

***The Great Inland Sea: reflections on the buddhadharma in the  
post-secular age.***

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For many decades following its first European settlement the Australian continent was believed to hold a vast inland sea, which had only to be verified by prompt exploration and scientific authentication. The first decades of the nineteenth century saw a rash of different expeditions that each sought out, and universally failed to find, the great inland sea of which so many, so hopefully, had dreamed. The primary cause for their hope is unclear, except that a reservoir of freshwater would have been able to support the burgeoning agricultural economy and demography of this new, promised southern land.

Their hope, though, perhaps went beyond this prosaic need and answered to a hunger for mythology. It was to them, as it can conveniently be to us, more than a metaphor of pathos. It was a human hope, wholly im-mured in historical contingency. These explorers had neither the technological facility with which the twenty-first century could come by the same knowledge, nor the safeguards in place for at least being able to rescue their lives should it come to the worst. It was a literal wandering in the wilderness, a wager with an indifferent world it is difficult, if not impossible, for us to conceive of. They kept on, believing that each step in obdurate sand was bringing them closer to a revelation of vast water.

Instead, many died, most often of starvation, in a desert they had not reckoned with. Often in states of utter hopelessness, still in search of an image which even in their dying breath they had no means of knowing was a mirage. Others simply gave up to defeat: they couldn't find anything. They sacrificed themselves for, and remained in thrall to, a hypothesis. There is no great sea to be found in the centre of the Australian continent, even should there once have been. It is largely arid desert. It can only be hoped that in the journey itself there was also a redemption of its end.

In our own time, they still die, such explorers of the spirit, which is as much what the Australian explorers were. They too are in thrall to an image they are certain shines like phosphorous from a transcendent truth. The exploratory expeditions continue; some even return to civilisation to report on the revelation of plenitude they have found at the centre of the human heart of darkness. It is there, they claim, and they carry its truth in the nervous system, the bones, and the blood. *I have seen it*. Until they lead others there by the hand to show them directly the same revelation of the same place, there is no certainty possible in regard to their claims. There is only hearsay.

Between the familiar and the unseen, between the realms of a phenomenal world and the intangible tracings of mind, beings find differing levels of such fulfilment. For many, world and mind are not a duality: everything that finds an origin in the play of consciousness, from Neolithic cave-painting to the programming of artificial intelligence in autonomous machines, also finds its proper manifestation in the visible forms of material culture that are then able to move back into conceptual reorientation. So ensues a multiform interaction of thought and matter, a web of invention that privileges no single dimension while it ceaselessly generates hitherto non-existent forms of being. Individual beings alone privilege one or other 'side' of the flux, according to a partial tendency. (How and why they do remains a fundamental question of theoretical psychology, not least of a metaphysics that might encompass it.)

For others, world and mind are neither a duality nor a multiform monism, but a designation of the same gestalt under two aspects that bear a relation of function if not of value. Spinozan thought and extension, for example, were understood equally as infinite terms (*attributes*) of a single substance, but for those faithful to the intuition of transcendence, thought takes precedence, comes causally prior to the material world, and is held responsible for it. All the worlds will dissolve into mind when mind has been recognised in its true nature, and all the subjective idealisms, from Berkeley to the Buddha to the Advaita Vedanta, come finally to rest in the Mind that is generator, creator, destroyer and magic-show master in one: a great inland sea from which all life has come and into which it will return – into the post-conceptual Absolute, the blissful void of Buddhist *śūnyatā*, or for the Vedanta the final release of the ego into the Self of Brahman.

Lost paradises, as these are, stand as both large propositions and powerfully seductive redemptions of the frequently senseless suffering of experience. They are able to stand in the mind as rationally defensible, intuitively sensible, aesthetically beautiful answers to absurdity. They are more than just ideas, and certainly reach far beyond the cognitive brilliance but terminal limitations of Western philosophy. Religion, if not at all moribund, finds itself discredited everywhere, but contemplative spiritual practice, especially of the Buddhist dharma, discovers a more profound engagement among the middle classes of the northern democracies today than at any time since the spread of esoteric and heterodox Christian movements of the European Middle Ages. Of them, too, it must be asked whether they enter into the search for an illusion, but one which is as necessary now as such search has always been before now.

On a path, for example, in a dry place, there are two people walking towards each other. The first is a nondescript figure, in simple working clothes, perhaps a teacher. The other wears the more elaborate clothes and markings of a life devoted to the serving of a God. At an inevitable point in their passage, they come to each other and out of courtesy stop and exchange some words. The religious one asks the other, "Where do you go?" The other looks the renunciate up and down and says simply "I go to work. They need a teacher in the next valley. I can read and write, I know the plants. And you, where do you go?" The renunciate says, "I'm not going anywhere, especially. All places are the same. I'm merely travelling on the way." "To what purpose?" asks the first. "To find God."

They part with some warmth and keep walking in their respective directions. But neither of them reach their goal. The teacher is attacked in the night by a gang of illiterate thieves, who kill him though they discover no money on his person. Before he passes into unconsciousness however,

the teacher has a revelation of extraordinary happiness, of understanding, and feels he is passing into a blessed state. His last thought is of regret for not being able to do some good for the people of the valley, and he deplores his untoward fate.

The renunciate, too, is killed in a rockslide set off by a goat traversing a narrow ravine high above. He too dies deploring his fate, asking of his God what he has done to deserve such a death, especially as he has harmed no one and has been praying all his life for the deliverance of his soul. When their bodies are found they both receive the same rites of burial, the same prayers are spoken over them. After all of the people go back to their homes and soon forget each of the dead, it is the same earth that holds them in its great, vast arms.

It is an old-fashioned parable, not complex. But the twenty-first century, too, is an unsophisticated time. While its people can't be so easily identified by their intentions, let alone their clothes, they are both identified and judged not merely by their intention but purely and absolutely by the clothes they wear, the markings and signs that signify an identification that all too often will be defended to the death. The so-identified will dispute this and assert that they do not defend the sign, rather the principle and truth it is meant to represent.

But if it is the sign that is believed to mirror without a flaw the invisibility of the human or divine truth it stands in front of, how else is its truth to be ascertained apart from it? The religious faithful proclaim their faith in their self-representation but die privately without it; the godless ones stumble upon grace when they have never been expecting it. In their case grace goes without a sign – one that all others can recognize – but who will trust in that grace without the signs history and opinion has furnished him?

It appears that those who battle over the sign (and they are many) do so over it alone, when no other indubitable evidence is forthcoming, and the signified remains obscure. Everywhere battle is waged over mere phenomena, appearance, the surface, as well as assumptions of trust. The world everywhere trades in the phenomenon, and noumenon goes dressed poorly, or not at all, and always easily misunderstood. Imagining they fight over the unseen and ungraspable, they fight (in a fact both banal and bizarre) over a veil, a piece of dusty ground once consecrated, over a word that, embedded in dense thickets of language, dares to describe the hierophant in one term and not another. The word is not the man, though it threatens his integrity, both as master of the Law and master of himself. The sign assumes extreme degrees of power. The unseen is so vulnerable to constant misunderstanding that it is only in the shoddy, various garbs of phenomenality that it can express itself, yet be hidden, find no refuge, and

finally retire again into that other world which defies the visible one to translate or comprehend it.

Yet where there is no phenomenon as a proof, there is a nothingness, and that, for most, is worse than misunderstanding what *could* be. For them, there is at least still a makeshift, rickety stage with gestures and familiar choreography, placards on which are repeated tired and diminished forms of language, on which they throw themselves around. And proceed, as in a perverse Punch and Judy horrorscape, to tear each other to pieces.

If so much of the authoritative world relies on appearance for its judgments, how much of its judgment remains sound? And if the unseenness of truth is so often misrepresented, how is its voice still able to be accurately heard? Does truth exist as such, to our gaze, or is it always and only dwelling in an ontology more or less closed to consensual experience?

To the first question (and it is a further irony of religious belief) theism will answer that no phenomenal or merely human authority can vouchsafe any divine truth and that even the evidence of holy beings must be apprehended within and through a prior faith in them. Atheistic idealism will seek to arrive at universal truth, philosophically, precisely through and only through the efficacy of *its* signs. Subjective idealism will regard the epistemological project with some disdain, because all truth is to be found not in a universal cognitive framework that all beings – from New York cab-drivers to Hutu bushmen – can agree on, but in the revealed self-evident experience of the unique psyche, which has its own infallible reason of the intuition, as well as the heart and the mind.

Where then, within these general parameters, is the greatest adequacy to truth to be found? Or does truth escape a theistic, rational-philosophical or subjective-idealistic understanding completely? Is it, as the perennial philosophy and all great esoteric schools of mysticism – from the Advaita Vedanta and Sufism to Taoist-inflected Buddhism or esoteric Christian mysticism – assert, eternally unnameable, ineffable and ungraspable to the experience of the ego- and cognition-centred consciousness? Truth for them would reside in a totalised revolutionary shift of the fundamental ground of consciousness, radically other to the working of the prosaic mind and yet in perfect congruence and symmetry identical with that mind as well. It is a switch of the gestalt; perhaps, initially, a choice, a willing of awareness to be nothing but the pure freedom it always has been, and is.

The elaborations and ramifications conflux, as the evidence of at least two-thousand years of metaphysical argument is there to demonstrate. The question, for this enquiry, is not which of these 'great paths to Awakening' is the more congruent, or which form among them truth might more accurately take, from wave to wave of history. The only consideration here, for

very pedestrian reasons, is whether the immanent, let alone transcendental, dimension of liberated consciousness *exists*.

The question presents itself for the mundane reason that the present time sees an efflorescence of speculative belief in the historical context of a profoundly ambiguous degradation of natural and human potentials. The godless age quietly slips in its doubt towards a campfire burning in the night, giving off a bare promise of deliverance from the static chill of disbelief.

But disbelief is a far lesser contingency than the worsening conditions of environmental, economic and political inequity engendering suffering for many. It is necessary to know where human truths reside because the conditions are too precipitate to allow for either fictions or abstract resolutions. A human future does not depend on a conclusive answer that is, as it has ever been, not likely to be forthcoming. But it does depend desperately, at a nexus-point of critical global survival, on a revelation of clarity. Revelation, like revolution, is a deliberate awakening, not one given by grace. It is asserted here as the accurate correlative to the clarity required: a functional *tabula rasa* that questions both transcendence and its liberation, just as it places attention on the structures of consciousness as it already is and accords them provisional foundation. The Buddha himself, the archetypal *ne plus ultra* of a metaphysic of a totalised freedom from suffering, took the same caution and touched earth, biological facticity, as the witness to his apparent transcendence of biology.

If the Buddha's act of witness is intelligible, the Awakening it is believed to ground, and thereby fundamentalise, must also be made intelligible for the whole to be valued and thereby become transformational. The dharma of the Buddha, as it was understood not only 2,600 years ago on its first dissemination, but also as it manifests now in West and East, is perhaps the most compelling organism in the 21st-century jungle of speculative metaphysical faith. It is neither a theism nor completely bound to traditional religious orthodoxies. It isn't purely a philosophy, though it engages with Western metaphysics as a genuinely fruitful challenge to its traditional limitations. It is not a purely subjective project that denies a rigorous cognitive attention to stage and sequence, causality and necessity, or practice and discipline.

It is rather a thorough, systematic and profoundly edifying narrative that tells the story of the movement from suffering to a decisive and permanent liberation of mind, self and body. It is a structure of ideas and practices that deserve and need to be tested, challenged and interrogated for authenticity. The proposition it offers is radical and nothing less than a totalising answer to all sentient doubt: given its totalising aims, nothing less

than an equally radical and thoroughly receptive doubt is required to confront its potential truth-claims.

The dharma in its nature is something that swims in uncertainty, in Zen's ubiquitous and illumined not-knowing, as its natural element. Such not-knowing becomes, thereby, alchemised in selflessness and ignorance, a form of very profound knowing: but that project swims perilously close to bad faith, and an unseen self-deception. How much an intuitive and alogical sophistry, and how much a bona fide entrance into privileged places of the mind depends purely and wholly on each mind that is thereby engaged – and such privilege itself is hard, if not finally impossible, to measure by any other in conclusive terms. The mind of Jesus, of Buddha, is a mind that walks past us in the street every day, and a mind that assumes to a salvation of all other soul-minds in existence. Again, it is a bold proposition, and many have asked where is the line that divides such terms between psychological realism and morally-edifying mythology.

The present age demands a clearer response: that it will never receive it is already a given, but neither the obfuscation of seemingly sophistic paradox nor a reliance on scientific-cognitive evidence is enough to move the mind toward acceptance. Acceptance itself is a misnomer: the mind requires an authentic apprehension of pure faith, as well as an alert, clear, unburdened attention to its own substance and kaleidoscopic contents. All men and women in all times have been able to watch, faithful to their own doubt, the nature of their mind; today there is a veritable renaissance of the contemplative arts that suggests, in isolated and stoic splendour, a challenge to post-scientific ignorance.

Again the question remains: is there the light to illumine, not the few, and by grace and good fortune, but the entirety, the sick and broken, the armies of the hopeless in back wards and poverty, in intractable economic and mental decline? Liberation, and its reality, is not a metaphysical question, it is an ethical imperative if it declares its own efficacy. Those who need it the most are those who suffer the most. The Buddha offered his teaching of freedom to all sentient beings of all capacities in at least 84,000 different forms; in our time his teachings reach only the few who are already able to congratulate themselves on a new-found capacity for renunciation. In the meantime, in the vast realms of the deprived, renunciation is the element into which already they are born, suffer and die, and no respect is offered them for the sacrifice, nor do they consider their disenfranchisement an achievement. They would never have learnt, let alone practiced, the arrogance and self-praise of self-abnegation.

A metaphysical truth, if it is such, must be able to answer to the relative conditions in which it speaks. Such propositions as those found in the

*buddhadharma* must do more than offer rational and intuitive sense. They must be congruent with reality.

One of the virtues of the age, at least, is a willingness to suffer without illusions, and for many it remains the single indubitable redemption of suffering, in this life, and not another. The liberation of mind promises far, far more. It will be for honest engagement, and honest testimony, to gauge how authentically such liberation is possible. Anything less than transparent confession is still obscure, anything more than fidelity to the subjective is already philosophy: we can say with Nietzsche that a suspension of the abstract is the necessary rapprochement with the self, and its world.

The Buddha demanded the same, and resisted cosmological and other explanations for man and his origin. The first task in that rapprochement, then, is a hard gaze onto the self and its existence in that real spurned world, that disjunction between the ideal and the real, the desired and the received, the expected and the unbidden. It is inside those interstices that truth comes alive, and foregoes faith. Faith, in those disclosures, would be period-costume worn over the skin of the actual, an extra weight, a gratuitous condescension to insight as it offers itself in the raw. The real challenge lies not in a leap of faith, but the courage to admit the fragmented, regretted, compromised real, devoid of the make-up of sentiment that serves to hide the ugliest wounds.

Humanity is a species of the walking wounded, and those who strike out for material or spiritual glory risk forfeiting the plumb-weight of humility, as well as the vision of the clear-sighted. The race needs healers, not winners; needs a freedom from pain, not the spoils of success. Spiritual belief seeks something other, not the life that swarms under its nose: who knows but that that life hides riches, not of the hereafter, but of the bare, fleeting moment. The only hands and eyes to see and hold them are not those of another, they can't be given for free, and the only saviour is the one who stands inside these same shoes. All the others walk elsewhere, and each points in his own direction, all the signs being provisional. The bare voice that speaks, often in another language, deep in the hours of unawareness, is the voice of the unseen, and though it can't see well or say the world beyond it, it is perhaps more blind than any other and is the only guide for the onward way. No other voice is there to speak as loudly, as surely, within you, even where it fails, stammers in exhaustion, all too often disappears entirely, and sometimes never returns.



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In the liminal space where certainty and intention have both dropped away, where the most insistent of the self's voices have lost the war of attrition against the vastness of not-knowing, nothing and everything seems possible of achievement. To float inside open-ended uncertainty – about self-nature, truth, or absolute wisdom – is to occupy a field of fertile negation. That is, it can be asserted that identity lies ultimately nowhere in designable phenomena – those things that at any rate have hitherto been taken as the bases for a working self-knowledge. Similarly, and just as provocatively, the existence of a salvific being or power is if anything marked by an ambiguity that speaks as much of constructed delusion as of indubitable presence. Nothing is certain apart from uncertainty.

The mind, the animal, the sinews of being soon tire and relinquish search: answers themselves are a weight not to be borne, and false ones even moreso. It seems far wiser, and truer, to live in the light of the knowledge of impotence, yet thereby of the essence of autonomy. The absurd man, it was considered, could survive by virtue of a willing capitulation to hopelessness combined with a will to enact ultimate impotence as provisionally useful endeavour. The recognition of the sentence allows the numbered days to be given over to the happy fiction of a moral agency: such meaning, in the face of evil and injustice, is meaning enough.

So it remains, for the mind of the twenty-first century. Morality, for that mind, remains a psychic structure that bifurcates experience and human action within it into one or another side of a dual divide. It evidences most gratuitously the proliferation of conflict *over* and *against* religious, racial, economic and ethical evil, defined freely by either side. Humanity wants to be moral, but perennially requires an enemy to be so. Righteousness without a front of resistance is rhetorical, and a million ready wills hunger for the cause that might set them against the assumed force of oppression, so that another battle for truth, liberty, democracy, justice or God might be won.

The slave revolts and sets up as the new master, and the oppositional duality that is the single most ubiquitous yet speciously reductionistic weapon of the mind keeps the bloody, rusty cranks of history turning. As God's will speaks, another tens of thousands of malnourished children die, disenfranchised 'minorities' move beyond any relation with enfranchisement at all, and the ecological balance of the biosphere buckles under exponentially increasing blows of abuse. It is not apocalyptic, which is only another projection of extreme duality: it is merely a breathtaking capacity for quotidian forgetfulness, a looking the other way, that allows for a split-identity nar-

rative of functionality (along with a stunning negligence of those in need) to drag interminably through its moves until a next, and a next, inevitable crisis.

No single mind would want to pretend to a redemption of such a circumstance, should it in (absolute) truth not exist. Different kinds of spiritual idealism straddle with a kind of perplexed discomfort the inequivalence between their spiritual-metaphysical desired outcomes and the continuing repudiation of an ethically-apportioned world that continues to see the weakest become weaker still, and the most morally equivocal still more powerful. For many, of even the deepest faith, the inequity (let alone metaphysical disparity) of the contingent and ideal becomes too great a moral chasm to broach. Contemporary Western faith has, for more than a century, become a tentative negotiation with culpability, recognising the necessity to take responsibility for global injustice not in God's name but in that of the dignity of the species.

It is a tired litany to repeat, here as anywhere, how far good intention can be read historically as a species of failure: today we salvage what is left of the philanthropic programs of earlier dual divides between master and slave, colonist and colonised, codifier and codified. The contemporary language of war and its various forms of aftermath places faith in the efficacy of such historical measures: democracy, once installed, is able to 're-instate' the liberty of a people, and the 'restructuring' of human freedoms allows for the 'reabsorption' of diverse elements into the 'rehabilitation' of the whole. It is up to the redemptive master to 're-make' reality, and remake it as a primary proof of unification.

Conflict itself, as its end aim, advertises the vision of unity, of brokenness-made-whole, in its ideal eye. The weak requires the strong, and only the strong have the means to institute the resurrection of all original goods. If power was unable to avert the loss of equilibrium between competing ills before, now it will fight solely on the side of the good of all, the unitary vision that, itself a utopia, remains a metaphor that each oppositional pole has as a single term to justify their non-unitary self-interest. The dream of wholeness, the mandala principle, becomes not merely the unspoken guiding figure of a lone, struggling self, but of a collective psychic entity: a nation, as well as that nation's enemy. A collective identity burns, even to the death, for unitary consciousness, but requires the subjugation of the Other in order to bring the phantom of totality to a Frankenstein-life. Every religious denomination, excepting perhaps the Buddhist, calls for the salvation of his brother, depending on his brother's submission to his faith.

Religious man seeks universal brotherhood but stumbles painfully in the shackles of his own adherence to a dualistic conceptual, linguistic and

religious model of truth. The model itself, over thousands of years, barely loses its sheen, while millions have died, as so many disposable rags, for the sake of its immaculacy: Christian or Communist, it is not the model itself that has necessarily counted, but the sheer human willingness to bow down before its universal judgment and submit to a willing, and even unwilling, martyrdom in its name.

Who has benefited from such exertions? If so much religious as well as secular response to worldly suffering proves so often to be an unintended displacement of the sources of that suffering so that the response to poverty, for example, becomes an exercise in microeconomic adjustment to an existing structure able to continually defer responsibility, exactly where responsibility for poverty may be placed remains a considerable question. The seemingly intractable global crisis of inequities of wealth, self-determination and power, racial and cultural sovereignty, or economic and intellectual hegemony, turn in cycles of never-completely realised causal indeterminacy. No one is certain, or even clear, where the formal bases for irresolvable conditions lie. International forces for regeneration and reformation attempt, with negligible success, to provide the groundwork for the new shifting of a paradigm. Yet the prospects of the day, the hours of drudgerous work, underpaid labour, material discomfort and spiritual desolation – this more recognisable world lags far behind the idealism of the voice of privilege.

The spiritual project of a metaphysical schema such as is to be found in Buddhism, for example, reduces such indeterminacy to the agency of the singular self, and with that self, the agency of consciousness. The material reality of all experience is to be rationalised by virtue of the consciousness that is able to so perceive it. For many cultural groups this is ancient, received wisdom, for better or for worse: there is not, for the Hindu caste-system, an ontological disparity between spiritual and material conditions – rather, they coincide.

Similarly, if all material reality might be determined, for the Buddhist accumulator of positive karma, by virtue of the purification and generosity of individual consciousness, and thereby of that individual's actions, then the ethical path of freedom and benefit for all beings indeed lies clearly ahead. I suffer precisely as much as my spiritual destiny requires me to, in order, at best, to overcome it. That destiny is, absolutely, determined by the choices of my conscious volition.

Without interrogating the extreme confusions implied in these various models of subjective idealism (those questions regarding the existence and agency of the will, and the functioning of that will in a predetermined structure of both mental and material worlds), it is not hard to recognise at the

centre of metaphysical speculation the reduction of ultimate agency to the self and the self that conceptually constructs its lived-reality. The central implication to be drawn from the essential solitude of such responsibility in its relation to the material world is that consciousness, before all else, is primary. This emphasises that mind ('Mind') and mind alone is the definitive site of agency in the project of a radical transformation of the self and the world.

Similarly it would not be amiss to claim that the master term of the contemporary dissemination of the *buddhadharma* is Mind, under which all ontologically subordinate, or derived, phenomenal things and experiences are ultimately subsumed. To the mind of awakening, that is, all things – conflicts, fears, desires, wars, obstacles, limits among them – are circumscribed within the self-reflexive consciousness that integrates them into itself and, in a redemptive sense, transforms them into grist for the spiritual mill. Thus, earthly toil and suffering, however absurd, is spiritual capital: a chance for the purification of those failings and delusions that maintain the actually-free mind in its bonded state of ignorance. Within the consciously-recognised frame of that earthly reality then, the contemporary Buddhist engages in purificatory and ritual acts of positive karmic investment as the most ultimately efficacious strategy for transforming the mind and all its perceptions, and thereby the 'real' condition believed to be experienced by the identity – the (ultimately illusory) 'self' – of that mind. Such ritual purification is a wholly solitary project; it involves no other, in particular no other in need, at all.

When more than a hundred thousand people die in the 2004 South Asian tsunami, it is a compassionate response of some millions of the Buddhist faithful in the affluent West to generate collective mantra or prayer and dedicate the subsequent collective merit to the victim or survivor as the most meaningful form of benefit they are able to extend. Some among them will donate material aid or voluntary time to the sufferers as well. But very few of the same Buddhist practitioners will endorse a global economic revolution, even rhetorically, in order to reinstate a degree of justice to the perennially weak, and meek, of the earth, unable to provide themselves with adequate preventative defense, medical care or emergency relief, in either peace or cataclysm. Recognising the often compromised value of material aid to the world's suffering, the spiritual practitioner puts his faith in a transcendent causal agency: by influencing the ills and ignorance of the collective human mind, change and benefit is necessarily wrought there. To place trust in material benefit alone is ultimately naive and even counter-indicative: in the final analysis only the evolution of the consciousness of the species will have a chance of saving the species.

The intention, even the arguably percipient psychologism behind such idealism, is compelling; all the moreso where its manifestation in practice might appear to the irreligious as irretrievably blinded. But it would be not quite true to dismiss the spiritual project, in this context, as self-aggrandising delusion; the spiritual faithful are *also* those most commonly to be found at the frontline of service, in the dysentery pits and volunteer encampments of the stricken and the dispossessed. Spiritual faith, as much now as through all history, might well be there, or believed to be, working its miracles of unfathomed beneficence.

It is difficult, however, to fail to recognise the depth to which so much materialist, spiritual, rational-economic or karmic rationalisation of human suffering bespeaks a categorical confusion of ethical grounding and collectively-willed agreement in alleviating suffering. Humanity under its own terms does not have consensus on which dimension of its trichotomy to concentrate resolution. It swings between political, economic and religious narratives in sanitising its experience and, again, perpetuates the various dualities of self and other, matter and mind, history and destiny in seeking true agency for transformation. It draws its object lessons from the past in confronting the contingencies of the present in order to shape (through choice, through emphasis) the kind of future it desires to know. In all three (at least) of these movements of mind requiring independent kinds of reflexive will, it may be that self-determination, both individual and collective, remains largely epiphenomenal to absolute history, a fictional function, that is, of the ignorance an epistemically-rupturing discourse such as Buddhism never tires of repeating as the original source of dis-ease.

Perhaps, for the same reason, the head-scratching of 'the reasoning animal' in the face of his own perplexity is part of the same fiction of self-determination: he will never be able to free himself from his materially contingent, and suffering, state, until that time when he is able to recognise his own ignorance for what it is, and newly engage it with the spiritual gnosis that alone will bring him into a true form of knowledge.

To that intuitive conviction, the *only* answer to global suffering (poverty, social degeneration, war and disease have all been evoked, among others) *is* the spiritual answer: the answer that by its nature is another kind of 'answer', requiring a criteria for enactment and confidence that, if it doesn't merely challenge rational-instrumental reason, actually transgresses it at its foundations. To enter into the spiritual solution, and the redemptive superstructure it explicitly promises, is to invest in a different kind of mind, entire. It is to leave a reductionistic dualism and its inherently antagonistic frame of reality – the 'flatland' of strife – behind and enter into a mode of conceptual suspension, until the will that is not merely yours, but that of

God, Goddess or Source as well, is able to apprehend which action, in any contingent case, is the true, the good and the beautiful. Neither political, economic, psychological nor even biological determinants can possess the absolute view such a renunciation of will appeals to. Only truth, or only God, can. But who is to hear, and then broadcast, for those who can't hear, the word of God?

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The desert-explorer, in her search, comes across a pair of footprints and soon recognises them, perhaps inevitably, as her own. She has come full circle, as have all her questions and her doubts, with their provisional answers. But the explorer must move on, if that is the condition of the search, and leave these (old) footprints, as well as all other (new) ones, behind. She must travel into the featureless, as if it was possible, a landscape without evident landmarks, guideposts or assurances of rescue. Her unknowingness carries her into the further part of the journey.

The featureless ground is, for the Buddhist, the ground of emptiness. It is a ground that is not-a-ground; for the same perceiving subject nor is it a ground wholly without features, even if little of what appears promises the kind of epistemological certainty so much of the Western angst around proof is bound to. The path, as the meditator and non-meditator alike can attest to, is rife with intimations of disclosure at every step of the way, even if the reflexive mind is not always able to assign decisive meaning to the signs that flash through its various levels of apprehension. The secular 'spiritual path' of the moment has been comfortably reified into just such an attention to the promptings of the psyche, attached as it might be to one or another of the traditional contemplative disciplines.

The primary experience, however, remains prior to the conceptual frame with which it is, at best, provisionally guided or, at worst, forcefully misrepresented. Western Buddhism, in its first full flourishing, is no less at the risk of such misrepresentation than other, perhaps more dogmatically inculcated, metaphysical frames; the Buddhist framework is itself able to confidently dismiss a wealth of contemporary discourse and be uncritically appropriated as a universally untouchable logos, no less fixed than mediæval Christian dogma: more True than the truth.

It is unclear, for every practicing individual, where the realm of subjective, even idiosyncratic, religious experience ends and its congruence with the essentialism of ancient tradition begins. Individual people, after all, become nominally religiously identified because they assume, failing com-

plete certainty, that their experience is in both explicit and personal terms co-extensive with, and normativised within, an ancient religious truth. The Buddha's experience, it is further assumed, is an experience that is able to be newly known by all forms of sentient consciousness, but especially that privileged human one. In the seventeenth century, too, Spinoza contended that in the acquisition of a true form of knowledge, and only through that knowledge, was the bondage to the passions that constitutes the heart of human misery able to be overcome. True happiness, true freedom and the true wisdom that is their foundation were for Spinoza, as much as for the Buddha and his particular metaphysic, disclosures of universal truth offered necessarily via the model of consciousness he was able to offer his (and all) time. Where Nāgārjuna's metaphysics are transmitted to the mind of the twenty-first century, most notably by the Tibetan Gelugpa school, it is similarly assumed that this, and not another, cognitive frame is the medium of the highest value for the contemporary transmission of the mind of the Buddha.

Whether or not this is true is not the most immediate concern here; that it is still an assumption for many minds in their daily interface with the contemporary world (however a deeply-held or intentional one) is. It is of concern, not because it might be right or wrong, whatever those terms might turn out to mean in the context of a subjective idealism, but because the nature of the mind that so organises itself could, paradoxically, and by virtue precisely of that self-organisation, be ignoring its actual nature, as it is.

A similar call has been heard by different voices: those of Krishnamurti, Alan Watts, Zen teaching generally, Stephen Batchelor or the more recent popular voices of Ken Wilber or Andrew Cohen. Their preeminent concern for the authentic experience of the unfettered mind is one that moves still in a trickster's hide among the great assemblies of the religiously stamped and approved. Buddhism, perhaps uniquely, was always able to throw the joke back by knowingly allowing that Buddhism itself is an 'empty' word, the entire edifice of cognitive argument a cloud of emptiness, every single historical master an empty turd pie and that anyone was welcome to pointlessly blather and defame to their heart's content. The true dharma, it has always been known, is untouchable, is not even the dharma, is so hard and durable with Truth that like a diamond there is nothing else hard enough to shatter it. Buddhism's saving irony could be one of its lesser-celebrated foundational truths as it grows out of its Western adolescence is taken at different times and places too seriously.

In the passing landscape all forms, models, archetypes, individuals, gods, goddesses and tropes of language stand out for the eager eye of the

self. A million more surround, invade, come between them – from cybernetic transfigurations, cryogenic immortalisations, technobiotic enhancements and AI utopias to neo-shamanic pre-rational regressions, psychedelic custom-designed neurotherapies, recreational pharmacological self-medications, born-again conversions, neo-Romantic tribalisations, crystal-gazing consumerisms and quasi-transcendental transpersonal ego-restructurings. The genre that is itself a bona fide treasure-trove of genres already has its own marketing division, official demographic and history of comedic impersonations. Even the *buddhadharma*, at this unclassifiable time, has its recanters and recovery-spokesmen, doubters and debtors. For the American ex-monk of the Burmese Theravada, Alan Clements, 'enlightenment' is a word that signifies a condition that doesn't, perhaps hasn't ever, existed. The best Zen teachers, too, will ridicule the Buddha's awakening and continue to work for the full enlightenment of every sentient being, as many as are the sands of the Ganges. Awakening is not a thing to be attained, is not attainable.

The explorer moves into such worlds with a high seriousness that has its tongue firmly planted in its own cheek, lest it stumble in its own quicksand. Outrageousness and sheer heartbreak bolt through the dark nights of the real like thoroughbreds outdoing each other for the gates of hell. Patent geopolitical absurdity, exploitation, acts of premeditated or arbitrary violence slather the veils of the actual across morning papers, every day, until such a time as the world as it has always been known should stop. It is the necessary and determined working-out of causal karma, and will continue until such a time as the collective mind has reached an adequate point of purification. But that can only happen if preceded by an adequate degree of self-interrogation, able to take upon itself the responsibility and hard discipline required for the 'intellectual love of God'.

Theoretically, a global population engaged in dharmic purification is capable of transforming human destiny forever. Historically, however, that might well never occur. Karmic purification, in practice, becomes reliably a project only of the self, that is, *another* project of the self, along with all the others. Insofar as it is a genuine project it is more intentionally a project for all the others, before the self, but again, the dividing-line between this self and all others becomes progressively harder to define. It becomes a project more accurately made on behalf of the process itself, given the absence of an unequivocal teleology. Every destiny is the irreplaceable heart of the entire unfolding. All events and all value-claims, including the most morally abhorrent, appear to be equal partners in the enacting of the virtual karmic movie, and you will know your own dividends when you discover which side of the barbed-wire fence you are on. All this, it becomes clear, is the wholly



ordinary nuts and bolts of the spiritual path, and nothing to be afraid of.

Just as much as these, naturally, are the mythological dark nights of spine-racking doubt. Such nights are what junk-food and vapidly amusing mainstream movies are made for. Mahatma Gandhi and Mickey Mouse and their derivatives each have the right answer, depending on the question. It is important to recall, also, as Sartre suggested, that the actual sense behind most questions is that they don't in fact desire an answer, or only that one that has already been readied for it. Spiritual questions, too, as the Doctor Spock of postmodernism suggests, are also not merely questions and Freud and Wittgenstein look over his shoulder and agree that the status of the question is as much a symptom as a noise without a meaningful predicate. Where, then, does the explorer, wandering in the same formless desert, brimful of all these kind monsters, lay her weary load?

There is nothing amusing in her weariness; she is genuinely tired. The Buddha has already advised her: right here, right where you are, is where the load is to be dropped. The tool, then, if a tool for a kind of relinquishment is required, is meditative discipline. Therein lies the dewdrop, simple sublime, and meditation the metaphor, as well as the practice, for achieving another kind of hold on the contents of Mind. It is a kind of hold that opens up an authentic field of new exposures: beyond black-and-white as well as colour transmissions. Neither one, two nor three-dimensional exposures of what her mind consists of but a direct interface with a frequency that, if it was possible, doesn't have any recognisable features at all. Such is the sign of emptiness. Physiology, however, responds: bodily sensations of boredom, delight, bliss, even ecstasy. Something is being done properly when life itself lights up.

Progress is there to be made. If the great inland sea hasn't yet been found, that might only be because in the secular mind that thirsts for it, it has already been abandoned as a mirage, a place where life can't be lived, and where there is no water to sustain it. With such blessings, the search continues. Sea or desert, what difference, on the far horizon of Mind?

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