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## *21 Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

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# A Review of *21 Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

Victor Forte<sup>1</sup>

*21 Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. By Yuval Noah Harari. New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2018, ISBN 9780525512172 (hardback), U.S. \$28.00.

Yuval Harari is arguably the most recognized public intellectual in the world today. His rise to global attention has been meteoric to say the least. Specializing in medieval European military history, Harari's publications between 2007 and 2010 were written for the kinds of limited scholarly audiences common in academia. His readership changed abruptly however, when he decided to write a world history textbook for his undergraduate students at Hebrew University of Jerusalem. This text, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, was originally published in Hebrew in 2011 and became a bestseller in Israel. The book was translated into English in 2014, and subsequently, about forty-five other languages, becoming an international bestseller of over twelve million copies. The success of *Sapiens* led to a busy lecture and interview schedule, taking Harari on a global tour, discussing a number of his idiosyncratic interpretations of human history in deep, yet accessible language. His popularity has only increased with the publications of *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, in 2017, and most recently, *21 Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2018).

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So why review a book written by a specialist in medieval European history for the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*? What has become increasingly visible in Harari's work since the publication of *Sapiens* is a recognizable influence of Buddhist practice in both his life as a public scholar and his interpretation of human history. While these influences were at work in all three texts, it may not have been appropriate for a review of *Sapiens* or *Homo Deus* to appear in *JBE*, but *21 Lessons* has, to a certain extent changed the conversation about Harari's work. While the author was somewhat hesitant to openly discuss the elements of Buddhist influence in his early publications, he ends *21 Lessons* with a confessional chapter of sorts, explaining to his readers the importance of the practice of *vipassanā* meditation in his own life and work. This has only led to further discussion of Buddhist practice in his lectures and interviews as well. Because of the great popularity of his books, Harari has as a result, raised the volume of broad public discourse regarding how Buddhist practice may be relevant to contemporary global challenges like nationalism, education and employment, Artificial Intelligence, biotechnology, brain science, environmentalism, and animal welfare, to name only a few of the large issues he addresses. In doing so, he has joined other popular intellectuals who have recently brought Buddhist thought and practice into public discourse, most notably Sam Harris (*Waking Up: Spirituality Without Religion*, 2015) and Robert Wright (*Why Buddhism is True*, 2017).

Harari has appeared on the podcasts of both authors, and while they profess shared interests, there are important differences as well. All three are concerned with the relation between human biology and the practices of Buddhist meditation. In this sense, there is a shared secular dimension to their appropriations of Buddhism. However, there are also important differences in matters of degree and emphasis. Harris has been mainly known for his open and uncompromising criticism of the Abrahamic traditions and has enough distaste for any form of religious faith that it is of central importance for his turn towards meditation to be a fully secular enterprise. Wright's interests are mainly in the realm of evolutionary psychology and he finds practical benefits in the use of

meditation for addressing the evolutionary conditioning of *homo sapiens*. While his notions of Buddhism have a secular underpinning, Wright's secularism is not couched in the critical agenda so central to the work of Harris. Like Harris, Harari is quite comfortable pointing out what he sees as erroneous narratives and the practical and ethical shortcomings of Abrahamic religious traditions (Chapter Eight "Religion: *God Now Serves the Nation*," and Chapter Twelve "Humility: *You Are Not the Center of the World*"), and is just as willing to point out the forms of violence perpetrated within traditional Buddhist cultures (309–311). But unlike Harris and Wright, his Buddhism has a more traditional structure, deeply grounded in the teachings of S. N. Goenka, and with less emphasis on neurobiology and brain science—preferring instead to "dig from both ends" of meditation and science, so that the former is never replaced or subsumed by the latter (318–322). In addition, Harari seems more reluctant to publicly tout an exclusively secular form of Buddhism, or at times, even to promote the practice of meditation.

What is most significant about the work of Harris and Wright, but especially of Harari, is in their interpretation of Buddhism as a response to here-and-now human challenges. By capturing the attention of a relatively large audience their assertions could therefore have far-reaching influence regarding the ethical meaning of Buddhism, especially among contemporary Westerners. While Harari's *Sapiens* focused on the past history of human kind, and *Homo Deus* looked to the possibilities of a not so distant future, *21 Lessons* is concerned with the immediate here-and-now, and most overtly addresses the place of Buddhism in Harari's assessment of the contemporary world.

*21 Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* is divided into five parts and twenty-one succinct chapters, each dedicated to a specific topic, and each chapter building upon the previous one. The five parts include, "The Technological Challenge," "The Political Challenge," "Despair and Hope," "Truth," and "Resilience," each of which is further divided into three to five chapters. Part Three, "Despair and Hope" functions as the center of the book,

pivoting from an analysis of the crucial global difficulties currently facing human beings to clarifying the differences between conventional narrative and ultimate reality, and then ending with notions of resilience needed to meet these challenges.

While exhibiting some hesitancy to openly bring Buddhist thought into the conversation, there are clear themes throughout Harari's work that anyone familiar with basic Buddhist teachings would recognize.<sup>2</sup> Probably the most central argument in Harari's interpretation of human history, introduced in *Sapiens*, is that what has separated *homo sapiens* from not only other animal species, but other human species as well, is our capacity to create meaningful stories, compelling large numbers of individuals to cooperate in powerful and productive ways.

The interesting tension that results from this phenomenon is that these stories are all fictions, not ultimately true in any real sense, yet at

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<sup>2</sup> To provide an introductory example, see Harari's discussion with Tom Friedman on the future of humanity during a New York Times conference held in London on March 19<sup>th</sup> of this year. Friedman stated at one point that the result of living most of our lives in cyberspace and its accelerated powers means that we are "living in a realm where we are all connected and no one is in charge . . . a realm that is fundamentally god-free . . . . We are standing at a moral intersection we have never stood at before as a species . . . entering a world where any one of us could kill all of us, and all of us . . . could feed, clothe, house and educate everyone on the planet . . . . We are at the same time god-free and god-like." Friedman's approach, given these circumstances, is to follow the golden rule on a global scale through the support and development of strong families and healthy communities. Harari responded to Friedman by stating, "the problem is not so much morality, as it is causality, the ability to understand the chains of causes and effects in the world. There is no lack of values today in the world. But to act well in the world it is not enough to have good values. You need to have a good understanding of the chains of causes and effects." He continued to explain the difficulty of fully understanding these chains in the day to day complexities of the contemporary world. The point of citing of such an example for this book review is not to argue whether one approach is preferable to the other, but only that Harari will often present arguments based in Buddhist philosophical and ethical models, but rarely identifies these positions as ones that are ostensibly Buddhist. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5chp-PRYq-w&t=3433s&index=3&list=PLLMzGOCeTzBMXIy5aJJ6zs-UzhwCGOjj>.

the same time, are often extremely impactful in harnessing the powers of cooperation, changing the world in unprecedented ways and doing so over a relatively short historical period of about 70,000 years. Human beings have an uncanny capacity to both invent and embrace stories to such an extent that we forget they are actually fictions, thus resulting in the power to bring about great improvements in human thriving, while at the same time, potentially effecting high levels of misery for large numbers of persons and other species.

These fictions include everything from religion and myth to corporations, monetary economics, sports, and nation states. While Harari never presents his argument in such a way, one could recognize this assessment of human communicative cooperation according to Buddhist notions of conventional truth. What is centrally important in the teaching of the two truths is not to simply reject conventional truth outright, but only to recognize that such conventions are not *ultimately* true. This allows for a certain level of critical distance, resulting in heightened personal freedom and both cognitive and emotional flexibility. Throughout *21 Lessons*, when Harari discusses examples of these fictions for an audience of readers living in the current “post-truth” world, he reminds them that *homo sapiens* is a “post-truth species” having been creating large cooperative fictions since the stone age (238). While he recognizes the great achievements of human narrative, often inspiring tens of millions of total strangers to work together towards common goals, he also takes it upon himself to expose our forgetfulness in distinguishing between conventional and ultimate truth.

Humans have a remarkable ability to know and not know at the same time. Or, more correctly, they can know something when they really think about it, but most of the time they don't think about it, so they don't know it. If you really focus, you realize that money is a fiction. But you usually don't think about it. If you are asked about it, you know that soccer is a human invention. But in the heat of a match,

nobody asks about it. If you devote the time and energy, you can discover that nations are elaborate yarns. But in the midst of war, you don't have the time and energy. If you demand the ultimate truth, you realize that the story of Adam and Eve is a myth. But how often do you demand the ultimate truth? (246–247)

One could argue that Harari's evaluation of conventional truth is, within the context of the Buddhist two truths, overstated—simply equating conventional truth with falsehoods, and not recognizing that conventional truth is necessary for all interpersonal communication and the forging of meaningful human relationships. Conventional truth is not equivalent to “a rabbit's horn.” But in order to create a greater level of critical flexibility for his readers, to open up the possibilities of insight into the conventionality of our social frameworks, such an overstatement may serve a beneficial purpose. For it is through this exposure of ubiquitous human fictions that Harari sets the stage for his rather idiosyncratic presentation of the Four Noble Truths. Perhaps the most unique feature of his presentation is that the Four Noble Truths are never mentioned, and in this sense, not explicitly related to Buddhism. In the longest chapter of *21 Lessons*, entitled “Meaning,” and subtitled “*Life Is Not a Story*,” Harari goes to great lengths in order to deconstruct numerous human narratives that have moved history and grounded our claims of truth: from Hindu Dharma, to Quranic judgment, to Israeli Zionism, Buddhist rebirth, Christian Communion, and Confucian rites, to the proletariat struggle, modern nationalism, and liberal democracy. By the end of the chapter when the reader may be thinking to themselves, “What's left?” Harari presents “The Test of Reality,” where he states, “The big question facing humans isn't ‘what is the meaning of life?’ but rather ‘how do we stop suffering?’” (311). This conclusion is reached because for Harari it is primarily suffering that truly passes the test of reality.

We humans have conquered the world thanks to our ability to create and believe fictional stories. We are therefore



particularly bad at knowing the difference between fiction and reality. Overlooking this difference has been a matter of survival for us. If you nevertheless want to know the difference, the place to start is with suffering. Because . . . the realest thing in the world is suffering. (311)

What is striking about Harari's formulation is first, its accessibility. In leaving out much of the Buddhist context in his presentation, he leaves the door open for readers who would either be disoriented or put off by traditional Buddhist formulations.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, it still brings the reader to the entryway of both the wisdom of the two truths as well as the compassion for suffering beings, presenting the removal of suffering as *the* primary human concern. In order to cultivate the facility to recognize the difference between conventional human narratives and the truth of suffering, a simple path is provided by the author: Just ask oneself if the entities created by collective narratives can actually suffer.

Can a nation really suffer? Has a nation eyes, hands, senses, affections, and passions? If you prick it can it bleed? Obviously not. If it is defeated in war, loses a province, or even forfeits its independence, it still cannot experience pain, sadness, or any other kind of misery, for it has no body, no mind, and no feelings whatsoever. (312)

There have also been times during Harari's interviews and lectures over the last three years when he presents his formulation of the Four Noble Truths to his audience in total, again without any direct reference to

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<sup>3</sup> While leaving out any direct reference to Buddhism Harari also contrasts the ethics of the Four Noble Truths with the kind of divine command ethics associated with the Abrahamic God as "worldly lawgiver." In Chapter Thirteen, "God: *Don't Take the Name of God in Vain*," in a section titled "Godless Ethics" he states, "Morality doesn't mean 'following divine commands.' It means 'reducing suffering.' Therefore, in order to act morally, you don't need to believe in any myth or story. You just need to develop a deep appreciation of suffering. If you really understand how an action causes unnecessary suffering to yourself or others, you will naturally abstain from it" (204).

Buddhist teachings.<sup>4</sup> However, on Harari's website readers can find a more explicit discussion of the historical Buddha and his discovery of the truth of suffering in an unpublished text titled "Happiness."<sup>5</sup>

The second major Buddhist theme running throughout Harari's writing is in his discussion of Artificial Intelligence. Perhaps his views on the development and possible impacts of technology have attracted the greatest public attention, including leaders in the field like Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg. Harari's second bestseller, *Homo Deus*, was completely dedicated to examining possible human, socio-political, and economic outcomes from the impending convergence of info-technology and bio-technology. He begins *21 Lessons* with chapters on the same topic in "Part I: The Technological Challenge." In the first chapter, "Disillusionment," he examines the seeming recent weakening of liberal democratic values and the rise of right-wing populist movements. What he finds most troubling about these events is the rising isolationism at a time when global cooperation is most needed to address our most pressing contemporary challenges (Chapter Six "Civilization: *There is Just One Civilization in the World*"). He identifies three specific challenges in his writings and in almost all his public appearances: global warming, nuclear war, and what he calls "technological disruption," arguing that none of these problems can be addressed on a national level, but only through global cooperation

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<sup>4</sup> See for example, Harari's TED interview from February 2017, just as *Homo Deus* was about to be published. When asked by the interviewer to distinguish between the meaning of intelligence and consciousness, and to examine whether human sentience indicates an underlying human purpose, Harari responded by stating that there is no evidence of any underlying human purpose in some cosmic drama as depicted in many of the world religions. In fact, we also share sentience with other creatures, so this capacity is not specifically human, and we therefore need to broaden our notion of sentience. Secondly, what is most important about our sentience is not in realizing our role in the universe but liberating ourselves from suffering. We should therefore focus on how sentient beings suffer—to know, "what suffering is, what causes it, and how to be liberated from it." See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szt7f5NmE9E> Accessed November 21, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.ynharari.com/topic/happiness/> Accessed November 21, 2018.

(Chapter Seven “Nationalism: *Global Problems Need Global Answers*”). While just about anyone can recognize that the effects of global warming and nuclear war would be detrimental, and should therefore be avoided, it is not as clear what should be done about the rise of AI. This is because we generally recognize and broadly support the idea of AI providing many future human benefits, and additionally, because it is impossible to predict all the kinds of advances and global effects, both positive and negative, that will result from AI. According to Harari, no one has a clear understanding of what the world will be like in 2050, due to our limited understanding of technological disruption.

Two rather dire possible results offered by Harari however, are first, the creation of a “useless class,” discussed in Chapter Two, “Work: *When You Grow Up, You Might Not Have a Job*,” and second, the ability for corporations or governments to hack human beings (Chapter Three, “Liberty: *Big Data is Watching You*”). The first problem may arise from AI replacing large numbers of human beings in a broad array of job markets, from manufacturing, transportation, engineering, computer coding, medicine, and education. What will make the displaced “useless” is that they will be economically and politically irrelevant, rendered unnecessary for these systems to continue functioning (34–38). The second problem may arise as an extension of what has been in operation among human societies for centuries. Governments, militaries, merchants, and corporations have manipulated human feelings and actions through the dissemination of various forms of rhetoric, propaganda, advertisement, and other social mechanisms. These approaches have escalated with the development of mass media technology throughout the twentieth century and now internet and smartphone technology in the twenty-first century, where the main interests of web designers seem to be in discovering methods for capturing user attention and then selling this captivated attention to advertisers (Chapter Five “Community: *Humans have Bodies*,” 87). Media content can also be tailored to particular persons based on their user histories, and other available personal data. These external systems of manipulation may become even more powerful when infotech combines with

biotech to create internal tracking devices providing continuous data of a person's emotional states.

When the biotech revolution merges with the infotech revolution, it will produce Big Data algorithms that can monitor and understand my feelings much better than I can, and then authority will probably shift from humans to computers. My illusion of free will is likely to disintegrate as I daily encounter institutions, corporations, and government agencies that understand and manipulate what was until now my inaccessible inner realm. (49)

While Harari agrees with much of current natural and neuroscientific theory that human free will is an illusion, he also recognizes that liberal democracies depend on the notion of free will in order to function according to the dictum that we must always trust human feelings to decide what is best. If human emotion is successfully hacked by governments and corporations then liberal democracy as we know it would no longer be possible. Harari is always quick to caution that these outcomes are not necessary futures, but contingent on a number of complex factors, many of which are currently unknown and unpredictable. His interests are also in preparing his audience for such possibilities so they can either adjust to these changes or avoid them altogether. One way these outcomes could be avoided according to the author is through political action, pressuring politicians to begin a public debate on the development of AI and to devise regulatory systems on a global scale. Another suggestion for protecting our internal worlds from being hacked is to get to know ourselves.

Because AI could offer a future where computer algorithms know us better than we know ourselves, for Harari there has never been a time in human history where the maxim, "know yourself" has been more crucial. If we do not make the effort to better know our internal world, we will not be prepared for the personal invasions of AI. One method for gaining this knowledge is in the practice of Buddhist meditation. The form preferred by Harari is *vipasannā* in the lineage of S. N. Goenka. Harari's

commitment to *vipasannā* has been well-known since he gained notoriety from *Sapiens* and is discussed to some extent in almost all his public appearances. Practicing since 2000, Harari schedules two hours of meditation each day and a thirty to sixty-day *vipasannā* retreat each year. He dedicated his book *Homo Deus* to Goenka stating, “to my teacher, S. N. Goenka who lovingly taught me important things.”<sup>6</sup> Harari has also openly stated since the publication of *Sapiens* that he would have never been able to write either this work or *Homo Deus* without the focus and clarity resulting from *vipasannā* (318). However, it is only with the publication of *21 Lessons* that Harari discusses the practice in one of his books at some length, ending the work with the twenty-first chapter “Meditation: *Just Observe*.” The “important things” taught by Goenka, according to Harari, are in the observation of bare bones, ordinary reality. *Vipasannā* brings the practitioner in direct contact with reality as it is: living in the body, experiencing the breath, watching the activity of the mind, observing sensations throughout the body, feeling the pain in one’s legs or lower back. Because the technology of the last century “has been distancing us from our bodies” (89), *vipasannā* functions as a powerful tool for reestablishing our lived-body reality. It is through contact with this reality that frees the practitioner from the limitations of collective human fictions and allows one to directly experience the truth of non-self.

If you want to really understand yourself. You should not identify with your Facebook account or with the inner story of the self. Instead, you should observe the actual flow of body and mind. You will see thoughts, emotions, and desires appear and disappear without much reason and without any command from you, just as different winds blow from this or that direction and mess up your hair. And just as you are not the winds, so also you are not the jumble of thoughts, emotions, and desires you experience, and you are certainly not the sanitized story you tell about them in

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<sup>6</sup> See Harari, Yuval. *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*. Harper, 2017, dedication page.

hindsight. You experience all of them, but you do not control them, you don't own them, and you are not them. People ask "Who am I?" and expect to be told a story. The first thing you need to know about yourself is that you are not a story. (306)

It is in these concluding pages of *21 Lessons* that Harari provides some personal details regarding his first discovery of *vipasannā*, a description of the mindfulness of the breath and body scan methods of practice, instructions he received from Goenka during ten-day retreats, and specific Buddhist teachings like the Three Characteristics.<sup>7</sup> Unlike the writing throughout the rest of Harari's popular works, the final chapter of *21 Lessons* is fully and openly Buddhist, including references to the special kinds of insights one might gain through rigorous meditational practice. For example, in probably the most cryptic language one could find in any of his works, Harari addresses our ordinary notions regarding death:

The more closely you observe yourself, the more obvious it becomes that nothing endures even from one moment to the next. So what holds together an entire life? If you don't know the answer to this question, you don't understand life and you certainly have no chance of understanding death. If and when you discover what holds life together, the answer to the big question of death will also become apparent. (316)

One final topic in the text that is also worth addressing is Harari's examination of contemporary education. Chapter 19 "Education: *Change is the Only Constant*, is included in the final section of *21 Lessons*, titled

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<sup>7</sup> On the Three Characteristics Harari states, "The Buddha taught that the three basic realities of the universe are that everything is constantly changing, nothing has an enduring essence, and nothing is completely satisfying. You can explore the furthest reaches of the galaxy, of your body, or of your mind, but you will never encounter something that does not change, that has an eternal essence, and that completely satisfies you" (308).

“Resilience,” and thus related to the final two chapters on meaning and meditation. In what sense is education a matter of resilience? Harari presents a rather unsettling assessment of education and its efficacy for career development. Because we cannot confidently predict the effects of technology on the job market in the short term of twenty to thirty years, it is difficult to know how to deliver education in a way that will prepare students for the future. Technology already provides students with more than enough information and may even take over many of the skills-based instruction students receive today in mathematics, lab science, computer coding, and foreign languages. While Harari seems to agree with educators who argue for training students in basic life-skills like critical thinking and creativity, he argues that the most important skill to develop for an uncertain future is emotional intelligence and mental resilience. Because of the rapid changes that will continually be taking place in the job market due to technological disruption adults may need to start new careers periodically throughout their entire working life. “How do you live in a world where profound uncertainty is not a bug but a feature?” (269).

Harari’s advice for students is, “don’t rely on the adults too much” (270). Educators around the world (including Harari himself, I would assume), are functioning according to an outdated pedagogical system and cannot provide much assistance in preparing students for the twenty-first century. Students should trust technology even less, given its already alarming level of manipulative power and the future prospects of “hacking human beings.” Simply trusting oneself is also problematic given the conditioning of one’s mind through external fictions as well as unknowable psychophysiological influences.

If, however, you want to retain some control over your personal existence and the future of your life, you have to run faster than the algorithms, faster than Amazon and the government, and get to know yourself before they do. To run fast, don’t take much baggage with you. Leave all your illusions behind. They are very heavy. (272)

This certainly *sounds* like a call to *vipasannā* meditation and given that this statement leads into the last two chapters of the book where Harari most explicitly asserts the personal benefits of such a practice in his own life, one could detect a certain level of urgency in his message. Publicly however, Harari is unwilling to promote such a solution for his readers. Maybe the most direct question regarding the influences of Buddhism on Harari's thought came during a recent public interview with Bari Weiss of the *New York Times* when she questioned whether *21 Lessons* was ultimately, "A stealth argument for Buddhist meditation."<sup>8</sup> In response Harari stated that this was one of his fears about the book, that it would be interpreted in such a way where meditation was some kind of "silver bullet" for solving all of humanity's problems. He assured his audience that this was not the case. *Vipasannā* is a very difficult practice, and he did not expect eight billion people to practice meditation. Even if they did, a great number of them would take meditation into "all kinds of problematic directions," concluding that whenever there is an attempt to "scale up" a religious practice it "inevitably leads to troubling results." During other interviews, including a Penguin Talk in front of an audience of secondary school students in London,<sup>9</sup> Harari has offered his audience alternative practices for getting to know oneself better, including talk therapy, sports, art, and hiking. His main point in all these contexts has been to underscore the critical importance of knowing oneself due to the real competition we now face for our own personal being.

However, the central point Harari makes about the importance of getting to know oneself is in recognizing the lack of an essential self and free will. By observing the functioning of the mind in meditational practices one realizes that the flow of thoughts arises independently of our sense of agency. It is in this clear and direct realization of a lack of free will that Harari believes will best protect us from the coming onslaught of AI and the possibilities of being hacked by powerful entities that would

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<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vxvb7Nw9JCE> retrieved November 21, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XCW\\_dLh7v4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XCW_dLh7v4). Retrieved November 13, 2018.



want to control our feelings, thoughts, and actions. By remaining deluded about the certainty of one's own free will, one would consequently be most vulnerable to this kind of manipulation. In other writings Harari has discussed additional benefits of abandoning the belief in free will which are more directly related to traditional Buddhist notions of desire. For example, in a recent article in *The Guardian* he states,

... realising that our thoughts and desires don't reflect our free will can help us become less obsessive about them. If I see myself as an entirely free agent, choosing my desires in complete independence from the world, it creates a barrier between me and all other entities. I don't really need any of those other entities—I am independent. It simultaneously bestows enormous importance on my every whim . . . . Once we give so much importance to our desires, we naturally try to control and shape the whole world according to them. We wage wars, cut down forests and unbalance the entire ecosystem in pursuit of our whims. But if we understood that our desires are not the outcome of free choice, we would hopefully be less preoccupied with them, and would also feel more connected to the rest of the world.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, it may be quite difficult to achieve such insights through pursuits other than meditation. While engaging in talk therapy, art, or hiking may provide a clearer sense of purpose and meaning, or even provide higher levels of mental resilience, the central concerns presented in Harari's work, including the distinction between narrative and reality, the lack of self and free will, the possible dangers of AI, and the destructive powers harnessed by human beings through acting out our collective and individual desires, have primarily originated from his own highly disciplined commitment to *vipasannā*. In addition, while the *vipasannā* movement in the lineage of Goenka is commonly associated with a more secular

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<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/sep/14/yuval-noah-harari-the-new-threat-to-liberal-democracy>

approach to Buddhist practice, and is openly described as non-sectarian, it is clearly grounded in Pāli Buddhism, and originates from Burmese Theravāda. The practice itself is based on a very specific interpretation of the functioning of the five *skandhas* (P. *khandha*), and Goenka's series of lectures for the ten-day retreats function essentially as a primer of Pāli Buddhist teachings in relation to this particular form of *vipasannā* practice.

However, Harari's reluctance to present his work as a promotion of Buddhism, or even a promotion of meditation, is ultimately quite reasonable. The evolution of the ideas he has presented to the public seems to have grown out of the impact of Goenka and *vipasannā* in his own life. But the matters he is attempting to clarify for his audience are of critical global importance, and to narrow the response to these challenges down to the practice of *vipasannā* would be a rather naïve and short-sighted approach. Raising global awareness of the challenges described in his books could contribute to important social, economic, and political forms of collective engagement, regardless of the spiritual interests and pursuits of individual participants. At the same time, those readers who have already embraced a personal resonance with Buddhist teachings and practices would certainly find much affinity in Harari's writings, and may even welcome his work as a skillful and much needed presentation of the Dharma for the contemporary world.