flings – in his own words “a very passionate, meaningful event ... [which] opened me up to a parallel world ... it made me feel truly alive”. At the same time, he had somehow compartmentalized the experience and was not entirely comfortable exploring its fuller meaning for fear that it would “spill over” into his everyday existence and disrupt it. I discussed with my supervisor whether Jim’s behaviour could be seen as compulsive and its possible roots traceable in earlier narcissistic damage. Was he consciously or unconsciously choosing to anaesthetise the resulting pain? Jim and I tried to explore in more details the two facets of his life. If anything, his ‘wild guy’ persona seemed to be endowed with a little more ‘soul’, human vulnerability and genuineness than the ‘good guy’ could ever muster. The latter seemed to be strangely contrived and partly governed by a strong need for security and emotional stability. We traced this back to his parents’ separation during early adolescence, a time of upheaval and uncertainty.

It emerged that both the ‘wild guy’ and the ‘good guy’ were dominant players in Jim’s life, yet strangely failing to put him in touch with himself. The challenge was for me to hold up both aspects without implying, suggesting, or moving ahead of his own process. The positive outcome was that to a certain extent he managed to do the same – holding both aspects – rather than trying to eradicate one and bolster the other. He also began to see meditation as *being with* the dilemma rather than using it as a prescriptive tool in the service of a pre-existing agenda.

I choose this brief outline of my work with Jim because exemplary of clients who practice meditation as a way of exerting control over their emotions and affects in the pursuit of the ‘good life’. The depth and breadth of questions raised is beyond the scope of this chapter, but I will outline some of the implications of this search for the good life in relation to mindfulness and meditation.

## **Mindfulness and ‘the Good Life’**

There are two ways of understanding *eudaimonia*, the good life, in the western tradition. One, going back to Aristotle, interprets it as ‘the virtuous life’, clearly demarcating virtue from vice, a good deed from a bad one. A good life or a happy life (*eudaimonia* is often translated as ‘happiness’) is a virtuous life. An aberrant yet not entirely incongruous development of this perspective is the contemporary belief in ‘bio-morality’ (Zupancic, 2012; Bazzano, 2013c). What is bio-morality? Let me answer with the following example.

When still a trainee psychotherapist, I worked for a year as a volunteer in the Renal Unit of a major London hospital and also did a brief stint in Palliative Care. I remember it to this day as one of the most challenging jobs I’ve ever done. The greatest difficulty was not dealing with my general sense of inadequacy in the face of great distress, but the patients’ deeply-held belief that their plight was due to having done something wrong. I can still hear my placement supervisor’s mantra: “Bad things can happen to good people”.

It is likewise common, in my experience, for people diagnosed with cancer to react with guilt and shame and for their acquaintances and loved ones to link illness to various degree of wrongdoing – if not bad karma, at least bad diet. Thus the ‘virtuous life’ is held up to a dutiful ideal – with deleterious results. Bio-morality means attributing physical illness and mental distress to moral shortcomings.

The other way to understand *eudaimonia* is to remember the *daimon* in *eudaimonia* – to listen to one’s *daimon* (often confused with ‘demon’, in itself an intriguing Christian mis-translation). The presence of the *daimon* in psychic life goes back to the pre-Socratics and to the Greek tragedians and it is famously mentioned by Socrates, whose wisdom is guided by the ‘inner’ voice of his own *daimon*. From the notion of the *daimon*, Rollo May (1969), echoed more recently by some contemporary practitioners (Spinelli, 2007; Bazzano, 2011

among others) has developed the hypothesis of the *daimonic*, which he describes as “any natural function which has the power to take over the whole person” (May 1969, p 123). Incidentally, May’s description of the daimonic as an “*archetypal* function of human experience – an *existential* reality” (Ibid, my emphasis) cuts through the old Platonic (and Jungian) division between archetypes and existence. For May, being *possessed* by daimonic energies leads one to psychosis; *chastising* them, however leads one to the anti-daimonic, which for him is another word for *apathy*, or absence of pathos. Could a reductive use of mindfulness do just that?

I studied Eastern thought and practiced meditation for the last thirty three years, all the while cherishing the belief that the Buddha’s teachings do not denigrate, but *affirm* life. I have acquired a habit along the way of applying a ‘life-denigrating detector’ to any philosophy, psychology and religious practice I happen to stumble upon. The inspiration is Nietzsche, who was in turn inspired by Heraclitus. They both belong to an unbroken tradition – which I call, borrowing from Madison (1981), ‘the counter-tradition’ – which submits any system of thought or philosophical practice to a few salient questions: Does it affirm life in all its imperfection, complexity and contradiction? Or does it look down on it, averting its gaze and directing it towards a metaphysical ideal? Does it affirm *becoming*, or does it privilege *being*? Does it affirm experience, inviting us to learn from its unfolding? Or does it postulate instead the existence of doctrines to which experience is subjugated? Does it *embrace* the humble joys and sorrows of ordinary, embodied human beings? Or does it disdain them as imperfect, sinful, and (a favourite word in mindfulness literature) ‘unwholesome’?

The question of life-affirmation vs. life denigration is central to mindfulness, a practice which (openly or covertly) amply draws on Buddhism. Is mindfulness life-affirming or life-

denying? In contemporary Buddhist discourse, the question does come into view but disguised somewhat, as a more apparent conflict between religious and secular Buddhism.

### **Mundane Buddhism**

Secular Buddhism is not *worldly* enough. It still erects a fence between ‘spiritual’ practice and the world. The very origin of the term ‘secular’ (from *saeculum*: century) is Christian Latin, pertaining to time *in relation to* eternity, belonging to the world *in relation to* the church and religious orders, as in the term ‘secular clergy’.

The term *mundane* goes one step further, meaning earthly, worldly, with no relation to the religious life and in some languages the word is used to describe ‘disreputable’ professions such as prostitution (*mondana* describes a sex worker in Italian) or ‘trivial’ pursuits such as fashion and ‘society life’ (*vita mundana* in Italian).

There is also another important association to the word ‘mundane’, one that is linked to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1964; Moreira, 2012), which emphasizes the concrete, *situated* experiences of human beings in history. For Merleau-Ponty, a *mundane perspective* of human experience is intrinsically *ambiguous*, originating at the intersection of the human being and the world, taking into account the cultural, historical and biological aspects of lived life, which together constitute “the multiple outlines of an ambiguous human development, constantly in movement” (Moreira, 2012, p. 56).

A secular approach to religious practice still preserves the whiff of the cloister. It frees the practitioner from transcendence but still keeps her tied to Judaeo-Christian morality. A secular clergy will fashion itself (more or less explicitly) as morally superior to the flock. Whereas a religious Buddhist teacher will underline a vague spiritual dimension, implying perhaps his greater intimacy with the deities or more direct experience of enlightenment, the

secular Buddhist teacher might emphasize freedom from ruminations, passions, and troublesome emotions. Both essentially chastise the contradictions and imperfections of the human condition.

I believe there are more avenues of exploration within a secular frame. My assertion has to do more with temperament and personal taste than with a belief that secularism holds a greater claim to truth. At the same time, when one scratches the surface of Protestantism (the most comprehensive and successful attempt at secularization within a major religion), one finds perhaps an even greater denigration of human imperfection in the name of an even sterner and prescriptive morality.

Until now, Buddhism in the West has been predominantly assimilated and interpreted within (North-American and North-European) Protestant sensibilities. There are versions of the Dharma being assimilated via a Southern, Catholic mentality. I am only familiar, via my short forays into Tibetan Buddhism in my early twenties, with a distinctly Catholic assimilation of a rather baroque range of deities and intricate doctrinal beliefs (karma, reincarnation etc). I am inclined to think with James Hillman (1992) that there might be more to the 'North-South' divide than doctrinal and theological differences. Southern sensibility is polytheistic, which in psychological terms may translate into an appreciation of the plural nature of psyche. The South of Europe is Greek long before being Catholic. And there is more to the ancient Greeks than Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle. Long before Greek philosophy 'proper' and the establishment of its avowed unified aim, ie *ataraxia* or imperturbability, we find the great poets/philosophers and the great tragedians inspired by Dionysus, a god symbolizing the ungraspable, the boundlessness of water, the flux of life, inexhaustible and fragmented. Finally, as strangely as it may sound to some, Dionysus is a god of *wisdom*. Euripides speaks of the wisdom of Dionysus from which philosophy itself stems. According to this interpretation, philosophy itself is born out of 'madness', excess and chaos – from the

full range of human life rather than from a rational and tranquil recollection of its vicissitudes.

### **An Appreciation of Life**

I still believe that an active acceptance of the human condition runs through the Buddhist tradition. Taizan Maezumi (2001) often described the essence of Zen practice as appreciating one's life, in turn a shrewd rendering of Dōgen Zenji's 'practice/realization' being one and the same. In other words: we do not practice in order to attain realization. We practice for no reason, with no particular goal in mind. Borrowing the term from the great Latin poet Virgil (2013), who used it in relation to the craft of poetry, I call meditation an *inglorious* activity (Bazzano, 2013a).

What often happens through sustained and sincere practice, uncluttered by religious Buddhist baggage and/or secular remedial agendas, is a profound appreciation of life's givens, and the realization that life's *givens* are life's *gifts* (Bazzano, 2012).

Appreciation is not passive acceptance of the status quo. It is not complacency. There is always room for improvement, for gaining greater freedom from hindrances, compulsions and obfuscations – for understanding that these are often self-created. It is more helpful, however, if this is done from a stance of self-compassion rather than self-punishment. To reduce Dharma practice to self-improvement is to shrink its scope to one of its possible 'side-effects'. Appreciating one's life means starting from a compassionate, ironic and active acceptance of self and others. This is not 'Buddhist resignation' but acknowledgement of the contradictions inherent in being human. The opposite stance is one of disdain, of looking down at our all too-human existence in the name of transcendental and religious ideals *or* in the name of equally lofty secular ideals. In this regard, both religious and secular Buddhism agree, even though they speak a different language.

Religious Buddhism will often juxtapose a samsaric world of greed, ignorance and hatred to a nirvanic pure land, a static realm or an equally static ‘enlightened’ mental plateau.

Secular Buddhism will repeat the ‘English mistake’ attributed by Nietzsche to George Eliot: doing away with religious paraphernalia yet obligingly preserve its life-denying moral apparatus. It might well be that the way out of this impasse is for Buddhist practitioners to learn the lessons of contemporary ethics, which are alert to the need for a non-metaphysical, situational and essentially radical response to otherness.

In both religious and secular Buddhism, the human condition is subjected to subtle or not so subtle condemnation. Religious Buddhism will have you prostrate in front of an altar. Secular Buddhism will send you on an eight-week stress-reduction programme. One will have you accumulate merit in a make-believe karmic bank account in view of more favourable incarnations in the future. The other will encourage you to give up powerful emotions and set the goal of tranquillity, leaving your very humanity at the door before entering the newly sterilized temple of ‘mindful living’.

### **Bad Life**

The resolve (the unexplained and compelling decision) to enter the stream, to bathe in the river of living-and-dying, to accept its inescapable route to the ocean thrusts me beyond the artificial confines of a self-bound existence lived on the riverbank. The resolution is inexorably linked to and echoed by the wide world. It is a decisive act: I decide that I want to remember. I decide to not forget. I take to heart the exhortation ‘never forget’.

‘Never forget!’ – with added exclamation mark – is of course Auschwitz’s powerful memento, running parallel, if we allow for Adorno’s (2005) sombre insight, with the impossibility of poetry after the Nazi camps but also, one is compelled to add, after Amritsar,

after Sabra and Shatila, after the Armenian genocide – the list could go on. This wider (unorthodox, yet necessary) remembrance (mindfulness) travels way beyond the narcissism of personal liberation, the self-absorbing dream of individual psychological integration. This is because the notion of a ‘good life’ surrounded by ‘bad life’ is futile (Butler, 2012).

### **In Praise of Reverie**

Alongside our emotions, feelings and the rich and chaotic array comprising of what Marcel Proust called *upheavals of thought* (Proust, 1982), another aspect of human experience chastised by a reductive understanding of mindfulness is the natural human tendency for reverie.

To cultivate the mind of awakening through everyday meditative practice – both on and off the cushion – is of course a *conscious* resolve, in itself remarkable if one takes into account our tendency to shelter from too much reality. Nonetheless, excessive reliance on the conscious mind is at variance with an embodied dharma practice and more attuned to the Promethean craving of the self to appropriate an organismic field of experience. This is also the stance of positivist psychology, currently dominant and leaning towards “hypertrophied consciousness” (Bollas 2007, p. 81).

What unfolds in Dharma practice is beyond the reach of the conscious mind. Conscious resolve is needed in order to summon up the aspiration to practice the Buddhadharmā. If this were all, however, it would betray a narrowly-conceived subjectivism and a naive reliance on ‘willpower’. Questioning the powers of the conscious mind does not mean advocating a mystical dissolution of the mind. Either position, Dōgen tells us, is a copout. For Dōgen (2002) even the nature of the resolve, of what he calls the ‘thought of awakening’ (*bodaishin*), is unfathomable:

[*Bodaishin*] does not exist independently or rise suddenly now in a vacuum. It is neither one nor many, neither spontaneous nor accomplished. [This mind] is not all-pervasive throughout the entire world ... Despite all this, the arising of the thought of enlightenment occurs where cosmic resonance presents itself. It is neither furnished by the Buddhas and the bodhisattvas, nor is it one's own effort. Because the thought of enlightenment is awakened through cosmic resonance, it is not natural" (Kim, 1975, p. 156)

The will of the conscious mind may *ignite* a process whose essential components are embedded in personal and social conditions and augmented by infinite resonance. All of the above are ingenious conceptual efforts on Dōgen's part pointing to the indefinable and ambivalent nature of *thusness*.

Dharma practice (and Dharma *education*) invites us to be a 'person of thusness' (*immonin*), one of Dōgen's favourite phrases. The journey of the person of thusness begins and ends in ambivalence, residing, after all negations have been uttered, in what Dōgen calls *kannō dōkō* or "endless reverberation" (Hisamatsu, 1971, p. 9). Dharma practice is not only subtle; it is, according to Dōgen, *imperceptible* (Kim, 1975). The 'work' goes on undetected by conscious mind.

The above will sound familiar to psychotherapists who, counter to the *Zeitgeist's* "embarrassing romancing of consciousness" (Bollas, 2007, p. 81) and its demands for "evisceration of the work with unconscious experience" (Ibid), are not prepared to readily accept the current dismissal of the unconscious. The popularity currently enjoyed by 'mindfulness meditation' and the way in which it is applied to mental health settings might be due to the Promethean emphasis, in our day and age (Rose & Rose, 2013), on the powers of the conscious mind and the reluctance to accept what Joyce McDougall (1998), echoing Freud, calls the *unknowable*.

This dominant cultural bias is perhaps reflected in the way in which Dharma teachings are currently apprehended: favouring *manifest* over *latent* states of consciousness, and relegating the latter to the purgatorial locus of obstructions (*āvaraṇa* in Sanskrit), afflictions (*kleśa*) and imprints (*vāsanā* or, in the language of western psychology, phylogenetic and trans-generational inheritance). This is in many ways parallel to the predominant reading of the unconscious as *Id* in contemporary psychology culture and the concomitant bypassing of its latent creative and healing possibilities. A worrying tendency, arguably gaining ascendancy at present in the field of mental health, would all too happily relegate the unconscious to the museum of outmoded curiosities in the name of ‘progress’.

### **Flowers of Space**

This brings us to another significant point, examined with great subtlety by Dōgen. It concerns the imaginings, daydreaming, associations, thoughts and feelings – the strange unending procession of dappled things, of things counter, original, spare and strange emerging in the mind-screen of the meditator. In Dōgen’s thirteenth century Japan these were deemed, disparagingly, as *kuge*, ‘flowers in the sky’—fickle diversions from the meditator’s serious task. This type of evaluation is comparable perhaps to how mindfulness writers are fond of chastising “ruminations” (Martin & Tesser, 1996; Bishop et al, 2004), said to be playing “a central role in exacerbating negative affect” (Bishop et al, 2004, p. 236), with the latter usually described as clinging to the past and pining for or worrying about the future. Typically, this is followed in mindfulness literature by exhortations to calm the mind and dwell in the ‘here and now’.

Yet the imperative to quieten the mind through the use of a meditative technique may be also seen as a rather despotic attempt to silence *psyche*, instead of being more humbly receptive to its assorted manifestations. I would like to suggest that this injunction violates

the first Buddhist precept: refraining from taking life. It could be argued that the suppression of any emergent phenomenon equally violates the precept. Suppressing what spontaneously arises is different from embracing, experiencing fully and *then* letting go. Left to their own devices, emergent phenomena vanish in the same spacious atmosphere in which they came into view.

Too single-minded an emphasis on the powers of the conscious mind fails to appreciate the subtlety and complexities of human experience. In his discourse ‘This mind itself is Buddha’ (*Sokushin-zebutsu*), Dōgen gave a new twist to the meaning of ‘flowers in the sky’: he retranslated *kuge* as ‘flowers of space’, phenomena to be embraced and appreciated by the mind’s thusness (*shinshō*), instead of being hurriedly and nervously rejected as distractions in a practice erroneously identified with quietism. It would be naive, Dōgen says, to identify Buddha solely with the discriminating activities of the mind.

### **The Unconscious Revisited**

What begins to emerge and gain momentum from various sources (Schoore, 2012; Schoore & Schoore, 2007; Ryan, 2007; Bollas, 2007; Panksepp, 2007) is that no successful therapy can take place without a subtle level of unconscious communication between client and therapist. The language in which this is expressed varies according to the theoretical orientation. Some will speak of right brain to right brain communication, essential in accessing psychic regions obfuscated by trauma. Others will report on the depth of relating and healing which can take place in moments of unbiased, uncluttered expression. Others still may emphasize the felt sense and the quality of presence, the shared humanity and vulnerability opening new vistas in the therapeutic landscape. Like fingers pointing to the proverbial moon, these reports testify of an unfathomable component playing a crucial role in therapeutic work.

One must resist, however, the urge to brand these dimensions as ‘spiritual’ or ‘transpersonal’, for these translations are too literal and close to hijacking an experience that remains – if one cares about intellectual integrity – *unfathomable*. To locate them within the unconscious seems less of a copout, provided the term is not reified, ie not understood as a ‘thing’ – retrieved from the mechanistic clutches of orthodox psychoanalysis and realigned with more inspired evocations.

To maintain the notion of an unconscious is a necessary downsizing of the self’s labour-intensive claims for exclusive sovereignty over the vast domain of experience and the different layers of inter-psyche and intra-psyche processes. Conversely, to maintain and reinforce the conscious mind is forfeiting psyche in favour of a limited self-construct – essentially an act of *hubris*.

### **Imperceptible Mutual Assistance**

Meditation is a communal act. When sitting together in *zazen*, Dōgen says, an astonishing thing takes place, unaided and undetected. He calls it *imperceptible mutual assistance* (Kim, 1975). Nothing is said, little is perceived by the conscious mind. Nonetheless this subtle process takes a life of its own. Provisionally united by a common yet paradoxical (ie not goal-oriented) aspiration, we help each other by sitting together in silence.

Often, during an intensive silent meditation retreat, participants feel that a subtle communication is being established. As days unfold, I may feel as if I am strangely getting to know someone intimately, even though not a single word has been exchanged between us. Then, on the last day, with the silence broken, speaking to those very same people over breakfast, I may find that the image I had built of them is contradicted, at times considerably so. Typically, I find myself thinking: ‘The image of this person assembled in my own mind

was a mere assortment of erroneous impressions, projections, and biases. *This* man or woman sitting opposite me and speaking to me right now is surely the *real* person’.

The above conclusion sounds true enough, yet nowadays I feel less certain as I realize that several things are going on at the same time in perception and communication. The majority of these are not registered by the conscious mind. It would seem that more subtle, unconscious communication takes place unheeded.

### **Mindfulness and double-entry book-keeping**

To conceive of *individual* liberation (or at least of greater freedom from distress) within a socio-political context that is far from liberated only reinforces the notion of the individual as an isolated body-mind unit. It confirms a misleading notion of meditation practice as personal salvation. What is more, by attempting to sever the indissoluble link between individual and societal malaise, it corroborates the view of contemplative practices as opiates, as ways to divert one’s attention from historical and political contingencies in order to pursue a path of private deliverance. It also de-contextualizes meditation: for centuries Buddhist meditation has been practised *communally*, embedded as it was in a cultural and religious milieu.

I am not advocating the preservation of the cultural and ritualistic trappings inevitably inhabited by the Dharma in its nomadic journeying through centuries and continents, but instead defending the quintessentially *collective* aspect of meditation practice. A *private* and *technical* conception of Dharma practice reflects the notion of a privatized religion which, alongside double-entry book-keeping, heralded the birth of capitalism and the Protestant worldview.

### **McMindfulness**

I sympathize with the optimism and ambitious claims of much contemporary neuroscience and of similar positivist perspectives, to which mindfulness belongs. Purpose and enthusiasm drive science forward; yet the implicit or explicit message often following positivist assertions is that it will be only a matter of time until the complexities of the psyche will be unravelled and the dilemmas of the human condition explained and resolved. I was schooled in the wary pessimism of the European philosophical tradition – as well as in the paradoxical teachings of Zen – which perhaps goes to explain why in my less generous moments I perceive the mindfulness phenomenon as the cultural artefact of American naiveté and American bravado – as a very American take on the Dharma. Some writers (Purser & Loy, 2013) have similarly referred to “McMindfulness”, offering “a universal panacea for resolving almost every area of daily concern”

At the heart of the European philosophical tradition are the hermeneutics of suspicion and the cultivation of perplexity. This point is hardly new or particularly shattering: Nietzsche questioned the supposedly noble claims of conventional morality, Marx critiqued the inbuilt iniquity of the social order, and Freud unveiled the complexities and dark corners of psyche. It took centuries of philosophical and historical tussle and strife to reach the flowering of ingenious doubt presented by these three great thinkers. Encompassed within the hermeneutics of suspicion are major developments of thought across many centuries, a vast canon of reference which continues to grow and ramify. Embedded within the European canon are metaphysics as well as a *critique* of metaphysics. An articulate critical assessment of metaphysics can only take place when elaborated systems of metaphysics have been developed. Hence Greek culture gave us Plato *and* Heraclitus, Aristotle *and* Pyrrho. For every architect of metaphysics, an equally ingenious dismantler of certainty came along. There is a Kierkegaard for every Hegel, an Adorno for every Heidegger and so forth. What’s more, each extensive system of thought has its own inbuilt demise: this is one of the

meanings of Jacques Derrida's *deconstruction* (Derrida, 1974, 1978). It would be a naive philosophy indeed that unquestionably believed in its own solidity and consistency.

I am not for a moment claiming that Europe is the privileged locus of such way of philosophizing. The very notion of 'Europe' is spurious: not only Europe has deep roots in the East and the Middle East (Said, 1979), but the flowering of European culture is itself the product of exiles (Adorno, 2005; Bazzano, 2006, 2012a), rather than the straightforward expression of an imaginary European identity. Moreover, much of European thought has been revitalized over the last few decades in America whilst arguably stagnating and fossilizing in European academia. A question some writers ask (Hartman, 1982; Vendler, 1988) is whether a restricted canon may engender narrow-minded views. They ask whether being disconnected from the distant past or, as Wallace Stevens says, (Vendler, 1988) not having within one's field of vision the vivid and mysterious sight of a Grecian urn might result in holding a strange mix of arrogance and naiveté.

Which is a rather roundabout way of asking: is Mindfulness in its current manifestation an American phenomenon? And what would happen if it were more fully impacted by the best European counter-tradition?

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