



A portrait of a young man, William Taylor, looking in a mirror.
Thomas Worlidge, 1751.

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Individualism and Fragmentation in the Mirrors of Secularism

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Consider two works of art featuring mirrors. The first, by Thomas Worlidge (1700–1766), a British painter and etcher, is titled *A Portrait of a Young Man, William Taylor, Looking in a Mirror* (1751). The etching is precisely what its title promises: a man looking into a small hand mirror, which reflects his puffy visage and buoyantly coiffed hair. It can be viewed as an apt emblem of the European Enlightenment, whose philosophers promised to develop the methods that would hold man and nature up to the mirror of empirical investigation and rational analysis, rendering clear and distinct representations of them. Nothing else appears in the work but the young man, his mirror, and his reflection.

Another quite different mirror-themed work is a series conceived in 1965 by the Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama (b. 1929) called *Infinity Mirror Rooms*.¹ In one, a viewer stands in a room whose walls are mirrors reflecting uncountable numbers of lights receding in all directions. Although a smallish room, it seems enormous, indeed infinite, and includes multiple images of the viewer herself. People around the world wait in line for hours to stand in these rooms and

experience themselves enveloped in countless lights and objects multiplied throughout unlimited space.

If Worlidge's image was compelling in the eighteenth century for its resonance with the Enlightenment ideal of the mirror of nature and the promise of clear and accurate representation of the autonomous, independent individual, Kusama's image is more resonant with our own era and its fragmentation, its consciousness of the vastness of the cosmos, and its hope for some significance—some reflection of ourselves—in that vastness. We might consider the two images to represent two archetypal ways of considering—or perhaps experiencing—oneself in the world. One, a coherent sense of selfhood, distinct from the world and clear to itself, still echoes in our time in calls for authenticity, self-realization, individualism, identity, thinking for oneself. The other represents a contemporary sense of multiple, displaced, disembedded, vertiginous subjectivity, more difficult to pin down, more disorienting, and perhaps frightening, but also potentially expansive and ecstatic.

These images illustrate competing versions of secular subjectivity. Although the Infinity Mirror model is more recent, the hand mirror model is by no means a relic of the past. We might instead see the contemporary era as marked by a tension between the two. In what sense are they secular, and what might they have to do with secularizing or secularized Buddhism?

Secularity and the Secular Buddhist

One way to approach the issue of secular Buddhism is to ask questions such as the following: *Should* Buddhism be secularized? Is secularized Buddhism authentic? Does it strip away too many essential elements? Rather than weigh in on the merits and defects of a secularized Buddhism, I want to think through some issues involving how two long, variegated traditions—Buddhism and modern secularism—converge. Often when people speak to the issue of secular Buddhism, they speak in terms of explicit beliefs. Do we believe in the possibility of rebirth as a hungry ghost? In a

hell realm? In a cosmos centered on Mount Meru? In evil spirits that can be fended off through Buddhist rituals? The fewer things like this we believe, the more secular our Buddhism, one might say. These questions play an important role in secularizing Buddhism, especially because one common use of the term “secularism” today involves explicit beliefs. But I’d like to think about the ways in which what we might call “secularity”—the pervasive, naturalistic zeitgeist of the times, the dominant discourse of modernity, the ideology of public discourse—structures not just explicit beliefs but more subtle ways of being in the world and experiencing oneself. I then want to further consider how secularity selectively draws forth and transforms particular elements of Buddhism.

Secularity in this sense is not only a matter of explicit beliefs that constitute a naturalistic worldview but also a complex of intuitions, practices, and sensibilities that structure lived experience in the late-modern world. It functions as a kind of background ideology that is so pervasive it often goes unnoticed. It is tied inevitably to particular political projects (the separation of church and state), particular configurations of the self (an independent, subjective self confronting an objective world of neutral facts), and, indeed, particular notions of what is religious and what is secular (religion as having to do primarily with beliefs, internal experience, emotions, and the secular having to do with rationality, public discourse, and politics). The binary of religious and secular does not refer to some objective state of things in the world but is a historically particular way of dividing things up, of constituting human subjects, and of framing institutions like public schools, governmental organizations, and the courts. As a sociopolitical project, secularism itself is rooted in an attempt to separate out the activity of rational individuals deliberating in the public square from “religion,” which is conceived as a matter of private, individual belief. This paradigm is deeply rooted in the European Enlightenment, with its valorization of reason, choice, activity, personal autonomy, and individualism, not to mention its historical framing of these virtues as the properties of “the West,” while “the East” was often associated with

the irrational, the mysterious, the feminine, the passive, and the collective. In ways that Buddhists should understand, the religious and the secular are not mere facts in the world, but, like many (all?) binary oppositions, they are coconstituted, intertwined, and culturally and historically contingent. Religion and secularity, in other words, are interdependently arisen, recently invented ways of configuring the world and constituting our experience. Nevertheless, if secularity is, in fact, the dominant zeitgeist of much of the developed world, it has already deeply structured the way many Buddhists practice their tradition. In fact, Buddhism made headway in Europe and North America in large part by being framed as aligned with secular, scientific orientations and eschewing things that were typically associated with “religion” and, especially, “superstition.” In other words, much Buddhism today, whether it claims the mantle of “secular Buddhism” or not, is already secularized to a great extent.

Particular elements of the zeitgeist of secularity have served as “magnets” that have drawn forth and transformed certain specific elements of Buddhism—especially the doctrine of non-self (*anātman*), dependent origination or interdependence (*pratītyasamutpāda*), and certain meditative practices. These elements of Buddhism, I suggest, have been transformed and embodied by modern people in ways that both embrace and attempt to ameliorate certain aspects of modern secularity as a lived experience. More specifically, they attempt to negotiate the tension between the two modes of modern secular subjectivity suggested by our two mirror-themed works of art: the sense of selfhood as singular, independent, and autonomous and the sense of fragmentation of the self into multiple identities.

Secular Subjectivities

Here is a brief story about the experience of selfhood in the modern West, how it developed and changed, and how it prepared the ground for particular versions of Buddhism to emerge. It is a ridicu-

lously abbreviated and too-neat story, and we could fill a book with caveats and attempts to nuance it, but we can't, so here it is. The Age of Enlightenment promised a kind of narrative clarity about the self. Descartes claimed to isolate the soul definitively—"I am nothing but a thinking thing." At its best, the soul, or self, had "clear and distinct" ideas. The discovery (or creation) of this self was part of a larger "subjective turn" in the West, through which attention turned inward as never before in European history. The subjective turn entailed attempts to systematically account for the faculties of mind and body—nail them down and establish once and for all just what the soul of man (yes, man) and its faculties was and its place in the universe.

The Enlightenment thinkers proposed that rationality was the essence of the self, and through stepping away from the emotions and relying solely on reason, one could make moral choices and live a good life. Romanticism countered this notion by insisting on the centrality of emotion, of passion, of deep interiority, of getting in touch with nature and the divine through interior exploration. Although they seem opposed, these two versions of selfhood were complementary and shared the notion of the autonomous individual whose judgment could, and should, transcend social convention and conditioning and be the sole author of itself. We can characterize these visions of selfhood as "secular" not because they necessarily rejected God or divinity altogether but because they shifted emphasis from dependence on God to self-determination and individual autonomy.

Charles Taylor argues that a distinctive characteristic of this newly constituted modern self is that it is "buffered" rather than porous. That is, the modern West inaugurated a firmer boundary between the self and objects than had existed in the premodern, enchanted world. In the enchanted world, he claims, this boundary was porous, and people were more vulnerable to the influences of external things—gods, spirits, and demons—directly. Objects were charged with inherent meaning: black bile was not just a physical cause of melancholy as a mental state—it *was* melancholy. Sand

from a sacred place could have beneficent, healing effects. This is not just a matter of beliefs but of a deep-rooted way of experiencing and interpreting oneself and the world. Think also of the significance of dreams or hearing voices in a lot of ancient literature: one heard God's voice; or maybe it's that of a demon.

Today, although many people still gather sand from sacred sites, see ghosts, and hear voices, most of us experience such things within the framework of a bounded self—the mind, the inside—more distinct from the external world. If I see a ghost, I wonder if it might be an eruption of my unconscious, a repressed memory, a hallucination, or the result of a chemical imbalance. I might explain any beneficent effect of sacred sand in terms of the effect it has on my mood; or perhaps it's a kind of placebo effect.

In the buffered self, the mind is the locus of all meaning, and the external world in itself is the blank slate for the projections of meanings. This framework also makes for the possibility of distancing oneself from the manifestations of the mind and treating them as objects—observing, controlling, and disciplining them.² The point is that the autonomous individual of the Enlightenment philosophers was a theoretical expression of something that was also taking shape on a more phenomenological level among many people in the West. If Descartes's "thinking thing" was a dry philosophical abstraction, it was (if Taylor is right) also refracted in the ordinary experience of "buffered selves," who, encouraged by educational and institutional structures, began more and more to conceive of and experience themselves as enclosed, self-contained beings with private minds separate from the world.

If it is true that a novel sense of subjectivity gradually emerged in the modern period, we might characterize "late modernity"—the latter half of the twentieth century up through the early twenty-first century—as a period when this sense of the autonomous, buffered self begins to fray at the edges. Countless examples from philosophy, art, literature, sociology, psychology, and religious studies offer insights into this. I only present a few gleanings.

The social theorist Anthony Giddens marks "late" or "high"

modernity as a period of increased disembeddedness from traditional social orders in which people's roles are more rigidly defined. Rather than being embedded in a family, community, social order, and cosmos that gives a de facto meaning to their lives, people in the conditions of late modernity are increasingly thrown back upon themselves to continuously figure out and construct who they are. The self, in other words, becomes a "reflexive project":

Transitions in individuals' lives have always demanded psychic reorganisation, something which was often ritualised in traditional cultures in the shape of *rites de passage*. But in such cultures, where things stayed more or less the same from generation to generation on the level of the collectivity, the changed identity was clearly staked out—as when an individual moved from adolescence into adulthood. In the settings of modernity, by contrast, the altered self has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflexive process of connecting personal and social change.³

Such conditions, Giddens argues, create increased uncertainty and doubt, as well as a sense of the fragility of one's narrative of the self: "A self-identity has to be created and more or less continually reordered against the backdrop of shifting experiences of day-to-day life and the fragmenting tendencies of modern institutions."⁴ In premodern times, Giddens argues, people's identities were, to a great extent, determined by gender, family, clan, lineage, and so on. Today some of these factors are still important; however, people increasingly must actively construct identities through "lifestyles," consumer choices, and interaction with many abstract systems, such as the educational system, the health care system, and the ubiquitous economic system of global capitalism. One must continually construct and revise one's identity in multiple contexts, repeatedly adapting and creating a "narrative of self"—a coherent life-story that appears to maintain itself throughout time. According to Giddens, the splintering of the self, and the energy-consuming

struggle to maintain a sense of narrative coherence, can lead to a disorienting sense of fragmentation, uncertainty, doubt, and the looming threat of personal meaninglessness.

Zygmunt Bauman extends some of Giddens's insights on the malleability of the self in modern times. He characterizes our contemporary period as one of "liquid life" in which conditions change at such a rapid rate that predicting the future on the basis of the past becomes increasingly difficult and, therefore, anxiety-producing. It is a period in which people, rather than having an identity given to them at birth based on being embedded in family, community, and nation, must create their identities in an ad hoc fashion. Baumann highlights the differential effects this situation has on people in different socioeconomic strata:

At the top [of the social hierarchy], the problem is to choose the best pattern from the many currently on offer, to assemble the separately sold parts of the kit, and to fasten them together neither too lightly (lest the unsightly, outdated and aged bits that are meant to be hidden underneath show through at the seams) nor too tightly (lest the patchwork resists being dismantled at short notice when the time for dismantling comes—as it surely will). At the bottom, the problem is to cling fast to the sole identity available and to hold its bits and parts together while fighting back the erosive forces and disruptive pressures, repairing the constantly crumbling walls and digging the trenches deeper.⁵

Identity must be constantly constructed, reconstructed, and maintained in large part through consumption of items—cars, phones, decor, clothing—of limited life and temporary value in conferring cultural capital. The self itself then comes to feel tenuous, fleeting, unstable, and thus continually in need of scrutiny and reform, while the external world is reduced to having primarily instrumental value. Individuality, rather than a given of our nature, as assumed by both the Enlightenment and Romantic thinkers, is an endless task to be achieved through lifelong struggle amid

dizzily rapid change. For Baumann, achieving individuality, therefore, is an *aporia*—an irresolvable contradiction—in a society that requires uniqueness and yet has undercut the social bonds of community that would confer any sense of stable identity. Thus, Baumann claims, “The struggle for *uniqueness* has now become the main engine of *mass production* and *mass consumption*.”⁶ Identity is perpetually hybrid, unstable, unfixed, yet always promised. And yet the construction of identity through career and consumer choice remains a privilege for those who can afford it, while those in less-privileged sectors of society remain stuck in assigned, imposed, overdetermined identity.⁷ No one escapes “liquid modernity”; however, the affluent global, “de-territorialized” citizen learns to ride the waves of rapid change while the underprivileged struggle with the risk of constantly being left behind, bereft of economic and cultural capital.

The psychologist Kenneth Gergen adds to this picture the ways that “technologies of social saturation”—primarily media technologies—have contributed to the sense of self-fragmentation:

Emerging technologies saturate us with the voices of humankind—both harmonious and alien. As we absorb their varied rhymes and reasons, they become a part of us and we of them. Social saturation furnishes us with a multiplicity of incoherent and unrelated languages of the self. For everything we “know to be true” about ourselves, other voices within respond with doubt and even derision. This fragmentation of self-conceptions corresponds to a multiplicity of incoherent and disconnected relationships. These relationships pull us in myriad directions, inviting us to play such a variety of roles that the very concept of an “authentic self” with knowable characteristics recedes from view. The fully saturated self becomes no self at all.⁸

As we are bombarded with ever-increasing social contexts, the languages of the self inherited from modernism and Romanticism—the knowable, rational, autonomous individual and the passionate

soul with a deep interior—begin to recede. If, in the past, a sense of relatively stable selfhood was created by embeddedness in tight-knit communities with relatively stable roles, the “saturated self” confronts countless others—physical, fictional, virtual—and is called upon to respond to each, creating a sense of subjectivity characterized by “a plurality of voices all vying for the right to reality.”⁹ The world of rapid travel and instant communication has created, Gergen argues, a situation in which “we are bombarded with ever increasing intensity with the images and actions of others; our range of social participation is increasing exponentially.” In this world, “we no longer experience a secure sense of self,” and “doubt is increasingly placed on the very assumption of a bounded identity with palpable attributes.”¹⁰

Social saturation brings with it a general loss in our assumption of true and knowable selves. As we absorb multiple voices, we find that each “truth” is relativized by our simultaneous consciousness of compelling alternatives. We come to be aware that each truth about ourselves is a construction of the moment, true only for a given time and within certain relationships.¹¹

Gergen dubs the “infusion of partial identities through social saturation” the “populated self,” a cacophony of images and voices representing disparate possibilities of selfhood that are constantly displaced by others. This condition is not merely a matter of self-concepts but also of activities and investments of time and energy. One effect is what he calls “multiphrenia . . . the splitting of the individual into a multiplicity of self-investments.”¹² The expansion of relationships leads to the “vertigo of the valued,” in which each context of interaction entails new things to value, desire, and choose, until life becomes a vertiginous swirl of beckonings and demands.

We shouldn’t be so naive as to think that this collage of late-modern subjectivities amounts to something all-encompassing or universal. Although there is little doubt that the symptoms they describe have gone global, they may be refracted quite differently in different cultural, class, or gender contexts, and may even be

relatively absent in some. There is also reason for some skepticism about Taylor's distinction between "porous" and "buffered" selves. People today still hear the voice of God and experience various enchantments and mysteries that many educated people have relegated to the "premodern" past but that are still quite alive today. No doubt, further nuancing is needed, but for now let's hazard the generalizations that, first, the modern world brought forth not just new ideas of individualism but also a felt sense of experiencing the world in a more bounded way, as an individual mind separate from an objective world; and second, that the conditions of late modernity have encouraged a sense of subjective fragmentation that disrupts the sense of the modern autonomous individual, as well as more "premodern" embeddedness in communities. Most pertinent to Buddhism in the West, these phenomena were likely familiar to those who have been responsible for bringing Buddhism into North America and Europe as a live option throughout the late twentieth century. Whether they have been Japanese immigrant Zen priests, Tibetan refugee lamas, or educated and spiritually curious European Americans, those who have shaped modern Buddhism have either experienced or been keen observers of this new mode of secular consciousness.

So the picture that coalesces from these authors about contemporary modes of subjectivity in the West is that the "modern self"—with its valorization of self-reliance, individual autonomy, and freedom from the external coercion—is splintering. In hindsight, it was always deeply flawed as a theory, but as an ideologically driven phenomenological sense of self, it attained a kind of provisional actuality as a coherent constellation of habits, dispositions, and sensibilities. Therefore, its fragmentation in the face of some of the above factors forms a part of the architecture of late-modern anxiety, stress, and malaise. There is, therefore, a tension at work in late-modern secular subjectivity, especially in the West: the modern construction of the self-sufficient, self-responsible, free agent separate from the objective world, isolated and buffered—a lingering centripetal force of Enlightenment individualism—exists in tension with a centrifugal sense of internal fragmentation, media

saturation, rootlessness, and disembeddedness. The late-modern secular subject, with the Enlightenment inheritance still part of the background understanding of individualistic personhood, is disturbed when that understanding is shattered daily by the forces of fragmentation. The man looking at his singular reflection in the hand mirror begins to see his image distort, double, triple, then explode into an infinity of images, some of himself, some of others, all scattering into a dizzying array of lights expanding to infinity.

How is it, then, that various strands of Buddhist thought and practice weave their way into this picture and create a further chapter in the story? How are certain elements of Buddhism envisioned as either accommodating this sense of subjectivity or offering ameliorative, transformative possibilities for its ills?

Tensions: Creative and Conflictual

The secularization of Buddhism is a process more complex than “Buddhism” being imported into “Western culture.” Different selected threads of Buddhisms around the world have been reconfigured and woven into the fabric of a globalized secular modernity (which is itself really an extended family of modernities and secularities, not all of which are “Western”), while other threads have been ignored. How could it be otherwise? So rather than list the various solutions and possibilities that Buddhism may offer to the tension between individualism and fragmentation I’ve outlined above, I confine myself to considering some secular interpretations of particular Buddhist ideas and practices: the ideas of non-self and interdependence, and the modern practices of meditation. I am not suggesting that these ideas and practices stand on their own as true and efficacious *per se*, and therefore provide solutions to the conditions I’ve identified. Rather, I am looking historically at how these social conditions (along with others) have created a space for certain Buddhist ideas and practices and have drawn them forth out of their home contexts and into new habitations of late-modern secularity.

Fragmented Selves and Non-Self

The most obvious place to begin is with the Buddhist insistence on the absence of an independent, enduring, and unchanging self (*ātman*). Given the received notions of modern Western selfhood rooted in the Enlightenment and Romanticism, the prospects for the doctrine of non-self (*anātman*) in the West would seem dim. But non-self functions in particular ways when magnetically drawn into the orbit of late-modern secular subjectivity and its chaotic liquidity, media saturation, instability, disembeddedness, and fragmentation—not to mention the nostalgia for the stable self-responsible agent of the Enlightenment.

If Giddens and Bauman are right that many people in late modernity are disembedded from the social forces that once provided a ready-made identity and that, instead, we must now constantly ask, “Who am I?”—that identity is not given and so requires a continuing task of constructing a stable, narrative self—then certain interpretations of *anātman* become, for some, a compelling way of navigating this reality. If we have never had a coherent, stable, permanent self to begin with, then attempting to construct one is not only unnecessary but futile. Better to recognize the fluid, malleable nature of consciousness, be aware of how various “selves” rise and fall depending on diverse causes and conditions, and learn to skillfully guide the process. This approach might serve to mitigate the anxiety of trying to anchor a stable sense of selfhood amid the whirlwind of ever-changing conditions of the late-modern period. If the bad news for the modern autonomous self is that it was a fiction to begin with—something that Western philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, and social science increasingly agree upon—the good news is that a rich, meaningful, and ethical life is available in its absence. If the fragmenting forces of late modernity have shattered the illusion of a fixed self, *anātman* provides a way of rethinking subjectivity in its absence.

The doctrine of *anātman* claims that, in the face of the constant flux of plural selves “vying for the right to reality,” as Gergen puts it,

that none actually has such a right. In a time of the multiplication of self-images and the frantic attempts to ground one of them in reality, refiguring subjectivity as non-self admits that such grounding will never happen and, moreover, that abandoning the attempt is part of the solution to the problem. And yet there is the possibility of agency and intention outside the confines of the isolated, autonomous self. *Anātman* introduces a way to imagine navigating the tensions between, on the one hand, the Cartesian notion of the bounded, autonomous self and, on the other hand, the lived experience of fragmentation, saturation, and permeability of the self. The autonomous self, it suggests, is a fiction. We are a combination of various processes coming together under the influence of past actions that color, constitute, characterize the present. Yet we have agency, in each moment, for further directing this complex process, our own stream of consciousness, in more wise and compassionate directions. We are neither wholly determined by the past, nor fully free from it.

Two Poles of Mindfulness

Reimagining subjectivity in this way is intimately intertwined with secular adaptations of Buddhist meditative practices. If the splintering of subjectivity into multiple selves, commitments, and projects constitutes a uniquely modern anxiety, what new uses and transformations of mindfulness emerge in the space created by these conditions? First, we can see mindfulness as the detached observation of these “selves” and their activities, which may desubstantialize them, decrease anxiety, and lessen the feeling of being trapped by them or overwhelmed by their mercurial flux, allowing room for critical reflection on the process. Rather than fleeing the modern burden of hyperreflexivity that Giddens outlines, meditative practices plunge the practitioner into the process in order to observe and reconfigure it. Mindfulness promises to harness the fragmented sense of self, cull it into a manageable, intention-directed stream of consciousness, and conjure a sense of steadiness—even resoluteness—out of the infinitely plural phenomenological continuum.

Given this, though, meditative practices might gravitate toward either of two poles. They might be used to shore up the “buffered self” and reassert the lost sense of autonomous selfhood. Popular culture in the United States and Europe (and increasingly around the world) tells us that we, indeed, have a self that we need to discover, and to discover it we need to look within. When we discover who we are, we must be true to that self, casting off socially conditioned influences to emerge as a truly free, autonomous self-contained being. Some Buddhist-derived approaches to mindfulness implicitly take this approach, using contemplative methods originally designed to undermine the perception of a fixed, permanent self instead to reinforce the individualism so deeply rooted in Western culture. They attempt to strike back against fragmentation by using meditation to reaffirm the integrated, singular individual—the man in the mirror. In this sense, meditation, mindfulness, self-monitoring, and self-observation have the potential to exacerbate the sense of individual isolation, separation from the world, and even narcissism. These interpretations of mindfulness tend to be either purely introspective or instrumental, offering either private psychological comfort or increasing one’s effectiveness at doing whatever one happened to be doing anyway. If mindfulness is a tool to enhance the efficiency of the autonomous self, then it can, in the current context, simply reinforce a sense of isolated individuality, to which instrumentalized, decontextualized, commercialized, and corporatized applications of mindfulness become an appendage.

But the other pole of interpretation retains something more substantive from the Buddhist tradition and uses contemplative methods to deconstruct the singular identity, to recognize the radical impermanence and multiplicity of conscious experience, and to open up the buffered self—not to the spirits and demons of old but to a renewed sense of connection and interwovenness with the world. This approach might mitigate the forces of fragmentation not by retreating to a doubly bounded and isolated subjectivity but by admitting the open, fluid, multiple nature of human consciousness and its intimate relatedness to other individuals, to community, to

the physical objects in our lives, and to the natural and built worlds we inhabit.

There is, therefore, a tension between two poles of interpretation of modern, secular mindfulness practices: at one pole is mindfulness as a private matter, a matter of personal experience and psychological health or instrumental efficiency; on the other is mindfulness as an awakening to a more urgent sense of connectedness with others, which in turn may foster particular ethical sensibilities. How are these approaches secular? They are all interfused with secularity insofar as they take for granted the value of *this* world instead of striving for another. They mostly accept the modern naturalistic worldview, which shifts attention away from otherworldly aims—eternal bliss in nirvana, rebirth in the pure land—in favor of this-worldly projects. One pole is constituted by a combination of the various elements of Buddhism—self-discipline and karmic responsibility, for example—with the of picture of the autonomous self derived from secular modernism and neoliberalism, with its emphasis on free choice, self-responsibility, independence, and self-determination. The other combines other elements of Buddhism—compassion for all sentient beings, interdependence or (in some cases) oneness of self and world—with a greater emphasis on a political, social, and ecological ethic emphasizing systemic suffering and care for the world and other beings. Secularity, with its shift to this-worldly concerns, provides the scaffolding for both poles of this continuum, and the many possibilities in between.

Secularity and Interdependence

These reimaginings of subjectivity through the idea of non-self, as well as the contemporary interpretations of mindfulness I've mentioned, are intimately related to modern articulations of the classical Buddhist doctrine of interdependence. The resurgence and rethinking of the ancient doctrine of dependent arising (*pratītya-samutpāda*) is perhaps inevitable in today's world, in which interconnectivity is the undeniable blessing and curse of the age.

Contemporary interconnectedness allows the grandmother in Taiwan to talk in real time to her grandson in Evansville, Illinois, and the carpet buyer in Los Angeles to put money in the pocket of the sweatshop owner in Pakistan. It allows feminism, white nationalism, lithium batteries, and CO₂ to pervade the globe with ease and speed unimaginable even a generation ago. Modern notions of interdependence extend to the cosmic realm, as humanity gets used to the recently discovered fact of the near-unimaginable vastness of the universe. It is no wonder that people wait in line for hours to stand in Kusama's Infinity Mirror Rooms in order to feel the expansive sense of themselves and their world in countless reflected images mingling and trailing off into endlessness. Art reviewers have noticed the relevance of Kusama's Infinity Mirror Rooms to Buddhism. In his review of one such installation, Michael Venables suggests that it invokes the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness and Thich Nhat Hanh's "interbeing," a popular modern articulation of the doctrine of dependent arising:

Thinking about Kusama's art, I find the Buddhist concept of "emptiness" to be useful. First, we are all uncertain expressions of a world that is passing. It begins with your own realization of the great cloud of dots, of which you are a part: your own "emptiness of essence"... Might this be something akin to Thich Nhat Hanh's "interbeing"? An affirmation of the inter-connectedness of the essence of all things?... It's the experience of infinity, in an instant of time. A sense of place in what seems like the chaos of our modern world. It's a feeling of hope, of connecting the Kusama dots that can bind us all together.¹³

Venables's drawing together Kusama's Infinity Mirror Rooms with Nhat Hanh's formulation of interbeing gestures toward a particular modern understanding of interdependence as a way of reenchanted the world. Nhat Hanh's descriptions of the cloud in the paper (the cloud produces rain, which waters the tree, which provides material for the paper) or the mutual dependence of roses and garbage (the

rose depends on decomposing material to nourish it, then it dies and becomes compost for other plants) provide mundane examples of how things exist in a vast process of mutually interdependent events. We too are a part of this process of the cosmos producing innumerable forms, says Nhat Hanh, transforming into each other in a vast web of interconnected life: “I” am not this limited form but the entire process—the entire ocean and not merely this one temporary wave.¹⁴ Such images take the mundane stuff of life and weave them together in ways that strive at once to gently obliterate the fixed, independent self of the Enlightenment and ease the frenetic fragmentation of the saturated self through mindfulness. Or perhaps ease *into* that fragmentation and reinterpret it as communion with all things. Nhat Hanh’s interbeing takes the raw ingredients of secular cosmology and infuses them with wonder by imagining the reopening of the isolated self into the cosmos, a reintegration into the alienated world, an expansion of the I into all things. But he offers nothing to transgress the basic foundations of the normative discourse of naturalistic secularity—no rebirth in the traditional sense, no heavens or hells, no miracles but mindfully walking on the earth. His unbuffering of secular subjectivity invites in no demons or gods or voices from other worlds. Just clouds, paper, roses, garbage, stars, planets, and each other.

Modern interpretations of interdependence like this take the splintered and decentered and reconfigure it as expansive and grand. They negotiate ways in which the fraying of the self-contained individual, with its scattering across so many spheres of activity, obligation, and meaning, can be called to order as a beautiful, expansive interwovenness with the cosmos. Rather than experiencing the world as a network of hostile forces aligned against an individual self, on the one hand, or as an overwhelming array of ever-splintering selves, on the other, one is invited to imagine all things as contiguous with oneself. Your current form is just one of many that you will take. The “you” that you think is you is not you—the real you is everything. Nhat Hanh’s cosmos is not a cold, lifeless, indifferent world receding into nothingness but a living

process tossing up form after form in a playful, creative, infinite process. Such a view offers a reenchanting cosmology that affirms the truths of scientific naturalism, with its webs of life and complex systems, giving them a glow of mystery and wholeness.

If modern articulations of interdependence like Nhat Hanh's are enchantments of the secular interdependence, they are also secularizations of earlier Buddhist models. In fact, Kusama's are not the first infinity mirrors to emerge from Asia. A second-century Indian Buddhist text, the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra*—part of the vast *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*—is an orgy of visionary imagery designed to disrupt the ordinary sense of self, space, and time through the infinite multiplication of images. In its climax, the main character, a pilgrim named Sudhana, encounters a great enlightened being, Samantabhadra. Rather than having a conversation, Sudhana gazes at him and sees that there are universes “as infinite as the sands of the Ganges” in each of the pores of his skin. In each universe, Sudhana sees an image of himself.¹⁵ Later, in China in the sixth and seventh centuries, the Huayan Buddhist philosopher Fazang attempted to boil down the narrative to a single image: reality is like a candle in a room with opposite-facing mirrors. Everything reflects and interpenetrates everything else, while still remaining distinct. Every individual contains the whole, and the whole is dependent on each individual. Another image used in Huayan Buddhism has become popular in recent ecological discussions: Indra's net—a net expanding out infinitely with a multifaceted reflecting jewel at each juncture. Each jewel in the net contains the mirror image of all the other jewels, while that single jewel is likewise reflected in all the others.

How is it that such images are drawn into the sensibilities of secular subjectivity and transformed by its hopes, fears, and anxieties? Like modern mindfulness, the Infinity Mirror model of self and world has two possible poles of interpretation. First is an aestheticized version of interdependence, focusing on wonder and comfort, blunting the soft edges of gritty physicality, shedding a soft-focus light on the harsh realities of death, illness, aging, and

vulnerability to the capriciousness of the world. In this sense it may be comforting but potentially anesthetizing of the reality that Buddhism itself has insisted we should look at squarely—remember the grizzly descriptions of the interiors of bodies and of corpses in the cremation ground in Buddhist meditation literature.

The other pole, however, holds additional possibilities. If the valorizing of wonder pushes human agency in the direction of passivity (things are beyond my personal control; death and suffering aren't so bad; or, perhaps, everything works together for a grand, cosmic good, so accept and surrender to it), other interpretations insist on ethical, social, and political implications. They urge action. It is no wonder that Indra's net has become a recurring image in ecological and social thought, where it is a potent symbol for the densely interconnected biosphere or the fraying social fabric, both under threat. Shake one part of the net and the reverberations are projected throughout its entirety, like coal smoke from China reaching Alaska or ethnic nationalism in the United States resonating with similar movements throughout Europe, spreading like wildfire across the internet.

Here the vision of intertwinement of self and world tends not (or at least not only) toward passive wonderment but also toward a heightened sense of ethical, social, and political responsibility. Infinite interconnectedness as an ethical imperative entails a recognition that all actions reverberate into the wider world. It opens up attention to what some have called “systemic suffering” perpetrated by the webs of interactions inherent in the globalized economic and political spheres. It encourages reenvisionings of right livelihood to include, for example, the consumer choices of the wealthy and their effects on the lives of the poor and disenfranchised. Some contemporary Buddhist authors encourage a sense of empathy that fosters imagining oneself as the other, as all others—as everything—and taking responsibility for the world as one would a part of one's own body, a body extending infinitely outward.¹⁶

If I am right that there are tensions—creative and conflictual—between these different approaches to non-self, meditation, and

interdependence, then underlying these tensions is perhaps the fundamental tension between versions of Buddhism as mainly a private matter—a matter of personal experience and psychological health—and Buddhism as more active and engaged in the monumental social, political, and ecological problems of the present age. This is not a stark, binary choice, and there is a spectrum of possibilities in between. Someone might simply use mindfulness for reducing stress, for example, but also be an avid political activist. But all of these approaches I've mentioned are interfused with secularity insofar as they take for granted the value of *this* world instead of striving for another.

Conclusion

In his influential book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), Richard Rorty describes the aspiration of modern philosophy and science to be a “mirror of nature,” a “final language” that directly reflects and gives a definitive account of things as they are.¹⁷ That ideal of the mirror of nature still survives today, mainly in the sciences, but in many ways it has given way to a funhouse mirror, where truth is harder to nail down, and competing versions of every conceivable thing multiply endlessly in ever-proliferating internet worlds. If there was ever a time when Thomas Worlidge's young man could gaze into his hand mirror and rest content in the singular vision of an uncomplicated individual self, that time has passed. Today we have multiple identities—personal, professional, legal, political, virtual. They are reflected back at us, in chaotic rapid-fire, in pixilated screens. Meanwhile, the secular cosmology that has emerged recently depicts humans as brief, accidental, and fragile wisps of living matter in an infinitely vast, impersonal universe. The “strategy” of many Buddhists and Buddhist sympathizers in allowing Buddhism to speak to this situation has been to infuse selected Buddhist ideas, practices, and images into secular discourse, with the hope that they will whisper a sense of wonder within confusion, invoke fractal order out of fragmented chaos, and assert responsi-

bility in the face of powerlessness. It remains to be seen whether these bits of Buddhism will be subsumed and tamed by secularity's more rapacious elements—commodification, commercialization, and trivialization—or will have a significant transformative effect on the ethos of secularity itself.

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