

# The Fourth Treasure: Psychotherapy's Contribution to the Dharma

**Manu Bazzano**

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*Abstract* It has been suggested that each of the three treasures (*Buddha, Dharma* and *Sangha*) become manifest in history in different ages. According to this view, our modern era would be the age of Sangha or community. The chapter explores some of its implications as well as the desirability of a *fourth treasure*, psychotherapy – understood as a road to the unknown and the unsaid that may help tackle the difficulties inherent in the notion of community. The relationship of psychotherapy to the Dharma expressed here charts a route away from the mainstream frame popularized by the mindfulness brand. Drawing instead on humanistic psychology and Zen, it affirms inquiry, social solidarity and the ability to perceive the elusive dimension of *affect*.

*Key words:* Dharma, Psychotherapy, Affect, Mindfulness, Solidarity

## Introduction

A Buddhist practitioner is said to take refuge in the three treasures (Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha), potent source of inspiration and support on the path. In doing so, she is reminded of the Buddha's own example, of his teachings (the Dharma) and of the encouraging presence of a community of fellow travelers (Sangha). One interpretation of the three treasures, unofficially attributed, among others, to Taizan Maezumi (1931-1995), is *secular* in the literal sense of the word, i.e. pertaining to history (*saeculum* means generation, age, as well as century). This interpretation sees the three treasures manifested in different ages of history. The first one would be the age of the historical Buddha Gautama. The second, the age of the Dharma, of consolidation (some would say institutionalization) of 'Buddhism' as a religious

doctrine. The third would be the modern age of Sangha or community. The emphasis in the latter is on ethics, the social dimension and the actualization of the teachings in the crucible of everyday life with others. When I first heard this interpretation, I instinctively linked it to the unorthodox views of Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202), the twelfth century Calabrian mystic, theologian and founder of a Christian monastic order who lived as a hermit in the Sila Mountains near Cosenza. Despite the widely different contexts (Joachim's view was centred on a theology of revelation), there are intriguing similarities between Joachim's reading of the Christian trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and Maezumi's interpretation of the three treasures. For Joachim, the first name of the trinity corresponds to the age of the father, i.e. the age of the Old Testament; the second (between the birth of Christ and the thirteenth century) to the age of the son; and the third, from the thirteenth century onwards, to the age of the spirit. The latter would be characterized by humankind's potentially unmediated contact (via spirit) with God – an optimistic if heretical view of history and theology that some scholars saw as anticipating of several centuries Hegel's (and Marx's) *theodicy* ie the belief in the presence of God's providence (or its secular equivalent, gradual progress towards justice and equality) in the midst of history's evils. This is not the place to discuss in depth whether the notion of a divinely or humanly inspired evolutionary 'progress' is defensible. My hunch is that it is not, yet both notions are evocative. That ordinary people may have access to the divine subverts in one sweep the clergy's millenarian authority and privilege. That community may acquire prominence over other concerns in the current propagation of the Dharma has, likewise, far-reaching implications.

### **Active and passive adaptation**

That our era is the age of community could mean that community is less a *given* than a *task*, i.e. an area we need to focus on, something to be practiced and cultivated because it has been

neglected, rather than factual description of our zeitgeist. Sangha may need to be valued over and above the two other ‘treasures’ which were dominant in other eras. In the case of the first treasure, this could mean going beyond the deification *and* the secular idealization of *Buddha* – beyond the otherworldly, enlightened archetype *and* the mindful, stress-reducing and allegedly objective physician. It could mean that in order to contribute to the contemporary world, the Dharma would need to be a little more than an exotic system of feudal religiosity at the margins of society or a pragmatic assortment of rescue-remedies for frazzled high-achievers.

Similarly, in relation to the second treasure (Dharma), the systematization of the Buddha’s teachings and institutionalization of Buddhism as established religion would take second place – a form of *active adaptation* of its views and precepts to the world we find ourselves in. The notion of active adaptation is borrowed from Adler (2006), who believed that human beings strive for a constructive adaptation to life’s challenges and demands, and that striving itself must be appreciated above an idealized and often damaging notion of perfection and a customary fixation with goals and targets. Adler’s notion was in turn inspired by the German poet and essayist Lessing (1729-1781) who maintained that if God gave him the choice between truth and the *striving* for truth, he would opt for the latter.

There is of course a world of difference between *no* adaptation, *passive* adaptation and *active* adaptation. In the first instance, one holds on to Dharma teachings as an eternal body of truth impervious to the contingencies of history. This stance possesses a certain appeal but cannot be said to directly contribute to the struggles and anxieties of the modern world. *Passive* adaptation, on the other hand, entails obeisance to the dominant ideological frame to which the sheer *otherness* of the Buddha’s teachings is co-opted, their existential edge smoothed out and their core made more palatable as yet another product on the shelves of the self-help superstore. This is clearly a case of throwing the baby-Buddha with the bathwater, which is

what I believe has happened, on the whole, with the ‘mindfulness’ phenomenon, employed in some instances by “those in power as a technology for their own self-serving purposes, unmoored from its ethical meaning” (Forbes, 2012, Internet file).

By adopting a stance of active adaptation, on the other hand, we potentially partake of the world, become implicated in the dust and noise of the marketplace. I have called this approach to Buddhism *mundane* (Bazzano, 2013), literally *of the world* (‘mondo’): earthy, earthy, with no remnants of the cloister and of the ‘monkish virtues’ derided by Hume (2004), those very same unnatural virtues that adhere so tightly to supposedly secular forms of Buddhism. The term ‘mundane’ links the Dharma to the best phenomenological tradition, which sees human experience situated in the world and as such inherently *ambiguous* (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). It smokes it out of the holier-than-thou dwellings to which Buddhism has been consigned, and links it to what is normally considered ‘samsaric’. A *mondana* is a sex worker in Italian slang, and *vita mondana* refers to an ‘unedifying’ existence dedicated to a Fellinian *dolce vita* of glamour and gossip and a celebration of what is conventionally seen as the world of ‘mere’ appearance. A mundane conception of the Dharma also affirms that a practitioner can be *in* the world and yet hold a watchful eye and a dignified bearing in its midst –the meditative posture being an embodied expression of *dignity*. By maintaining a dignified stance, I would perhaps feel less compelled to bow to ideological pressures or having to acquire the latest gleaming product on offer. Equally, I’d feel less inclined to join the religious and moralistic chorus of sanctimonious disapproval of the world and be more critical of dominant values and agendas – which in this day and age are those of neo-liberalism. At the same time, I’d recognize that the way in which we experience *dukkha* is not one and the same as the way in which it was experienced by people at the time of the Buddha. Of course death is certain (and tomorrow as uncertain) now as it was two thousand and five hundred years ago. Of course craving and reactivity (*tanha*) cause disappointment now as

they did then. But to disregard history altogether would be a serious mistake. It would also be an act of indolence. Every era needs to describe human experience anew. This is what the historical Buddha did in relation to the dominant worldview of his time. He did not particularly oppose or endorse the latter but was decidedly non-committal with regards to metaphysical questions.

Actively adapting the Dharma could then mean retranslating it, re-interpreting it while maintaining its otherness and its existential valence – a difficult task, and for that very reason worth pursuing.

### **From Secularism to the Mainstream**

It would be naïve to assume that a healthy dose of psychotherapeutic knowledge and expertise could ‘cure’ or prevent the inevitable pitfalls we face in trying to actively adapt the Dharma to the contemporary world. This is because the very same reductionism now in vogue and forcefully endorsed by vested interests is at work both in psychotherapy as in Buddhism. For example, humanistic psychology and psychotherapy trainees in the UK are increasingly being taught ‘evidence-based’, quantitative methods of research, study and practice that are often at variance with the humanistic ethos and with more heuristic, exploratory modes historically associated with therapeutic practice. This mode may be alternatively seen as pure and simple sell-out or, more charitably, as a well-intentioned but misguided attempt to appease and be acknowledged by the ‘Father’ and the powers-that-be so that funding will not be stopped, our survival ensured and our way of being in the world validated. This way of thinking flies in the face of the wisdom acquired in many decades of social and political activism, something pithily expressed by Audre Lorde: there is no way you can pull apart the master's house by using the master's tools (Lorde, 2007). Another way of registering this very same puzzling inclination to bend over backward in order to please

Big Daddy is the widespread use of left-brain type of language to promote right-brain ideas. This can be seen at play in contemporary neuroscience literature (Schoore, 2011), although it is fair to concede that this may well be a translation of progressive principles into a language that has wider appeal and applications (Voller, 2013, p. 77).

More worryingly, progressive psychology and psychotherapy appear to have engendered, like hippy parents to an ‘ultra-square’ progeny, a new breed of neo-conservatives – writers and practitioners who officially advocate progressive psychological principles yet show unequivocal signs of having contracted, in a perverse Foucauldian twist, a ravenous hunger for power. They will extol the virtues of Randomized Controlled Trials<sup>1</sup>, refurbish psychopathology and diagnosis, colonize space left for debate at conferences with streams of data and blanket use of *PowerPoint*. The assumptions behind these words and deeds appear to be that progress can be measured by how often state, government and governing bodies adopt a progressive jargon, or by how far we manage to go in convincing the ruling elites that our utterances and practices are legitimate. What is strange is that the most vocal exponents of this pervasive compulsion-to-compromise wish to maintain their ‘radical kudos’ intact, seeing no contradiction at all between what they preach and their nominal progressive affiliations. We witness something similar with the mindfulness brand, now cheerfully adapted to the corporate world and the military, no (ethical) questions asked. This tendency has been building up for some time and is now hailed as a welcome development from a once hopelessly peripheral, exotic practice of meditation into the coveted territory of the *mainstream*, a term praised by Kabat-Zinn (2015) as a more preferable goal for the mindfulness movement than the outdated secularist paradigm. Both ‘mainstream’ and ‘secularism’, however, have become hallmarks of dominant western ‘non-ideological’ ideology: the former is characterized by the amount of corporate power it takes to propel a

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<sup>1</sup> A randomized controlled trial (RCT) is a type of medical test, now extended to counselling and psychotherapy, where people being studied are randomly allocated one or other of the different treatments under study.

product; the latter, as the recent emergence of militant *laïcité* in France testifies, is increasingly a synonym, at least in Europe, for time-honoured hatred of otherness and suspicion of foreign religious beliefs. This represents a rather perverse turn of events if one considers that originally *laïcité* (its English rendition ‘secularism’ is at best an approximation) meant avowed neutrality of the state towards religious beliefs and, conversely, affirmation of non-interference by any religion in the running of government. Upheld in the first article of the French constitution, at its inception this notion of secularism vividly expressed freedom of thought in the religious sphere. The tragic developments of 2015, from the *Charlie Hebdo* killings to the *Bataclan* massacre at the hands of fundamentalists and the polarization that followed have, however, brought about a sharp transformation in the very meaning of *laïcité*, to the point where it could be arguably be understood as a liberal form of Islamophobia. This is all the more problematic if we consider the shadowy backdrop of colonial France and the Algerian war of independence. Even when removed from *laïcité*, the notion of secularism in the English-speaking world carries its own shadows. It will suffice to mention here the ‘god delusion’ industry, after the book by the same title (Dawkins, 2006) which saw a series of authors lining up in hasty and largely uninformed condemnation of religion and religious thought *per se*. My own criticism is mild compared to Terry Eagleton’s lampooning of this reactionary brand of secularism:

Imagine someone holding forth on biology whose only knowledge of the subject is the *Book of British Birds*, and you have a rough idea of what it feels like to read Richard Dawkins on theology (Eagleton, 2006, p. 32).

It is perplexing to find some Buddhist writers directly or indirectly aligned to the ethos of the god delusion brigade. The cover of the renowned Buddhist scholar Stephen Batchelor’s *Confessions of a Buddhist Atheist* (Batchelor, 2010) is embellished by an endorsement written by none other than Christopher Hitchens, the late, great British essayist notorious for his *volte face* from progressive thinking to right wing war-mongering. Much more worrying

is the presence among the new secularists of Sam Harris, who features prominently among the authors and speakers of the recent 31-day *Mindfulness Summit* event. Harris is well known for his advocacy of torture against Muslim fundamentalists and for his rejection of pacifism on the grounds that its widespread influence would create a situation where thugs inherit the earth (Harris, 2005). What he perhaps forgets is that thugs *have* inherited the earth a while back and it wouldn't surprise me to learn that they signed up for a handful of 'mindfulness' sessions in order to reduce the stress of running a misshapen world.

This is why the term 'secularism' begins to sound almost obsolete here, as it does not quite describe the scope and breadth of the current mindfulness movement's ambition. As it can be inferred by the various contributions to the online Mindfulness Summit in October 2015, a more adequate word for this is 'mainstream'. If *Newscorp* Chairman and CEO Rupert Murdoch practice meditation, to name one among "outrageously successful people" (Gregoire, 2013, Internet File), this is surely a sign that meditation and mindfulness have gone mainstream. Whether this is something to be welcome and be excited about is another matter.

I remember reading several years ago an interview in a renowned Buddhist magazine with people in the Pentagon who regularly practiced mindfulness. Wasn't it wonderful, the journalist pondered, that these people meditated? I found this question deeply disturbing, for I thought, as I still do, that one of the effects of a meditation practice that goes beyond solipsistic concentration and self-absorbed relaxation would in this context be a critical examination of the very notion of war, of the *raison d'être* of the military and of a department of defence. Unless of course one seriously thinks it is wonderful to drop bombs mindfully.

### **Remembering and Forgetting**



There have been considerable efforts recently from the mindfulness movement to offer itself to mainstream culture. Highly symbolic among these is Mark Williams' "explanation" in the Attlee Room in the British parliament of the "basics of [a] 2,400-year-old tradition" boiled down to "how to control and measure your breath, thoughts and feelings". This preceded a call by a cross-party group of MPs to bring mindfulness-based meditation in the public sector "in a bid to improve the nation's mental health, education and criminal justice system". The financing of these "secular meditation courses" is done with the intention of "reduc[ing] misbehaviour and ... improve GCSE results" and in prisons it will help reducing re-offending (Booth, 2015, Internet File). The above example is only one among many. Whilst one cannot deny the expediency and sincerity of this effort, seemingly aimed at putting to good use the millenarian tradition of the Dharma, the emphasis on reducing misbehaviour and re-offending seems perniciously close to connivance with societal injustice and discrimination if not paired with a critique of current educational and 'corrective' systems. I was faced with similar conundrum a while back when I considered applying for Buddhist chaplaincy work in prisons. Although keen to do this at first, I had serious doubts after talking to people who had worked as chaplains and qualified prison counsellors. They all seemed to agree on the fact that their effectiveness was at best minimal, at worst counter-productive. The reason for the latter was that they were being perceived by inmates as complicit with the institution. Many emphasized that there was too wide a gap between the compassionate ethos they strived to personify and a structural approach based almost exclusively on punishment and retribution. In this context, they argued, meditation and counselling offered mild consolation and even a deluded, complicit encouragement that it is possible to lead a good life when surrounded all around by a 'bad life'.

This disquieting image, borrowed from Adorno (2005) is not confined to life in prison but can be extended to our alienated, commodified existence in a contemporary world marred by

injustice, suffering and exploitation on a grand scale. In this context, achieving personal meditative serenity and private ‘integration’ is positively trivial. This type of ‘mindfulness’ is effectively a form of *forgetfulness*.

In his original discourse on mindfulness, the Buddha encouraged us to *remember* a number of things worth remembering (Thera, Internet file). Among these are the certainty of death and the uncertainty of the time of its occurrence. Being mindful in a world besieged by suffering must also mean *not forgetting* – for instance, not forgetting Auschwitz, Amritsar, Sabra and Shatila, or the Armenian genocide. Not forgetting that our fêted capitalist democracies are founded on colonial abuse, wars, wage labour, unemployment, the violent repression of strikes, anti-Semitism, and racism (Merleau-Ponty, 2000). This type of remembrance/mindfulness “travels way beyond the narcissism of personal liberation, the self-absorbing dream of individual psychological integration” (Bazzano, 2013, p. 70). It goes well beyond the fantasy of *ataraxia*, the imperturbability we love to project on the ancient Greeks and the early Buddhists in India. It goes beyond the fairy tale vision of an innocent and wise humanity at the dawn of civilization.

### **Entering the Stream**

Can ‘going mainstream’, as the mindfulness movement is enthusiastically doing at present, be reconciled with ‘entering the stream’? The latter expression is used by the Buddha to describe those who enter the path. Among the synonyms of mainstream we find: conventional, middle-of-the-road, (pertaining to) the majority, standard, ordinary and run of the mill. With the exception of ordinary (as in the Zen turn of phrase ‘ordinary mind is the way’), all of these illustrate an altogether different stance to that of entering the stream. A *sotāpanna*, one who entered (*āpanna*) the stream (*sota*), is described in the *Dhammapada* as a person who has gained spontaneous, intuitive understanding of the Dharma. The fruit of stream entry is

said by the Buddha to excel “sole dominion over the earth, going to heaven [and] lordship over all worlds (Thanissaro, 1997). It also excels, I believe, the gaining of greater cultural currency and status, especially when these are bought at a high price.

Entering the stream could be understood as going *against* the stream – against the cultural, social and political conformities that keep us lulled in tranquilizing complicity. It could be understood as development of greater awareness, hence greater involvement with the river of the world, that river of becoming which cannot be entered twice. Going mainstream can, on the other hand, be apprehended as forfeiting the investigative, counter-traditional elements that have made of the Dharma a vibrant practice across the centuries. These latter aspects are arguably harder to embrace because they require of us the courage to stand apart from the normalizing institutional truths aimed at the manufacturing of pseudo-individuals. I’m obliquely reminded of Kierkegaard (1980; 1987), a thinker and a poet of religion for whom religion is as far removed from pandering to the mainstream as one can imagine. Paradoxically, only one who is able to stand alone and be a true individual can see through the non-substantive nature of individuality itself. This standing-alone often opens up as a result of a crisis in life. It is in attempting to alleviate the suffering produced by a crisis that most of us come across the Buddha’s teachings and the yearning to practice. At this crucial juncture we can embark on a path of curative therapy that lowers our cholesterol and reduces stress before going back to the traffic jam, or back to “enjoy[ing] the routine and monotony of the assembly-line” (Purser, 2015, p. 8). *Or* we can embrace a path that may turn crisis into opportunity for greater freedom, potential breakdown into breakthrough. For an individual who, sustained by faith in the three treasures, has the courage to attempt the latter another dimension opens up, one that is sorely missing from the stress-reduction, low-cholesterol brand of mindfulness: the *communal* element of Dharma practice.

## **Communal Feeling and Imperceptible Mutual Assistance**

‘Entering the stream’ is a powerful image that strongly reverberates in western psychology and philosophy. The metaphor of the river is common to significant strands of humanistic psychology. We find it in Carl Rogers (1961), who equates therapeutic progress with the active acceptance of self as *process*, a “flowing river of change” (p.122). We find it in Rosenzweig (1999) who compares opinions and concepts – the whole array of what makes up a point of view – to a bowl filled with stream water, which the observer takes home to study, thinking all along to be ‘studying’ the river. This is impossible, Rosenzweig warns; it is futile to try to comprehend the startling poetry of experience; to believe that in gazing at the water in a bowl we are gazing at the river is a delusion. Both Rogers and Rosenzweig refer to the acceptance of the natural fluidity of the self and of existence as something desirable. Indeed, what is variously referred to as incongruence, neurosis, mental distress in all its manifestations can be compared to an unrealistic desire to stand aside from the stream, from an existence that inevitably flows into the ocean of death. This knowledge often brings about a defensive shrinkage of experience and an almost exclusive focus on self-preservation (Bazzano, 2016), something already highlighted in the 1930s by a precursor of humanistic psychology, Kurt Goldstein (Goldstein, 2000).

An important aspect of this newly acquired fluidity, away from the fear of death and the fear of life is *life with others*, life in society and community. Alone among the pioneering psychologists and psychoanalysts of the early years of the twentieth century, Adler placed *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* – communal feeling or social interest – as the very centre of psychological development, as the very yardstick by which mental health can be assessed (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964 ; Bazzano, 2005).

There is a link here between this notion of psychological maturity and the propagation of Buddhism in the West. With the latter, it was the third treasure, Sangha, that became the

crucial element, and this in spite of the arguably exotic and ‘Orientalist’ escapism of the early years. If early Indian Buddhism had as its main objective individual liberation from the wheel of birth and death, later traditions underlined the communal dimension. A bodhisattva operates for the benefit of all beings. She is what Nietzsche (1978) called “a genius of the heart”: a person “from whose touch everyone goes richer” (p 200). In Buddhist lore, the bodhisattva is said to vow *not* to enter nirvana until the last being on earth achieves freedom from suffering. A bodhisattva is prepared to work endlessly for the welfare of others, whether she finds herself in heavenly or hellish realms. Zen practice is a collective endeavour. The Buddha Way is realised together. “Leaping beyond the confines of ... personal enlightenment – Dōgen says,

[The Buddhas] sit erect beneath the kingly tree of enlightenment, turn simultaneously the great and utterly incomparable Dharma wheel, and expound the ultimate and profound *prajna* free from all human agency ... They in their turn enter directly into the way of imperceptible mutual assistance” (Dōgen, 2002, p. 12)

*Imperceptible mutual assistance*: by sitting together in silence, with no utilitarian aim in mind, we sustain one another. We do so without even trying. Initially, we may take our shoes off and enter the meditation hall with an overriding sense of having to solve a personal problem. We may sit on the cushion feeling alone and isolated, wanting our self-generated concentration and absorption to illumine a way out of our own private suffering. Gradually, we find ourselves becoming more sensitive to the presence of others; they too bring their own private burden of hope and anxiety. At times, these individual burdens seem lifted in the pervasiveness of our common unspoken intent. Being able to sit together in silence, for long periods of time, is an ordinary experience – yet also remarkable.

*Imperceptible mutual assistance*: these three words admirably encompass all there is to say on the subject; they are a form of *Dichtung*, a poetic condensation able to convey deep meaning with a minimal amount of words

### **The Existential Unconscious**

The conventional view among Buddhists and psychotherapists is that at the very heart of our endeavor is an attempt to make the unconscious conscious. This is based on the belief that becoming more aware will reduce the detrimental influence our biases, aversions and cravings exert on us. Making aspects of the unconscious conscious sounds not only legitimate but crucial when dealing with instances such as trauma, dissociative disorder, several kinds of self-destructive behavior and so forth.

At the same time, to seriously think that all there is to know about human motivation and emotion can be brought to the surface from the depths, scrutinized under the floodlight of consciousness, understood and duly modified is downright naïve. To think that, given time, the unknown will become eventually known is a form of hubris. It is also the dominant view at present. Asserting *imperceptibility*, as Dōgen does, goes counter the current *Zeitgeist*. That the ‘real work’ should go on unobserved goes against the current “embarrassing soap opera romancing of consciousness theory in psychoanalysis” (Bollas, 2011, p. 236). Similarly, the recognition that Dharma practice is not only subtle but *undetectable* is placed at the opposite end of the mindfulness project as it has been developed and apprehended thus far.

The fact that a great number of psychoanalysts are now beginning to doubt whether the key tenet at the origins of their discipline, ie the unconscious, exists at all is a confirmation of our times of “hypertrophied consciousness” (Bollas, 2007, p 81).

This state of affairs is nothing new – nor is the corresponding critique of the unlimited power attributed to consciousness. Already in 1930, in the midst of his lecture tour in the

United States, Otto Rank –one of the most gifted and creative early psychoanalysts – spoke of an important cultural battle taking place, not so much between different ‘schools’ of psychology as between two worldviews (Rank, 1996, p. 221-27). One view, roughly associated with a scientific stance, could be called *Promethean*. Acting strongly in response to what he perceived as the rigid determinism of mainstream psychoanalysis, Rank saw the attempt to build a ‘scientific’ psychology as a failure, for psychology is “necessarily insufficient” (ibid, p 222) in explaining the mysteries and vagaries of human nature. According to Rank,

The error lies in the scientific glorification of consciousness, of intellectual knowledge, which even psychoanalysis worships as its highest god – although it calls itself a psychology of the unconscious. But this means only an attempt to rationalize the unconscious and to intellectualize it scientifically (ibid).

We find a parallel critique in the writings of another great psychoanalyst, Ignacio Matte-Blanco (1975; 1999). It is possible, Matte-Blanco persuasively argues, for crucial facets of the *repressed* unconscious to enter consciousness “once [the] prohibition is cancelled” (Matte-Blanco, 1999, p. 87). In contrast, the unrepressed unconscious “cannot enter consciousness owing to its own nature” (ibid). The reasons for this differ widely in Rank and Matte-Blanco. I will not open here what is a complex, tantalizing discussion in trying to articulate their different ways of amending Freud’s notion of the unconscious. What can be said is that common to their stance is the assertion that the unrepressed unconscious cannot by definition be made conscious.

The above assertion may in turn be adapted as follows: what is “wholly other” (Otto, 1950), the *mysterium tremendum* of existence or *existential unconscious* is simply beyond the grasp of our consciousness. All that a sincere meditation practice can do is make us aware of the *unknowability* of our being in the world; it may help us realize the impossibility of knowing the real.

What may stem from this is *humility*: through meditative practice I may begin to see a little more clearly into the absurdity of the claims of the conscious mind and the ego. This sense of humility constitutes the very ground, according to the great Scottish philosopher David Hume, for the cultivation of a healthy scepticism (Hume, 2004) that, if applied, would turn our meditation practice from stress reduction into a practice of open inquiry. At first, the latter may well *induce* more stress rather than reduce it (Lopez, 2012; Bazzano, 2013).

In this context, the notion of *awakening*, pervasive in Buddhist teachings, may come to signify the realization of the unfathomable nature of reality rather than the more customary meaning attributed to it, namely the certification of having achieved a zenith in one's psychological and spiritual development, a place where the mysteries of existence have been duly eviscerated and resolved. The latter reading testifies of the current predominance afforded to consciousness, which is in turn an aspect of the *Prometheanism* of our times. Many will be familiar with the character of Prometheus who in Greek mythology was one of the Titans. The Titans were primordial, powerful deities that ruled during the legendary pre-Olympian Golden Age. Prometheus is both praised and condemned for stealing fire from the gods. Our contemporary world worships Prometheus; we admire the boldness with which he transgresses a prohibition; his self-assurance reminds us of the pride of the self-made person. The notion of Prometheanism had his fair share of interpreters. Rowan Williams recently gave it a rather unconvincing, and distinctly labor-intensive, Protestant ethic-style twist, for he sees Prometheanism as a fitting symbol for "wanting to steal divinity from God" as well as a poor substitute for our task of "labouring at being human" (Williams, 2015, p. 15). A much more convincing interpretation – one that would not be out of place within a Zen perspective – is found in the writings of Thomas Merton. For Merton (2003) our contemporary human predicament is Promethean in the sense that we paradoxically want to steal what is freely available. Why? Because we assume that God is keeping something good



from us. But the hidden treasure is there for all to see. In Zen the tradition, similarly we learn that there is no need to buy water by the river. “One of the real reasons – Merton writes – why Prometheus is condemned to be his own prisoner is because he is incapable of understanding the liberality of God ... [T]he fire he thinks he has to steal is after all his own fire ... But Prometheus, who does not understand liberality since he has none of it himself, refuses the gift of God” (Merton, 2003, p. 24).

What is even more crucial is that Merton sees the Promethean permeating spirituality and theology. His is a confrontational claim that reinforces the suspicion that Prometheanism, far from being solely the province of dogmatic claims associated with science, is in fact so pervasive as to be even at times the driving force behind religion, an area supposedly steeped in humility and untainted by human hubris. The latter makes of spirituality itself another ego ornament or, as I believe may well be the case with the mindfulness movement, *a tool for bolstering the domain of the ego instead of a strategy for its eventual decentering*. Merton sees Promethean spirituality as “obsessed with ‘mine’ and ‘thine’ – on the distinction between what is mine and what belongs to God” (2003, pp 24-25). My contention is that there is a dominant cultural bias, reflected, as I wrote elsewhere, “in the ways in which Dharma teachings are currently apprehended” (Bazzano, 2013, p. 72) by 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’ (ibid).

### **Psychotherapy’s Contribution: Working with *Affect***

Despite its inevitable inconsistencies and ambiguities, since its early, Freudian days, psychotherapy has testified of the ever-present anguish of the “animal subject to language” hidden under the “aloofness of logos” (Clemens, 2013, p. 13), whether coated in the alleged objectivity of science or the assumed superiority of philosophy.

Despite being tormented by and often giving in to ‘physics envy’ (the desire, born out of a sense of inferiority, to prove itself measurable and quantifiable), its fundamental tenets and practices are still available to us. These are invaluable, for they are linked to the core of human experience and to the wider domain of intensity in which human experience is inscribed. This proper name for this wider domain is *affect*. It is hard to describe this domain directly – not because it belongs to a different plane of existence, but because it is “unformed and unstructured [though] highly organized and effectively analyzable (... not entirely containable in knowledge, but ... analyzable ... as effect)” (Massumi, 1995, p 107n). At heart, good psychotherapy evokes this domain, one that, though impersonal, is translated in narrative, personalized terms as ‘emotion’, and one that can be hinted at (often through art) rather than directly accessed. A couple of examples from literature may help uncover aspects often bypassed in literalist psychology as well as incurrent mindfulness practice.

Whenever Flaubert describes an amorous moment in *Madame Bovary*, he shifts his attention to the description of a painting. At first I thought this had to do with modesty and even prudishness, as in old fashioned movies when the focus politely drifts to clothes scattered on the floor, on the curtains, or on a glimpse of outdoor scenery through the window. This is in itself more alluring (and sexier, in my view), than depictions of sweaty, emoting film stars reaching climaxes unknown to common mortals.

I suspect something more important is at play here, found not only in Flaubert’s writings, but in great realist literature too. One way of describing this is as a shift from the domain of narrative to that of *affect* (Jameson, 2014). When this happens, narrative is interrupted and

writing takes flight. In Flaubert's case, with the storyline lapsing into description, and depiction of paintings taking over, we almost partake of the intensity and ineffability of what is coming to pass. Tenderness, passion, the ecstatic and bewildering feelings experienced by the fated heroin – all carry her into a different dimension where straightforward narrative is simply inadequate.

Yet narrative is clearly useful: it takes us from A to B; it relies on cause and effect; it gives us the frame, the subject matter; it provides us with information; it tells us the context, informing us of the functional reference points we need to have in order to follow what is going on. Narrative is important, even though, overused by politicians and commentators, the term itself has nowadays become a cliché.

In therapy, narrative is also known as *content*. Naturally, it is not a bad idea for a therapist to pay attention to content: at the very least, as a sign of respect towards clients, a way of attending to and taking seriously the presenting issues and concerns they bring. At the same time, do I really have to remember the maiden name of my client's cousin's second wife? A supervisor once asked me, in response to my consternation in being unable to remember such details: What if the client's content is fiction? He had a point. There is more to human experience than the story; there is a lot more to life than a sequence of facts and events. This 'something more' is commonly known in therapy as *process*.

Content refers to the 'what' of therapy. It tells us what the client and the therapist talk about. It addresses the nature of the 'problem'; it includes valuable information. It is undoubtedly an essential aspect of the whole endeavour. Yet most practitioners would agree that to stop at content would be incomplete – something else needs to be taken into account.

Going back to Emma Bovary's romantic interludes with her idealized Rodolphe, Flaubert's lapse from narrative to description signals the upsurge of *affect*, a domain of experience not adequately represented by narrative and plot. It may well be that affect is beyond

representation; hence we can only evoke, suggest, or, by a leap in style and expression, register a change in perception, the quickening of our heartbeat, a change in body temperature. Recent research and theory (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Massumi, 1995; Bazzano, 2013) suggest that affect may denote a level of intensity in not measurable until it gets summarily translated (and diluted) as subjective emotion (Massumi, 1995).

It appears that the troubadours of the high Middle-Ages knew about this, for their love songs were marked by *tempo rubato*, a music signature literally meaning ‘stolen tempo’ as well as ‘stolen *time*’, encouraging expressive and rhythmic freedom, speeding up or slowing down according to how the singer was *affected* and impacted. The tempo (as well as time itself) expands or contracts in such moments; that is to say, the experience of rapture escapes a linear sequence.

Affect is then a realm of experience not readily accessible through discourse, facts and reason but one that may be approached by means of a more diffuse awareness. There is in affect a different logic at play, one that does not rely on cause and effect. For instance, the *relational* element, intrinsic in any encounter, is certainly *part* of affect. Client and therapist co-create the counselling environment, ideally through mutual endeavour and cooperation. But affect also comprises of another element, a more *impersonal* dimension which is then inhabited by the relationship. Marcel (1965) similarly spoke of a given that precedes encounter, the mystery of being which for him is blind knowledge, a sort of blindfold knowledge of being inferred in all particular knowledge.

One could say this has to do with the general atmosphere, with the tonality and texture that permeates the therapeutic encounter. Gaining an insight, or at least an inkling of affect, however tentatively, may give us a sense of the general ‘feeling’ of our meeting with another. And this in turn may provide us with a deeper understanding of process *beyond* the relational, which in turn can become useful to the therapeutic relationship. Openness to affect (another

word for openness would be ‘objectivity’) assists the therapeutic relationship precisely because when we are attuned to affect we are not *enmeshed* in the relational – hence can perceive the relationship more openly or objectively.

Being attuned to affect and going ‘beyond’ the relational is not as mystical as it may sound at first. A famous passage from realist literature may help illustrate this. At one point in his novel *The Belly of Paris*, Emile Zola describes the Parisian market of Les Halles, the narrative exploding in a multiplicity of smells, sounds, textures that are truly disorienting and take the reader into an altogether different dimension. The vast quantity of vegetables described in the long passage, then the meats and blood, the dairy products, the feverish variety of seafood and their strange, even monstrous shapes carry the reader into a space that is also wholly independent of narrative. Rather than being provided with an allegory, or a cluster of symbols placed there just in order to represent and explain something else, the fantastic richness of the description – particularly the bewildering variety of cheeses described, a veritable ‘symphony of cheeses’ their smells and flavours – makes readers dizzy and presents us with an opening into affect – a space that is different from the narrative dimension of cause and effect. For a moment, we almost feel what it was really like to be there in the food market at Les Halles in nineteenth century Paris.

The other important component of affect is *multiplicity*: many factors, many characters come together to create this moment. The client walking into the room is a complex assemblage of diverse relations and connections, a relational field that would be missed by too narrow a focus on content.

Perhaps if process can be understood as part and parcel of affect, we may gain greater insights into ‘what is going on’. Process refers to the *how* of therapy, but it seems to me that this *how* is not entirely covered by the relationship. It *includes* the relationship between therapist and client; it also describes the *flow* of activities and interactions between the two,

the full meaning of which is often beyond the reach of conscious thought. What this requires of us therapists is fine attunement and openness – what Diana Voller fittingly calls ‘listening to the music behind the words’ (personal communication, 2015).

By paying attention to process, I attend to the impersonal as well as the personal and relational elements at play – I listen to the general ‘feeling’ of the meeting with another whilst attending to the client’s process and to my own process. A simple and direct way to access process is via the body, as we learned from the great phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1969; 1983): direct, uncluttered awareness of our sensations, body posture, feelings, and emotions – a way of being-in-the-world that reminds us of our inescapable limitations (as embodied beings) as well as of our potential for openness.

## **Conclusion**

The present ascendancy of mindfulness and other similarly remedial approaches to the Dharma relies on their eagerness to conform to the existing cultural and political status quo. Their efficacy is cosmetic: they apply a Buddhist-tinted sticking plaster to the ills of the world; they focus on the distress of decontextualized individuals; they rely on “magical voluntarism” (Smail, 2012; Purser, 2015) and “social amnesia” (Jacoby, 1997; Purser, 2015)

In this chapter I’ve tried to sketch a different direction that acknowledges the centrality of community and puts to good use some of the insights of western psychotherapy, particularly those that alert us to the presence of an existential unconscious and of affect. These two components may help us steer a course away from current reductivism and make us more alert of the complexity of our human predicament.

**Manu Bazzano** is a writer, psychotherapist and supervisor in private practice, a primary tutor at Metanoia Institute, a visiting lecturer at Roehampton University and various other schools and colleges. He facilitates workshops and seminars internationally. Among his books: *Buddha is Dead: Nietzsche and the Dawn of European Zen* (2006); *Spectre of the Stranger: towards a Phenomenology of Hospitality* (2012); *After Mindfulness: New Perspective on Psychology and Meditation* (2014); *Therapy and the Counter-tradition: the Edge of Philosophy*, co-edited with Julie Webb (Routledge) and the forthcoming *Zen & Therapy: A Contemporary Perspective* (Routledge), and *Nietzsche and Psychotherapy* (Karnac) [www.manubazzano.com](http://www.manubazzano.com)

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