

## Immanent Practice

### The great feast of knowledge

Picture the scene: A colossal hall packed full of massive wooden rectangular tables, around which are sitting, standing, pacing, gesticulating the motliest throng of human beings you can imagine. Wealthy and poor, well-dressed and ragged, smart and stupid, saints and monsters, the ruined and the saved; at turns pensive, polite, inflamed, and furious, merging, submerging, coalescing, colliding in excited anticipation. The hall reverberates with the raucous roar of booming voices. The Great Feast of Knowledge is at hand! The feast is a place where ideas—concepts, beliefs, myths, truths, fantasies, hopes and dreams—are subjected to a ravaging ordeal; they are: exalted, weaponized, hunted down, beaten, contested, defended, slaughtered, thrown into the fire, served up, desecrated, devoured. This feast has been unfolding since the first primitive grunts of human communication. Though refined through the centuries, the feast is still permeated by the most primeval dual need of *homo sapiens* ape: security and belonging. At the imposing entrance stands a guard. His task is to collect the weapons from the grand disciplinary forces seeking entrance to the feast. Philosophy, History, Physics, Literature, Law—everyone may enter, but first shorn of sword and insignia. Look! Buddhism is arriving, arrayed with its battery of concepts, inexhaustible treasures illuminating the darkness of the world; its *bodhisattva* field marshals armed with seductively confident arguments; its Buddha, glowing with the sovereign nimbus of the thaumaturge. Stripped down, deprived of their regency, institutionally indigent, the Buddhist agents enter the hall indistinguishable from everyone else. They take their seats amid the chaotic swarm. The struggle begins.

The Western Buddhist *no!* that I supposed, rightly or wrongly, at the end of the previous chapter, should not be passed over too quickly. I also mentioned there the endless bickering (Nietzsche's "war"?) that typically characterizes

incommensurable communities of thought. Almost invariably, what follows this bickering is the end of dialogue, each party retreating back into the secure warm bosom of its community. If my critique is to have any effect beyond a self-selected group of already critical-minded readers, it is crucial that it offer a way through this quagmire. The trick, of course, is that the way proposed be agreed on by all parties. That rarely happens in real life. The trope of The Great Feast of Knowledge, however, is intended as a way forward *in thought* at least. I will say more in a moment about that idea specifically. First, some exploration of the very idea of incommensurability and how it might, paradoxically, enable even the most recalcitrant reader's reception of this critique.

As Laruelle claims for non-philosophy, I claim for the present book, and for non-buddhism specifically, namely, that it offers "thought for [Western Buddhism], but which [Western Buddhism] does not want, and which it resists *de jure*." Of course it resists! This critique is claiming, after all that Western Buddhism currently has more in common with a "psychological trick" than with a "science." I acknowledge the necessity of this resistance even though, as I have emphasized throughout this book, Western Buddhism (Buddhism, x-buddhism, Mindfulness, Zen) *fashions itself* as something like a rigorous science. Still, to entertain the possibility that it "relies on this thought to make something other than a simple transcendental illusion which is ignorant of itself" is a lot to ask a fan of Western Buddhism. This is true even though I further claim that this thought aims to relate to Western Buddhism as a "new type of 'object,'" one which Buddhism itself has perhaps concealed from us, and "which can do so without destroying [Buddhism] through positivism."<sup>1</sup> There seems to be some element in our respective approaches that marks as adversarial this x-buddhism/non-buddhism encounter. To leave it at that, however, would be a grave mistake, one that undermines the very intent of my critique. It would be equally unproductive to leave the seemingly intractable issue of incommensurability unaddressed. The Polish microbiologist Ludwik Fleck calls these differing approaches *thought styles*. To psychoanalyze our feast participants for a moment, we might say that their respective thought style is a mere *symptom*, a manifest sign of an underlying identification; it marks the place—the "(w)hole" of discourse—that the participant has "fallen into." A person's thought style thus reveals his or her subscription to a program of knowledge. More specifically, Fleck defines a thought style as "the readiness for directed perception and appropriate assimilation of what has been perceived."<sup>2</sup> He explains that what directs perception and determines appropriate assimilation is the particular *thought collective* that produces a thought style. But first, I should mention the

role that *mood* plays in the allure of ideas. Although Fleck is taking the natural sciences as his example of the genesis and development of knowledge, anyone referring to religious material such as Buddhism should recognize the qualities of this “mood.”

[The mood] is expressed as a common *reverence* for an ideal; in the *belief* that what is being revered can be achieved only in the distant, perhaps infinitely distant future; in the *glorification* of dedicating oneself to its service; in a definite *hero worship* and a distinct *tradition*.<sup>3</sup>

Significantly, the symptomatic nature of a thought style ensures that the interlocutor employs it reflexively. This reflexivity, in fact, marks the successful subjectivization of the person within a particular ideological apparatus; or, in Laruelle’s terms, it is indicative of the force of decision in assuming a World. It is this apparatus that Fleck refers to as a *thought collective*. A committed Western Buddhist practitioner is called to, is made to desire, Buddhism as a system of knowledge on hearing the promise of its powers. But that practitioner must then spend time within the institutional structure that encodes the master’s knowledge, being formed as the “special ‘carrier,’” as the embodiment, of that knowledge via the thought style of the collective.

A “thought collective” [is] a community of persons mutually exchanging ideas or maintaining intellectual interaction ... The individual within the collective is never, or hardly ever, conscious of the prevailing thought style, which almost always exerts an absolutely compulsive force upon his thinking and with which it is not possible to be at variance.<sup>4</sup>

It is this tendency toward style invariance combined with institutionally reinforced personal identity formation that foreshadows incommensurability. An *astronomer* might listen “with respect” (as we like to believe) as her *astrologer* interlocutor explains the impact of Venus’s rising in Gemini on the love life of earthlings, but she won’t be buying any of it. Conversely, the astrologer, on hearing from the astronomer that Venus’s atmosphere consists of 96 percent carbon dioxide, 3.5 percent nitrogen, and less than 1 percent of carbon monoxide, argon, sulfur dioxide, and water vapor, might, while feigning interest, secretly believe his interlocutor to be “trapped in the intellect,” and thus wholly missing the point. Both interlocutors are “experts on Venus.” But to each, the other’s thought style, and by extension institutional thought collective, is deeply misguided, even foolish. The institutional inculcation that is necessary for the formation of the practitioner simultaneously limits the possibility of his or her thought style.

Because it belongs to a community, the thought style of the collective undergoes social reinforcement ... It constrains the individual by determining “what can be thought in no other way.”<sup>5</sup>

At The Great Feast of Knowledge, Western Buddhism must enter into dialogue with disparate thought collectives. Imagine, for example, the conversation between agents of, say, Biology and Buddhism on the necessity of lust/*lobha* for human existence, for reproduction and perpetuation of the species, for instance. Such an encounter, such a fusion, creates a new thought collective, however fleeting and begrudged. For, a nonnegotiable premise of The Great Feast of Knowledge is that all disciplines *think*. At the feast, *thought circulates freely*. Among other consequences, this feature accounts for the possibility of what we all know to be true of systems of thought, even the most sacrosanct: they change. Hence, as Fleck says, a “fundamental phenomenon of epistemology is the *fact* that the circulation of thought is always related, in principle to its transformation.”<sup>6</sup>

So, our reflection on incommensurability has a hint of promise. But, as the rowdy medieval image of the feast is meant to convey, it is a promise that carries with it a certain threat of conceptual anarchy. For who can say what might be bred in the dregs of thought’s circulation? Who can say whether the trajectory of “transformation” might not be mutilation, defacement, undesired mutation, perversion? Yet, as the great champion of the unbridled anarchy of thought, Paul Feyerabend, insists, perhaps knowledge absolutely *depends on* the communal sounding of discordant local knowledges:

Knowledge ... is not a series of self-consistent theories that converges toward an ideal view; it is not a gradual approach to the truth. It is rather an ever increasing *ocean of mutually incompatible (and perhaps even incommensurable) alternatives*, each single theory, each fairy tale, each myth that is part of the collection forcing others into greater articulation and all of them contributing, via this process of competition, to the development of our consciousness.<sup>7</sup>

But before we celebrate our escape from the morass of incommensurability, Feyerabend reminds us that this turbulent ocean of knowledge is populated not only by the “lucubrations of experts” but also by “ancient and modern prejudices ... and the fantasies of cranks.”<sup>8</sup> How can we determine the difference? By what criterion can we judge?

To answer this question, we have to turn once again to the idea of the Real.