

Chaim Wigder

REALITY AS IT'S NOT

SNB Magazin 9

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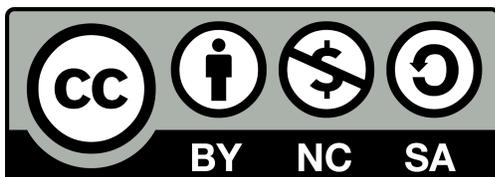
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ONE NIGHT IN LONG BYGONE TIMES, MAN AWOKE AND *SAW HIMSELF*.

He saw that he was naked under cosmos, homeless in his own body. All things dissolved before his testing thought, wonder above wonder, horror above horror unfolded in his mind.

Then woman too awoke and said it was time to go and slay. And he fetched his bow and arrow, a fruit of the marriage of spirit and hand, and went outside beneath the stars. But as the beasts arrived at their waterholes where he expected them of habit, he felt no more the tiger's bound in his blood, but a great psalm about the brotherhood of suffering between everything alive.

That day he did not return with prey, and when they found him by the next new moon, he was sitting dead by the waterhole.

WHATEVER HAPPENED?

At the heart of the non-buddhism project lies an attitude not of hostility toward, or a rejection of, but rather of an *anarchistic engagement with*, Buddhist thought, however it may present itself. That is, in engaging non-buddhism, we enter into Buddhist discourse not through a polite ringing of the doorbell at the Gateless Gate, an official invitation from Shakyamuni himself in hand, but with a no-knock raid that starts by kicking down the doors of the Buddhist institution, ignoring demands for an explanation. This kind of engagement with Buddhist discourse is as authentic as any other, being differentiated only in the sense that it does not operate within Buddhism's own set of rules, does not answer to the authority which Buddhism asserts over itself, and has little interest in making sense to the Buddhist material with which it is engaging. In this way, the practice is inherently about stripping Buddhism of its power over those who choose to engage with its ideas. This kind of attitude, properly manifested, has a paralyzing effect on the Buddhist, because it presents – nay, *imposes* – a set of standards which Buddhism as a system, and in turn the kind of subject it produces, is entirely incapable of living up to. The result is that, from the perspective of that subject, the only possible responses are either a retreat

into the refuge of an x-buddhist ideology or a decimation of that refuge, the latter of which can only result in a head-on collision with the sheer terror of the naked here and now— itself an alleged Buddhist goal which, strangely enough, Buddhism seems to spend all of its energy desperately avoiding.

Indeed, this avoidance of reality turns out to be the primary religious practice of all Buddhisms: It is not merely an emergent behavior carried out by particular Buddhists acting lateral to Buddhism’s ideological viscera. In fact, it is Buddhism’s very own ideological commitments openly stated, along with its concepts, rituals, and so-called “contemplative practices”, that both endorse and facilitate avoiding reality at all costs. It’s quite obvious to see why this should be the case. After all, it is only by flinching from reality that one could take seriously Buddhism’s ultimate promise of salvation.

In effect, Buddhism promises two things that are mutually exclusive, namely the eradication of suffering and seeing reality “as it is.” If there is suffering — the mantra goes — then you must not be seeing clearly. But in fact, if we spend even a moment staring directly at reality, then the presence of suffering is blindingly obvious: anxiety, anger, war, poverty, guilt, shame, disgust, murder, exploitation...

those things are all *real*—as real as the breath that one follows in an attempt to escape them. It is the invisible albeit vehemently controverted *atman* of the x-buddhist that fuels this fantasy; only by believing in a transcendental self can one come to believe that the eradication of suffering is a mere personal project. Tune into your body sensations and suffering is no longer real. Tune into the sand and the beach disappears. Thus I have heard.

Buddhism cannot keep both of these promises—particularly not when viewed from within an individualistic framework. Luckily for the Buddhism industry, humans don't particularly care for seeing reality as it is. Humans want to avoid suffering, whether it arises as a result of reality or otherwise; reality is a mere afterthought. Buddhism, then, must insist on avoiding reality as much as possible (and, when that fails, on redefining reality itself).

How does Buddhism go about this?

Peter Zapffe, in *The Last Messiah*, describes four strategies that human beings use to come to grips with existential anxiety, all of which work by “artificially limiting the content of consciousness.” This repertoire of

cognitive defense mechanisms has been developed by humans in response to us reaching a particular milestone in our cognitive evolution: the establishment of a capacity to see ourselves for what we are. And what we are is not pretty: a ravenous, destructive, insatiable species that is incapable of satisfaction in the face of the apparency of nihilism and the ever-present terror of death as finality.

We've come far as a species—too far, according to Zapffe. With our ability to augment our survival by building planes and skyscrapers and curing diseases comes the unavoidable fact of having to face the existential and ecological context in which we are doing so. Driven by its biological urge to survive, reproduce, and maintain power at all costs, directing attention to and contemplating its condition is simply not an option for the human. The results, after all, would be disastrous: imagine a species perpetually collectively gripped by an existential terror at the real condition of their existence, which is nothing more than a mass suffering perpetuated only in the service of reproducing the kinds of beings which can suffer. Buddhism offers itself as the antidote to suffering—not merely as a suppressor of its symptoms, as with hedonism or magical thinking, but as the *cure* to suffering altogether. It is crucial, then, that Buddhism's treasury is nothing more than a trove of tools for repression.

Existential repression, in Zapffe's view, is the most active human activity:

The whole of living that we see before our eyes today is from inmost to outmost enmeshed in repressional mechanisms, social and individual; they can be traced right into the tritest formulas of everyday life. Though they take a vast and multifarious variety of forms, it seems legitimate to at least identify four major kinds, naturally occurring in every possible combination: isolation, anchoring, distraction and sublimation.

The first, and most direct, mechanism, that of *isolation*, is the dismissal from consciousness of disagreeable or destructive thoughts and feelings. This strategy simply involves a literal *removal* of unpleasant realities from one's awareness, as "when a man who weeps on the street is removed with police assistance."

American culture is a pioneer in such a practice. Coupled with Buddhism, the practice is raised to an artform. What is the goal of "mindfulness" as it is touted by every book ever published by the Mindfulness Industry™? Despite the formulation of mindfulness as being the practice of

“paying direct, non-judgemental attention to the present moment”, the advertised result of such a practice is almost exclusively some kind of pacification of negative thoughts and emotions, be it stress-relief, increasing one’s long-term happiness, or boosting productivity by quieting one’s inner screams that offer themselves in response to capitalistic exploitation. (Even apart from the secular-medicalized formulations of mindfulness, the goal of Buddhist practice among religious Buddhists is just as blatantly isolationist in its fantasy: the eradication of negative states and the fetters such as hatred, ill-will, conceit, or sensual desire. In other words, the eradication of the realities of human nature.) A popular catchphrase in mindfulness literature encourages “gaining a distance from thoughts”, which may even elevate itself to a complete repudiation of thought altogether. Oh how the Buddhist cherishes the widely sought-after state of “no-thought”, where no threatening exposure of x-buddhist hypocrisy can make its way into his mind.

The second repressional mechanism is *anchoring*. Anchoring begins in early in childhood when we cling for comfort to the parent, who provides us with a sense of familiarity and a safe space from the ephemerality of the world around us. I propose that an anchor is experienced as something transcendental; something which, by dint of

not being subjected to the insubstantiality and unpredictability of raw experience, can be held on to as means of carrying on in experience and one's routine:

Though typically unconscious, it may also be fully conscious (one 'adopts a goal.') Publicly useful anchorings are met with sympathy, he who 'sacrifices himself totally' for his anchoring (the firm, the cause) is idolised. He has established a mighty bulwark against the dissolution of life.

Adopting a personal goal involves manufacturing something abstract that is beyond one's actual experience, but which allows one to use this imagined entity as an anchor, as a way to avoid having to admitting defeat just yet. Most of our anchorings are built on collectively constructed ones:

Any culture is a great, rounded system of anchorings, built on foundational firmaments, the basic cultural ideas. The average person makes do with the collective firmaments, the personality is building for himself, the person of character has finished his construction, more or less grounded on the inherited, collective main

firmaments (God, the Church, the State, morality, fate, the law of life, the people, the future).

Buddhist ideology benefits from the fragility of socially constructed anchorings. Many Westerners, for example, are increasingly recognizing the arbitrariness of their culture's system of anchorings, which is clearly illustrated by the decline of religiosity in the West and skepticism toward government institutions. The loss of trust in Western society's ability to provide adequate anchoring prompts people to look for a system from outside, perhaps by looking to the "mysterious East", whose sages seem to have come upon some existential grounding that is not the shallow religious dualism or capitalist materialism of the native culture, but rather is a *real response* to the human experience. Buddhism offers a unique solution to the horror of existence that is seemingly not beholden to the humanly realms of invented culture and institutions. It speaks *ad nauseum* about the "present moment" and the importance of accepting reality "as it is."

Yet the concept of "Refuge", which traditionally forms the very foundations Buddhist practice, seems utterly antithetical to reality as it is. Let's examine dharma teacher Jack Kornfield's poetic description of the practice, from his website:

Viktor Frankl, the concentration camp survivor, was also the founder of logotherapy. He discovered that most of those who survived the camps did so only if they had faith in a greater purpose for themselves and the world. Like these survivors, we each need to find our sense of purpose, to orient and support ourselves amidst the fragmented pulls of busy, modern life. Buddhist psychology's response to this need is to offer the practice of taking refuge.

Let us ignore for a moment the tired trope of presenting what is essentially a religious practice as “Buddhist psychology”, as if it were a medically legitimized clinical discipline. Immediately we see an appeal to “[finding a] sense of purpose” to ground oneself in, and to “orient” oneself *around* reality, rather than being with it. The Buddha, it is said, simply had those recite the vows of refuge who “wanted to become a follower of the path.” In what can only be a deliberate work of irony, Kornfield says of this process, in a manner tediously repetitive of virtually every x-buddhist advertisement:

There is nothing to join, nothing to become—simply this turning of the heart.

Of course, there is in fact “something to become” in taking these vows, namely, an x-buddhist subject. In taking refuge, “we reaffirm our sacred connection with the world”, and “[make] conscious our trust in a lineage of teachings.” These statements are as clear affirmations of subjectification to an ideology as any. By subjectifying oneself to x-buddhist ideology, one gains access to a refuge. This is supposed to help us in “our journey as we move through joy and sorrow, gain and loss.” In other words, refuge serves as a form of anchoring. It is not enough to merely experience moving through joy and sorrow, or gain and loss—to be with reality as it is. Some subtle form of comfort to cling to must be slipped in—be it refuge, Buddhahood, or “Pure Consciousness.” Zapffe writes of the disillusionment of anchorings in a way poetically appropriate as a description for what happens when the Buddhist fantasy of refuge is shattered and “Pure Consciousness” subsides, marking a return to the Real:

[D]uring such play one may accidentally rip a hole right to the bottom, and the scene is instantly transformed from euphoric to macabre. The dread of being stares us in the eye, and in a deadly gush we perceive how the minds are

dangling in threads of their own spinning, and that a hell is lurking underneath.

If we were to design a practice for getting in touch with reality, the description above would be set as the aim of such a practice—to arrive there over and over again. Buddhism inverts this by making the practice about *building* anchorings, rather than tearing them down.

Another strategy is to engage in simple *distraction*: “[o]ne limits attention to the critical bounds by constantly enthralling it with impressions.” X-buddhisms that preach about the primacy of body sensations are engaging in this form of repression. To them, suffering can be subdued with nothing more than a re-directing of one’s attention toward the body. The fact that such a practice happens to be quite convincing phenomenologically makes it all the more sinister, for, far from eradicating suffering, directing attention away from suffering does just that—it causes one to simply forget about it.

“Formal” meditation in the broad sense, as it is currently defined by Buddhism in any of its flavors, is merely a synonym for distraction. You download the hottest meditation app so that you can “take a break from life.” Obviously, life in all its horror does not pause when one

closes one's eyes and counts one's breath. All that has happened is the shifting of attention from the world to a limited field of sensory experience prescribed by the flashing screen or the mindfulness guru guiding the meditator through the speakers. Even formal meditation framed as contemplation, rather than stress relief, is inherently distracting from reality. It is an absurd assertion that in order to contemplate reality, one must retreat from it as it is and turn inward in some quiet corner on a cushion. It is equally absurd to suggest that in order to address suffering, one must turn inward. Despite so many Buddhists' bafflingly blatant endorsement of a solipsistic conception of suffering (i.e. "suffering is created in your own mind"), the inconvenient truth is that most forms of suffering are *collectively* created, a truth which Buddhism rarely, if ever, acknowledges, especially as it forges its alliance with modern individualist ideologies. We will return to this last point in a moment, as it is the needle that threads together the strands of Buddhism's philosophical and sociological juvenility.

Let us now turn toward the most subtle strategy:

The fourth remedy against panic, sublimation, is a matter of transformation rather than repression. Through stylistic or artistic gifts can

the very pain of living at times be converted into valuable experiences. Positive impulses engage the evil and put it to their own ends, fastening onto its pictorial, dramatic, heroic, lyric or even comic aspects.

Interestingly, Zapffe views sublimation as the “rarest of the protective means” he introduces. When it comes to Buddhism’s appropriation of this strategy, it turns out to be the very foundation of even the most serious Buddhist practice. Buddhism is about investigating suffering, which can mean taking suffering as an object in some way. That is, we can, as subjects, take the experience of suffering and act as experiential detectives, inspecting its function and mechanisms as something apart from ourselves. By understanding our own suffering, we can cease suffering... or so the theory goes. This is, quite frankly, a ridiculous fantasy, for what makes human suffering so problematic is the fact that, along with the self, it is collectively constituted. There is no self apart from suffering, just as there is no self apart from our collective mind. To speak of removing oneself from one's embeddedness in a system of suffering when that self is itself a formation of that very same system is to use the means of language to pervert possibility. It is precisely this fallacy that endlessly blinds us to the circularity of our attempts at changing reality

without actually *doing* anything *to* it, let alone merely looking directly at it.

We've seen that, while Buddhism endlessly preaches about the real conditions of human existence, its practical function serves only to obscure them. My temperament drives me to believe that the circus of Buddhist teachers and authors speaking about the "freedom from suffering" all themselves consume the snake oil they distribute. Yet my intellect and experience drives me to believe that many of them know quite well that the promise of eradicating suffering while keeping one's self intact is a deluded myth. So utterly terrifying is it to admit a defeat of hope in the face of reality that it is preferable to knowingly promote delusion rather than succumb to nihilism. That is, in fact, a diagnosis of all of twentieth-century Western philosophy, and Buddhism is not special in this regard. Buddhism as it functions today can only be viewed as a religious practice grounded in an aversion to its own historical pessimism. While the real promise of Buddhism lay in the radical possibility of taking seriously the notion of nihility and the futility of our efforts to individually triumph over a shared human condition, the West instead chooses to use Buddhism to reaffirm its revulsion for any acknowledgement of our existence as shared, and its fetishized ideal of individual human agency and power.

And make no mistake: when Buddhism ceases to be useful in supporting the ideologies of corporate consumer capitalism and the neoliberal American dream in their quest for worldwide ideological dominance, it will crumble and die just like every other culture exploited and consumed before it, while its institutional leaders will take their *dana* offshore, hand-in-hand with their technocrat co-conspirators. When that time comes, are we going to get up and follow them there? Or will we remain seated and follow our breaths?

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AUTHOR

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