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### This very body, the Buddha

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## This very body, the Buddha

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Dharma practice, a way of being in the world, is at present being selectively employed as *mindfulness* within the helping professions as a set of skills with the aim of controlling the unruly nature of the affects, the chaos engendered by difficult emotions and the “passions”, including sexual desire. This approach strengthens the self and its faculties of cognition, representation and volition without significantly questioning or deconstructing its nature. Embodied Dharma practice is presented here as a cultivation of a way of being that promotes disorientation and perplexity in the face of the vastness and ambivalence of the world and one that does not shun sexuality which, for phenomenology, is the very realization of embodied existence.

**Keywords:** sex; mindfulness; desire; embodiment; Dharma; affects

### Passion and com-passion

A little-known story in the Zen tradition tells of an old woman in China who had supported a monk for several years by building a little hut for him and providing him with food while he was absorbed in deep mindfulness. Wanting to find out about his progress, she sought the help of a girl who, the story tells us, was “rich in desire”. “Go to him – she told her – hug him and kiss him passionately, and then ask him ‘What now?’” The girl went to see the monk and without hesitation started to caress him and kiss him. Then suddenly asked: “So, what are you going to do about it?” The monk breathed mindfully before replying, rather poetically: “An old tree grows on a cold rock in winter. Nowhere is there any warmth.” The girl came back and told her what had happened. The old woman was very angry. “I have supported him for many years! He showed no consideration for your need. He didn’t have to respond to your passion, but he could have at least showed some compassion!” Then she went to the monk’s hut and burned it down (Reps, 1985).

Denying sexual passion, the story seems to imply, is a juvenile approach to the Dharma,<sup>1</sup> mistaking indifference for equanimity and apathy for serenity and forgetting that com-passion is rooted in passion.

A little statue adorns our mantelpiece at home: the Buddha Manjushri, embodiment of wisdom, sits on a mythical beast with fierce eyes and hideous fangs. The dragon looks very much alive and dangerous yet is happy to provide a support. The Buddha does not bother slaying the dragon. Instead, he sits on it.

### Embodiment

I have practiced the Dharma for 32 years, mainly within the Soto and Rinzai schools of Japanese Zen but also inspired by Korean Zen and recent developments in what is known

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as “secular Buddhism” (Batchelor, 2010), I would say that the very personal impact the teachings of the Buddha have had on me so far is threefold: they educated me in the arts of *embodiment*, *disorientation* and *interdependence*. Of the three, embodiment is directly linked to sexuality and will therefore be discussed here.

The heart of Zen practice is *zazen*, or sitting meditation. From its inception, the Zen tradition egregiously synthesized the teachings of the Madhyamika (Hopkins, 1996) – a Dharma “school” of radical scepticism, whose main proponent was the Indian sage Nagarjuna – and Taoism. Rather than a system of beliefs or a set of ethical prescriptions based on Buddhist scriptures, Zen presents a paradoxical perspective emphasizing direct experience, a fiery commitment to a somatic practice and the cultivation of inquiry and active perplexity. Unlike several other Buddhist traditions, Zen practice (as I understand it) emphasizes *immanence*, that is, a profound appreciation of the world and its imperfect, impermanent nature – including the contradictions and struggles inherent in the human condition. It does not presuppose another, more perfect world or another, more “integrated” human being. Naturally, there are dangers within this “immanentist” perspective, namely “ignoring the vast difference between awakening and our current state of delusion” (Batchelor, as cited in Bazzano, 2006, p. 92). At the same time, if we raise awakening or even only “greater integration” to a nearly impossible achievement placed in the future, we risk devaluing human existence altogether (p. 92).

The very first thing I learned through practicing *zazen* was how to inhabit this body. It took a while to realize how strangely absent from my body I had been. By practising *zazen* regularly, I became progressively aware of my body, slowly starting to live in it. It then took a few more years to *be* this body. From inhabiting to being a body: through regular practice, I became more embodied. In Zen the sitting posture is the beginning *and* the end of practice. The highest form of practice is *shikantaza*, a Japanese word which means “just sitting”. Nothing else is needed, just sitting. Through *zazen*, embodiment becomes real. But what is *embodiment*? Also a key notion in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology (1963, 1964a, 1964b, 1968, 2002), it derives from incarnation (becoming flesh), a notion that Merleau-Ponty developed from Gabriel Marcel’s (2007) writings on *incarnate personality* and the inseparability of existence, consciousness of self as existing and the consciousness of self as bound to a body, as *incarnate*.

As a Christian, Marcel’s inspiration was the embodied Christ, the paradox of a god becoming flesh. An embodied Christ is of course *sexual*, and in less puritanical times than our own, such as the Renaissance, artists have rendered depictions of the Christ’s genitalia, none of them gratuitous or sensationalistic but appreciative of Christ’s humanity, of “God [becoming] an *entire* man, and therefore a sexual being; his sex, like his dependence on his mother’s breast, is a pledge of that full humanity” (Kermode, 2001, p. 169). Paintings by Ludwig Krug (1520) and Maerten van Heemskirk (1532), various renderings of Crucifixion and Pietà “suggest large erections which man have been intended to symbolize resurrection” (p. 169). In parallel fashion, John Donne’s sonnet “Show me, dear Christ, thy spouse” the Church itself is depicted as a harlot with the poet exhorting Christ to “betray, kind husband, thy spouse to our sights, /And let mine amorous soul court thy mild dove, /Who is most true and pleasing to thee, then/When she is embraced and open to most men” (as cited in Kermode, 2011, p. 173). The use of sexual imagery was common practice in Counter-Reformation Catholicism, a famous example of which is Bernini’s orgasmic St Teresa.

### A twofold denigration

There is no depiction of the Buddha’s genitalia that I am of aware of, nor sexual or sensuous imagery used in conjunction with Dharma practice – in fact the very idea would strike

contemporary sensibilities as odd, even improper, a reaction perhaps symptomatic of the way in which the Dharma is currently being apprehended in western culture.

The reason for this is, in my opinion, twofold: on the one hand, Dharma teachings are filtered through the Platonic/Judaic-Christian fundamental denigration of life, sexuality and the passions – a philosophical/religious stance, which is at heart a refusal of immanence in favour of transcendence – of becoming in favour of being. On the other, the progressive secularization and reification (i.e., de-contextualization) of Dharma practice has (successfully, in some quarters) turned it into a set of techniques. Could it be that this stance has now reached a peak via the theoretical articulation and practical application of “mindfulness” in the field of mental health, particularly in conjunction with cognitive behavioural therapy and neuroscience?

I submit the above question hesitantly and not without some trepidation – I submit it as an invitation to further debate, for I do believe that the current popularity enjoyed by mindfulness meditation in the mental health field is an attainment – remarkable in translating the Dharma in the lingo of hard science yet problematic in its medicalization of the human condition.

I would in fact wish to go further: the popularity of “mindfulness” in current discourse is intriguingly reminiscent of the advent of Socratic philosophy in ancient Greece, in itself the culmination of an anti-Dionysian position with its unreasonably univocal appeal to reason and logic, with its recipe of “abstinence and strict segregation” from the “unphilosophical stimulants” (Nietzsche, 2000, p. 77) provided by the tragic art of Sophocles and Euripides. Nietzsche thought that there are two dominant ways of denigrating life: the “religious” stance symbolized by the mythical figure of Silenus, for whom the best thing would be not to be born and second best to die soon, and the “rational” stance of Socrates of “embracing rationality as the only mode of salvation” which “always marks a profound crisis in human culture: it indicates that the collective psyche has already been swamped and overruled by the passions, and therefore has to cling to reason as its last resort” (Bazzano, 2006, pp. 55–56). If conventional religion chastises the passions as sinful, secular “rational” approaches such as mindfulness chastise them as unruly.

The term “passion” derives from the Greek *pathê*, which for Epicurus plainly referred to the human experience of pleasure and pain, what we feel via *aisthêseis* or sensations (Konstan, 2006). Yet his near-contemporary, Aristotle, will translate *pathê* as “emotions” and “passions” and from here it will be a smooth ride to Christianity, with the term coming to describe the locus of insidious and inscrutable dangers, an area of human experience to be subdued and scrutinized by reason, bolstered by probity and religious conviction, geared towards greater control in the name of spiritual virtue. I would like to tentatively suggest (realizing how controversial, merely speculative and even far-fetched this might sound to some) that there might be a parallel between the conventional religious stance towards the affects and a secular therapeutic discourse increasingly geared towards affect management – or towards what current mindfulness literature calls “improved affect tolerance” (Bishop et al., 2011, p. 234).

A basic attitude of suspicion of the affects and subsequent reliance on the managerial powers of reason long pre-dates Christianity. In antiquity it reached its apogee with Socrates and Platonism but had been there since Parmenides, the first consistent exemplar of the dominant philosophical stance in the West, that is, *rationalism*. It was even present in the luminous teachings of Epicurus, who, with most other Greek philosophers, saw *ataraxia* (impassivity) as central to the practice of the good life (Konstan, 2006).

### Of private/deprived existence

After popularizing a stance of suspicion towards the passions, Christianity added, with Augustine, a crucial component to its theoretical apparatus: it theorized individuality as *private*, which in turn became an unassailable western idea, especially in psychology, predictably *echoed* in current conceptualizations of mindfulness as “a process of investigative awareness that involves observing the ever-changing flow of *private experience*” (Bishop et al., 2004, p. 234, italics added). I emphasize “echoed” in the passage above: mindfulness is obviously not the culprit but merely echoes the dominant western view of individuality. Is this a missed opportunity? Inspired as it is by the Dharma, it could have come submitted the idea of individuality and its attendant pathologies to closer scrutiny.

Augustine’s account, “the first sustained history of an inner life” (Abrams, 1971, p. 83) indelibly casts introspection as an act of repentance, “licensed by the Christian model of conflict” (Bollas, 2001, p. 15) between Christ and Satan. Could it be that biomedical, “secular” or “mindful” approaches are variations on the theme, with homeostasis replacing virtue, pathology replacing sin? Though not the dominant models, these are not the only ones available. Western thought has also produced a notion of interiority as dispassionate, skeptical and ironic *investigation*: from Pyrrhonism in ancient Greece and Montaigne in the Renaissance, to Nietzsche and, later, phenomenology and deconstructionism, this mode of introspection leads to the discovery of “the fluid and contradictory nature of the self” rather than the melodramatic “parables of repentance and redemption” (Bazzano, 2012, p. 4) of Judaeo-Christian literature. This second mode of investigation, freed from the clutches of guilt, control and the demands of the self-improvement industry, leads Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2002) to state provocatively: “there is no inner man” (p. xi), that “internal experience is meaningless” (p. 276) and that “the inner life is an illusion” (p. 183). Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology arguably provides us with a more coherently secular perspective because it is not dependent on a notion of individuality inextricably linked to the Augustinian matrix. It is also concurrent with Dharma practice as I understand it, that is, among other things, an encouragement of organismic awareness aimed at problematizing the artificial division between inner and outer worlds (which in turn fosters mutuality and compassion), a cultivation of perplexity paired to an ethical stance as the natural outcome of the deconstruction of the very self on which western thought (both religious and secular) is founded.

Dharma practice opens the practitioner beyond self-boundedness and the limitations of a private existence or deprived life (the Latin origin of private, still present in Italian and French, means both private *and* deprived), beyond the wretchedness of bourgeois existence, “where each atomized being thinks itself unique” (Bazzano, 2012, p. 74).

### Sex, Zen and the sacred

Sex and *zazen* both belong to the domain of the sacred, understood as the *non-useful* (i.e., not bent to utilitarian purposes, or as an area endowed with intrinsic value) and as *play*. Non-useful activities share the domain with ethics, at least within Kantian, post-Kantian and the “continental” tradition – widely diversified yet unanimous in its critique of utilitarian ethics.

For Dōgen, the founder of Soto Zen in Japan, we do not practice in order to achieve spiritual realization – let alone to improve mental health, although this may occur as a by-product (Waddell & Abe, 2002). We practice for no reason whatsoever: this is what defines untainted Zen practice (Kim, 2004; Nishijima & Cross, 2006). We give ourselves

to practice, throwing ourselves into the vast ocean of the Dharma (Maezumi, 2001). It is a form of gift-giving, symbolized by the offering of incense on the Buddha's altar: the gift or our body/mind as it is, with all its foibles, with all its ephemeral pleasures (Maezumi, 2001). Of course a thirteenth-century religious and literary genius such as Dōgen expresses this differently and with much greater panache than I can ever muster: we do not practice in order to attain realization, he will say, but because we are *already* realized, because practice and realization are not two but one and the same thing: practice-realization (Waddell & Abe, 2002):

Zazen is not learning Zen. It is the Dharma Gate of great repose and bliss. It is undefiled practice-realization. (p. 110)

The two great difficulties in the practice of the Dharma are accepting that we are already realized and then being able to manifest this truthfully.

Sex has another link with the sacred via eroticism (or more broadly, the Dionysian), out of which religion itself came into being by either *subjugating* it or *annihilating* it (Derrida, 1992). Eroticism defines religion positively as backdrop and negatively as what religion denies. A religion that only denies or fights the erotic can therefore be said to have lost touch with the sacred (Bataille, 1987). And a religion whose frame is entirely utilitarian and entirely oblivious of play would equally lose its connection with the sacred.

### **Affect-regulation is not control**

As a practitioner actively involved for years in the integration of Dharma practice and therapy, I appreciate the current popularity of mindfulness meditation and its latent applications in therapy. Yet the way in which the heightened awareness spontaneously generated by meditative practice is being utilized by current mindfulness programmes arguably veers towards “control”, assumed to be the same as “self-regulation” and “affect-regulation”. I have also found striking similarities in the way in which the notion of “control” is understood in both mindfulness and in a practice such as yoga. “Yoga can positively affect self-regulation and decrease hyper-arousal”, writes one therapist and yoga practitioner (Ryan, 2012, p. 16), who also quotes yoga teacher Mira Metha for whom yoga is “the control of the mind with the goal of spiritual peace . . . founded on ethical conduct and calm-inducing mental habits” (p. 16). Similarly, “by paying close attention” – a contemporary mindfulness theorist writes – “practitioners of mindfulness strengthen their cognitive control because they increase their ability to retain information and thus see their true significance rather than being carried away by their reactions” (Dreyfus, 2011, p. 47). “A criterion for participating in MBSR/MBCT [Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction/Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy]”, writes another practitioner, “is at least some willingness to examine the whole question of control over your behaviour” (Maex, 2011, p. 170). For many mindfulness practitioners and writers, the chief aim seems to be exercising control over the archenemy, “unconscious forces” or even “the unconscious”. Some writers manage to present mindfulness as control over the unruliness of the natural way the mind unfolds, something interestingly close to the psychoanalytic method of free association, which, for one thing, “subverts the psychoanalyst’s natural authoritarian tendencies . . . [and] unleashes the disseminating possibilities that open to infinity” (Bollas, as cited in Rose, 2011, p. 12). No free wandering of the mind seems to be allowed in mindfulness, presumably because one does not know what “unwholesome” and “unconscious” shenanigans one might open oneself to. As Olendski (2011) writes:

When the mind is deliberately placed upon a particular object (using applied thought) rather than allowed to drift there “on its own,” or held deliberately upon a chosen object (using sustained thought) even though it may be inclined to wander elsewhere, we are imposing some control on the process and it is no longer entirely conditioned by unconscious forces. (p. 63)

*Control* (or, for some mindfulness writers, “mastery”) seems to be the elected province of mindfulness practice, understood as “freedom from habit, the . . . realization of choice and the realization that mindfulness is not confined to specialized situations or circumstances” (Santorelli, 2011, p. 208). From the “basic unreliability [of] our experience” (Teasdale & Chaskalson, 2011, p. 92) and the contingent nature of a world of “mutually interacting shifting conditions” (p. 92) the practitioner is invited to build a citadel of mindful control over an unpredictable world. This is laudable and no doubt motivated by the aspiration to alleviate suffering but something gets lost in the process. Yet, as Sharon Salzberg (2011) points out, it is because of our “three habitual tendencies” of “grasping, aversion or delusion” that we “distort our perception of what is happening” engaging in the “futile and misguided efforts to deny or control our experience” (p. 177). At times, she writes, people “consider it almost a personal humiliation to be sick, grow old, or to die, as if we should be able to determine not to, as though they had made a grave mistake somewhere. Yet we cannot control it” (p. 179).

In the same way, the mental anguish generated by the contingent and uncertain nature of life may be considerably alleviated but not pathologized and partly redeemed by a prescriptive re-education programme over the course of a few weeks.

I believe the fundamental mistake is to confuse the notion of control with the more nuanced neuro-biological notion of affect-regulation. The two notions are only superficially linked and there is, in fact, a wide distinction between control and affect-regulation.

*Control*, arguably the goal of yoga and of disciplines linked with Hinduism and Indian “Theravada” Buddhism (the latter a major influence on mindfulness-based cognitive therapy), aims at restraining the entire sphere of emotions and feelings, what many religious traditions refer to as “the passions”. Control is needed through the cultivation of “meditative states, the culmination of yoga . . . the fruit of practice arising from stilling the senses and concentrating the mind” (Ryan, 2012, p. 16). The all-too-human dimension of sex and sexual desire is problematic, intense and challenging. It is also very rewarding and, in belonging to the life of “the passions”, it is what makes us humans.

Control is different from “affect-regulation” as well as “self-regulation”, although the two terms are often used interchangeably in some mindfulness and yoga literature. Affect regulation is not just the reduction of intensity, the reduction of negative emotion, but it also involves an augmentation of positive emotion, necessary for self-organization (Schore, 2001). Moreover, affect-regulation is learned within primary and significant relationships in the life of the infant and the adult, rather than by being proficient in the use of techniques, spiritual or otherwise. The aim of self-regulation is not to curb intensity *per se* but to develop resilience and widen the range of one’s response to life’s variegated and often unpredictable occurrences.

Mindfulness approaches to therapy are currently fashioned as “a form of mental training” aimed at reducing vulnerability to “reactive modes of mind that might otherwise heighten stress and emotional distress or that may . . . perpetuate psychopathology” (Bishop et al., 2011, p. 231). As such, they certainly contribute to alleviating distress, providing the sufferer with a certain amount of freedom from compulsive or dangerous behaviours. At the same time, it might be worth asking whether this stance may also bring about a regrettable loss of intensity. Massumi (2000) defines intensity as *the*

*inassimilable*, that is, what the self fails to assimilate. The self cannot, by definition, assimilate experience in its entirety, no matter how hard it tries, for the latter is always greater. Even if the self did manage that, it would only be left with a structure, at the most a symbolic hold over experience. Therefore, affirming the primacy of the affects and the importance of affect-regulation over the need to control them incorporates intensity, keeps our very humanness alive and does not introduce a potentially draining psychological conflict. The mindfulness practitioner certainly gains *control* over his/her passions but, arguably, loses intensity (wrongly and summarily perceived as not detrimental to wellbeing).

There are several ways of approaching meditation and learning from the vast reservoir of the Dharma. We can either shun the blood, sweat and tears of the world or embrace them. We can either look down at our rich and often troublesome feelings, emotions and passions, trying to suppress, overcome and go beyond them – we will surely gain greater control but we will lose something precious in the process. *Or* we can befriend them – consider them with awe and respect. Many will be familiar with the image of the lotus flower growing out of the mud. As humans we are made of *humus*, or soil – a meditative practice cannot afford to forget this element. Broadly put, the difference between an embodied Dharma practice inspired by Zen and current mindfulness meditation practices is philosophical.

Moreover, a detrimental effect engendered by a reductive understanding of meditation and yoga is a polarization of one's psychological life, as several examples from my own clinical work teach me. The typical meditator and yoga practitioner is often caught up in the oscillation between indulgence and purification, between, as one client put it, "having a fun, lively and crazy time and bouts of cleansing rituals where I do lots of healthy eating and yoga or meditation retreats". Often the paradox in similar cases is that in spite of the person's identification with the latter – the slightly enforced positive striving – it is the former – the "fun time" – that feels beguilingly more real.

### **This very body, the Buddha**

Unlike mindfulness, Dharma practice is not a "learned skill" (Bishop et al., 2011, p. 237) but a stance of openness to the teachings inherent in the *dharma*s, or phenomena – a form of schooling in the unexpected and the unfathomable, since life and the world are forever ambiguous and ungraspable. The unambiguous way in which the latter become manifest is through the *event*: "Nothing is prefigured in the event", Massumi (2000) writes, "It is the collapse of structured distinction into intensity, of rules into paradox" (p. 277). By embarking on the path, a Dharma practitioner aspires to become a *bodhisattva*, which literally means an "awakened being" (Śāntideva, 1995; Tobden, 2005), a figure that, from early iconography to the present day, has shed the otherworldly garment of Buddhist archetype in order to assume the features of an ordinary human being. A bodhisattva willingly takes up four vows, the third of which states: "The dharmas are boundless. I vow to learn from them". There are many interpretations as how to read the word *dharma*s (in the plural and with a small initial, not to be confused with Dharma, singular and with a capital "D"). Some Buddhist traditions will translate it as "religious teachings" or practices, others will read dharmas as phenomena. The last reading will regard all phenomena as teachings, as opportunities to practice, as doors to wisdom and compassion. The other crucial inference in the second interpretation is that the teaching one will receive from the dharmas is not prefigured nor spelled out by some "sacred text". Instead, it will be an *event*. In their manifestation, the dharmas escape our categories of apprehension. Sexual



experience equally escapes and baffles us. It is understandable that in the absence of a philosophy capable of translating it in a more loyal, that is, non-systematic or structural way, one would resort to the “received wisdom” of existing structures, but this would be a mistake. It would mean “undoing the considerable deconstructive work that has been effectively carried out by post-structuralism” (Massumi, 2000, p. 277).

Hakuin Zenji, a great innovator of the Rinzai school of Zen in seventeenth-century Japan, begins his “Song of Zazen” (Waddell, 2012) with: “All beings by nature are Buddha/ As ice by nature is water”. It would be a mistake to think of “Buddha-nature” as separate from our current reality. For Hakuin, we are already Buddhas: to be a Buddha means having a profound appreciation for the human condition, for the suffering and the joy that it entails. Hakuin concludes the poem by saying:

Truly, is anything missing now? Nirvana is right here, before our eyes. This very place is the Lotus Land, This very body, the Buddha. (Waddell, 2012, n.p.)

### Note

1. Throughout the paper I mainly refer to what is conventionally known as Buddhism as *Dharma*, the word originally used by the Buddha. The former term is implicated in political, institutional and doctrinal entanglements, which, in my view, obscure contemporary discourse.

### Notes on contributor

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