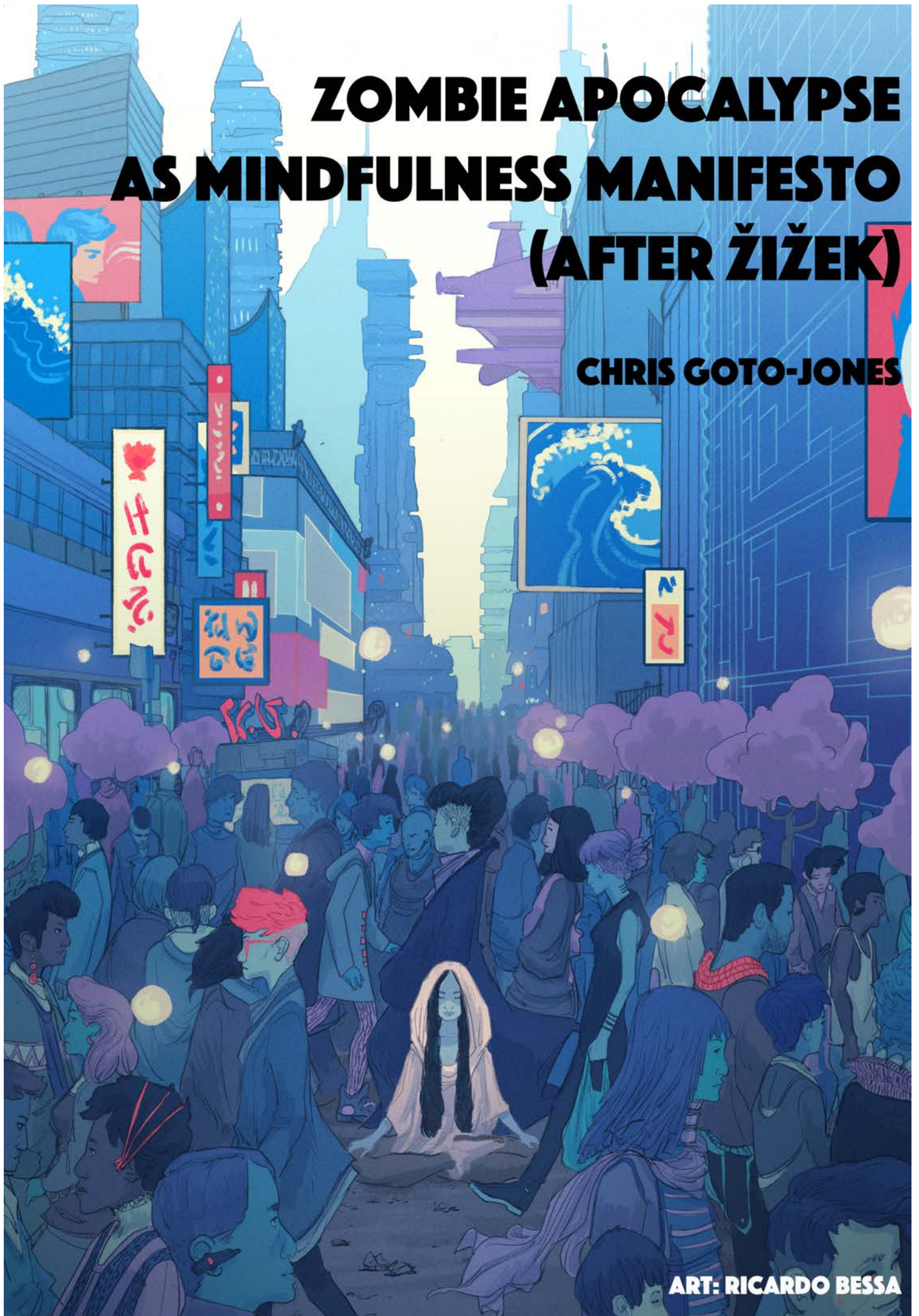


ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE AS MINDFULNESS MANIFESTO (AFTER ŽIŽEK)

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ART: RICARDO BESSA

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Zombie Apocalypse as Mindfulness Manifesto (after Žižek)

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Abstract

An icon of horror, the zombie blunders with apparent mindlessness, bringing only contagion and chaos. It has lost its ego, its individuality, its reasoning self. It is a repellent vision of posthumanity. Mindfulness is a therapeutic practice rooted in the meditative traditions of Buddhism. Liberated from the stresses and anxieties of capitalist society, practitioners escape the demands of an ego driven to exhaustion by instrumental rationality. This essay explores the growing interest in mindfulness meditation and flourishing portrayals of the zombie apocalypse in contemporary societies to suggest a possible connection between these models of (post)selfhood.

Key words: *mindfulness, meditation, zombie, emancipation, capitalism*

Manifesto: don't just do something, sit there!

There is a “quiet revolution” sweeping the Western world. It is not the revolution of the desperate or disenfranchised in society, nor is it the impassioned conflict of religious fundamentalism, but rather a “peaceful revolution” being led by white, middle-class Americans. The revolution doesn't require any particular change in values or economic systems, but simply involves becoming able to relate to those values differently – with more patience, gentleness, and compassion. In the words of Congressman Tim Ryan, “the mindfulness movement is not quite as dramatic as the moon shot or the civil rights movement, but I believe in the long run it can have just as great an impact” (xvii, xxi).

For a revolution, this movement shows remarkable conservatism. The leading voices make no demands on followers. They need not become activists or participate in political struggle. There are no millenarian cults or mass suicides. There is nothing to televise. Instead, in general, the literature suggests that capitalism is not really the problem – indeed, the literature's architectural embrace of liberalism is entirely consistent with a future society of peace and prosperity for all. The problem is that people in contemporary societies are suffering from a “thinking disease” (Wilson 164). The crisis is in the heads of individual people, not in the structures and institutions of society *per se*. In the words of one of the founders of modern secular mindfulness, Jon Kabat-Zinn, it's as though capitalist societies themselves are suffering from a form of ADD, “big time – and from its most prevalent variant, attention deficit *hyperactivity* disorder. And it is getting worse by the day” (*Coming to Our Senses* 153).

In other words, society's sickness is not a material condition that should be treated by physical interventions at the barricades. The problem is not the distribution of wealth or justice *per se*. Rather, society is ailing psychically – it needs therapy. In the language of Thomas Szasz and Ronald Laing, progenitors of anti-psychiatry, the patient requires a “moral education” to

deal with “problems in living,” not the violence of biomedical procedures. However, it is not even that the revolution requires an ideological intervention to transform *societal values*. Instead, it is focussed on the impact of changes in *individual psychology*: the mindfulness revolution does not aim at ideological change as much as at each of us becoming more in touch with (and more compassionate about) our authentic selves and our genuine relationship with these superstructural features. The idea is that mindfulness will reinvigorate existing value structures by enabling a more authentic engagement with them.¹ As Jeff Wilson notes, the mindfulness literature is consistently conservative: “mindfulness authors expect change to come about slowly, peacefully, through the established political system. They also rarely call for wholesale shifts to a totally new form of economic organization. A mindful America will still be a consumerist, capitalist nation” (184). In concrete terms, change is to be accomplished at the level of the individual: social change will be the natural, incremental result when individuals reach more authentic and healthy understandings of the way they *feel and think* about their (unchanging) place in society.

For Kabat-Zinn, this *revolution* approximates an *evolution*: he maintains a loosely teleological vision of human history in which the development of the mindful society is a natural outcome (or the culmination) of the development of democratic societies: “In a society founded on democratic principles and a love of freedom, sooner or later meditative practices, what are sometimes called consciousness disciplines, are bound to come to the fore.... It is part of the ongoing evolutionary process on this planet” (*Coming to Our Senses* 553). This evolutionary process is supposed to move towards maximal individual self-understanding and freedom.² The rationale behind

¹ Ryan claims, “We don’t need a new set of values. I really believe that we can reinvigorate our traditional, commonly held American values – such as self-reliance, perseverance, pragmatism, and taking care of each other – by adding a little more mindfulness to our lives” (xviii).

² Kabat-Zinn does not seek to develop a teleological model, so he makes no argument about developmental stages in human history. An argument about such stages would have to contend with the supposition that technologies of mindfulness have existed for hundreds or thousands of years in several Asian

this diagnosis is that modern citizens have their authentic freedom compromised by being too attached to thinking itself: they spend too much of their time “lost in thought,” ruminating about the past and the future, worrying, dreaming, riddled with anxieties about things that are not happening (and might never happen), depressed and stressed and unhappy. The modern individual spends more of her life entrapped in her own abstractions than she does actually experiencing the world around her. People today have learned thought patterns that *disconnect* them from the world and the people around them – we are self-alienated by our own cognitive patterns. The mindfulness revolution seeks to pathologize and politicize certain patterns of thought, suggesting that liberating ourselves from these schema will also emancipate our communities.

Of course, it is not the case that the mindfulness movement demonizes *all thought*, only certain types of thought that involve cycles of rumination. Mindfulness training generally takes the form of therapeutic interventions designed to transform our patterns of thought. While the idea that particular styles of thinking can be pathologized with political significance evokes the controversial anti-psychiatry movement, one of the particular characteristics of the mindfulness movement is that it does not target an ostensibly deviant minority of individuals for “correction” by authority, but instead asserts that it is the majority that is somehow muddle-headed and sick.³ The hegemonic discourse is the source of toxicity rather than the basis for rectification. In this case, the political relations implied by the therapeutic model are not the personalised power-relations of the centre

societies without those societies apparently having accomplished, as far as the mindfulness movement is concerned, maximal individual authenticity or freedom.

³ Anti-psychiatry was originally associated with the work of Thomas Szasz (*Law Liberty, and Psychiatry; The Manufacture of Madness*; and others), Ronald Laing, and David Cooper (*Reason and Violence; The Politics of Experience; Psychiatry and Anti-Psychiatry*). It was extended by the emergence of schizoanalysis in Deleuze and Guattari. More recently, the concerns have been discussed under the umbrella of critical psychiatry, which is closely associated with the work of Foucault on madness (*History of Madness; Psychiatric Power*), and then post-psychiatry (Bracken and Thomas). Each of these fields is concerned with the contestation of the meaning of sanity and mental health, and thus with the possibility that dissent would be medicalized.

and periphery of society (or even relations between state and society) as suggested by the anti-psychiatrists, but rather the disjunction is between the material conditions of capitalism and the psychic conditions of humanity in general: with a few exceptions, we are all muddle-headed about how to live in capitalism in a healthy way. The mindfulness movement seeks to reveal and resolve a kind of false-consciousness generated by the dynamics of capitalism itself.

One of the difficulties of this situation which has not been adequately addressed by the “movement” concerns the political meaning and significance of this (r)evolutionary, therapeutic agenda. To some extent, this question has simply not been asked because of the movement’s focus on therapeutic efficacy for individuals. At the very least, the movement suggests two political positions: the first is that mindfulness enables a form of genuinely healthy authenticity that emancipates people from the suffering foisted upon them by capitalism (even while leaving the structures and institutions of capitalism materially untouched); the second is that mindfulness functions as a form of secular religion within capitalism – a contemporary opiate for the people – serving as a new form of ideological domination that enables people to endure the alienating conditions of capitalism without calling for material revolution, redistribution, or institutional change.

This essay is a playful attempt to explore the terrain outlined by these two interpretations, utilizing the imaginary contrast between the mindful meditator and the mindless zombie. In the end, the image of the zombie apocalypse emerges as an ironic manifesto for the mindfulness movement in capitalist societies.



Image 1: 'mindfulness meditation' (Goto-Jones & Bessa)*

The Mindfulness Movement

When we speak of meditation, it is important for you to know that this is not some weird cryptic activity, as our popular culture might have it. It does not involve becoming some kind of zombie. (Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go* 9)

Even though the literature and teachers of mindfulness are very careful to make it clear that mindfulness is an elusive condition in the modern world, “mindfulness” appears to be everywhere. Meditation and mindfulness practices have emerged recently out of the provenance of religion or spirituality and into the cultural mainstream of Europe and North America. We find mindfulness training in high schools, universities, workplaces, and homes for the elderly. It’s in the civilian sector and in the military. We see mindfulness clinics for stress reduction (MBSR), cognitive therapy (MBCT), and therapeutic interventions (MBI); and there are mindfulness courses for corporate leadership, creativity, combat effectiveness, and life skills. The growth of interest in mindfulness-related practices has been called the “attention revolution” (Wallace 2006), the “mindfulness revolution” (Boyce), and even the “dharma evolution” (Michaelson).⁴

The cultural importance of mindfulness in contemporary Western societies seems to have reached a level at which it requires consideration as a social movement. In the USA alone, it is estimated that more than ten million people meditate on a regular basis, with perhaps 20 million having

⁴ The data on the rise in scholarly interest in meditation and mindfulness is widely available and often quoted. Indeed, it is frequently used in self-help guidebooks to mindfulness practice as a way to convince readers of the scientific (and non-religious) credentials of the practice. Following David Black, Michaelson notes: “In 1983, there had been only three peer-reviewed scientific studies of meditation; by 2013, there had been more than 1,300” (ix). Two of the great innovators of mindfulness-based therapeutic approaches (MBA), Mark Williams and Jon Kabat-Zinn (2), provide comparable data showing an exponential rise in the number scholarly publications each year (in English) about mindfulness between 1980 (zero publications) and 2011 (397 publications).

meditated at least occasionally within the last year (Michaelson 10).⁵ Meditation is no longer the preserve of alternative, new-age, or hippie culture, but represents a significant mainstream movement. As we will see, despite the therapeutic and well-being-oriented context in which it has developed, in some quarters it has even been seen as a plague or a menace. Most controversially, Žižek, a central interlocutor in this debate, argues that mindfulness is already insinuating itself as an element of the “hegemonic ideology of global capitalism” (“From Western Marxism”). He suggests that were Max Weber alive today, “he would definitely write a second, supplementary volume to his *Protestant Ethic*, entitled *The Taoist Ethic and the Spirit of Global Capitalism*.”⁶

The development of mindfulness in Western societies can be mapped through a number of stages: it begins with early encounters with Buddhism and Hinduism as part of Oriental Studies in Europe; it moves through the influence of Zen to the USA, as it emerged from Japan in the early postwar of the twentieth century (in the work of pioneers such as DT Suzuki and then the more eclectic Alan Watts); it then moves through the revolutionary 1960s (and the growth of transcendentalism) into a more widespread and mature growth of Buddhism in the USA (and somewhat in Europe); and finally the practice of mindfulness begins to emerge as (also) a universalizing and secularized discourse in a clinical and therapeutic frame in the 1990s (McCown et. al. 31-58). However, while interest in meditation and mindfulness has grown rapidly, both in society generally and within the academy, transforming it into an issue of social, political and cultural urgency, there has been relatively little serious engagement with these

⁵ The growth of mindfulness meditation over the last few decades has been a largely Western phenomenon. Why this is has not been adequately studied. Arguably, contemporary Japanese society remains deeply skeptical about the social implications of intense meditation following the dubious record of Zen Buddhism in World War II and, more recently, the Aum Shinrikyo gas attacks of 1995.

⁶ Žižek treats Taoism here as an aspect of an overall movement that he calls “Western Buddhism.” For him, this category represents a “distorted” version of Buddhism that focusses exclusively on the practice of meditation. Hence, it tends towards secular mindfulness rather than Buddhism *per se*.

aspects of the phenomenon.⁷ Instead, scholarship has focused on the clinical, therapeutic, and psychological value of meditation and mindfulness practices – the most pressing research question appears to have been whether or not mindfulness “works” (whatsoever that turns out to mean).⁸ Indeed, it is precisely this focus on mindfulness as a “remedy against the stressful tension of capitalist dynamics” that enables us to “uncouple and retain inner peace and *Gelassenheit*” while continuing to live in the capitalist system that provides the context for Žižek’s controversial interventions (“From Western Marxism”).

That said, in recent years we have seen the gradual emergence of concerns about the intersections between mindfulness, wisdom, and ethics. These issues cut to the core of the social significance of mindfulness as a movement, but they also expose a deliberate strategy among the advocates of secular mindfulness to avoid questions of ethics in their teachings. The chief reason for this has been the perceived importance of maintaining a distance between secular mindfulness and Buddhism. While nobody says that mindfulness practices do not find their roots in Buddhist traditions, the secularization of mindfulness as a kind of “technology of the self”⁹ has been seen as vital to its acceptance as a clinical or therapeutic tool in predominantly Christian societies.¹⁰ Secular mindfulness has self-

⁷ This reflects the history of meditation and self-cultivation as internally (rather than socially) focused practices. The anti/non-social Zen master or Taoist sage is an archetypal image in East Asian cultures. In recent years in the “West” some people prominent in the mindfulness movement have made attempts to trace the political potentials of mindfulness practice, but the results (which remain framed in a therapeutic mode) have seemed politically naïve. An interesting example might be Jon Kabat-Zinn (*Coming to Our Senses*).

⁸ I have been present at a number of mindfulness conferences and workshops at which researchers have stated explicitly that they are uninterested in the question of political, ethical, or religious significance of mindfulness.

⁹ I am using Foucault’s term here in a restricted sense to refer to the mechanisms through which people advance their “selves” in society and especially to the ways in which various discourses either enable or circumscribe the same. Although my principal concern is not with Foucault, his concerns about the interactions between structures of power and the development of technologies of the self are important to my argument.

¹⁰ Books about mindfulness often begin by acknowledging the debt to Buddhism, followed immediately by a disclaimer that engaging in mindfulness should not be seen as in any way Buddhist. Kabat-Zinn (*Wherever You Go*) is typical in this regard.

consciously distanced itself from the ethical traditions that accompany its historical evolution precisely so that it does not risk causing ethical offense in Western societies, where the history of ethics is distinctly other. This is one of the significant changes following the New Ageism of the 1960s and the Hippie movement. Ironically, as mindfulness develops into a secular, social movement, it is now this absence of a coherent ethical theory accompanying the practice that is seen by some of its critics as a challenge to public morality. Is it the case that mindfulness promotes ethical vacuity? Does it, to paraphrase the assurances of the influential Jon Kabat-Zinn, transform practitioners into zombies?

The movement's secularization strategy reveals a cluster of fears regarding the likely reaction of mainstream Western cultures when confronted with other ethical traditions that are undergirded by deep and sophisticated philosophical foundations. Žižek refers to a "threat" being experienced by the "Judeo-Christian legacy" even while European technology and capitalism seem triumphant across the globe ("From Western Marxism"). The threat from "New Age, 'Asiatic' thought" is, he suggests, "at the level of the 'ideological superstructure'" of the European space. In some ways, then, the strategic choices regarding the development of secular mindfulness (which have been extraordinarily successful) represent an awareness of society's fear of transnational cultural flows and an emerging globalism more generally.¹¹ We might speak, for instance, of a type of "enlightenment peril" that echoes the more racialized "yellow peril" of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹²

In the first lines of the chapter "What is Mindfulness," he writes: "Mindfulness is an ancient Buddhist practice which has profound relevance for our present-day lives. This relevance has nothing to do with Buddhism per se or with becoming a Buddhist, but it has everything to do with waking up and living in harmony with oneself and with the world" (3).

¹¹ Žižek is keen to point out the false opposition between globalization and the survival of local traditions; globalization recuscitates and thrives in local traditions – its opposite is universality. See Žižek, "From Western Marxism" and *The Ticklish Subject* (especially chapter 4).

¹² Or perhaps a more generalized "religious peril" in societies that see themselves as increasingly inhabiting a secular modernity (and hence fear the smuggling-in of new religions in the guise of clinical technologies).

The move to sidestep this peril has inadvertently provided a space for new fears to emerge regarding the effects of mindfulness meditation on its practitioners. In the absence of sophisticated Buddhist discourses on questions of agency and morality that emerge from the (often transformative) experience of meditation, many practitioners are left to confront deep fears about themselves and their place in the world; they are staring into an abyss.¹³ Not only do they not have answers to their questions (indeed, it's conceivable that answers are actually impossible, as we'll see), but they also have a whole realm of possible "Buddhist" answers negated for them by the very framework within which they are practicing (which was designed to mitigate xenophobia and cultural essentialism).¹⁴ Perhaps unsurprisingly, fear of what we might discover in deep meditation is also common to Buddhists (which is why there is a rich tradition of texts dealing with this fear in various Buddhist traditions). In the words of Joseph Goldstein, the co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society in the USA:

Meditators sometimes report that fear of liberation holds them back in their practice; as they proceed into uncharted territory, fear

¹³ Recent studies such as Willoughby Britton's "Dark Night Project" at Brown University (see Rocha) address the so-called "dark side" of mindfulness practice for individual practitioners who find themselves encountering difficulties in unusually stark and powerful ways while meditating. Such stories are just beginning to make it into the broadsheet press (e.g., Booth).

¹⁴ Conversely, mindfulness practitioners talk about mindfulness as a form of "secular Buddhism," as though it contains the key teachings of Buddhism in a secular form (rather than simply being a meditation practice in its own right). This discourse seeks to transform the practices of Buddhism into therapeutic technologies; in so doing, the Buddha himself is sometimes transformed from a religious icon into the founder of a school of psychotherapy – indeed, he is sometimes called the "world's first psychotherapist." This can seem an outrageous form of imperial violence and appropriation. In this respect, the work of Stephen Batchelor (*Buddhism without Beliefs*; *Confessions*) has been provocative and controversial; the exchange between Batchelor and B. Alan Wallace in the online Buddhist journal, *Mandala*, gives a sense of the stakes and the passions involved (Wallace). There have been numerous "dialogues" between mindfulness practitioners and leading Buddhist figures. In one such dialogue at the *International Congress on Mindfulness* in Hamburg, Germany (21 August 2011), the Dalai Lama applauded the therapeutic merits of the practice of mindfulness but made it clear that it was not in itself a religious or Buddhist practice.

of the unknown becomes an obstacle to surrender. *But this is not really fear of enlightenment.* It is rather *fear of ideas about enlightenment* The mind might invent many different images of the experience of liberation. Sometimes *our ego creates images of its own death that frighten us* (5, emphasis added).



Image 2: 'zombie oblivion' (Goto-Jones & Bessa)*

Zombie Apocalypse as Enlightenment Peril

The idea that the “ego creates images of its own death that frighten us” is conventionally linked to the activity of *maya* (illusion/delusion) or sometimes *mara* (the daemon who tricks us into failing on our paths) – the kinds of tricks played on our minds (and by them) to prevent our liberation.¹⁵ The Buddhist pantheon is replete with daemons and monsters that effectively stand-in for this notion, literally scaring people away from their salvation until their courage, resolve, and discipline are sufficient to overcome these beasts, or their insight is developed so that they can see the daemons for the illusions they truly are.¹⁶ In this context, it is intriguing that contemporary societies are seeing a concomitant boom in zombies.¹⁷ The marketplace is flooded with zombie movies, TV shows, books, and videogames.¹⁸ To what fear does this zombie explosion speak? Does the zombie apocalypse stand-in for our fear of enlightenment – is this an instance of the “enlightenment peril”? To what extent is the thrill of “survival horror” the excitement of the righteous violence of slaying such daemons?

For some, the fear is simple enough: “Zombies embody the great contemporary fear – and, for some people, the great contemporary fantasy

¹⁵ The terms *maya* and *mara* are Sanskrit. In Japanese these are *ō* and *ma* respectively. In this essay, I use the Sanskrit for these two terms (as well as *samsara* and *nirvana*) because they are better known. For other concepts I prefer the Japanese readings, because much of the contemporary theory about Mahayana and Zen Buddhism comes out of Japan and because I access the primary resources usually through Japanese texts.

¹⁶ For an excellent recent treatment of the connections between violence and taming/slaying these kinds of daemons in Tibetan Buddhism, see Dalton.

¹⁷ At least 223 zombie movies have been released since 1996, which was the date of the release of the first “Resident Evil” videogame for the Playstation, which is credited by some (including Simon Pegg, the co-writer/star of “Shaun of the Dead,” one of the most successful zombie-comedies of recent years) as kick-starting the recent vogue. “Resident Evil” was developed by Mikami Shinji for Capcom; it was released in Japan as “Biohazard.” Pegg’s view on the significance of Resident Evil was cited by the BBC (Barber).

¹⁸ Even a sketch of some of the blockbusters will be indictative: *World War Z* (Film: Mark Forster. Book: Max Brooks); *Resident Evil* (5 films, 2 animated films, 11 novels, 4 comic series, and perhaps 20 videogames selling more than 50 million units); *The Walking Dead* (multiaward winning TV series for AMC starting in 2010, now in its fifth season; Comic book: Robert Kirkman, 2003-present, 122 issues).

– that we’ll soon be surrounded by ravenous strangers, with only a shotgun to defend ourselves” (Barber). Yet the idea that the zombie is an alien is undermined by the fact that a zombie is not an alien at all; the horror of the zombie is rather that, in an uncanny way, it is us.¹⁹ The zombie is a self-alienated human. The terror of the zombie apocalypse is not the xenophobic fear of alien invasion, but the horror of our own radical (and contagious) dehumanization (perhaps resulting from foreign contamination); it is precisely our imagination of the human condition after the death of the ego.

Whether or not we agree that scarecrows are also frightening, Žižek seems to be correct when he says: “what makes scarecrows terrifying is the minimal difference which makes them *in*-human: there is ‘nobody at home’ behind the mask – as with a human who has turned into a zombie” (*Less than Nothing* 44-45):

This is why a zombie par excellence is always someone we knew before, when he was still normally alive – the shock for a character in a zombie movie comes when they recognize the formerly friendly neighbor in the creeping figure relentlessly stalking them.... [A]t the most elementary level of human identity, *we are all zombies*.... The shock of meeting a zombie is thus not the shock of encountering a foreign entity, but the shock of being confronted by the disavowed foundation of our own humanity. (341)

While for Žižek this “zero-level of humanity” is reached when we are reduced to our mechanical, purely habitual core, stripped of all

¹⁹ The category of “zombie” is not uncontested in literature, film, and other media. The most common usage arguably refers to the character from Haitian folklore, where a zombie is a re-animated corpse, brought back into life by magical means. Contemporary usage is largely inspired by the work of George Romero, despite the fact that the term “zombie” was not explicitly used in his seminal film, *Night of the Living Dead*. The zombie is seen as a re-animated body, divorced from its human personality, its memories, and rational thought process. It is often blood-thirsty and contagious – passing along its condition with a bite. Romero’s zombies appear to owe a debt to those of Richard Matheson’s classic novel, *I am Legend*.

“intelligence (language, consciousness, and thinking),” it is by no means certain that we need to understand the zombie as representing this regression. In their fascinating and provocative “Zombie Manifesto,” Lauro and Embry present the zombie as a radical form of post-capitalist posthumanity; they argue that it is an “antisubject” for whom the foundational subject-object distinction on which the rationality of capitalism depends is destroyed and, with it, the conventional self or ego. “[T]he zombii [sic] illustrates our doubts about humanity in an era in which the human condition may be experiencing a crisis of conscience as well as a crisis of consciousness” (91-92). In such an era, the zombie need not represent a regression to a pre-conscious, zero-level of humanity, in which we are ripe for exploitation like animals in the master/slave narrative, but serves as an ironic (and deeply pessimistic) enactment of negative dialectics. Following Horkheimer and Adorno, Lauro and Embry argue that the zombie stands-in for the post-capitalist agent who has escaped the kind of subjectivity that enables the ideological control of capitalism. In other words, the zombie is the depressing answer to the question: if the human condition is trapped into capitalism by the mechanisms of its very consciousness, then what kind of posthumanity can be free of it?

While Lauro and Embry’s provocations about enlightenment are deeply depressing, it is interesting to reflect that this is precisely why the zombie is a figure of horror, and is not aspirational. The *Zombie Manifesto* is as repellent as Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” is attractive. Taking the extra step, then, might we not ask whether the zombie is actually a kind of *mara* – a monster generated by the subject/object rationality of capitalism precisely to scare us away from resolving to attain a type of consciousness free from that rationality? Is the image of the zombie a way for capitalism to thwart our attempts to escape the clutches of its instrumental rationality by making our liberation appear as repellent and alien as possible? As Goldstein notes, “this is not really fear of enlightenment. It is rather fear of *ideas about* enlightenment.... Sometimes our ego creates images of its own

death that frighten us" (5).²⁰ The zombie apocalypse is the vision of the horror of the death of ego *par excellence*.

Lauro and Embry are quick to note that their manifesto is far from utopian: "this essay is not a utopic fantasy in which man is liberated from the subject/object conundrum, nor is it a riotous celebration of the apocalypse that would ensue if humanity were able to get free of the subject/object bind" (91). Instead, they offer a dystopia:

The zombii [sic] thus suggests how we might truly move posthuman: the individual must be destroyed. With this rupture, we would undo the repressive forces of capitalist servitude. But at what cost? The zombii's dystopic promise is that it can only assure the destruction of a corrupt system without imagining a replacement – for the zombii can offer no resolution. (96)

It is certainly true that it is almost impossible to imagine a way in which zombies could form and sustain a workable society of any kind,²¹ let alone present this in a way that would seem utopian to us today. However, if we take a step back from zombies for a moment (since they represent our fears about enlightenment, not enlightenment itself) and focus on the salient quality of the posthuman that has broken free of capitalism – the

²⁰ While the use of this quotation here seems to force the equivalence of two radically different meanings of "enlightenment," this was not my intention. Rather, I seek to observe parallels between the liberation from capitalism (as a kind of enlightenment) and the liberation from samasara (which is also capitalist at present): both appear to rest on the overcoming of subject/object rationality and instrumentalism. It seems both fortunate and unfortunate (yes, why not both!) that Horkheimer and Adorno use "the Concept of Enlightenment" as the best language for this discussion (1-34).

²¹ Although I note that this feat of imagination has been tried, at least as an additional element of horror, for instance by Richard Matheson in his classic novel, *I am Legend*, at the end of which the still-human hero discovers that he's become the freak (legend) in a new society of non-humans. This brilliant ending was evidently too dark for Hollywood, which inverted it entirely for the original release of the Francis Lawrence dramatization – a subsequent re-release on DVD with an alternative ending that recovers some of the societal radicalism of Matheson's novel. Interestingly, Žižek is also critical of Lawrence's film, which he argues misses the multiculturalist point of the novel and replaces it with a form of religious fundamentalism (*End Times* 64).

establishment of a consciousness that is not encaged by subject/object rationality – it stands to reason that we are not able to envision this posthuman society.²² All of our imaginations (and fears) of such an organization are themselves generated by exactly the kind of thinking that will not be a factor in its principles. Both the utopia and the dystopia are features of our current capitalist society, not of this posthuman future.

In other words, our inability properly to imagine a posthuman, post-capitalist society is a feature of the epistemic cage of capitalism. We might go even further to suggest that the very concept of the utopia/dystopia is tainted with the kind of thinking that needs to be overcome. In mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), this kind of thinking is called “*discrepancy-based processing*,” because it is based upon our perception of a disjunction between how things are for us now and how we hope/fear they will be in the future (Segal et. al. 178).²³ Such thinking typically leads to stress-based reactions, such as attachment or aversion, hope and fear. Such reactions trigger our brains into what Segal, Williams, and Teasdale call a “doing mode,” in which we seek to instrumentalise the world around us into tools that will help us to reach/avoid that future. This is contrasted with “being mode,” in which people are fully alive in the present moment: “being mode” is the state of mind cultivated in mindfulness practice and meditation (63-77). We might call this the authentic, zero-level of human consciousness.

²² For Lauro and Embry, the zombii (which is their ontic/hauntic version of the zombie) is also distinguished by its immortal/dead body and its apparently swarm-based behaviour. However, it is the zombii’s radical consciousness that generates the rupture with capitalism.

²³ For Segal et al., such ruminative thought patterns are especially to be avoided in people prone to depression. It is also worth considering the ambiguous place of the utopia in some traditions of Buddhism, especially those oriented towards sudden enlightenment and the doctrine of original enlightenment (including the non-duality of the absolute the the relative). While Pure Land Buddhism maintains a conception of the Pure Land in the West, in general the ideal world is depicted as the present world transformed by our awakening to our already enlightened consciousness, rather than an alien utopia to which we should aspire.

Ernst Bloch might have recognised this rendition of the utopia as an unimaginable space for which we can hope but not plan; for him, utopia is properly a kind of “not-yet-become” of which we are “not-yet-conscious.” He sees a difference between the “partial enlightenment” that enables critique of present societies in their own terms and the “genuine enlightenment” that liberates us into the unimaginable. Our hope for emancipation is real, even if we accept that it must remain impossible for us to envision it.²⁴ Horkheimer and Adorno similarly hold that instrumentalization is a feature of the capitalist cage of reason that must be defeated before enlightenment: in capitalism “reason serves as a universal tool for the fabrication of all other tools, rigidly purpose-directed and as calamitous as the precisely calculated operations of material production, the results of which for human beings escape all calculation. Reason’s old ambition to be purely an instrument of purposes has finally been fulfilled” (23). Here, “purpose-directed thinking” and “doing mode” tend together as ethical and therapeutic critiques of human consciousness in capitalist societies.²⁵

In this way, we might understand a mindfulness manifesto as radically non-utopian, even anti-utopian, and deeply critical. It calls for people to see past the ways in which their consciousness itself causes them to see the world (as a constellation of sensations and objects on which to enact one’s will towards a purposive end), and seeks to provide them with the means to accomplish this kind of thinking.²⁶ In the words of Jon Kabat-Zinn: “Meditation is not about trying to become a nobody, or a contemplative zombie, incapable of living in the real world and facing real problems. It’s

²⁴ Bloch develops these ideas in his magnum opus, *The Principle of Hope*. His distinction between partial and genuine enlightenment is sometimes rendered as half and full enlightenment, where the former involves the deployment of reason to challenge ideological claims, and the latter represents the interrogation and overcoming of ideology itself in the search for emancipation.

²⁵ While some anti-psychiatrists suggest that an individual who diverges from “instrumental thinking” or “doing mode” would be pulled back into line by professional psychiatry, mindfulness therapy embraces this divergence.

²⁶ Goallessness is not considered a goal but, conventionally, simply an effect of authentic being (mode).

about seeing things as they are, *without the distortions of our own thought processes*" (*Wherever You Go* 239, emphasis added).

This non-utopian vision calls for people to transform their societies without necessarily calling on them to make any material changes to those societies; the transformation is entirely in the consciousness, provoking rupture from capitalism through freedom from the purpose-directed rationality that fuels it. This raises the possibility that the post-capitalist society looks remarkably similar to the capitalist one, but that people live in it in freedom rather than in servitude to it. This vision of the non-utopia seems to subvert the conventions of radical or critical science fictional utopias, in which "cognitive estrangement" organized around a pseudo-rational novum provides the rupture with the extant.²⁷ In this non-utopia, however, the rupture is occasioned by the estrangement of cognition (as we know it) itself. Thus, because of its missionary investment in rational cognition, even so-called "critical science fiction" is revealed as complicit in the ideological trappings of capitalism: it is not *free of the distortions of our own thought processes*, but rather seeks to utilise these processes to affect change. In other words, counter-intuitively, the zombie apocalypse as a science fictional dystopic critique actually acts to bolter the capitalist *status quo*.

²⁷ The idea of science fiction as cognitive estrangement is promoted by Darko Suvin, who sees science fiction as a potentially radical and subversive genre, albeit grounded in science and rational cognition. For Suvin, fiction that succeeded in affecting estrangement but utilized non-scientific nova to accomplish this is fantasy, not science fiction. Famously, this led some to characterise Star Wars as a fantasy franchise because its central novum (the Force) is scientifically inexplicable. The radical political potential of science fiction has been explored by Carl Freedman and Fredric Jameson.



Image 3: 'seeing freely' (Goto-Jones & Bessa)*

‘Western Buddhism’ and the Post-Self

In his recent provocations about so-called “Western Buddhism,” Žižek picks up on the idea of changeless-change.²⁸ He seems torn between fascination and skepticism, which (to be fair) appears to be a fairly characteristic response to this particular ethical dilemma in Buddhism. Indeed, the integrity (even if not necessarily the authenticity) of this form of transformational experience cuts to the core of the place of *faith* in Buddhist ethics.²⁹ In Pure Land Buddhism, where this idea is powerfully elaborated, the development of a mind of faith (jp. *shinjin*) is the goal of devotional practice, where this faith is the manifestation of the practitioner’s absolute renunciation of their ‘self power’ (jp. *jiriki*) and thus their complete surrender to the “other power” (jp. *tariki*) of Amida Buddha. In Shin Buddhism, which frames this attainment in terms generally familiar to the Mahayana tradition’s sense of the non-dualism between relative and absolute knowledge, this transformation is represented by a bi-directional process: first the practitioner cultivates a so-called pure and egoless mind (through meditation and other practices), effectively travelling to the “Pure Land” and engaging with the absolute, but then the practitioner returns to this world of relative forms to continue life as though unchanged (whilst in reality fully awakened). This process, to which Žižek (*Buddhist Ethic*) appears to allude when he refers to the Bodhisattva ideal, is denoted by the intensely dense phrase *gensō-ekō* (returning to the world)³⁰: “in one version of Buddhism nothing even has to change materially, only your, let’s call it – even though it sounds too Californian – your attitude.”

²⁸ Žižek establishes an open and frank spirit of exchange in his work on Buddhism. He is clear that his term “Western Buddhism” is a label for particular practice in the story of Buddhism, which in the end is perhaps not really a religious or Buddhist form. He also professes to being open to correction where his knowledge of Buddhism seems to let him down.

²⁹ Žižek is very clearly not interested in Buddhism as a religion, but rather as a framework within which techniques for a particular kind of existential transformation have been developed. Indeed, these techniques (meditation) are what he takes to be “Western buddhism.”

³⁰ This phrase is closely associated with the teachings of Shinran (1173-1263), the founder of what is now Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism.

In these deliberately provocative interventions, Žižek appears to be relatively unconcerned with the potentially transformative impact of *faith* in Buddhism. He is interested in what he terms “Western Buddhism,” which he specifically identifies as being primarily concerned with the practice of meditation itself – he calls this “our Western distortion”: the parsing of Buddhism from its religious structures, its ethical traditions and moral rules, and its reformulation as a kind of technology accompanying the so-called “cognitivist breakthrough” (*Buddhist Ethic*).³¹ When considering Žižek’s various interventions about Buddhism (which have caused quite a storm amongst Buddhist groups³²), it is useful to remember that he is explicit about his focus on what he takes to be a “distorted” kind of Buddhism, which he believes has taken root in the “West” for predominantly ideological reasons (or, at least, with powerfully ideological consequences). Žižek thus locates himself in the heart of an ongoing, emotive, and rather volatile debate about the merits and authenticity of so-called “secular Buddhism,” which has polarised practitioners as well as scholars and many voices in between.³³ The critical issue for Žižek appears to be what he identifies as the “completely authentic” existential experience that is occasioned by disciplined meditation and self-cultivation (through the deployment of techniques traditionally associated with Buddhism). This “existential experience,” for Žižek, need not be seen as religious but simply as an empirical moment, a state which one can attain with the kind of practised attention developed in meditation and mindfulness training. Žižek’s “Western Buddhism” more closely resembles the category of secular mindfulness training than it does Buddhism.³⁴ As he sees it, Buddhism is

³¹ Wilson also discusses the formation of “American Buddhism,” suggesting that the mindfulness movement might be seen as the exemplary expression of the interaction between Buddhism and American culture.

³² Anecdotally, I have been at a number of mindfulness conferences, online forums, and Buddhist meetings at which Žižek’s work has been the subject of muttered fuss and indignance, usually accompanied by the charge that he is ignorant about Buddhism. However, I’m not aware of any serious, sustained responses.

³³ See note 15, above.

³⁴ I’m not especially interested in judging whether he’s right that this is genuinely the flavour of Buddhism in the West, or Western Buddhism. See Wilson for an attempt to grapple with the effects of the intersection between Buddhism and American culture in particular.

“automatically meditation” in the West, while in traditional Buddhist societies it’s a way of life, a system of ethics, and a commitment to faith.³⁵

In this way, Žižek arrives at two powerful criticisms of secular mindfulness, both of which resonate with our fear of the zombie apocalypse. The first is precisely this fear of the ethical implications of the changeless-change that apparently accompanies the attainment of the standpoint of the death of the ego and the collapse of the subject-object dichotomy. The second concerns the sociological impact of a growing subculture of people (who look just like everyone else) dedicated to living their lives following the death of their conventional egos. To phrase this in terms of fears: the first is the fear of what a zombie might be uninhibited from doing in our present societies; the second is the fear of what happens to such societies when zombies become an infestation.

Unlike Lauro and Embry, Žižek does not primarily see the liberation of the self from the self as the most fundamental form of rupture from capitalism, not even in the irony of the apocalypse. Instead, Žižek is concerned about

³⁵ This observation speaks to a deep historical, cultural and doctrinal schism in Buddhism, highlighting the dangers of treating “Buddhism” as a unitary category. There have been (at least) two major approaches to the differential importance of meditation and ritual or devotional practice. In one, the so-called Mahayana tradition (which later took its most aesthetic and ascetic form as Zen in Japan), the emphasis is on the “sudden enlightenment” of practitioners who seek to follow the Buddha into enlightenment through his own example of accomplishing this spontaneously through meditation. This type of Buddhism became most rooted in East Asia. In the other, the so-called Hinayana tradition, more emphasis is placed on devotees following the teachings of Buddha by serving in their communities, performing compassionate duties, and incrementally accumulating merits that would lead to their eventual salvation. This type of Buddhism took firmest root in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. Of course, the differences and similarities between these broad traditions are often subtle and sophisticated. Indeed, the terms Mahayana and Hinayana are themselves disputed, in particular because they appear to be partisan: praising Mahayana as the “great vehicle” and deprecating Hinayana as the “lesser vehicle.” Sometimes the term Theravada is used instead of Hinayana, but this is an imperfect substitution. Theravada is the Buddhist tradition most common in Thailand. Hence Žižek’s contrast between “Western Buddhism” and “authentic” Buddhism might also reflect the powerful influence of Zen on Buddhism in the USA after WWII, as would his choice of Thai/Theravada Buddhism as representative of non-Western Buddhism. The signifier “Western” may play only a nominal role here.

the more scientific, empirical problem of verifiability. If it's the case that we accept the possibility of a "completely authentic" existential experience that results in a profound (yet invisible) transformation of the self into an enlightened and liberated *post-self* (or *authentic prior-self*), surely it becomes important to be able to recognise when this has happened to *other people*? While it seems plausible to believe that we are able to recognise this transformation in ourselves, it is difficult to imagine a way of identifying it in another.³⁶ Unlike zombies, presumably the mindful post-self does not distinguish itself by staggering through its own decaying immortality, drooling moronically, staring vacantly, and then attempting to eat anyone it encounters. Presumably.

The need to identify the liberation of another into the condition of *post-self* becomes especially urgent when one considers that such a liberation is immediately (also) liberation from the restrictions and norms of a society premised upon a conventional self (and even liberation from the very principles that established and bolster such restrictions and norms). The post-self is no longer circumscribed by conventional morality (which has been developed for a society of selves). It is precisely in this kind of radical liberty that we suppose the emancipatory potential of the post-self resides; through behaviours that subsist outside the frameworks of instrumental rationality associated with capitalism, the post-self manifests and demonstrates the potentials of this liberty for others and hence (assuming that conventional selves can really understand the actions of the post-self) serves as a vanguard in the revolution. The post-self should be as charismatic as the zombie is contagious; but from the standpoint of mental health provision, it is important to be able to distinguish between the liberated post-self and the simply insane.³⁷

³⁶ There are a number of ongoing attempts to create a functional "mindfulness scale" that aims to assess and compare levels of accomplishment in this field scientifically. Results are controversial. One of the most influential is the Toronto Mindfulness Scale (Lau, et al.).

³⁷ Indeed, anti-psychiatry would caution us to predict that genuine psychic accomplishment here would be pathologised by hegemonic voices (such as psychiatrists) and "corrected" to bring the post-self back into line with convention.

This shape of argument is familiar within various kinds of Buddhism, especially those that make use of the Bodhisattva as a device for the salvation of all living beings. The Bodhisattva (an enlightened being who refuses to enter into Nirvana before the salvation of all beings, and so “returns” to the world to assist them in their journeys) is precisely such a liberated agent, to whom the conventions of everyday morality cannot adhere. The Buddhist canon is replete with stories of Bodhisattva breaking all kinds of laws as “expedient means” (jp. *hōben*) to encourage people into behaviours or attitudes more conducive to their own eventual enlightenment. They have been known to lie, cheat, steal, even kill – even appearing as demons (although I’m not aware of Buddhist zombies) – all activities that appear to contravene the “relative ethics” of the conventional self, but that apparently do not contravene the more “absolute ethics” of the post-self. The metaphysics of Mahayana Buddhism are founded on the non-duality of these two realms and on the doctrine of original enlightenment (jp. *hongaku shisō*).

Unsurprisingly, Buddhism has produced various responses to this dilemma in its long and sophisticated history. Twentieth-century history has brought these responses under renewed critical scrutiny, including through the development of the so-called “critical Buddhism” movement in Japan beginning in the 1980s (jp. *hihan bukkyō*).³⁸ In the Buddhist discourse, a key issue has been how to tell whether or not a self has entered the post-self condition (or achieved enlightenment), before taking it *on faith* that

Of course, this post-self might also come into conflict with other kinds of social and political authorities, such as the police and judges. In such circumstances, it is interesting to consider what the content of an insanity plea would be for one whose ostensible insanity is actually emancipated enlightenment.

³⁸ Critical Buddhism is associated with the Komazawa University in Tokyo (a Sōtō Zen university), and especially with the work of Hakayama Noriaki and Matsumoto Shirō. Sōtō Zen is the largest sect of Zen Buddhism in Japan, founded by Dōgen (1200-1253); it places great emphasis on so-called *shikantaza* (just sitting), focusing on sitting meditation as the core (and sometimes only) practice required in the cultivation of enlightenment. Sōtō Zen is one of the inspirations behind the mindfulness movement in the West, even though many practitioners are unaware of the differences between this and other traditions.

anyone genuinely undergoing this changeless-change would “return” to everyday life free of the egoistic compulsions, interests, and imperatives that lead the rest of us into immorality – hence, taking it *on faith* that the actions of such post-selves will be (in some sense) ‘good’ for us (not matter how they might appear).

In his critique of the ethical dangers of this position, Žižek (*Buddhist Ethic*) draws upon the rather contentious work of Zen Buddhist “D.T.” (Daisetsu Teitarō) Suzuki, arguing (correctly) that Suzuki’s work reveals a potentially deep complicity between the idea of the consummate changeless-change (found, for Suzuki, in Zen Buddhism) and the possibility of reckless violence and moral monstrosity, specifically during WWII in Asia. Suzuki’s writings on Zen and martial violence are part of a long (and sometimes rather nuanced) tradition of such writings in Japan, which emphasize the ways in which moral agents are (invisibly) transformed by the experience of enlightenment in such a way that they not only become much more expeditious killers (this form of consciousness makes them technically more proficient at killing) but also removes them from a moral universe within which they can be held responsible for such killing (or in which such killing could be judged as “wrong”).³⁹ Žižek quotes Suzuki explaining that the enlightened swordsman is not responsible for the deaths caused by his blade, but rather the sword itself acts as an instrument of justice and mercy – the swordsman is wielded by the sword.⁴⁰ Žižek goes further to suggest

³⁹ Suzuki’s most famous writings in this connection are his controversial essays on Zen, the samurai, and swordsmanship. It seems that Žižek leans heavily on the influential interpretation of these texts by Victoria. Žižek is at pains to evade the charge that this interpretation of Buddhism is really about the “freaky Japanese,” but in fact the literature to which he alludes is important to the intersection of the Japanese bushidō tradition with Japanese Zen.

⁴⁰ A very interesting contemplation on this idea is the 1966 Okamoto Kihachi film, *Dai-bosatsu toge* (The Great Bodhisattva’s Pass, ingeniously translated as *The Sword of Doom*). The basic premise, which would be recognizable to readers of certain texts within the bushidō tradition, is that the perfection of swordsmanship is a *post-self* accomplishment, liberating the self from the moral concerns (and presumably the bonds) of selfhood.

The film opens with an old man and his granddaughter on a pilgrimage, trekking across a mountain pass – the eponymous *dai-bosatsu* pass. At the top, before a beautiful vista, they come across a little shrine. The grandfather offers a

that an individual might best demonstrate his enlightenment by behaving monstrously (without feeling bad about it), since to do so would manifest his post-self condition. Following along these lines, we might ask whether the zombie's relentless, inhuman violence is the supreme manifestation of its liberation from the conventional human condition. Does the zombie stand-in for the fear that psychic emancipation from capitalism tends towards Fascism?

For most Buddhists and schools of Buddhism, however, this kind of position would seem overly polemical, not least because it deliberately brackets out the issues of faith, moral cultivation, and ethical commitment to compassion and non-violence that lie at the heart of Buddhism as a religion (which Žižek explicitly dismisses as salient factors in the authenticity of the secularized existential transformation we're interested in). However, postwar Zen Buddhists in Japan have struggled to understand how/why some *rōshi* (highly venerated Zen masters who have been certified as enlightened) were able to support the atrocious conduct of the Imperial Army in Asia. At the very least there appears to be an interpretive conundrum: either it's the case that the attainment of enlightenment (the attainment of changeless-change) is not accompanied by the attainment of

conventional Shin-Buddhist prayer to the Buddha, asking for mercy and compassion, and saying that he hopes to pass from the world so that he'll be less of a burden to his granddaughter. He puts his faith in the Buddha to move things as they should move: *namu amida butsu*.

Just as he finishes his prayer, a deep voice intones from behind him: *Old man ... look to the west* (which is the direction of the PureLand for rebirth). A lone samurai appears and kills the old man with a single cut. He (the samurai) then casually wanders off down the mountain as though nothing has happened.

This swordsman goes on to kill many other people, but we see his gradual decline from a rather amoral figure at the start (when he presents himself as the tool of his sword), through a gathering pride in his ability to kill as an immoral figure (when the sword becomes his tool), to complete psychic collapse towards the end when he can no longer reconcile himself to what he's done, as an insane figure.

In this way, the film seems to condemn swordsmanship as a Way of cultivation, since its practice is so violent and anti-humanistic that it ultimately undermines the very spiritual accomplishment that marked it in the first place. The samurai cannot sustain being a sword-sage *and* doing the things that a sword-sage can do. He cannot reconcile the absolute and the relative and continue his everyday life – the changless-change. Yet, perhaps the sword-sage *must* do these things? This is the sword of doom.

great moral virtue (hence, *rōshi* could support war crimes in good conscience), or it's the case that the system used to verify the attainment of enlightenment in Zen Buddhism is essentially flawed (i.e., the *rōshi* who supported monstrous activities were not really *rōshi* at all – they were frauds, simply insane, or both).⁴¹ The possibility that the *rōshi* were authentically enlightened and supported the war efforts because those efforts were moral and good in ways that may be unintelligible to conventional selves has been considered only in the context of right-wing historical revisionism in Japan, where the question of the historical and moral significance of Japan's defeat in 1945 remains deeply contested.

It seems that Žižek wants to go at least one step further than this Zen soul-searching, not only because he's uninterested in the religious argument, but also because he is searching for a more scientifically verifiable space of transformation. Assuming the authenticity of an existential experience that can be reached through meditation, Žižek wants to know whether there is anything empirically verifiable about the condition of the post-self and whether it is accompanied by moral imperatives. By scientifically resolving the question of those who fraudulently claim post-selfhood in order to excuse anti-social behaviour (such as precipitating the zombie apocalypse), Žižek seeks to isolate the moral quality of the condition of post-selfhood itself.

⁴¹ Such issues are convincingly discussed by Christopher Ives.

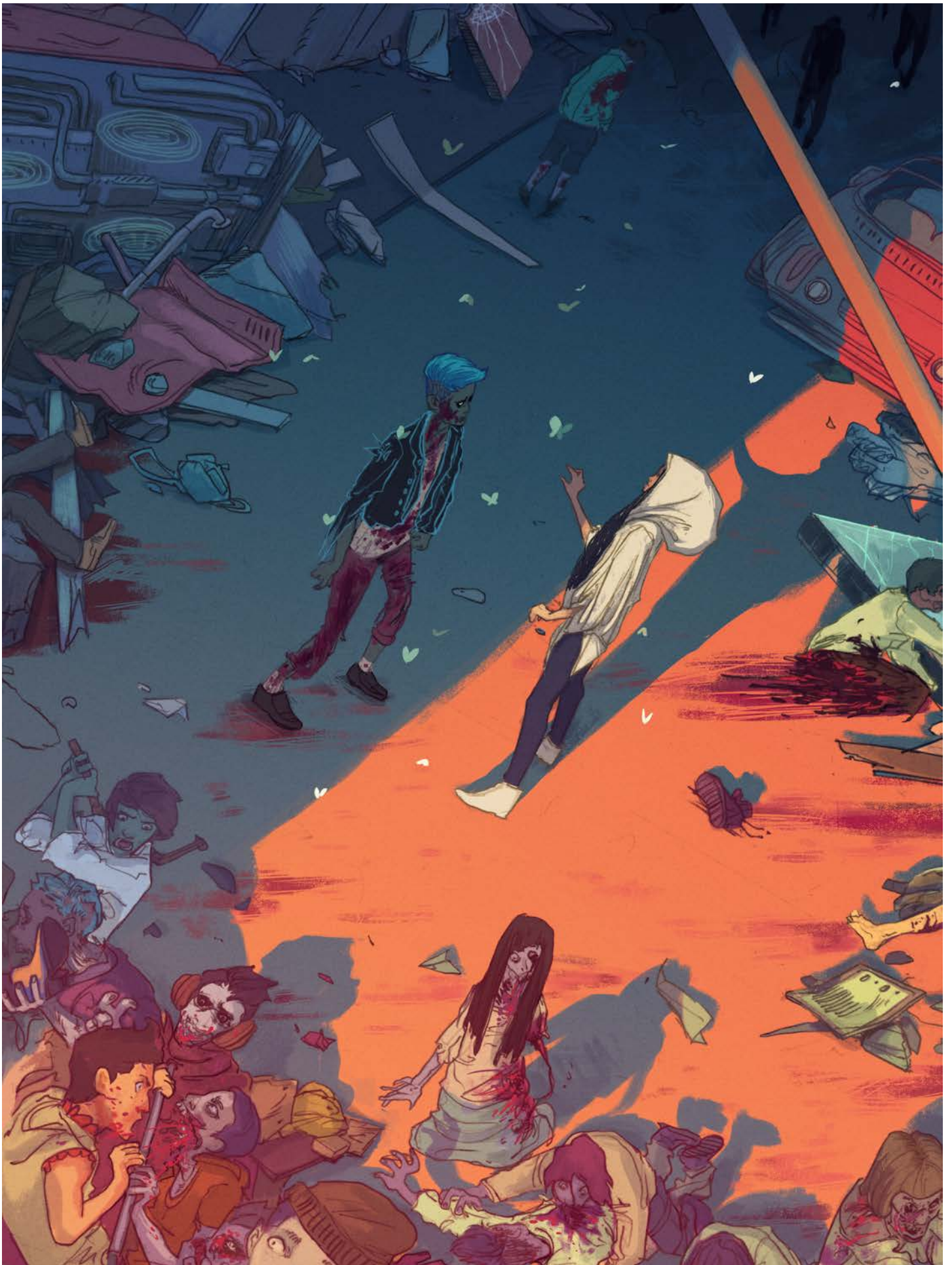


Image 4: 'recognising freedom' (Goto-Jones & Bessa)*

Drugs, Zombies, and Emancipation

In a particularly intriguing move, Žižek asks what the consequences might be if the shift in consciousness that we're calling "authentic existential experience" could be accomplished artificially. Specifically, he ponders the significance of the biochemical attainment of this state of mind through the use of drugs, hypothesizing that such a synthetic experience could "imminently, inherently, fit nirvana."⁴² In this way, he dismisses (as "totally non-immanent") the possibility that religious or devotional practices can impact on the quality of the space in which you find yourself *qua* post-self: "once you are in, you are in; who cares how you got there?" It is a material site. The point does not appear to be (although we could also take it to be) that the "accomplishment" of a zombie is usually the result of a viral infection rather than an extended period of meditative discipline.

Related to the ostensible materiality of this site (and the European Enlightenment conception of the self that undergirds it) is the question of whether a biomedical intervention could accomplish such an "authentic existential experience" and, if so, should the medical establishment be required to provide it (assuming that it can be agreed that these promote well-being)? This question rests at the heart of anti-psychiatry, which arose as a movement in the 1960s and 1970s to resist the (bio)medicalising mental and emotional well-being because it opened the door to involuntary treatment of patients, and especially involuntary treatment with drugs, surgery, and electro-shock therapy. Of course, this kind of "involuntary treatment" is very different from the way in which zombies *infect* other people involuntarily, but the spectre of involuntary biomedical interventions to bring about an existential condition provokes a

⁴² Here Žižek appears to be using the term "nirvana" as a placeholder for the empirically verifiable biochemical condition of a brain undergoing the existential experience of transformation to the post-self.

consideration of the place of the politics of domination in practices of well-being.⁴³

Instead of making this engagement with the politics of (bio)medicalizing a therapeutic technology, Žižek makes a remarkably agile move from the dismissal of religious awakening as a basis of ethical quality (in the space of an empirically verifiable transformation to the post-self) to a *Star Wars* analogy apparently provoked by whispered conversations with Tibetans in Beijing. However, this move to a science fictional realm provides exactly the kind of provocation that critical science fiction should enable, not only (but also) in the context of our concern with the zombie apocalypse as a kind of inverted science fictional critique.⁴⁴ His point appears to be that the “Force” (to which Jedi and Sith attain when their minds are at peace and in tune with the whole, following sustained cultivation via meditation) operates as a power resource rather than an ethical determinant. The Force has a “dark side,” but it is still the Force; as a place of existential experience it is unified. This is not the “dark night” of Willoughby Britton’s psychological study at Brown University but rather the moral darkness that is the concern of the ‘sword of Doom’ – although we might concede a correlation between these.

⁴³ In fact, the complex politics of domination is one of the areas of contestation between the founders of the anti-psychiatry movement. While Szasz strongly endorses an individualism rooted in the European Enlightenment tradition, and so opposes any kind of involuntary psychiatric treatment (or even the medicalization of psychiatry per se), he combines this with a defence of the free-market (and the commodification of therapeutic technologies) as the best way to bolster individual liberty. Contrary to this, Laing appears to use his opposition against involuntary psychiatric interventions as a springboard to a more general opposition against state domination, where psychiatrists act as surrogates for the overwhelming power (and sometimes violence) of the modern state. A concise comparison of the two is Roberts and Itten.

⁴⁴ I discuss the shared frontier of Asian Studies and Science Fiction elsewhere (Goto-Jones). Here it is interesting to note that Žižek effectively renders Tibet into a science fictional place. He sees it as an exemplary case of the “colonization of the imaginary” and the reduction of “the actual Tibet to a screen for the projection of Western ideological fantasies” (“From Western Marxism”). In the context of the science fictionalization of Tibet (and the mythic/hauntic Orient as a whole), we might also understand the attraction of *Star Wars* in terms of the lust for spirituality. It is interesting to consider the categorical differences between Jedi Knights and Tibetan monks in the public imaginary.

From this science fictional springboard, Žizek finds a new way to ask about the ethics of the secular post-self: although there may be a “higher domain of peace” into which we can step to find liberation from the stresses and confusions of capitalist society, “what if something could go terribly wrong in this nirvana domain itself?” What if the zombie and the mindful post-self are unified in this “domain of peace”? Here Žizek opens the possibility of the evil of the authentic post-self; indeed, he seems to posit that this possibility is a basic feature of the secular “nirvana domain” in which the self is liberated from itself. He borrows the agnostic terms of Schelling to paraphrase this insight: “human evil is not because we fell from God; human evil originates in madness reversal, something going wrong in God himself.”⁴⁵

In this way, Žižek effectively resuscitates the credibility of the zombie apocalypse as not only an aspect of our ideological horror regarding *ideas about enlightenment* (that we invent to scare ourselves away from our own liberation), but also as a representation of our fear of the potentials for evil within enlightenment itself. It seems to me that this is a superb instance of an inverted science fictional critique, in which the device is the *estrangement of cognition* rather than “cognitive estrangement.”

Conclusion: don't just do something, sit there!

The “mindfulness revolution” appears to be gathering pace across the Western world. While there seems to be a growing scientific consensus about its therapeutic and health-related benefits for practitioners, there remains scepticism and concern about the social, cultural, and political significance of mindfulness as a movement. Indeed, powerful provocations in this direction by thinkers such as Slavoj Žizek have been largely unanswered, presumably because the secular mindfulness community

⁴⁵ In keeping with the unusual, secularized use of “nirvana,” Žizek is clear that he’s aware that Buddhism has no conception of God and he’s deploying this term to signify an existential location rather than a deity.

(such as it is) is largely unconcerned by the political (rather than personal) significance of their practices, while the Buddhist mindfulness communities feel that the secularized debate is not really about Buddhism at all. There is legitimacy to each of these positions, although the debates are increasingly starting to blur the boundaries between these stakes and communities of interest.

This essay has attempted to expose some of the ethical and political issues that arise from the gradual mainstreaming of secular mindfulness, with a particular focus on the kinds of fears that this movement seems to engender. Playing with the tradition of critical, posthumanist “manifesto” that originates with Donna Haraway and moves through Lauro & Embry, this essay attempts a deployment of Žižek’s zombie (and its apocalypse) as a lens through which to frame our concerns about a future inhabited by mindful post-selves. It is an ironic and depressing vision.

On the one hand, we have the critical stance of Žižek, who argues that mindfulness is essentially a mechanism in the thrall of capitalism. In a relatively extreme formulation: the mindfulness movement pathologizes the experience of stress that is caused by life under capitalism, suggesting that it requires treatment (a therapeutic intervention) to cure this “thinking disease” so that the patient can continue in the service of capitalist society without breaking. The emphasis on overcoming our “doing mode” and entering into a more harmonious “being mode” is best understood as a way for us to accommodate ourselves to the stressful and persistent demands of life in contemporary capitalism.

Instead of trying to cope with the accelerating rhythm of technological progress and social changes, one should rather renounce the very endeavor to retain control over what goes on, rejecting it as the expression of the modern logic of domination. One should, instead, “let oneself go,” drift along, while retaining an inner distance and indifference toward the mad dance of accelerated

process, a distance based on the insight that all this social and technological upheaval is ultimately just a non-substantial proliferation of semblances that do not really concern the innermost kernel of our being. (“From Western Marxism”)

Not only does secular mindfulness resemble Marx’s “opiate for the people,” replacing more traditional conceptions of religion in the age of rational, secular globalization, but it also “fits perfectly the fetishist mode of ideology in our allegedly ‘post-ideological’ era.” Here, the fetish allows people in capitalist societies to accept their situation of exploitation and servitude while clinging to a fetish that disavows this signification. For Žižek, this mindfulness fetish “enables you to fully participate in the frantic pace of the capitalist game while sustaining the perception that you are not really in it; that you are well aware of how worthless this spectacle is; and that what really matters to you is the peace of the inner Self to which you know you can always withdraw.” The idea of withdrawing or returning home to the self is a basic teaching (and constant refrain) of mindfulness meditation.

This fetish seems to adopt the qualities of the hauntic. Mindfulness, like the popular imaginary of Tibet in the contemporary West, resembles a “fantasmatic Thing ... which, when one approaches it too much, turns into the excremental object” (Žižek, “From Western Marxism”). Here the line between the *mindfulness* ideal and the apparent *mindlessness* of the zombie apocalypse blurs into a hauntingly repellent vision of future society, where people have regressed to a “zero-level” of humanity through transformation into psychically-detached creatures of unengaged routine and habit. This renders mindfulness into the handmaiden of the dystopian capitalist nightmare of the zombie apocalypse. The *mindful* and the *mindless* occupy a unified experiential space.

By playing with the question of whether this condition of post-selfhood might be accomplished through biomedicine (narcotics or technology) we

can see how this fetish also extends into various (post-)Marxian critiques of psychiatry and therapy in general, where these disciplines seek to encourage accommodation to the madness of capitalism rather than bolstering its opposition. “Prozac nation” becomes a therapeutic ally of the mindfulness (r)evolution in the framing of the zombie apocalypse. However, while anti-psychiatrists tend to critique psychiatry for its ideological (and medical) violence against individuals who diverge from the status quo of instrumental reason, the mindfulness movement seeks to embrace, support, and encourage a specific divergence, suggesting that *mindlessness* is of even greater benefit to capital than stressed or anxious conformity to reason. In either case, the idea that this move constitutes a “treatment” provokes the spectre of domination.

For good measure, Žižek also colours his critique with hints of an alien invasion. Part of the narrative that leads towards the zombie apocalypse involves a foreign infection – like the viral contaminants of most zombie movies. For Žižek, this “New Age, ‘Asiatic’ thought” has entered into the ideological superstructure of the “Judeo-Christian” West and launched a challenge to hegemony from within (“From Western Marxism”). This infection has mutated into a distorted form through interaction with local agents, and it is precisely this mutation that has made the infection so dangerous, destructive, and contagious. The communicability of globalization provides the conditions of the possibility of the zombie apocalypse, combining a primal fear of the loss of self with a cultural fear of the loss of historical centrality. The conception of self in the European Enlightenment project is displaced by the self of the Asian, Buddhist Enlightenment ideal. This is the horror of the lone survivor with a shotgun surrounded by hordes of alien(ated) and infectious zombies.

On the other hand, we have the radical stance of Lauro and Embry, which enables us to see the cultivation of mindfulness as an emancipatory technology, even in the instance that this leads us to consider the zombie apocalypse. The emphasis on making a shift from the instrumentalized

rationality of “doing mode” to a less subservient and slavish “being mode” is understood as a form of liberation from the hegemonic reason of capitalism (built on a subject/object distinction that provides the parameters of the conventional self) into a form of post-capitalist organization (resting upon the transformation of this subject/object dichotomy into an enlightened post-selfhood). From this standpoint, attempts to quash the mindfulness movement (including that of Žižek) themselves seem to resemble the patterns of domination in the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness identified by the post-psychiatrists. Ironically, Žižek’s attack on mindfulness as an opiate of capitalism itself comes to resemble a voice of domination seeking to thwart human (r)evolution.

In this instance, then, rather than being the vision of a capitalist dystopia to which we could condemn ourselves through mindfulness practice, the zombie apocalypse becomes the representation of our fears about our emancipation; it serves to frighten us away from the cultivation of precisely the technology that will liberate us from capitalism most fundamentally. The zombie apocalypse, being a consumer product of capitalism and a popular representation of our ego’s fear of its own dissolution, does not tell us what our lives would be like were we free of capitalism but rather it warns us away from our freedom with the horrors of our bounded imagination. Zombies are the daemons of *mara*, tricking us into wanting to remain enslaved by fabricating nightmares that make sense only to slaves.

This radical reading of the zombie apocalypse is only able to sustain hope in the most abstract, non-utopian sense. It rests upon the idea of an empirically verifiable, authentic, and secular existential experience that can be attained through meditation and mindfulness practice. This experience affects a transformation of the self into a kind of post-self, which may actually be invisible in any material aspect. It could entail no visible change at all in the organization and conduct of society, but simultaneously involve the complete transformation of the quality of our experience of that society

and its signification. The post-self is distinguished as a form of agency emancipated from the instrumental rationality that characterizes capitalism. Since such a form of agency is inconceivable and actually unimaginable to the conventional self (bounded as it is precisely by this rationality), the very notion of our ability to depict an attractive utopia or an aversive dystopia is nonsensical. We simply cannot know what it would mean to be not-ourselves. All we can expect to see are false utopias and dystopias generated by the attractions and aversions of the “doing self” that seeks its own continuation, even while rupture from that self into a “being self” is (in these scenarios) the only route to radical emancipation. From the perspective of the mindfulness revolution, even critical science fictional utopias and dystopias are revealed as complicit in capitalism; emancipation relies on the inversion of the logic of such visions and the estrangement of cognition itself. This is the meaning of the zombie apocalypse as mindfulness manifesto.

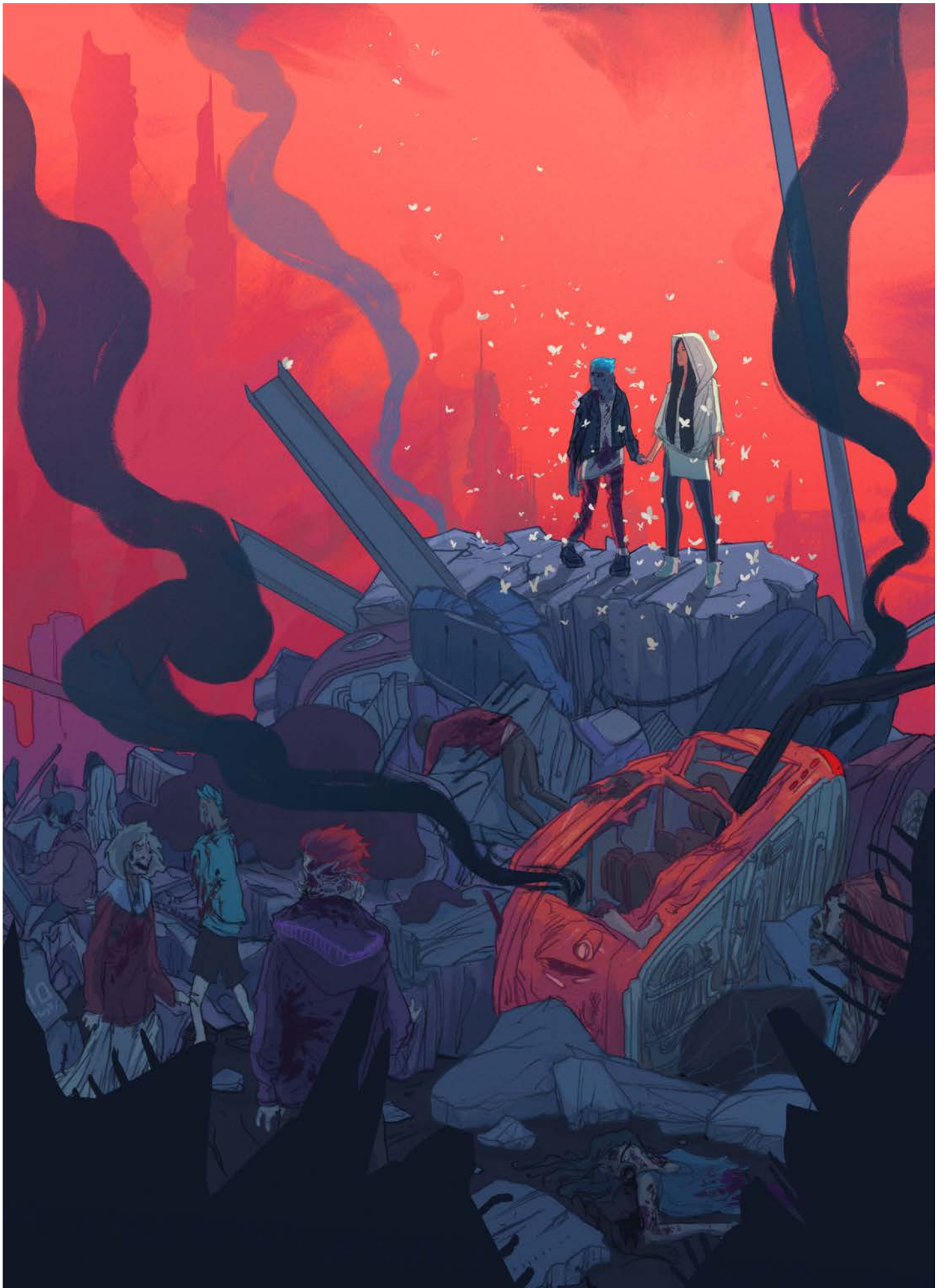


Image 5: 'emancipation?' (Goto-Jones & Bessa)

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