

Fascist Yoga: Grifters, occultists, white supremacists and the New Order in wellness

Stewart Home. (2025). London: Pluto Press.

Agents of systemic stupidity

Yoga is good for you. It improves strength, balance, flexibility, cardiovascular health and muscle tone. But none of the above gains is more effective than gym workouts, swimming, running and so forth. C'mon, some will say, yoga is far more subtle than a gym workout! It comes with a profound philosophy steeped in an ancient tradition whose wisdom reverberates from ancient Indian caves where transmissions between gurus and their chelas are still felt right now, in, you know, the here and now. Of course, to have that kind of subtle perception you need to know how to access the etheric body. Only then, as in the Modern Lovers' song, you will be able to meet another in the astral plane (Richman, 1976).

But the yoga lineages of successive yoga mini-gurus are either dodgy, non-existing or entirely made-up. Yoga ideology is insultingly orientalist, perpetuating a sentimentalised, patronising and racist view of the exotic East whose timeless wisdom is to be plundered while ignoring the historical situatedness of places like India.

It is depressing to hear contemporary yoga instructors tout, as Stewart Home writes in *Fascist Yoga*, “discredited medieval ideas about ‘bodily energy centres’ and ‘grids’ as some kind of Eastern scientific accomplishment”, and “ignoring the fact that the Indian subcontinent is today a hotbed of technological achievement” (p7). Could it be that modern yoga is a fictitious tradition like Wicca (Hutton, 1999)? I do not know about Wicca, but there have been some problems with yoga. Home writes:

In my experience the overwhelming majority of yoga instructors peddle false historical accounts of what they teach, even if most of them actually appear to believe the drivel they spout. It is partly due to this, along with the fact that the overly subjective, inward-looking mindset fostered by this form of embodied spirituality makes practitioners vulnerable to backward ideologies and cult exploitation, that I regard postural practice as it exists today as having a negative impact on the world.

(p8)

But there is more to yoga's ‘philosophy’ than New Age fluff, backward ideology and cultish behaviour. The Covid pandemic revealed that many among yogis and yoginis are antivaxxers, anti-masking, and anti-science; all marks of witlessness, individualistic ideology and complete lack of civic sense. The antivaxxer subculture chimed with the mainstream creed

of ‘wellness’ and gained ascendancy by touting miracle cures to beat the virus: hydroxychloroquine, bleach, the livestock de-wormer ivermectin. It would be laughable if it were not so tragic: modern-day reactionaries see themselves as freedom fighters and freethinkers. Reactionaries are “agents of systemic stupidity...specialised organs of reactive contagion” (Massumi, 2015: 269). A reactionary organism is one infested by reactive forces, driven solely by the suppression of active, liberating, life-enhancing forces (Bazzano, 2019). An organism driven by reactivity – *tanha* in the language of the historical Buddha, wrongly translated as ‘desire’ and ‘craving’ – is incapable of both independent, intelligent thought as well as anything resembling creative action.

Conspirituality and regimes of reaction

The sort of toxic faux-rebellious posturing of contemporary reactionaries has found its incarnation in Donald Trump and one of its quintessential manifestations is in the policies of his health and human service secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr, including \$500m in cuts to the mRNA vaccine investment portfolio (Sridhar, 2025).

Like some of my friends and acquaintances, I am keen on natural foods, meditate regularly, practice exercises such as *chi gong* and, like many, I try to avoid unhealthy habits, particularly after my cancer diagnosis in 2022. For a long time, I naively associated these lifestyle choices with progressive thinking, which is why the growing convergence of wellness with reactionary ideas surprised me at first. In truth, however, this slow-moving shitshow has been creeping around for some time, hailing like sickening magma all the way from the Nevada desert with the super-corporate Burning Man consumer-fest for the super-rich to the storming of the Capitol building in Washington D.C. in 2020. Usually lurking in the fringes, this phenomenon came to prominence during the Covid pandemic, as the global health crisis provided a speaker-corner ranting platform for many associated with various wellness practices and yoga in particular. Stewart Home sums it up:

While the Covid pandemic may, to a degree, have offered a gateway for yoga's repressed fascist past to resurface in the form of anti-vax and anti-masking politicking, leading in turn to the explosion of QAnon and other far-right conspiracy theories, the signs of where things were headed could already be seen. In fact, in my experience, fascism and fascists can pop up in the most unexpected places – and not just in yoga.

(p1)

You might have come across, as I have, yoga devotees banging on against the Covid vaccine and the use of protective masks in the name of liberty of

the individual and in the name of so-called 'Nature'. At the time, I found it merely annoying, dogmatic and ill-informed but saw it as harmless eccentricity. But I did not know how closely aligned these obnoxious, falsely progressive ideas peddled by middle-class hippies are with the alt-right.

The shitshow in question started a long time ago. *Fascist Yoga* presents a compelling argument, backed by painstaking research, showing that the ostensibly harmless faddish yoga practiced today in the West by the middle-classes owes much to the barmy esotericism of early twentieth-century Europe, including the writings of occultist and founder of the Theosophical Society Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891). It is equally indebted to a worldview whose principal tenets are essentialism and anti-empiricism. Home explains:

Many fascists, hippies and yogis act and speak as if there is a natural essence to everything that trumps science-based evidence. In short, what they believe to be true is – at least as far as they were concerned – not only true but irrefutable.

(p2)

With its empirical approach, progressive views and its critical stance, Home's book is a useful source for existential practitioners/trainees, and for readers of this Journal interested in existential therapy as well as in meditative/spiritual traditions. It encourages us to see that it is possible to be creatively and critically involved in the latter without having to give in to reactionary mumbo-jumbo, and without forfeiting the progressive view that is at the heart of existential thought.

Modern yoga is aligned to the atomised neoliberal of Western physical culture (and, worse, to the mystical cult of Aryanism) rather than to ancient Indian spiritual culture and practice. That New Age 'spirituality' was from the start aligned to reactionary politics has been clear for some time and it is finally sipping into popular consciousness.

A paper published more than a decade ago in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (Ward & Voas, 2011) describes this phenomenon as conspiratorial: the meeting of New Age 'spirituality' with conspiracy theories. The New Age emerged in the Eighties; it coincided with neoliberalism, cultural and societal decline, and the rise of Thatcherism. It has been characterised as having the following features: mystical individual transformation; belief in non-material realities; the projection of a subjective perspective onto society; belief in unseen forms of energy (Melton, 2007). Some of these ideas have crept up inside the mainstream and become pervasive. The notion that 'everything is connected' is commonly accepted, alongside that other baloney, 'nothing happens without a reason'.

As for conspiracy theories, the second ingredient in this venomous brew, its characteristics include: speculations over events (was Diana Spencer

assassinated?); bio- and geo-conspiracies (is the weather being manipulated? Are diseases manufactured?); belief in shadow government and a new world order (do secret societies pull the strings globally?).

The offspring of this atrocious coupling is a two-faced doctrinal monstrosity: (1) a covert group globally controls the world; (2) humans are going through a momentous shift in consciousness.

Paranoia has notably become the norm in American politics for some time (Hofstadter, 1964), but other nations too have consistently displayed a flair for manufacturing dangerous drivel. It is beside the point whether this is a widespread pathology attacking individuals and requiring ministrations from learned dealers of psychiatric drug units. It is much more than that. Fear of persecution is perceived to be operating not against a person but against whole nations and collectivities. It is a style, in the sense that Romanticism or the Baroque were a style, a way of perceiving oneself and the world. A feeling of persecution is at the heart of the paranoid style, its opus made up of a collection of turgid and malodorous conspiracy theories.

The worrying thing is that this concoction has taken on virulent forms. The phenomenon in question may seem harmless but a closer look at several contemporary yoga teachers' websites reveals something disturbing. Never mind the superstitious mumbo-jumbo, the fluffy lingo, the rhetorical appeal to 'Nature' with a capital N. Never mind the platitudes about the innate intelligence of the body and so forth. Things get hairy when ignorant, self-styled yoga teachers baselessly rail against science, harp on against viruses or vaccine, and promote individualistic views.

One thing is to be a skilled contortionist teaching a trick or two to wannabe circus performers, but it is quite another to be a fully-fledged fake, peddling the unchecked health benefits of a bunch of *asanas* spiked up with a sprinkle of wisdom-while-u-wait *adagios* bestowed on one's admiring *chelas* – seemingly made up of ingénues with money to burn, low self-regard and an aptitude to be exploited in exchange of a handful of mystical insights. But it is quite another when to this already toxic mix one adds fascist ideology. This has been going on for some time: since the beginning of the twentieth century in fact, as Home's book meticulously testifies. What is more, yoga lineages are non-existent, invariably spurious and mystifying, grounded on fraudulent claims of various transmissions whether as in some cases from Zen Buddhism, Advaita and Tantric masters, and nebulously Buddhist associations, or sporting spiritual ancestry from mythical yogis sitting full lotus inside mountain caves in India.

"I started to teach yoga in 1979," muses yoga teacher Godfrey Devereux, with the typical humility of such accounts. "By the time I had become famous and celebrated... I had found shelter and guidance at the hands of Zen Masters. Soon I found the same from Tantric and Advaita Masters, and was teaching

meditation and tantra alongside yoga” (<https://www.godfreydevereux.com/teacher.html>). The norm in yoga ‘lineages’ appears to be that names, places or dates of trainings and teachings received by gurus and instructors are either non-existent or misted over by smoke and mirrors in a way that is reminiscent of *Twin Peaks*’ more comical moments. As Stewart Home writes:

Guru lineages have been repeatedly falsified in an attempt to make it appear as though modern yoga originated on the Indian subcontinent and is an ancient, rather than a recently invented, tradition. Much of the hype around yoga leans on cognitive priming: the deep cerebral desire we all have to see what we expect – or hope – to see. Just as fascism provides false solutions to real problems, those marketing modern postural practice have often relied on a cynical exploitation of human needs.

(p11-12)

Yoga shares with psychotherapy buzz words such as embodiment, a funny term that reminds me of what an actor I know once said to me about physical theatre: “All theatre is physical theatre darling! We all have a body, don’t we?” Embodied spirituality as well as radical embodiment (what the hell is that?) are buzzwords in yoga circles, and Home points out that those attracted to it are disposed to imagining that modern yoga started in ancient India rather than, more likely, in nineteenth-century Western circus acts and gymnastics. Were circus acts and gymnasts not embodied too? What they lacked was the sophisticated ‘philosophy’ of radical embodiment and embodied spirituality. Circus acts cannot be spiritual by definition, can they?

A similar widespread tautology is somatic, from the Greek *sōma* which simply means body. Sure, calling the wares I peddle ‘somatic’ with all its possible variations – somatic intimacy, somatic resilience, somatic retuning, somatic meditation, somatic therapy – makes them look deeper and so very embodied. I for one am in favour of disembodiment: think of that hub of joyful creativity, the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics for instance, founded in 1974 at Naropa University in Colorado by Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman – alongside Diane di Prima, John Cage, and Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche – a radically alternative literary space rooted in contemplative practice and experimental poetics. Give me this wonderful outrider lineage of iconoclastic, innovative minds over the dull seductions of yoga fakery and gimmicky therapy anytime.

Mind control and the fascist state of mind

Home charts a genealogy of influential figures in modern yoga and in all cases a common refrain emerges, namely the claim to have received an initiation into “supposedly ancient yogic practices by a teacher whose

very existence may be questioned” (p98). Among many others, I found the story of Indra Devi (1899-2002) exemplar. Awestruck as a young woman by Fourteen Lessons in Yogi Philosophy by phoney yoga guru Ramacharaka (aka William Walker Atkinson) and by theosophy, Eugenie Peterson (Indra Devi’s name at birth) moved to the Indian subcontinent and studied with Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, “a man with an impressively and demonstrably fake guru lineage” (p97), as documented at the time by Elizabeth Kadetsky and quoted by Home:

Krishnamacharya’s story about discovering a hermit in the caves of Tibet in the deep Himalaya, circa 1915, and imbibing the wisdom of yoga as preserved in the caves since the tenth century, does not really stand up to investigation...the whole story is laced with mystical details. So maybe Krishnamacharya never went to Tibet.

(ibid)

Krishnamacharya is quoted approvingly in several yoga journals and websites. The *Yoga Journal* refers to him in a blog titled ‘Yes, you can control your thoughts in relation to mind control’. It quotes Satchidananda’s translation of the Yoga Sutra of Patanjali: “if you can control the rising of the mind into ripples, you will experience Yoga”. Alongside mind control, the blog also promotes the peculiar notion according to which “our experiences are projections of our mind”. The aim seems commonsensical enough: “Renowned teacher Tirumalai Krishnamacharya suggests that you experience a state of yoga only after quieting mind fluctuations and achieving one-pointed attention” (<https://www.yogajournal.com/yoga-101/control-your-thoughts/>).

Nothing wrong with achieving single-minded concentration but boiling down meditation to mind control is mind-boggling to me. It may be just my opinion, but in my forty-five years of meditation practice (first with Lama Yeshe at the Lama Tzong Khapa Institute in the Tuscan Hills, then in the Indian ashram of controversial teacher Osho, later with the Zen lineage of Taizan Maezumi Roshi known as the White Plum Asanga and the secular Buddhism of my friend and teacher Stephen Batchelor), I understood the foundation of ‘sitting’ to be openness and curiosity to all phenomena traversing this bodymind: streets sounds, voices, rain patter, thoughts, emotions, daydreaming – within an accepting, spacious frame of mind. The thirteenth-century monk, philosopher and founder of the Soto school Dōgen Kigen called the complex weaving of thoughts and imagining conjured up by the mind Flowers of Space, a bold re-interpretation of the old notion of *kuge*, traditionally understood as idle daydreaming and fickle diversion to be controlled, an attitude similar to how mindfulness teachers are fond of chastising what they call ruminations. I have suggested elsewhere

(Bazzano, 2014) that this injunction violates the first Buddhist precept: refraining from taking life. It could be argued that the suppression of any emergent phenomenon equally violates the precept. Suppressing what spontaneously arises is different from embracing, experiencing fully and then letting go. Left to their own devices, emergent phenomena vanish in the same spacious atmosphere in which they came into view. Too single-minded an emphasis on the powers of the conscious mind fails to appreciate the subtleties and complexities of human experience.

To suppress is to impose a tyrannical mode in the citadel of our psyche. Yogic mind control sounds positively tyrannical and is a factor of the fascist state of mind (Bollas, 1993). The philosophical counter-tradition, in particular Spinoza, who wrote of the subject as a coalition of affects, and Nietzsche, as well as later on some psychoanalysts, pointed out that the subject is made up of various parts. The psyche is in many ways a polis, “a parliamentary order with instincts, memories, needs, anxieties, and object responses finding representatives in the psyche for mental processing (Bollas, 1993: 197). Under intense stress, the internal world begins to malfunction and loses its internal coherence. As a result, contrasting parts are projected onto other objects, stripping the mind bare of its ability to organise experience in a healthy fashion. It is as if a reasonably democratic society is taken over by a gang. The gang is highly organised, functioning well under the thumb of an autocratic leader and at the service of destructive narcissism, with every part of the psyche working eagerly to carry out destructive work (Rosenfeld, 2004). The fascist disease begins with the illusion of certainty, an aptitude whose pathological functions Freud (2010 [1928]) was well aware of and whose antics include one-sided thinking and the reactive denial of any feeling of uncertainty that inevitably crops up. And when uncertainty, weakness and illness are projected onto others, they become threats to be eliminated (Sontag, 1978).

I find it deeply troubling that several forms of ‘spirituality’, be it yoga or Dharma practice, should promote suppression of aspects of the psyche and experience. During my training in some aspects of Korean Zen with Stephen and Martine Batchelor, the core of the practice was awakening a sense of active perplexity and inquiry, epitomised by the one *koan* studied by practitioners in that tradition, namely working with the following questions: What is this? (Batchelor & Batchelor, 2019). To ask what this moment is, this whole existence, implies that I do not know; it opens the door to perplexity rather than the shield of certainty.

Wicked stepmother nature

Out of the woodwork they crawl, the new puritans, foaming at the mouth against the dangers of evil science the world over, pontificating from

their pulpits, holistic retreats and semi-literate blogs where they harp on about natural healing. Healing is a magical word in the roaring self-help industry, promising the elimination of “all functional weaknesses or mental obstacle in the name of efficiency and performance” (Han, 2025: 30). The goal is self-optimisation, which goes hand-in-hand with the optimisation of the neoliberal regime of reaction we have been under for some time. Its real outcome is self-destruction as well as self-exploitation, a fairly new phenomenon; think of Protestant ethics on steroids. The new puritans, CEOs and their obedient subordinates, freshly showered, fragrant with sandalwood scent said to promote a sense of inner peace and spiritual connection, energised after a hot yoga class, are looking not for the sins of the old religion but for signs of negative thinking. You can bet these oily folks never heard of Hegel (1991), for whom a life without negativity is a zombie life. They never considered that going with the so-called flow is neither desirable nor human. For Nietzsche, who knew a thing or two about health and sickness as he experienced their dramatic alternation on his own skin, bone and marrow, the human soul needs tension, tautness and negativity – what he called *agon* – to thrive. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, aphorism 225, Nietzsche writes:

That tension of the soul in unhappiness which cultivates its strength...its inventiveness and courage in enduring, persevering, interpreting and exploiting suffering, and whatever has been granted to it of profundity, secret, mask, spirit, cunning, greatness – was it not granted through suffering, through the discipline of great suffering?

(2000: 344)

For the neoliberal machine, healing ultimately means killing; be it the ravaging of the self-optimised body or the zombification of minds and hearts through the ideology of voluntary servitude.

What is more, it also revealed what artist, and activist Stewart Home has painstakingly documented in *Fascist Yoga*, namely, that since its spurious inception in the West in the early days of the twentieth century, yoga has been consistently allied with fascist ideology. Equipped with a handful of contortionist postures and a fluffy rhetoric of natural embodiment, natural intelligence, natural intuition and equivocal appeals to a nebulous and, you guessed it, natural oriental wisdom, yoga looks innocuous at first, even beneficial. Who cares about its ideology and philosophy? Some will say, I just want to get flat abs and a pert bum. What is more, yoga retreats are in nature, the food is organic, the mats are made of natural materials and the people who attend are so open and natural. Some people have natural hookups there and when the ‘teachings’ are mixed with tantra, one

may experience natural sex with natural people to a background of inspirational music played on natural instruments by natural musicians.

But nature, as Gary Snyder (2010: 118) says, “is not just eating berries in the sunlight”. We could dare to imagine “a ‘deep ecology’ that would go to the dark side of nature – the ball of crunched bones in a scat, the feathers in the snow, the tales of insatiable appetite”. There is another side to nature and to ignore this is to be in denial. The early nineteenth-century Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi called nature “a mother of mortals in birth, and a wicked stepmother in will” (2015 [1836], translation modified). Echoes of Schopenhauer, a decisive influence on Leopardi, and of the Buddha’s teaching of life as *dukkha*, the intrinsic dissatisfaction of our conditioned existence. Pessimistic? You bet. But give me Leopardi’s pessimism woven into his beautiful poignant verses anytime over the depressive platitudes of your average yoga mini-guru blog, harping on about Mother Nature, about the intelligence accessible through natural power, resilience and so forth, the very same intelligence, that will turn your body, sweetie pie (“Come and see me in my room after this session on groundbreaking ecology”), into a vessel of intimacy, awe, appreciation, love – you name it. But remember: refrain from seeking help in modern medicine! Follow the ancient wisdom! Follow me. And above all, go with the flow.

Trombone solo

Speaking of Italian poets, there is another poet in the canon whose verse every schoolboy and girl had to learn if growing up in the Bel Paese as I did, Gabriele D’Annunzio. That was his high-sounding *nom de plume*, mind you. His real name was Gaetano Rapagnetta. The surname Rapagnetta has a comic ring in Italian. It automatically brings to mind a rude word that rhymes with it, *pugnetta*, the equivalent of ‘wank’ in English. That would make the celebrated D’Annunzio a wanker in the multifarious senses of the term. Apart from being a sex and cocaine addict with terrible teeth and halitosis, he was also a monstrous narcissist claiming to be the greatest Italian poet after Dante. Because he was a warmonger engaged in foolhardy military action, he is also credited with being the precursor of Mussolini’s fascism. Stewart Home writes:

After the First World War, there were disputes over the status of the city of Rijeka (called Fiume in Italian), and on 12 September 1919...D’Annunzio...led a rag-tag army of fascist legionnaires into the seaport and announced he had annexed it for Italy. Rather than accepting this, the not yet-fascist Italian state attempted to blockade the city in line with the wishes of the then dominant international order – or more specifically the victorious allies of the First World War. Nevertheless, D’Annunzio held onto

the city and on 8 September 1920 declared it an independent state with a corporatist – that is, fascist – Constitution. Selflessly, he appointed himself at its head.

(p38)

Mr Rapagnetta's antics sowed the seeds of Mussolini's and Hitler's regimes: aggression, braggadocio, the belly-in, chest-out stance of a man with a raging inferiority complex, the penchant for uniforms, parades and the adoption of ancient Rome's 'aesthetics'. His poetry is still part of the curriculum in Italian schools today and acclaimed by a semi-literate far-right government. The faithful congregate to this day in great numbers to marvel at the *Vittoriale degli Italiani* meandering through a complex of buildings, streets, squares, open-air theatre, gardens and waterway. This veritable monument of kitsch on Lake Garda was commissioned by Rapagnetta himself, who is buried there, to humbly celebrate his own life exploits as a protofascist poetaster.

It has been forgotten that Italy's greatest literary critic Benedetto Croce (1951) saw Rapagnetta's overblown, self-consciously 'decadent' poetry (think a cartoonish, imbecilic version of Baudelaire) as the output of a dilettante of sensations. Equally forgotten is what Tabucchi wrote in his classic novel *Pereira Maintains*:

Retiring to Gardone, to a villa which he himself named Vittoriale degli Italiani, he there led a dissolute and decadent life, marked by futile love affairs and erotic adventures. Fernando Pessoa named him Trombone Solo and maybe he had a point. Certainly, the voice which comes over to us is not that of a delicate violin, but a brassy blare, a blustering trumpet. A life far from exemplary, a poet high-sounding and grandiose, a man much tarnished and compromised. Not an example to be followed, and it is for this very reason that we recall him here.

(2011: 87)

Rapagnetta's closest friend and political enforcer in Rijeka was Guido Keller, like Rapagnetta "a decorated fighter pilot and dandy" (p39). Mentally unstable due to his lavish use of cocaine, he was described as Rapagnetta's freelance regimental officer and morale booster, and one who co-created the YOGA group. Another member of the group was Marinetti, hailed by many as hero of Italian Futurism while conveniently forgetting his bombastic support for fascism and what he referred to as the cleansing function of war. The YOGA group published a homonymous weekly Journal with the typically self-effacing subtitle 'Society of free spirits progressing towards perfection'. The Journal's symbol was the swastika and its article "argued

that ‘the genius of the Italian race’ had been ‘perverted by the democratic and bourgeois ideas of the ‘negative races’, English, French and above all Jews” (p42).

Their favoured activity was to assemble under a fig tree in the square where they indulged in singing, tree hugging and giving impromptu talks on freedom and free love, privileges to be enjoyed in their ‘aristocratic’ view, solely by perfect human beings like themselves who had become free of the shackles of karma through practicing natural and esoteric ancient wisdom techniques. Sounds familiar?

Pure white stock

For the first yoga popularisers in the West, the ancient wisdom of yoga they peddled was distinctly Aryan, and although it had been preserved in India, it had originated with a superior race. Hamish McLaurin, author of *Eastern Philosophy for Western Minds*, published in 1933 in the US with an introduction by the British fascist Francis Yeats-Brown, stated this point enthusiastically:

The Aryans, when they arrived in India, were a highly developed race. They represented the purest possible white stock. Biologically they were the equals of any white race existing today, and there is every reason for the assumption that, in some of their faculties and capacities, they were our superiors. Therefore, the moment they crossed the Indian frontier and encountered a dark-skinned people infinitely beneath them on the evolutionary scale, they were confronted with a grave problem...Having gained control over their dusky brethren through a superior knowledge of physical and mental phenomena, it was no part of the Aryan scheme to let the people of the lower castes have access to that knowledge until such time as they had evolved to a point at which they became capable of handling it. A scalpel may safely be entrusted to the hands of an expert surgeon. In the hands of a child it becomes a menace.

(quoted by Home, p26-27)

That the esoteric yoga texts were preserved in India does not mean, according to McLaurin, that they were “the product of a dark-skinned race”, he reassures his readers, aware of the fact that the increased popularity of yoga in the United States after World War I coincided with eugenics-driven legislation that prohibited Indians to immigrate to the US. They ancient wisdom is Aryan, according to the author, belonging “to the legitimate heritage of the people now in ascendancy throughout Europe and the New World” (p26).

Liberalism with fangs

Once I was invited to deliver a mindfulness session at a business school in London. They probably expected me to facilitate a mix of relaxation techniques, guided visualisation and awareness of breathing. I did some of the latter but premised it by saying that by ‘mindfulness’ the Buddha meant mindfulness of the uncertainty of life and of the certainty of death. I then proceeded to guide them through what is known as the Buddha’s meditation on death. Awareness of breath leading to contemplation of a time when we will draw our last breath, our body will become cold, we will be buried or cremated, and after some time when everybody who knew us or heard of us will also die, our trace on the face of the earth will be extinguished. I had facilitated this sort of thing many times in different settings and participants responded in different ways. Some found it terrifying to contemplate this, others found it soothing and a great relief. Either way, they found it useful in some way, particularly the final bit of the meditation, where one contemplates, having reflected on the reality of death, what really matters in one’s life, what is a hindrance and how to proceed from there. At the business school, I did not get a chance to do this last bit because participants left the room quietly, discreetly, one by one, during my facilitation. I was never invited back. Clearly, they had a wholly different notion of what mindfulness is; probably how to be more efficient at doing corporate work. After all, mindfulness has become popular in the military, thanks to the efforts of a capitalism-friendly, jingoistic approach to psychology known as Positive Psychology.

This is nothing new, as a mythical-religious story provides justification for this stance. In Chapter 11 of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna famously dispels the warrior Arjun’s doubts and concerns about killing his own cousins who happened to be on the other side of the battlefield. A warrior’s job is to kill, Krishna tells him; in the great scheme of things, we are all already dead. Compared to the eternal life of the soul, this life of flesh and blood is illusory and fleeting; illusory because fleeting (Bazzano, 2017). This is the absolute position; if not duly tempered as it should be by the relative stance – love, ethics and genuine care for others, a domain where everything we do matters – we are already swimming in the murky waters of fascist ideology.

In the Eighties, Reaganomics and Thatcherism turbo-charged neoliberalism and its cultural offshoot, mumbo-jumbo. The latter looks harmless at first, even benevolent. One of its prototypes is the New Thought movement, documented by Home and originated in nineteenth-century North America, a reliable paradigm for a recognisable configuration of foolish beliefs now fashionable within mainstream sensibilities (including aspects of Christianity). At the heart of it is the notion that “one’s thoughts could unlock secrets

to living a better life...its belief that individuals possessed a God-given facility to change their life through positive thinking” (p9). The sleep of reason produces monsters. As with conspirituality, New Thought’s entrenchment with mainstream Christianity has fathered the libertarianism of Norman Vincent Peale (1898-1993), author of *The Power of Positive Thinking*, frequently quoted by Trump as his major religious influence and an influence on the MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement.

Marx famously referred to religion as opium of the people, and the dictum has been adapted recently to Buddhism as the opium of the middle-class, an accurate description, in my view, when one thinks of the corporate take-over of aspects of the Dharma’s vast corpus of teachings and practices by McMindfulness, sharply critiqued by a host of scholars and practitioners, including my comrades Ron Purser and David Forbes (Purser, 2019; Forbes, 2019).

Even outside the precincts of the wisdom-while-u-wait, hyper-secularised, dull and dangerous self-optimisation of the neoliberal subject enacted by corporate mindfulness, it cannot be confidently said that Buddhist lineages themselves are immune to fierce, internecine politics as well as some degree of complicity with the neoliberal machine. I am not entirely sure why that is. Could it be imputable to the fact that individualistic pseudo-spiritual mumbo-jumbo has engulfed contemporary culture to such a degree that any spiritual path is filtered through its abysmal nonsense?

Despite efforts in the last three decades to marry Dharma practice and philosophy to socio-political and ecological engagement, aspiring to actualise the *bodhisattva* vows of working in solidarity with others for their benefit (Jones, 1989; Snyder, 2010; Loy, 2019), the majority of official Buddhist lineages in various tradition stubbornly maintain a mystifying apolitical stance.

When it comes to yoga, as it starkly emerges in Home’s book, there is no pretence whatsoever to practice for the benefit of anyone other than one’s own pampered self. What is more, unlike ‘mindfulness’ and more religious contemporary Dharma groups and organisations arguably inspired by endless variations of liberalism, yoga is more prone to fascist ideas. It could be argued that fascism is liberalism with fangs, a conservative counter-revolution. All it takes is to threaten the sanctity of property, national and gender identity, and most liberals will turn into fascists overnight without any need for Dr Jekyll’s potion of blood-red liquor and crystalline salt.

Manu Bazzano

References

- Batchelor, S. & Batchelor, M. (2019). *What is This? Ancient questions for modern minds*. New York, NY: Tuwhiri Project.
- Bazzano, M. (2014). Mindfulness and the good life. In Bazzano, M. (ed.)

- After Mindfulness: New perspectives on psychology and meditation.* Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan. 61-80.
- Bazzano, M. (2017). *Zen and Therapy: Heretical perspectives.* Abingdon: Routledge.
- Bazzano, M. (2019). *Nietzsche and Psychotherapy.* Abingdon: Routledge.
- Bollas, C. (1993). *Being a Character: Psychoanalysis and self-experience.* Abingdon: Routledge.
- Croce, B. (1951). *Filosofia, Politica, Storia.* Milano: Ricciardi.
- Forbes, D. (2019). *Mindfulness and its Discontents: Education, self and social transformation.* Halifax: Fernwood.
- Freud, S. (2010). *The Future of an Illusion.* Mansfield, CT: Martino Publishing.
- Han, B-C. (2025). *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and new technologies of power.* London: Verso.
- Hegel, G.W.F. (1991). *The Encyclopaedia Logic.* Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Hofstadter, R. (1964). The paranoid style in American politics. *Harper's Magazine.* 77-86.
- Hutton, R. (1999). *The Triumph of the Moon: A history of modern pagan witchcraft.* Oxford University Press.
- Jones, K. (2003). *The New Social Face of Buddhism: A call for action.* Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications.
- Leopardi, G. (2015). *La Ginestra. Wild Broom, or The Flower of the Desert.* Trans. S. J. Willett. https://www.academia.edu/25061521/Giacomo_Leopardi_La_Ginestra_Wild_Broom_Or_The_Flower_of_the_Desert_ [Accessed on 9th August 2025.]
- Loy, D. (2019). *Ecodharma: Buddhist teachings for the ecological crisis.* Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications.
- Massumi, B. (2025). *The Personality of Power: A theory of fascism for anti-fascist Life.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Melton, J.G. (2007). Beyond millennialism: The New Age transformed. In Lewis, J. & Kemp, D. (eds.) *Handbook of New Age.* Boston, MA: Brill. 77-97.
- Modern Lovers. Astral Plane. *The Modern Lovers.* studio album. New York: Beserkley.
- Nietzsche, F. (2000). *Basic Writings.* New York: Modern Library.
- Purser, R. (2019). *McMindfulness: How mindfulness became the new capitalist apirituality.* London: Repeater.
- Rosenfeld, H. (2004). *Impasse and Interpretation: Therapeutic and anti-therapeutic factors in the psychoanalytic treatment of psychotic, borderline and neurotic patients.* Abingdon: Routledge
- Snyder, G. (2020). *Practice of the Wild.* Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint.
- Sontag, S. (1978). *Illness as Metaphor.* New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

- Sridhar, D. (2025). RFK Jr has slashed vaccine research. *The Guardian*. 11 Aug. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/aug/11/rfk-jr-trump-vaccine-research-avian-flu> [Accessed on 11th August 2025.]
- Tabucchi, A. (2015). *Pereira Maintains*. London: Canongate.
- Ward, C. & Voas, D. (2011) The emergence of conspirituality. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. 26 (1): 103-121. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1537903.2011.539846> [Accessed on 18th August 2025.]