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Living Mindfully Through Crisis: Searching for Life Advice in the "Philosophy-Medicine" of Buddhism

Abstract:
This paper examines philosophy as a way of life in a time of crisis by focusing on Buddhism, envisioned as a path exercising the faculty of "mindfulness." From this standpoint of "Buddhist philosophy as mindful exercise," and following the Kyōto School's inspiration of engaging a dialogue with Western traditions, including modern psychology and medicine, the paper reflects upon the role of philosophy during this critical period. In response to the contemporary fragmentation of knowledge, it conceives creatively a set of core principles in the form of maxims – to be examined and adapted by each potentially interested individual – as tools to retain vital information, organize reflection, and reorient one's attention and destiny. Structured according to the Buddhist categories of view, meditation, and conduct, this collection of maxims serves to articulate the organic movement that goes back and forth between the distinctions made in philosophical discourse and the unity of lived philosophy.

Keywords:
Buddhism, mindfulness, meditation, memory, attention, care, wisdom

Introduction: Buddhist "Wisdom for Survival"[1]

Edgar Morin's insight seems today, during the present pandemic, more relevant than ever: "While the human species pursues its adventure under the threat of self-destruction, the imperative has become: to save Humanity by realizing it."[2] I intend to gather here, around the philosophical ideal of self-knowledge, some resources and reflections of classical humanities and cross-cultural perspectives, in order to respond, at a modest level, to Morin's major call.

I have recently proposed an articulation of *Buddhist philosophy as mindful exercise*[3] that, in line with the application of Pierre Hadot's redefinition of *philosophia* as a way of life to the idea of "Buddhist philosophy,"[4] refers to the integration of Buddhist meditation in medicine and psychology according to the notion of "mindfulness."[5] This conception is based on a tridimensional model of mindfulness or "presence" (Pāli *sati;* Sanskrit *smṛti;* Chinese *nian* 念; Tibetan *dran pa*),[6] each dimension being in close relation to the core cognitive faculties of memory, judgment, and attention, as (1) keeping philosophical *principles* present in mind, (2) organizing one's mind reflectively according to adequate re-*present*-ations, and (3) cultivating a *presence* of mind, refining direct perception, and enhancing lived experience moment-by-moment. In this article, I aim to formulate a practical application of this model in response to the present health crisis, especially from the point of view of an ordinary citizen who has to face social isolation, political conflicts, anxiety-provoking and sometimes confusing information, and who must maintain one's mental and physical health (both of which are related through psycho-immunology); as well as to access deeper resources in order to re-invent, beyond dystopian scenarios, a possible harmonious way of living together on this planet. To do so, among the many philosophical literary genres, I have chosen to explore that of "maxims," not by providing a historical survey, but by allowing myself to creatively conceive a new set of twelve maxims,[7] extracting the essential principles of philosophical traditions, especially Buddhism, and formulating them as a practical "wisdom for survival":[8] a set of guiding principles in order to live mindfully through the

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1) This paper was written at the kind invitation of the leading editors of this issue on "Philosophy as a Way of Life in a Time of Crisis." Following their call, I have intended here to reconsider the relationship and frontiers between academic training and life advice, relying especially upon the concept of mindfulness, at the crossroads of wisdom traditions and modern psychology. This paper does not constitute as such a specialized research paper, but is rather a philosophical essay (or trial) that searches ways to articulate humanistic resources and their real-life applications, especially in response to the current state of emergency. It was developed on the basis of teaching materials that were addressed to Japanese and international graduate students, from very different disciplinary and cultural backgrounds, at Kyōto University, and in order to offer them some support during the pandemic. Written with a spirit of urgency, some comparisons remain elusive: they were intended to identify and communicate some core human values in a multicultural context, while evolving in Kyōto's inspiring environment. The transitions from theory to practice, and from specialization to integration, and the question of how to overcome both the limits of narrow specialization (leading to isolation) and of excessive simplification (leading to confusion), remain fundamental issues related to "philosophy as a way of life," and being "in a time of crisis."

2) Morin, *Seven Complex Lessons in Education for the Future,* 62.

3) Deroche, "Mindful Wisdom," 19–20.

4) Kapstein, *Reasons' Traces,* "Introduction: What is 'Buddhist Philosophy'?"

5) Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living.*

6) Hereafter, in order to indicate Buddhist original terms, I generally use Sanskrit (as a common scriptural tradition from India to Japan) but, in specific reference to early Buddhist sources, I use Pāli. In this paper, which is intended for a broader audience and refers to Buddhism through its diverse traditions, I have refrained from adding too many philological details. The interested reader will nevertheless find all necessary references in order to look deeper into Buddhist texts themselves.

7) McKeown's book of self-management, *Essentialism*, offered a very contemporary source of inspiration, and Citton's "attentional maxims" (*Pour une écologie de l'attention,* 254–60) gave me another example to emulate.

8) On the notion of "wisdom for survival" and its significance at Kyōto University, see Matsumoto, "Mottainai (勿体無), Mittomonai (知恥), Katajikenai (忝)."

current crisis. I have formulated such maxims or "maximic modes," followed by a commentary and explanation, not in the imperative form, but in the present participle form, and not in the second person ("you"), but more impersonally ("one"). In this way, I wish to avoid the coercion of some prescriptions or suggestions, including those rather questionable ones represented by the many commercials or slogans that have invaded our public and private spheres (like "just do it," *sic*). Instead, I propose principles to be rationally examined, adopted or not, and if adopted, then adapted personally, along the path of self-knowledge and freedom.

Since I have been trained primarily in Buddhist studies, with a specialization in Tibet and the Himalayas, the Tibetan literature of "spiritual instructions" (*gdams ngag*), "oral advice" (*zhal gdams*), and "essential guidance," or "guidance on the essential points," (*don khrid*) has been an important source of inspiration. A key component here is "mind training" (*blo sbyong*) with its use of organized sets of simple sentences, injunctions, or reminders.[9] The rationale for the use of maxims can be articulated according to the threefold model of mindfulness mentioned above: (1) maxims are memorable and motivational, and when structured into a list, they can serve to retain and organize vital information, (2) they can serve to guide self-reflection and facilitate decision-making, and (3) they can orient attention and educate perception in order to come as close as possible to see things as they truly are. As such, in the search for integrity and coherence, they can form a bridge between discourse and lived experience, or between the assiduous study of ancient texts, traditions and philosophers, and the vibrant response to each new situation in its novelty.

The twelve maxims are themselves organized according to the Buddhist threefold model of the philosophical "view" *(dṛṣṭi)* or understanding, of "meditation" (*bhāvanā*) or formal self-cultivation through mind-body exercises, and of "conduct" (*caryā*), the integration of these views and meditation into daily life, guiding behavior and ethical relations with others. This other threefold scheme, view-meditation-conduct,[10] can also be seen as a Buddhist hermeneutical tool to articulate philosophical discourses with structured programs of embodied and contemplative "spiritual exercises," ultimately leading to integration of the two preceding elements into a "way of life." I would argue here briefly (a full comparison is to be developed elsewhere) that these three Buddhist categories may also be seen as parallels to the three parts of ancient philosophy: logic (expressed by Hadot as the discipline of judgment and the resulting correction of one's views), physics, and ethics. This comparison also points to the main difference between Indo-Buddhist and Greco-Roman philosophies as consisting in their middle element, meditation or physics, showing the different emphasis in these two traditions, on observing nature and man respectively through meditative absorption or through scientific investigation.

Inspired by Kyōto School philosophers, especially by Nishitani, philosophical principles are organized here by adopting an explicitly Buddhist standpoint[11] enlarged to cross-cultural perspectives, and engaging a philosophical dialogue with Western traditions. Some maxims are then illustrated more particularly by elements from traditional Japanese ways of life. Hadot's notion of philosophy as a way of life, the Kyōto School's legacy, and the integrative model of Buddhist philosophy as mindful exercise developed here, all tend to see philosophy – the love of wisdom – as the path toward self-knowledge and self-transformation: implying a conversion of interest and attention. In this way, the frontier between philosophy and religion is not based on an opposition between reason and faith, since the notion of wisdom, in the sense of an intellectual intuition transcending discourse, integrates and transcends both. Instead, in the context of a national and secular university, the distinction would be rather that of public versus private. The following maxims, while inspired by the religious

9) Thubten, *Mind Training.*

10) This is the top-down perspective that is complementary to the bottom-up classical progression of the three trainings: ethics (*śīla*), meditative concentration (*samādhi*), wisdom (*prajñā*).

11) Nishitani, "The Standpoint of Zen."

philosophy of Buddhism, can thus also be approached from a secular and cosmopolitan perspective that will be more directly relevant and accessible to today's public. A middle term that is significant for both secular and religious perspectives may be that of therapy, especially holistic therapy or mind-body medicine. Then, from a Buddhist perspective, the secular-religious demarcation line may be seen as the distinction between this life and the next life, based upon the concept of the continuity of consciousness after bodily death. But again, an integration of both perspectives may be seen in the conception that the mind is the governing factor of our experience, and that its mastery, defined as wisdom, is the supreme good in all times and places (including next lives), and that it is actually accessed only through attending properly to the "here and now."

The ethical and soteriological goal of Buddhism is the alleviation of suffering, and the attainment of the blissful state of wisdom understood as transcending the unsatisfactory alternation of transient pleasures and pains. In this way, it has been rightly described as a "doctrine-medicine,"[12] or I would say, "philosophy-medicine." And it is precisely in the realm of modern medicine and psychology that Buddhist meditation has been reframed into a secular therapeutic way to treat –especially – stress, depression and anxiety, when facing the major changes and challenges of life. Mindfulness has thus been envisioned by Kabat-Zinn as the way of "full catastrophe living,"[13] living through the very drama of life: the current crisis only reveals this tragic background more acutely in terms of intensity, synchronicity, and collectivity. Therefore, I have decided to focus on the larger principles that can be applied and personalized to the multiple aspects of the present crisis, and the next to come. Refraining from offering any policy suggestions, I have emphasized self-reliance instead. Nevertheless, since this invitation to live philosophically was first developed and addressed in the context of a transdisciplinary Graduate School, I hope that these principles can become philosophical resources accessible to scholars who are trained in other relevant fields, including life sciences and social sciences, in order to access new perspectives and potentially catalyze new solutions.

Figure 1. Recapitulative list of the twelve maxims

I. View	1. BEING one's own lamp, present and aware 2. LEARNING from spiritual friends and classical books 3. REMEMBERING the principles to live by 4. REFLECTING on life and death
II. Meditation	5. RETREATING from agitation and dispersion 6. REVITALIZING one's self with supportive conditions 7. EXERCIZING mind, body, and breath 8. CONTEMPLATING wholeness without bias
III. Conduct	9. PRIORITIZING vital information over distraction 10. CREATING through aspiration and application 11. CARING for communities living together 12. DEDICATING one's life to understanding

12) Bugault, *La notion de "prajñā,"* 69, 214. For an exhaustive discussion of the historical relations between Buddhism and medicine, see the two anthologies edited by Salguero, *Buddhism and Medicine.*

13) Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living,* liii–lx.

I. View

1. BEING One's Own Lamp, Present and Aware

This first maxim refers to sayings attributed to Śākyamuni Buddha: "Through zeal, heedfulness, self-control and restraint, the sagacious make an island no flood waters can overcome"[14] and "Be an lamp unto yourself."[15] Depending on the two contexts, the same Pāli term *dīpa* can be translated as an "island" or as "lamp." Here, we can interpret the two interrelated meanings by considering that the light of awareness, cultivated through a heightened sense of presence, does constitute one's own refuge, one's inalienable place of freedom. This echoes the Delphic inscription and Socratic injunction, "Know Thyself." As set forth in the first *Alcibiades*, by delimiting one's own true domain (the soul distinguished from the material body and possessions) and defining the correct relation with one's self, self-knowledge forms the appropriate care (*epiméleia*) of the self, a care that is one's sole responsibility and is to be accomplished by exercising of the virtue of temperance (*sophrosúnē*) or self-mastery. The abovementioned Buddhist quotations from the *Dhammapada* express very similar attitudes and notions. And the same scripture emphasizes self-reliance in striking terms: "For the self is the friend of self, for what other friend would there be? When the self has been well-trained, one finds a friend that is hard to find."[16]

Nevertheless, the Buddhist doctrine of "no-self," or "dis-identification" from egocentric consciousness, avoids any sense of self-indulgence. Instead of a narrative or discursive mode of self-reference, including even identification with the "thinker," Buddhism gives epistemological primacy to an immediate, impartial and detached form of observation of one's experience, including one's own thoughts. The *Sutta of Establishing Mindfulness* (*Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*) (*Majjhima Nikāya*, no. 10) describes the fundamental attitude on this path toward complete self-knowledge and liberation: "one should be diligent, aware, mindful, and free from desires and discontent in regard to the world."[17] This network of core faculties and attitudes is synthetized in the combination of "mindfulness and awareness" (*sati-sampajāna*), the second term having been also interpreted recently in dialogue with cognitive scientists as "meta-awareness" in reference to the concept of meta-cognition. Such "presence of mind" is the actual foundation for self-reliance and flourishing. It is to be cultivated in all circumstances, alone or with others, during all day, and even at night, in order to sleep well or to explore more lucidly the realm of dreams. This is thus the first and foremost maxim, the founding principle in order to live philosophically – mindfully – through the crisis.

2. LEARNING from Spiritual Friends and Classical Books

On the basis of such an attitude, one can recognize the need for guidance and support, at the same time being guided by one's own lucidity in order to select carefully reliable sources among the many vying for our attention in the information age. Self-guidance and guidance by the teacher are deeply interrelated: the teacher serves to mirror and foster the student's self-awareness, the "guiding part of the soul" (*hegemonikon*) in the language of Greek philosophy, or the "executive functions," especially executive attention, in the language of cognitive sciences. The fact that true self-knowledge is only possible through the medium of the other, and especially through dialogue and mutual correction, was a fundamental principle of Socratic methods and it is certainly

14) *Dhammapada*, 25

15) Ibid., 236. Translations of the *Dhammapada* in Pāli are adapted from Ānandajoti, *Dhamma Verses*.

16) Ibid., 160.

17) Adapted from Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna*, 3–4.

a need acknowledged in Buddhist traditions as well, according to which no one can truly walk the path safely without the guidance of a teacher or "spiritual friend" (*kalyāṇa-mitra*), the indications given in canonical corpora, the support of a community, and especially elder students.[18]

Then, learning also entails identifying or extracting the essential information to be subsequently remembered, assimilated, reflected upon, and implemented. This is an important issue today in view of the access, at almost every time and from everywhere, to potentially unlimited information in digital form (see maxim 9 in closer relation to this aspect), the increased exposure to a considerable variety of cultural traditions and systems, and the hyper-specialization of science – along with the exponential growth of publications. This has led largely to the end of totalizing worldviews integrated with corresponding ways of life. The transdisciplinary and transcultural quest of integrated knowledge and life remains indeed a considerable challenge. Moreover, in the context of the present crisis, one can observe and suffer considerably from the exacerbation of conflicting information together with the complex social, economic, and political implications.

In response to this situation, the humanistic scholar and lover of wisdom may reassert the value of philosophical classics as offering a refuge, not in the deadened forms of dogmatism and conservatism, but as an oasis to replenish one's inner forces. Hadot's notion of philosophy as a way of life represents a strong argument in defense of classical humanities, reviving them by replacing them in their original life-world (*Lebenswelt*) – considering especially in-depth reading empowered by philological studies, and elucidating commentary as foundational exercises for self-edification. Philosophy, and more generally the humanities, enables students (1) to build a historical awareness, zooming out and resituating the present moment within the larger perspective of the history of human civilizations; (2) to adopt a critical and reflective perspective through the discipline of articulated discourse, based upon clear conceptual categories, distinctions, and logical reasoning; and (3) to operate a reflexive turn, a conversion to oneself, and a shift in the mode of self-awareness.

Classics may be also seen as the repositories of the survival wisdom of past generations, the vital information that generation after generation have considered to be essential, repeatedly validating its content through the struggles of living and dying, and then transmitting it down to us, across centuries or millennia. In this sense, since they are timeless, classics are always timely, at the condition that their core principles can still be highlighted and lived from within. They need to be re-actualized and re-generated to overcome the "noise," irrelevant details and multiple errors that time may have added to their transmission. In a rapidly changing world, such principles are strikingly constant, if not "universal," across civilizations.[19] In contemporary academia, it is obvious that students (and teachers themselves) tend to be attracted or overwhelmed by the exponential number of recent papers, publications, or online materials quickly accessible and superficially glanced at on screens, and consequently to neglect the patient reading of entire classical books, sometimes judged superficially as being obsolete. There is a renewed need to point out reading curricula of selected major works, with a sense of progression and priority, taking into proper account the inherent limitations of attentional resources, as well as the need to compile information and to organize knowledge. Reading classics, especially in the morning, can center the entire day on their principles, nourishing self-awareness, recognizing one's essential life goals, and directing attention to them. Then, it is possible to respond in an organized fashion and to properly allot one's energies to the various demands, without succumbing to distraction or collapsing under social pressures. Such grounding seems especially important to learn as an undergraduate or graduate student, in order to become a self-reliant individual in our digital age.

18) This idea is precisely encapsulated in the Buddhist notion of taking refuge in the "Triple Gem": The *Buddha*, the *Dharma*, and the *Saṅgha*. See Gethin, *Foundations of Buddhism*, 34, 107–8.

19) Peterson and Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues,* 33–52.

3. REMEMBERING the Principles to Live By

To stay on track, one has to keep in mind the essential principles that have been previously learned. As shown by Pierre Hadot, ancient *philosophia* was practiced through a movement of going back and forth between integration and clarification: reaffirming an indivisible core set of essential principles to live by, and developing their detailed analysis and justification.[20] Such a balanced approach avoids two pitfalls: on the one hand a dogmatic approach that ignores the reasons for principles, and on the other hand, forgetfulness of principles due to getting lost in detailed reasoning, if not compulsive thinking.

Buddha Śākyamuni's teachings were originally transmitted orally and memorized upon hearing their recitation. Mnemonic devices played a considerable role. It has been argued that the organization of teachings told circumstantially by the Buddha (and recorded in the category of *sutta*, "discourses") in a systematic fashion (under the category of *Abhidhamma*) initially emerged from lists to be memorized.[21] But by becoming more and more sophisticated, such systematizations have periodically renewed the need for more direct approaches.

In Greece, since Mnemosyne is the mother of the Nine Muses, memory has remained central, as shown in the Egyptian myth told by Plato,[22] and which regarded writing as a deviation from true memory as differentiated from simple reminiscence, leading not to truth, but to the semblance of truth. The superiority of memory lies in the fact that it is always at one's internal disposal, retrievable at will. On the other hand, maintaining information has a high cognitive cost, and externalizing it into external written supports frees considerable psychic resources that become then available for other purposes. The issue of the overload of information has been historically a recurrent issue,[23] but it has become today, in the information or digital age, extremely exacerbated, calling for new approaches to organizing mind and life. Rather than being completely forgetful of the wisdom of past humanity, and indulging with contempt in futurist fantasies, understanding the content, structure, and purpose of essential philosophical works seems a safer and more reasonable strategy. The very purpose of the *Manual* (*Encheiridion*, originally in Greek a "hand knife" or "dagger") of Epictetus is to offer the essential principles that are to be always "at hand," kept ready in mind in order to protect oneself against life's difficulties and maintain one's integrity with resilience. The role of memory in conjunction with attentiveness is explicit in Epictetus' *Discourses*:

> To what things then ought I to attend? First to those general (principles) and to have them in readiness, and without them not to sleep, not to rise, not to drink, not to eat, not to converse (associate) with men… . we ought to keep the soul directed to this mark, to pursue nothing external, and nothing which belongs to others (or is in the power of others)… . Next to this we ought to remember who we are, and what is our name, and to endeavor to direct our duties towards the character (nature) of our several relations (in life).[24]

20) Hadot, *Discours et mode de vie philosophique,* 46–47: "Le disciple reste donc constamment en contact avec les trois disciplines, même s'il étudie l'une d'entre elles d'une manière plus approfondie. Il y a toujours un va-et-vient entre la concentration et la distinction, entre la simultanéité et l'ordre successif."

21) Gethin, "The Mātikas."

22) *Phaedrus* 274c–275b, *Complete Works,* 551–52.

23) Citton, *Pour une écologie de l'attention,* 31.

24) Epictetus, "On Attention," chap. 7 in *Discourses*, 369–71.

And the essence of Stoic philosophy is given in the distinction at the very forefront of his *Manual* (I): "Some things in the world are up to us, while others are not." This becomes like a sword to distinguish events from our reactions to them, cutting our chains and exercising our free will. In Buddhism, the first words of the *Dhammapada* (1) are: "Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief; they are all mind-wrought." And in the language of modern psychology: "The idea of free will is a self-fulfilling prophecy; those who abide by it are liberated from the absolute determinism of external forces."[25] Keeping these principles in mind, one has to remind one's self to watch or monitor one's own mind. To this end, memorizing philosophical principles forms ethical literacy in order to distinguish virtues from passions, wholesome from unwholesome mental factors, positive from negative psychological attitudes, and carry out from within the capacity to reform one's mind. In *Mahāyāna* Buddhism this overall orientation reaches its fullest extent with the idea of the "Awakening Mind" (*bodhicitta*), the aspiration to obtain the perfect and complete awakening of a Buddha – totally free but also capable of helping others – thus opening the way for the career of a *bodhisattva*, a being bound to awakening (*bodhi*). This core principle is then articulated in terms of intention and action, or in other words, as aspiration and application. The Awakening Mind thus represents the Buddhist way to reorient desire, *eros*, toward the Sovereign Good. A Tibetan treatise of spiritual instructions uses the following framework of the Awakening Mind to encapsulate the fundamental virtues on the path:[26]

Figure 2. Framework of the Awakening Mind

The Awakening Mind (*Bodhicitta*)
I. In Aspiration: The Four Immeasurable Minds
1. Loving kindness
2. Compassion
3. Joy
4. Equanimity
II. In Application: The Six Transcendent Virtues
1. Generosity
2. Discipline
3. Patience
4. Effort
5. Meditation
6. Wisdom

25) Csikszentmihalyi, *The Evolving Self,* 14.

26) Longchenpa, *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind*, 86.

Such lists are powerful reminders, and their recollection is itself a spiritual practice that serves to strengthen the corresponding virtues.[27] As in Stoicism,[28] these virtues constitute the inner resources to be cultivated in order to meet different circumstances and challenges.[29] Each problem becomes an opportunity to exercise a given virtue, this virtue being the first place to look in order to allow a solution to emerge. Wisdom remains the overarching faculty and in its full actualization it is the ultimate Awakening Mind.

4. REFLECTING on Life and Death

The philosophical quest of the good life is inseparable from the fundamental "exercise of death,"[30] exemplified by Socrates' attitude, which gives preeminence to moral intention over physical survival. Socrates exemplifies the ideal of freedom from hope and fear; of autonomy from reward and punishment.[31] Philosophy as the exercise of death is the path toward the transcendence of the partial ego, which sees the world only in terms of its desires and aversions, in order to attain the universality of the *logos*. Moreover, by remembering and reflecting upon the reality and inescapability of death (*memento mori*), one can discern the vital from the trivial, the essential from the superficial, and reconsider one's life goals and shift one's priorities. Seen from the perspective of its endpoint, life is perceived in all its value and fragility. It is with the awareness of death that one can actually live a life worth living, lived with a heightened sense of purpose and greater clarity. Recognizing intellectually and accepting emotionally the certainty of one's mortality, while discerning the many possibilities of death, can start to loosen the grip of fear and attachment. Far from constituting a denial, however, this is a path of courageous confrontation, a face-to-face with reality.

Facing the reality of life in entirety, including its most difficult aspects, constitutes the first noble truth taught by the Buddha Śākyamuni, the "noble truth of suffering," followed by the "noble truth of its origin," the "noble truth of the cessation of suffering," and the "noble truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering," which together make up the set of the "four noble truths,"[32] after the model of a medical diagnosis. But the sickness that is here first diagnosed is our existential "unsatisfactoriness," due to a fundamental mistake or ignorance about the self and the world. At its most gross levels, it takes the form of (re)birth, sickness, old age, and death. These "bad news" are nevertheless followed by the "good news" of a possible cessation of suffering, its extinction (*nirvāṇa*), and the path to leading to it, that is a state of authentic happiness, identical to the possession of wisdom. This liberating path begins by acknowledging one's slavery. Denial and escapism are themselves intrinsic parts of the problem, being rooted in the blind compulsion to seek pleasure and to avoid pain, with the accompanying feelings of incompletion and fear, and attitudes of greed

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27) For the function of reciting such lists in early Buddhism, including a healing aspect used by the Buddha himself even after his full awakening, see Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna*, 241, n. 37.

28) Epictetus, *Manual*, 10.

29) A comparative table of Platonic virtues and Buddhist Mahāyānist so-called transcending virtues could serve as a compact Greco-Buddhist version of Peterson and Seligman's larger project in positive psychology (*Character Strengths and Virtues*, see in particular 33–52) to compile a list of six core virtues (courage, justice, humanity, temperance, transcendence, wisdom) or character strengths, based on the consideration of the various cultural traditions of China, South Asia, and the West. Platonic justice may be seen as corresponding to Buddhist generosity plus discipline (or ethics); Platonic temperance to Buddhist patience; Platonic courage to Buddhist effort, and Platonic wisdom to Buddhist meditation plus wisdom. As for the four immeasurable minds, a Western equivalent is found rather in the Stoic/Christian conception of the absence of passions (*apatheia*) and the Christian notion of love (*agape*).

30) Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 193.

31) Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, 16.

32) Gethin, *Foundations of Buddhism*, 59–84.

and aggression that constitute the illusory sense of self by which one gets trapped in the vicious circle of existence (*saṃsāra*).

As Michel Henry has analyzed in a remarkable essay,[33] our whole contemporary world and the enterprise of scientism (not science but the non-scientific ideology disguised as science) can be seen as a form of *fuite de soi*[34] or self-escapism, representing what he called the "sickness of life" (*la maladie de la vie*):[35] the mad and desperate enterprise to suppress suffering through the phenomenologically self-contradictory project of eradicating subjectivity under the name of objectivity, in order to turn away from sensitivity and affectivity as they make us fundamentally vulnerable. As Henry observes, when suffering is not embraced and is thus sublimated into the higher possibilities of ethics, art and religion, it becomes locked into anguish (*angoisse*) and life degenerates under the power of the sinister forces of stagnation or self-destruction. A major characteristic of our secularized societies is indeed the denial of death, or the attempt to divert one attention away from it (Pascal's *divertissement*) through constant distraction or entertainment – or through the transhumanist dream of technology-assisted material immortality. By teaching us to die before we die, the love of wisdom can free us from the fear of death, allowing us, in the most difficult circumstances, to live with joy and to care with love. But, this realization is only possible through an embodied practice that can transform deeply ingrained and largely subconscious tendencies. This is then the role of meditation or cultivation, for which Buddhism constitutes a considerable treasure-house, starting with India's ancient lore of *yoga*, experienced, adapted, and expanded by combination with local traditions throughout the diffusion of Buddhism across Asian civilizations, and now in the West.

II. Meditation

5. RETREATING from Agitation and Dispersion

The practice of spiritual retreat has been central to most religious and philosophical traditions, and this is especially true for Buddhism. In order to begin to reach some level of mastery of meditation, a calm and inspiring environment, without too much external disturbances, is a major condition. During the present crisis, unprecedented policies of "social distancing," curfew, or lock down, have been implemented on a global scale. While this situation has been very distressing, and for some economic actors, the cause of bankruptcy with all its tragic consequences, I would like here to envision the possibility, at least to some degree and for some people, to transform this obstacle to normal social life into an opportunity of spiritual practice. In this maxim, I consider the general significance of retreat. In the next, I will discuss the supportive conditions that, if available, can make it a safe, or even an enjoyable experience.

First, it is essential to differentiate[36] the sentiment of *loneliness*, marked by a feeling of disconnection and despair, and *solitude* itself, which, on the contrary, can be experienced as an opportunity for profound reconnection with oneself, one's values, with nature, God, the true Self, Emptiness, or Buddha-nature, depending on the language and views of one's philosophical or religious tradition. Solitude can thus be the opportunity for a personal re-unification, freeing oneself from alienating influences and finding autonomy, focusing on what is considered essential and setting boundaries around it, and allowing thus a process of self-edification, at one's own pace, with respect toward one's individual condition.

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33) Henry, *La barbarie*.

34) Ibid., 186.

35) Ibid., chap. 4.

36) Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow,* 164–75.

Moreover, for those who have embraced a contemplative vocation, the sense of belonging to a spiritual lineage or community can actually be deepened and intensified during solitary retreats leading to sentiments of communion and beatitude. Of course, such positive outcomes are the fruits of a long path of inner transformation, and of learning patiently to deal with psychological hindrances by trial and error. And conversations with teachers and companions, at least punctually or periodically, have been considered since early Buddhism[37] as the universal remedies for all major obstacles. In the language of modern psychology, one must essentially learn to be alone by structuring by oneself one's own time and attention, beyond boredom and anxiety. This capacity, quite rare, is the foundation for "flow," the optimal experience obtained through the mastered process of a skilled activity, including that of a symbolic system like philosophy, that can order consciousness. As reported by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi,[38] the leading psychologist on flow, it is this mastery that enables some people to survive or even to thrive in the most adverse circumstances.

Retreating, even for brief periods of the day, consists in crafting time and space for taking back control of attention and the direction of the mind. In our contemporary world, marked by constant solicitations and addictive uses of information and communication technologies, it has been argued that re-creating cultural "vacuoles" or "aesthetic laboratories"[39] is decisive in order to reclaim power over our attention and destiny. With this aim in mind, I will discuss in the next section some possible inspiration from Japan. But, at the very foundation of the use of technology and of lifestyle design, let us consider the necessary harmonization of the psychological faculties.

Spiritual retreat is essentially a retreat from the vain agitation that is to be entirely differentiated from true action, envisioned below in the category of conduct. While the latter is grounded in authentic being, agitation or "busy-ness" forms the superficial mode of doing that operates when one is confused with one's self-image.[40] The distinction becomes then that of image and reality, or according to Buddhist epistemology, of two knowing modes, (1) conceptual representation that is bound to temporal succession, and (2) direct perception that is instantaneous as the lived present. Retreating then means learning to come back to and dwell more and more in the present moment, circumscribing it,[41] in all its unveiled liveliness – not being carried away by concepts about past and future, memory or imagination, regret and worry, which, when uncontrolled lead to depression or anxiety: the two main poles of mental imbalance. The fundamental place and time of retreat is thus here and now, in the midst of things as they are, thus securing one's peace of mind and maintaining one's balance.

6. REVITALIZING One's Self with Supportive Conditions

Since the present crisis is a serious matter of public health, it makes sense to insist here on the concept of healing or "revitalizing," including prevention and maintenance. Philosophy as a way of life can be articulated with behavioral medicine in the concept of mindful living and supported by mind-body medicine – including the discipline of psycho-immunology. Basic supportive conditions for health are: proper rest, sleep, diet, and ideally a harmonious environment surrounded by nature. I will consider adequate exercise in the next maxim,

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37) Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna*, 200.

38) Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow,* chap. 9.

39) Citton, *Pour une écologie de l'attention,* 230–31.

40) Segal, Williams and Tessdale, *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression,* chap. 4, propose the distinction between "being" (process-oriented) and "doing" (goal-fixed). Both are necessary, but "being" has phenomenological primacy and a central therapeutic value.

41) Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?,* 190–98.

and meaningful work and social relations in the section on conduct. Here, I will describe briefly some Japanese cultural ideals of retiring into nature.

Elements of Buddhist and Daoist hermitages were remarkably synthetized in the Japanese traditional teahouse (*cha-shitsu* 茶室),[42] in which one can find temporary refuge from the furor of the world and focus on the simple act of offering or receiving tea in communion with another human being. In close association with the art of gardens, it had an extraordinary cultural influence in Japanese lifestyle as a whole, conveying the values of intimacy, simplicity, and serenity, even in the smallest places in the midst of busy cities. With few elements of the mineral and vegetal world, Japanese architects and designers are able to recreate an aesthetic sense of harmony and peace. Contemporary Japan is also particularly fond of "forest-bathing" (*shinrin-yoku* 森林浴) as a way to relax and refresh body and mind by immersing oneself in the de-stressing and revitalizing atmosphere of deep forests and mountains. Then more literally, bathing in the water of hot springs (*onsen* 温泉), notably with outdoor facilities, combines a privileged access to nature within a highly aesthetic architecture that conveys a deep sense of the sacred. Relaxing by contemplating a Japanese garden represents a simple yet powerful method for "attention recovery," naturally rebalancing top-down and bottom-up systems, focused attention, and peripheral awareness, as one's gaze moves calmly and freely through the different parts of the garden, zooming in and zooming out.

A fundamental principal of Daoism and traditional Chinese medicine, that was also integrated in Japan through Chan/Zen 禪/禅 Buddhism, is that of "nourishing the vital principle" (*yōjō* 養生).[43] While it is fully developed within the context of formal and sometimes complex meditation and gymnastic exercises, I wish to emphasize here its diffusion in the larger culture that then functions as a supportive and nourishing condition. This illustrates almost literally Michel Henry's definition of "culture as the cultivation of life" (*la culture comme culture de la vie*).[44]

7. EXERCIZING Mind, Body, and Breath

The basic Buddhist psychosomatic framework for formal "spiritual exercises," or rather "mind-body exercises," is that of the four ways of establishing mindfulness: body, feelings (basic hedonic tones), mind (attitudes), and *dharma*-s (phenomena or categories of Buddhist teachings). Exposed in the *Sutta of Establishing Mindfulness*, this method was revived in South Asian, modern Buddhist traditions, and then became the starting point of the "mindfulness movement" once these techniques had been transmitted to the West and incorporated into mainstream medicine and society. As part of the body, and as its animating function or life-principle, the breath is a privileged object. Another early Buddhist scripture, the *Sutta of the Mindfulness of Breathing* (*Ānāpānasati Sutta*) (*Majjhima Nikāya*, no. 118), takes this exercise as the guiding thread for the entire path. The Buddha himself is said to have attained awakening through this technique.

In later Buddhist theories of meditation, mindfulness of breathing is judged especially appropriate for people prone to intellectualization,[45] distraction, and agitation. Such tendencies have indeed become more generalized with modern education and lifestyle, and mindfulness of breathing has become the foundation for

42) Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture,* chaps. 8–9, 11.

43) For the classical Sinological study on this topic: Maspero, "Les procédés de 'nourrir le principe vital' dans la religion taoïste ancienne" originally published in *Journal Asiatique* in 1937, and republished in *Le taoïsme et les religions chinoises,* 481–589.

44) Henry, *La barbarie,* 103.

45) As Vasubandhu explains, "those dominated by concepts" (*vitarkacarita*) practice mindfulness of breathing as a specific antidote: La Vallée Poussin, *L'Abhidharmakośa,* vol. 4, 148–9, 153–58.

medicalized meditation programs.[46] One sits in a posture that is appropriate for one's physical condition, the straight back being the main element, and one settles the mind on the breath. In this way, the mind becomes still, the breath more natural, less disturbed by emotional thinking, and the body can therefore become revitalized and recover balance. A positive reinforcement is created between body and mind through the medium of the breath. Breathing actually connects the self and the environment, and as discussed above, a special alchemy operates through the air breathed in the midst of nature. Meditation thus starts by minding the body, cultivating an embodied presence of mind, back to the present, and by attending to breathing, back to the "life-world," cultivating lived-experience.

By focusing especially on the physical sensations associated with the movement of the breath at the level of the abdomen, a rebalancing of the autonomous nervous system also takes place. Deep exhalation especially facilitates the release of tensions. It is then possible to become intensively alert and deeply relaxed. In the Zen tradition, and again in connection to Daoism and Chinese traditional medicine, the belly or *hara* 腹 is also known as the lower *tanden* 丹田, a term originating from Daoist alchemy, and the place where vital energy (*ki* 氣), intimately connected with breathing,[47] is to be gathered and equilibrated. In this line of thought, vital energy tends to be dispersed through the five senses when the mind is directed outward. In this way, *ki* mainly accumulates in the head, increasing conceptual thought activity. By directing attention, and the vital energy that follows, toward the lower abdomen, both mind and vital energy are re-equilibrated and recollected. Breathing with the lower abdomen is thus considered a method for longevity and healing in Chinese medicine. Through Zen, it was also largely disseminated in the military class and has remained a central element of modern Japanese martial arts. In China, this grounding of consciousness in the center of gravity of the body has also remained a fundamental teaching in longevity exercises or martial arts. In the Buddhist framework of the establishing mindfulness, breathing with the sensation of the whole body is considered as deeply healing and appeasing. Then mindfulness of the body can serve to sustain awareness in daily life, in all postures and activities, including walking or physical exercises.

Pierre Hadot[48] used to distinguish two movements in the acquisition of true self-knowledge, or self-awareness, according to the practice of spiritual exercises: (1) concentration of the self; (2) expansion of the self. We may draw here a parallel between those two forms of meditation that Buddhism shares with the larger Indian tradition of *yoga*: (1) calm abiding (*śamatha*) aimed at unifying the mind, concentration, and reaching levels of meditative absorption; and (2) the four immeasurable minds mentioned above. Then the specifically Buddhist meditation is that of insight (*vipaśyanā*), transcending the very act of grasping at a self. I will conclude this section with the Buddhist exercise of concentration, and explore the others in the context of the next maxim on contemplation. Early Buddhist texts list five major hindrances to the attainment of concentration: sensual desire, hostility, the combination of sloth and torpor, the combination of agitation and worry, and finally doubt. Then there are five absorption factors to rely upon: conception, investigation, joy, happiness, and concentration.[49] This teaches us that proper conceptual activity and clarity of mind are considered to be necessary in order to direct and sustain attention upon the object of meditation. Maintaining clear concepts and cultivating a direct perception are both mutually supportive of progress. Then, craving for sensual pleasures is seen as opposite to

46) Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living,* chap. 3; Segal, Williams, and Teasdale, *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression,* chaps. 10, 18.

47) For perspectives in medical anthropology and phenomenology on the connections between breath and vital energy, see Hsu and Low, *Wind, Life, Health.*

48) Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?,* 189.

49) Gethin, *Foundations of Buddhism,* 180–81.

the arising of joy and happiness that are both physical and mental. Seen from the psychology of flow, obstacles can be grouped under the two larger categories of boredom and anxiety, and with the proper channeling of psychic energy, once the state of flow is reached, enjoyment becomes a central characteristic.

8. CONTEMPLATING Wholeness Without Bias

Through concentration, one purifies the mind from the five hindrances mentioned above. They are manifestations of the three root poisons, the main causes of our spiritual dis-ease: greed, hatred, and ignorance.[50] These form the relational structure of the partial consciousness, based on ego-grasping: attraction to the pleasant, aversion of the unpleasant, and indifference toward what is neither pleasant nor unpleasant. A systematic method for transforming these reactive and subconscious attitudes is that of the four immeasurable minds. It consists in cultivating unconditional attitudes to all types of persons, whether they are relatives or friends, perceived as enemies, or ignored as neutral or unknown people. Such attitudes are developed in reference to different possible experiences: loving kindness is the wish that others experience happiness, compassion is the wish that others be free from suffering, joy is the capacity to rejoice about others' good qualities and achievements (instead of envy, jealousy and competitiveness), and equanimity is the foundation of all the four immeasurable minds as the mind that embraces all people equally.[51] The practice is progressive, including oneself, and focusing on specific persons, until it ultimately includes all sentient beings imagined in every direction of the whole space and universe. One can thus contemplate totality, without partiality, beyond identifying to a camp and opposing to another.

The fundamental cause of suffering, the grasping of the ego, loosened by the previous practices, is then entirely uprooted with the practice of insight (*vipaśyanā*), realizing the absence of a self, emptiness. Based upon a necessary level of stability or concentration (the definition of the extent of this remains an important issue in contemporary Buddhism), it is essentially accomplished by cultivating a watchful, non-reactive, observation of all possible experience. Referred to by the category of "open monitoring" in cognitive sciences,[52] insight is practiced differently according to various Buddhist traditions, some of them pointing at an ultimate form of knowing, beyond the first of all dualities, that of a subject and an object.[53] There are here important historical and philosophical distinctions to be made and it seems essential to respect the integrity and coherence of each approach. Moreover, because of its depth, this practice is better undertaken with the clear framework and guidelines of a given tradition, and with the personal guidance of a qualified teacher. In this sense, it is beyond the public sphere and academic domain that define the general and non-sectarian perspective of this paper.

III. Conduct

9. PRIORITIZING Vital Information Over Distraction

The previous sections of view and meditation have already established the capacity to prioritize, exercising the fundamental faculty of self-determination and autonomy versus alienation and heteronomy. Here I wish to apply especially those principles to the conduct of daily life that is, in our times, marked by the omnipresence

50) Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism,* 68–74.

51) Ibid., 186–87.

52) Lutz, Slagter, Dunne, and Davidson, "Attention Regulation and Monitoring in Meditation."

53) Deroche, "The Conversion of Attention."

of digital information and communication technologies. Although the present paper was written, prepared, and shared thanks to such technologies, it adopts a radically critical distance to them. This critique or discernment is grounded in the Buddhist examination, and its Stoic parallel, of the very nature of representations, mediating images or concepts, and the potentially deceptive character of language, to be distinguished from reality – things as they are in themselves. Observing thoughts as thoughts, and not taking them as realities or facts,[54] is the very exercise of insight, or in more recent psychological language, of metacognition. A recent work in psychology and neuroscience has actually offered a concrete strategy for accessing the necessary information while avoiding the pitfall of distraction[55]: (1) first of all, the key is to increase metacognition, taking control of one's attention; (2) limiting accessibility (echoing the concept of retreat discussed above), and avoiding constant connectivity with its disrupting consequences (especially for vital functions such as sleep); then finding ways to decrease (3) anxiety (the so-called "fear of missing out" on urgent or important news and messages) and (4) boredom, through proper stimulation, motivation, and engagement. By finding a middle path between those last two elements, anxiety and boredom, one can find the state of flow that, through the mastery of a skilled activity (including one's work), is endogenous or self-generated, while passive entertainment is exogenous and other-powered. We can see here why self-directing one's life, and one's use of information and communication technologies (including ancient medias such as books) through the love of wisdom represents a major antidote to the dystopian perspectives of digital heteronomy.

It has been recently argued that new media have tended to de-possess their users of their attentional control.[56] As in the Buddhist meditative observation of thoughts, the most liberating insight is not concerned with changing or discussing their content, but with finding a new structural attitude toward them, more integrative and free. Processing information about the constant changes of the environment, including the health situation and social guidelines, is indeed necessary for our survival. But, the overload of information can be deadly: physically, because words and images by generating feelings do have a strong impact on the body; and spiritually, because it leads to the oblivion of our most important values, goals, and destination. Sobriety, moderation, self-regulation, or controlling one's impulses, are thus the keys to maintain, especially during this crisis, our physical and mental integrity. Information is to be examined, digested, assimilated, and organized on the path to wisdom.

In Buddhism, distraction can actually be seen as deeply interrelated with metaphysical ignorance, since the latter can be conceived as a form of hypnotic trance or sleep from which one is exhorted to wake up. Distraction first happens with a loss of perspective, consciousness being narrowed down and attention captured by one element, then carried away, entangled, lost, and dispersed. To recover from this state, focusing on a unique object, or concentration, is the first step, but liberation happens ultimately through re-enlarging consciousness and re-establishing self-awareness. In the economy of the information age, attention has become the main resource for generating profits. And the strongest attractions used by the industries that have interests in capturing the attention of others, are the alarm system, the innate function used to detect danger, and the reward system; in simple words, fear and desire, with the consequent narrowing down of consciousness into "tunnel vision;" and at the grossest levels, the violent and sexual content watched passively on screens.

According to the "illusionist" perspective of the Madhyamaka school,[57] things do not exist as they appear: being dream-like, they appear although they are ultimately non-existent. Similarly, medias do not show the world,

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54) Segal, Williams, and Teasdale, "Thoughts are not Facts," chap. 14 in *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression*.

55) Gazzaley and Rosen, *The Distracted Mind*, chap. 11. For philosophical and theological perspectives as well as practical recommendations on this issue, see Larchet, *Malades des nouveaux medias,* chap. 14.

56) Citton, *Médiarchie,* 49.

57) Westerhoff, *The Golden Age of Indian Buddhist Philosophy,* 101–4.

but only images of the world, images that are themselves highly constructed, with all possible selection biases, reflecting priorities that may not be ultimately in the viewer's best advantages. In Buddhism, renunciation of the world essentially means renouncing a mistaken worldview, a worldview that is but the projection of the ego, taking shape according to its partiality and falsity, with all its delusive fascinations and terrors. The media, with their messages and images, are to the collectivity what language and imagination are for the individual; they create a "pseudo-reality" that was already analyzed by Guy Debord almost sixty years ago in his famous essay.[58]

I will conclude my comment on this maxim by saying that it is by no means technophobic. On the contrary: by investigating the very ground of knowledge and illusion, at the core of our own being, we can cut off the root of all fantasies, including pessimistic ones. The internet exists for better and for worse. If we choose the good life, it enables us to access the most valuable knowledge accumulated by the various human civilizations and sciences, to an extent that seems unprecedented in history. The point is this: through undistracted awareness and discernment, we can make the best use of this precious opportunity, and avoid wasting it by following seductive but destructive temptations. Moreover, when properly accessed, such vital information will not redirect us to more virtual objects through a vain and insatiable curiosity, but it will take us back to our real lives, to people for whom and to things for which we are directly responsible.

10. CREATING Through Aspiration and Application

From a Buddhist perspective, each being is responsible for its destiny. This principle is actually empowering and it is rooted in the understanding of the creative power of the mind, for good or for evil, as stated in the clear and simple terms exposed at the outset of the *Dhammapada*.[59] While a major survival mechanism linked to the function of fear is be on the lookout for potential dangers, this automatism, if it is itself left unrecognized and uncontrolled, can trap most of our attentional resources into the consideration of solely negative aspects, into counter-productive rumination, leading potentially to exhaustion and hopelessness. The previous maxim points out the need to find a refuge, both internal and external serenity and safety (in Japanese: *anshin* 安心 and *anzen* 安全), so that one can replenish one's self and then find better ways to cope with the challenges of life. In this sense, retreat becomes the condition for finding new creative solutions by enlarging consciousness. As seen above, in Japan, the tea room has represented, especially in deeply troubled times, such an opportunity to find peace, momentarily retiring in a minimalist abode secluded from the external world, emptied from all superfluous artifices in order to re-energize one's self by drinking green powder tea (*maccha* 抹茶) in communion with trusted friends, or possibly negotiating alliances. The difference between such an adaptive refuge and maladaptive escapism (addictions, etc.) is that it serves, subsequently, to come back to reality with a greater sense of perspective and power. Japanese culture could here serve as an inspiration for redesigning our lifestyles and recreating such spaces, as well as to reconfigure proper relations between natural, digital, and human connections.

Retreat provides the opportunity to clarify one's essential intent, to define one's strategic vision, and to align all one's tendencies, drives, and motivation with a corresponding sacred sense of mission or vocation, which is then implemented into dedicated application through meaningful and focused work. The Buddhist tradition has emphasized the notion of "aspiration" (*praṇidhāna*), the wish from the bottom of the heart that can be formulated with prayer: it is a major soteriological tool for both mundane and supra-mundane purposes. It enacts a form of "creative imagination" – radically different from passively indulging into the chain associa-

58) Debord, *La société du spectacle,* 10.

59) *Dhammapada*, 1–2.

tion of mental images – that, guided by a wholly positive intent, can tap into much deeper resources and serve to redirect one's destiny.

11. CARING for Communities Living Together

A Buddhist way of considering the alternation between retreat and engagement is through the articulation of wisdom and compassion, the understanding of emptiness that frees oneself from illusion and suffering, and the compassionate responsiveness that fulfills others' needs. This is the "double benefit" (or "win-win" strategy), for oneself and for others, that defines the ideal of the *bodhisattva* up to the achievement of complete Buddhahood. More prosaically, this perspective could also serve to rethink the relations between research and education for academic philosophers and humanists, especially from the perspective of philosophy as a way of life. In Buddhism, the gift of the teachings – rather than rituals – was originally considered as monks' main duty toward the lay community.

Attending to and caring for are intimately connected. Therefore, the reconversion of our attention, from distraction to consecration, is essential to expand our area of concern and to invest properly our energy into the care for others. The maxim on contemplation set forth such sensitive consideration by means of the four immeasurable minds, going beyond our ordinary partiality and limitations. While our attitude of mind or intentions can become unlimited, our actions, as they unfold step by step, are necessarily limited. Nevertheless, by focusing our attention in order to help where we can be most useful, to those who may benefit from our modest assistance, we may then extend such attitudes to others as well, and thus expand the spheres of our outreach in a symbiotic way from families, to friends, colleagues, students, readers, fellows, citizens, nations, to potentially include all humans and all sentient beings.

The very expression "social distancing," although well intended, may be quite unfortunate, implying as it does the idea of the necessity of social disconnection for survival. The truth is quite the opposite: in order to survive and to thrive, we have to invest our attention and concentrate our forces in order to connect to each other – on common goals – even if this may currently entail the hygienic need to avoid some specific forms of physical contact (in this way caring to protect others), but certainly not all forms of social and emotional contact. At least, by looking at each other, even through online digital mirroring, we can reinvent skillful ways of supporting each other.

12. DEDICATING One's Life to Understanding

In Buddhism, the ultimate expansion of concern consists in dedicating each positive action to the welfare of all sentient beings, following the transcendent goal of the Awakening Mind. This vast intentionality can be encapsulated in the idea of dedicating one's life – and potentially future lives – to awakening: to live in order to awake and free oneself as well as others. Since awakening starts with the act of raising awareness, in each moment, it represents the vertical or spiritual dimension of life that crosses, in each new moment, the horizontal timeline of living. The concept of dedication also points to the metaphysical questions of the ultimate ends of human life – its meaning and purpose – although such questions have become largely ignored, or even rejected, by narrowly limiting our perspectives to the sole horizon of material development. Awakening to one's own true nature illuminates our origin, identity, and destination (Paul Gauguin's famous painting *D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?* 1897–1898). Awareness and awakening are actually the alpha and the omega of the present collection of maxims: our very awareness constitutes the ground to be investigated, the path to be

cultivated, and ultimately, the fruit to be manifested as full awakening.[60] Dedicating actions toward awakening also involves checking one's motivation before acting upon it. The centrality of intentionality for Mahāyāna echoes Hadot's analysis of the examination of conscience in ancient *philosophia*. One is to raise one's awareness and motivation in the beginning of the day, and to review one's actions and progress at the end of the day. The repetition of such cycles constitutes the very dynamics of the path. From a secular or scientific perspective, awakening could be more simply envisioned as "understanding," and this word would still convey both the senses of comprehending and caring, knowing and loving – or in Buddhist terms: wisdom and compassion.

Conclusion: The Crisis as a Spiritual Exercise

On the basis of awareness and with a view toward awakening, by means of the twelve maxims presented in this paper, I have intended to envision life through the current crisis as a spiritual exercise in itself. The current situation can be seen as part of a larger critical period, extremely complex and problematic in all its ramifications (existential, political, economical, ecological, etc.). As much as we can, we thus need to exercise our critical discernment. With this goal in mind, recognizing the dangers of forgetfulness, I have emphasized the need to clarify again and again our most precious philosophical lore: the core principles of wisdom from East and West. In a situation that requires the highest peak of cognitive intensity in order to reach new systemic breakthroughs, the temporary relief of entertainment could become dead ends, if humans continue to indulge excessively in them as they currently do. As an antidote to forgetfulness and distraction, the faculty of mindfulness – our capacity to direct our own attention at will – can consequently be considered as our innermost ally, and to become the core of a renewed conception of education – including life-long learning. Rather than escaping or denying, mindfulness can sustain our awareness of the bare realities of life, including our very vulnerability and mortality, and tap into resources that can be truly nourishing and regenerating, inspiring and empowering. By considering the potentialities of the "philosophy-medicine" of Buddhism, I hope to have gathered here some materials in order to articulate core human values with the practicalities of life, and to reconsider, beyond mere physical survival, the very question of the purpose of life.

60) I am here especially referring to the perspective of Dzogchen (*rDzogs chen*), the ultimate vehicle of spiritual progression according to ancient schools of Tibetan Buddhism, which offers an all-encompassing viewpoint on the various Buddhist teachings (Deroche, "The Conversion of Attention"). In this tradition, the personal realization of pure non-dual awareness (*rig pa*), explained as the goal of all Buddhist methods, is understood as the most essential and direct path.

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