



THE DARK SIDE OF MEDITATION



Aaron Alexis was in search of something. He started attending a Buddhist temple and learned to meditate; he hoped it would bring him wisdom and peace. 'I want to be a Buddhist monk,' he once told a friend from the temple. His friend advised him to keep studying. Aaron did. He learned Thai and kept going to the temple - chanting, meditating. But other things got in the way.

On 16 September 2013 Aaron drove into Washington's Navy Yard. It was eight o'clock in the morning. He'd been working there not long before, and security let him in. He walked out of the car with a large bag and briefly disappeared into a toilet. Minutes later the security cameras caught him holding a shotgun. Aaron walked briskly and hid behind a wall for a few seconds before advancing through the building. Within 30 minutes 12 people were dead. He killed randomly, first using his shotgun and then, after running out of ammunition, using the handgun belonging to a guard he'd just killed. He died after an exchange of gunfire with the police¹.



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It took only 24 hours for a journalist to notice that Aaron had been a Buddhist, prompting her to write an article² that asked, 'Can there be a less positive side to meditation?' Western Buddhists immediately reacted: 'This man represented the Dharma teachings no more than 9/11 terrorists represented the teachings of Islam,' wrote one. Others explained that he had a history of mental health problems. However, some noted that Buddhism, as other religions, has a history that links it to violence³. And meditation, for all its de-stressing and self-development potential, can take you deeper into the darkest recesses of your own mind than you may have wished for.

This chapter asks difficult questions that are seldom given a voice. They are questions I have wrestled with, both as a psychologist and in my own spiritual practice. Do I have unrealistic positive expectations about what meditation can do? Can it also have adverse effects, finding its way to non-spiritual, even non-peaceful ends?

When something goes wrong, the way it did with Aaron Alexis, we can't look the other way - rationalizing that he wasn't a true Buddhist or meditator isn't enough. We need relentlessly to examine the less familiar, hidden facets of meditation - a technique that for centuries has been used to cultivate wisdom, clarity of mind, and selflessness. We need to ask ourselves if meditation has a dark side.

ADVERSE EFFECTS

I'd come across the idea that without the guidance of an expert teacher meditation can have adverse effects, but I'd thought that this was a metaphor for the difficulties we might encounter as we venture deep into ourselves. I hadn't considered that the adverse effects might be literal ones. Then, one day I heard a first-hand account that opened my eyes to my naïvety. At the time I was teaching an open course on the psychology of spirituality. There were a few twenty-year-olds, but the majority of students were in

their late fifties and early sixties and represented a combination of retired lawyers, Anglican priests, psychiatrists, and three or four yoga and meditation teachers. Louise was one of them.

In her late fifties and lean with dark, short hair, Louise was a quiet member of the group, who in general spoke up only when she felt she had something important to say. She had taught yoga for more than twenty years, stopping only when something unexpected happened that changed her life for ever. During one meditation retreat (she'd been on many), her sense of self changed dramatically. 'Good,' she thought initially, 'it must be part of the dissolving experience.' But she couldn't help feeling anxious and frightened.

'Don't worry, just keep meditating and it will go away,' the meditation teacher told her.

It didn't. She couldn't get back to her usual self. It felt like something was messing with her sense of identity, how she felt in her body, the very way she looked at the world and at other people. The last day of the retreat was excruciating: her body shook, she cried and panicked. The following day, back at home, she was in pieces – her body was numb, she didn't want to get out of bed. Louise's husband took her to the GP and, within hours, she was being seen by a psychiatrist. She spent the next 15 years being treated for psychotic depression; for part of this time, she had to be hospitalized.

Louise had chosen to give a presentation on the psychology of spiritual experience, as part of her assessment on the course. She talked lucidly about her illness and its possible origins, including a genetic predisposition to mental health problems. She explained that she had gradually taken up yoga practice again, but had never returned to meditation retreats. 'I had to have electro-convulsive therapy,' she told the class. That means strong electric shocks going through your skull, a treatment that is not only painful, but leads to memory loss in the short term.

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I was stunned. I couldn't know for sure; perhaps her mental illness could have developed in some other way but, as it happened, those three days of intense meditation are likely to have triggered it. I mentioned this to a friend who, in the 1970s, had taught meditation to 13- to 14-year-olds.

'Oh yes,' he said, 'I once had two boys who were becoming quite emotionally disturbed; the meditation practice was unleashing emotional material that they couldn't deal with.' 'So what happened?'

'I told them to stop doing it,' my friend told me. 'I had twenty other children to look after. And as soon as they did, they were fine.'

Two in twenty – that's a 10 per cent probability that meditation could have an adverse effect on young adolescents. But this was anecdotal evidence taken from a single meditation class that happened forty years earlier – indeed, if the hundreds of scientific articles I'd read on the effects of meditation were to go by, there seemed to be only good news. So, are cases like Louise's and the boys in my friend's class the exception? I looked through the medical and psychological databases in search of articles on the possible adverse effects of meditation. There were some, most of them case studies. One of the most striking, written in 2001 by a British psychiatrist, told the story of a 25-year-old woman who, like Louise, had a serious mental health problem following meditation retreats. The first time she was admitted to hospital her symptoms included: 'thought disorder with flight of ideas, her mood was elevated and there were grandiose delusions including the belief that she had some special mission for the world: she had to offer "undying, unconditional love" to everyone. She had no [critical] insight.'⁴⁷ (p.210)

This woman, referred to as Miss X, was diagnosed with mania. After six weeks of medication her symptoms were controlled. A psychiatrist saw her regularly for two years and she started twice-weekly psychotherapy. Then, she took part in a Zen Buddhist retreat and was hospitalized again. She couldn't sleep

for five days and, according to a psychiatrist who saw her, displayed a number of unrestrained behaviours: she was irritable, sexually disinhibited, restless, made repeated praying gestures, and attacked a member of staff. Miss X had to be transferred to an intensive psychiatric care unit for three days.

Interesting, I thought, but I was still unconvinced. All these examples could be individuals with a strong predisposition to mental illness. As I looked further into the scientific literature, though, I found other kinds of evidence. In 1992 David Shapiro, a professor in psychiatry and human behaviour at the University of California, Irvine, published an article about the effects of meditation retreats. Shapiro examined 27 people with different levels of meditation experience. He found that 63 per cent of them had at least one negative effect and 7 per cent suffered profoundly adverse effects. The negative effects included anxiety, panic, depression, increased negativity, pain, feeling spaced out, confusion and disorientation⁵.

Perhaps only the least experienced felt these negative experiences. Several days of meditation might overwhelm those who were relatively new to the practice. Was that the case? The answer was no. When Shapiro divided the larger group into those with lesser and greater experience, there were no differences: all the meditators had an equal number of adverse experiences. An earlier study had arrived at a similar, but even more surprising conclusion. Not only did those with more experience of meditating find themselves with negative symptoms – particularly anxiety, confusion and restlessness – they also had considerably *more* adverse effects than the beginners⁶.

Amid the small pile of articles on the adverse effects of meditation, I was surprised to find two by Arnold Lazarus and Albert Ellis, co-founders of CBT (see p.81). In a 1976 article Lazarus reported that a few of his own patients had had serious disturbances after meditating; these included depression, ongoing tension and a serious suicide attempt. Lazarus strongly criticized

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the idea that 'meditation is for everyone'. Instead, he argued that 'one man's meat is another man's poison', and that researchers and therapists need to know both the benefits and the risks of meditation for *different* kinds of people⁷.

Albert Ellis shared Lazarus' misgivings about meditation. He believed it could be used as a therapeutic tool, but not with everyone. 'A few of my own clients,' he writes, 'have gone into dissociative semi-trance states and upset themselves considerably by meditating.' Overall, he believed meditation could be used only in moderation as a 'thought-distracting' or 'relaxing' technique⁸:

'Like tranquilizers, it may have both good and bad effects - especially, the harmful result of encouraging people to look away from some of their central problems, and to refrain from actually disputing and surrendering their disturbance-creating beliefs. It may also be perniciously used to enhance self-rating or "ego-strength", so that people end up by believing "I am a great meditator and *therefore* am a good and noble person!" I therefore recommend meditation... as a palliative, a distraction method, and advise most of my clients to use it with discretion and not to take it too seriously or view it as a generally therapeutic method.' (p.672)

A SPIRITUAL EMERGENCY?

I felt like an archaeologist digging up long-forgotten artefacts. How could this literature on the adverse effects of meditation, including short - but sharp - comments from founding cognitive psychotherapists be completely absent in the recent research on meditation? It was conceivable that clinicians and researchers simply did not report the negative consequences of meditation in their articles, but it was more likely that the *meditators* themselves did not talk about it. Many who encounter difficulties during or after their practice may feel they're doing something wrong, or even that their distress is part of the process and will eventually pass. That was the case of Miss X, who had two manic

episodes following meditation retreats, but eventually refused continuous treatment, explaining that her mania was nothing more than a release of blocked energy from years of not dealing with her emotions adequately. Many meditators thinking like Miss X could, to a certain extent, explain why negative reports didn't make it into scientific journals – adverse effects could be regarded as mere stones on the road to peace or spiritual attainment.

I was thinking about this when Jo Lal, our publisher, emailed to ask how the book was going. I told her what I had found.

'Have you heard of Dr Russell Razzaque?' Jo asked. I hadn't.

'We're about to publish his book *Breaking Down is Waking Up*⁹. You may find it helpful.'

Razzaque is a London-based psychiatrist whose own Buddhist meditation practice has led him to re-evaluate the meaning of mental illness. He argues that many of the psychotic experiences his patients describe resemble mystical experiences of ego-dissolution that are known to occur after years of meditation practice. Razzaque suggests that mental breakdowns are part of a spiritual-growth process, in which we learn to see the self for what it is: an illusion. He describes his own mystical experience in the book:

'I found myself descending into a deeply meditative state; I somehow travelled through the sensations of my body and the thoughts in my mind to a space of sheer nothingness that felt, at the same time, like it was somehow the womb of everything. I felt a sense of pure power and profound energy as I came upon a sudden brilliant light and a profound feeling of all-pervading joy ... I was everything and nothing at the same time.' (p.40)

In the days that followed, however, life wasn't so blissful. Razzaque found that he couldn't contain his joyful experience and there was something deep within pulling him in the opposite direction. 'I could sense the powerful currents in my whirling mind – the self-doubts and the dents in self-esteem sucking me towards a ball of depression, the anxieties and fears threatening to balloon

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into full-blown panic, obsessions or defensive compulsions, and the speed of it all that risked pushing me into a manic state.' (p.44)

Razzaque managed to keep grounded and, as a result of his difficult experience, felt greater sympathy towards his psychotic patients. Wait a minute, I thought; here we have a trained psychiatrist who can identify his symptoms and fight them off – but the majority of people meditating know next to nothing about psychiatric diagnosis; nor are they familiar with seeing patients experiencing unusual states of mind. Can these difficult emotional experiences arising from meditation really be a sign of spiritual awakening?

Others before Razzaque have trodden a similar path and pointed out similarities between the symptoms of psychotic people and spiritual experiences. In the late 1980s Stan Grof (see p.40) edited with his wife a book on spiritual emergencies¹⁰. They caution clinical psychologists and psychiatrists to be aware of and respect what on the surface may look like mental illness, but is, in fact, the expression of spiritual experiences that are having a profound, though momentarily stressful, effect. The Grofs mention shamanism and near-death experiences, as well as meditation and other spiritual practices, in association with spiritual emergencies.

Their pioneering work came to fruition when a new category was added to the fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV), used by psychiatrists worldwide – that of Religious and Spiritual Problems¹¹. This category acknowledges that some mental health problems, such as depersonalization, may arise as a temporary result of spiritual practices. If you have ever felt a strong state of depersonalization, you wouldn't forget it easily! The Cambridge Depersonalisation Scale, a questionnaire that measures symptoms, includes unusual experiences, such as: 'Part of my body feels as if it didn't belong to me' or 'I have the feeling of not having any thoughts at all, so that when I speak it feels as if my words were being uttered by

an automaton.¹² But other statements, such as ‘I feel so detached from my thoughts that they seem to have a life of their own’ might be quite familiar to mindfulness meditators.

With a category of religious and spiritual problems, clinicians are potentially able to recognize what are genuine manic, depressive or psychotic episodes and what are the non-pathological, although sometimes difficult effects of meditation. But it’s far from a straightforward distinction. David Lukoff, the clinical psychologist who co-authored this new category¹³, admits that his interest in the topic arose in 1971 when he spent two months experiencing his own spiritual crisis – fully convinced that he was the reincarnation of Buddha and Christ with a mission to save the world¹⁴.

But how many clinicians worldwide, I wonder, even those with a spiritual faith, would not deem someone whose life was dominated by delusion for two entire months to be seriously mentally ill. The problem centres around how we define mental illness as distinct from a spiritual emergency – clearly, not all spirituality-related experiences are benign. The late Michael Thalbourne, an Australian psychological scientist, suffered from bipolar disorder, wherein periods of mania would trigger messianic delusions that had a spiritual element:

‘I sometimes get into this very focused state of mind that I can’t shake, where I believe I am Christ,’ he told me once, opening wide his eyes and gazing intensely ‘I don’t just believe I am in communion with Christ, but that I actually am *the* Christ.’

Michael Thalbourne had a deep personal interest in spirituality, but didn’t look at his mental suffering as a benign stone on the winding road to spiritual growth. It affected both his personal life and his academic career. ‘My university has never given me a proper academic post; they see me as unreliable and potentially dangerous,’ he explained.

The Grofs cautioned that not all difficult experiences associated with spiritual practices are necessarily ‘spiritual’. A psychotherapist

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or an expert spiritual teacher may have the power to help to turn a difficult experience into a meaningful one, but not always. With the growing number of people interested in meditation in the West, many will walk away from their weekend meditation retreat or eight-week mindfulness course without expert guidance. How many of them in their search for a moment of peace and quiet, I thought, can end up having a bumpy ride, not to mention the real danger of a journey into the hell of mental illness.

CONVULSIONS, TWITCHING AND NUMBNESS

A number of Western Buddhists are aware that not all is plain sailing with meditation – they have even named the emotional difficulties that arise from their meditative practice, calling them the ‘dark night’. The concept of a spiritual dark night isn’t originally Buddhist. Coined by the 16th-century Christian mystic St John of the Cross, the phrase originally described an advanced stage of prayer and contemplation characterized by an emotional dryness, in which the subject feels abandoned by God¹⁵. Buddhists, in principle, ought not to feel abandoned by God, but their accounts of the dark night associated with meditation are riddled with emotional and physical turmoil. A Buddhist blog sharing experiences of the dark night features a number of testimonies¹⁶: ‘Nine years on and off of periods of deep depression, angst, anxiety and misery’; ‘there was a nausea that kept coming up, terrible sadness, aches and pain’; ‘I’ve had one pretty intense dark night, it lasted for nine months, included misery, despair, panic attacks... loneliness, auditory hallucinations, mild paranoia, treating my friends and family badly, long episodes of nostalgia and regret, obsessive thoughts (usually about death).’

Willoughby Britton, a neuroscientist and psychiatrist at Brown University who has conducted studies on the positive effects of mindfulness, is now trying to map these more difficult experiences, which she calls ‘The Dark Side of Dharma’. Her interest arose from witnessing two people being hospitalized after intense

meditation practice, together with her own experience after a retreat in which she felt an unimaginable terror. Reading through the classical Buddhist literature to try to understand what was happening to her, she realized that these negative experiences are mentioned as common stages of meditation.

'I was woefully uninformed,' she admits in an interview¹⁷.

Meditation retreats easily led people to sense the world differently: the hearing gets sharper; time moves slower. But the most radical change that can occur is in what Britton calls 'the narrative of the self'. Try this out: focus on the present moment, nothing else than the present moment. You may be able to do it easily for a very short time. However, if you try extending this 'presentness' for one, two hours and keep trying for some days, your usual sense of self – that which has one foot in the past and the other in the future – collapses. The practice may feel great for some, but for others it is like being continuously tossed around in a roller coaster. Vertigo, rather than blissful realization of the emptiness of the self, may be the end result. Other unpleasant things happen, too, as Britton discovered through interviews with numerous individuals: arms flap, people twitch and have convulsions; others go through euphoria or depression, or report not feeling anything at all – their physical senses go numb.

Unpleasant as they are, if these symptoms were confined to a retreat there wouldn't be much to worry about – but they're not. Sometimes they linger, affecting work, childcare and relationships. They can become a clinical health problem, which, on average, lasts for more than three years. Some people 'seemed to go through these experiences fairly quickly, like under a year, and in other people can last a decade', Britton reveals¹⁸.

Britton hasn't yet published her research, but it confirms the case studies, earlier findings with groups of meditators, and Lazarus's and Albert Ellis's comments on the adverse effects of meditation. These negative effects may very well turn out to be a stage in our spiritual journey, but if we don't address them

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properly they can be destructive and harmful. Meditation teachers know about it – Britton says – but meditation researchers are usually sceptical; they ask about the prior psychiatric history of meditators who develop mental health problems, as if meditation itself had little or nothing to do with it¹⁹.

I thought the same before starting the research for this book. Its title was originally going to be *From Monster to Buddha*, intending to highlight the astonishing possibility of personal change arising from meditation. I haven't stopped believing in meditation's ability to fuel change, but I am concerned that the science of meditation is promoting a skewed view: meditation wasn't developed so we could lead less stressful lives or improve our wellbeing. Its primary purpose was much more radical – to rupture your idea of who you are; to shake to the core your sense of self so that you realize there is 'nothing there'. But that's not how we see meditation courses promoted in the West. Here, meditation has been revamped as a natural pill that will quieten your mind and make you happier.

I recently asked students in a class I was teaching on the psychology of contemplative techniques what they thought the similarities and differences were between meditation and psychotherapy. A student who was a regular meditator argued that doing psychotherapy was all about past wounds and relationships, while meditation, she said, was 'free from all that crap; it's all about being in the present'.

But it's not. Repressed and traumatic material can easily resurface during intense meditation.

From the moment I accepted this and started talking to regular meditators, I kept finding more and more evidence. I discovered even more online – and sometimes in the least expected places. Take Deepak Chopra's website, for example. There is a correspondence section where readers post their questions or experiences and Chopra answers. A number of these posts concern physical or emotional symptoms that arise

from meditation. On 11 April 2014 an individual who had been meditating for one year – and finding in it ‘true bliss’ – describes having twice experienced a deep emotional sensation, ‘like something is being ripped from me’, that left her wanting to cry and yell. Chopra’s reply is optimistic:

‘It’s both normal and okay. It just means there is some deep emotional trauma from your past that is now ready to come to the surface and be healed. After meditation I would recommend you take a few minutes and sing out loud. Find a song you love that resonates with the emotional tone of your pain. Listen to it at above normal volume so that you can really feel the sonic effect of the song and music. When you feel it has engaged your emotions, start to sing so that your voice translates your feelings into sound. If you do this every time you feel some unresolved residue of emotion after your meditation, it will facilitate the release and healing process.²⁰’

What if someone like Aaron Alexis had emailed Deepak Chopra and received a reply like this – would singing along to his favourite song, turned up nice and loud, have healed his past emotional traumas and led into the wisdom he sought, rather than a killing spree? Unlikely. Furthermore, there is a real danger that what the person who wrote to Chopra asking for advice is feeling is not ‘normal and okay’, and that if she keeps meditating without an expert teacher, it may disturb rather than heal her.

WHAT IF HITLER HAD MEDITATED?

‘If every eight-year-old in the world is taught meditation, the world will be without violence within one generation.’

The Dalai Lama

When best-selling spiritual author Marian Williams tweeted the above quote, it quickly went viral. It probably helped that her friend Oprah Winfrey re-tweeted it to her 24 million followers with the comment, ‘This I believe is true. Have seen it in action.’²¹

The notion that religious or spiritual practice is something of a

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cure-all isn't unique to Eastern practices, though. Fundamentally, all religions moot that spirituality can make you a better person. The evidence for this is ambiguous. It is true that religions emphasize the caring part of our human nature – from the 'thou shall not kill' of the Hebrew scriptures, through the Hindu praise in the Bhagavad-Gita of the person who hurts nobody and is compassionate towards all beings, and the Quran's rule to be kind to orphans, the needy and travellers, to the Buddha's precept to 'avoid killing, or harming any living thing', and the Christian golden rule of treating others as you would want them to treat you. While there is psychological evidence that practising religious people are more charitable²², our ability to differentiate between good and bad deeds is already in place before we acquire religious ideas.

Studies have shown that from as young as six months old, we have a preference for those we see helping another, and we'd rather be with someone neutral (who acts neither positively nor negatively) than with an uncooperative individual. And from eight months old, we are able to appreciate when a helpful individual acts against another that has behaved badly. This ingenious research was conducted with computer images and puppets, so the babies could effectively recognize positive and negative moral behaviour in strangers²³.

The idea that we seem to be biologically predisposed towards morality does not answer the question a 16-year-old once asked me at a public lecture in India: 'If we are born good and kind, how come there is so much violence and evil in the world?' Religions have dealt with such 'problem of evil' questions for a long time and have come up with various answers – the existence of free will, disobedience to God, the work of the devil, and the concepts of illusion, karma or greed. Psychologists rarely come up with such enticing explanations about the origins of violence and immorality. We simply know that while we are born with the ability to tell a helpful from an unhelpful gesture, a caring from a callous person,

we are also rooted in our needs – our desire to want things, to achieve – and in trying to reach our goals we are able to hurt, and even kill. While some of us have more of a propensity towards doing this than others – for example, those with psychopathic traits – hurting someone else in order to meet our own needs is something we are all potentially capable of; and to at least some small degree, probably do.

While there is evidence that religion can make people act better towards others, there is also plenty of evidence to the contrary: religion can make you more prejudiced towards the non-religious or gay²⁴. But we can detach meditation from groups and religions. You can use meditation to de-stress or explore the self just as easily whether you ascribe to a set of religious beliefs or a religious group or not. The beauty of meditation is just that – its separateness from the necessity of divine rules of morality and punishment. But, if we take this view, we return to the question that we asked in Chapter 5: meditation without religion might improve its attraction, but is its lack of attachment to spiritual moral guidelines also a weakness?

I asked an old friend who runs a sociological research centre specializing in equality and racism issues what he thought of the Dalai Lama's idea that meditation could eventually eradicate violence. He gave me a puzzled look before answering.

'There are various factors that explain violence, right? Some psychological, others societal. Put them all together in a statistical regression model: start with level of income, education, access to health, then consider psychological factors such as the presence of childhood abuse; see how much of these explain the likelihood of my neighbour being in a fight at the pub or hitting his partner. Then, add meditation to your statistical model – would it add anything in predicting violence compared to the other factors?'

'Well ...' I started, but he interrupted me.

'Would it have made a difference if Hitler had meditated?' he asked grinning.

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I saw what he meant. You can't remove an individual from the larger context and one's psychological makeup. It would not have made much of a difference if Hitler had meditated – like Aaron Alexis did – unless he removed himself from the society that raised him to power and he radically changed his ambitions and ideas. On the other hand practices such as meditation and yoga are rooted in inner peacefulness, and the spiritual traditions upon which they're built believe that radical personal changes are possible, regardless of the environment we live in. All in all I felt I had a puzzle with quite a lot of missing or ill-fitting pieces. I couldn't quite see the larger picture. Very soon, though, I was challenged to look in a completely different way at the question of the extent to which contemplative techniques are associated with violence.

THE MISTY ROAD TO HARDIWAR

'KINDLY BE CALM', read a sign in large capital letters above the reception desk. On the other side of the lounge, there was a picture on the wall of a forty-something bearded man with a pristine smile, wearing the traditional orange robes of Indian yogis. I yawned and rubbed my eyes, trying hard to keep awake. It was past midnight and I'd been travelling for eight hours on a dimly lit motorway, thick with fog, clotted with buses and trucks without rear lights.

'Don't go, it's suicide,' a friend had told me in Delhi. 'Get the train in the morning.'

I didn't listen. I was in awe of the driver's night vision and his ability to notice the invisible buses and trucks just before crashing. 'No worry, no worry,' he said halfway through the trip. 'My name is Bobby and everyone in India knows that no Bobby has ever been in a car accident.'

Travelling with me in the same taxi was Bishal Sitaula, a friendly and talkative professor of environment and developmental studies from Norway who had arrived from

Nepal. He took out his video camera to show me footage of his Nepalese trip.

‘Then I met with this really revered Buddhist monk. Here I’m asking him a question – do you want to hear?’ I looked at the screen as he pressed play. The monk had a benevolent smile. Bishal was telling him about a personal moral dilemma. ‘When my wife makes herself pretty, I look more at her. But, when I am walking up the road and see a woman with long beautiful hair and wearing nicer make up than my wife’s, and I stare at her, then, I walk five more metres and stare back at her again – is this a sin or bad for my karma?’

The monk continued smiling. I imagined that if the whole world collapsed around him he would still smile.

‘No, no, it’s not a sin to look,’ he replied. ‘You may enjoy looking at a beautiful woman. That is fine. But if you crave and run after her, that is no good, no good; no good for your karma.’

Stopping the video, Bishal laughed loudly and put his arm around my shoulders.

When we arrived at the Patanjali Research Foundation, where I am taking part in a conference on the effects of yoga, I could make out only tiny fairy lights scattered around the complex. In the fog they looked like blurred dragonflies. Inside the accommodation block a sleepy lady handed me a key after I showed her my passport. The bedroom’s floor was paved in black-and-white marble. It was the coldest January recorded in Indian history; in Delhi homeless people were dying because of the low temperatures. I took out all the blankets from the drawer and laid them on the bed. I had travelled to India on a few occasions, but had never come so far north, only a few miles away from the source of the Ganges and the river village of Rishikesh, home to a number of celebrated ashrams and yogis. It seemed the right place to build the Patanjali Research Foundation, which holds masters and PhD programs on the science of yoga and has the largest research centre in the world dedicated to the study of this millennia-old practice.

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Lying under three heavy blankets, I gazed at the puffed steam coming out of my mouth and eventually fell asleep. A few hours later the radio switched on. I opened one eye and looked at my watch on the bedside table: it was 4am. 'Where's the damn switch?' I thought to myself. The music poured out of the speakers within the room and out in the corridor, a smooth stream of sitar and lulling voices. I walked to the reception, but saw no one. As I turned around I noticed a man by the door with a scarf wrapped around his head.

'The radio inside the bedroom, how do you turn it off?' I asked. He smiled.

'The radio,' I gestured, pointing at the speakers in the corridor. 'Off, off.'

He smiled again and tilted his head from left to right repeatedly. 'No sir, no sir. Wake up, wake up. Yoga,' he said, still smiling and pointing outside. It was pitch black.

The music continued. At 5.30am I ventured outside. There was daylight, but the thick fog from the previous night hadn't yet lifted. I followed some people who seemed to know where they were heading, and entered an enormous auditorium, where approximately 2,000 people were sitting on yoga mats. The spiritual guru of the Patanjali Research Foundation, Swami Ramdev, was on top of the stage, alone and wearing nothing but an orange loincloth.

A man sitting next to me whispered into my ear that he was a medical doctor at the foundation and offered to translate what Swami Ramdev was saying.

'It's *pranayama*. We start with breathing; right breathing can heal anything.'

Yoga with machine guns

For the next hour we breathed together and listened. First, how *not* to breathe. Then, how to breathe through alternating nostrils, and how to use your belly and diaphragm in a syncopated way.

‘Like this!’ and ‘Don’t do this!’ he said, hyperventilating with a contracted abdomen and eyes wide open, looking like he was having a fit. ‘This breathing cures asthma; this one heals all types of arthritis; if you’re depressed, this will cure it.’

There was clapping from the audience. Steam clouds came out of people’s mouths. The list of diseases that yoga and *pranayama* can heal was almost endless – dementia and cancer among them.

The breathing exercises went on, but my feet and hands were getting colder. After an hour of breathing, the swami stood up and began a series of *asanas*. ‘Finally,’ I thought, ‘we’re going to gently warm up.’ But it was far from gentle; more like a kind of yoga-on-speed mixed with aerobics. I looked around and noticed only one man among the audience who could keep up with the guru. For the last posture Swami Ramdev walked around the stage on his hands – for about 1 minute. There was more clapping.

We finally moved towards a peace chant, which was interrupted by a few minutes of yoga laughter – ‘very good for depression’ – and followed by singing from the swami alone. ‘He has the personality of a rock star,’ I overheard someone with an American accent whisper behind me.

When the solo chant ended, Swami Ramdev uttered a shrill cry, which was imitated by most of the audience as they repeatedly raised their fists upwards. It was a strange sight. The cry and fist waving were the kind you’d see in a political or military gathering. As the session ended the translator held my hand: ‘Come, I’ll take you to Swami Ji for a blessing.’

I followed him. There was a queue of people waiting. I looked around: there were numerous posters of the Patanjali Research Foundation and university, mostly in Hindi. My translator pushed me forwards; I was now very close to the Swami. The man in front of me was carrying a beautiful, handcrafted bag. On it, next to the foundation’s name, was written ‘Self and National Character Building by Yoga’. Finally, it was my turn. Swami Ramdev smiled;

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I smiled back. I slowly tilted my head forwards to greet him as my translator introduced me, but halfway to the full nod, I froze.

'Bloody hell,' I caught myself saying. A man came from behind the Swami holding a machine gun about the length of an extended arm. He was pointing the gun at me. My translator guided me away while the Swami smiled and waved goodbye.

'What was that?', I thought, my eyes fixed on the gun. 'He's a very holy man, don't you think?' my translator said, still holding my arm and apparently unfazed by the bodyguard with the machine gun.

Outside I saw Bishal, the professor who had travelled with me the night before. I felt like hugging him. He was in his perennial chatty mood. 'Hello, my friend! Chilly, huh? Did you enjoy the session?'

I asked Bishal about the sort of war cry at the end of the session and the armed bodyguard. He told me about the political influence of the swami – that he's pressured the parliament to put an end to corruption and some politicians don't like him.

'Look, look,' I interrupted, pointing at the person holding a bag I'd noticed inside the yoga hall. 'Do you see what's written on that bag: Self and National Character Building by Yoga. What do they mean by *national*?'

'Oh, that. Well, it's all around the place. This is not only about yoga, but about social transformation.'

'But why national?'

'Yoga comes from India, right? It's India's trademark. Here, that's part of their message, that yoga is Indian.'

I stared back in silence. As we made our way back to the accommodation hall, I noticed a large banner with a picture of the guru holding up his fist with an angry face. The writing was in Hindi. 'And what's that about?'

Bishal reminded me of a horrendous gang rape that had recently happened in Delhi, inside a moving bus. The girl died shortly afterwards and there had been a public outcry. My friend

in Delhi had told me that Indian culture, particularly in the north, was not only sexist, but violent towards women.

'So the banner literally asks,' Bishar translated, 'What shall we do with the rapists? And the red letters say: Death Penalty! Death Penalty!'

'Are you serious?'

'I find it strange, too,' Bishar replied. 'But they believe in harsh punishment.'

It was my fourth time in India, but the first that the contradictions of this country were pressing on me. Yoga, an instrument of serenity and enlightenment, was serving political purposes. The Patanjali Research Foundation is powerful: it has its own TV satellite channel, factories producing a variety of health products, a university and a leading yoga research centre. They also commission cartoons that portray Swami Ramdev as an enlightened yogi to educate children not just about the technique of yoga, but about its whole philosophy – even its nationalistic and punishment views, I suspect.

There were other odd things going on. The foundation's wireless Internet server was excellent, but it didn't allow you to access a number of webpages. The first banned site I noticed was Facebook. I checked with a German conference participant and he couldn't access it either. Most web searches related to drugs were forbidden, as I discovered while trying to read about the uses of morphine as a painkiller. When I asked Nandim, a Master's student at the university, why they had censored Facebook, he laughed.

'Very few people from the outside notice it.'

'Why can't you use it?'

'Oh, you know, students were spending too much time on it.'

'That's rubbish,' I said. 'Students can spend too much time just browsing the web. Why Facebook?'

Nandim looked around before answering. 'You know... many boys were using Facebook to talk to girls.'

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'So?'

'Well, that's not allowed.'

'What do you mean?' I ask. 'The university is not sexually segregated; you have men and women.'

'Yes, yes, but Swamiji doesn't like us to be together,' Nandim said speaking in a hushed voice.

I looked at him puzzled.

'A couple of incidents happened last year,' he said. 'There were boys and girls spending time together, you know, like they were a couple.'

'Yes, it does happen.'

'Not here, sir, not here. They were expelled from the university.'

On my way back to Delhi, this time on a sunny though heavily congested road, I saw graffiti on the wall of a tunnel. No pictures, only wide letters written in black across the extension of the wall: 'I HATE MY LIFE.' I felt a sudden wave of empathy for whomever had doodled it; the land that had given birth to numerous sages and yoga, the soil of non-dualistic Advaita Vedanta was riddled with contradictions. At the Patanjali Research Foundation, ideals and techniques for inner-peace-making were fused together with nationalism, violence (guns and the endorsement of capital punishment), censorship and sexual repression. When I returned to my friend's house in Delhi, he teased me for my naïvety.

'Many of these yogis are millionaires. They live in fancy air-conditioned flats. And the nationalism and violence, give me a break: do you know how many wars we, the very spiritual Indian people, have been involved in during the last fifty years?'

My doubts about meditation and yoga having a role in solving the world's violence substantially increased after this trip. When I returned to England, I emailed Torkel Brekkel, an Oxford colleague who specializes in the study of Asian religions. I asked what he knew about violence in the Eastern spiritual traditions. My general understanding was that in a religion such as Buddhism, which has compassion and non-violence as central principles,

you would find few, if any, displays of violence among its followers. 'That's not the case,' Torkel replied and added that he had lost count of the times his colleagues, students and journalists had tried telling him that Buddhism, unlike Christianity or Islam, is an essentially peaceful religion. 'It's not,' he asserted, referring me to some books on the topic, including one he'd recently edited²⁵.

COMPASSIONATE KILLING

During the first decade of the new millennium, while psychologists and neuroscientists were examining the positive psychological effects of Buddhist mindfulness meditation, scholars of religions were looking in the opposite direction; they were examining the violent history of Buddhism. The book edited by Torkel Brekkel is only the most recent in a number of publications looking at the use of violence by Buddhist monks and *bodhisattvas* (enlightened persons). The titles of the volumes are revealing: *Buddhism and Violence*, *Buddhism and Warfare*, *Zen at War*.

Apparently, the early Buddhist views on violence were astonishingly similar to those of the Christians who tried to follow Jesus's saying, 'if someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also'²⁶. Like the early Christians, followers of Buddha prided themselves on being different from the fallen world. One early Buddhist text recognizes that violence should be avoided:

All
tremble at the rod,
all are fearful of death.
Drawing the parallel to
yourself,
neither kill nor get others to kill.
(*Dhammapada*, 129)²⁷

In another early text, the *Yodhajivasutra*, the Buddha explains that warriors are to be reincarnated in hell or as an animal,

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rather than in the company of heavenly deities (*devas*). There is a particularly striking story of how the Buddha personally walked into the battlefield and avoided bloodshed. Four years after he attained enlightenment, two armies were facing each other because of a dispute about access to water. The Buddha came between the armies and asked their commanders:

'How much value do you think water has in comparison with the life of men?'

The commanders agreed that the value of water was infinitely less important than human life.

'Why do you then destroy lives that are valuable for valueless water?' the Buddha asked, thus preventing the oncoming bloodshed (p.194).²⁸

Many have reiterated this view. Buddhism's precept of non-violence has inspired people in Asian countries living under its influence, so that 'throughout its peaceful march of 2,500 years, no drop of blood has been shed in the name of the Buddha' (p.195), writes Narada, a distinguished Sri Lankan monk and scholar.

But a cursory glance at the news broadcasts about Buddhist countries challenges this peaceful image. Let's start with Sri Lanka. In 2013 groups of monks were holding rallies against the Muslim minority; since 1983 many Buddhist monks have been directly involved in military campaigns against a separatist faction in northern Sri Lanka. In the first half of the twentieth century, monks joined and led the struggle for independence against the British. Two thousand years ago, King Duttagamani fought a war to re-establish Buddhism in the country 'where he used a Buddha's relic as his banner' (p.200). One thousand miles from Sri Lanka in Burma, in May 2013 Buddhist mobs were killing Muslims and burning mosques; one Burmese monk, jailed for inciting religious hatred, likes to call himself the 'Burmese Bin Laden'²⁹.

These events, I soon found out, aren't exceptions to the rule. Although preaching non-violence to his followers, the Buddha didn't try to persuade kings to adopt a pacifist stance. He clearly

separated the waters by not allowing former soldiers to become monks and forbidding his followers to preach to soldiers – violence was understood as part of life and there was no attempt to eradicate it entirely from the world. The effort was in trying to contain it in Buddhist monks. But even that failed. Just as Christianity developed its ‘just war’ theory – wherein, according to St Augustine, an early Christian theologian, war could be an instrument of divine justice on wickedness – Buddhism came to develop its own theory of *compassionate killing*. A text written in the fourth century entitled ‘Discourse on the stages of yogic practice’ argues that under certain circumstances even an enlightened person is allowed to kill *out of compassion*.

‘If a *bodhisattva* meets an evil person who is going to kill many people... he will think to himself: if by killing this bandit I fall in hell, what does it matter? I must not let him go to hell! Then the *bodhisattva* ... will kill him, full of both the horror of the crime and compassion for that person. In doing so, he will not commit any transgression; rather, he will acquire much blessing.³⁰’ (p.9)

The Buddha himself told the story of how, in a previous life, he had killed out of compassion. As narrated in the *Mahaupaya-Kausalya sutra*, there was a time when 500 merchants went to sea in search of treasures, but one of them schemed to kill the others and keep all the treasures for himself. A deity discovered this and informed the Buddha who had the following dilemma: if the other merchants learn of the evil merchant’s plot to kill them, the evil merchant will be killed and the 499 merchants will go to hell. However, if nothing is done, the merchants will be killed and their murderer will go to hell. So, the Buddha decided to kill the evil merchant and save the others. He explained to his followers that his action was the result of compassion for the sake of a greater number of living beings³¹.

It’s not difficult to follow the Buddha’s logic – it’s similar to the tram problem first posed by British philosopher Philippa Foot in 1967, and subsequently often used in psychology experiments on

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moral behaviour³². In this scenario there is a runaway tram that is heading straight towards five workers. A large man is standing on a footbridge over the tracks. If you throw him off the bridge his body will block the tram and the five men will be saved. What would you do? Rationally, you ought to kill the single man on the footbridge to save the greater number of people. But this involves choice – a conscious decision to kill a man, at your will, rather than the tragic but accidental killing of the people on the track. As a result most people's gut reaction to this moral problem is not necessarily the most reasoned one: it may *rationally* be better to kill the man, but *intuitively* you feel it's wrong and opt against it, letting the five workers die in a tragic accident instead.

Through dilemmas such as these, psychologists have shown that many of our moral decisions are intuitive rather than rational. However, there is a problem with these findings. New studies have found that for people who display lack of empathy – such as psychopaths – the intuitive answer is to kill the large man, because to them the act of killing is not particularly aversive³³. There is a kind of indifference or amorality about killing for people with a psychopathic personality. Although, on the surface, this seems the very opposite of what Buddhist practice is seeking to attain, something similar to this emotional indifference comes across in some Buddhist texts. One of the crucial teachings of Buddhism is that of emptiness: the self is ultimately unreal, so the *bodhisattva* who kills with full knowledge of the emptiness of the self, kills no one; both the self of the killer and the self of the killed are nothing more than an illusion.

In the *Nirvana sutra*, there is the story of a prince who murders his father, the king, so he can accede to the throne. Heavy with remorse he consults the Buddha for advice. The Buddha makes him see that he is not responsible for the killing for two reasons. First, the king was killed as the consequence of his karma – in a previous life he murdered a holy man. Second, and most important, the Buddha states the unreality of killing:

'Great King, it is like the echo of a voice in the mountain valleys. The ignorant think it is a real voice, but the wise know it is not. Killing is like this. The foolish think it is real, but the Buddha knows it is not.³⁴' (p.196)

Another Buddhist text (*Jueguan lun*) echoes the idea of the *emptiness of killing*; if you do it as if it were a spontaneous act of nature, then you're not responsible for it³⁵.

'The fire in the bush burns the mountain; the hurricane breaks trees; the collapsing cliff crushes wild animals to death; the running mountain's stream drowns the insects. If a man can make his mind similar [to these forces], then, meeting a man, he may kill him all the same.' (p.226)

This idea is reinforced in various other texts. If you are in a selfless and detached state of mind, you can do anything, even 'enjoy the five sensuous pleasures with unrestricted freedom' (the *Upalipariprccha* explains), as your actions will have no negative karmic consequence³⁶. In other words *bodhisattvas* are not morally responsible for their actions because they act without self-interest. The Fifth Dalai Lama used this argument to justify the violence of the Mongol king Gushri Khan, who in the 1630s and 1640s violently unified a large portion of Tibet and converted the people to Buddhism. The Fifth Dalai Lama glorifies this because the Mongol king was an emanation 'of Vajrapani, the *bodhisattva* representing perfect yogic power', who had realized emptiness and 'would radiate 100 rays of light in the ten directions'³⁷. (p.94)

The idea that Buddhism, unlike other religions, did not force people to convert, but 'pacified' the new lands to which it spread, is also a myth. Just like Christianity and Islam made churches and mosques from pagan temples and fought animistic ideas as heretical, something similar happened with Buddhism. Shamanic practices were prohibited in Mongolia from the 1500s, spirit figurines were burned and replaced with Buddhist images of six-armed Mahakala. Those who continued to practise Shamanic rites were subjected to brutal punishments or executed. These acts

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were justified because of the spiritual status of rulers, who were recognized as living Buddhas, accomplished in virtue and wisdom, and endowed with unbiased compassion. Mongol laws regulated the privileges of the Buddhist clergy and the punishment of any attacks on monasteries depending on the social class of the offender: if a nobleman, the punishment was exile; if a commoner, the sentence was more likely to be death³⁸.

Bernard Faure, a professor at Columbia University, suggests that forced conversion is sometimes brutally visible in religious imagery. In the case of Tibet, there is the myth that its first Buddhist king subdued the demoness who ruled the land by nailing her down to the ground. The holiest of places in Tibetan Buddhism, the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa, is symbolically known as the nail that was driven into the vagina of the demoness. 'The rape imagery,' Faure writes, 'could hardly be more explicit³⁹.' (p.231)

The demonization, dehumanization and social discrimination of rivals seem to be as prevalent in Buddhism as in other faiths. In one sacred text often used by the current Dalai Lama (the *Kalachakra-tantra*), the final battle of the world will be between Buddhists and heretics - the heretics are identified as Muslims.

In Thailand, Buddhism needed to tackle other classes of enemies. In 1976 a leading monk declared in an interview that 'killing communists is not a sin'. These were his reasons:

'First, killing communists is not really killing; second, sacrifice the lesser good for the greater good; third, the intention is not to kill but to protect the country; fourth, the Buddha allowed killing.'

And he concludes: 'Our intention is not to kill human beings, but to kill monsters. This is the duty of all Thais.'⁴⁰ (p.179)

This extraordinary statement doesn't come out of the blue. In Thailand, as in other Asian countries, the state protects its Buddhist religion and Buddhist monks protect the Thai state. Thai temples are used as military bases and some soldiers are ordained as monks - they are known as 'military monks' and one of their primary duties is to protect, using violence if need be, Buddhist temples.

All of this was new to me. As a reader of books on Eastern spirituality and meditation since my teens, I had never come across any remote suggestion that Buddhism was similar to other religions when it came to justifying and using violent means. If Buddhist monks and enlightened teachers can be violent towards others, why would Western meditators be any different? I was coming to the conclusion that meditation is only a process: it can sharpen attention, quiet thoughts and angst, increase positive emotions towards ourselves and others and, in the extreme, it can lead to a deep alteration of our identity – a kind of ecstatic annihilation of the ego. But with the wrong kind of motivation and without clear ethical rules, that very spiritual selflessness can serve all kinds of ill purposes. That happened with Japanese Buddhism not long ago.

Zen soldiers

'Why didn't we have the religion of the Japanese, who regard sacrifice for the Fatherland as the highest good?'

Adolf Hitler⁴¹

In the late-1950s journalist and author Arthur Koestler travelled to the East and met with a number of leading spiritual teachers. The narrative of his travels was published as *The Lotus and the Robot*⁴². In the last chapter, entitled 'The Stink of Zen', Koestler takes issue with Zen's amorality and goes as far as criticizing Suzuki, the Zen scholar who made Zen known to a wide Western audience. He quotes from Suzuki's book *Zen and Japanese Culture*:

*'Zen is ... extremely flexible in adapting itself to almost any philosophy and moral doctrine as long as its intuitive teaching is not interfered with. It may be found wedded to anarchism or fascism, communism or democracy, atheism or idealism.'*⁴³ (p.63)

Koestler commented that this passage 'could have come from a philosophical-minded Nazi journalist, or from one of the Zen monks who became suicide pilots' (p.271). His meetings with

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Zen teachers only reinforced the idea that Zen has no interest in morality or social ethics. When he asked about the persecution of religion in totalitarian countries or Hitler's gas chambers, the answers generally showed a lack of interest in differentiating between good and ill deeds. He regarded this as a 'tolerance devoid of charity' and was skeptical about the contribution Zen Buddhism had to offer post-World War II to the moral recovery of Japan, or any other country.

In this short chapter Koestler pointed his finger at a phenomenon of unimagined proportions. Forty years later it became public knowledge that the 'stink of Zen' dominated Japan during World War II; Koestler was right.

It was Brian Victoria, a Zen priest and historian of religions, who brought the evidence to light. He has shown how, during World War II, the Japanese military used Zen Buddhist ideas and meditation techniques and how Zen Buddhist leaders showed explicit support of the war⁴⁴. Victoria's verdict is as sharp as a samurai's sword. He reveals that nearly all of Japan's Buddhist leaders were fervent supporters of Japanese militarism. As a result, he argues, Zen Buddhism so deeply violated Buddhism's fundamental principles that it should no longer be recognized as an expression of the Boddidharma⁴⁵. Within a Western religious context, this would be the equivalent of saying that during a certain period (such as the Inquisition), the Catholic Church was not an authentic expression of Christ's teachings.

Victoria methodically reveals how warfare and killing were regarded as manifestations of Buddhist compassion, selflessness and dedication to the Japanese emperor. The soldier's code, which all soldiers had to learn by heart in 1941, had a section entitled 'View of Life and Death' which read:

'That which penetrates life and death is the lofty spirit of self-sacrifice for the public good. Transcending life and death, earnestly rush forward to accomplish your duty. Exhausting the power of your body and mind, calmly find joy in living in eternal duty.'⁴⁶ (p.110)

This is eerily familiar to us living in a post-9/11 world. The violent rhetoric of religious extremism is probably universal, but, in the case of Zen Buddhism, its very spiritual pinnacle – the attainment of enlightened selflessness – was used to train soldiers during World War II, who would sacrifice themselves as if their lives were of no consequence. Thus, an army major advised his soldiers:

‘[The soldier] must become one with his superior. He must actually become his superior. Similarly, he must become the order he receives. That is to say, *his self must disappear.*’ (p.103)

Islam or Christianity’s promise of eternal life is here exchanged for the Buddhist idea that, by becoming selfless, life and death become undifferentiated; there is nothing to lose by dying on the battlefield once you realize the emptiness of the self. This spirit is deeply entrenched in Japanese Buddhism, going back at least to the samurai age. Takuan, a famous Zen master from the 1600s, wrote:

‘The uplifted sword has no will of its own, it is all emptiness. It is like a flash of lightning. The man who is about to be struck down is also of emptiness, and so is the one who wields the sword. None of them are possessed of a mind that has any substantiality. As each of them is of emptiness and has no mind, the striking man is not a man, the sword in his hands is not a sword, and the “I” who is about to be struck down is like the splitting of the spring breeze in a flash of lightning.’⁴⁷ (p.131)

D.T. Suzuki expressed the same view in the twentieth century. He eloquently compared the Zen master’s use of the sword to the production of an artistic masterpiece. Although it is not the intention of the Zen master to harm anybody, the enemy appears and makes himself a victim of the enlightened swordsman, Suzuki suggests; it is as if the sword acts without an agent – or through a robot, if we want to use a less poetic image. It is then no great wonder that Hitler and the Nazis were fond of the Zen. Heinrich Himmler, leader of the SS (*Schutzstaffel*), who was obsessed with esoteric ideas and sent expeditions to Tibet and India, believed

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that all his military had to act with 'decency'. By decency he meant that they had to remain untouched by human weakness when staring at the thousands of corpses, lying side by side, as they tumbled into the pit at concentration camps. When he was caught and questioned after the war, he didn't have a shred of insight about the villainy of his actions⁴⁸; like a Zen master, he seemed indifferent.

When Brian Victoria's book, *Zen at War*, was translated into Japanese, it had an unforeseen impact. Instead of trying to deny Japanese Buddhism's ties to militarism, a number of Zen masters admitted this had happened and formally apologized. It was a long journey for Victoria, who had been ordained as a Zen priest in 1964 because he believed Zen Buddhism was free from the violence that had marked Western religions⁴⁹. But he hasn't lost his faith. He upholds Buddhism's non-violent principles and denies the possibility of compassionate killing, arguing that under no circumstances can a *bodhisattva* legitimately employ violence to the point of actually taking the life of another human being.

However, this leaves us with another, no less difficult question to answer: what do we make of a *bodhisattva* or, in the Zen tradition, someone who has reached *satori* (the realization of selflessness) and still commits violence - is this person truly enlightened? Paradoxically, yes. After the war Suzuki, although not retracting any of his former works, argued that enlightenment alone is not enough to make you a responsible Zen priest. A Zen priest also needs to use intellectual discrimination, because enlightenment in itself is just a state of being that cannot tell right from wrong.

This is not what we're used to hearing. Enlightenment in the East is regarded very much like saintliness in the West - whomever reaches such a state of being is expected to be the pinnacle of selflessness and love. Followers revere their spiritual teachers, often treating them like the living embodiment of nirvana or God. The idea that the highest attainment of spiritual development may not be enough to tell right from wrong is

disturbing. Two hypotheses come to mind: either enlightenment does not necessarily make you act in an unselfish or a peaceful way; or perhaps those whom we think of as enlightened aren't as holy as they seem. Mystics of all times have warned against the dangers of spiritual infatuation. The Spanish Christian mystic Theresa of Avila went as far as suggesting that we should never trust the goodness of the holy people who are still living⁵⁰. In the Christian tradition it is a sin of vanity to believe you are holy. In the Buddhist tradition it would probably be proof that the egoless master still has some ego to shed. But in the East it's widely accepted that some people are real embodiments of compassion or God, and it's not unusual for the masters themselves to proclaim that. Recently, in India, one man was revered by millions and looked upon as the living God.

The most selfish man on Earth

I first heard of Sai Baba through a friend who was doing a Master's degree in the sociology of religion. Having been raised by Marxist parents, Joana was curious about religion and went off to southern Italy to do fieldwork with a community of Sai Baba followers. It was very much like any other Hindu devotional community, she told me, with lots of chanting, praying and some meditation – but there were a couple of unusual things. First, there were various gifts – bracelets, watches – that, apparently, the guru had produced from thin air and offered to his followers. Second, the guru often showed up in people's dreams – an event that had been the catalyst for conversion to Sai Baba's doctrine for many of the people Joana interviewed during her fieldwork. Joana herself, despite being an atheist, had dreams about Sai Baba while staying with the community. This frightened her, but it didn't turn her into a believer⁵¹.

The first time I considered the idea that an enlightened person could be flawed was in relation to Sai Baba. I was talking to Carlos do Carmo Silva, a philosopher of religion based at the

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Catholic University of Lisbon. A tall, thin and unassuming man in his late fifties, he has produced work on the parallels and tensions between Buddhist and Christian mystical attainment that is the most insightful I've ever encountered⁵². I was asking what he thought of Sai Baba's claim to being an 'avatar', the very embodiment of God on earth.

'Perhaps he is,' he said gazing upwardly. 'But other times he can be the most selfish man on Earth.'

I looked at him, puzzled. He didn't offer an explanation for this contradiction and I wasn't expecting him to – he often challenged me to think out of the box. His words popped into my mind when a few months later a BBC documentary on Sai Baba accused the guru of sexually abusing some male teenage American devotees. Shocking as the revelations were, the way an Indian minister treated the BBC journalist who confronted him with the allegations was no less brutal⁵³. The auras of devotion and power surrounding the guru were astounding.

The sexual abuse allegations probably did not harm Indian devotion to Sai Baba, but they did have an effect on Western devotees. Many centres in Europe and the USA closed down. I didn't think about it any further, though, until one evening in Oxford I was invited to comment on a lecture by the Icelandic psychologist Erlendur Haraldsson. He was speaking about some work he had done on children who claimed to remember past lives, but I knew that Haraldsson had written a book about Sai Baba's miracles⁵⁴. At the end of the event, I asked him if he had personally met the Indian holy man.

'Oh, yes, on quite a number of occasions. I spent some time at his ashram during which we spoke on a daily basis.'

'And what do you make of him?'

'I do think he has some unusual powers. I can't tell if all the stories are real, but I think some of them are,' he confided.

'What about the sexual abuse allegations; what do you make of them?'

Haraldsson looked down at me (he is quite a tall man) and shrugged.

‘Well, he’s obviously a gay man ...’

I stared at Haraldsson and said nothing. We stayed quiet for a moment and then changed subject.

Violence comes in many shapes. Sexual abuse is one of the most difficult forms of violence to confront; often the abuser is a powerful figure, either within a family or an organization. Spiritual organizations are not immune to this. The recent scandal of sexual abuse among the Roman Catholic clergy has stirred waves in the Western world, but Buddhist monks in the East, including leading priests, have also been found guilty of this. Recently in the USA Sasaki, a revered Zen priest known to be Leonard Cohen’s Buddhist teacher, has been accused of sexual abuse by a number of female followers. On various occasions Sasaki asked women to show their breasts, and explained that this was part of a Zen *koan* or a way of showing non-attachment. Another woman complained that the master massaged her breasts during a private session and was asked to massage his genitals⁵⁵. The accusations against Sai Baba were very similar, but the target of the abuse was at the time a young male adolescent. I thought again of what Carlos do Carmo Silva, the philosopher, had said: the holiest man on earth can also be the most selfish. I also remembered German psychologist Harold Wallach telling me that he had met advanced meditators who were ‘assholes’. As hard and paradoxical as it sounds, it is very likely that no human being is immune to being cruel or taking advantage of others at times, no matter how spiritually evolved.

By the time I’d uncovered all this material, I was feeling disillusioned and somewhat nauseated. The old aphorism ‘the road to hell is paved with good intentions’ played loudly in my mind. Meditation and spiritual teachers are coloured with a sweetened aura that distorts the reality of individuals, societies and history. The unrealistically positive ideas associated with

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meditation only make people more vulnerable to either the adverse psychological effects or its enlightened-amoral teachers. The other danger was that the cover up about the dark aspects of meditation, implicitly or explicitly endorsed by scientists studying its effects, could destroy the good it had to offer. I painfully understood Koestler's feelings of disillusion at the end of his chapter on Japanese Buddhism:

'For a week or so I bargained with a Kyoto antique dealer for a small bronze Buddha of the Kamakura period; but when he came down to a price that I was able to afford, I backed out. I realized with shock that the Buddha smile had gone dead on me. It was no longer mysterious but empty.' (p.274)

But I also realized, with a sense of relief and humility, that meditation need not be a panacea to cure every ill, nor a tool to moral perfection; perhaps we shouldn't treat it very differently from prayer, which can quiet our minds, give us some comfort, and lead us towards a deeper place where we can explore who we are or be closer to God. Perhaps meditation was never supposed to be more than a tool to help with self-knowledge; one that could never be divorced from a strong ethical grounding, who we are and the world we live in. In Patanjali's *sutras*, when he describes the various aspects of yoga, meditation is only one of them⁵⁶. The first one, the very basis of a healthy and eventual selfless being is self-restraint (*yama*), which he defines as 'non-violation, truthfulness, non-stealing, containment, and non-grasping' (p.119). And to be sure that these are the definite and non-debatable foundations he adds:

'These restraints are not limited by birth, time or circumstance; they constitute the great vow everywhere.' (p.120)

Only with this strong foundation, can the other limbs of yoga (as Patanjali calls them) emerge, including the *asanas*, *pranayama*, meditation and the blissful experiences of unity with the ground of being.

FIGHT WITH EVERYTHING YOU'VE GOT!

Re-reading this chapter I felt unhappy not to finish on a more hopeful note. Despite its dark side and the limitations of the current scientific research, I still think meditation is a technique with real potential for personal change, if properly guided and taught within a larger spiritual-ethical framework. I was also aware that read on its own, religious extremists and proselytizers could use it to belittle Buddhism and Hinduism. I thought of looking for someone who, coming from the West, had embraced the Eastern meditation tradition without denying its darker side. I found that person in Swami Ambikananda, a South African woman who took religious Hindu vows and who teaches meditation and yoga, while also running a charity in the southwest of England. She has translated a number of Indian sacred texts from the Sanskrit; I'd read her clear and poetic translation of the *Katha Upanishad*, which has the very first recorded teaching on yoga⁵⁷.

She welcomed me at her house in Reading, about an hour west of London. It felt odd to call her Swami Am-bi-ka-nan-da, seven full syllables of a name; her direct and expansive personality seemed to require no more than two. I wondered what birth name she'd been given, but it felt odd to ask. She was dressed in the orange cloth of the Indian ascetics, but her way of speaking and gesticulating was definitely Western feminine. We walked into her living room and she invited me to sit down on a cushion on the floor.

'We have no chairs here,' she explained. 'I hope you don't mind.'

'I don't. Is it okay if I write down some notes?'

She offered me tea. I was happy to see her again. We'd first met at the day course on the psychology of meditation I gave with Catherine Crane (see pp.109-110). Her questions and comments stood out, very much like her orange garment. When I told her I was writing this book and looking into the potential dark side of meditation, she asked whether I had heard of Aaron Alexis; I hadn't yet.

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'There is a new dogma about meditation: when it fails its limitations are never questioned,' she told me. 'We are told that they weren't doing it right. But it may be neither the practice nor the person that is wrong. The truth about our human condition is that no one thing works for everyone. The spiritual journey is about the unmasking of oneself, being more authentically "self" and whatever path leads us there is grand for each of us, but that particular path is not necessarily good for all of us.'

She was aware of the dangers of contemplative practice and open about it. I asked how she had become interested in meditation and Indian spirituality.

'My father was a Marxist atheist and my mum a devout Catholic. This was confusing but not too much, until I turned 11 or 12. Then, I heard about the doctrine of limbo – I don't think the Catholic Church believes in it anymore – you know, this place where the souls of unbaptized children were supposed to go and stay for eternity. That was it for me; I became an atheist. I didn't think too much about the soul or religion for a while, until I had twins and then became depressed. One day a friend thought it was a good distraction to take me to a lecture by a *swami*, so I went. The people there were very serious – try lighting a cigarette in a yoga lecture like I did! – but there was something I liked about Swami Venkatesananda and kept meeting him. But I only got to the yoga and meditation later.'

'How did that happen?'

'I was visiting Swami Venkatesananda in Mauritius and had bought a pile of books on Indian spirituality and philosophy. One day he told me he needed some help in clearing up some junk and pointed at a ravine where people threw all kinds of stuff – old fridges, cars, you name it. I said, yes, I'll help you. He then picked up the whole pile of books I had just bought and threw them down the ravine. "Why did you do that?" I asked him. He told me the time had come to stop reading and to try out yoga and meditation. That's how I started.'

I asked Ambikananda whether or not she believes meditation can change a person, and, if she does, how much meditation it would take to change. She told me about meeting Krishnamurti, the Indian-born writer who was heralded as the New World messiah by the Theosophical Society, but eventually walked away from the movement to become a kind of spiritual free thinker.

'He told me two minutes a day was enough. I laughed; it takes me two hours of meditation to get two worthwhile minutes! But he was right that it's not only about meditation; your intention counts. My teacher used to tell me: "Hunt down the self ruthlessly; this isn't for the faint hearted." There is an acknowledgment in all religious traditions – whether it's the spiritual work of Ignatius of Loyola or the process of St Theresa of Avila, or the Way of the Buddha, or the yoga path of Patanjali – that you need more than meditation to change.'

'What do you mean?' I asked.

'To start with, you need to have a healthy ego; what kind of self are you surrendering if you don't have a stable sense of who you are?'

'What about the clinical use of mindfulness to treat depression and anxiety? I suppose you don't have a healthy sense of self there ...'

'I'm uncertain about the exact value of mindfulness,' Ambikananda told me. 'Since it has moved out of the monastic environment into the wider secular world, meditation is being sold as that which will not only make use feel better but will make us better people – more successful, stronger, convincing ...'

I interrupted her. 'But are you aware that some researchers are claiming that mindfulness meditation *per se* can turn you into a better, more compassionate person?'

'No, no, no,' she stressed. 'Meditation needs to be embedded in its context, there are moral and emotional guidelines to be followed; Patanjali spells them out clearly in his work on yoga.'

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'But the whole purpose of meditating - isn't it meant to make you an enlightened and deeply moral individual; moral in the sense of unselfish and compassionate. Isn't that what happens?'

'Morality can be divorced from spirituality. My ego can dissolve while I meditate, but when I get up it's reconstructed. You can meditate 22 hours a day, but in those two hours you have left, you are a human being living in matter, and this aspect of reality' (she touched the ground) 'doesn't care too much if you're enlightened or not.'

I told Swami Ambikananda about the evidence I'd uncovered concerning the adverse aspects of meditation and its violent history in the East; she simply nodded. Even the claims of sexual abuse by some spiritual teachers didn't surprise her. 'I had one of the few truly celibate Indian spiritual teachers,' she admitted. Ambikananda then told me the story of once travelling through the Himalayas in search of a levitating holy man. She was staying at the ashram of her teacher in Rishikesh, at the foot of the Ganges, when a friend told her about a flying hermit, who lived in a cave only a day's journey away.

'It took us about three days, walking in the Himalayas to find him. We were going in the wrong direction for more than a day. But we managed to find our way and met the flying *baba*. He asked for some rupees and went into a trance state. After a few minutes I couldn't believe my eyes: he was really lifting off the ground! I felt rather irritated; this is *not* supposed to happen. I got some branches from a nearby tree and moved them beneath and above him to make sure it was not a trick. I couldn't see the trick and asked him to do it again; he did it and still I couldn't see how. When I asked if he could also do it standing, he said he couldn't; he had to be sitting down. I wanted to see him doing it a third time, but he refused. He said he'd teach me if I stayed for a few days and gave him some more rupees.

'And did you?' I asked.

'I wouldn't stay alone with that man for anything in this world!' she said laughing. 'He made it very clear that besides money he wanted sexual favours.'

After our talk Swami Ambikananda gave me a lift to Reading railway station. I thanked her for her time and asked again about Aaron Alexis, the man who was a regular meditator and killed 12 people.

'Do you think it had anything to do with meditation?'

'I don't know. I don't dispute that he had serious mental health problems; but meditation probably didn't help him either. Meditation is about looking into the abyss within, it wasn't created to make you or me happy, but to help us fight the illusions we have and find out who we truly are. My teacher used to tell me: "This is your battle, you fight it with everything you've got." He also used to say that we shouldn't take ourselves too seriously. I certainly do my best,' she said, laughing.

Meeting this lively and grounded South African woman turned Hindu priest made me feel less pessimistic about the use of meditation and yoga in the West. If we admit its frailties and limits, that it takes other things for these techniques to make real positive change – the right intention, a good teacher and moral framing – they can still prove effective engines of personal change. I wanted to test the effects on a population who might not often get the chance to try out yoga and meditation practice, but who might need the benefits more than your average person. Back in Oxford I rang the director of the Prison Phoenix Trust. 'Sam, let's go ahead with the research project. If you provide the yoga and meditation classes to prisoners, I'll handle the science part.'