

Entering the tiger's cave



Four talks by Winton Higgins

Creative Dharma

TAKING CREATIVITY INTO MEDITATION + MEDITATIVE SENSIBILITY INTO THE ARTS

ENTERING THE TIGER'S CAVE

The texts that follow started out as talks given by Winton Higgins to One Mindful Breath, Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand in February 2019.

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SECULAR BUDDHISM AND THE WESTERN SEARCH FOR MEANING

Since the late nineteenth century Buddhism has been promoted in the west in various different guises – as an alternative, ‘scientific’ religion; as an **alternative to** religion; as a psychotherapy; and as a **practical philosophy** in the ancient Greek sense of a set of ideas to actually live by. It has been promoted in this way on both sides of what we might *now* think of as a religious/secular divide.

Many early western adopters and adapters followed the logic of the late 19th-century biologist Thomas Huxley. He had lots of close Christian friends but he couldn’t swallow their beliefs. At the same time he wanted to be like them and ‘have a tail like all the other foxes’, so he invented agnosticism as his own quasi-‘faith’.

That motivation has drawn many westerners to Buddhism up to the present time. Encouraged by western ‘orientalism’ in particular, they’ve adopted traditional religious forms of Buddhism which offer revealed ultimate truths; venerable institutions; bracing rituals and ecstatic experiences – ‘religious experiences’; and practices that promise individual salvation, just like the west’s own dominant religion.

Both Christianity and Asian Buddhisms provide answers to the two basic and interdependent questions every human being must answer in practice, willy nilly:

- ▶ ***How should I live?***
- ▶ ***What sort of person should I become?***

Consciously posing these two questions throughout our lives is often referred to as ***the search for meaning***.

We should note the strong ethical element in these questions, one that presupposes an ***inner life*** – a sensitivity and attention to our innermost



experiences. This requirement for a life well lived goes back to the ancient Egyptians and their injunction – ***Know thyself!***

The injunction has reverberated down through the millennia. It appears carved in stone at the portal to the oracle in Delphi. Early Christianity adopted it. It's endemic to Buddhism. And so on, to its modern apotheosis in secular philosophy and psychoanalysis.

We'll be returning to this vital requirement in Saturday's workshop.

RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR SEARCHES FOR MEANING

Religion *as such* never enjoyed a monopoly on the search for meaning – the claims of its messianic practitioners notwithstanding. Ancient Greek thinkers were posing questions like the two just mentioned in essentially non-religious terms that didn't rely on revelation and blind faith.

The Greeks kicked around these questions in an open-ended way. They *examined* the questions, and themselves. As one of them, Socrates, put it: the **unexamined** life is not worth living. It's not worthy of a human being. From the European Enlightenment to the present day, major western thinkers have tended to turn away from religious doctrine and towards something like the open-ended, inquiring and secular approach of Socrates & co.

We can trace the history of Buddhism as wandering back and forth across this religious/secular dividing line, right up to its present-day development in the western world. Stephen Batchelor's work over the last quarter-century builds a strong case for seeing the Buddha's own approach to the search for meaning as open-ended, inquiring and secular, just like that of Socrates.

However, religion in ancient Indian culture had tremendous cultural prestige, such that on his death his followers gravitated across the religious/secular line to start a religion like any other – combining revealed truths (beginning with karma and rebirth, and 'the four noble truths'); with authoritative institutions that featured



hierarchy, dogma and patriarchy; ritualised practice; and the promise of individual salvation (fortunate rebirth, enlightenment, the end of suffering) to the compliant. Many expressions of Asian Buddhism and their western transplants still rely on these features today. For many practising Buddhists, their adherence stands or falls on the promise of a fortunate rebirth, and fear of its opposite.

But as the Buddha's tradition spread out and away from India, the religious impulse could falter, especially in host societies with developed cultures and weaker religious institutions. The main case in point is early Chinese Buddhism which started two millennia ago, and its Korean and Japanese offshoots. Instead of dogma, scepticism ('great doubt') found favour, as did inquiry and experimentation with forms of practice. The focus fell on living this very life intelligently and with maximum awareness, not banking on post-mortem bliss.

ENTER SECULAR BUDDHISM

In the last 70 years the foundations of secular Buddhism have been laid by two westerners who separately delved into the Buddha's own teaching (as preserved in the Pali canon, before later commentaries masked it and religified it). The latter of the two also took inspiration from the sceptical east-Asian tradition. In the light of the above trajectory, these origins appear natural, as does the border-hopping back across the religious/secular demarcation line.

The first of these founders was a British military-intelligence officer from world war two, Harold Musson, who in Sri Lanka became the senior Theravādin monk Ñāṇavīra Thera (1920–65). He made himself unpopular in orthodox circles by pointing out the enormous gap between the Buddha's own teaching and the Theravāda school's orthodox commentaries – not least as they touch on the doctrine of the 'four noble truths'. This doctrine displaces the Buddha's four central injunctions that we find set out in his first discourse.

These injunctions, Ñāṇavīra showed, come unencumbered with metaphysical truth-claims, and can thus usefully be compared to the injunction on the label Alice read on the bottle she found when she fell down the rabbit hole – it just said: 'Drink me!' Or: Just do it! As if that wasn't enough, he declared ignorance of the commentaries



to be a positive advantage for any serious dharma practitioner intent on applying the injunctions in question. In effect, he championed Buddhism as a practical philosophy on the Greek model.

Ñāṇavīra exercised a seminal influence on the second major founder of secular Buddhism, whom I mentioned earlier: Stephen Batchelor (b.1953), whose work brings us together this evening. Ordaining as a Tibetan monk as a young man, Batchelor later moved to a monastery in Korea where he trained in the great-doubting Sōn tradition which aligns with Chinese Chan and Japanese Zen. So both these practitioners are heirs to Buddhism in its ancient secular iterations.

But that is not all Ñāṇavīra and Batchelor have in common. Both draw on post-metaphysical currents in western philosophy since Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). In other words – to summarise brutally – they eschew any notion of ultimate truths hiding behind (and contradicting) direct experience. There is no ultimate reality that religious and other metaphysical truth claims can correspond to. Rather, truth refers to ethical, practical outcomes. A *true statement* is one that points the way to human flourishing through skilful ethical practice.

By making this link between the early teachings of Buddhism and today’s western post-metaphysics, both these founders have provided the dharma with an expression that makes sense to many of us living in the modern west.

PURIFICATION AND SELF-ENLARGEMENT

Before concluding, I want to introduce another distinction that helps us to situate and profile secular Buddhism. The distinction itself comes from the work of a prominent member of the American pragmatist school of post-metaphysical philosophy, Richard Rorty (1931–2007), and relates to the second of the two key interdependent questions I raised at the beginning: what sort of person should I become? That is: what sort of character should I aim to foster, and how am I to go about it?

Rorty divides the various answers to this question into two antithetical strategies. The first springs from ‘the desire to purify oneself, [which] is the desire to slim



down, to peel away everything that is accidental, to will one thing, to intensify, to become a simpler and more transparent being'. The celibate, ascetic lifestyle of the Buddhist monastic fits this description to a tee. The payoff is transcendence to a permanent post-human, post-suffering state of grace. In traditional Buddhism, the ascetic monastic provides the template for the dharma practitioner as such.

The opposite strategy is 'self-enlargement' – not to be confused with narcissistic self-aggrandisement which leads straight to self-diminution. 'The desire to enlarge oneself,' Rorty suggests in *Essays on Heidegger and others*, 'is the desire to embrace more and more possibilities, to be constantly learning, to give oneself over entirely to curiosity, to end by having envisaged all the possibilities of the past and of the future...[It inspires] the life that seeks to extend its own boundaries rather than to find its centre.'

This is the aesthetic rather than ascetic strategy, and it doesn't presuppose any post-human, post-mortem transcendence, sainthood, or state of grace. Just flourishing in *this* life. Secular Buddhism exemplifies this strategy, I suggest.

On Saturday, we might want to explore what this distinction means in practice – in how we live, and how we meditate. Do we enter our inner worlds in the spirit of Marie Kondo, decluttering and junking all the bits of ourselves that don't fit the serene, pure model? Or do we embrace 'the whole catastrophe' of what's going on in our hearts and minds, and gradually bring harmony and meaning to our enlarged inner lives?

Either way, of course, we'll avoid slamming the door on the inner life as such – the great temptation of the digital age, but not peculiar to it. On Saturday we'll go more deeply into this topic as well.



The three talks that follow were given during a daylong workshop

ENTERING THE TIGER'S CAVE INSIGHT MEDITATION AND THE INNER LIFE

SESSION 1 • *Satipaṭṭhāna* – seeing the wood, not just the trees

On Wednesday evening, I raised some issues in my talk on secular Buddhism and the western search for meaning around the need to **know thyself** – the injunction that comes down to us from the ancient Egyptians and Greeks, right down to the benefits we attach to **the inner life** today, where our **search for meaning** takes place.

I suggested that the central Buddhist practice of insight meditation based on mindfulness (to use that problematic term for now) is a highly developed approach to opening up our inner lives in the interests of our personal development as reflective human beings, and pursuing our personal search for meaning. The Buddha's foundational teaching for this meditative practice is the *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta* (the discourse on the focuses of awareness).

Some teachers – such as Anālayo, the German-born Theravādin monk I'll return to in a few moments – feel that the Pali word *satipaṭṭhāna* contains too many nuances to be rendered in English, and they choose to leave it untranslated when referring to the meditation practice it proposes. Instead of that choice, I'll follow another widespread tendency and refer to this practice as 'insight meditation'. Note, too that some teachers of some forms of *mindfulness meditation* also see the discourse in question as the basis of their practice, and translate its title as 'The discourse on the four foundations of mindfulness'.

What we see when we open up the discourse is a kind of word map. A graphic version of it would look a bit like a thinking person's hiking map which contains all the features of a particular terrain to facilitate our picking our own way through it



without getting lost. So it's not a strip map, or one that simply stakes out 'The One True Way' to a given destination, like a Google map.

In fact, it's a representation of the whole field through which our awareness might wander. Our attention is doing the hiking, and it's stalking our mind wherever it goes in the seclusion and repose of a meditation session. Or we might equally consult the map while we're going about our everyday lives. It provides lots of reference points to help us locate ourselves and our experience, including seeing where we've just come from, and what the options are for our next steps.

Today I'm inviting you to think of this discourse (or word map) as an aid to knowing ourselves and opening up our inner lives.

But this isn't how it's usually presented.

Because of its salience in the Buddha's tradition, monastic teachers have interpreted and reinterpreted the discourse, and repurposed it, to within an inch of its life. Almost invariably, it comes out the other side bent to a monastic agenda – an ascetic, other-worldly one of 'purification' as opposed to self-enlargement – a contrast we discussed on Wednesday evening.

This observation extends to laicised versions of Theravādin *vipassanā* meditation, which present it as a strip map to get us to a 'goal' (an end point and status variously called awakening, nirvana, or liberation) where the usual horrors and highlights of a human life no longer apply.

Before we return to that problem, let's just get an overview of the discourse.

A GLANCE AT THE SATIPATTHANA SUTTA

The discourse has a complex structure. To keep the map analogy running for one more step: it identifies four principal areas of human experience that act a bit like the cardinal points or quarters on a map. But instead of north, south, east and west, we have experiences of the body, feeling tone, mind, and conceived phenomena (aspects of experience that have been sorted and can be



contemplated along conceptual dharmic lines). Any experience arising at any given moment can be located in one or more of these quarters.

Most maps show north at the top. In much the same way, *awareness of the body* functions like north on our meditative map. Whatever happens to us – whatever experiences we have – the body is always involved. We go through life as *embodied sentient beings*, so the body is *the anchor* at which our awareness rides. Whatever is going on in the other three quarters (or focuses of awareness), it will have bodily ramifications. Think of the needle on our compass – always reminding us where north lies.

Each of the four focuses of awareness (or ‘quarters’ in which experiences arise) has its unique substructure which highlights points of interest. Here’s a starter’s list:

1. **Body** – postures (sitting, standing, lying down, walking); bodily activities (including ‘talking’); bodily sensations (including hot and cold); and what we see, hear, taste, smell and touch (the five physical senses); death and decay.
2. **Feeling-tone** – the instant, often subtle judgment – of pleasant, unpleasant or neutral – that we make every time we feel, see, hear, taste, smell, touch or think something.
3. **Mind** – our gamut of moods, emotions and desires, including their presence or absence at any particular moment, *and their ethical quality*.
4. **Dhammas** (‘phenomena’, roughly) – this category concerns how we process and understand our experience in dharmic terms. In the discourse this focus of awareness comprises a ‘list of lists’ – five basic teachings of the Buddha which he repeatedly presented in the form of lists, starting with the ‘five hindrances’ (forms of resistance to awareness); through the five aggregates (‘heaps’ of experiences – *khandhas* – that constitute human *being*), the six sense spheres, and the seven awakening factors; to the four tasks/noble truths.

The received version of the discourse that has come down to us ends on an odd note, which the German-born Theravādin monk Anālayo presents in his translation of and commentary on the discourse, *Satipaṭṭhāna: the direct path to realization*, under his heading, ‘Prediction’: depending on the intensity of the individual’s practice, s/he will arrive at the goal – or at an important staging post on the way thereto – within any time frame ranging from seven years to seven days.



Yes, this is the monastic, ‘purification’ model of human development coming in at the end of the discourse. It reduces this magnificent map to a strip map. The goal is defined in the standard monastic terms: ‘final knowledge’, ‘purification’, ‘the end of sorrow and lamentation (*dukkha*)’, and the realisation of nirvana (*nibbāna* in Pali).

THE CHOICE OF PURIFICATION

We should note that Stephen Batchelor treats the ‘prediction’ section sceptically. It might have been added later, and thus be apocryphal. It reads too much like a promo. And the discourse as it now stands incorporates the doctrine of the ‘Four Noble Truths’ – which certainly seems to have been a later bolt-on onto the discourse as it stood at the time of the Buddha’s death.

As it stands, though, the discourse ends up in what analysts of religion call a **soteriology**: a doctrine of salvation or redemption that promises some sort of heavenly endpoint. As heavens go, this one isn’t particularly alluring. It’s not promising pink clouds, choirs of angels, occupancy of one of God’s many mansions, or even 72 virgins. **It’s basically offering extinction:** (‘Poof! Gone!’) as one prominent monk put it a few years ago.

Why? Because in this monastic framework, extinction means escaping the hell of human life as ordinary mortals experience it, and as they’re endlessly reborn into it, because of their attachments in it. Final purification from those attachments puts an end to all that. If we subscribe to a hell-on-earth view of our human destiny, then of course we’ll eventually see how all our worldly ties bind us to the endless round of misery and rebirth. So why not make a beeline for this promised escape hatch at the end of our spiritual development?

Needless to say, I don’t think we should buy the opening premise in this strategy. And if we don’t buy it – I’m suggesting – we need to keep treasuring the discourse, but be prepared to repurpose it. (Many have already done just that.) But before we go any further, I want to open a little parenthesis and put in a good word for Anālayo.



ANALAYO'S SATIPATTHANA SUTTA

Since 2003, Anālayo has published three erudite books on the discourse. They've become more user-friendly each time. The latest came out just a few months ago: *Satipaṭṭhāna meditation: a practice guide*. It's the best discussion I've come across of what the discourse has to offer someone seeking to know themselves through insight meditation. It brings the dynamics and conceptual treasures of the discourse to life in a highly accessible way. Without dumbing them down. I commend it to you wholeheartedly, but with the caveat that I've already signalled: the purification and soteriological model running through it.

That said, Anālayo makes clear the way the commentarial tradition diverges from the original Pali text of the discourse, and he illuminates aspects of the practice in helpfully striking ways. Perhaps the most important example of this is his riff on that crucial little four-letter Pali word *sati* – the first component in the compound word *satipaṭṭhāna*. Sati (awareness, mindfulness, recollective awareness) is the fulcrum of the whole practice. Like almost all Indo-European languages, Pali ascribes gender to nouns, and *sati* is feminine.

At the perhaps acceptable risk of essentialising gender, Anālayo suggests we cultivate *sati* as a constant friend always at hand, and a feminine presence at that. So *sati* – awareness – goes everywhere with us. She's soft and gentle, but alert; highly receptive, and capable of giving birth to new and wiser perspectives – especially those that open the heart to compassion and bless us with **reflectivity and wisdom**. She readily forgives us when we blank out and forget about her, not aligning with a forceful, dissociated sort of attention or hyper-attentiveness 'that requires strained effort in order to be maintained' (p.7).

A SECULAR APPROACH TO SATIPATTHANA MEDITATION IN BRIEF

Let's reframe our meditation practice to serve the aspiration to deepen and enlarge our humanity rather than leaving it and its life-world behind as an irredeemable vale of tears. We take *sati*'s hand and invite this human body-and-mind to reveal its contents. At first it might look like an uncharted jungle in there, but that's the nature of the beast, and that's okay.



We have the body as a constant, grounding reference point. Never leave home without your body! At the beginning, and at any subsequent stage, we can ‘check in’ to the body, by watching our breathing, taking note of our posture, and of what we’re doing in the physical realm. And sati holds the map.

We should pass up artificial navigation aids, such as technical instructions and supposed milestones on our way. We have no use for formulas. We follow our experience wherever it leads us, and we have the map to reveal to us where we find ourselves at any given moment.

We’re not heading towards a goal, or chasing any particular experience. We don’t need to be ‘redeemed’, or ‘saved’ – swept off to some post-human, post-suffering plane of existence that would in fact demean our human dignity.

Instead, we’re patiently exploring our inner world and getting to know its myriad inhabitants. We’re clarifying ourselves, becoming more connected, balanced and intelligent. We need to be alert to these processes. Gradually patterns will reveal themselves and ethical discrimination will arise, especially as we master the conceptual framework of the discourse – that is, of the dharma itself – in the course of our meditative lives. And our insights will have the supreme authority of our very own experience.



SESSION 2 • Old and new forms of resistance to the inner life

On Wednesday night, and in the previous session today, I was assuming that we were all on the same page in embracing the inner life. Why would any of us have come to this workshop otherwise? I imagine most of us would agree with Socrates in affirming the examined life as the only one worthy of a human being. What, after all, would an **un**examined life look like?

It would look like going through the day – or year, or decade, or lifetime – putting one foot after the other, doing what those all around as are doing; making habitual responses to the demands of the moment; choosing, acting, speaking (or shouting) without reflecting; avoiding ever asking where it's all headed; never evolving; never deepening or expanding; never tapping into a richer vein.

The Pali term conventionally translated as 'rebirth' actually means **repetitive existence**. Going round and round in circles, or 'the wheel of life' as the Tibetans call it. And wheels going round and round a circuit make ruts. Now that really is something worth giving a swerve! Which is what the inner life – the search for meaning – is all about.

Of course, meditation is just one way into the inner life. It can be summoned up in many other ways: walking in nature, listening to the sounds of nature or meaningful music, keeping a secret diary, intimate correspondence or conversation with people close to us, spending time with works of art, reading good literature, engaging in artistic expression ourselves, or even just living reflectively.

PERENNIAL FORMS OF RESISTANCE

The benefits of cultivating the inner life might make it sound like a no-brainer, but **r**esistance to the inner life has been going on since time immemorial. Otherwise Socrates wouldn't have bothered pointing out the importance of the examined life. In Hannah Arendt's view (her Exhibit A being Adolf Eichmann), lack of reflection underpins what she called 'the banality of evil'.



The Buddha dealt with resistance to the meditative process in one of his core teachings – already mentioned in the previous talk under the rubric of the fourth focus of awareness – in the form of the five hindrances: craving for sense contact, aversion in all its manifestations, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, and shilly-shallying doubt.

Freud identified ‘resistance’ as the principal obstacle to the psychoanalytic process (another road into the inner life) as it manifested in free association. I’m pretty sure he was addressing the same problem that the Buddha did – the drive to skate along on the surface, no matter how thin the ice underfoot is.

Early Protestant theologians even raised resistance to ‘the inner probe’ to the dignity of a pious virtue, and their legacy is alive and well today. If people looked inside and pondered their wretched chaotic lives, the theologians argued, they’d become terminally depressed, if not actually disobedient. To avoid that, the pious Christian should remain perpetually **busy**.

God rewards busy people by making them rich – a surefire sign of His approval and blessing, went the argument. This was music to the ears of pioneering capitalists and their successors. So we find an archetypal busy capitalist, Henry Willcox, in EM Forster’s 1910 novel, *Howard’s End*, boasting: ‘I am not a fellow who bothers about my own inside.’

We still live in cultures that affirm *busyness as a virtue in itself*, and those under its spell brusquely dismiss any form of reflection and contemplation. ‘Don’t ask a busy man like me to think about life, death, and the meaning of it all! Let alone sit around on a cushion doing nothing!’ (The *time-poverty* of my fellow Sydneysiders is legendary!) I imagine that all of us who meditate regularly have come up against this sort of attitude, and found it difficult to justify ourselves in the face of it.

Another form of resistance to the inner life is **distraction**. Consumerist culture – ‘the greed and titillation society’, as Donald Horne put it – also self-evidently subverts the inner probe. In the case of the dharma at least, the inner probe depends on a degree of ‘seclusion and not clinging to anything in the world’, our friend Anālayo writes, channelling the Buddha.



Before we go further into the problem of distraction as resistance to the inner life, we might pause to consider the superficial unattractiveness of the inner probe that fuels the resistance, given the human condition itself.

Here's the great novelist Iris Murdoch's view of that condition, as summarised by the British philosopher and literary critic Galen Strawson:

We are limited, imperfect, unfinished, and full of blankness and jumble. We [are] unable to domesticate the senseless rubble aspect of human life, the 'ultimately unintelligible mess'. We are divided creatures, distracted creatures, extended, layered, pulled apart, our minds are ragbags, as we struggle with fear and muddle (nothing is more evident in human life), with the invincible variety, the unmasterable contingency of the world, with moments of senseless horror and 'scarcely communicable frightfulness'... Egoistic anxiety veils the world. It sets up a haze of self-protective illusion. The mind is 'besieged and crowded' by selfish dream life. It is hard to exaggerate our capacity for egoistic fabrication and 'rat-like fantasies'. We cannot see things as they are.

Welcome to the tiger's cave, my friends! Those old Protestant theologians had a point, then, didn't they? Choosing to spend time exploring this inner landscape demands a certain amount of self-confidence and intestinal fortitude. A meditative sit isn't always a dance on roses, even with our friend *sati* by our side. Fear and loathing of the inner world – of the mind itself – has become so intense that it has, according to Christopher Bollas, attracted a psychoanalytic name: **psychophobia**.

RESISTANCE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Thanks to our sped-up lives and new 'information and communication technologies', our distractedness has ballooned. In *Net loss: the inner life in the digital age*, a brilliant essay in defence of an inner life under threat, Sebastian Smee writes: 'Today, being human means being distracted. It is our new default setting.' When we occupy that default setting, inner life eludes us, making us different, drastically reduced selves.



To be clear: the new technologies haven't forced the recent changes on us. The problem lies in how we deploy it and build it into our way of being in the world – allowing it to become a bad master rather than a good servant. As a good servant it can help us achieve skilful purposes – witness the #MeToo movement.

But as a bad master, the new technologies accelerate our pre-existing resistance to looking inside and to acknowledging 'the whole catastrophe' that awaits us in there. It encourages our propensity to split off aspects of our inner worlds that we find painful; that don't fit some template or other, including our own self-preening delusions; or that we deem unfit for public consumption.

In the first instance, what we post on a social-media platform masks our inner selves by creating what Smee calls a **performative self** – in many instances a performer desperate for approval and applause – not just in editing what is revealed and concealed about her/his reality, but doing so in the debased language that these platforms support. This is a language stripped of nuance, doubt and ambiguity; it consists largely of clichés, platitudes, stock phrases (often reduced to their initials, like OMG), emoticons, and thumbs-up and thumbs-down signs. It's a language that lends itself to the abrupt, 'emphatic non-sequiturs' that typify social-medial utterances, such as Trump's tweets.

The tragedy is that over time we can gradually *become* these inarticulate caricatures of ourselves. They become naturalised. **They become who we are to ourselves.** Which is precisely what the owners of the platforms require. Those who use social media platforms constitute the platform-owners' *products* to be on-sold to advertisers. These products need to be reduced to the labellable and quantifiable units that can be factored into algorithms and targeted for micro-marketing.

We can link the art critic Sebastian Smee's alarm at what's happening to our inner lives to that sounded (also last year) by the psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas. He embeds his diagnosis of the inner life's current plight in a bold historical survey of successive, culturally induced 'frames of mind'.

In our digital age, he suggests, we arrive at 'transmissive selves' who melt themselves into various sharing circuits, and receive and re-transmit so-called



‘information’, often intensively. There’s no search for truth going on here, just the need to remain networked in some sense to virtual ‘friends’. Which largely consists in sharing trivia and everyday logistics, and imposes conformity and the subliminal attitudes that underpin the process. Bollas refers to the conformism of the transmissive self as ‘normopathy’ – being abnormally normal.

Becoming hyper-connected transmissive selves doesn’t liberate us or add something to our lives – it *reduces* us, squanders our attention, and ties us to a standardised, hollowed-out way of being in the world. And of course, it militates against our delving into our inner lives.

THE MEDITATIVE LIFE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Gotama thought it worthwhile to name the forms of resistance to the inner life that he encountered long before our complex societies and technologies arose. Maybe he was applying the strategy of keeping your friends close and your enemies even closer.

The rewards of pursuing a meditative life are invaluable, but we do need to be alert to cultural factors that tend to obstruct our pursuit – as well as those on his original list. As many great meditation teachers have shown, the hindrances can be our teachers – they constrain us to look at negative aspects of the mind that we need to acknowledge and let go of. We can apply the same strategy to today’s cultural obstacles, including those sporting the blandishments of digital devices.



SESSION 3 • Sangha essentials – creating community

We all have some thing or things that occupy the centre of our life-worlds – often objects of daily devotion on which our sense of meaning and security depend. For some it's a career, fame (real or online), a healthy bank balance, an office crammed with tech, insurance policies, or a snappy car. For others it might be a relationship, or a network of them – family life.

In Buddhist terms, these are called 'refuges' – refuges from the scary 'unmasterable contingency of the world' that we heard Galen Strawson mention in the previous talk. The trouble is that all these refuges *belong to* that contingent world, so they're likely to fail us when we need them most.

For this reason the Buddha proposed as the centrepiece of his practice tradition three refuges that aren't like that. Nothing, no-one and no contingency can take them away from us. They're always there for us, come what may. They are our human capacity to awaken, the teaching and practice that invokes it, and the community of our fellow dharma practitioners – *sangha*. In short, the traditional three refuges of Buddha, dharma and sangha.

How does sangha get a guernsey in such august company? I can meditate by myself in my own bedroom, where I can also jump online and read or listen to a cornucopia of dharmic teachings. I can listen to podcast dharma talks anywhere and any time. If I need to talk to others about it, I can join an online chat room.

Okay, I understand that in other times and places people needed their sanghas because they had nowhere else to sit in peace and had no other access to the dharma. But it's not like that any more. Besides, I'm a busy person and can't afford to be tied down to a fixed weekly commitment (unless it's for something important like football training). And, frankly, *I'm simply not a joiner*. Sorry. Two refuges are enough for me.

Does this sounds familiar? Doesn't it also sound unconvincing? It's worth pondering just why this common talk does sound so unconvincing. One of the more



interesting writers today is the feminist historian, Barbara Taylor, and in *The last asylum: a memoir of madness in our times*, she puts her finger on it:

We become who we are through relationships. This 'I' is born at the interface of self and other, the helpless and help-giver, infant and parent. As babies we learn about ourselves via the minds of those around us; inchoate sensations take on shape and meaning through the responses of others. Selfhood surfaces on a tide of recognition: this is who you are/this is who I am. We human beings are dependent creatures who discover ourselves in communication with others, spoken and unspoken, conscious and unconscious. Without such communication the individual remains undiscovered, lost in a limbo of unintelligible being.

So lack of community hollows out our inner life – confines us to ‘a limbo of unintelligible being’. Taylor introduces her bold statement with this one from her famous friend and sometime co-author, Adam Phillips from his book *Missing out*: ‘There is nothing ... that can solve the problem that other people actually exist, and we are utterly dependent on them as actually existing, separate other people... [E]verything else follows from this.’

Note Phillips’s phrasing here: ‘*actually existing*, separate other people’. Christopher Bollas, in his book that I cited in the previous talk, vividly describes a tragicomic scene that we will all recognise: good friends meeting to share a meal and to ‘catch up’, but ending up spending most of the time on their phones. Privileging virtual entities over the flesh and blood friends actually present. ‘Virtuals’ over ‘actuals’.

Unmediated communication with actual others actually present is a rich, subtle and complex business. Meaning is communicated by words, yes, but also by gestures (including touch, perhaps), body language, tone of voice, facial expression, shifting direction of the gaze, intonation, hesitations, and so on. No wonder we find ‘talking’ among the activities of the body commended by the Buddha in his discourse on the focuses of awareness. There’s a lot going on right there!

So *mediated* communication (with the partial exception of audio-visual conversations) with virtuals is stunted, single-channel communication. In *ID: The quest for meaning in the 21st century*, the neuroscientist Susan Greenfield warns



that we actually stunt the development of our very brains if we habitually communicate with virtuals online instead of meeting up with actuals. Our brains need the complex challenge of unmediated interaction with actuals in order to develop physiologically.

And our hearts and minds certainly need to tap into the rich source of actual, dynamic community in order to deepen and expand our inner lives.

WHAT SORT OF SANGHA?

The term 'community' refers to a **process** of interaction and bonding between people, not to a mere sum of the members of a group. A shared purpose provides the focus for the interaction and bonding in question. The community's shared ethic drives it, and clarifies and supports the main ethical principles that its individual members each seek to cultivate and realise in their own life. It would be odd if it were otherwise – we humans are herd animals, after all.

We live in a wider, modern western culture with its own civic ethos that stresses equality and inclusiveness within the membership of any voluntary association. This in turn requires us to consort on democratic terms. A western sangha needs to honour these values above all. If we join in building a sangha, or join an existing one, we should demand that our age, gender, ethnicity and all the other ascribed differences that constitute our identity, are accepted equally, and without question.

These requirements flatly contradict the sangha models we find in the traditional Buddhist world. In almost all cases women are institutionally or informally marginalised and subordinated. Monastics are exalted over lay people. Authority is exercised according to monastic or quasi-monastic rank. Vertical communication trumps the horizontal alternative. In the Theravāda school, the word 'sangha' itself is reserved for the monastic collective – which leaves one wondering under what name the fellowship of lay practitioners is to be known and honoured.

The modern western sangha thus represents a radical departure from the organisational model that comes down to us through the Asian lineages. At the same time, we have to acknowledge that whether a sangha thrives or not is the



responsibility of each of us members. It doesn't belong to a service industry: having decided to participate in it, we can't just grump about the quality of its 'services' and walk away. Each of us must own and seek to identify and overcome the sangha's shortfalls. They're not someone else's responsibility.

One final, important requirement: our sangha must have humour pumping through its veins. As we delve into our inner lives, we'll find plenty to laugh about. And remember to look for the aha! moment each time you do have a laugh. It could be a vital awakening moment!

*Audio of the last three talks can be found at
onemindfulbreath.org.nz/awakening/entering-the-tigers-cave*



NOTES FOR THOSE WHO ENTER INTO THE TIGER'S CAVE

Sati • Often translated as 'mindfulness', but better translated as 'recollective awareness', as every experience in the moment is part of a causal chain or sequence.

Satipaṭṭhāna sutta • The Buddha's discourse on the focuses of awareness. (The first term is perhaps best translated as 'attending with awareness'.)

Soteriology • Any (usually religious) doctrine that promotes the idea of salvation or redemption, typically through transcendence to a higher plane of existence.

Psychophobia • Fear of the mind; associated with avoiding introspection.

Normopathy • Being 'abnormally normal', conformism; associated with psychophobia.

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