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“OTHERS THINK I AM AIRY-FAIRY”: PRACTICING NAVAYANA BUDDHISM IN A DUTCH SECULAR CLIMATE

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ABSTRACT

This article draws attention to Navayana (Western) Buddhists practicing their religiosity while facing a strongly secularized context. Based on data gathered from fieldwork, this article reveals an interesting paradox concerning the importance of material forms in Navayana Buddhism in the Netherlands. While the body and objects were observed to be crucial for the meditation ritual in Navayana Buddhism, their function was strongly downplayed by most practitioners themselves. I suggest that this contradiction reveals a particular coping mechanism mobilized by practitioners in order to cope with a marginalizing, secular environment. Hence, this article sheds new light on discussions about the characteristics of new forms and expressions of religiosity in secular contexts, and additionally questions the primarily theoretical assumptions regarding the passiveness of a secular environment.

Introduction

A year ago, I interviewed Marjan, a 30-year-old psychologist from the Netherlands. While discussing her involvement in Buddhism, Marjan told me that she practiced meditation daily, preferably alone in her room, not disturbed by anyone. Practicing meditation helped her to alleviate stress, she said. After we discussed her motivations, Marjan suddenly started talking about condemning statements she had received from friends and family. She said:

My ex-boyfriend was very sceptical [about Buddhist meditation]. I cannot explain it properly, [even though] I already thought about this before the interview in fact. I am just looking for things, you know, I do not have one particular direction or something. But he [the ex-boyfriend] was sceptical and thought it [Buddhist meditation] was not so good for me. He asked me to stop. [...] Others think I am airy-fairy (“zweverig”) and they do not understand meditation or retreats. I have never been involved in a retreat but I noticed that some friends, who were involved, are afraid of that [marginalizing statements]. Many friends say meditation

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is something for other people, definitely not something for them. Others think my involvement is completely weird. They regard me as someone saying weird, philosophical things. [...] I prefer not to talk about my involvement to avoid annoying remarks.

As my research progressed, I came to realize that this quote summarized an unexpected problem many practitioners in my fieldwork had encountered. In the Netherlands, I gradually learned, Buddhism is no longer “cool” as many seem to think. Rather, it is perceived as something for “weirdos,” that is, people who believe in “weird stuff,” and who say “weird things.”

This article, which is part of my larger research project on Dutch Navayana – or “Western” – Buddhists in 2015, draws attention to the mismatch between the hegemonic academic interpretations of the secular on the one hand, and how the secular is experienced in a “lived” world on the other.¹ To illustrate this mismatch, I set out to let the reader experience a bit of the complexity I faced during my fieldwork, through which I hope to lift a little corner of the veil of how the secular is experienced in a lived, materialized society. By doing so, this article sheds some new light on the discussions regarding new forms and expressions of religiosity through questioning the academic assumptions concerning the “passiveness” of a secular environment. Through a particular focus on the body and materiality in Navayana Buddhism, this article reveals an interesting contraction related to the importance of these material forms, which is, as I suggest, a consequence of practitioners coping with a secular, marginalizing environment.

This article proceeds as follows: I will first discuss Charles Taylor’s understanding of our age as a secular age, in which the default option is claimed by the secular, and where *cultural* secularism plays an important role on many levels. Subsequently, I will present some empirical findings of my research among Navayana Buddhists in the Netherlands. First, I present a description of the two Buddhist sanghas I participated in, followed by a delineation of their regularly held evening gatherings. I proceed by presenting my analysis of the observed “effective forms” of Navayana Buddhism: the cultural forms sought by practitioners to experience a certain perceived effect. For the Buddhist in my research, I observed the meditation ritual to be such a form. Through analyzing the material forms arousing the experience of a meditation, a paradox is revealed. On the one hand, the importance of the body and the objects seems evident, though, on the other hand, this importance is strongly downplayed by the practitioners themselves. I conclude by suggesting that the practitioners’ tendency of downplaying the material forms might be a coping mechanism, which is invented to cope with the Dutch, secular, marginalizing environment.

A secular age

Recently, many scholars have shifted their focus in an attempt to come to terms with the puzzling transformation to which religion in the West has been subject

(see Meyer 2014). Exploring the variety of new forms and expressions of religiosity, scholars now seek to understand why these forms are—if indeed they are—capable of bridging the gap created by processes of unchurched (e.g. Campbell 2007; Taylor 2007). These new forms and expressions of religiosity are often shaped by Eastern influences (Campbell 2007), the Western culture of authenticity (Aupers, Houtman, and Roeland 2010; Taylor 2007; Van Harskamp 2008), or the impact of psychological and therapeutic orientations (Aupers and Houtman 2006). Together, these new, diverse forms and expressions are brought under the same umbrella of the multifaceted “spiritual supermarket” of the West, which is, in academia, held to be an important facet of the contemporary Western religious climate (e.g. Aupers and Houtman 2010).

Interestingly, in academia, this spiritual supermarket is considered to become increasingly popular in the West, and additionally it seems somehow assumed that this supermarket is accepted—or even integrated—in its secular environment. This obviously contradicts the academic assumptions concerning, for example, Islam or Christianity, as these religions are often considered to face a lot of secular condemnation in our post-secular societies.² For new forms and expressions of religiosity, however, the secular climate is considered suitable. The secular, in the context of new forms of religiosity, seems to be perceived as merely the neutral water in which we all swim (see Hirschkind 2011, 634).

In his monumental book *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor (2007) describes the historical development of the way that the secular is currently taken for granted. While in the Middle Ages it was almost impossible not to believe in God, Taylor argues, believing in God is nowadays only one option out of many. In contrast to the world of our ancestors, where for instance spirits were not considered to be an option, but rather an inevitable—and often frightening—part of life, our current world facilitates believers’ and unbeliever’s participation in a universal spiritual search within the context of an “immanent frame”: a worldview that distinguishes a self-sufficient immanent natural order from the transcendent.

Within this immanent frame, people might embrace the transcendental but there is also the more commonly embraced option to stick to one’s buffered self as the immanent frame does not require transcendental involvement. However, Taylor departs from the assumption that every person is capable of experiencing fullness: “a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worthwhile, more admirable, more what it should be.” (Taylor 2007, 5). There are many interpretations of how to achieve fullness, and, therefore, the immanent frame holds many positions, each of them employing a different perspective on what it is that constitutes a person’s religious or secular practices. Taylor categorizes these different interpretations to distinguish three positions that are involved in a constantly interacting “battle.”

The first position is taken up by secular, exclusive humanists, who emphasize rationality, and who deny the transcendence.³ In their opinion, God is dead, and the power to experience fullness lies within humans themselves. The more

people become aware of the existence of this power, the more they will realize that they can find it within themselves.

The second position consists of anti-humanists. Members of this group neglect notions of the transcendental, and also deny claims based on reason. They turn against the values of the enlightenment, but do not return to the transcendent. From their perspective, fullness is not within reach, and we just have to face that incapability. Finally, the third position is taken by believers in the transcendence. These believers can reach fullness by seeking good in something beyond the human (Taylor 2007, 8).

For the purposes of this article, I want to highlight Taylor's suggested *interaction* between the different positions at stake. Taylor writes about an "interacting battle" between different positions, options, and groups. Secular, exclusive humanists, anti-humanists, and believers are engaged in dialogs, which subsequently might influence their ideas, or which might even convince them to switch positions. What can we observe if we decide to narrow our focus to the interaction between the "default option" and the new religious? How, for instance, do new forms of religiosity relate to the secular? To answer these questions, it is first necessary to have some more insights into Taylor's category of "unbelievers."⁴

Cultural secularism

For now, we will leave Taylor's work and shift our focus to the contemporary debates on the ideologies of the secular. Cultural anthropologist Peter Van der Veer (2009) has argued that "the spiritual" and "the secular" are produced simultaneously as two alternatives to institutionalized religion in the West (Van der Veer 2009, 1097). Therefore, he argues, comparable to the options of spiritualism and institutionalized religion, secularism should also be studied as an ongoing project.

In academia, secularism, for some time, also appeared to have no ideological significance of its own. In recent years, however, secularism and its features have been subject to intensified academic scrutiny which has undermined its alleged "value freedom" and "objectivity" (Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, and VanAntwerpen 2011, 4). Casanova (2004) has drawn attention to secularism as an ideology that offers a teleology of religious decline, which might function as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Secularism is not neutral in itself, but is in fact "something," which is therefore in need of investigation. As Needham and Rajan (2006) have put it: "Secularism is a far more comprehensive and diffuse package of ideas, politics, and strategies than its representation solely as religion's Other would lead us to expect." (Needham and Rajan 2006, 3).

Currently, many scholars have taken up the aim of "rethinking secularism" (e.g. Bangstad 2009; Cady and Hurd 2010; Calhoun et al. 2011), and some have even suggested discarding the notion as they considered it as having too

many interpretations (Bader 2012). Others have tried to redefine the term (e.g. An-Na'im 2010; Bhargava 1999; Calhoun et al. 2011; Modood 2010; Sullivan 2010).

However, observing these debates, I have noticed that this academic attention mainly concerns *political* secularism, that is, forms of secularism that are about the “manifold ways the state governs and regulates religions.” (Tamimi Arab 2015, 32). Cultural, or “nativist” (Tamimi Arab 2015, 162) forms of secularism are far less explored. This is, in my view, problematic as these forms are certainly playing an important role in our societies (see e.g. Tamimi Arab 2015; Verkaaik 2009).⁵ Also, the study of secularism is in need of more empirical inquiry (see Burchardt and Wohlrab-Sahr 2013; Cannell 2010; Verkaaik and Spronk 2011) as I have indeed experienced an “impasse between theory and empiricism that continues to be a hallmark of many books with a focus on the politics of religion and secularism” (Dressler and Mandair 2011, 21). Besides the many studies that discuss models regarding the “correct” role for religion in a secular society, and besides the many studies that explore how these models have been put into practice in different societies around the world, we need to investigate the role actually being played by secularism the ground level in society. How do the people living in a secular society experience this persuasive ideology?

Cultural anthropologist Oscar Verkaaik (2009) provides us with an illustrative example of an ethnography of cultural secularism. Based upon his empirical research on “naturalization rituals” in the Netherlands, he argues that cultural, progressive secularism is a dominant phenomenon in the Netherlands. Moreover, it has become part of Dutch identity and can be considered as a form of nationalism (Verkaaik 2009, 140–144). Verkaaik illustrates this by showing how homosexuals are “mobilized” in Dutch media, functioning as representatives of secular thought, and how Muslims are experiencing extreme difficulties in becoming accepted as tolerated, integrated citizens (Verkaaik 2009, 144–147). Verkaaik also shows that cultural secularism in the Netherlands entails a strong skepticism towards things that are “irrational,” such as believing in something transcendental, or “gut feelings” (Verkaaik 2009, 113, 114).

Both Tamimi Arab and Verkaaik describe, based upon empirical research they have conducted, how they observed cultural secularism playing an important role in Dutch society. In what follows, I attempt to illustrate how I have observed something similar, albeit in a different context. Setting out to investigate Navayana Buddhists in the Netherlands, I gradually became aware of their struggles related to the secular environment they are facing. First, however, I will briefly discuss my methodology.

The research

The empirical component of this paper draws on a selection of qualitative findings from earlier research on Navayana Buddhism in the Netherlands (Wiering

2015). I understand Navayana Buddhism to be an all encompassing notion used to cover a variety of Buddhism practiced in the West (see Van der Velde 2011, 2013, 2015).⁶ Since the meaning of the notion of Navayana Buddhism depends on what exactly is considered “Western,” it is hard to, for example, present an overall history or theology of Navayana Buddhism. There are some general characteristics though. Navayana Buddhism is often characterized by its pragmatic interpretation of Buddhist themes: abstract concepts such as dharma are often “concretized” to make them applicable in day-to-day life (see Batchelor 2015; Eddy 2013; Williams and Queen 1999; see also Schedneck 2007, 2011). Additionally, there is the “democratization” theory (Coleman 2001; Kornfield 1988, xi–xxviii; Queen and Williams 2013; Schedneck 2007, 2011; Van der Velde 2011, 2013, 2015), which suggests that Navayana Buddhism features an ongoing emphasis on equality above hierarchy. It is argued that hierarchical relations of teachers and students are slowly being abandoned through “laicization”: a process in which lay practice and the de-emphasis of ordained and monastic vocations are emphasized.

In this research, I have employed a material approach to religion entailing a particular interest in material forms as source material rather than top-down illustrations or theories (see Meyer 2006, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014; Meyer, Morgan, Paine, and Plate 2010). These material or outward forms are concrete acts that involve people, their bodies, things, pictures, texts, and other mediums through which religion becomes tangibly present (Meyer 2014, 206). I consider this approach even more fruitful in the context of the Netherlands, as Christianity – and perhaps its “non-materiality” as well – is obviously embedded in Dutch history. Many Dutch day-to-day practices and ideas are shaped by Christian influences, including conceptions of good and bad religion. A focus on the material forms in a culture that is shaped by Christian notions of religion might direct researchers to material that was overlooked in the past.

The findings presented in this article are taken from a larger ethnography of Navayana Buddhists in the Netherlands. The information was gathered between February and May 2015, when I conducted participant observation for three months among two Buddhist sanghas in Utrecht: a “Diamond way sangha” and a “Zen Buddhist sangha.” Additionally, I held eight semi-structured interviews that usually lasted about an hour, and all of them were recorded and transcribed. I visited both groups for three months, both for at least one evening during the week but often two, or an extra day at the weekend. I selected these two sanghas because I considered them two very different poles of Navayana Buddhism.

The population of my research consisted of people who were living or who had lived in the Netherlands, who, at the time of my research, participated in activities related to Buddhism, and for whom it was, in my view, reasonable to assume that they visited the sanghas with the intention of applying some of the aspects experienced there in their life.⁷ The respondents were not always involved in the sanghas though: sometimes they were friends of

former interlocutors selected through snowball sampling. Finally, since participant observation has been an important methodological tool, it is important to stress that the gathering of information and the analysis are influenced by my own personal bias.

Whisky, itch and Lamas

In this section, I will provide the reader with some context through presenting a sketch of a standard evening of both the sanghas in which I was involved.

The Diamond Way sangha

During my fieldwork, the Diamond Way sangha met on multiple evenings during the week. Tuesday evenings were the best visited, though, because they included an introduction for new visitors. Generally speaking, there were eight people on Tuesdays, and four or five people on the other days. There were slightly more men than women visiting, and the average age was about 30. At the weekends, irregular events took place, such as lectures, or a practice called “the rolling of mantras.”

The practitioners had found their location in a community center in central Utrecht. It was an old building, which was somewhat hidden. One needed to pass through a narrow alley with an iron fence before reaching it. Inside the building, only two of the rooms were used by the practitioners. One room was used for welcoming and chatting and one was used for meditation practices. The “welcoming area” had formerly been used as a kitchen. There was a large round table, surrounded by chairs, where practitioners usually sat down to drink tea before and after the meditation sessions. Next to the table, there were two huge cupboards with books and supplies, such as coffee, biscuits, beer, and whiskey.

The other room was solely used for the meditation sessions. On one side of the room, there were three big cupboards, all filled with books and statues. Another side had an altar with many Buddha statues on it. One meter above the altar, there were three large frames, each of them containing a large image of the 16th Karmapa Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, the 17th Karmapa Trinley Thaye Dorje, and Lama Olé Nydahl with his former wife Hannah Nydahl. In the corner opposite the altar, there were many Tibetan cushions, which were handed out to practitioners just before the meditation started. Attached to the door, there was a list on which some practitioners kept track of how frequently they have visited.

A Diamond Way Buddhist regular evening

Every Tuesday at 8 pm, the doors of the community center in Utrecht opened. All present hung their coats on a rack, and sat down at a large round table. There was a general conversation about topics such as study or work, and everyone

who wanted could have a cup of tea or coffee, with biscuits. The waiting usually took half an hour. Some practitioners who visited regularly paid close attention to the new visitors, or to those that had no one to talk to. They usually started a conversation with them. During this half hour everyone slowly trickled in.

It was usually Jens, a 35-year-old daily visitor and member of the international Diamond Way Buddhism organization, who urged us to start. He asked the group whether it would be time to “start doing something.” Subsequently, everyone took off their shoes and moved to the room where the meditation took place. We were all provided with a Tibetan cushion. Jens, or Sten (the latter was also a daily visitor and a member of the international Diamond Way Buddhism organization) were in the front. They took turns to read out the meditation procedure. Some practitioners wrapped a “Mala” (a bracelet with 108 pearls) they had brought from home around their arms.

On Tuesdays, the meditation started with an introduction to new visitors. According to Jens, it was a short introduction that helped new visitors to meditate in the right way by providing them with some understanding. Jens told the group in a monolog introduction that Buddhism was not a religion but rather a tool to explore one’s “true” self. By practicing meditation, Jens argued, we could learn to live in the moment and overcome our attachments and longing for earthly things, which are doomed to vanish. Subsequently, Jens explained the structure of the meditation session and warned new visitors of the “weird things” that were going to happen. These “weird things” however, should be seen as tools to help, and we should not consider them as related to a specific god. Buddhism, we were told again and again, is not a religion.

The meditation started, and everyone closed their eyes for the upcoming 30 min. The meditation was read from a small book with the Vajradhara Buddha on its cover. Everyone was told to visualize the 16th Karmapa Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, and the bodhisattvas, who were said to be sending green and red streams of light toward us. Between the sentences Jens read, there was a short silence. Within these periods, one could hear the participants making noises, such as breathing, swallowing, scratching, or farting. We were told that the streams of light were full of energy, and that we needed to try to “feel” them. After a while, Jens started with a mantra, which means that he was reciting one phrase repeatedly. “Karmapa Chenno” (“power of all Buddhas work through us”) he read, and he was immediately followed by the rest of the participants. After approximately five minutes reciting the mantra, we were told to take notice of our insights, and to apply them in our current day-to-day life.

One by one, we opened our eyes, and we were given a small book containing songs, written in phonetic Pāli. Subsequently, we sang a song together. The most experienced Buddhists sang the loudest, and, since it was quite an easy melody, even new visitors were capable of singing along. This, however, rarely happened, probably because for most practitioners singing along felt awkward in the beginning. After finishing the song, at approximately half past nine, we

left the room together, and sat down the round table again. We had another conversation with those who were interested. Most new visitors left the center at this point, but others stayed and had another cup of tea. Sometimes, tea was replaced by whiskey, or beer.

The Zen Buddhists sangha

During my fieldwork, I also participated in a Zen sangha. The Zen sangha in Utrecht was part of a larger community in the Netherlands. In Utrecht, meetings were held every Monday and in order to acquire access to these meetings, one first needed to participate in an introduction session. These sessions were held on the last Saturday of the month.

The introduction sessions and the regular sessions were held in a hired classroom. The classroom had a small kitchen, a small separated area where practitioners could change their clothes, and an altar. The height of the altar was one and a half meters, and it had several items placed upon it: a Buddha, some incense (sticks in a holder), some bowls, and two candles. Next to the altar, on the ground, was a gong. This gong was used to mark the beginning and ending of a meditation session. The rest of the room was empty except for some low benches or cushions participants had carried into the room to sit upon.

There were some differences between the introduction sessions and the regular ones. The introduction session took four hours, whereas the sessions on Monday evening generally took two hours. Another difference between the two is that the introduction involved an explanation, whereas the general session was held in silence. Despite these differences though, there were also many commonalities, which is why I think that the following description of the introduction session is sufficient.

A Zen Buddhist meditation session

The introduction session I attended was led by a man referred to as “Reverend Shutka.” Reverend Shutka had been a monk since 1990, and he lived in a monastery somewhere in the Netherlands. At the start of the session in which I participated, we, a group of 18 participants, were asked to stand in a wide circle. Reverend Shutka asked us to introduce ourselves, and to state whether we had already practiced meditation before. As it turned out, most participants had already practiced some form of meditation in the past, but not in an “official” setting like the one they were engaged in now. Subsequently, Reverend Shutka explained the importance of practicing meditation. Like participating in a specific sport or taking a walk in the forest, meditation could help us to experience “being in the moment.” Reverend Shutka said: “Just experience yourself being in a certain environment, nothing more than that.” We were told that, in order to achieve this experience of being in the moment, it was important to maintain

an adequate posture. The back of the body should be straightened, the knees should constantly be touching the ground, the head should be up, and the hands should be on our bellies. Additionally, breathing was considered important: we should try to take long breaths ensuring all tensions would be released.

According to Reverend Shutka, “being in the moment” has the potential of making a practitioner stronger and it might provide him or her with a so-called active attitude. To “prove” this point, Reverend Shutka divided the group in pairs. While standing, one of each pair was told to try to lift the leg of the other person two times. The first time, the person whose leg was lifted was instructed to think about his or her busy life. The second time, the person whose leg was lifted was first provided some time to breathe extensively. According to Reverend Shutka, it should have been harder to lift the person’s leg the second time as he or she now held an active posture.

After these tests, we began with the actual meditations. Again, Reverend Shutka paid close attention to our posture. We were provided a Tibetan cushion, optionally with some extra cushions to support our knees, or a low, wooden bench, so that we could sit on our knees. We sat in a wide circle with our backs towards each other. There was one exception though: Reverend Shutka sat with his face toward the circle. This enabled him to speak and watch all individuals simultaneously.

Our main task in meditation, we were told, was to be silent, and to let us experience all of our thoughts and senses. We were explicitly told not to block them. Reverend Shutka spoke to us in a slow, soft voice. He mentioned the noises coming from outside, the air that we were breathing, and the feelings that we were experiencing within our body. Despite paying close attention to sensory perceptions, Reverend Shutka emphasized that it was also perfectly fine if a stressful thought would appear. We should not block these as, after a while, any stressful thought would gradually disappear.

The first meditation was succeeded by a second, so-called “walking” meditation. All practitioners walked around in a large circle, taking slow steps, and barely making any sound. I had noticed some difficulty in not walking too fast: I needed to adjust my walking speed to the practitioners walking before and after me.

After this session, the day finished with tea and a short group conversation. I found it striking, however, that, during this conversation, only Reverend Shutka talked: none of the practitioners asked any question, everyone only listened. Reverend Shutka told us again about the merits of meditation, and he invited us to visit the regular evenings on Monday. He warned us that these sessions would be different from the one we just had. The session on Monday would, for example, involve a song that could be experienced as “a little weird.” However, Reverend Shutka emphasized, this song was merely included to “get everyone in the right mood.” It would help to experience being in the moment.

Effective forms of Navayana Buddhism

In my analysis of the information, I have focused on what I coined “effective forms” of Dutch Navayana Buddhism.⁸ This notion of “effective forms” is a derivative of the notion of “sensational forms,” the latter being coined by Meyer (2006, 2015). Effective forms are cultural forms sought by practitioners to experience a certain perceived effect. Echoing the notion of the sensational forms, the notion of effective forms has a double meaning. The forms entail a specific, generated, sporadic “effect,” which subsequently is “effective” in the sense that it may affect the practitioner, having him or her experiencing an effect even after the effective form has ceased. In contrast to the sensational forms, though, effective forms do not presuppose a presumed, transcendental involvement (see Meyer 2006; Wiering 2015).

Comparable to investigating sensational forms, examining effective forms enables social scientists to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of religious experiences. Such an examination might reveal, for instance, how the body endures these effects, or how particular objects are implemented and authorized in the effect (Wiering 2015). During a “completely secular” meditation, it is possible to study the specific cultural context, including the authorized forms of behavior and the authorized material forms, which will provide information that contributes to our understanding of how such a desired effect is produced.

Embodied expertise

My interlocutors emphasized that they considered the meditation sessions the crucial aspect of their involvement. They maintained different views on what such sessions consisted of, though. According to Marjan, the meditation she practiced was something she had personally developed over the years. She had learned a focus on her breathing to be the most effective. To others, such as Amber, a 24 year-old student of biomedical sciences, the meditation was a product of several strict guidelines formulated by others. Following these guidelines convinced Amber of the effectiveness of her involvement: her meditation was recommended by “acknowledged” experts. Some practitioners preferred a “guided” meditation, whereas others embraced a meditation they considered personally composed.

I explored an interesting variety of tools for seeking guidance. Esmee, a 22-year-old student of Cultural Anthropology, stated that she appreciated reading books on Buddhism because she preferred understanding what she practiced. For this reason, she additionally participated in academic courses on Buddhism. Others, such as Marjelle, a 25-year-old economics student, searched the internet to find guidance. She examined the variety of views on Buddhism in order to decide subsequently which aspects she wanted to add to her meditation.

To other practitioners, guidance was provided during the evenings in the centers. Reverend Shutka, for instance, proved himself capable of answering basically any question related to stress or anger, which were the topics mainly addressed. In fact, for some, his physical appearance, combined with his particular techniques of speaking, “proved” that Zen meditation was effective. He seemed in absolute control of his body, and he did not appear bothered by any problems.

Others, such as Jens and Sten, considered Lama Olé Nydahl an expert. Lama Olé, as he is referred to, is a Danish Lama in the Karma Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, who played an important role in introducing Diamond Way Buddhism in the West. Jens frequently mentioned the massively attended meditation session he joined a few years ago, which was led by Lama Olé. Such meditation sessions are additionally broadcasted on the Internet, though one has to be a regular visitor to subscribe. Interestingly, pictures of Lamas seemed to contribute to the meditation as well: images of Lamas on the wall suggested that they were somehow involved in the meditation sessions, regardless of the fact that some of the Lamas depicted had already passed away many years ago.

The notion of “guidance” appeared to be complex, though. This was reflected in the fact that status, and, hence, the right to provide others with guidance, could be earned through a particular embracement of norms. During my period of fieldwork in the Zen sangha, I observed Jeroen, a 26-year old former economy student, improving his status. After three months, Jeroen had become someone who “knew how things worked.” This meant that he had obtained permission to answer questions posed by other practitioners. This example further illustrates that the practitioners, especially in the Zen sangha, appreciated the guidance not because of its surprising, complex content. On the contrary, the content was rather superfluous: most explanations contained many clichés, sometimes literally taken from websites or magazines such as the Dutch magazine “Happinez.” This “superfluous content” was also mentioned by Esmee, who recently visited the Dalai Lama in Rotterdam:

I visited the Dalai Lama in Rotterdam and that was nice. In fact, it was quite funny because he kept on saying the same kind of things. It was still interesting though, because even though the things he said were simple, they kept reminding you of things in some way. I don't know why, maybe because it was he who said it? [...] I was there together with a boy from Tibet. He told me that a lot of mistakes were made in the translation – ha-ha! Nobody seemed to notice!

Rather than searching for guidance entailing profound verbal content, these practitioners sought guidance provided by experts, who proved themselves “healthy.” Status seemed to be depending on experience rather than, for example, a particular wisdom expressed in complex terms.

This status was, however, not so easy to determine. How, after all, is it possible to determine one's expertise in a practice referred to as an exercise for the mind? On a few occasions, it was possible to spot a practitioner's status as an

expert. Sten or Jens, for example, were allowed to read the mediation, and, by doing so, they were clearly presiding at the group.

In other situations, it was not so clear who was the expert. Once, at the end of an evening of Zen Buddhism, a discussion started about what we should eat before the meditation. One of the most experienced (as we later learned) practitioners had just recommended us eating little. Then, however, an elder woman responded. She said: "Well, I do not agree. In my opinion, we can eat everything we want. They also happen to do that in all the monasteries in England, you know!" The man who had spoken first (who, as we later learned, had been visiting many such monasteries) did not seem to like her criticism: "Well, in my 15 years of experience I have learned not to do so," he said. Then he continued: "Help me out here, because I seem to have forgotten. How many times have you actually visited those monasteries? One time, right?"

This example illustrates the importance of both experience and status. Status, which was mainly based on experience, provided some practitioners with authority in the group, and subsequently, these practitioners considered themselves the legitimate experts who were allowed to answer questions. To illustrate one's experience, the body and its performativity appeared to be crucial. Through observing a practitioner's "controlled" body and speaking, I could identify those who were more experienced. This was, for instance, reflected in a friendly "head-butt ritual" in the Diamond Way sangha. This ritual took place when two experienced practitioners met each other. Rather than shaking hands, which newer practitioners generally did, experienced practitioners softly pressed their foreheads together.

Another example of the body's function of indicating status was reflected in the fact that, during a session, new practitioners frequently experienced difficulties with their legs. More experienced Buddhists, such as Jens and Sten, however, did not seem to have any problem at all. In fact, on Thursday and Friday they usually engaged in more physically demanding meditations, illustrated by this personal fragment I wrote:

At the end of the evening, my legs were killing me, so I decided to call it a day. I had already stayed one additional hour so that I could participate in an extra meditation session. I told Jens and Sten that I was done, but I was not even sure whether they heard me as they were intensively engaged in their meditation. I left the room, and looked for my shoes and jacket. A few seconds later, Sten showed up, asking me why I was leaving. He was just about to start another, special kind of meditation, he told me. I had been there two hours already, and one quick thought about my legs convinced me that I really should leave. I told him, after which he nodded, and returned to the room. I took my jacket and my shoes, and decided to first write some jottings before leaving. After I wrote down my notes, I suddenly realized I could not leave the building without someone inside pressing the button that would open the fence. I decided to wait, because I did not want to interrupt their meditation. After fifteen minutes, however, I got frustrated. I tried to make some "accidental noises" (dropping my keys) so that they would hear me. It did not work. After waiting ten more minutes, I decided to take some further

action: I dropped some books. It did not have an effect either. Finally after forty-five minutes, Sten appeared. He only wore trunks, and he had turned bright red, with huge amounts of sweat running all over his body. He was very, very surprised I was still there. It took him some time to catch his breath, and to be able to focus on our conversation. Then he said: "Next time, try this meditation Jelle, it's also a nice work-out in itself, as you can see!"

Looking at these examples it seems that, even though the body was often said to be irrelevant, it, in fact, appeared quite crucial. Every practitioner was involved in a particular process of disciplining the body: adopt the right posture, ignore itching or pain, and make sure you show your progress!

This particular role of the body points us to an interesting paradox in Navayana Buddhism. On the one hand, practitioners emphasized that they tried to make sure that the mind was not obstructed by the body. Meditation, I was told, should completely be about the mind and, hence, the body was considered merely a tool. On the other hand, however, the body was very important. There were clear "techniques of the self," and, consequently, there was an obvious performativity. In every session, people – and especially Reverend Shutka – looked at others to observe how they were doing. Influenced by "goals" of alleviating stress through "being in the moment," practitioners showed their "disciplined" body, and by doing so, their progress.

To me, it made sense that the practitioners "used" their bodies to illustrate their progress: there is not really any other implicit way of doing that as it is quite hard to witness someone's progress within his or her mind. But, as we have seen, "experts" were in fact needed. Practitioners were looking for role models: other practitioners who managed to "prove" that they had made progress, and perhaps for this reason the body was so important. It helped practitioners find such role models. This paradoxically means that in the context of an alleged exercise for the mind, the body functioned as an indicator, and hence as a tool, for showing—and finding—expertise.

Tools rather than gods

Like the body, material objects also play an interesting role in Navayana Buddhism. This is mainly because of the presumed attached involvement of the transcendental. However, comparable to the fact that many practitioners in my research did not like to acknowledge the role of the body, the topic of the transcendental was also generally avoided. During the few occasions that we did address the topic though, my interlocutors spoke about energies, the cosmos, karma, and reincarnation, but no one seemed convinced about his or her ideas. The following quote of Jacomien, a 23-year-old female biology student, illustrates this indistinctness:

I think it [reincarnation] is very interesting, and I thought about it a lot. It is not my vision, though. During my visit to the north of India, I had a lengthy conversation

about this with someone I had met on my bus to Tibet. He really believed in those things [reincarnation], and he even argued that some people in his village had been reincarnated. Kids, who knew who they were in a previous life. But I don't really know. I believe in more abstract things, it may sound very weird. Some sort of big box, containing a lot of information, to which you have no access. I mean, if I die, I will leave a footprint. Every human does. It is very down to earth, but I think these things work on a more complicated level.

To most interlocutors, basically everything related to the transcendental was rather unclear. Hence, these practitioners were not “believers” in the sense that they agreed on the existence of something transcendental. They were intrigued by it, though.

I noticed that, within each sangha, quite different perspectives on the transcendental coexisted. In the Diamond Way sangha, for example, reincarnation was sometimes considered important. Lamas who had died were still “kept alive” through pictures on the wall, and during the meditation sessions we were told about particular waves of energy provided by our own visualization of these lamas. Jens once stated that he agreed with Lama Olé's suggestion about the fact that there is a next life, the quality of which can be influenced by the way we lead our current ones. Sometimes karma was also considered important. The most striking example is the help that one will receive, according to Lama Olé, Jens, and Sten, when one is seeking a parking spot.

Others within the Diamond Way, such as Amber, did not necessarily agree on this “pragmatic” understanding of the concept of karma. Amber had not made up her mind about a next life being possible or not, but she did not agree on karma helping to get an empty parking spot. For her, such an understanding was too forced. She agreed that certain actions could influence other “unrelated” actions, but this was a very complex process that had nothing to do with the more direct relation in the example of the parking spot. This broader, vaguer, interpretation of karma and other transcendental aspects can also be found outside the Diamond Way sangha. Ileen, a 22-year-old student of communication sciences, for instance, also agreed on this perception of karma. She told me that this understanding motivated her to be kind to every person she met.

In the Zen sangha, there was an obvious contradiction between what was verbally expressed, and what I observed. Stressing their practice to be non-religious, which happened frequently, did not seem to stand well with the presence of an altar, the gods mentioned in the songs, or the ritual bowing before every meditation. It seemed that the practitioners tried to make sure that people, both inside and outside the Zen Buddhist sangha, were made aware that their form of Buddhism was not an old or dusty religion. Their form of Buddhism was something scientifically supported and something that was perfectly fitting our busy and stressful society. Every association with religion was stubbornly denied.

“Just to get you in the mood”: a non-religious introduction

We have seen how the body and material objects, be it in complicated, puzzling ways, helped to arouse the effective form of the meditation ritual. Additionally, we have seen how the practitioners themselves, especially during the introduction sessions, did not agree on the importance of these forms. The information I obtained was therefore contradictory. Moreover, it was not uncommon that one interlocutor provided me with different explanations, which also contributed to my lack of understanding. How could it be that the information I obtained varied that much? Why did my interlocutors decide to tell different stories at different occasions? As a cultural anthropologist, I was familiar with contradictory stories emerging from the field, but this time I was convinced that there was more at stake.

Let me first briefly recall the paradox. I observed and was also told in some interviews, that the body (and its attached expertise) and the objects (and their attached transcendental involvement) were important for arousing the effective form that was sought by the Navayana Buddhists. This was reflected in the existence of the statues, images, transcendental topics that were being addressed, gods, waves of energies, alleged lights, correct treatment of certain objects, status-related behavior, correct postures, etc. The material forms were attached special meanings and rules, and they occupied particular spaces, such as the wall that was looked upon during the the meditation.

However, this importance was explicitly denied. As I have mentioned above: every Monday or Tuesday evening started with an introduction for new visitors. During those introductions, it was emphasized that the body, the guidance, the expertise, and the objects involved were merely tools. Their mere function was “to get you in the right mood.” The body, we were told, was not important: it was the mind that needed to be controlled. The ritual leaders, such as Jens or Reverend Shutka, were not important either: their only function was to organize the sessions. The objects were irrelevant: the images of the lamas, for example, merely had some inspiring function. The shrine’s only function was to show some respect for tradition. The “weird” songs, we were told, could just be ignored, and we should just consider the visualization of the lamas as a vehicle to explore one’s true self. Transcendental subjects such as karma and reincarnation were not included in the meditation at all.

Near the end of my fieldwork, I discovered a pattern that helped me understanding the contradictions. Analyzing the specific context in which the different accounts emerged, I realized that it had something to do with the weekly new visitors. During my fieldwork, new visitors appeared *every* week, in both groups. These new visitors were in need of an introduction to the meditation, and they were given the “non-religious version,” which was full of reassurances of the idea that Buddhism is not a religion. Often, these visitors left straight after the

meditation, when the evening officially ended, and therefore, they missed the discussion afterwards.

It was exactly during these discussions afterwards, though, where things were different. This was especially the case in the Diamond Way group. All of the sudden, meditation could literally help you to find a parking spot. Certain objects contained special powers that would increase your focus. Participation in meditation sessions had the potential of healing one's family. The relevance of the ritual leaders being physically present during the meditation, was openly acknowledged. Both karma and reincarnation, were complicated, though absolutely relevant matters, especially in the context of reincarnated lamas. In short: another side of the sangha was revealed.

The Buddhists' coping mechanism

I suggest that the practitioners' tendency to marginalize their material forms could well be a particular coping mechanism that supports their attempt to deal with Dutch cultural secularism. New visitors, who frequently ask permission to conduct interviews or to take pictures, seem to be taken as some sort of personification of the project of secularism. To avoid marginalization, the practitioners present these new visitors with a non-religious instruction, which means that the aspects Dutch culture generally considers "religious" are left out, such as transcendental involvement and dogmas, are left out. Only those visitors who decide to stay longer—and who thereby show themselves not to be frightened by the few "weird things" that, despite all efforts to avoid them, *did* happen during the meditation—the "religious" aspects of Buddhism are revealed.

Let me emphasize that it is not my aim here to pick a side in the debate whether the Navayana Buddhists are either "secular" or "religious," whatever this might mean (see Wiering 2015). Rather, I want to emphasize that, regardless of their (perceived) religiousness, all practitioners *stubbornly emphasize* their "non-religiousness." In the Netherlands, the embracing of "transcendental matters," such as karma or reincarnation, apparently has some unappreciated consequences. Hence, secular marginalization in the Netherlands is not limited to the category of, for instance, Muslims, (see e.g. Tamimi Arab 2015) or migrants, (see Verkaaik 2009) but is also directed at practitioners of new forms of religiosity, whose religion in academia is often considered "popular" and "rising."

In our current secular age, the dynamics and the interactions of the religious and the secular seem highly relevant to me as both of these phenomenon are playing a crucial role. To me, it seems that the fact that religion – including its new forms presumed to be popular – is facing a marginalizing, secular environment deserves more *empirical* academic attention. There is, in my view, a strong difference between the secular as it is discussed in academia, and how it plays out in a lived society. More empirical inquiry could, for instance, help us

understand how religious practitioners experience such a secular environment, and subsequently how they respond to it.

Could it, for example, be that the coping mechanism described in this article can also be found in other religions in the Netherlands? And if so, could it also be that the Netherlands, or perhaps the West as such for that matter, is, in fact, more religious than previously considered? Is that Buddha statue we see in so many gardens in the Netherlands really “just a statue,” or is that statue, when nobody is watching, secretly asked to provide a little bit of extra support for its owner’s busy day tomorrow? When we seek to understand religion, it seems important to me to take the climate it has to endure into account. Perhaps, religion is hiding somewhere beneath the Dutch polders, waiting for the right time to “pop up” again, as keeping afloat in the secular water of the West seems to require more than just swimming: it requires specific techniques of swimming.

Conclusion

In this article, I have drawn attention to Buddhists practicing their religion in a strongly secularized context. In both my fieldwork and my analysis, I have focused on the body and materiality, and by doing so, I have revealed a paradox concerning the importance of material forms. Despite the observed importance, these forms were not considered relevant by most practitioners themselves. I have suggested that this contradiction might be part and parcel of a particular coping mechanism embraced by the practitioners to cope with the marginalizing, secular Dutch environment. In the Netherlands, Buddhism, it seems, is no longer “cool” but rather something for “weirdos”: people who believe in “weird stuff,” and who say “weird things.” This sheds some new light on the discussions regarding allegedly “cool” new forms and expressions of religiosity and questions the—primarily theoretical—academic assumptions of the “passiveness” of a secular environment.

Notes

1. I prefer the notion of “Navayana Buddhism” over “Western Buddhism” as the category of the West somewhat echoes the lingering colonial discursive frame that sets apart “West” and “Rest.”
2. Following Jürgen Habermas, who coined the notion of “post-secular” societies, I understand such societies as societies that still have to “adjust themselves to the continued existence of religious communities in an increasingly secularized environment” (Habermas 2008, 20). This means that they have not “overcome” the secular as the term post-secular incorrectly implies.
3. For Taylor, the transcendence refers to something “higher” than human (see also Van der Braak 2008, 7–10). In general, I agree with this understanding, but I prefer, following Mattijs van de Port (2010), to define the transcendental as “the rest of what is.”

4. I am aware of the fact that the category of “unbelievers” is more diverse than is presumed in the next section. This point goes beyond the scope of this article though.
5. In fact, Tamimi Arab also points to important differences between academic theories on political secularism on the one hand and constitutional secularism in a “lived” society on the other.
6. Interestingly, Navayana Buddhism also has practitioners in non-western regions as well. See Van der Velde 2015.
7. For an extensive discussion of this definition, see Wiering 2015, 32–35.
8. For a more comprehensive explanation of this notion, see Wiering 2015.

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Notes on contributor

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