Beyond scientific materialism and religious belief

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Secular Buddhism, a concept still somewhat vague yet emotive, is being exalted or vilified across net and media – and so are its users occasionally. We need to be clear: secular Buddhism is neither Stephen Batchelor's invention nor the final triumph of scientistic rationalism over religion. History is full of examples of social change due to processes of secularization involving religious movements – notable examples include Ancient Greece (5th–4th century BCE) and the Age of Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th century in Europe and Northern America.

To disentangle the topic of a secular Buddhism it may be useful to distinguish four related, yet different, notions connected with the term secular:

a) the gradual and social *process of secularization* by which civil societies and governments are emancipated from religious or feudal control, and where a clear separation of the state and the religion(s) of this state are the foundation of liberal democracy;
b) the *historical acts of secularization* whereby monasteries have been expropriated and the clergy disempowered at various times and for different reasons (e.g. in the UK, France, Germany, Japan);
c) a *constitutional secularity* as a structural principle of a legal system offering religious freedom to its citizens;
d) *secularism* as a conscious choice to take no interest in all religious questions, matters of transcendence or theology.

The Buddhist variety of secularization didn't begin in the West – it started in Asia. Under the heading of 'Buddhist Modernism' this process has even been explicitly researched for at least the last 50 years.(1) Many readers will be influenced by the *Vipassanā* movement which emerged only in the late 19th and early 20th century; it's an exemplary secular response to political and social conditions in one of the heartlands of Buddhism at that time. The dethronement of the Burmese king by the colonial power England in 1885 resulted in a severe disruption to popular Buddhist worldview, in which the (ideal) king traditionally acts as support, major benefactor and protector of the Dharma. This cosmological vacuum in Burma's new world order was followed by a sudden and immense social upgrading of the laity that, in the absence of the royal protector, took on unprecedented responsibilities. This led to a flowering of meditation practice under non-ordained teachers and, among other things, the effective spread of Vipassanā meditation beyond what had hitherto been recorded in Buddhist history.(2)

At the beginning with the 20th century, a number of other examples of entirely diverse Asian secular movements can be found: the Sinhalese reformer Dharmapala's Protestant Buddhism, Sri Lanka's Gandhi-inspired Sarvodaya movement, Sokka Gakkai, Japan's post-war 'value-creation society', India's Ambedkar Buddhists, and Thailand's Young Buddhist Association.

Maybe the beginnings of secular Buddhism go back even further: to the very lifetime of its founder. As a first stage of secularization we might consider an incident related in an unflattering passage of the monastic discipline; it appears to date back to the very early days of the male monastic order. The passage testifies to the frustration of non-monastic supporters of the Dharma, who on the moon days assembled and visited the monastic community where they sought teachings and contact with the meditating monks. The latter, according the text, met the visitors with obstinate silence, which prompted the supporters' complaint that the monks in their refusal to communicate resembled 'dumb pigs'.(3)

When the matter came to the Buddha, he stipulated that from now on his ordained community was to share the Dharma and communicate with its supporters on at least the four moon days every month. From today's point of view, this is certainly a secularizing injunction as it acknowledged his monks' duty toward their supporters and a mutuality between his ordained and non-ordained disciples.

One of the challenges in talking about Secular Buddhism lies in the various and divergent shades of meaning that the adjective 'secular' takes depending on and context and user. In practice, different users of the term only imply some of the following meanings:

• *contemporary* – in its literal sense of 'in this century' *(saeculum)*
• *non-monastic* – not part of an order or a clergy
• *modern, liberal, tolerant* – as the opposite of 'orthodox'
• *not bound by tradition* – as the opposite of 'fundamentalist'
• *pluralistic* – as the opposite of a unified theological worldview
• *non-metaphysical* – concerned with this world
• *non-religious* – a) not belonging to any defined major religion, or b) anti-religious
• *worldly, mundane, profane* – quotidian as opposed to 'sacred'

On one point there can be little doubt: we live in a thoroughly secular age. By that I mean that none of us truly have the choice to withdraw into a unified pre-modern, mythical or cosmological interpretation of the world. If it rains in the 21st century, I can't help perceiving this as a meteorological phenomenon rather than the weeping of the deities. The major discourses of our time – in the natural sciences and the humanities in psychology, medicine, economics and law – are all held in secular terms. If Buddhists wish to bring a vision of Buddha's Dharma into these discourses they need to engage in that dialogue on its secular terms.

If we look for Western Buddhism, we find predominantly non-monastic representatives, centres and publications. The Dharma has arrived in the West in secular places in secular contexts and media. In many ways, the question of a secular in Buddhism has been decided – it is not about the *whether* anymore but about the *how.* To interpret the Buddha's Dharma for one's own time is not only legitimate but indispensable; a testimony to the vitality of Buddhist transmissions that

the teachings have both been translated and acculturated during all epochs of Buddhist history. It may be good to remember that the Asian Buddhisms some of us have looked on as 'original' traditions – in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Taiwan, Korea, Tibet and Japan – are, in fact, all examples of successful acculturations of a long lost Indian Buddhism.

As desirable as creative interpretations of the Dharma for the present secular epoch are, so is a rigorous understanding of the old teachings. This is not about belief and partisanship but about textual literacy, informed reading and hermeneutic competence. Every reading – even those thought to be orthodox – is interpretation. The attempted juxtaposition of a 'secular' – supposedly interpreted Buddhism – vs. a 'classical' one (deemed orthodox) obfuscates this fact and tacitly canonizes the author's preferred exegetic position as the classical one.(4)

Despite this reservation, I do think that people interested in a secular take on Buddhist teachings need to query their own agendas: how far do secular interpretations of our age correspond with what we know of Buddha's vision and how has his teaching been understood at other times? How conscious are we of our own cultural bias when we read Buddhist teachings through our Western spectacles?

Since each new interpretation is a reinterpretation, and every interpretative update also comes at a loss, some questions arise: how knowledgeable and careful are we with the riches of existing traditions? Which declared and/or implicit criteria do decide in the secular Buddhist's mind on the validity of a contemplative wisdom teaching? I have elsewhere described a number of possible pitfalls for an emerging secular Buddhism and would here like to focus on the tasks I see necessary.(5)

Here some tasks I would like to see secular Buddhists pick up:

The first challenge is that of *Sangha* – to build resilient practice communities in times of individualism; any serious Buddhist movement will have to face this task.

We do not understand Buddhist texts nearly well enough. Instead of throwing things out that don't immediately cater to our Western sensibilities, we need to better understand what is actually there. We simply need to learn more about texts, their interpretation and the circumstances surrounding their transmission. This requires both cultural and linguistic research and creative reading.

Whoever tries to convey Buddhist teachings in practical ways soon discovers that 'cultural translations' are needed. It is not enough to translate texts from one language to another – a literally accurate English translation of a source text doesn't automatically make sense in terms of one's own life experience. After the philological work, a further step of cultural translation is needed if the message is to percolate down into the idiom of one's psychological self-reflection.

It seems imperative that practitioners study the history of Buddhism – especially of their own teachers and traditions – in the broader context of history and the history of ideas. Every tradition inevitably pursues some mythologizing around its own role and importance; as long as the teachings and the history of this tradition are accessed exclusively through its own representatives, the one-sidedness of a specific school or lineage is not sufficiently visible.

I'm all for the naturalization of Buddhism into Western societies and ways of thinking – yet only after we've properly contextualized where it is coming from. Unless we take the trouble to understand content *and* context of what exactly we are amalgamating, we may end up 'naturalizing' more of our own misunderstandings or, at best, a blend of our own preferences under the flag of secular Buddhism, rather than a contemplative wisdom tradition.

The abundance of accessible Buddhist teachings strikes me as greater than what I sense is often shared in Buddhist places of learning. As teachers, we may not always succeed in the educational balancing act: opening up all the riches of the Dharma while at the same time presenting this wealth in psychologically digestible forms, allowing for experiential understanding to grow. Maybe I'm just being impatient?

Interested Western psychologists and psychotherapists will find a detailed study of Buddhist contemplative psychology and its epistemology promising. I envisage a continuation of what has started some time ago as Positive Psychology(6) – a psychology dedicated to the inquiry into the factors of wellbeing rather than just into pathogenic conditions. While modern psychology has spent much of its first 130 years on the latter, we still lack basic research on genuine Salutogenesis(7).

Buddhist mind training is known for inducing calm and bringing about existential insights; what is less known outside the Buddhist world is that it extends beyond *samatha* and *vipassanā* exercises and offers pragmatic ways to train empathy – in its diverse forms of friendliness, compassion, joy and equanimity – and of what brings about health in the broadest sense: self-calming skills, balance, confidence, contentment, benevolence, self-respect and value-based happiness, attuned empathetic connection, and inner freedom based on self-knowledge.

Greater familiarity with Buddhist psychology may also help with the recontextualising of mindfulness. It is one thing to appreciate the value of applied mindfulness as it currently happens in many places in healthcare, education and beyond. It is an all together different task to understand the functions of mind being exercised by these practices. While the 'mindfulness' brand has become a huge growth area, academic psychology still struggles to agree on operationalized definitions for the very quality so eagerly researched and popularized.

Some of the definitory wrestling has to do with an inherent conflict of interests: while scientific methodology demands isolation of the quality researched, Buddhist psychology is adamant that it is one of the features of mindfulness to be refractory to such isolation and only works embed-

ded in a number of other mind functions.

Another aspect is that some academic mindfulness definitions seem to be almost intentionally reductionist and more tailored to be proven (and funded) – rather than aiming to actually transport the complexity that *sati* carries in Buddhist traditions. Both research psychologists and Buddhist practitioners alike continue to warn that all is not well with some of the current understandings of mindfulness in many of the studies by those in the academic field.(8)

My last and most emphatic wish concerns the study the of the *Nikāyas* and other early Buddhist texts using the tools of literary criticism: textual analysis, hermeneutics, comparative work, narratology – the whole apparatus of litcrit. The Buddhist world is lacking people who bring their literary competence to a study of Suttas.(9) Biblical criticism and historical-critical scholarship have, for the last 150 years, been trying to find what German theologians called the 'Sitz im Leben', the situational setting in life, from where a text speaks. This means: a) attempting to re-contextualize and look more deeply at the function of a text; b) understanding more clearly how it works with the tools of textual analysis. It's that simple: If we are interested in how meaning is construed, we need to understand better how the story is constructed. Bringing the tools of literary scholarship to these texts, without necessarily having either theological or atheistic points of view to sell, would teach us a lot. How is this simile constructed? Whose voice is talking? What is the speaker's perspective and focus? Who is his or her audience? What is *not* being said?

Reading texts is an art – any text; all the more a text 2,000 or more years old. Careful reading provides insights into the diversity of voices and tensions of a text beyond canonical interpretation. This is not an easy task; our click-and-link culture appears hermeneutically challenged. Even if digital dementia turns out to be more of a scare term than an actual fact, at least according to anecdotal evidence many people nowadays have a harder job at extracting meaning from things written. If we wish to have access to the practical wisdom couched in scriptural teachings we need to get in there somehow; one way to do so is with the toolbox of literary scholarship.

If as secular Buddhists we are to be more than just secularists, we need to 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(10) *(lokuttara)* and the role of absorptions *(jhāna)* – rather than just trying to write them off because they sit uncomfortably with Western values and current beliefs.

There is a whole set of teachings pertaining to the topics of realization and the aspect of *lokuttara*, (a 'transcendent' dimension). These teachings emphatically insist on the possibility of an embodied, subjective and numinous experience through the practice of meditation. I see some secular Buddhists struggle to even acknowledge this aspect of the teachings. At the very least, I sense the question of and the quest for personal realization needs to be seen as legitimate. If we give up the possibility of realization we have turned these teachings into just another brand of critical humanism and thus, I believe, secular Buddhism into one of the 'near enemies' of the

Buddha's message.

Is there a middle path, a living Buddhism, beyond approaches either conveniently tailored to my likings and congenial to my comfort-seeking habits and one demanding credulous traditionalist partisanship to one of the existing lineages? Maybe the option between self-serving arbitrariness and dogged orthodoxy is the old Western Enlightenment project. Leaving behind familiar perceptual grounds, moving out of the comfort zone of personal views and beyond an intellectual world where the only alternatives seem scientific materialism or religious belief takes effort, independent thinking and maturity of mind. This means as much getting beyond the various traditions' exclusive claims to correctness in their interpretation of Buddhist teachings and, more generally, the mythification of their own history. It also means getting beyond the simplistic impulse to debunk all these traditions and start from scratch with a 'reasonable' Buddhism.

If a historically informed and knowledgable secular Buddhist perspective is likely to help some of the traditions brushing up on their own history and do away with some mythologizations, it also has to be acknowledged that beyond all critique we owe these traditions the preservation and transmission of texts, the nurturing of practice lineages and an ongoing exegetical engagement for the vision of Buddha's message.

Notes

1. See e.g. Bechert, 1966; Gombrich, 2006 and McMahan, 2008.
2. See Braun, 2014; Bretfeld, 2008.
3. Vin i 101: *mūgasūkarā.*
4. Bodhi, Bhikkhu: 'Facing the Great Divide' in: *Inquiring Mind* Vol. 31 (2015), No. 2, also available here.
5. Also available as a PDF here.
6. Seligman, Martin EP; Csikszentmihalyi, Mihály: 'Positive psychology: An introduction' in: *American Psychologist* Vol. 55 (2000), No. 1, p. 5–14.
7. The term was coined by Aaron Antonovsky (1979) but is now used widely.
8. Paul Grossman (2004) and others (e.g. Rosch 2007, Mikulas 2010, Purser and Milillo 2014) continue to point to these difficulties with sympathies for the mindfulness cause. Somewhat less sympathetic is a meta-Analysis of the *US Departments for Health and Human Services* on Meditation research (Ospina et. al., 2007) which concludes of existing studies: 'Scientific research on meditation practices does not appear to have a common theoretical perspective' and they are 'characterized by poor methodological quality' (p. v). Further: 'The field of research on meditation techniques and their therapeutic applications has been clouded by confusion over what constitutes meditation' (p. 209). Particularly the mindfulness research comes in for criticism: '… however, general descriptions of mindfulness vary from investigator to investigator and there is no consensus on the defining components or processes'(p. 32). Thanks to Bhikkhu Analāyo (2013) for pointing to relevant passages of this 429-page study.
9. The Buddhist world still lacks people like Northrop Frye, Frank Kermode and Robert Alter. I hope to see one day late Harald Beaver's unpublished 'Broken Gong' as a milestone in this pursuit; I am indebted to him for his vision.
10. The term 'supramundane' (*lokuttara)* is specific and technical in its use. (Its opposite is *lokyia, '*worldly'.) The term refers e.g. to absorptions, degrees of realization, a number of specific states of consciousness and, notably, a type of dependent arising; it should not be confused with or treated as meaning 'supernatural' or 'metaphysical'.

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