

PHILOSOPHICAL ASCESIS
AND THE PACT OF INDIFFERENCE
AROUND PETER SLOTERDIJK'S 'ANTHROPOTECHNIC
TURN' AND INDIAN SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

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ABSTRACT

In a recent work entitled *You must change your life*, Peter Sloterdijk explores the practising nature of philosophy and predicts the return of the “immunological”. There is currently a growing demand for anthropotechnics able to strengthen our immune-symbolic system (i.e. mental and physical methods that protect us against uncertainty, anguish, and death). The anthropotechnics that are being practiced worldwide, such as Yoga or Mindfulness, come originally from Indian philosophies and not from ancient Greek or Roman philosophy. Despite the work of historians of philosophy such as Pierre Hadot, the spiritual exercises of ancient Greco-Roman philosophy continue to be studied as fossilized specimens inside university classrooms. This could be due to the pact of indifference, the tacit agreement that lies behind the functioning of contemporary Institutional Philosophy. Thanks to this pact there is no longer any possible contradiction between life and work, because there is, to begin with, no vital commitment to the genuine exercise of philosophy. We assume that philosophy is an exclusively rhetorical exercise and that the task of the professional philosopher is to publish as many papers as possible in prestigious journals that tend to privatize knowledge. Following a different daimon, this essay was conceived as an exercise in thinking outside the academic standards of professional philosophy. The resulting literary experiment has been intentionally kept as natural as possible, without disguising the crossroads of ideas, thinkers, doubts and new problems that arose spontaneously during the exercise.

KEYWORDS

Yoga, Spiritual Exercises, Institutional Philosophy, Anthropotechnics

1. WHEN THE MAP PREVENTS TRAVEL

*A metaphysics could be reborn as
a science of ascetic limits*

RENÉ DAUMAL

Lefeu, the painter of Jean Améry's novel, wants to save himself from success. Avoid it at all costs. He practices detachment from the world and refuses to be anything other than an anonymous artist, a survivor of culture. To create this character, Améry was inspired by the life of the Austrian painter Eric Schmid, who was so far removed from the circuits of commercialization of art he did not even bother to exhibit his works. His withdrawn, "monastic" life consisted of painting and waiting. "The artists of our time", writes Améry in 1959, "who do not perform any social function [...] are the monks of our time. They are the only ones who fulfill the triple vow: poverty, it goes without saying, chastity in the face of the temptations of the world and obedience to the laws of art!" (2003, p.217). It would be more accurate to say that Schmid took upon himself the vows of an "ascetic" life. The alcoholic beverages that Améry finds in the painter's room would be incompatible with the life of a monk. So it would be more accurate to say that the artists who practice detachment from the world and, who for this reason do not fulfill any social function, are not the monks but the *ascetics* of our time. Neither the austere life nor an existence dedicated to a sensible or supersensible ideal are the exclusive patrimony of religious ascetics or exercisers. When Nietzsche extols austerity in *The Gay Science* (185), affirming: "It is the poor who misunderstand his voluntary poverty", or when he defends asceticism of the will, understood as the sublimation of instincts and values, he explicitly places himself in the antipodes of Christian ascesis, which Nietzsche considered, incidentally, a sickly endeavour. Nietzsche is one of the figures who recovers the exercising, ascetic character of philosophy. Peter Sloterdijk considers him "the discoverer of ascetic cultures": he reveals the Earth as an ascetic planet that harbors diverse anthropo-technical systems supported by opposite ascetologies. These systems, whether inscribed in sick or healthy ascetologies, or responding to more or less spiritual horizons, have to be

approached from an immunological-cultural front according to Sloterdijk. In the voluminous work happily entitled *You must change your life*, Sloterdijk exposes in detail the three immune systems that human beings are endowed with: the biological, the social and the symbolic. The first protects us from disease, the second from invasions, wars, social disorder; the third, on the other hand, protects us from the uncertainty of existence, from anguish, from the absurd, from the fear of death. This third immune system provides us with a symbolic lair against suffering and emptiness and becomes a kind of existential refuge. To strengthen this system, what Sloterdijk calls “anthropotechnics” are used, rescuing this term from anthropological studies and defining them as “methods of mental and physical practising by which humans from the most diverse cultures have attempted to optimize their cosmic and immunological status in the face of vague risks of living and acute certainties of death” (2018, p.10). Each immune-symbolic system appears to be an ascetic planet unto itself, however, and there can be no such thing as a universal instruction manual for strengthening symbolic defenses. The ascetic must learn to give himself the necessary conditions for his own exercise, especially when the social or even biological environment seems harmful to his life purpose. In the particular case of Nietzsche, biological and symbolic immunity are especially related. This can be seen clearly in his correspondence. For example, when in the spring of 1876 he shares with Rodmunt the belief that fatigue and skepticism are his greatest enemies: overcoming them implies recovering “the courage of health” (*den Muth der Gesundheit*). Although Nietzsche always maintained a good relationship with the University of Basel, which after his resignation assigned him a generous financial allowance, he was already beginning to consider himself a philosopher rather than a professor of philology: “now I dare to pursue wisdom myself and to be a philosopher myself; formerly I worshipped the philosophers”. (BVN-1878,729). Years later, in the spring of 1879, he wrote a letter to his friend Frank Overbeck explaining that Basel’s “noxious and oppressive” environment gave him headaches to the point that he could no longer tolerate reading and writing for more than twenty minutes. His conclusion seems decisive: “*Ergo: Academia derelinquenda est*”. (“Therefore, Academy must be forsaken”; BVN-1879,837). At 34 years of age,

Nietzsche resigned from his position at the university due to continuing health problems that, curiously, did not prevent him from focusing on his philosophy. In fact, the most creative -and exercising- decade of his life starts at that moment. Did not Zarathustra have to sacrifice himself in order to preach among men, “descending into the depths”, and climbing down alone from the mountains? Do not all men have to sink into their sunset before they can become overmen? But this is the imaginary of Nietzschean asceticism, and it is not necessary to adopt it to recognize in its vital commitment the universal sign of all ascetic rebellion. Consider the case of the French poet and philosopher René Daumal, who was as indifferent to success as the painter Eric Schmid and as committed to the sunrise as Zarathustra. Pataphysic, founder of the avant-garde movement called “the Simplists” which was in open confrontation with the surrealist group of André Bretón, student of Sanskrit and Indian philosophy, disciple of Gurdjieff and unconditional lover of *upaniṣadic* non-dualism, his writings are the testimony of an intense vital exercise which does not seem to fit within the confines of his brief stay in the world –thirty-six years. Daumal, the poet-magician, embodies the anthropotechnics of conscious writing and differentiates between white and black poetry as one does in magic. He also emphasizes the distinction between the map and the journey, – between the word and the ineffable–, to the point that he wonders if speech could provoke the experience of the unspeakable:

Discursive philosophy is as necessary to knowledge as the geographical map is to travel. The great error, I repeat, is to believe that one can travel by looking at a map. When the problem of incitement to travel is posed, we can indeed wonder: *is it possible to use a geographical map not only to guide, but also to provoke the trip?* (1991,p.97)

In a recent essay, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben answered this question in the negative: the romantic attempt to unite work on oneself and the production of a work is doomed to failure. Daumal's life-work culminates in an unfinished novel, entitled *Mount Analogue*, for which he is timidly recognized in literary circles. A novel that recounts the journey of a group of friends towards a symbolic mountain, the meeting point between heaven and earth, with the aim of creating

another way of inhabiting the world, and therefore, of creating a new humanity. Regarding this work, Agamben wonders:

Why does the work on oneself, which has to lead to spiritual liberation, need the work on an opus? If Mount Analogue materially exists, why give it the shape of a narrative fiction, which was initially presented as a “treatise of psychological mountaineering,” and which the author certainly did not care to include among the masterpieces of twentieth-century literature? (2017, p.111-112)

Following the voice of original philosophy, Daumal would reverse Agamben's question: if Mount Analogue did not already exist in some form, why would he have felt the urge to write it? To what extent is it possible to separate life and work without losing the meaning of both? The Orientalists and Sanskritists of his time were reproached by this self-taught student of Sanskrit: *sic vos, non vobis, mellificatis, apes*. (“Thus you, bees, make honey but not for yourselves”). Daumal directed this Latin verse, doubtfully attributed to Virgil, as a reproach to Jacques Bacot, translator into French of the Tibetan text *Life of Milarepa*. In a more general way, Daumal aimed it at all the specialists who, losing themselves in the philological and rhetorical study of oriental texts, did not take seriously any of the ideas or ways of life reflected in these texts. This reproach has not lost an iota of its validity today. The institutions that administer the functioning and teaching of the humanities demand of their members a kind of “ascetic” work, if I may abuse the limits of this term, based on specialized research exercises—a kind of lifetime hyper-repetition—which obeys the logic of an omnivorous production of “cognitive capital” in the form of books, papers, and metapapers whose publication conditions, commercialized to the extreme, hardly seem to provoke ethical debates among professionals of philosophy. These exercises are above all rhetorical in character, meaning by this that language becomes an end in itself. It is nothing new to affirm that institutionalized philosophy has ended up being a conversation between specialists subscribed under a tacit and comfortable pact: that of absolute indifference between life and work, i.e., between exercise and thought. Pierre Hadot has explained, in part, how a notion of philosophy has been reached historically that is so far removed from its original and etho-

poietic impulse, and that is now understood as a mere speculative discourse divorced from all spiritual exercise. The spiritual exercises of ancient philosophy were the nucleus of a way of life practiced in community and reveal what Sloterdijk calls its “self-educational pathos”: “Philosophy that would not have operated as a transformative exercise (*askesis*) would have remained suspect to its ancient acolytes also as a source of knowledge” (2013, p.10).

Sloterdijk is right when he warns us of the return of the immunological, that is, of a growing social demand for anthropotechnics and exercises that can strengthen the immune-symbolic system. It is not about the return of religion, in the same way that the austere life of Schmid, Daumal, or Nietzsche should not be understood automatically as a “monastic” life. What there is, instead, is a more or less serious, more or less narcissistic return to ascetic practices and a reevaluation of the exercising nature of human existence. Underneath this demand could be hidden a desire to sabotage the abusive role attributed to the map or to language, a desire that Sloterdijk makes explicit when recalling “Wittgenstein's well-known demand to put an end to the chatter about ethics” (2018, p.16). It is to Sloterdijk's merit that he includes, in the revision of the ascetic universe, Indian anthropotechnics, for the current study of Indian practices is often totally subordinated to philology, ethnography, sociology, or historiography. Among all these disciplines, the absence of a broad philosophical thought about the globalization of these practices and its contemporary relevance stands out. Let us bear in mind that these are exercises such as mindfulness or yoga, in its numerous models and manifestations, which today summon millions of practitioners of very different ages, cultures, and latitudes, and not the spiritual exercises of Greek or Latin philosophy. Often, these Indian anthropotechnics are rooted in metaphysics of renunciation that promote the definitive flight from existence and the world. Sloterdijk criticizes these ideas vigorously, ignoring that both the metaphysics and the exercises themselves have undergone a great transformation in their process of globalization. This social demand for anthropotechnics, however, does not affect the institutional course of philosophy, since the *pact of indifference* is subscribed equally in all domains of thought. And in this case, Indian philosophies

that involve spiritual exercises are no way an exception. They have entered the university through a safe process of hyper-rationalization, as did, in their day, those Greek or Latin philosophies that also included beyond-textual exercises. While René Daumal wondered if the map could *provoke* the trip, it would be necessary to wonder to what extent the current map of institutional Philosophy *prevents* it.

2. PHILOSOPHICAL ASCESIS AND THE PACT OF INDIFFERENCE

We know as much as we do
Novalis

The Greek term 'askesis' does not appear in the New Testament. However, along with prayer, it becomes one of the central themes of later patristic literature. Once the figure of the monk internalizes that of the martyr, the true reference of the *imitatio Christi*, the "martyrdom of conscience" (*conscientiae martyrium*, VA, 47.1) becomes the fundamental *askesis*. As Hadot has shown, from the second century apologists on, Christianity is presented as the true philosophy, and numerous techniques from Greek philosophy start being redefined (2002, p.77). This resignification can already be found in the Hellenistic Judaism of Philo of Alexandria, especially in his work *Allegorical Interpretation* of which Hadot (2002, p. 26) highlights a list of practices, all inherited from ancient Greek philosophy. Readings (*anagnôseis*), meditations (*meletai*), self-control (*enkrateia*), recollection of what is good (*tôn kalôn mnêmai*), acts of worship (*therapeiai*), and the performance of duties are part of Jacob's training when he moves away from bodily passions. Applied now to the context of biblical Genesis, Philo seems to imply that these philosophical techniques are not sufficient by themselves, since finally it is up to God to make Jacob's soul migrate from the realm of passions. If in Platonic idealism the soul moves away from the sensible through union with itself (an experience that Plato calls 'phronesis'; *Phaedo*, 79d), in Philo's religious interpretation, this exile is explained as a migration (*metoikia*) of the soul that is oriented towards God (*Leg. Alleg.* 3.18-19). To the aforementioned spiritual exercises we could add others such as the stoic *prosoché* (attention, vigilance), *akroasis*

(listening), or *skepsis* (deep examination). Hadot reclaims the expression “spiritual exercises” because their field of action is not only moral but above all existential, they promote “a transformation of the vision of the world and a metamorphosis of being”, and therefore they “involve the whole spirit” (2002, p.77). But then, Hadot emphasizes a striking distinction between “philosophical thought exercises” and a number of other seemingly non-philosophical practices:

For the ancient philosophers, the word 'askesis' designates only spiritual exercises of which we have spoken, that is, an inner activity of thought and will. What exists in certain ancient philosophers, for example in the Cynics or Neoplatonists, alimentary or sexual practices, analogous to Christian asceticism, is another question. These practices are different from philosophical thought exercises. (Hadot, 2002, p.78)

I wonder to what extent we can abstract these thought exercises from the way of life that they themselves require and demand. Each practicing life requires its own conditions insofar as it is oriented towards a specific purpose and is part of a specific circumstance. In his own version of philosophical asceticism, Epictetus points out that it is not about practicing anything randomly, in the style of the jugglers (*Dis.*, 3.12, 1-4). Depending on the chosen purpose, the practitioner must seek the conditions that make their exercise not only possible but also real. Does not the correct practice of Stoic attention require certain vital conditions inherent in the practice itself? Could we separate the Buddhist practice of the four foundations of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhānā*) from the circumstances of the practitioner who embodies it? I am not appealing to any kind of correspondence or ethical harmony between what is thought, what is said, and what is done. Rather, I am wondering about the conditions that make it possible to think and speak in a certain way, conditions that provoke ways of thinking and speaking capable of fostering new ways of acting in the world. The relationship between exercise and life is so intimate that a change in vital conditions can alter the nature of an exercise; and the modification of the purpose to which it is directed also has an influence on life and technique. Let us take for example the anthropotechnic of inner watchfulness and vigilance, as it is applied in the Greek and Latin Stoa and the way in which Antony of Egypt

recommends it to his disciples in the desert. “When any image (*visio*) appears”, says Antony (or rather Athanasius), “do not promptly collapse with cowardly fear, but whatever it may be, first ask with stout heart, ‘Who are you and whence do you come?’” (VA, 43.1). The reader familiar with Stoic epistemology, and with such an effort to keep an eye on the impressions (lat. *phantasmata*; *visios*) that come to mind, will notice a family resemblance in this recommendation of the Christian monk. The cited passage, in particular, refers us to Epictetus: “For as Socrates said, we ought not to live a life without examination, so we ought not to accept a representation (*phantasian*) without examination, but we should say: ‘Wait, let me see who you are and whence you come’. Like the sentinels: ‘Show me the pass’” (*Dis.*, 3.12; see also 3.8). Despite the apparent similarities, Saint Antony is teaching his disciples to protect themselves from demons and his classification of the impressions is quite simple: there are two kinds of mental images, angelic and demonic. To learn to discern them, the disciple does not have to delve into the mechanism of his own mind or the value judgments that these images trigger, but simply ask about the origin of these images and then pay attention to the sensation: “if it should be a vision of the good, they will reassure you and change your fear into joy” (VA, 43.2). In this reappropriation, the technique is simplified in the realm of thought while its complexity increases in another sense, since now the weight of self-examination is shifted to the realm of faith and intuitive communication with God. Both the ascetic life of the Christian monk and that of a Stoic like Epictetus are compromised by the kind of exercise to which they are engaged. And if the life of the monk is not incompatible with the application of certain techniques of thought, neither can philosophical asceticism be reduced to a series of techniques independent of the kind of life in which they are inscribed. This interrelation between life and exercise becomes much more explicit in the case of the practice of Buddhist vigilance. Concentration on the present moment is as fundamental in the Stoicism of Marcus Aurelius (*Med.*, VII, 54) as in the teaching of Buddha:

Let not a person revive the past
or on the future build his hopes.
For the past has been left behind
and the future has not been reached.
Instead with insight let him see
each presently arisen state;
let him know that and be sure of it,
invincibly, unshakably.
Today the effort must be made;
tomorrow Death may come, who knows?
No bargain with Mortality
can keep him and his hordes away,
but one who dwells thus ardently, relentlessly, by day, by night —
It is he, the Peaceful Sage has said,
who has had a single excellent night.

(MN, 131; trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2015, p.1039)

The excellent day or night (*bhadekaratta*) of the Buddhist is not the excellent day of the Stoic or the Christian monk. These three versions of self-vigilance, offered here as an outline, are adapted to different ideas and ways of life and the correct password for impressions will also be different in each case. Stoic attention conforms to the basic principles of Stoic philosophy, to the discernment between what concerns us and what does not, inscribed in a series of ideas about the cosmos and the human being. In the same way, Buddhist attention requires analytical thinking, a discernment that consists in putting into practice the ideas of the teaching preached by the Buddha. To apply this technique one must have given his/her assent to the three characteristics of existence (dissatisfaction, impermanence, the absence of essence or selfhood), to the five phenomena that constitute our empirical identity, to a specific interpretation of the law of cause and effect, and so on. This assent to the teaching, in the case of Buddhism, should not consist of mere blind acceptance nor should it consist of an uncritical reliance on tradition. To awaken to the truth (*saccānubodha*), one has first to trust the one who preaches the teaching by verifying that there is a correspondence between what he says and what he does, thus faith (*saddhā*) arises, and respect, attention, listening and then memorizing the teaching, after

which one proceeds to investigate the meaning of what has been memorized. Only through reflective acceptance does the sufficient aspiration arise that leads the practitioner to the application of the will and to critical analysis, since it is this scrutiny that will determine his effort (*tapas*) and the quality of his immersion in the meditative practice of awakening (*vipassanā*). To discover the truth (*saccānupatti*), we are told in this middle discourse (MN, 95), what is decisive is the effort in meditative practice that is preceded by the critical analysis of the essential points of the teaching itself. This brief example already suggests that the four foundations of Buddhist mindfulness, as set out in the Pali Canon, have little to do with the contemporary mindfulness technique understood as training in “bare attention” largely unrelated from these ideas, and divorced from the purpose of spiritual liberation that was the essence of the original teaching. Once again, by changing the purpose, the practice itself changes and also the vital conditions that are required to exercise it. Under their original conditions, Buddhist meditation techniques probably would not have been globalized in the way that they have. Instead, they have undergone a series of philosophical simplifications in order to be adapted to almost universal contexts, to the point that their globalization has contributed to the preservation of these techniques as much as to their loss, or at least to their radical change. If the metaphysical ideas of the Śramaṇas, for example, about *saṃsāra* and definitive liberation, had not been reinterpreted—and in certain cases, suppressed—neither would yoga in its many styles and transformations be practiced today on a global level. In a way, it is these original ideas that lead Sloterdijk to present such a negative view of Indian anthropotechnics and to lose himself in historical and rather archaic treatments of castes and Indian society. Aurobindo Ghose already lucidly dealt with these ideas of renunciation in his writings and created an evolutionary model of yoga whose goal was set in service of the world. He did not give a new meaning to classical terms of the yogic tradition (for example: *mokṣa*) but directly understood that the goal of yoga *could no longer be* that kind of liberation. What bothers Sloterdijk is that same spirit of abandonment of the world that animates many of the anthropotechnics of this ascetic universe, be they Buddhist, Christian, or Stoic. The tendency to

“recessive insularization” of the retreatants promotes the flight of the “ethically best”, something totally detrimental to the world itself. Following Plotinus’s command: give it all away! (*aphele panta*; *Enn.* V. 3.[49].17,39), the voluntary exile of these “secessionists” –ascetics, meditators, thinkers, and artists– leaves us alone in a world of experts.

Owing to the exodus of the ascetics, meditators and thinkers, [the world] becomes the site of a drama that fundamentally questions its ability to house ethically aroused inhabitants sufficiently: what is this world if the strongest statement about it is a withdrawal from it? (2018,p.221)

There are, however, two different types of secessionists: those who flee the world to work on themselves, and those who, being obsessively busy and active in the world, flee from themselves. It is the latter who seem to currently call for anthropotechnics to reinforce their immuno-symbolic system. Although this “self-care” has suffered since modernity what Sloterdijk calls an “externalization” process, and perhaps it is being implemented superficially, the contemporary demand for symbolic refuge does not deserve to be underestimated. The exodus of the ascetics happens in the outskirts of the world but ends up returning to its center as a mirror, our own mirror. Let’s look at the list of eight exercises of Patañjali’s Yoga. Each of these steps (*aṅga*) requires specific conditions and prepares the practitioner for the next step. The *Yogasūtra* says that the list can be reduced to seven exercises, but this in turn calls for new conditions. For example, to skip *pratyāhāra*, an exercise where attention is withdrawn from the senses, one must first have achieved mastery of the breath (*prāṇāyāma*), for which specific bodily conditions are required. Patañjali’s *aṣṭāṅga* proposes a ladder of conditions aimed at reaching the ultimate *samādhi*, that is, the ultimate split between mind and consciousness, a liberating isolation called *kaivalya*. This model of yoga, strongly inspired by Buddhism, pursues the same “ontological suicide” that characterizes the *Śramaṇa* metaphysics of renunciation (Mallinson and Singleton, 2017, p.xiii). Sloterdijk relies solely on this idea to delve into the particular “secessionism” of Brahmanic and extra-Brahmanic ascetologies. Only in this way can he consider Buddhism and Jainism as two “great systems of pessimism” or Indian spirituality as “the

planetary granary of narcissism”, (2018, pp. 267 and 262). The real task here, however, is to investigate how and why the anthropotechnics that arise from these extreme ideas of renunciation have come down to us softened in their eschatological content and empowered in their ethical content –how and why, in our day, practitioners are often more familiar with terms like *saṃsāra*, *karma* and *mokṣa*, than with Greek words like *eudaimonía*, *aponía* or *ataraxía*. Sloterdijk forgets to mention that thanks to the globalization of yoga schools, today millions of people who probably have no interest in seeking a definitive exit from the world, – and who may not have heard of Marcus Aurelius's *Hyponmenata*–, know and study that list of eight yogic exercises. Patañjali's *astāṅga* yoga, having undergone an important reinterpretation process throughout history, is used as a global initiation base to yoga. Does this have something to do with the “power of return” inherent in antiquity? Sloterdijk (2018, p.32) mentions this power when dealing with Nietzsche's contemporaneity: “[...] antiquity has no need of repetitions enacted in subsequent periods, because it 'essentially' returns constantly on its own strength”. The definitive renunciation that is at the base of this “classic” model of yoga is not a common ontological suicide, but a very particular and difficult one to carry out. Paradoxically, it requires great attention to vital conditions and a major effort aimed at transforming the very nature of the mind. In fact, it is the antipodes of ordinary suicide as we commonly understand it. The first two *astāṅga* exercises lay the ethical foundations for this path to isolation, and consist of ten precepts –*yamas* and *niyamas*– partially borrowed from Jainism (*Ācārāṅga Sūtra*, 3rd century BCE), whose fundamental premise is non-violence. A suicide whose basic requirement is non-violence has more to do with raising awareness than with “raising a hand at oneself” –the title of a brilliant essay by Jean Améry on voluntary death. Due to their Buddhist influence, the Yoga aphorisms also adopt the four *brahmavihārās* or noble thoughts of Buddhist ethics: friendship (*maitrī*), joy (*muditā*), compassion (*karuṇa*) and equanimity (*upekṣa*). The ethical exercise is applied here in a double sense, emphasizing the psychosomatic relationship between action and thought: on the one hand, living according to these precepts brings as a consequence mental clarity (*citta-*

prasāda; YS, 1.33), on the other hand, meditating on them awakens strength (*bāla*) in the practitioner (YS, 3.23). Simply retaining the metaphysical ideas associated with renunciation, and forgetting the ethical component of these practices, seems too easy a route to philosophical escapism. To reduce Buddhism to a “nihilistic” system is not only to ignore Buddha's own arguments against this accusation, but to ignore the fact that the world today would be much worse –much more nihilistic, no doubt– if Buddhist meditation or Patañjali's yoga were marginal practices, instead of being an almost universal refuge to which one goes urgently. To begin with, the practices to which *śramaṇic* metaphysics has given rise, attenuated and reconverted to therapy, camouflaged and adapted to current demands, constitute the main anthropotechnics of our times and not the therapy of desire of the ancient philosophers of Greece and Rome. These Indian exercises require discernment and analytical application of certain philosophical ideas about life, the cosmos, and the human being: they have little to do with closing your eyes and throwing yourself into the gutter of emptiness. Of course, the practice of meditation or yoga does not guarantee any moral virtues, nor does the practice of logical and analytical thinking have the power to create good human beings. Goodness –or what is good– remains a mystery of human nature: there is no recipe, no practice or theory, that alone can safely lead us to that goal. Arindam Chakrabarti (2003) has a wonderful text on the triple relationship between yogic meditation, ethics and analytical thinking, so we leave the interested reader in his hands.

In the case of the exercises of Greek and Roman philosophy, we cannot speak of any “evolution” or “involution” of them, since they have not been subjected to any significant innovation. The contemporary “rediscovery” of ancient philosophical experience –thanks to the works of Hadot, Rabbow, Foucault, Nussbaum, and many others– has not renewed the academic environment of philosophy, but rather these exercises have been subjected to academic treatment. Inside a university classroom, spiritual exercises are studied as fossilized specimens rather than as living self-pedagogical tools. My intuition is that this has to do with the pact of indifference between life and thought that underlies the profession of

the specialist. The requirement of specialization in institutional philosophy focuses on the study and compilation of information, and aims to relate said information with the greatest erudition and originality possible, without the need to make any use of said information for life (something which was already common in the times of Epictetus; *Dis.*, 3.21, 8-11). As it is often an exclusively rhetorical exercise, this pact of indifference towards the private and personal life of the expert is implicit. This tacit pact annuls any possible contradiction between life and work, since there is, from the outset, no vital commitment to thinking, but a normalized split between the hand that thinks and the hand that breathes. If we admit with Agamben that the writing of a work is not synonymous with the personal fulfillment of its creator, without this desire and this will for inner fulfillment it is difficult to influence the world and society. Ideas have the power to change social behavior, but this power must first shake the life of those who engender them. Otherwise, the words begin and end as a dream in debt. All the voices that are currently clamoring for a revolution within the academy, and for a renewal of institutional philosophy, seem to reclaim a use of thought and speech projected towards social problems and extirpated from the natural narcissism towards which all rhetoric tends. For this communion between philosophy and society to take place, a much more intimate reconciliation must first happen between one's life and the work of philosophy. As long as the breathing hand is not compromised with the thinking hand, philosophical ascesis will remain a merely rhetorical exercise.

Nothing guarantees, however, that yoga or the anthropotechnics of Indian philosophy will not go through the same process of hyper-rationalization that Greek and Latin spiritual exercises went through inside the academy. There was a time when philosophy was the servant of theology (*ancilla theologiae*), today, similarly, it is subjected to institutional rules that are designed for the sciences and that inevitably turn the practice of philosophy into a kind of humanistic engineering whose results are measured with quantitative criteria. This implies that the only legitimate approach to study is the one that adjusts to those parameters, even when approaching texts, experiences, realities, that are not themselves

scientific or do not understand knowledge as contemporary science does. In addition, as a result of this servility to science, every philosophy professional tacitly consents to subject her thinking to the same writing guidelines. Apparently, *what we think* must be independent of *how we write it*, since in order for something to be ‘scientific’ philosophy, it must yield to a ready-made template that is the same for all disciplines. Whoever wants to publish philosophy in a format other than ‘scientific’ prose will find few prestigious journals willing to publish it. Instead, the professional philosopher must follow the homogeneous script of scientific papers that serves both for writing about chemistry and writing about Giordano Bruno's *dialogues*. This absurd imposition is counterproductive to the very exercise of philosophy: it limits creative thinking, hijacks our narrative capacity, and ends up hindering our ability to read –thus, it damages the three spiritual exercises par excellence. And in this scientific exercise of philosophy, language, turned into an end in itself, endures the greatest losses.

3. PHILOSOPHIA-MUNDI: *SIC VOS, NON VOBIS...*

I understood then that Nietzsche had sought me out to get out of his texts, to take long paces along its margins.

Maria Gabriela Llansol

The close relationship between life and practice is made explicit in many yoga treatises. In the medieval treatises of Haṭha yoga, for example, we hardly find philosophical or metaphysical doctrines but rather lists of respiratory, corporal, energetic exercises, etc., all oriented to spiritual liberation and the obtaining of powers (*siddhis*). Often these powers attract much more attention from researchers than the preconditions for obtaining them. The *Śiva saṃhitā* (3.35-41; 5.3-8), the *Gheraṇḍa saṃhitā* (5.23-31) or the *Haṭha yoga pradīpikā*, expose exhaustive lists about what the yogi should eat, what attitudes and what company he should cultivate and avoid, etc. Why should not certain philosophical exercises require a series of similar conditions? If Epicurus teaches a philosophy that aims at *ataraxia*, the pleasure (*hedone*) which forms the cornerstone of his teaching must be forcibly sustained in a frugal life,

for only a moderate life can create the necessary conditions for it to be an uninterrupted pleasure that does not disturb the mind. The rule of life (*kanon*) is so closely linked with his philosophical teaching that we cannot say where his life routine ends and where the properly “philosophical” exercise begins. Similarly, to practice the yoga of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, described as “skill in action” (BG, 2.50) and based on “equanimity” (BG, 2.48), the yogi should not eat much or little, he does not have to sleep much or little, and there are certain nutritional, ethical and social conditions to attend to. These vital conditions are not accidents separated from ideas, but are the *sine qua non* for thought to develop in one direction and not in another. Both yogic meditation and Platonic recollection of the soul require certain conditions, just as Plotinus's *Enneads* are not the result of abstract circumstances, nor are they the fruit of the kind of life that Caligula led. It is common sense—if we can appeal to this rare friend—that Plato arrives in Syracuse and observes that a way of life based on excess is not compatible with the philosophy that he believes in and that he teaches/practices: “With such habits, nobody under the sun who had followed this path since childhood could ever develop any sense—no one is tempered by so admirable nature—nor would anyone ever be likely to become moderate” (L.VII, 326c). In fact, Plato is thinking about the conditions that a republic requires of its citizens; if those from Syracuse are to become sensible and prudent, Plato suggests, they better strive to *change their lives*. Regardless of whether this *Seventh Letter* can or cannot be legitimately attributed to Plato, the social conditions demanded by the Platonic ideal republic are a reflection of the conditions of his own philosophy, which in turn would have been fatal to other practising lives, for example, to the philosophy of the Cynics.

Hadot himself argues that we cannot separate philosophical thought from the way of life in which it is embodied: “Philosophical discourse is part of the way of life. But, on the other hand, we must recognize that the philosopher's choice of life determines his discourse” (1995, p.21.) Therefore, his distinction between ascetic practices related to eating, sleeping, or sexual practices, and “philosophical” exercises, makes sense only if what is sought is to distinguish the monastic life from the ascetic

life of the philosopher. We have already indicated that not all asceticism is of a religious nature. But under these distinctions is hidden the danger of abstracting the philosophical practice from the vital conditions that are inherent to it. There is something that all ascetics –religious, artistic, philosophical, or of any other kind– inevitably share: their lives are committed to the exercise itself. The life of the practitioner must be, by force, alien to any pact that isolates what s/he does from what s/he is. The exercise of the philosopher, however diverse it may be, should represent no exception here.

Jean Améry ends up feeling ashamed of himself when trying to steer his ascetic friend, the painter Eric Schmid, down the road to success: “Shame because we were unable to embrace monastic life, because we decided to live in this century [...] shame because we stood before a type of life that has never known the concept of falsehood, while ours...” (2003, p.219). What Améry so honestly describes is the shame of someone who has learned to live by doing something that s/he is not committed to being. The real mistake, however, is to believe that this commitment is an exclusive feature of “monastic life”. What kind of philosophical exercise this misunderstanding may give rise to, especially when it turns out to be a consensual error promoted by the institutions that administer philosophy, is something that practitioners of philosophy will have to ponder with themselves. But as long as there is no collective will to break with the assumptions that support the pact of indifference, the verse *Sic vos, non vobis, mellificatis* ... will continue to be the hidden sentence – the potential motto – behind so many rhetorical discourses held in the name of a *PowerPoint*-wisdom.

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