

Secular Buddhism: New vision or yet another of the myths it claims to cure?

A hundred years ago, almost exactly, Karl Kraus, an eminent Austrian publicist and German language's foremost satirist, famously claimed in his newspaper that Psychoanalysis *is* the very mental illness it claims to cure.¹ Amusing and bitingly unfair, Kraus turned his violent dislike into a crafty aphorism. Today, we know how prejudiced and superficial his knowledge of psychoanalysis was when he wrote this, how personal slight rather than understanding led to what has become famous not for its veracity but for its turn of phrase.

“Secular Buddhism” has become a catchphrase—publications, interviews, blogs and podcasts abound with it, exalting or vilifying the term and, occasionally, its users. So what *is* Secular Buddhism? Is it already happening? Is it needed? Should it be prevented? What would it do? What would it *cure*? That's of course what we're here at this conference to talk about.

The term “secular” is both charged and diffuse. Let's look at some of its many meanings:

Depending on context I can see the following uses of “secular”

- as an antonym for “orthodox”, i.e. “liberal,” “tolerant” or even “pluralistic”;
- as meaning “not bound by tradition”, definitely as “not-fundamentalist”;
- quite literally, in the sense of “as of this century” (*saeculum*),
- as “non-monastic” and “not part of a clergy or church”
- as “not of one unified view of the world”;
- as “non-metaphysical” and decidedly concerned with “this world”
- as “non-religious”
- as “worldly” in the sense of opposed to “sacred”

If we were to lump all these different notions together—no doubt under loud protestations of the people subscribing to one but none of the other meanings above—we would probably arrive at a mix not too dissimilar from what we have as contemporary Buddhist movements in the Western world. There may be a few explicitly orthodox, traditionalist, monastic, metaphysical, religious sacralists around—but even many monastic women and men share at least one or more of the above “secular” values.

Also, secular developments are far from being an entirely Western thing: many of us here are deeply influenced by the Vipassanā movement, which emerged in the late 19th and early 20th century in Burma and, I think, is a good example of a post-colonial and largely secular response to political and social conditions in one of the heartlands of Buddhism. There are other examples of Eastern secular movements: Dharmapala's Protestant Buddhism, Sri Lanka's Sarvodaya movement, Japan's Sokka Gakkai, India's Ambedkar Buddhists, Thailand's Young Buddhist Association.

Looking at contemporary Western Buddhism and its often non-monastic exponents, centers, movements and its publications we can't fail to note that “Secular Buddhism” is already happening: much of Buddhist transmission in the West takes place in largely secular contexts—and this secularization of Buddhist teachings has been going on for quite a while. The question is not *whether* but *how*—and to what purpose: how congruent is

this development with the Buddha's vision, how conscious and honest are we about the forces that drive this movement, how reflective and self-critical are we of our own history and cultural biases? And: how aware we are of the Teaching's potential, how careful in our interpretations of tradition and how clear of what is at stake?

I have, for the title of this talk, adulterated Karl Kraus's statement about psychoanalysis. As a disciple of the Buddha and, willy-nilly, one of these contemporary Buddhists addressing other contemporary Buddhists, I would like to give you my take on the good and the bad I see happening under the name of an emerging Secular Buddhism. And since its already happening I thought I would add my personal wish-list.

Let me start with the bad. I have concerns about a number of particular attitudes already discernible that I fear will become, by default, endorsed as "Secular Buddhism".

The first one is a **convenient & easy Buddhism** – the wellness-school: utterly unthreatening to existing Western values, current beliefs and conditioned sensitivities. It's inoffensive, doesn't demand effort, difficult changes, hard thinking or anything challenging. Its message is simple: "If it feels good it can't be bad. Just be normal and don't make a problem out of it".

Type number two is a **nice Buddhism**: this one is about the bambification of the Dharma; it's the lifestyle brand of convenient Buddhism above. It's quite popular, has many credible arguments and its tenor is reassuring: "We don't need to study difficult texts, make strenuous efforts, challenge our views or give up anything. Let's just all be kind, nice and a little more mindful."

The third type is a **reasonable Buddhism**. It willingly subjects the tenets of Buddhist Teaching to whatever trends of thinking currently claim the prerogative of interpretation on what is factual, valid, normal and healthy. It eagerly backs the Teachings with whatever findings in the sciences it comes by: Rationalism, Logical Positivism, Behavioral Neurosciences, Clinical Psychology etc. The basic message is this: "If we can't prove it by measuring, then it's not really happening. We don't have enough evidence to establish validity." The worst brand of this is Scientism – science not as an application of methodological scientific practice but science as an ideology and religious substitute. One of the speakers this morning, Winton Higgins, has addressed this more accurately and exhaustively than I could. I sense great value in Buddhism rubbing up against the sciences, quite appreciate the worth of Buddhist thinking and practices being both influenced by and influencing secular and non-religious fields of learning. Yet I hesitate to adopt the going creeds in those respective fields as my personal criteria for the validity of Buddhist Teachings in my own life. "Buddhism – yeah. But we don't have enough data yet to prove that this stuff does something to brains". I'm tired, after thirty years of sitting on my bum and meditating, looking at the arising and ceasing of ignorance in my own mind, that I actually need to be wired up to have proof of neurological changes, that I should disregard my unscientific personal and anecdotal evidence studiously and wait for science to prove beyond suspicion that something *is* happening – subject to methodological rigors and criteria possibly designed by people who may simply lack the imagination to come up with better ones. If science demands this for itself, so be it. But I'm tired of having this not just as benchmarks for my wellbeing and brain changes but as the touchstone for the whole of Buddhist wisdom traditions. "And as long as we can't prove this experimentally, the most

valid assumption is that Buddhism and healthy effects of meditation are likely a hypothesis of the Pali Text Society”. I do feel a little tired of that.

A last attitude towards the Teaching I’m concerned about I like to call **flatland Buddhism**. These are post-metaphysical times and the critics of any metaphysical stance in religion are quick to point out the danger and the damage done by religious folk and their institutions in the name of religion’s exclusive claims to truth and right living over the last millennia. We should be justly nervous about facile ontological claims about a reality beyond empirical experience, behind all appearances — of “the secret blackness of milk”, as a poet has put it.ⁱⁱ However, there are other extraordinary things besides metaphysics. Our critics easily overlook the difference between what is supra-mundane or numinous — a *personal experience* in which I may feel awed and connected to something beyond my self-construct or even completely other and which may be truly transforming — and a metaphysical statement, supernatural belief or a deontological absolutist position. Undervaluing or entirely throwing overboard the former to prevent the latter creates the sort of flatland Buddhism I mean. If I have a good nose and actually can smell if somebody has cut the bread on the onion board, then to the guy who does not have a good nose, this may seem an extra-sensory and supernatural experience. To me, it is not — it just smells of onion. I cannot prove how I know, but I do know. It’s the old story of the turtle telling the fish of his visit on dry land — his walk, the gentle breezes, the evening sun, the scent of the blossoming trees — and the fish concluding that anything not wet, cool and liquid according to his experience is unthinkable, that dry land, breezes and walks under blossoming trees are mere fantasies.

While the polite agnostic at least remains open to a numinous dimension, the flatland Buddhist denies the possibility of transcendence and insists on the invalidity of what is beyond his or her immediate horizon of experience: “This is fairy-tale-stuff. Let’s cut the purple prose and be real.”

Let us turn to the good in emerging Secular Buddhism:

One of the most delightful aspects of recent developments is that more people have access to the Teachings and feel empowered to actually read these old texts. You know, these are fantastic times. I’m not affiliated to a monastic college or an indological or theological department and yet I have three editions of the Pali Canon on my laptop. I have access to such a wealth of teachings and material which, less than fifty years ago, would have been the province of a handful of universities. We all have, collectively, more access to Buddhist Teachings than the people who taught us. This is great. I’m all for being secular when it comes to accessibility.

I’m also happy to see Buddhist Teachings cross-referenced among different Buddhist traditions. Not that long ago, the representatives of the different traditions sat on their islands, behind their mountains, fenced off by cultural, linguistic and doctrinal barriers. Buddhists, while holding quite a few opinions about each other, didn’t actually talk that much. If by chance they came across each other, they were mostly happy to identify the other guy in the terms of their own tradition’s doctrinal positioning, then consult what their own books had to say about the other lot, shuddered briefly at the erroneous views the other guy supposedly held and went on with their own business. While they could have talked to their fellow Buddhist in the other-coloured robe and found out, they mostly preferred to just go and look him up in their texts — “Early Buddhist guy... must be a Vaibhāsika... we’ve known what they are about for the last 1500 years”.

This has greatly changed — the differing schools have all landed in the West, have similar cultural challenges, Western disciples and many of them actually have started

talking with each other — Buddhists looking across traditional fences and acknowledging the diversity of their own traditions and their respective strengths. This, I think, is a huge boon and partly due to Western secular societies that offer something of a neutral meeting ground.

I'm excited to see Buddhist practices and concepts of mind reach other fields of learning: mindfulness has become a household term in mainstream psychology, compassion practices are actively taught and researched in non-religious contexts in several places on either side of the Atlantic, academic philosophers talk of relational identity constructs and grapple with teachings on impersonality, psychoanalytic schools — after acknowledging intersubjective experience beyond mere transference — compare notes with Buddhists and applied forms of meditation practice have become acceptable in clinical contexts and healthcare institutions: I am excited to see aspects of Buddhist thought and practice mingle with and even take root in secular society.

While some of these influences and applications may appear de-contextualized, they can form a gateway for broader contact with Buddhist Teachings — what starts with some clinical mindfulness may grow into an interest in Buddhist Psychology and lead on to deeper epistemological exposure of Buddhist notions of mind and its development.

My wish list for secular Buddhism is a long one; let me share what I see at the top of my personal chart of desiderata.

First, we don't really understand enough of Buddhist texts. Rather than throwing things out, we need to understand better what's there. And I don't believe we have a secure acquaintance with the oral traditions in which these textual transmissions have always been embedded; I simply think we need to learn more about texts, need to reflect on their meaning and circumstances of transmission. We need to engage in linguistic and cultural studies, and, particularly in what I would like to call "cultural translation". It's not enough to just translate texts from one language into another. In teaching Buddhism — I suspect most of you are engaged in teaching Buddhism in some form — you notice that people can go along quite happily with English equivalents of Sanskrit, Tibetan, Japanese and Pali terms in their heads and still not connect the significance of these terms with their actual experience. The lady who recently referred to an insight she had as "you know, in all those years of listening to teachings on *dukkha* I never really understood that my anger actually is a form of *dukkha*" may not be alone in her difficulty connecting Buddhist concepts — however neatly translated — to her actual psychological experience. There are two translations needed: one from a Buddhist source-language to our respective mother-tongues, and another one from the Buddhist-speak in our languages to the graphic and practical ways in which we think about and understand ourselves. Reflection about one's own experience can take place highly unaffected by the Buddhist bits I may have learned. Even though translated into English, these bits somehow stay in a Buddhist niche of one's mind — and remain there quite ineffective for changing one's understanding or transform one's experience. Most of my own translation-work as a teacher happens in this second field. I try to teach people how to recognize what the Nikāyas are saying — but in the language of their own experience. This is fascinating and rewarding stuff, but for this we need to understand the old texts better and grasp more clearly from what contexts they have arisen.

I'm up there with John Peacock who spoke this morning about the need for the study of Buddhist history and a contextualization of the Teachings. I'm all for the naturalization of Buddhism in Western societies — but please, only after we've contextualized

where it's coming from. If we haven't understood clearly what we're naturalizing, it may be that we "naturalize" something very, very different from what it was meant to be.

The amount of teachings available and the amount currently being taught seems disproportionate. Often enough, we don't manage to convey what we actually have available to people, or succeed in providing the tools for them to gain an experiential understanding. On a broader scale it's probably necessary to admit that we have only just begun taking these Teachings on board and it's still early days for Buddhism in the West. Even as we have it now, the wealth is demanding, powerful, and fascinating. But the quarry is so much richer. If we learn to look more closely, we'll find even more of these riches.

Another wish is that I would love to see the contributions of the Nikāyas more deeply appreciated by Western branches of learning. A close reading of Early Buddhist contemplative psychology and its epistemology would be of great value to Western psychology and psychotherapy. I'm also still hoping for more of a "positive psychology" along Buddhist notions of mind-training. We have so much research into pathogenic factors and we seem to lack corresponding research into the nature of well-being, contentment, compassion, inner freedom. Also, it's one thing to appreciate the value of applied mindfulness practices; it's an all together different kettle of fish to understand the functions of mind being exercised by these practices. Mindfulness is a huge growth area right now but how much our barely 130-year-old psychology struggles with the refractoriness of the Buddhist concept of mindfulness can be seen when we look at some of psychology's disheartening attempts to come up with an operationalized definition of mindfulness—sometime the latter's criteria seem to be tailored more to something that can be tested, proven, funded and sold—rather than actually transport the complexity of the Buddhist notion of *sati*. A few researchers, amongst them Paul Grossman, have done some revealing work in this area, starting with a meta-analysis of mindfulness-studies. Others with him continue to warn that all is not well in many of the current notions of mindfulness in the field of psychology.ⁱⁱⁱ

In the field of philosophy, I would like to see a more serious investigation of Buddhist epistemology and its understanding of mind coming directly out of contemplative traditions. That will be hard work since it means engaging with a form of thinking that has developed along considerably different lines than the Western philosophical tradition. But it's all there, waiting to be picked up and actually delved into.

My most emphatic wish concerns the study of the Nikāyas and other early Buddhist texts with the tools of literary criticism: textual analysis, hermeneutics, narratology—the whole apparatus of lit crit. I feel the Buddhist world lacks men like Northrop Frye, Robert Alter and Frank Kermode. Biblical criticism and historical-critical scholarship has, for the last 150 years, been trying to find what in German you'd call the "Sitz im Leben", the situational setting in life, from where the text speaks. This is not a homiletic job (referring to the text's use in preaching) but an attempt to look more closely at a text's function and how it works with the tools of textual analysis. If we're interested in the meaning, we need to understand more deeply how the story is constructed. There is much to be done yet in this respect regarding Buddhist texts. I wish we would look more closely, with the eyes of literary scholarship, into these texts, without having theological (or atheistic) points of view to sell, just trying to get a better grasp of what's going on in the text. How is this simile constructed? Who's voice is talking? What is the speaker's perspective and focus? Who is his audience? What's the context of the teaching situation?^{iv}

Reading texts is an art — any text; all the more so a text that may be 2000 or more years old. All my teacher friends complain how their university students are clueless at interpreting even simple texts. Our click-and-link culture is hermeneutically challenged and does an increasingly bad job of extracting meaning from something written — a skill that goes beyond the mere download of information. And since the iconic turn, accelerated by the digital age and imposed on all of us, that skill has become specialist knowledge.

If we want to have access to the wisdom in these scriptural teachings we need to get in there somehow; that's where the tools of literary scholarship, narratology and textual analysis come in.

Stephen Batchelor has emphasized the Four Truths and reframed them as Four Tasks in his talk here. When a monk, many years ago, I was struck by finding Bhikkhu Ñānavīra's explanation of these Four Truths in one of his letters to a supporter, very much in Stephen's vein, where he illustrated them with Alice in Wonderland, finding a bottle with mysterious content. The bottle's label didn't say what it contained, only what Alice was supposed to do with it: "Drink me". In the same way, said Ñānavīra Thera, are we to treat these Four Truths — not as truths at all, but as tasks: the first of the Buddhist bottles insists on "understand me"; the second asks "give me up", the third encourages "realize me" and the fourth urges "develop me". It's necessary to go back to these four tasks — not as safe "truths" but as appeals and genuine duties to be undertaken.

If Secular Buddhists want to be more than just secularists, they will need to look at and sift through Buddhist traditions with as little prejudgement as possible. This means actually trying to understand things like ethical conditionality (*kamma-vipāka*), renewed becoming (*punabbhava*), the status of the supramundane (*lokuttara*) and the role of the absorptions (*jhāna*) — without trying to write them off, just because they somehow sit uncomfortably with Western values and current beliefs. There is a whole set of Teachings pertaining to the topics of realization and the domain of *lokuttara*, (the transcendent / supra-mundane dimension); these Teachings emphatically insist on the possibility of an embodied, subjective experience of the numinous through the practice of meditation. I see some Secular Buddhists struggle to acknowledge this aspect of the Teachings — and I would like at least the question to be considered legitimate, what my personal relationship to the possibility of realization is. If we give up the possibility of realization we've turned the Teachings into another brand of critical humanism — and, so I believe, Secular Buddhism will become to the Buddha's message something akin to being its own "near enemy".

What is the alternative between a Buddhism conveniently tailored to my likings on one hand, and becoming a credulous traditionalist partisan to one of the existing lineages on the other? It strikes me that the option between self-serving arbitrariness and dogged orthodoxy is the old Western enlightenment project. This means getting beyond the various traditions' exclusive claims to rightness in their interpretation of Buddha's Teachings and, more generally, the mythification of their own history — and also getting beyond the simplistic impulse to debunk all these traditions and start from scratch with a "reasonable" Buddhism. An informed Secular Buddhist perspective may even help some of these traditions to go about their housecleaning and brush up on their own history.

If Secular Buddhism is to be more than the latest myth pretending to clear up the old myths it will also need to look at its own history and self-image, at its own agenda. What are we trying to cure by being secular? Part of me hopes that Secular Buddhists do not give up on the dimension of the religious — however hackneyed the term, however well-

documented the abuses in the name of religion may be. If Secular Buddhists retreat from the field of the religious, it's the orthodox traditionalists and fundamentalist that will win this ground. I'm quite keen to retain Buddhism as a religion and champion a *religious* secularist Buddhism: critical, informed and enlightened.

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- i) Karl Kraus, „Die Fackel“, Vol 15, No. 376-377 from 30.5.1913, p. 21).
- ii) Jacques Audiberti (1899-1965), French surrealist poet, speaks in one of his sonnets of “la noirceur secrète du lait.”
- iii) Examples of voices highlighting the challenges of conceptualizing the notion of mindfulness:
- Grossman, P., Niemann, L., Schmidt, S., & Walach, H. (2004). Mindfulness-based stress reduction and health benefits. A meta-analysis. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, vol 57, 35–43.
 - Grossman, P. (2008). On measuring mindfulness in psychosomatic and psychological research. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*.
 - Grossman, P., & Van Dam, N. T. (2011). Mindfulness, by any other name...: trials and tribulations of sati in western psychology and science. *Contemporary Buddhism*, 12(1), 219–239.
 - Kang, C., & Whittingham, K. (2010). Mindfulness: A Dialogue between Buddhism and Clinical Psychology. *Mindfulness*, 1(3), 161–173. doi:10.1007/s12671-010-0018-1
 - Rappay, L., & Bystrisky, A. (2009). Classical Mindfulness: An Introduction to Its Theory and Practice for Clinical Application. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1172(1), 148–162. doi:10.1111/j.1749-6632.2009.04405.x
 - Rosch, E. (2007). More than mindfulness: When you have a tiger by the tail, let it eat you. *Psychological Inquiry*, 18(4), 258–264.
- iv) Late Harald Beaver’s still unpublished work “The Broken Gong” will one day be considered a milestone in the task outlined here. I’m indebted to him for some of these thoughts.