Jonathan Earle

ONLY DON'T KNOW!

REFLECTIONS ON A THOUGHTLESS LIFE

SNB Magazin 11

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Reflections on a Thoughtless Life

By Jonathan Earle

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My conversion to Buddhism happened in a church bathroom.

I remember flushing the toilet and watching the water disappear to who-knows-where. I scrubbed my hands and examined my face in the mirror, thinking, "I'm going to be doing this for the rest of my life."[1] Becoming a Buddha would take my whole life, surely. I imagined a path spiraling out endlessly before me. It was a terrifying and exciting thought. I guess I would call that my, "conversion experience."

I must have been thirteen years old. I was in the bathroom of the local Unitarian Church at a Friday evening meeting of the Springwind Zen Center.[2] I had gone to several meetings by this time. They usually consisted of sitting meditation for twenty minutes, walking meditation for ten, sitting another twenty, and then a discussion with the group's leaders Troy and Carlo. I didn't quite get the point of meditation and I didn't quite get the point of the strange, circular kind of language Zen people use to talk about what they do, but there was something that *they* possessed and I lacked. They: Those wild, old Zen men from the *kōans*.[3] I was fascinated by stories of these masters performing miracles and giving laconic answers to enigmatic questions. I was captured by the mystique,[4] believing it to be profound. Even my American Zen teachers seemed to be completely at home in a radically different way of seeing and being in the world. What had they figured out that I hadn't? I supposed it could be summed up with the one word, "enlightenment." In the bathroom that evening, I was prepared to spend my whole life getting there.

I have re-told this memory enough times that it has become a myth: I'm certain that whatever content it once had has been thoroughly

re-inscribed by new meanings. In the past I've said of this story, "It was a gut feeling. I just *knew* that there was something about this stuff (i.e., Zen) that was *real*." I no longer think of my "conversion experience" as a pre-conceptual recognition of timeless wisdom. Maybe Zen does indeed intimate to something true, but the mystical experience of a believer cannot verify that truth. I write this today as an incorrigible *icchantika:* a slanderer of the Three Jewels.[5]

I used to imagine my life as a path—a thoroughly Buddhist image. Before I came to Buddhism, I was lost. An innumerable number of causes and conditions had fortunately brought me onto the right path and I had no choice but to follow until the end. I don't think of my life so teleologically anymore. I try to think of it in a more aleatory way: An innumerable number of contingent conditions coalesced and that juncture, that temporary node, is "me." And one of the big knots of sub-nodes that makes up the "me" is Buddhism, and on one of the deepest roots in one of those sub-nodes is my bathroom mirror revelation. It's just a useful literary device, a trace. The conversion experience is a symbolic beginning.

The purpose of this essay is to confess—to give an account of how I became and un-became a Buddhist. This is an impossible task, but I hope to draw out some of the innumerable forces at work in my becoming and unbecoming.

Hopefully this essay can also shine some light back onto the reader—What ideologies do you hold dear? Where do they come from? How do they compel you to act in the world?

Nowadays I have a different interpretation

of my "conversion experience." Now, I interpret that moment of recognition, of gut-level "knowing," as significant in an entirely different way: it was the moment of *interpellation* into an *x-buddhism*. Glenn Wallis has coined the term "x-buddhism" to combat the illusion of a monolithic Buddhism that claims "grand authority concerning

human knowledge."[6] The "x" signifies the numerous possible modifiers (e.g, secular, Thai Forest, Soto Zen, Pure Land, etc.) of the single theme of "buddhism." Each of the limitless possible x-buddhisms has its own "version of the means and end of the One's grand authority."[7] In other words, every x-buddhism conceives of "Buddhism" ("the One"), and even the world, from its own "Right View."

Interpellation is the term Louis Althusser uses to describe the "entering into" or "being hailed" by an ideology. An ideology is a belief-in-practice[8] which functions to reproduce class relations.[9] Althusser illustrates his theory of interpellation with the famous policeman example: You are walking down the street when suddenly you hear the voice of a policeman behind you, "Hey! You!" You stop and turn around. In that moment,[10] you are interpellated. By turning around you affirm the authority of the other/the policeman. The policeman is a representative of, what Althusser calls, the Absolute Subject. This Subject (in this case, The Law) is the center of the ideology (ideology of the police) for which all subjects of an ideology work.[11] Simultaneously, you recognize *yourself* as a subject: the policeman is really calling to *you*. There is also the unstated understanding of how you *ought* to behave with the police officer; as long as you are a law-abiding citizen (a good subject), "everything will be alright."[12] In successful interpellation, the subject believes that their ideology "really is so," that they "freely" submit to "the commandments of the [Absolute] Subject." Particular ideologies produce subjects for particular class positions who "work by themselves" to perpetuate their ideology and their class position. In the mirror, I recognized myself as a suffering sentient being in need of the Dharma. I knew that if I followed the "path" of the Dharma I would end up at enlightenment. I became a subject of the Dharma.

I grew up in a stable, middle-class household with a loving family.

Our comfortable existence [predicated on the invisible suffering of untold masses] allowed for the luxury of dabbling in diverse pastimes (such as Buddhist meditation). My siblings and I grew up in the void of our parents' non-practicing-Protestantism. We went to church *maybe* once a year. (I think in 2001 we went on Easter, a few days after 9/11, and Christmas.) My parents were the "spiritual but not religious" sort of agnostics. They encouraged my siblings and me to explore "spiritual" interests but not to become "too dogmatic."[13]

Many of my childhood obsessions were scientifically-oriented, and became progressively more grandiose as I got older: in first grade, I wanted to build a bomb; in third grade, a robot; in fifth grade, I wanted to understand how life began… At some point I decided that the most interesting questions weren't scientific ones but questions of meaning. I decided that I couldn't find ultimate meaning, truth, or happiness in science, so I turned to religion for answers. By the time I was thirteen, I was engaged in a full-blown quest for existential meaning and truth. This was to become a lasting interest. Initially I tried praying, but nothing ever happened, so I gave up on God. My religious quest led me to read the *Bhagavad-Gita,* the *Dao De Jing,* and finally an anthology called *Essential Zen*.[14] This last one captured my imagination and set me looking for someplace where I could learn more about Zen Buddhism.

In a paper on Western Buddhism, Žižek makes an interesting argument that gets at a possible motivation for my precocious crisis of meaning. He argues that Western Buddhism is an ideological "fetish," which is "the embodiment of the Lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth."[15] As fetish, Western Buddhism allows you to believe *it* is what "really matters," while functioning to enable "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."[16] The "unbearable truth" Žižek speaks of is, of course, the fact that the Western Buddhist *is* really "in it" (i.e., capitalism), she cannot escape "the spectacle," and the "inner Self" is, in fact, a gaping hole to be filled by ideology. From Žižek's perspective, put simply, the unbearable truth is the exploitative economic system to which we are all subjected.

Tom Pepper makes a similar argument in a review of *The Trauma of Everyday Life* by Mark Epstein. While specifically referring to Epstein's brand of *petite-bourgeois* Buddhism, the argument can be applied to most Western Buddhists (I think). Pepper argues that Epstein's ideology is one tailored to reproduce, what he calls, the "professional" subject. This subject occupies a class position in the "lower stratum of the ruling class," believes what she does to be "natural, necessary," and that she "works hard."[17] She lives off the labor of the working class while functioning to "administer the transfer of capitalist wealth from those who produce it to those who appropriate it."[18] However, this subject must "remain ignorant, in fact, of what role they play in the social formation."[19] Pepper compares this subject to the master in Hegel's master-slave dialectic. The master is an idle being, cut off from the slave who labors to turn raw Being (matter) into commodities for the consumption of the master, and must enjoy "fleeting, passive" pleasures.[20] Like the master, thinking too hard would make the "professional" subjects unhappy,[21] so they search for a spiritual fetish like Buddhism. Thought-free bliss is a goal for the professional subject, and certainly one of the great appeals of Zen for me. It was a revelation when I learned that thinking was the cause of all my unhappiness!

There are numerous forces at work here, but to keep the narrative flowing, I'll just say that Google led me to the Springwind Zen Center…

What kind of ideology, specifically, was I engaged in

at the Springwind Zen Center? The Center is a part of the international Kwan Um School of Zen. Kwan Um began with the founding of the Providence Zen Center in 1972 by Zen Master Seung Sahn.[22] He is the

most well-known Korean Buddhist leader in the West and worked tirelessly to found over a hundred Zen Centers across North America, Europe, Asia, and even South Africa and Australia.[23] Seung Sahn was well known for forcefully asking his students the question, "What are you?" In fact, this became one of his signature teachings: "Zen is very simple…*What are you?*"[24] In my years with the Kwan Um school, I have often heard students describe being "hooked" by this question, saying something to the effect of: "I had always wanted to ask that question but never had," or "I was absolutely stumped." Seung Sahn's method is interesting because it points to something true: the hole at the center of subjectivity, the utter emptiness of ideology. Those who felt struck by this question were probably already imperfectly interpellated into other ideologies, and perhaps understood the emptiness of their ideology on some level. Asking that question, point-blank, is in a sense a reversal of Althusser's classic example of the policeman shouting, "Hey! You!" It is pulling the rug out from under—pushing someone briefly outside of their ego identifications, and into new ones. As Althusser says, we are always-already within ideology.

While Seung Sahn may have gestured at the utter contingency of human being, he could not but fill that void: "In this whole world everyone searches for happiness outside, but nobody understands their true self inside." Seung Sahn raises the terrifying possibility that there is *no self,* but quickly fills in the void with a "true self" which is the source of true happiness. Seung Sahn says that if you pursue the question, "'what am I?' sooner or later you will run into a wall where all thinking is cut off. We call this 'don't know.'" "Don't know" is something like a spirit—a "clear" consciousness, which is *prior to* (thus unaffected by) thought, and which can directly perceive things just as they are: "Finally, your don't-know mind will become clear. Then you can see the sky, only blue. You can see the tree, only green. Your mind is like a clear mirror."[25] Simply by no longer thinking and "looking within," you can "return to your true nature" and see that everything is perfect just the way it is. The apparent simplicity (just

don't think!) of this solution to "the great matter of life and death" appealed to me.

When I entered high school I took the Five Precepts[26] which, in the Kwan Um School, mark one's commitment to "the Dharma." My belief only intensified as I swallowed the teachings whole with the zealousness of the newly converted. By the time I got to college I had done my first silent, weeklong retreat, consisting of over ten hours of meditation per day. In my first two years of college I adamantly refused to take any philosophy or Buddhist studies courses for fear that they would "interfere with my practice." Finally, in my first semester of junior year, I took a class with William Edelglass called, "Buddhism, Representation, and Language," which at the time was my first experience thinking critically about Buddhism in any capacity. I remember reading and discussing an article by Dale S. Wright called "Rethinking Transcendence and the Role of Language in Zen Experience." Wright critiques the notion advanced in many modernist presentations of Zen (e.g., D. T. Suzuki and Thomas Kasulis) that "Zen enlightenment is an undistorted, 'pure experience' of 'things as they are' beyond the shaping power of language."[27] In my mind, of course, this *was* enlightenment. Whereas before this course I had always avoided scholarship (critical scholarship in particular), disregarding it as "intellectualization" for people who thought too much and didn't understand the heart of Zen, for once I had to come to terms with criticism of my own tradition. Contradictions opened up in the tension between my naive Zen beliefs and criticisms like Wright's. The discomfort that this course brought me was the first spasms of what Glenn Wallis calls *aporetic dissonance:* "An affective condition. The believer's discovery within himself or herself of a dissonant ring of perplexity, puzzlement, confusion, and loss concerning the integrity of Buddhism's self-presentation"[28]

I interpreted the *aporetic dissonance* as a result of thinking too much. This course signified what I felt to be a growing disconnect between my coursework (mostly natural sciences) and my Buddhist practice. With the additional stress of a failing romantic relationship, I decided

to temporarily leave school in my second semester of junior year. I imagined myself as a monk, renouncing the material world and pursuing my true nature on a mountaintop in Korea. Turns out that's not so feasible. Instead, I planned on attending the full three month winter retreat at the Providence Zen Center, so that I could finally do what I was meant to do: sit. To my disappointment, my grandmother died at an inopportune time: I couldn't attend the first month of the retreat.[29] This time in retreat was a breakthrough for me. I felt that I had finally attained "don't know." All of the tricky academic questions were in abeyance.

When I got back to school in the fall, I committed to Buddhist studies as a major. I was immediately confronted again with difficult questions. In "Buddhist Modernism in Theory and Practice" I began to develop a more critical attitude towards Buddhism (without ever getting too close to my own tradition, thankfully). Early in the course, as we were discussing David McMahan's *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, William asked me nonchalantly, "So, do you think of yourself as more of a Buddhist modernist, or traditionalist?" I tried, but couldn't really answer the question. Neither option seemed great. As I understood it then, the traditionalists were bound up with ritual and superstition about "hungry ghosts," reincarnation, the Four Great Elements, and other fictions of a medieval cosmology. The modernists, like the MBSR (Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction) and McMindfulness people were clearly throwing the baby out with the bath water! They were missing some crucial feature of a "correct Buddhism" that I could never quite articulate.[30] I more or less side-stepped questions that might have engendered *aporetic dissonance,* but at least I began getting comfortable with critical thought.

I resolved to learn more about Korean Sŏn Buddhism, the parent of the Americanized Kwan Um School. In the spring of 2016, I finally decided what my Plan of Concentration would focus on: Pojo Chinul's (1158-1210) conception of "true mind." Chinul is an extremely influential figure in the Korean Buddhist tradition (yet little-known in

the West), responsible for uniting the (erstwhile) rival doctrinal and meditative schools. His work is still studied at Korean Buddhist seminaries.[31] I chose to study Chinul because I wanted to study my own "spiritual heritage." I chose Chinul because he was a thinker relevant to my life, i.e., he was a thinker officially sanctioned by teachers of the Kwan Um School. However, as I waded through Robert Buswell's *Collected Works of Chinul*, a troubling question began to gnaw at me: Why was there so much discussion of the mind as the basis for reality? It was beginning to sound like Chinul was an idealist...

Ultimately, what is that thing which during the twelve periods of the day knows hunger and thirst, cold and heat, anger and joy? This physical body is a synthesis of four conditions: earth, water, fire, and wind. Since matter is passive and insentient, how can it see, hear, sense, and know? That which is able to see, hear, sense, and know is perforce your Buddha-nature.[32]

I could forgive the antiquated pseudo-chemistry of the four elements; chemistry hadn't been invented yet. But the last two sentences were making me anxious...how could the Buddha-nature be separate from matter? How was the belief in a separate category of being apart from matter any different from the belief in a soul? I had long since disavowed the non-practicing Protestantism of my childhood and considered myself to be thoroughly "materialist."[33] The notion that Chinul expresses here, that there is a strict duality in matter and mind and that the latter is the important one, made no sense to me.

In contrast, Seung Sahn taught that "mind and matter are not two," and that this duality is just an empty name, as the Absolute is "before thinking."[34] I interpreted this in a sort of vague, crypto-vitalist way. In other words, if you don't think about it, the relationship between mind and matter ceases to be a problem. It may have been obscurantist, but at least Seung Sahn's view accorded with the hegemonic discourse of reductive empiricism.

What's the problem? Why does it matter that a twelfth century Korean Zen master and a 20th century Korean master don't agree? Isn't an evolution in thought predictable and desirable? At this point in my life I was still enraptured by Ch'an/Zen/Sŏn's perennial ideal of the unbroken transmission. I didn't believe that there was *literally* a single, unbroken chain of ancestors, but I certainly believed there must be some continuity in thought. Sure, the outer features of the teaching (unimportant things like karma) could change, but the *core* itself couldn't change because there is one, universal experience transcending all of the particularities of culture and history: access to the true mind. The minor differences in Buddhist thought could be attributed to culture.

However, the differences between Seung Sahn and Chinul about the nature of true mind (was it a spiritual essence, or the non-duality of mind and matter?) were significant enough to cause me a lot of stress. I had difficulty writing a paper on Chinul that semester because I didn't feel confident in my interpretation of his ideas. Either I was missing some key part of his thought that would temper his radical dualism, or Chinul was simply too profound for me to comprehend. The alternatives—either he was wrong about true mind, or I was—were too awful to consider.

I was consistently frustrated by this problem throughout the semester, and I began to think that my lack of understanding was indicative of a general lack of spiritual maturity. The old ideas of escapism that I had felt a year prior resurfaced. Again, I began entertaining fantasies of moving to Korea and becoming a monk. The world has so many problems, how could I waste my time doing anything else?

In spring of 2016, Marlboro College awarded me a summer grant to study Korean Buddhism as part of my Plan of Concentration (senior thesis). I planned to travel around South Korea, visiting historic sites, temples, spending time in monasteries with monastics, and taking Korean language classes. On some level, I hoped that this trip would help me resolve the deepening inner contradiction I felt over Chinul.

and rocky contours of the mountain stream separating Baekdamsa temple from the mundane world. It was day four. We had just heard Venerable Subul's second mandatory Dharma speech of the day, and about half of the retreatants had left the *sŏnbang* (meditation hall) to walk or sleep or else do something prohibited. Subul had urged us as always, through the voice of our illustrious (Twitter-famous) translator Venerable Haemin, to break through the *hwadu* (topic of meditative inquiry).

This was the *hwadu* Subul had given us on the first day of the retreat…

Subul held up his hand and then slowly curled and uncurled his finger. The room was silent as 60 eyes trained on the inscrutable movement of a finger. He asked us to do the same. Then he had said, "What is moving this finger? It is neither finger, I, nor mind. However, you cannot also say that the finger, I, or mind does not move the finger either. Then, what is causing me to move this finger?"[35] That was our question to meditate with/on/through for the next 6 days. I should amend this; for Subul, the *hwadu* is not the question "What is making me do this?", but the bodily sensation of doubt—the desperately-wanting-to-understand (Subul called this feeling *doubt*) that the question was intended to evoke. We[36] were instructed to focus single-mindedly not on the doubt sensation; every other sensory/cognitive phenomenon was to be ignored. Twice a day Subul instructed us to practice *ferociously and constantly*—as if we were mosquitos vainly trying to penetrate an iron ball; or like the *hwad*u was a burr caught in our throat: impossible to either swallow or spit up. We were to practice until we reached the place of "silver mountains and iron walls," and then, "when the time is ripe, sudden enlightenment is revealed at the moment the practitioner 'breaks open' the hwadu."[37] Subul claimed that he had designed this particular method with very little instruction in order to frustrate us and make us look harder for the answer to our question. Almost all of these talks

ended in questions from the audience regarding what the *hell* we were supposed to be doing.

On the fourth day, after his virtually identical morning speech urging us to push through with the *hwadu* until the very end, he called up a young Korean man from the group to talk about his experience. This was the camera guy. He had beautiful, long hair done up in a ponytail, a messy goatee and mustache, and fashionably large glasses. He had stayed at the periphery except when he was taking group pictures—he would enthusiastically yell, *hanna!…dŭl!…set!* ("one, two, three") and take the picture one-handed. I didn't even realize he was taking part in the meditation until two days before when he had gotten up from his seat in the *sŏnbang*, stormed over to the rice paper doors, and slammed them in the faces of two retreatants who were loudly talking outside. Subul informed us that this man had solved the *hwadu*. Through the voice of our translator, the man told us how he at first he couldn't concentrate on the *hwadu* at all. He felt as though he alone didn't understand while everyone else was beginning to grasp it and make progress. He was determined to solve the *hwadu* or die trying (hence the door-slamming). The night before, he told us, he had stayed up all night meditating, trying to break open the *hwadu*. At one point he was in so much pain and felt so much anger that he thought he would die. The intensity continued to build until suddenly it felt like the sky had broken open: the feelings completely evaporated and the *hwadu* lifted from his shoulders. He immediately jumped up and began laughing. He felt so much power that he could knock down the *sŏnbang* with a single blow. The blissful feeling had lasted through till the following morning when he related his experience to Subul and had received the seal of approval: sudden awakening!

I couldn't help but feel that this "awakening experience" was very contrived—an emotional anomaly that was taken to be some lasting cognitive shift. But I was still intrigued. I had a tiny belief that I could get some grand experience out of this ordeal after all. I stuck it out.

That afternoon, the ten or so of us who were inspired by the bravado of Subul's speech held our rectangular, grey mats and pressed on

fearlessly with the *hwadu*. In rows, meditators were slouching and scowling, a few nodding off. In the back of the room was a constantly replenished supply of coffee, Oreo cookies, Choco Pies, and juice boxes. I sat—enervated by stillness, silence, and heat. Mercifully, there was no rustling of wrappers at the moment. After struggling for what was probably all of 10 minutes, I stood up on stiff legs and headed outside for a walk. Just as I reached the door, a sobbing erupted from one of the middle-aged Korean women in the room. It was the kind of primal expression of pain that comes from young children but rarely adults. I looked on, unsure of what to do. The *sŏnbang* monitor, a silent yet imposing young monk, had taught us through glares not to attempt to comfort a crying person during meditation: this was a natural part of the process and we weren't to interfere.

But this woman was really breaking down, half-crumpling into herself. Subul was alerted. I watched as he stepped into the *sŏnbang* with a look of (could it be?) glee, quietly positioned himself behind the woman, and let out a shout as he pounded her back once with the heel of his hand. As this near-farcical scene unfolded, I passed through the paper doors. I was completely fed-up with the sadomasochism of the retreat and (in my mind) Subul's imperious attitude. What was I doing in this place? Subul's hit only confirmed for me what I had suspected all along—this brand of Buddhism was baloney. I decided then and there to give up the crazy *hwadu* practice Subul had given us at the beginning of the retreat and return to the comfortable mantra practice that I had learned in American Zen centers.

I stewed in the Korean summer sun. Subul left the building. The crying continued.

Subul was not acting in a random, violent way, but perhaps

even had an altruistic motivation in mind: to "liberate" this woman from her ignorance. To use Bernard Faure's phrase, Subul was simply performing the rhetoric of immediacy. In Wallis' terminology, Subul

was *ventriloquizing* tradition. Wallis defines *ventriloquism* as "the Buddhist (person) manifesting buddhistic representation via speech and writing… Evidence of ventriloquism is the predictable iteration of buddhemes."[38] Clearly the hits and shouts are *buddhemes*, which Wallis defines as "the iterative vocabulary, phrases, and sentences that comprise virtually one hundred percent of buddhistic discourse… In reflexively speaking and writing in buddhemes, Buddhists effectively reduce reality to the descriptive terms provided by Buddhist discourse."[39] OK, so hits and shouts aren't "vocabulary, phrases, and sentences," per se, but they are symbols recognized by a group—a language game. Dale S. Wright terms this non-verbal discourse employed in Ch'an "encounter dialogues" right up until the present-day, "the rhetoric of direct pointing."[40] Wright claims that it was because of the "'depth' and invisibility of its referent" that this rhetoric developed to be "as unconventional as its referent,"[41]the referent being, of course, open parentheses. By virtue of their very "directness," these signs (hitting, shouting, etc.) can be ascribed any meaning endorsed by the orthodoxy of a particular group. I thought I understood the meaning of Subul's action, but the obvious performativity of it, and the apparent pleasure he took in exercising his power, made the whole incident an odious one.

Marilyn Ivy proposes that, in modernity, Buddhism is imagined in two distinct modes: "Buddhism as object of modern fantasy and longing, bearing nostalgic freight of the premodern and non-Western; 2) Buddhism as a transhistorical religion comprising technologies of liberation, thus intrinsically empty of historical signification or cultural baggage."[42] One of my desires on this trip was to confirm this second perception of Buddhism: Chinul was saying exactly the same thing as Seung Sahn. "True mind" was always understood as somewhere-in-between a vitalist force animating matter and a Lockean "ghost in the machine." There could be no contradiction because both men had had the universal, incontrovertible experience of awakening. At the same time, I was anxious that perhaps I was getting something wrong. Perhaps in returning to the "motherland" of Kwan Um Zen, I would have a profound experience or meet a wise

spiritual guide to set me straight. My desire to become a monk was certainly based partly on this romanticized (orientalist) view of Korea, as well. However, the retreat with Subul dealt a serious blow to the first illusion. It went a long way to confirming my suspicion that there were no "true monks"[43] left in Korea after Seung Sahn, or if there were, they were hidden deep in mountain monasteries. In effect, I retreated further into the Kwan Um camp, believing my x-buddhism to be the correct one after all.

After the retreat with Subul, I spent nearly six weeks at Musangsa, the only Kwan Um monastery in South Korea. During this time, my desire to ordain only grew. Living the holy life was all I could think about: all day, every day. I talked about my ambitions with the Zen Master and other senior monks; they encouraged me to wait until I was *certain*. Surely the idea of a sexless life was off-putting, but it was a small price to pay for a lifetime of service. Throughout the three month trip, the feeling of desire became one of certainty, fate.[44] I distinctly remember chanting *Kwan Seum Bosal* (the Korean name for Avalokiteśvara, bodhisattva of compassion) in the *Sanshingak* (shrine to the mountain spirit) one afternoon, and having an overwhelming sense of the suffering of the world. I knew that only by ordaining could I be of use in the universe's Grand Design. I fell on my knees and wept, completely certain, resigned to the inevitability of a life spent in grey robes.

I carried this certainty with me back to Vermont in September. I was excited to finish my college education, get a job, pay off my student loans, and then save up enough for a plane ticket to Seoul. However, once back in the academic trenches, my certainty began eroding again.

Strangely, I have the most difficulty making sense

of this last part of my story. By trawling through the last seven months of my email correspondence, I've been able to reconstruct a rough timeline.

On October 15th, I had a conversation with a Zen Master at Providence Zen Center about monkhood. She told me that many of the monks she had met in Korea had girlfriends. She said that she had no problem with this, except that monks ought to be more transparent. She also informed my that one of the monks that I admired most had had several relationships while ordained. I came away from this conversation profoundly disappointed. Perhaps it was "unnatural" for people to constrain their sexual drives for their entire adult lives? By late October or early November, I had discovered the Speculative Non-Buddhism site. I remember my first reaction to the site (after utter incomprehension) was rage. I couldn't believe how disrespectful the authors and commentators were. The rage began mutating to horror as I read on. Reading the blog was like watching a meticulous, gory surgery, but I couldn't turn away. On November 6th, unsure of what to do with it, I recommended the SNB blog to my Zen teacher, Jean, telling her that "the object seems to be pretty scathing (accurate, I think) critiques of Buddhism, especially the sloppy thinking of modern, Western Buddhists. I've found that it is a good mirror to reflect my own prejudices and deeply cherished beliefs about what Buddhism(s) is/are, have been, could be." She said that, reading the blog, she wanted to "stand up and cheer." I don't think she read very far…

By Thanksgiving, I was utterly fed up with Chinul and his confusing Huayan metaphysics. Hoping to get away from it, I began reading about Insight Meditation avidly. I was particularly taken with Gil Fronsdal and his vision of a metaphysics-free, "Naturalistic Buddhism." I bought one of his books, and even signed up for two retreats at the Insight Meditation Society (which I subsequently cancelled). At this point, I was still entertaining the thought of (at least) temporary ordination. This Insight obsession was to last from late November to mid-January.

I estimate that I began reading the SNB material in earnest on January 22nd, when I subscribed to the blog. Pretty soon after that, I entered into what Wallis calls, *aporetic inquiry*. This is a radical questioning of

Buddhism's epistemic authority which "alerts the practitioner to (i) fissures, gaps, aporia, in the Buddhist dispensation" as well as the possibility that Buddhism simply plasters over these fundamental gaps with rhetorical assurance.[45] For me, this inquiry into all-that-did-not-make-sense happened rapidly and intensely: there was a weeklong period where I did nothing but read the SNB material all day, barely eating or leaving my room. I felt like someone had died. On February 2nd, I called one of my Zen teachers to tell him that I didn't want to be part of the Kwan Um School any longer, and that I couldn't trust the Kwan Um teachings any more. It was a heated exchange, but I delayed leaving Kwan Um, deciding to "sit on it" a little more. On February 11th, after reading Glenn Wallis' appeal to use the "instruments of non-buddhism" to "do something,"[46] I decided to give it a try (see the first two emails of the appendix).

Finally, there is *ancoric loss*. This is Wallis' term for the final loss of hope that Buddhism *does what it says it does*.[47] Ancoric loss is the *irreversible* acceptance that x-buddhism cannot offer a refuge, ultimate wisdom, or an end to suffering. In a sense, ancoric loss is the completion of the job Seung Sahn started, but refused to finish. He may have yanked the rug out from under a few students with the question, "What are you?" but he always slipped a Zen rug under their feet. The SNB project refuses rugs, and it questions the entire edifice that the rug conceals. Any place a Buddhist might seek refuge has been immanently critiqued by Non-buddhism in order to show that x-buddhism is not sufficient knowledge in and of itself. The relentless critique of x-buddhism that brings the practitioner to ancoric loss is only half the battle, however. If, as Tom Pepper insists, we "take *anātman* at full strength,"[48] then it is only possible to change society by consciously creating better ideologies. Non-buddhist practice therefore necessarily includes the theoretical and the political.

I titled this essay, "Reflections on a Thoughtless Life" because I have spent nearly half of it avoiding thought, practicing "don't know." Thinking was impossible because I was committed to the idea that it is the cause of suffering. Ancoric loss is the best thing that has ever

happened to me: I am now relearning how to think, and how powerful and enjoyable it can be when done well. I'm no longer interested in practicing Buddhism, but I am interested in practicing non-buddhism. As I said, non-buddhist practice involves both a continuous critique in theory, as well as political action in practice. I can't think of a better way to address *what is to be done,* or a better embodiment of the twin Buddhist ideals of Wisdom and Compassion.

I would like to end this paper

in the same manner that we end every practice session at the Springwind Zen Center—with the Four Great Vows:

1. Sentient beings are numberless. We vow to save them all.
2. Delusions are endless. We vow to cut through them all.
3. The teachings are infinite. We vow to learn them all.
4. The Buddha Way is inconceivable. We vow to attain it.[49]

I sometimes recite these vows to remind myself of the manner in which I want to live my life. Saving a sentient being, cutting through a delusion, learning a teaching, and attaining the Buddha Way, looks a bit different now. "Saving" looks like true political and economic equality attained through struggle; "cutting through" looks like ideological and theoretical critique; "learning" involves careful thought and its application in practice; and "attaining the Buddha Way" looks like expanding human knowledge of empty reality in order to benefit all people and the planet. These vows don't look much like the originals. They are, as Glenn Wallis is fond of saying, "buddhistically uninterpretable"—the Four Great Non-buddhist Vows.

Notes

1. I don't mean peeing or hand-washing, although I expect to do those things for the rest of my life too.
2. I have changed all of personal (and place) names in this paper.

3. An anthologized "case" in the Ch'an/Zen/S ŏ n tradition; an anecdote usually consisting of a highly stylized "encounter" between Zen teachers or students. Often, Zen teachers will ask their students questions about a particular *kōan* (Chi. kung'an; Kor. *kong'an*), or ask them to comment on it to show their understanding. *Kōans* are usually the original sources of *hwadus*. Here's a well-known example:

"Deshan's Thirty Blows"

Zen Master Xuanjian of Deshan [Jianxing] said to the assembly during an informal talk, "I am not going to give an answer tonight. Anyone who asks a question will get thirty blows."

A monastic came up and bowed. Deshan hit him.

The monastic said, "I haven't asked a question. Why did you hit me?"

Deshan said, "Where are you from?"

The monastic said, "I came from Silla [in Korea]."

Deshan said, "Before you even got on board the ship, you deserved thirty blows."

I've spent way too much time over the years meditating on and giving answers to *kōans* like this, learning through trial-and-error the formulas to this language game.

From John Daido Loori, *The True Dharma Eye: Zen Master Dōgen's Three Hundred Kōans,* trans. Kazuaki Tanahashi and John Daido Loori, (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2005), 44.

4. Glenn Wallis refers to this (quasi-Orientalist?) mystique as *rhetorics of self-display:* "The aesthetic affectation of thaumaturgy—clothing, naming, hair styles, painting, sculpture, architecture…Roaring roshis, shamanic lamas, wizardly tulkus, and wonder-working arahants," all of which constitute rhetorics of self-display. To put it simply, the "outer form" of Buddhism

does "work" on the practitioner. The outer form metaphorically says, *I know something that you don't*. See, Glenn Wallis, "Nascent Speculative Non-Buddhism," (2011), 19.

5. *Icchantikas* are a class of sentient beings "lacking in Buddha-nature"; they can never become awakened (*Wonhyo: Selected Works,* ed. A. Charles Muller [Seoul: Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, 2012], 89). "The Three Jewels" are the three basic components of Buddhism: The *Buddha*, the *Dharma* (teachings), and the *Sangha* (community of monastic and lay practitioners). "I vow not to slander the Three Jewels" was the tenth precept that I took in the Kwan Um School of Zen (of which the Springwind Zen Center is a part).
6. Glenn Wallis, "Why X-Buddhism?," *Speculative Non-Buddhism,* 2010.
7. Wallis, "What is X-Buddhism?"
8. Tom Pepper's expression. See, "*Saṃsāra* as the Realm of Ideology," in *The Faithful Buddhist,* (Amazon Digital Services, 2011).
9. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays,* trans. Ben Brewster, (Monthly Review Press: 1971).
10. Actually, we are all "always-already" interpellated into ideology (although not *all* ideologies). If you weren't already interpellated into the police ideology, you wouldn't have turned around.
11. Althusser, "Ideology," 178.
12. Althusser, "Ideology," 181.
13. A criticism that my mother has been leveling at me *for years* in regards to my involvement with Buddhism.
14. A big influence on my interest in East Asian culture arose, I imagine, from a two week trip to China that my parents, brother, and I took to adopt my little sister. Initially, I was much more enamored with Chairman Mao than Buddhism.
15. Slavoj Žižek, "From Western Marxism to Western Buddhism," *Cabinet,* no. 2 (2001).
16. *Ibid.*

17. Tom Pepper, "Traumatized by Toast," in *The Faithful Buddhist,* (Amazon Digital Services: 2011).
18. Pepper, "Traumatized by Toast."
19. *Ibid.*
20. Apologies to G. W. F. Hegel, who I'm probably misrepresenting. My interpretation is entirely second-hand, based on Pepper's essay and Muhammad Kamal, "Master-Slave Relationship in Hegel's Dialectic," Hegel Summer School 2004.
21. Interestingly, David Graeber supports this position indirectly by drawing a comparison between the conditions of slavery and the conditions of capitalism wherein societies with "extreme forms of chattel slavery" often originate ideologies of "freedom," "essentially as a point of contrast"; in an analogous way, he argues, neoliberal societies have notions of "freedom of contract," and "personal liberty *outside the workplace"* (emphasis original). Graeber concludes that capitalism is a transformation of slavery (a part-time slavery), and vice versa. The "unhappily affluent" are still alienated as, in the words of Kamal, "slaves of capital." Isn't Buddhism precisely such an ideology of freedom? See, David Graeber, "Turning Modes of Production Inside Out: Or, Why Capitalism is a Transformation of Slavery," *Critique of Anthropology,* vol. 26 no.1 (2006): 79-80.
22. Kwan Um School of Zen, "About the School."
23. *Ibid.*
24. Seung Sahn, "About Zen," *Cambridge Zen Center,* accessed April 20, 2017. "About the School," *Kwan Um School of Zen,* accessed April 20, 2017.
25. In Kwan Um the five precepts are:

I vow to abstain from taking life.
I vow to abstain from taking things not given.
I vow to abstain from misconduct done in lust.
I vow to abstain from lying.

I vow to abstain from intoxicants, taken to induce heedlessness.

26. Jacob Perl, "The Five Precepts," *Kwan Um School of Zen*.
27. Dale S. Wright, "Rethinking Transcendence: The Role of Language in Zen Experience," in Philosophy East and West, vol. 42 no. 1, (1992): 113.
28. Wallis, "Non-Buddhism," 12.
29. Such a compassionate Bodhisattva! I was actually more concerned about "my practice" than my grandmother.
30. Perhaps *sila* (ethics) and *prajña* (wisdom)? For a great discussion on the evolution of mindfulness in the United States, see Jeff Wilson's *Mindful America*.
31. For more information, see Robert E. Buswell Jr.,*The Zen Monastic Experience,* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).
32. *The Korean Approach to Zen: The Collected Works of Chinul,* trans. Robert E. Buswell Jr., (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), 141.
33. Which, in practice, meant reductionism with the gaps filled in by the protean notion of "don't know mind."
34. Seung Sahn, "Sim Gum Do: Mind-Sword Path," *Kwan Um School of Zen,* 10/1/1974.
35. These are actually the instructions given in a paper written by Subul, "Making Ganhwa Sŏn Accessible to the General Public," trans. Robert E. Buswell, Jr., (8/13/2010), 5. I can only remember Subul wiggling his finger at us and asking, "What is making me do *this*?"
36. "We" were a group of about thirty: Four foreign scholars; my religious studies grad student roommate from Jersey; a beautiful German exchange student; some staff, faculty, and students from Dongguk University; two Chinese men who were evidently only there to promote their temple-building business (who knew that industry existed?); and several Korean monks: the talkative one, the shy one, the handsy one, and the one who liked potatoes. In short, an odd bunch.

37. Subul, “Making Ganhwa Seon Accessible,” 5.
38. Wallis, “Speculative Non-Buddhism”, 20.
39. *Ibid.,* 12.
40. Dale S. Wright, “The Discourse of Awakening: Rhetorical Practice in Classical Ch'an Buddhism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61, No. 1 (Spring, 1993): 29.
41. *Ibid.,* 29.
42. Marilyn Ivy, “Modernity,” in *Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism,* ed. Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 313.
43. Or true Scotsmen.
44. This was due, in no small part, to every Korean I met in a Buddhist context telling me that I should become a monk.
45. Wallis, “Speculative Non-Buddhism,” 12.
46. Glenn Wallis, “How to Do Things with Non-Buddhism,” *Speculative Non-Buddhism,* posted April 6, 2013.
47. Wallis, “Speculative Non-Buddhism,” 12.
48. *Anātman*, while interpreted quite differently in different Buddhisms, is a fundamental Buddhist concept (one of the Three Marks of Existence), often translated as “no-self,” “non-self,” or “not-self.” Pepper takes it literally—there actually *is no self* beyond a conventional, socially constructed one. Applying the lens of contemporary social theory, Pepper concludes that mind only arises socially, among individuals practicing shared symbolic systems, not within individual brains. The individual mind is simply the effect of the discourses in which that individual takes part. Tom Pepper, “Taking *Anātman* at Full Strength,” in *The Faithful Buddhist*, (Amazon Digital Services: 2011).
49. “The Four Great Vows,” *Kwan Um School of Zen*. Posted February 16, 2011.

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