

CHAPTER 7



INSIGHT MEDITATION

Liminality Without the Excitement

Ward Keeler

At the opening of Chapter 4 of *The Ritual Process*, entitled ‘Communitas: Model and Process’, Victor Turner writes of ‘a seminar [he] ran with an interdisciplinary group of students and faculty, on various aspects of what may be called the meta-structural aspects of social relations’ (Turner [1969] 1977: 131). If I may be permitted a boast: I was a member of that seminar, and it was very exciting. For the whole of the fall semester of 1967, at each weekly gathering (held in the evening at his and Edith Turner’s home), Turner read out to us drafts of the chapters of the book he was writing. His ideas all seemed wonderfully clarifying and in step with the times.

Following the book’s appearance in 1969, it was then gratifying to see how widely Turner’s concepts of liminality and communitas were taken up, not just by anthropologists but by people in a great range of fields in the humanities. Clearly, many other people found these ideas as clarifying, useful and exciting as we had when Turner laid them out for us at Cornell.

I do not want to deny the power of these concepts. But in what follows I do wish to analyse their appeal – and to suggest that our own enchantment with communitas, like Turner’s, stems from a set of assumptions that incline us to make judgements in favour of certain social phenomena and against others. Those phenomena we favour, ones characterized by feelings of solidarity and enthusiasm, we believe to have a ‘universal’ appeal. But anthropology has taught us we should be guarded about anything ‘universal’ – and that even includes communitas. The example I will use to make my argument is a Burmese meditation retreat that I undertook in the Shan Hills in

2012. Everything about this ten-day experience fits the account of a liminal period to a Turnerian T. Yet even if the retreat did, after a fashion, generate feelings of solidarity, such feelings were for most intents and purposes squelched, or at least discounted, by the organizers of the event. I include among those organizers not just the people responsible for that particular retreat but more importantly U Goenka, the Burmese man of Indian descent who founded the organization, Vipassana Meditation, which has now spread around the world and brought the practice of 'insight meditation' into the lives of enormous numbers of people.

The terms and conditions for participating in a ten-day meditation course at the Dhamma Vipassana Center in Pyin Oo Lwin (formerly Maymyo), Burma (now Myanmar), were as straightforward as they were astonishing.¹ One needed simply to arrive on a course's starting date – in my case, 25 April 2012 – and complete a short form. I was handed a pamphlet listing the Code of Conduct in English (see below), and immediately shown to my room, a very small one, in a row of similar ones. It had a rough cement floor, two simple wooden beds (one on each side) and a tiny bathroom at the back with a small sink, a toilet, and two big plastic buckets (formerly paint containers) to store water for bathing South East Asian fashion, pouring water over one's body with a big plastic ladle.

We men were few enough in number that we each got a single room; I later learned that women participants, more than three times more numerous, were all doubled up except for the one Western female participant. As a Westerner, I too came in for special treatment: I was granted the loan of a mosquito net, a very thin mattress, and a single sheet (on which was printed a repeating, and in context, an odd motif: 'I love you' in three languages). Burmese participants were not so favoured, presumably because they would know to travel with such amenities if they felt they needed them. Mosquito nets are used almost universally in the lowlands but in the cooler Shan Hills mosquitoes are much less prevalent, and so many people do without; and many people in Burma sleep on simple woven mats placed over wooden planks for beds. That is how I slept in the monastery where I was living (as a lay visitor) in Mandalay at the time, but I was happy to accept the loan of the mattress. A neighbour, peering through the tinted jalousies flanking the door, the room's only windows, saw the mat I would not be using, as I had a mattress, and darted in to borrow it. Assuring yourself a little extra padding is a wise move at a meditation centre, as I was soon to learn.

No reference was made in all of this to money. Those of us participating as students ('yogis'), about 130 people, would be housed, fed and instructed, for ten days plus an initial evening and a final morning, for free. Anyone who chose to make a donation at the end of the course to help defray the cost of future ones was welcome, but by no means obliged, to do so. There was

no talk of ‘suggested donations’, those shame-based hooks that American museums twist into their visitors’ flesh. Instead, we were to enjoy in our efforts the same kinds of support, including board and lodging, and a few basic amenities (e.g. buckets and ladles for bathing) that monks and, to a lesser degree, nuns, enjoy in Burmese Buddhist society while pursuing the path of *Dhamma*, the ‘Law’, a simple set of moral understandings articulated by Gautama Buddha about 2,500 years ago.

Monks follow a set of 227 rules, known as the *vinaya*, an elaborate, abstruse, and sometimes puzzling list of pro- and prescriptions. One such proscription has it that a monk must not sit in a careless manner when in the upper story of a building. A monk told me that this rule stems from an incident in the Buddha’s time – all fundamental elements of the Buddhist scriptures, written in the classical language of Pali, must be said to have originated during the Buddha’s lifetime – when a monk was sitting inattentively, fell down, and killed a monk who was sitting a storey below.

A much shorter list, the Five Sila, imposes five rules upon all Buddhists, lay as well as religious: not to kill any living being; not to steal; not to engage in sexual misconduct; not to lie; and not to imbibe intoxicating substances. We yogis, however, were to imitate monks and nuns by abiding by the five sila in more stringent form: to engage in no sexual behaviour of any kind, and not only to avoid lying but also to lay no claim to possessing supernatural powers. A rider to that last rule is that even if one does possess such supernatural powers – most Burmese Buddhists believe that there are a good number of such people about – one should refrain from boasting of the fact. So even if you are capable of levitating through meditation, for example, you should make no mention of the fact.

In accordance with the Code of Conduct to which we pledged to conform, we yogis would commit ourselves to a further three precepts. Like Buddhist monks and nuns, we would not eat any food after noon until the following early morning meal; not dance, sing, play a musical instrument, or use perfume or cosmetics; and not indulge ourselves in any excessive comforts, such as sleeping on thick mattresses or sitting on highly cushioned seats.

There were further rules, and this was where our rules were more stringent even than those enumerated in the *vinaya* for members of the clergy. Men and women were to remain segregated in different areas at all times. Tarps divided the meditation centre’s campus into two parts, and the dining shed was similarly divided. Only in the Dhamma Hall itself, where we sat in meditation, would we actually see members of the opposite sex. But then we would sit divided by gender and, whenever sitting, have our eyes closed. We would neither read nor write during the entire retreat. We would seek out no other form of entertainment. We would not speak among ourselves from six that first evening until the rule of silence was lifted mid-morning

on the tenth day. (We could speak, briefly, to the teacher for individualized pointers about meditation, and for practical matters, as well as to ‘Dhamma Workers’, volunteer support staff (people who had previously completed a similar course). We were not permitted cell phones, and nor could we make any sign, verbal or physical, among ourselves. In fact, we were even prohibited from so much as glancing at other yogis.

We were told in our first evening lecture that we were to think of ourselves as much as possible as being like forest monks. These lone ascetics, who pursue their spiritual betterment in the jungle, are paragons of Buddhist ascetic practice. They can lay the greatest claims to moral purity and so are thought to be those ‘most likely to succeed’ – that is, to escape the cycle of rebirths to become individuals poised to enter Nirvana.

And after that first evening, when we were served dinner (for the only time) and given our initial instruction, we would follow a rigorous and consistent schedule. We would be awakened at 4 in the morning by a series of deliberately paced but stentorian gong strokes – these gong strokes punctuated every period in our day – and we would gather in the Dhamma Hall, all of us, to start meditating by 4.30 AM. That first session would end at 6.30, when we would have breakfast – noodles of one sort or another, and the Burmese version of coffee (a weak, sweet swill made with powder and hot water) in place of the more ordinary, and so less prestigious, Burmese version of tea (a very strong, very sweet, very milky concoction, drunk in small but still powerful quantities, to which I had become addicted). At 8.00, we would sit for another hour, have a five-minute break, reconvene for another sitting lasting until 11.00, at which time we would be served lunch – a big plate of rice with two curries and other accompaniments, plus a sweet (the diet was vegan). At 1.00 PM, we would start a sitting lasting till 2.20, then another from 2.30 to 3.30, and another from 3.35 (usually more like 3.38, and the minutes mattered) to 5.00, at which point we would be served a cup of a sweet fruit drink and a little ball of toddy-palm sugar (monks are also granted this slight leeway in the prohibition on eating after noon). At 6.00 PM we would have another hour’s sitting, then a lecture lasting about 75 minutes: a recording in Burmese played in the Dhamma Hall for most of the participants; a recording in English played in the Mini Hall for the five of us needing or preferring the English version. Finally, we would sit (the Burmese expression is ‘to sit the Law’) from 8:30 to 9.00, then get ready for bed, with ‘lights out’ at 9.30 – except that few South East Asians sleep with the lights out, so our rooms were always quite brightly illuminated from the lights kept on all night in the open-air passageways between the rows of rooms.

Here we find all the features Victor Turner sees as characteristic of liminal situations: isolation in space from one’s normal social as well as physi-

cal context; disruption of the normal tenor of face-to-face interaction; and the imposition of ascetic rigours. Even the principle of exchange was put in abeyance, as we were fed, housed and instructed without need for payment. As in many other liminal situations, we were also enjoined to rethink our assumptions, to take a different perspective on the world and our place in it. We should find ourselves changed in fundamental ways at the end of the period of seclusion, having learnt both from the lectures we had heard and, more importantly, from the ordeal – it was truly an ordeal – of doing meditation ourselves for ten-and-a-half hours a day.

Had the 130 or so of us who had undergone this experience together come to feel by the end the sense of solidarity and fellow-feeling that Turner would lead us to expect? The answer is yes and no – but mostly no. And that was, in the view of our teachers, I believe, as it should be.

To the extent that doing anything in a group, particularly a physically and emotionally stressful activity, gives it greater affective resonance, yes, I think we all felt a heightened sense of solidarity. When the ban on talking was lifted midway through the tenth day, there was a camaraderie in the air that differed, I think, from what the atmosphere would have been had we simply come together at that moment without having just shared a ten-day ascetic exercise. The extra fortitude that undertaking the endeavour along with others granted us was, for that matter, I assume, part and parcel of the organizers' strategy, even if unacknowledged. We are social beings, and the presence of others always matters to us. That fact alone helped us to not just give up and go home – although the thought certainly went through my mind, and I imagine other people's too. In any case, brought together in liminal situations, as Turner taught us to see so vividly, we are inclined to bind ourselves to each other in one – perhaps highly euphemized, or even denied – way or another.

Yet denied our inclination to bind ourselves to others certainly we certainly were, both experientially and doctrinally. Recall that we were enjoined to not even look at each other. The model to which we were told to aspire, that of a lone monk meditating in the forest, stands at the opposite pole from that of a participant in rites of passage who learns the fundamental, and presumably heartening, lesson of human community – that we are all in this together – in the company of his or her peers.

To describe individuals at a meditation retreat whose identities have been stripped from them as 'equals' would not be completely inaccurate. Granted, there is still a status hierarchy: we were seated in order, according to how many such retreats in U Goenka's tradition each of us had done. Individuals with a greater number of such retreats to their credit were seated closer to the (more prestigious) east side of the hall. Those, like me, who had not yet done any, appeared to be arranged fairly randomly. Nevertheless, no

further acknowledgement of our personal identities was made other than to sort us by gender (separated in space) and by whether we were lay people (sitting on mats) or members of the Buddhist clergy (sitting on slightly elevated stools). Yet Buddhist ideology and also the retreat's practices did not so much look upon us as equals but as free-floating individuals – which was how they urged us to see ourselves.

To address the matter of ideology first: Buddhism shares other Indic traditions' view that each of us carries with us an ongoing karmic balance sheet. Our deeds and misdeeds have generated and continue to generate (as we speak) a certain quantity of merit, and that quantity determines what kind of existence we will enjoy or suffer come our next turn in the cycle of rebirths. It is hard to think of any more individualizing concept than this one. True, the way you interact with others has inescapable karmic consequences, but each of us must tend to our own personal karmic account. It is, one might say, a free market in merit. Even if we team up with others for a while in this life, and if we are lucky and wish it to be so, might even get to re-establish those ties in another one, we are still lone individuals pursuing idiosyncratic paths through the cosmic samsaric landscape. Not incidentally, the reason most Burmese give for engaging in meditation is that according to the Buddha this is the single most effective means for attaining merit. I am not sure that the Pali canon actually supports this view, but it is very widely held in Burma today.

If Buddhist ideology tells us that we are on our own, the meditation retreat was designed to implement such notions in practice. With respect to what we did, what mattered was what we did *not* do: talk to each other or otherwise interact (let alone have sex – something U Goenka told us, in one of his recorded lectures, we would lose all interest in once we were advanced enough in our meditation practice). So we enjoyed not the thrill of community but rather the calm, the lack of stress, the relief, of autonomy. I have written elsewhere about how much autonomy preoccupies Burmese and so will not repeat myself here (Keeler 2017). I wish to pursue the question, rather, of why equality and what we assume goes with it (feelings of solidarity and collective effervescence – Turner does not use the term, in my recollection, but certainly has it in mind) speaks to us so compellingly, and why it figures so little in Burmese imaginings of an alternative to ordinary, structured, which is to say hierarchically differentiated, social life.

Before I turn to that larger us vs. them question, let me note one more element of our practice of meditation in which pondering ourselves as individuals took precedence over celebrating any potential solidarity we might feel with others. Meditation in U Goenka's tradition is not 'guided': we were not told what sorts of images we should attend to in the course of any sitting. Nevertheless, what distinguishes 'insight' meditation from 'concentration'

meditation is the way that in the former, as we learned from U Goenka's taped evening lectures, the meditator casts their attention over the surface of his or her body, attending to any physical experience one may note. Tension in past relationships, moments of anger and disappointment, are believed to have generated knots that inhere in the body and these are expected to come to the surface under such attention. The meditator is not advised to ponder the nature of the original cause of particular knots but rather simply to let the resultant tension go. Thus attention is not focused on one's relations with others but rather on oneself. U Goenka believes, along with other meditation instructors, that such inward-looking, 'insight'-generating practice will give rise to more satisfying and sustainable relationships with others.

Yet the practice is predicated on a radically solipsistic focus – or actually on a still more radical assertion: that there is no self. This important and abstruse Buddhist concept of 'non-self' further denies the reality of our everyday lives, going along with the fundamental assertion that, as all conditioned beings and circumstances are impermanent, there is nothing real about our experience. I will not try to explain a concept that I (along with a great many Buddhists) find difficult to fathom. I will simply note that Turner's idealizing image of liminal individuals joined together in the equality and fellow-feeling he labels 'communitas' stands in clear contrast to a set of free-floating elements of so-called persons who are really just transient and chance agglomerations of constituent, impermanent parts in an illusory world. This way of conceiving matters is not likely to give rise to a lot of singing and dancing.

Communitas is not foreign to all Burmese social life. Some degree of licence is to be found in the *nat* cult, wherein cross-dressing spirit mediums become possessed by the spirits of legendary figures, and thereby become those figures' vessels for communicating – sometimes quite abrasively – with their human interlocutors (Spiro 1978; Brac de la Perrière 1989). Events of this sort can take place throughout the year, although the government has made concerted efforts to tamp them down, but really come into their own at the annual Taunbyoun festival, when spirit mediums gather for a brief period of intense ritual activity, plus a lot of carryings-on (Brac de la Perrière 2005; Nu Nu Yi 2008).

More obviously still, during the Buddhist New Year celebrations, the 'water festival', there is riotous behaviour among young and old. The event occurs during the pitiless heat of April, and it allows people to throw water on anyone within range. This custom may once have implied the gentle and welcome relief of people's heat-induced discomfort. That would have been prior to the arrival of plastic buckets, water guns and fire hoses in places like Mandalay, where the practice has come to assume extraordinary proportions. The mighty are of course altogether fair game at such a moment,

a ‘moment’ that lasts a few days, and come in for many a drenching should they venture outside unprotected. Few do.

Closer still to a Turnerian vision of marginal figures laying bare the fact that the powerful have feet of clay was a traditional practice (*than ja'*) included in water festival celebrations whereby young people chanted rhymed verses critiquing the authorities. I observed it in Mandalay in 1988; flatbed trucks were driven through the city's streets from one rallying point to another, and young men standing on them chanted scripts that had been written out for the purpose in the preceding weeks (see Keeler 2009). The criticism had to be oblique, couched in euphemistic allusion, not direct attacks. But it was the one instance in which the politically weak got to let the politically powerful know what they were thinking, a practice that otherwise would have been extremely dangerous. Tolerated even during the dark days of Ne Win's military dictatorship, it was then forbidden by the military clique that replaced him in 1988. I am unaware whether it has been reinstituted: I saw no evidence of the practice in April of 2012, and the new civilian government turns out to tolerate criticism no more graciously than did the military one. Yet I cannot say for sure whether the practice has been revived.²

The question remains, though, why such an obviously liminal event as a meditation retreat should generate so little by way of *communitas* among its participants, and why its organizers should seem so little invested in making such a thing happen. A related question is why so many of us embrace the idea of *communitas* so fulsomely. I offer two suggestions to account for why Burmese meditators show so little taste for the experience and expression of fellow feeling and solidarity. The first turns on questions of emotional style; the second on divergent ideological models of how to organize humans into groups.

Anthropological attention to the matter of emotions has waxed and waned over the years. At present, when many of our colleagues contend with urgent questions of human rights, migration, the environment, and so on, talking about feelings strikes some people, I imagine, as irrelevant, or even self-indulgent. Yet I am convinced that how people react to their experience belongs at the centre of virtually any anthropological project, and reactions always implicate attitudes towards the experience and expression of feeling.

What strikes me as characteristic of much Burmese talk and behaviour is the preference for an attenuated degree of emotional arousal. People may not conform to this ideal: I have certainly seen people get angry or impatient or unhappy. Yet as anthropologists have reported from elsewhere in the region (cf. Brown, Cassaniti, Cook, Geertz, Wikan), public expectations and, to a remarkable degree, actual behaviour emphasize the need to stave off powerful emotions. This applies to positive as well as negative emotions. I was frequently told in Burma (and in Indonesia, as well) that one must not

be too happy or too sad. To be given over to any emotion, even a pleasant one, implies a lack of control, and with that comes vulnerability. Self-control enjoys an enormous value; strong feelings, even if they are positive, always threaten to undermine such control.³

The need to resist pleasure just as much as anger or hurt comes up in U Goenka's instructions to meditators. In the course of their meditation, many people apparently experience a very pleasurable sense, a kind of shower of sensations flowing from their head and then down over their bodies. Should they encounter this, however, they must be careful not to invest in the pleasure: rather they should, as with everything else, simply note it and let it go. To come to like it, or even seek it out, would mean becoming attached to it: precisely the wrong move. The core claim of Buddhist teachings is that attachment, given the impermanent nature of all conditioned things, is the cause of suffering, and the aim of meditation is to learn to forego all attachments.⁴

Julia Cassaniti, in a vivid and intriguing analysis of how people she knew in northern Thailand handled their own feelings, describes the great store people lay on 'letting go', on not letting feelings of hurt, disappointment, grief or anger take clear form and preoccupy their thoughts (Cassaniti 2015: 87–117). Claiming that what people are doing is suppressing the negative emotions they experience is not a gloss that Cassaniti wants to put on what people have told her, as she is anxious to avoid imposing Western understandings on her data in this way. She insists that people did indeed seem able to dissipate and even stave off any distress that might come up in their day-to-day lives.

I am a little more wedded to Western psychological biases than Cassaniti. I see real costs to this strategy of minimizing emotional experience, as it gives relationships in Burma a tenuousness that I, as a Westerner, find unfortunate. (I infer from Cassaniti's data, and from incidents that Brown (2001) and Cook (2010) report, that the same characterizes relationships in Thailand also.) Yet Cassaniti has written illuminatingly about that very contrast between the ways that we Westerners think about and respond to the rough patches in our experience and the ways people in the region of northern Thailand – not all that far from the Shan Hills of eastern Burma where I did the meditation retreat – do so.

The whole point of a meditation retreat, or at least a major element of it, is to enable practitioners to distance themselves from the vagaries of their own reactions to things. Just as one notes physical sensations on the surface of one's body and simply moves on, such experiences as anger and grief should be noted but then dismissed, as they derive from our relationships and so, like everything else, are a part of this impermanent world, which makes them unworthy of attachment.

Communitas celebrates the attachments we humans can and should enjoy with our fellow humans. But we are too often prevented from doing so because ‘structure’ insists upon our differences, distracting us from our more fundamental, existential similarity. Strip away the differences, or even strip away people’s clothes (think of the immodesty enjoined upon Ndembu women in certain fertility rites), and people will enjoy the excitement, joys and reassurance that human solidarity affords us. A Buddhist meditator would hardly know where to begin to counter such illusory notions, ones necessarily leading, in Buddhist views, to suffering.

I do not wish to suggest that Turner is wrong in his compelling account of *communitas*. It is a phenomenon to be found in contexts the world over, and, at times, as I have suggested, even in Burma: a powerful model to pit against the normal and normative organization of individuals into distinctive roles. Rather I wish to suggest that Turner has omitted from his account an alternative rejoinder to structure, a third possibility to place alongside the ‘two “major” models of human interrelatedness’ he posits, one ‘structured’ and the other ‘unstructured’ (Turner 1969: 96).

I do so with recourse to Louis Dumont’s analysis of two *other* major models of human interrelatedness, predicated on what he labelled ‘hierarchical’ and ‘egalitarian’ or ‘modern’ assumptions. In the former, Dumont tells us, people are bound together by virtue of their differences. For example, men and women have an interest in pairing up because each of them has traits and capacities the other lacks. In egalitarian or modern ideology, in contrast, people are looked upon as fundamentally similar. Men and women may differ, but in what really matters – their dignity and their rights – they are the same. In hierarchical arrangements, difference is the keystone in the social arch; in egalitarian ones, difference makes (or should make) no difference.

At one point, Turner gives an account of ‘structure’ that rhymes pretty closely with Louis Dumont’s account of ‘hierarchy’. Turner describes the standard, everyday model of society ‘as a structured, differentiated and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of “more” or “less”’ (Turner 1969: 96).

Similarly, Dumont describes Indian caste society as predicated on relations of exchange among people differentiated along some axis of difference (ritual purity, gender, etc.) – and along with that difference, whatever it may be, a difference in value (Dumont 1980). Important to note here, though, is Dumont’s emphasis upon the bonds, not the separations, that hierarchical distinctions generate. Once again, it is because individuals have distinctive skills and roles that they have an interest in linking themselves to others, unlike themselves, in long-term relations of exchange.

Turner goes on, in the same third chapter of *The Ritual Process*, to note that, ‘from the perspectival viewpoint of those concerned with the main-

tenance of “structure”, all sustained manifestations of *communitas* must appear as dangerous and anarchical, and have to be hedged around with pre-scriptions, prohibitions, and conditions’ (Turner 1969: 109).

Dumont makes a similar point about caste society protecting itself from challenge when, in an early, much-noted discussion of renunciants in Indic traditions, he points out that the only way those traditions could accommodate ‘individuals’ was by allowing them to pull out entirely from society: to become mendicant wanderers (Dumont 1960). Buddhism, in the creation of a monastic order, represents one among several variants of the pattern. Buddhist monks become permanently marginal, in Turner’s terms, and thereby are at once tolerated and neutralized. So the Buddhist solution to the idea that there might exist an alternative to ‘structure’ fits Turner’s view that the guardians of order will go to great lengths to protect structure from all counternarratives.

Turner himself was very interested in the phenomenon of monks, particularly Catholic ones, as marginal beings. But he also included a few paragraphs about the Buddha towards the end of *The Ritual Process*. His final gloss on him is as follows: ‘In the Buddha we have a classic case of a “structurally” well-endowed religious founder who underwent initiation into *communitas* through stripping and equalizing, and putting on the behavior of weakness and poverty’ (Turner 1969: 197).

I think we can relate this comment to one Turner makes in an earlier chapter, when he writes: ‘Prophets and artists tend to be liminal and marginal people, “edgemen”, who strive with a passionate sincerity to rid themselves of the clichés associated with status incumbency and role-playing to enter into vital relations with other men in fact or imagination’ (ibid.: 128). It is in that last phrase (‘to enter into vital relations with other men’) where I think Turner is misleading for the Buddhist case, and where thinking further about Buddhism might have suggested an important emendation of his views. The ‘path’ that Buddhism prescribes as an alternative to structure is the opposite of what Turner takes to be self-evident. Rather than pitting against structure, which is to say, hierarchy, affirmations of solidarity, it pits against it the absence of bonds.

It turns out that structure – people bound to each other through hierarchically differentiated roles – admits of two contraries: people bound together in homogeneity and equality, and people not bound to each other at all. Even though the existence of the community of monks, the *sangha*, is predicated upon mutual interdependence through difference, the ultimate Buddhist ideal, as personified, or really, idealized, in the lone monk meditating in the forest, is of the absolutely autonomous individual.

To be fair to Turner, he was not unaware of the latter possibility, that of radical individualism. Very occasionally, he alludes to it, particularly in the

essays collected in his 1974 book, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*. Here is a representative, if particularly piquant, example of the passing glance he makes from time to time to this alternative to both structure and *communitas*-filled anti-structure: 'Liminality often provides favorable conditions for *communitas*, but it may have the reverse effect, either a Hobbesian war of all against all, or an existentialist anarchy of individuals, each 'doing his own thing' (Turner 1974: 285).

But Turner never dwells on these alternative cases. Nothing about Africa, as far as my little reading on the region tells me, and little about Victor Turner's investments, would lead him to linger over this other kind of response to structure. The fact is that contemporary, well-educated Westerners worry about alienation, isolation, a loss of community, as Durkheim did – and before him, Tocqueville warned us that we should. Of course, we have plenty of other matters to worry about. But Turner's description of moments in social life when inequality falls away and 'vital relations with other men' come to the fore appeals to us, and appealed I assume to him, because it fits so well with our ideological commitments.

The fact that Turner's concept of *communitas* caught on so widely – close to thirty years after the publication of *The Ritual Process* a colleague at the University of Texas was using Turner's ideas as the key theoretical instrument with which to analyse Japanese manga – reflects Dumont's point that 'modern' people have embraced egalitarian ideas so completely that we have lost all feel for what an alternate take, a hierarchical one, on social relations would look like. We have taken our stand on equality. Anything that contrasts with it we brand 'inequality' and condemn.⁵

In their 1986 book, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Stallybrass and White already warned us of the violent turn that *communitas* might take when generated in situations of communal tension. Think, for example, of South Asia. Old leftie that he was, Turner also well knew the perversions that might arise when certain people took it upon themselves to dismantle dominant hierarchies, only to replace the formerly powerful, in the name of the people, with themselves.

Indeed, Turner was actually more discerning than many of the people who took up his ideas. He points out in passages close to those I have quoted that 'structure' is necessary to the orderly pursuit of social life, that *communitas* can only operate as a reminder, punctuating our lives at moments of individual or social transition, of the fact that our hierarchical relationships are elaborated upon a fundamental, foundational ground of shared humanity. Both models, structure and anti-structure, he notes, must coexist and keep the other within bounds: '[F]or individuals and groups, social life is a type of dialectical process that involves successive experience of high and low, *communitas* and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality

and inequality . . . In such a process, the opposites, as it were, constitute one another and are mutually indispensable' (Turner 1969: 97).

Yet even if we accept Turner's sober qualifications, our hearts respond more readily to appeals for solidarity based on fundamental sameness. As Dumont emphasizes, this makes it difficult for us to concede that others may very well not share our investments. Others, such as a lot of people in Burma, and a lot of Buddhists, may choose to idealize not powerful and exciting sensations shared among people in groups, but rather a very different, if equally unsustainable, model, one in which we evade the burdens of hierarchical relationships by wandering off on our own to meditate like lone ascetics in the jungle.

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NOTES

1. More thorough accounts of meditation retreats in South East Asia can be found in Jordt 2007; Cook 2010, 2012; Keeler 2017; and Cassaniti 2018.
2. Since I wrote this essay, the Burmese military has staged a coup (on 1 February 2021), removing the civilian authorities from power and reversing what small liberalizing steps the civilian government had made.
3. Cook discusses the need to exercise control over emotions among Thai nuns who engage in meditation as a way to seek and at the same time embody and perform the Buddhist ideal of detachment (Cook 2010). Cassaniti traces the central importance of a Buddhist notion of 'remembering' in Thailand, Burma and Sri Lanka, and in each case the concept seems to imply a similar emotional steadiness (Cassaniti 2018). I find Cook's and Cassaniti's arguments convincing, but would note that a great many South East Asians who are not Buddhist adopt the same attitude towards emotions, suggesting that Buddhism provides only a partial explanation of the phenomenon – or even that Buddhist ideas have been shaped in light of a more generalized set of assumptions that are widespread throughout the region.
4. I never had to be careful not to grow attached to any pleasure during the retreat. I was struggling constantly to develop some equanimity in the face of physical and

emotional pain, so I was well insulated from such a risk. Cook and Jordt clearly proved much better equipped to engage in meditative practices than I was.

5. David Graeber voices precisely such a gut aversion to hierarchy and to Dumont in a recent commentary (Graeber 2018).

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