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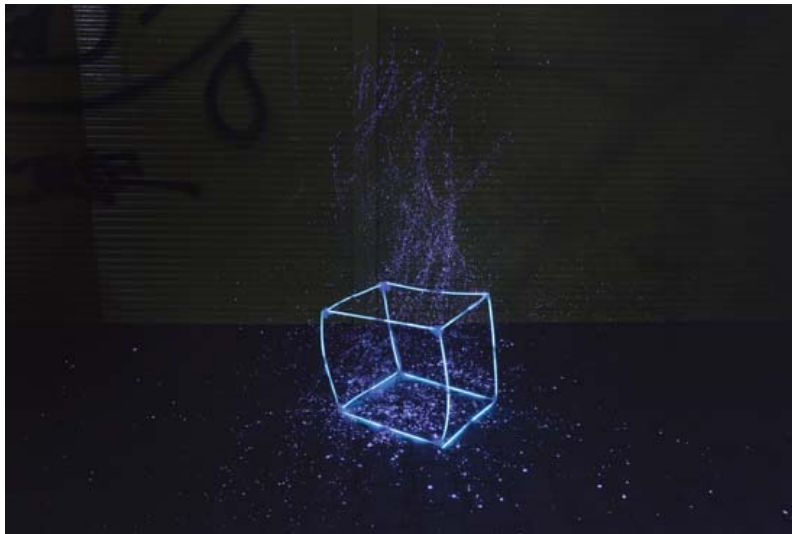
MAGAZINE › WINTER 2014 › THE PRESENT MOMENT

Present Moment

Filed in [Mindfulness \(sati\)](#)

"Present moment" is on everyone's lips nowadays. But do we really know what we mean by it? Philosophers of antiquity help us get underneath the cliché.

Jack Petranker



In the history of Buddhism, popular movements that present meditation as a relatively simple practice, accessible without extensive training, are nothing new. It happened in 8th-century China, and again in 19th-century Burma. And—growing directly out of the Burmese movement—it is happening again in today's secularized mindfulness movement, represented most notably in the practice of MBSR, or Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction.

Wherever such movements flourish, a backlash quickly develops. No one denies the potential benefit from learning to calm or focus the mind, but many Buddhist teachers worry that an approach may be easy and give immediate benefits and yet risk discarding essential elements in the Buddha's teachings. And so the battle is joined. Does the secularized mindfulness movement zero in on the most vital points, or is it just "McMindfulness," a simplified, less nourishing version of dharma that turns meditation into a form of self-help?

The debate will no doubt continue, yet both sides fail to ask an essential question: if MBSR presents mindfulness as "purposeful, nonjudgmental attention *in the present moment*," do we really know what we mean by the present moment? Can we assume in advance that we know how to maintain present-moment attention? Asking these questions will do a lot to clarify what the mindfulness movement does and does not do. If we understand what goes on in the present moment and how best to engage it, we may discover new resources for bridging the divide between traditional mindfulness practice and the current mindfulness boom.

Starting Way Back

Around the start of the Common Era, and for centuries afterward, several flourishing schools of Western philosophy, especially the Stoics and the Epicureans, presented their teachings much as Buddhism does: as a way of life and a path to deeper realization and profound peace. As far as we know, followers of these schools did not practice sitting meditation in the Buddhist sense, but they did offer a meditative approach to daily life, based on cultivating the insights of their founders. Both schools emphasized the importance of present-moment attention, and their teachings are helpful in reflecting on how we understand mindfulness today.

Why look back to the past, instead of striking out on our own? For one thing, wisdom is scarce, and it's always good to seek guidance from the great thinkers of the past. More fundamentally, however, the dialogue between Buddhism and the West in recent decades has been too narrow in its range. In

our historically-challenged culture, we seldom look back at the sources that shape how we make sense of our lives. There are plenty of people ready to tell us about the links between Buddhism and psychology, and others who see interesting possibilities for a conversation between Buddhism and science. Some look to the 18th- and 19th-century Romantics, such as Schiller and Blake, or reach back to individual philosophers, such as Spinoza or Nietzsche. But if that's as far as we go, we are leaving out of account more than 2,000 years of Western thought.

Because the Stoics and the Epicureans share with Buddhism a concern for how to live one's life well, they are natural conversational partners for the meeting of dharma traditions with the West. In fact, their worldview may be closer to a Buddhist outlook than anything we are likely to find by sifting through the insights of the materialistic, nihilistic thinkers of our own time. You could put it this way: can the Buddha's teachings truly transform who we are when we don't know in any deep sense who we have been?

Three Ways to Be Present

When we bring the Stoic and Epicurean teachings into the picture, it makes sense to distinguish at least three different ways to practice being attentive in the present. All three figure in the current debates, but usually they are not clearly separated out. For clarity's sake, we can call them therapeutic presence, joyful presence, and mindful presence.

Therapeutic Presence

One way to practice present-moment attention is to let go of the past and the future. The guiding principle is hardly subject to debate: we all spend a lot of our time obsessing about the past and the future—worry, regrets, replaying and anticipating, making plans, falling into fantasies and daydreams. If we can learn to drop such characteristic moves, our world becomes a simpler, kinder, friendlier place, and we can live without all those desires, judgments, and the like. Here's how Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of MBSR, put it in an interview: "Quite simply, the future is not here. . . . The past is already over. We have to deal with things as they are in the moment. . . . Healing and transformation are possible the moment we accept the actuality of things as they are."

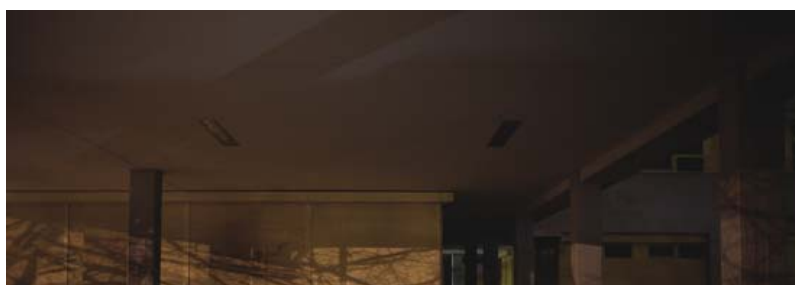
A wide range of Buddhist texts and teachers make the same point, and it has become central in the modern mindfulness movement. As Thich Nhat Hanh writes in a book on mindfulness, "From now, I'll use the term 'mindfulness' to refer to keeping one's consciousness alive to the present reality."

Here we can start to make some comparisons, because the Stoics gave the same advice. Marcus Aurelius wrote, "If you separate from . . . everything you have done in the past, everything that disturbs you about the future . . . and apply yourself to living the life that you are living—that is to say, the present—you can live all the time that remains to you until your death in calm, benevolence, and serenity."

Joyful Presence

Another way to attend to the present moment is to cultivate full appreciation of the rich experience available in each moment. Think of the well-known MBSR practice of slowly, mindfully eating a raisin. It has been argued that this dimension of mindfulness meditation owes less to classical Buddhist teachings than to the unacknowledged elements of 19th-century Romanticism that color modern Western Buddhist understanding. Still, joyful appreciation (or the closely related practice of complete acceptance) is by now firmly embedded in modern Buddhist practice.

The best classical comparison here comes from the Epicureans, who insisted that only in the present moment is happiness possible. What is more, they said, happiness in this one moment is all the happiness one could ever want. In his influential reinterpretation of ancient philosophy as presenting a way of life rather than just abstract ideas, the late historian of philosophy Pierre Hadot summarized this Epicurean outlook: happiness comes "when we learn to accord infinite value to the slightest moment of existence." It was the Epicurean poet Horace who coined the well-known phrase *Carpe diem*, "Seize the day," and even if there is more of melancholy in this phrase than joy (act now, for death awaits), it can stand in for joyful presence, for that is how it is most often understood.





Mindful Presence

Buddhist scholars regularly point out that the word translated into English as “mindfulness” (*sati* in Pali, *smṛiti* in Sanskrit) has ‘remembering’ as its fundamental meaning. This is “mindful presence” —presence that remembers. And to be clear, “remembering” here does not just mean remembering to be mindful: it refers instead to remembering what has value, what matters most.

Secular mindfulness practice (including MBSR) has little to say about mindful presence, yet there’s no denying that it figures prominently in the tradition. Let’s take the example of present-moment attention to the body. In the *Satipatthana Sutta*, the single most important scriptural source for the mindfulness-movement teachings, mindfulness of the body certainly includes “therapeutic presence,” or nonjudgmental, present-moment attention to body sensations:

When walking, the monk discerns, ‘I am walking.’ When standing, he discerns, ‘I am standing.’ When sitting, he discerns, ‘I am sitting.’ When lying down, he discerns, ‘I am lying down.’ Or however his body is disposed, that is how he discerns it. . . . when going forward and returning, he makes himself fully alert; when looking toward and looking away . . . when bending and extending his limbs . . . when carrying his outer cloak, his upper robe and his bowl . . . when eating, drinking, chewing, and savoring . . . when urinating and defecating . . . when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and remaining silent, he makes himself fully alert.

But the sutta goes on from there in a very different vein, instructing listeners to practice “mindful presence” with respect to the body. Specifically, it tells the assembled monks to remember certain fundamental insights meant to counteract attachment to the body. Here are three: view the various constituents of the body (blood, pus, snot, phlegm, urine, feces and the like) as unclean or repulsive; analyze the body as composed of the basic elements of matter; and remind yourself that the body is mortal and will one day turn into a decaying corpse.

With mindful presence, then, we move beyond immediate sensory experience and disregard for past and future, beyond joyful and therapeutic presence. In fact, mindful presence might seem to take us out of the realm of present-moment attention entirely. After all, being mindful that the body is constructed out of the basic building blocks of matter invites reflecting on the body’s past origins, while being mindful of the body’s decay after death invokes events that will take place in the future.

A better way to make sense of the practice of mindful presence, however, is to see it as inviting a broader sense of what it means to inhabit the present moment. We can see this clearly if we focus on the fact of mortality. True, your death is an event in the future, but the certainty that you will die is a present reality, true in each present moment. Dropping your concern with the future (therapeutic presence) does not mean losing sight of your mortality, which (as Buddhist and Western thinkers alike steadily remind us) colors every moment of our lives. As Marcus Aurelius writes: “Let your every deed and word and thought be those of one who might depart from this life this very moment.” For the very same thought, see the *Bhaddekaratta Sutta*: “Today, effort must be made; tomorrow death may come, who knows?”

Mindful presence, then, does not turn away from the present moment at all. However, it requires us to rethink what goes in that moment. As human beings, we do not live in a point-instant present, even if experience does change from one moment to the next. Instead, we live in a present that draws on the past and the future. We understand our own experience in terms of ongoing stories that we use to make sense of the way things are. Our sense of having or being a self, for instance, is such a story. My present experience only makes sense in terms of who I am, where I come from and where I am headed; my plans and projects, my history and circumstances. Therapeutic presence encourages us not to cling to these elements of experience, which means radically simplifying the story, and there is clearly value in this. Yet when we operate in the world, the story of our lives—unfolding from past to future, shaped by memory and anticipation—structures our experience at the deepest level.

Mindful presence acknowledges this wider temporal presence and asks us to frame it according to the insights of the Buddha. To go back to the example of giving mindful present attention to the

body, you do not just experience feelings and sensations in the body; rather, right now, in the present, you see the body as repulsive, composite, and mortal.

When you practice this kind of mindful presence—presence that remembers or keeps in mind key Buddhist teachings—a certain attitude toward life takes hold. For instance (keeping the focus on the body), you no longer concern yourself as much with taking care of the body, beautifying the body, gratifying bodily impulses, and so on.

It may seem that the practice of mindful presence puts us squarely back within traditional mindfulness practice, but looking to the traditions of Western philosophy helps us see that what is at stake here is much broader. There is a striking parallel between Stoic and Buddhist practice here that helps make the point clear. Stoic writers regularly invite their followers to practice by memorizing (shades of *sati/smriti!*) short sayings or maxims that embody Stoic teachings, so that you always have them on hand to apply to each new situation. Here is the Stoic statesman and philosopher Seneca (c. 4 BC) on such short sayings: “These are the precepts that [the practitioner] must never let go. Rather, he must cling fast to them and make them a part of himself, and by daily meditation reach the point where these salutary maxims occur to him of his own accord.”

Now, exactly the same instruction appears in the well-known root text of the mind training teachings (*lojong*) brought to Tibet in the 11th century by the Buddhist master Atisha. The text consists of 59 sayings. Saying 9 instructs the practitioner: “Use sayings to train in all forms of activity.” For our purposes, we can rephrase this slightly: “To train the mind, use sayings in each present moment of action.”

What emerges here is that Buddhists and Stoics both ask us to maintain present-moment attention, but they also both understand that this will involve a way of being present that takes us beyond the particulars of “this single moment.” The present moment is not defined solely by letting go of past and future (therapeutic presence), nor by accepting and appreciating what arises right now (joyful presence), but by choosing in this very moment how we make sense of the world (mindful presence).

There is, however, a fourth way of practicing attention in the present moment, which we might call “active presence.”



Active Presence

Mindful presence involves choosing to orient ourselves in the world in accord with a certain outlook or set of teachings, whether we have them available as sayings and instructions or have embedded them in our awareness in some other form. But it is not enough to accept this outlook. We also have to take responsibility for this outlook, to act on our convictions. This is “active presence.” Open and attentive to the multiple dimensions of experience, seeing the world as we understand it to be, we act accordingly. This is a point emphasized by the Stoics. We can only act in the present, not the past or the future. When we practice active presence, choosing how to act in this moment, we also choose who and what we will be.

Active presence—choosing how to act in this moment—takes mindfulness out of the range of sitting meditation and inserts it into daily life. Think here of practicing the eightfold path. We start with right view and right thoughts or intentions, and then live our lives accordingly. As the Sri Lankan Buddhist monk and author Henepola Gunaratana has emphasized, to live our lives in accord with the eightfold path means practicing mindfulness—“active mindfulness”—in each moment.

In this sense, active presence includes the other three forms of present-moment attention already

identified here. In therapeutic presence, you actively choose where to focus your attention. In joyful presence, you actively choose how you react to your experience. In mindful presence, you actively choose how to make sense of your experience.

Active presence has the potential to go further, for it invites an open-ended engagement with experience. When I am actively present, I choose the whole: what values I will enact, what commitments I will make, what understanding I will bring to bear. Potentially, it makes available for questioning each and every ordinary, taken-for-granted structure of my experience. It puts everything into play. What is my relationship to the objects I encounter in the world, or to other beings? How do my moods and emotions affect the ways I engage the world? What happens when thought carries me away from direct experience? Can I be attentive *within* thought? Each and every dimension of experience is available; nothing is presupposed. Each position I take is more a provisional positioning than a fixed structure.

Taking the Present-Moment Plunge

Seneca wrote, "*Toti se inserens mundo*," a phrase translated by Hadot as "plunging oneself into the totality of the world." Taking this plunge could be understood as the heart of active presence, of "being here now." The Tibetan lama Tarthang Tulku writes in *Love of Knowledge* (1987) that the self lives in the world like an illegal alien, always afraid that its identity will be questioned. "Taking the plunge" is the exact opposite. It means fearless presence, total involvement, holding nothing back. If it is difficult for the self to do this, if it clings to and defends its own positions and wants, that only underscores the need to challenge the self and the conditions it imposes on experience.

Those who question the contemporary mindfulness movement ask whether it does justice to the Buddha's revolutionary call to transform both self and world. But we do not have to conclude from this that the only alternative is to stay within the tradition, though for some that will clearly be the right response. Active presence does justice to the Buddha's revolutionary impulse on a wholly different basis. Not holding back, fearlessly questioning, always going beyond what we know, active presence offers a way into the deeper existential and universal concerns that the Buddha raised through his teachings.

From the perspective of active presence, neither therapeutic nor joyful presence is sufficient to turn us toward the existential transformation that the Buddha asked of us. Mindful presence is the right place to start, provided we are ready to respond to what we call to mind. It is really a question of how we live in the world. When we engage the present, we engage the whole of our lives. When we plunge into the world, we accept the whole of what is.

The present moment is more than we imagine it to be. Active in the present, we act on our intentions and our values as well as our perceptions and our attitudes. Ready to question our ordinary concerns, commitments, and understanding, we come close to the teaching of the Buddha, even if we choose not to think and see and frame reality in accord with the models for understanding that the Buddha put in place. Present in the moment, we are present to ourselves, and perhaps also to the universal truths that the Buddha made available.

Jack Petranker, MA, JD, is Director of the Center for Creative Inquiry and Mangalam Research Center for Buddhist Languages, both in Berkeley, California, and teaches at Nyingma Institute and Dharma College. He has been a student of the Tibetan lama Tarthang Tulku since 1980.

Photographs by Tonje Thilesen. Opaque Fields, for the exhibition Grenzen und Innenwelten at Kunstquartier Bethanien in Berlin, January 2014.



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 Daily Weekly



Reply by [JoseBuendia](#) on November 18, 2014, 2:38 pm

It would be helpful if this article explored what mindfulness means in Buddhist traditions before drawing comparisons with Western philosophy.

Although I am no expert, the Greeks (perhaps because they do not have a tradition of meditation) do not have a concept of non-dualism. Because the present moment can be conceived of only in comparison with past and future, the present moment does not exist. That is why shamatha practice -- which involves using the present moment as a reference point -- is a dualistic practice. Non-dual concepts such as egolessness or shunyata -- which are the essence of Buddhist philosophy -- and the concept of liberation altogether -- either have no parallels in Western philosophy or the

connections are just not explored in this article.

REPLY



Reply by [johnmarder](#) on November 19, 2014, 10:23 am

But it seems to me that the way mindful and active presence are described in this article, does represent non- dualism

REPLY



Reply by [Dominic Gomez](#) on November 19, 2014, 10:41 pm

That "the certainty that you will die is a present reality, true in each present moment" is the non-duality of life and death. Can't have one without the other.

REPLY



Reply by [JoseBuendia](#) on November 20, 2014, 2:54 pm

Actually, life and death is dualism. When you say "the certainty that you will die is a present reality" you are talking about present and future -- dualism. Anytime you talk about "present" you are already talking about past and future as well -- present exists because of past and future and doesn't exist otherwise. Present, past and future are all dualistic concepts. As you say "can't have one without the other". That is dualism.

Non-dualism is beyond speech and thought. It is what the Heart Sutra refers to when it says "there is no attainment and no non-attainment" and "there are no characteristics".

REPLY



Reply by [Dominic Gomez](#) on November 20, 2014, 3:50 pm

Life and death cannot be separated and experienced as either one or the other by itself. Dualism thinks otherwise, hence "Life ever after" in Heaven or enlightenment in the Western Paradise or eternal damnation in Hell...but only AFTER clinical death.

REPLY



Reply by [Dominic Gomez](#) on November 18, 2014, 5:25 pm

An examination of the Buddhist teaching of the eternity of life would also help Western minds wrap themselves around the ever-present moment. The seeds of the present moment have been sown in the past, present moments are constantly becoming future ones.

REPLY



Reply by [smbaker](#) on November 18, 2014, 1:17 am

Thank you for this interesting and useful analysis of mindfulness. I particularly liked your reminder that 'As human beings, we do not live in a point-instant present, even if experience does change from one moment to the next'. Many teachers of meditation seem to forget this - or wish it were otherwise.

As an aside, I do think that as Buddhists we need to be more explicit about the difference between our path and that of "McMindfulness," a simplified, less nourishing version of dharma that turns meditation into a form of self-help'. The Buddha himself was a compassionate teacher dedicated to ending or alleviating suffering: something which even the worst promoters of self-help and their own overpriced books claim to do.

REPLY



Reply by [John Haspel](#) on November 17, 2014, 6:27 pm

Mr. Petranker's article points out the misunderstandings that have developed by attempting to reconcile the Buddha's original teachings with other disciplines, and dissecting one factor of the Eightfold Path, mindfulness, and making that one factor the focus and the goal of a much more comprehensive practice.

The result of this accommodation has resulted in a diminished and misapplied use of mindfulness that has led to more confusion and, in a not so subtle way, a "buddhist" practice that supports the continuance of a doctrine of self, precisely what the original teachings are presented to bring to cessation.

The underlying inquiry of this article seems to be how to accommodate "Buddhism" in a way that develops a concern of "living life well" and the possibility that the "Buddha's teachings truly transform who we are when we don't know in any deep sense who we have been?"

An understanding of the Buddha's teaching on Non-self and the purpose of life would not conclude that the teachings are to show us how to "live well" or to deepen any sense of who we are. The Buddha teaches that who we are is impermanent, insubstantial and is to be understood as such. and all doctrines of self abandoned.

I understand the interest and almost a compulsive need to find parallels between individuals, their sayings and ideas, and what the Buddha taught, and if that is the focus of this article, perhaps there should be some reference to what the Buddha actually taught. To put the other concepts mentioned in proper perspective.

This is not meant to be a criticism of the later developed schools. We are all free to develop a "spiritual" or "self-help" practice in whatever context seems appropriate and effective. An "authentic" Tibetan, Zen, Nichiren, Soka Gakkai, Mindfulness, or a practice of MBSR, are all authentic as far as their own teachings.

Twenty-five thousand years after the Buddha there are hundreds of "Buddhist" schools and disciplines. Most consider themselves the authentic Buddhism, some are just taking aspects of some "spiritual" practice into their lives and consider their practice a buddhist practice if their is some form of meditation or mindfulness incorporated.

Of course the Buddha taught only one Dhamma and that is the Four Noble Truths which includes the Eightfold Path and Right Mindfulness as one factor (of eight.) It is interesting that Tricycle (on this web site) has designations for most of the modern "traditions" but none for the original tradition. There are also categories for different types of practice, including a category for mindfulness, but none for The Four Noble Truths.

The practice of developing understanding of the Four Noble Truths within the framework of the Eightfold Path, understanding stress, its origins, and engaging the complete Eightfold Path, are the original teachings that the Buddha presented to humanity upon his awakening. Forty-five years later, near the end of his life, he stated: "my teachings are not like those of a teacher with a close fist. I have held nothing back. Decay is relentless. Work diligently for your own salvation."

Mindfulness as the Buddha taught is more a quality of mind than a technique used to manipulate Anicca.

"Even in a confining place (an un-awakened mind) it is found, the Dhamma is for the attainment of unbinding. Those who have gained mindfulness (a quality of mind) are rightly well-focused" (to experience unbinding.) [sn 2.7]

The modern mindfulness movement, discarding most of the Buddha's teaching in favor of a hybrid type of mindfulness meditation that has resulted in type of a religion of mindfulness with the present moment as the object of worship.

The Buddha was not talking about developing deep mindfulness for the purpose of eating a grape. He was not teaching to worship an activity labeled "mindfulness" or to develop worship of the present moment as if focusing on an undefinable moment within Anicca could somehow help develop unbinding.

The Satipatthana Sutta teaches the quality of mind in relation to meditative absorption. Being mindful of the breath in the body, of feelings, and of thoughts attached to those feelings, is simply bringing to mind the process of living in a psycho/physical body.

In an attempt to make the Buddha's teachings more relevant, and perhaps to further his view that Stoicism is somehow relevant to The Four Noble Truths, Mr. Petranker quotes Seneca:

"These are the precepts that [the practitioner] must never let go. Rather, he must cling fast to them and make them a part of himself, and by daily meditation reach the point where these salutary maxims occur to him of his own accord."

This concept is actually promoting clinging and promoting and prolonging a doctrine of self. It is a good example of how misapplying the Buddha's teachings can result in creating more confusion and more suffering.

Making the connection to the Tibetan practice of lojong creates yet more confusion. Of course the Buddha did not teach any process such as lojong, and that Atisha taught lojong, does not legitimize worshipping clinging to the present moment.

(Please don't take this as a refute of lojong, it is not. It is simply to say that the Buddha did not teach lojong or mindfulness in connection to the Tibetan practice of lojong.)

Furthering the compulsion to attach Buddhism to Stoicism, Mr. Petranker states: "Buddhists and Stoics both ask us to maintain present-moment attention, but they also both understand that this will involve a way of being present that takes us beyond the particulars of "this single moment."

Who is Mr. Petranker referring to as Buddhists? Is a buddhist someone who practices mindfulness, or zazen, or deity worship, or 108,000 prostrations, or lojong? Is anyone who engages in anything related to mindfulness a Buddhist? Does Seneca's quote then describe Stoics as Buddhists? Or are Buddhists those that develop understanding of the Dhamma through the direct teachings of the Buddha, including the very specific teachings on mindfulness?

The last question is moot and moot for a few reasons. Labels can be applied to anything. Calling a sows ear a silk purse does not make a silk purse. It is still a sows ear. Calling Stoics or Epicures or those that practice mindfulness meditation "Buddhists" does not make them "Buddhists." In fact there is no definition of what a Buddhist is. The Buddha was not a Buddhist.

The Buddha was a human being who awakened. The Buddha described awakening as understanding suffering, abandoning clinging, experiencing the cessation of suffering and developing the path leading to the cessation of suffering. He consistently described an awakened human being as “unbound” and “released.”

Mindfulness is more a quality of mind than an activity. Mindfulness is a dispassionate awareness of what is occurring in the present moment in the context of the Eightfold Path. Mindfulness is not an attachment to, or clinging to, the concept of mindfulness or to the present moment. Despite what Seneca professes, clinging in all its forms is to be released if awakening (according to the Buddha) is to occur.

John Haspel

<http://crossrivermeditation.com>

REPLY



Reply by [laurad](#) on November 23, 2014, 8:02 pm

Thank you for Mr Haspel's response and the original article, both most instructive.

Mr Haspel's argument that we're seeing a 'religion of mindfulness with the present moment as the object of worship' is interesting and it may well be 'prolonging a doctrine of self' as he suggests. Perhaps the West is mired in narcissism so deeply, that mindfulness itself is being envisioned anew through that lens. Certainly, swooning over the wonders of the present moment may be ripe for abuse if unhealthy self-love and excessive self-obsession with identity and the worst forms of insensitivity and selfishness are its end products.

My understanding is that the 8 path factors work together to create a 'middle way' leading to the end of suffering. No one factor is privileged above the others - they all work together to create an approach that is 'balanced' - with the potential for mis-guided application of any factor being thereby diminished.

The Satipatthana Sutta also advises that one contemplates internally and externally and both. This may mean that one should be as aware of another's experience as one is of one's own. Neither is privileged, this being another recipe for balance and which surely leads to humility. Humility is vital, because a humble person can have a strong sense of who they are - a prerequisite for effective human functioning - but not be self-obsessed or selfish and the cause of suffering to themselves and others. The challenge to know another as well as oneself is therefore fundamental to the path and begs the question: How well can one ever know another human being and what does it take to do so? Extraordinary effort and dedication and patience, love not to mention compassion, with a whole lot else besides. And how many of us are capable of some, let alone all of that?

I struggle with the notion that the path is not about 'living well.' The goal is liberation, but from what, and is it even possible? Neuroscience tells us that some conditioning is preset in the mammalian brain. The Buddha could not have known that, but if liberation means freedom from all conditioning, does not the science suggest that that is simply not possible? This issue is something of a conundrum, as the science also suggests that freedom from some forms of conditioning is possible. If I free myself from those burdensome hatreds and jealousies experienced as 'binding' but not preset, I do actually 'live better'. In that sense, 'living life well' may not be so poor a description of the path after all, provided one does not become conceptually bound and constrained by such language.

At the end of his life the Buddha is said to have met with some young monks, whippersnappers, who with the supreme confidence of youth said that they got it, they understood it all. He however turned to his attendant saying that if he lived another lifetime or more, he still would only have understood a fraction. Perhaps this actually happened, perhaps it didn't, who knows, but it's a wonderful story about how a great mind engages with life's mysteries.

As for the issue of Buddhists, best to treat all people as human beings. One may identify as Buddhist, or as Christian, or as a Free Market ideologue, but much safer to put identity aside and be human, preferably humane.

REPLY



Reply by [jackelope65](#) on December 28, 2014, 7:59 am

In the modern study of Epigenetics we are learning that what we once believed was "set in stone," our DNA or genes may be changed by the very milieu in which we choose to surround them: by both mental as well as physical actions. Next, I wonder why we have to see the body as vile to help us understand impermanence and death. Pus is quite remarkable made up of exploded white cells that have sacrificed their lives to kill bacteria for the greater good. (We kill whether we choose or not.) We can rub spit on goggles or a facemask to bring clarity to underwater life. My toes are numb and hurt, reminding me that I'm aging and will die but I am no

less amazed by the nervous system. I see vultures daily eating rotting, stinking dead creatures that are picked clean by day three and I am amazed by the vultures ability to eat what would kill us. Finally, thank you to the wonderful authors as well as commentors who bring forth such interesting topics in Tricycle, which has about the only comment section now left that is worthy of participation.

REPLY



Reply by [Dominic Gomez](#) on November 24, 2014, 5:52 am

The goal is liberation, but from what? From the fetters of past karma by changing the present moment.

REPLY



Reply by [rhonapost](#) on November 23, 2014, 8:53 am

Thank you John Haspel for taking the time to parse this article apart. I think you would enjoy meeting Michael Gregory, Director of Mindfulness Meditation Centers (here in Sarasota Florida) as I experience an alignment between you.

I hope to hear more commentary from you. I am grateful for your teachings here.

Happy Trails,
Rhona

REPLY



Reply by [mscoree42](#) on November 17, 2014, 11:30 am

Was really looking forward to this article and a good description of the Present Moment, how to get there, etc. I have no idea why writings of Stoics and the Epicureans are referenced and what they have to do with this article. Are there not enough Buddhist and Mindfulness sources?

REPLY



Reply by [chafu](#) on November 17, 2014, 9:42 am

By pure coincidence sitting on my coffee table right now is the book "The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers" which is a compendium of writings by Epicurus, Epictetus, Lucretius and Marcus Aurelius edited by W.J. Oates. Next to it is "The Miracle of Mindfulness" by Thich Nhat Hanh and "Wherever You Go, There You Are" by Jon Kabat-Zinn. The former I bought just after college when I was desperately seeking a philosophy to live by. Buddhism folowed later.

For me the main connection between them is that they both pragmatically address the Four Noble Truths: Suffering and the way out of suffering. We inflict so much suffering upon ourselves and others by dwelling on the past or worrying about the future instead of abiding mindfully in the present moment and learning to accept it exactly as it is. I appreciate the author's insights.

REPLY



Reply by [oliverhow](#) on November 17, 2014, 7:42 am

Thank you very, very much for this article....with metta, richard

REPLY



Reply by [Dominic Gomez](#) on November 17, 2014, 6:32 am

"If you want to understand the causes that existed in the past, look at the results as they are manifested in the present. And if you want to understand what results will be manifested in the future, look at the causes that exist in the present."

~Contemplation on the Mind-Ground Sutra

REPLY



Reply by [tbreeze](#) on November 17, 2014, 5:24 am

For me, this helps direct where and how I place my attention at those moments when I am wondering what to do with myself... a starting point. Instead of simply expecting life to unfold moment by moment in a way that would reflect the benefits that I might expect (attachment) from mindful practice, to broaden the perspective and choose to pro-actively approach the moment (and current activity) with intention based upon historical knowledge, limits of the body, time until I die, etc. Thank you, Mr. Pertranker for your knowledge of history.

REPLY



Reply by [buddy](#) on November 16, 2014, 1:49 am

Enjoyed this... especially articulating mindful presence as the "right pace to start". This wise starting point may not appeal to the masses, however it has proven to be authentic in my practice.

Thank you Mr. Petranker for the detail provided on the four perceptions of the present moment. It should certainly help those willing to read your words thoroughly.

REPLY

Discussion

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