



Tricycle Teachings

# MINDFULNESS

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A TRICYCLE E-BOOK

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## INTRODUCTION

Mindfulness meditation has gone mainstream. In addition to meditation centers, you can find it in hospitals, schools, prisons, and in some of today's largest corporations. It is being used to help people quell their cravings, find emotional balance, eat healthier, and even to fall asleep at night.

All of these things are good, of course, but how does mindfulness really work? Where does it come from? What are the best ways to practice mindfulness? What place does it have in the Buddhist tradition? In this special e-book, *Tricycle Teachings: Mindfulness*, we go beyond mere buzzwords to explore the purpose, science, practices, and daily application of this core meditative discipline, which is a Buddhist treasure shared by virtually all lineages.

Since the practice doesn't stop when you get off the cushion, *Tricycle Teachings: Mindfulness* takes a special focus on mindfulness in everyday life. Allan Lokos teaches us how to use speech skillfully; Lori Deschene (a.k.a Twitter's @TinyBuddha) shows us how to use social media mindfully; and Laura Fraser gives us a mindful cooking lesson.

A parting thought before you dive into these teachings: As we were recently reminded in the Tricycle office by Thai Forest monk Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "Being mindful isn't enough, you have to choose to be mindful of the right things."—The Editors

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# FOUNDATIONS OF MINDFULNESS

Tracing the origins of mindful awareness

STEPHEN BATCHELOR

The origins of mindful awareness practice are found in Gautama's own discourse on the "Foundations of Mindfulness" (Satipatthana Sutta) in the Pali Canon. It has been described as "the most important discourse ever given by the Buddha on mental development," and as such is highly revered in all Theravada Buddhist countries of Asia. The Buddha opened the discourse by declaring:

There is, monks, this way that leads only to the purification of beings, to the overcoming of sorrow and distress, to the disappearance of pain and sadness, to the gaining of the right path, to the realization of Nirvana-that is to say the four foundations of Mindfulness.

These four foundations are the four areas of life to which mindful awareness needs to be applied: body, feelings, mind, and objects of mind. In other words, the totality of experience.

The Buddha recommends that a person retire to a forest, the root

of a tree or a solitary place, sit cross-legged with body erect and then turn his or her attention to their breath. Then, “mindfully he breathes in, mindfully he breathes out. Breathing in a long breath, he knows that he breathes in a long breath, and breathing out a long breath, he knows that he breathes out a long breath.” There is no attempt to control the breath or in any way interfere with the immediacy of experience as it unfolds. If the breath is long, one recognizes it to be long; if short, one recognizes it to be short.

Yet for many this seemingly straightforward exercise turns out to be remarkably tricky. One finds that no matter how sincere one’s intention to be attentive and aware, the mind rebels against such instructions and races off to indulge in all manner of distractions, memories and fantasies. One is forced to confront the sobering truth that one is only notionally “in charge” of one’s psychological life. The comforting illusion of personal coherence and continuity is ripped away to expose only fragmentary islands of consciousness separated by yawning gulfs of unawareness. Similarly, the convenient fiction of a well-adjusted, consistent personality turns out to be merely a skillfully edited and censored version of a turbulent psyche. The first step in this practice of mindful awareness is radical self-acceptance.

Such self-acceptance, however, does not operate in an ethical vacuum, where no moral assessment is made of one’s emotional states. The training in mindful awareness is part of a Buddhist path with values and goals. Emotional states are evaluated according to whether they increase or decrease the potential for suffering. If an emotion, such as hatred or envy, is judged to be destructive, then it is simply recognized as such. It is neither expressed through violent thoughts, words or deeds, nor is it suppressed or denied as incompatible with a “spiritual” life. In seeing it for what it is—a transient emotional state—one mindfully observes it

follow its own nature: to arise, abide for a while, and then pass away.

The Buddha described his teaching as “going against the stream.” The unflinching light of mindful awareness reveals the extent to which we are tossed along in the stream of past conditioning and habit. The moment we decide to stop and look at what is going on (like a swimmer suddenly changing course to swim upstream instead of downstream), we find ourselves battered by powerful currents we had never even suspected—precisely because until that moment we were largely living at their command.

The practice of mindful awareness is a first step in the direction of inner freedom. Disciplining oneself to focus attention single-mindedly on the breath (for example) enables one to become progressively more quiet and concentrated. Such stillness, though, is not an end in itself. It serves as a platform from which to observe more dearly what is taking place within us. It allows the steady depth of awareness needed to understand the very origins of conditioning: namely, how delusion and craving are at the top of human suffering. Such meditative understanding is experiential rather than intellectual, therapeutic rather than dogmatic, liberating rather than merely convincing.

The aim of mindful awareness is the understanding that frees one from delusion and craving. In Pali, such understanding is called *vipassana* (“penetrative seeing”), and it is under this name that the traditional practice of mindful awareness is frequently presented in the West today. *Vipassana* is often translated as “insight” and courses are offered on “insight meditation.”

This usage has given rise to some confusion. It has led to the impression that some Buddhists practice *vipassana*, while others (such as practitioners of Zen or Tibetan Buddhism) do not. In fact, *vipassana* is central to all forms of Buddhist meditation practice. The distinctive goal

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of any Buddhist contemplative tradition is a state in which inner calm (samatha) is unified with insight (vipassana). Over the centuries, each tradition has developed its own methods for actualizing this state. And it is in these methods that the traditions differ, not in their end objective of unified calm and insight.

**Stephen Batchelor** is an author, teacher, and scholar.

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THE AIM OF ATTENTION

Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche gives instructions  
on the liberating practice of awareness

YONGEY MINGYUR RINPOCHE

Self-awareness . . . is a neutral mode that maintains  
self-reflectiveness even in the midst of turbulent emotions.

—Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*

Ordinarily, our minds are like flags in the wind, fluttering this way and that, depending on which way the wind blows. Even if we don't want to feel angry, jealous, lonely, or depressed, we're carried away by such feelings and by the thoughts and physical sensations that accompany them. We're not free; we can't see other options, other possibilities.

The goal of attention, or *shamatha*, practice is to become aware of awareness. Awareness is the basis, or what you might call the "support," of the mind. It is steady and unchanging, like the pole to which the flag of ordinary consciousness is attached. When we recognize and become grounded in awareness of awareness, the "wind" of emotion may still blow. But instead of being carried away by the wind, we turn our attention inward, watching the shifts and changes with the intention of becoming familiar with that aspect of consciousness that recognizes "Oh, this is what I'm feeling, this is what I'm thinking." As we do so, a bit



of space opens up within us. With practice, that space—which is the mind’s natural clarity—begins to expand and settle. We can begin to watch our thoughts and emotions without necessarily being affected by them quite as powerfully or vividly as we’re used to. We can still feel our feelings, think our thoughts, but slowly our identity shifts from a person who defines him- or herself as lonely, ashamed, frightened, or hobbled by low self-esteem to a person who can look at loneliness, shame, and low self-esteem as movements of the mind.

The process is not unlike going to the gym. You have a goal—whether it’s losing weight, building muscles, promoting your health, or some other reason. In order to achieve that goal, you lift weights, jog on a treadmill, take classes, and so on. Gradually, you begin to see the fruits of these activities; and seeing them, you’re inspired to continue.

In the case of attention practice, the important point is to know that the goal is to establish and develop stability of awareness that will allow you to look at thoughts, emotions, and even physical pain without wavering. Bearing that in mind, let’s look at applying the following four steps.

### STEP ONE: THE MAIN EXERCISE

The main exercise of attention practice can be broken down into three stages. The first involves simply looking at a thought or emotion with what, in Buddhist terms, is known as *ordinary awareness*—bringing attention to thoughts or feelings without any express purpose or intention. Just notice and identify what you’re thinking or feeling. *I’m angry. I’m sad. I’m lonely.* We practice ordinary attention every moment of every day. We look at a cup, for example, and simply acknowledge, *That’s a cup.* Very little judgment is involved at this stage. We don’t think *That’s a good cup, a bad cup, an attractive cup, a small cup, or a large cup.* We

just recognize *cup*. Applying ordinary awareness to thoughts and emotions involves the same simple acknowledgment: *Oh, I'm angry. Oh, I'm jealous. Oh, I'm frustrated. Oh, I could have done better. Oh, I said (or did) something.*

Sometimes, thoughts and emotions are not very clear. In such cases, we can look at the messages we receive from our physical bodies. Physical sensations could reflect a host of emotional or mental states—anger, frustration, jealousy, regret, or a mix of disturbing thoughts and feelings. The important point is to simply look at what's going on and acknowledge whatever you're experiencing just as it is, rather than to resist it or succumb to it.

The second stage involves *meditative awareness*—approaching thoughts and emotions as objects of focus through which we can stabilize awareness. To use an example, a student of mine once confided that he suffered from what he called a “people-pleasing” complex. At work, he was always trying to do more, to work longer hours to complete professional projects, which consequently stole time he wished to spend with his wife and family. The conflict became intense. He would wake up several times during the night, sweating, his heart beating fast. He felt he couldn't please his managers, coworkers, and family at the same time, and the more he tried to please everyone, the less successful he felt. He was judging himself a failure, creating judgments about others as demanding, and casting those judgments about himself and others in stone. He had defined himself as a failure, incapable of pleasing all of the people all of the time.

This man had some experience with looking at objects, sounds, and physical sensations, so I advised him to apply the same method of meditative awareness during those moments when he woke up at night. “Watch the thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations,” I told him. “Ini-

tially, ‘the people-pleasing’ complex might seem like one giant thing. But as you look at the complex it doesn’t seem like one big giant thing anymore. You’ll start to see that it has a lot of parts. It’s made up of thoughts, like ‘I should have done A, B, or C. Why didn’t I do X, Y, or Z?’ It also comprises emotions, such as fear, anger, and resentment, and physical sensations, including churning in the stomach, an accelerated heartbeat, and sweating. Images may also occur: people being disappointed in you or yelling at you. As you look with meditative attention, the complex becomes like a bubble—inside of which are many smaller bubbles.”

Whatever you’re feeling—whether it’s panic, anxiety, loneliness, or people-pleasing—the basic approach is to try to watch any of the smaller bubbles with the same sort of attention applied to watching a physical object or focusing on a sound. In doing so, you’ll probably notice that the thoughts, emotions, and even physical sensations shift and change. For a while, fear may be most persistent, or perhaps the beating of your heart, or the images of people’s reactions. After a while—perhaps five minutes or so—one or another of these responses, the bubble within the bubble, pulls your attention. Focus on that with meditative attention. In so doing, gradually your attention will shift from identifying as swallowed up in an emotional bubble to the one watching the bubble.

The third stage of the exercise involves a little bit of analysis: an intuitive “tuning in” to determine the effect of the practice. As I was taught, there are three possible results of applying meditative awareness to an emotional issue.

The first is that the problem dissipates altogether. Some of my students tell me, “You gave me this exercise, but it doesn’t work for me.”

“What do you mean?” I ask them.

“These thoughts, these emotions, disappear too quickly,” they reply. “They become fuzzy or unclear. They don’t stay in place long enough to look at them.”

“That’s great!” I tell them. “That’s the point of attention practice.”

The second possibility is that the thoughts, feelings, or physical sensations intensify. That’s also a good sign—an indication that deeply embedded perspectives are beginning to “loosen up.” To use an analogy, suppose you apply a few drops of water to a plate or bowl encrusted with dried food. Initially, the plate or bowl looks messier as the residue spreads. Actually, though, the plate isn’t getting messier; the dried food is dissolving.

The third possibility is that emotions may just remain at the same level, neither diminishing nor intensifying. That’s also great! Why? Because we can use an emotion—and the thoughts, images, and physical sensations that accompany it—as strong supports for attention practice. So often, we allow our emotions to use us. Applying attention practice, we use our emotions as a focus for developing awareness, an opportunity to look at the “looker.” Just as we need sound to look at sound, form to look at form, we need emotions to look at emotions. In fact, intense emotions can be our best friends in terms of stabilizing the mind, giving the restless bird a branch on which to rest.

Focusing on form, sound, or physical sensations develops your capacity to look at long-term, overwhelming emotional states.

## STEP TWO: TRY SOMETHING DIFFERENT

In the beginning, it can be difficult to immediately address strong emotions or the biases that have developed over long periods. Emotions can color perception, behavior, even physical sensations. They can seem so solid, so big, that we can’t bring ourselves to face them. As one student of mine commented recently, “Working with big emotions—the longterm ones like low self-esteem that kind of define your life—is like trying to

climb Mount Everest before we've even learned how to climb a hill."

So, bearing in mind that the goal of shamatha practice is to develop stability of awareness, I offer people the advice given to me by my own teachers. Rather than try to tackle powerful or long-term emotions, focus instead on something smaller and more manageable.

One method is to generate, by artificial means, another emotion, something simpler or smaller and not so intense. For example, if you're working with loneliness, try working with anger. Imagine a situation in which you're having an argument with a coworker who messed up your files or someone who cuts ahead of you in line at the grocery store. Once you begin to feel that anger, use that to focus your awareness. Focus on the feeling of anger, the words that cross your mind, the physical sensations, or the image of the person cutting ahead of you. Practicing in this way, you can gain experience on how to deal with emotions.

Once you've achieved some proficiency in dealing with artificially generated emotions, you can start to look at past experiences and deliberately recall situations in which you may have felt anger, jealousy, embarrassment, or frustration. Bear in mind that the point of trying something different is to develop a stability of awareness—to discover the looker rather than being overcome by what is looked at.

Working with artificial or smaller emotions builds up the strength to work attentively with larger or long-term emotions, such as loneliness, low self-esteem, or an unhealthy need to please. In a way, this approach is like starting a physical workout regimen. When you go to the gym, you don't start off by lifting heavy weights. You begin by lifting weights that are manageable. Gradually, as your strength improves, you can begin lifting heavier weights. Drawing attention to emotional states works the same way. While there is some benefit in addressing large or long-standing emotional issues directly, sometimes we have to build up our

emotional muscles a bit more gradually, remembering that the goal of attention practice is to develop stability of awareness.

Another approach involves using the physical symptoms of emotion as objects of focus. For example, a woman attending a public seminar confessed that she had suffered for years from severe depression. She had been taking medication prescribed by her doctor, but she couldn't escape the feeling that her body was filled with burning lead.

"Where do you feel this burning lead?" I asked.

"All over," she replied. "It's overwhelming."

"Okay," I told her. "Instead of looking at the overall pain, focus on one small part of your body. Maybe your foot. Maybe just your toe. Choose a small place to direct your attention. Look at small parts of your body one at a time, instead of trying to work on your whole body at once. Remember that the goal of shamatha practice is to develop stability of awareness. Once you've achieved stability by focusing on your foot or your toe, you can begin to extend that awareness to larger areas."

Applying attention to smaller emotions—or simply focusing on form, sound, or physical sensations—develops your capacity to look at long-term, overwhelming emotional states. Once you begin to grow your "attentional muscles," you can begin drawing attention to larger emotional issues. As you do so, you may find yourself directly confronting the underlying self-judgment and judgment of others as "enemies." You may unravel the belief in being stuck, or the blind spot that inhibits your awareness of your potential. Almost certainly, you will confront the "myth of me," the tendency to identify with your loneliness, low self-esteem, perfectionism, or isolation.

It's important to remember that such confrontations are not battles but opportunities to discover the power of the mind. The same mind that can create such harsh judgments is capable of undoing them through the

power of awareness and attention.

### STEP THREE: STEP BACK

Sometimes an emotion is so persistent or so strong that it just seems impossible to look at. Something holds it in place. Another approach that can be especially helpful when dealing with particularly strong emotions, or mental or emotional habits that have developed over a long period is to take a step back and look at what lies behind the emotion—what you might call the support or “booster” of the emotion. For example, there were times when I would try to look directly at the panic I felt as a child, and I just failed. I couldn’t sit still, my heart would race, and I’d sweat as my body temperature rose. Finally I asked my teacher, Saljay Rinpoche, for help.

“You don’t want to feel panic?” he asked.

“Of course not!” I answered. “I want to get rid of it right now!”

He considered my response for a few moments and then, nodding, replied, “Oh, now I see. What’s bothering you is the *fear of panic*. Sometimes, the fear of panic is stronger than the panic itself.”

It hadn’t occurred to me to step back and look at what might be holding my panic in place. I was too wrapped up in the symptoms to see how very deeply I was afraid of the overwhelming emotion. But as I took Saljay Rinpoche’s advice and looked at the underlying fear of panic, I began to find that panic became more manageable.

Over the years, I’ve found this approach effective in counseling other people. If an emotion or a disturbing state of mind is too painful to look at directly, seek the underlying condition that holds it in place. You may be surprised at what you discover.

You may find fear of the emotion, as I did. You may find some other



type of resistance, such as a lack of confidence in even trying to work with emotions. You may find small events, triggers that signal or reinforce a broader emotional response. Fatigue, for example, can often signal a depressive episode. An argument with a coworker, spouse, or family member can often trigger thoughts of worthlessness or isolation, reinforcing a sense of low self-esteem. When we work with the feelings behind the feelings, we begin to work more directly with the entrenched beliefs that perpetuate emotional difficulties.

#### STEP FOUR: TAKE A BREAK

An important part of any practice involves learning when to just stop practicing altogether. Stopping gives you more space, which allows you to accept the ups and downs, the possible turbulence of the experience that may be generated by your practice. If you don't give yourself an opportunity to stop, you may be carried away by the turbulence—and by a sense of guilt because you're not “doing it right” or not understanding the exercise. *How come even though I have these very clear instructions, you may ask yourself, they don't seem to work? It must be my fault.*

In general, when you engage in attention practice, you'll encounter two extreme points at which you know when to stop. One extreme is when your practice begins to deteriorate. Maybe you lose your focus or feel disgusted with the exercise. Perhaps the method becomes unclear. Even if you step back, looking at the triggers or boosters of anxiety, loneliness, and so on, or try something different, your practice doesn't work. You may think, *I'm so tired of practicing. I can't see the benefit of going on.*

The idea of stopping meditation when the focus becomes too intense or your mind becomes dull or confused is actually an important and often overlooked part of practice. An analogy is often drawn from



“dry channel” or “empty reservoir” irrigation practices implemented by Tibetan farmers who would plant their fields around a natural reservoir, such as a small pond or lake, around which they’d dig channels that would run through the crops. Sometimes, even if the channels were well dug, there wasn’t much water flowing through them, because the reservoir itself was empty.

Similarly, when you practice, even though you have clear instructions and you understand the importance of effort and intention, you can experience fatigue, irritation, dullness, or hopelessness because your mental, emotional, and physical “reservoir” is empty. The likely cause is that you’ve applied too much effort, too eagerly, and haven’t built up a sufficiently abundant reservoir of inner strength. The instructions I received from my father and other teachers urging short practice periods can’t be emphasized enough. In dealing with intense or long-term emotional states, we need to fill our reservoirs. Even the Buddha didn’t become the Buddha overnight!

The second extreme at which it’s important to take a break occurs when your experience of the practice feels absolutely fantastic. There may come a point at which you feel extraordinarily light and comfortable in your body or an intense state of happiness or joy. You may experience a boundless sense of clarity—a mental experience like a brilliant sun shining in a cloudless blue sky. Everything appears so fresh and precise. Or perhaps thoughts, feelings, and sensations cease and your mind becomes completely still. At this point, you stop.

Sometimes people say, “It’s not fair! I’m having such a wonderful experience. Why should I stop?”

I sympathize with their frustration, since I, too, have enjoyed such blissful experiences. I felt such greed, such desire to hold on to them. But my teachers explained to me that if I held on, I would eventually grow

disappointed. Because the nature of experience is impermanent, sooner or later the bliss, the clarity, the stillness, and so on, would vanish, and then I would feel really horrible. I'd end up feeling like I did something wrong or that the practices don't work. While the real goal is to develop a stability of awareness that allows one to look with equanimity at any experience, there is also the danger of becoming attached to blissful, clear, or still experiences as the result of attention practice.

They further explained that taking a break at a high point cultivates an eagerness to continue practicing, encouraging us to stabilize awareness and "build up our reservoirs."

Strange as it may seem, stopping is as much an important aspect of practice as starting.

**Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche** is a teacher in the Karma Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. This article was excerpted from *Joyful Wisdom: Embracing Change and Finding Freedom*, © 2009 by Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche. Reprinted with permission from Harmony Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

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## SKILLFUL SPEECH

By working with the lay precept on speech, we can learn  
to say the right thing at the right time.

ALLAN LOKOS

Years ago, when I began traveling the Buddha's path, I was surprised by the emphasis placed on the practice of skillful speech. The Buddha considered the way we communicate with each other to be so important that he taught the practice of skillful speech alongside such lofty teachings as skillful view, thinking, action, and mindfulness as a pillar of the Ennobling Eightfold Way.

The Buddha saw that we are always engaged in relationships, starting with that most significant relationship: the one with ourselves. On the cushion we notice how we speak to ourselves—sometimes with compassion, sometimes with judgment or impatience. Our words are a powerful medium with which we can bring happiness or cause suffering.

Skillful speech begins by refraining from lying, slander, profanity, and harsh language. We should avoid language that is rude, abusive, disagreeable, or malicious, and we should abstain from talk that is foolish, idle, babble, or gossip. What remains are words that are truthful, kind, gentle, useful, and meaningful. Our speech will comfort, uplift, and inspire, and we will be a joy to those around us.

The pillar of skillful speech is to speak honestly, which means that

we should even avoid telling little white lies. We need to be aware of dishonesty in the forms of exaggerating, minimizing, and self-aggrandizing. These forms of unskillful speech often arise from a fear that what we are is not good enough--and that is never true. Honesty begins at home, so the practice of skillful speech begins with being honest with ourselves.

The Buddha cautioned against gossip because he saw the suffering that this kind of unskillful speech causes. There is an old Hasidic tale of a villager who was feeling remorse for the harm his gossip had caused his neighbor. He went to his rabbi to seek advice. The rabbi suggested that he go to town and buy a chicken and bring it back to him, and that on the way back he pluck it completely. When the man returned with the featherless chicken, the rabbi told him to retrace his steps and gather every one of the scattered feathers. The man replied that it would be impossible; by now the feathers were probably blown throughout the neighboring villages. The rabbi nodded in agreement, and the man understood: we can never really take back our words. As the Zen poet Basho wrote: "The temple bell stops but the sound keeps coming out of the flowers."

Gossip is defined as speaking about someone who is not physically present. It doesn't matter whether what is said is positive or negative. If the person is not there, it is gossip. If we have to speak about someone who is not present, we should speak of them as if they were there. An exercise that I do once or twice a year is to designate a specific period of time—a week or a month—when I do not speak about anyone who is not present. I find that my voice gets quite a rest, and the part of my ego that believes I do not gossip gets quite a jolt. Every time I do the exercise I find that the effects of this awareness practice are with me for weeks, and even months, afterward. When I start to speak about someone, a

little reminder beeps in my mind: “Don’t gossip.”

A word about teasing—don’t! Teasing is always at someone’s expense and often hurts more than the person being teased lets on. Simply stated, teasing causes suffering. The same energy used to create a tease can be used to create an honest compliment.

Skillful speech has a communicative partner called deep listening. No matter how unskillful their speech, people are often trying to communicate something hidden beneath their words. What does “Daddy, I hate you!” really mean from a child in the midst of a temper tantrum? What does “Now that you’re dating Robert, you have no time for me” mean from an old friend? These angry comments express a desire for more attention. When we listen deeply, taking time to breathe, we can avoid a conditioned reaction that could cause suffering and instead respond compassionately to what is beneath the harsh words. We can comfort our child with our love or assure our friend that she is important to us and that we will try to spend more time with her.

At times noble silence is the most skillful speech. For several years I facilitated a weekly sangha. The sangha rules were that no one commented on anything that was said by another member during the discussion period. We didn’t even say, “I agree with Bob,” or “My sister went through the same thing.” All we did was listen. Over time, we realized how often our minds were busy preparing a response when we thought we were actually listening. Knowing that we would not respond dramatically changed the way we listened.

One evening a young woman joined us, and during the discussion period she shared with the group that she had just lost her 37-year-old husband to cancer. Over the ensuing weeks, when she spoke we often could not understand her words through her heavy sobbing. Sometimes our eyes also filled with tears as we listened but did not comment. To

witness a person pouring her heart out and going through such suffering while feeling as if we were offering her nothing felt strange.

Then one day she told us that she had left her various support groups because she was receiving exactly what she needed from our sangha. We were allowing her to experience and express her pain without judging or offering quick fixes. We were present for her, bearing witness to her sorrow, holding her in silent compassion. Being truly present for another is the greatest gift we can offer. Sometimes people need to be sad, and noble silence can be truly ennobling.

When we consider skillful speech today, we must also consider a phenomenon that did not exist in the time of the Buddha: email. With the popularity of the telephone, we became a people that, for the most part, abandoned the practice of letter writing. What a perfect recipe for unskillful speech: a people long unpracticed at thoughtful letterwriting now equipped with the technological capability to churn out one quick email after another. Writer beware!

The most important step in developing skillful speech is to think before speaking (or writing). This is called mindfulness of speech. Few things can improve the nature of our relationships as much as the development of skillful speech. Silence offers us, and those around us, the spaciousness we need to speak more skillfully. When we speak with greater skill, our true self—our compassionate, loving self—emerges with gentle ease. So before you speak, stop, breathe, and consider if what you are about to say will improve upon the silence.

**Allan Lokos** is an Interfaith minister, meditation teacher, and author. He is the co-founder and director of the Community of Peace and Spirituality and the founder and guiding teacher of the Community Meditation Center in New York City.

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# TEN MINDFUL WAYS TO USE SOCIAL MEDIA

Right tweeting advice from @TinyBuddha

LORI DESCHENE

For the last two years, I have provided a daily wisdom quote through a Twitter account called Tiny Buddha. Since the follower count has grown by leaps and bounds, people have suggested I tweet more often throughout the day. I've realized, however, that the greatest lesson we can all learn is that less is enough. In a time when connections can seem like commodities and online interactions can become casually inauthentic, mindfulness is not just a matter of fostering increased awareness. It's about relating meaningfully to other people and ourselves. With this goal in mind, I've compiled a list of 10 tips for using social media mindfully.

## 1 KNOW YOUR INTENTIONS.

Doug Firebaugh of SocialMediaBlogster.com has identified seven psychological needs we may be looking to meet when we log on: acknowledgment, attention, approval, appreciation, acclaim, assurance, and inclusion. Before you post, ask yourself: Am I looking to be seen or validated? Is there something more constructive I could do to meet that need?

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### 2 BE YOUR AUTHENTIC SELF.

In the age of personal branding, most of us have a persona we'd like to develop or maintain. Ego-driven tweets focus on an agenda; authenticity communicates from the heart. Talk about the things that really matter to you. If you need advice or support, ask for it. It's easier to be present when you're being true to yourself.

### 3 IF YOU PROPOSE TO TWEET, ALWAYS ASK YOURSELF: IS IT TRUE? IS IT NECESSARY? IS IT KIND?

Sometimes we post thoughts without considering how they might impact our entire audience. It's easy to forget how many friends are reading. Two hundred people make a crowd in person, but online that number can seem insignificant. Before you share, ask yourself: is there anyone this might harm?

### 4 OFFER RANDOM TWEETS OF KINDNESS.

Every now and then I ask on Twitter, "Is there anything I can do to help or support you today?" It's a simple way to use social media to give without expectations of anything in return. By reaching out to help a stranger, you create the possibility of connecting personally with followers you may have otherwise known only peripherally.

### 5 EXPERIENCE NOW, SHARE LATER.

It's common to snap a picture with your phone and upload it to



Facebook or email it to a friend. This overlaps the experience of being in a moment and sharing it. It also minimizes intimacy, since your entire audience joins your date or gathering in real time. Just as we aim to reduce our internal monologues to be present, we can do the same with our digital narration.

## 6 BE ACTIVE, NOT REACTIVE.

You may receive email updates whenever there is activity on one of your social media accounts, or you might have your cell phone set to give you these types of alerts. This forces you to decide many times throughout the day whether you want or need to respond. Another approach is to choose when to join the conversation, and to use your offline time to decide what value you have to offer.

## 7 RESPOND WITH YOUR FULL ATTENTION.

People often share links without actually reading them, or comment on posts after only scanning them. If the greatest gift we can give someone is our attention, then social media allows us to be endlessly generous. We may not be able to reply to everyone, but responding thoughtfully when we can makes a difference.

## 8 USE MOBILE SOCIAL MEDIA SPARINGLY.

In 2009, Pew Research found that 43 percent of cell phone users access the Web on their devices several times a day. It's what former Microsoft employee Linda Stone refers to as continuous partial attention—when you frequently sign on to be sure you don't miss out anything. If

you choose to limit your cell phone access, you may miss out online, but you *won't* miss what's in front of you.

## 9 PRACTICE LETTING GO.

It may feel unkind to disregard certain updates or tweets, but we need downtime to be kind to ourselves. Give yourself permission to let yesterday's stream go. This way you won't need to "catch up" on updates that have passed but instead can be part of today's conversation.

## 10 ENJOY SOCIAL MEDIA!

These are merely suggestions to feel present and purposeful when utilizing social media, but they aren't hard-and-fast rules. Follow your own instincts and have fun with it. If you're mindful when you're disconnected from technology, you have all the tools you need to be mindful when you go online.

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5

# THE JOY OF MINDFUL COOKING

Practicing awareness in the kitchen

LAURA FRASER

Dinners at the Nevada Ranch where Dale and Melissa Kent work as caretakers are potluck. Whoever is visiting or living on the former dude ranch—now a private retreat, set up against the Eastern Sierras— shows up with a big pot of *pozole*, fresh greens from the garden, handmade tortillas, or a peach crumble made with fruit picked from the orchard outside. The wide-open kitchen is infused with the cheerful spirit of its former owner, Maya, who passed away a couple of years ago at 90; I can still see her kneading the sourdough bread she made in the quiet mornings, doing nothing else with her great intelligence and energy, at those moments, but kneading bread.

The ranch dinners are always fresh, and the various dishes made with love, but I've noticed, visiting over the years, that Dale and Melissa's contributions to the meals taste brighter and are presented more beautifully than, say, the goat cheese and crackers I plop onto a plate. Even their simplest dishes, mere vegetables cooked with some olive oil and salt, are somehow transformed; they're not just yummier, they're

mysteriously more satisfying to the soul. Nor do the Kents ever seem frantic getting something to the table on time, fret about the result, or burn anything in their haste to finish cooking already. It's as if their food is seasoned with grace.

That cooking magic has something to do with the fact that they spent seven years at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, the renowned Buddhist monastery in California's Ventana Wilderness, where Dale did a two-year stint as *tenzo*, head of the kitchen. Tassajara has a long lineage of great cooks and cookbooks starting with Zen priest Edward Espe Brown and his *Tassajara Bread Book* (1970) and subsequent works (his *Complete Tassajara Cookbook* will be released in September, along with a revised Bread book), and including Deborah Madison (who wrote *The Greens Cookbook* with Brown, along with her own books *The Savory Way*, *Vegetarian Cooking for Everyone*, and others) and Annie Somerville (*Fields of Greens* and *Everyday Greens*). Like these other Tassajara cooks, Dale and Melissa Kent don't just practice cooking; they've made cooking a practice, one that benefits not only what is on their plates and in their bellies but what is in their hearts.

The Kents now offer their next-generation Zen-inspired cookbook, *Tassajara Dinners & Desserts* (Gibbs Smith), which sets down recent recipes from the monastery, along with their own thoughts about mindful cooking and words of wisdom from guest cooks who have passed through those gates. The recipes are simple, calling for improvisation, and focus on seasonal, organic, and local ingredients, as well as some ethnic and exotic ingredients that are more readily available now than they were at the time of earlier Zen cookbooks.

Each time I relished their meals, I wondered whether I could also learn to cook more mindfully—but without spending years in a monastery. My cooking is usually messy and distracted, except when I make

soup, because you can't screw up soup, and something about chopping vegetables and tossing them in a pot restores my calm and equanimity. But I never know how anything else will turn out: when I made my great-grandmother's recipe for fig-filled cookies shaped like delicate sand dollars, for instance, the friend I was baking with observed that mine came out looking like "mud huts." My scattered haste in the kitchen is even dangerous: I once sliced off my entire index fingernail along with the onions. And let's not discuss what I have burned.

I had no idea how to begin to cook mindfully, or really what that meant. I had an image of slow-motion cooking, of a Zen monk taking an hour to slice one carrot, pausing to breathe, focusing on its texture, color, smell, and the miracle of its being alive, as if studying it on high-grade LSD. I pictured it as cooking in a trance, which struck me, given the knives and heat, as quite dangerous, too.

I asked Edward Brown, whose cookbooks are ragged in my kitchen from twenty years of thumbing through for simple, reassuring recipe ideas, about my notion of slow, mindful cooking. He told me that Zen monks like to eat on time like everyone else. "Some people think they're being mindful by working very slowly, but they're confusing being mindful with being quiet, still, and composed—which are different qualities," he said. "You can work extremely diligently and quickly and be mindful."

Mindfulness, he says, is more about simply being present when you cook, fully engaged with the food and your relationship to it, from the earth it was grown in to the table. It's being aware of the food with all your senses, and of how you transform it with your hands, knives, herbs, and heat—making it taste alive, nourishing yourself and those who eat your meals. "Your awareness can be in bringing the activity alive and giving it some energy, vitality, and exuberance," he said.

When you see Brown cook, as in the 2007 film about him, *How to Cook Your Life* (from the German director Doris Dörrie), he fairly sparkles with that vitality, passing energy from his body and hands to the bread dough, and vice versa. But I wondered how you accomplish that trick of mindfulness, of making your experience and the food you cook come alive, when the temptation in busy times is to put packaged meals into the microwave, carelessly throw together a sandwich while on the cell phone, or, for special occasions, fearfully measure and rigidly follow a recipe, hoping it turns out to be perfect.

Being a Zen priest, Brown didn't offer me any easy answers, only a few ideas to chew on. "Mindfulness is much more about receiving your experience than dictating it," he told me. "Most people's habits of mind and activity, when it comes to cooking, are about making it come out the way it's supposed to, rather than receiving and appreciating it the way it is." The mindful focus is more on the kale in your hands—its curly leaves, earthy smell, and deep-green color—than on the casserole you hope will come out of the oven crisp and browned at precisely seven o'clock.

Brown offered a quote from Zen master Tenkei about how to cook mindfully: "See with your eyes, smell with your nose, taste with your tongue." That sounds obvious, but cooks are often so used to going through the motions, so focused on a recipe, a habit, or the product of our efforts— not to mention a million other distractions—that we forget to stop and experience the food we're cooking. The nature of awareness, Brown says, is to resonate with the object of awareness; with cooking, it is responding to the food you choose in the market, wash, and place on the cutting board in the kitchen. It's establishing a connection to the food, a relationship with it. "You're waking up to the way things are," he says. "Smell, see, taste, touch. Start to notice." His simple recipes aren't exact

instructions for cooking, but permission to experiment and a structure within which to explore a deeper sort of joy of cooking.

Brown's other instruction about mindful cooking is one he says is classic Zen: "When you wash the rice, wash the rice; when you stir the soup, stir the soup." Give your attention to what you're doing, rather than to the preoccupations and daydreams scampering through your mind. "This is what some people call reinhabiting your body—extending your consciousness into your feet and hands, finding the life and vitality in your body and activity, rather than going through motions so it's a chore and drudgery." With cooking, you can use your awareness to inhabit physical movements that may be new, he says—cutting, washing, examining, mixing, folding—until, with practice, there is an invigorating flow of energy in those physical experiences, a delight.

Such energy, focus, and wholehearted attention nourishes yourself and those you feed, Brown writes in the introduction to his new *Complete Tassajara Cookbook*: "Cooking is not just working on food, but working on yourself and other people."

Dale and Melissa Kent, who met at Tassajara in 1997, were both attracted to the monastery partly because of the cookbooks; the way to their hearts, they said, was through their stomachs. "I found the *Tassajara Bread Book* in a used bookstore and wrote to the address on the back," said Dale. A promising philosophy student, he confounded everyone in his life by finding work as a baker instead of going to graduate school. "I was following my breath while doing repetitive tasks, and feeling real peace," he said. "*The Tassajara Bread Book* described what I had been doing and encouraged me to pay attention, to treat pots and pans and knives as friends. Its poetry and sweetness spoke to me."

After two years at the monastery, Dale began to work in the kitchen. At Tassajara, monks work in silence, except for occasional functional

speech (“What’s burning?”). From the various tenzos he cooked with, Dale says, he learned different lessons—how to taste food and pay attention to the details of a dish, when to salt, how to be generous and fearless, how to plan and move quickly, how to be playful, and to be patient. He also learned how energy, intention, and mood affect what you cook. “If someone was angry and making the bread, they would turn out these angry little loaves of bread.”

I wondered how cooking mindfully would be different outside the monastery, whether it would be more difficult to have a sense of spirituality in your own kitchen. Melissa, who was *ino*, or head of the meditation hall, told me that cooking is actually a reminder that the spiritual is always at hand. “When you cook mindfully, you’re honoring an everyday activity as sacred, and an opportunity for peace,” she said. “When people elevate time in the meditation hall above time doing the dishes, they’re missing the point. There’s nothing special about meditating in a monastery.”

Annie Somerville, who was tenzo at Tassajara and has been chef at Greens Restaurant for 28 years, says her experience at the monastery grounded her for cooking in the rest of her life. “It’s the hidden storyline,” she says. “All those years of Zen practice were great life training for experiencing all the things that have come my way.” But her practice now is in the restaurant kitchen. “The reason I’m in the kitchen and not sitting in the zendo is that I like to run around,” she says. Cooking, she says, is fully engaging and sharpens her sensory attention—she can see when pasta is done, smell when the vegetables are roasted, and knows the onions are ready because they’re translucent. That kind of attention can be freeing for home cooks, too, she says. “For a lot of people, cooking is a wonderful release from the stresses and strains of your daily life. It’s an escape to get into the kitchen, to make food that is delicious and



nurturing and beautiful, and to be involved in that process from beginning to end.”

Deborah Madison, whose new cookbook is called *What We Eat When We Eat Alone* (Gibbs Smith), cooked at the Zen Center in San Francisco, Tassajara, and Green Gulch for 18 years; when she left, she found that cooks could be as mindful in a chaotic atmosphere as in a silent one. “When I went from Zen Center to Chez Panisse, there was opera playing, and people coming through saying hello to each other, but the cooks were in some ways even more focused than in a Zen Center kitchen.” Mindfulness, she says, is about intention and focus, and isn’t dependent on externalities in the kitchen, including silence.

Madison, who lives in New Mexico, says she no longer even consciously thinks of her cooking as a spiritual practice. “I don’t use those words,” she says. “But when I go into the kitchen to cook, I enjoy a calmness and the connection I feel with food I’ve grown myself or that comes from a rancher down the road. There’s a shift in me when I cook with that kind of food, and I always recognize it when I see it in other people’s food—there’s a brightness, cleanness, and energy.”

Madison doesn’t use the word “mindful” about cooking much, either. “It can sound scoldy, like ‘Pay attention!’” But the benefits of awareness in the kitchen are clear to her. “Whenever you’re doing something with awareness, it’s a two-way street; things talk back to you. In the kitchen you get a lot of immediate feedback, and consequences to your actions. You have sharp, hot things, you check your email and your turnips are burned, you cut yourself, or you have wonderful tastes.” Cooking, she says, is a wonderful opportunity to observe—the food, yourself, and the magic that can happen between the two.

“People feel so frazzled about their lives, and being in the kitchen, putting dinner on the table, even if it’s simple steamed vegetables, is a

way to step into another world and out of that chaos,” she says.

Dale and Melissa and I decided to make dinner together so I could learn something not only about how to follow their recipes but also about their practice of mindfulness in the kitchen. It was a chilly winter day in Nevada, snow barely sticking to the ground. I have little experience with formal spiritual practice—Vipassana meditation and a little yoga—and so was worried I couldn’t cook alongside a couple of Zen pros without revealing myself as a slob, both spiritually and as a cook. But Melissa told me to relax: we were just going to make some pizza.

We started by cleaning all the counters and washing our hands, which had a ritual feeling to it. “You lay everything out very carefully that you’re going to use for the meal,” Dale said. “Before you pick up a knife, you stand and feel your feet on the ground and take a few deep breaths, bring your attention into your hands and to what’s on the cutting board.” We turned off the music to focus on the cooking, though they often cook with music on.

We began by dissolving yeast into water, which sounds simple. But Dale’s yeast started to bubble alive, and mine did not. He’d said the water should be body temperature, and in my impatience I’d tossed the yeast into hot water without feeling how warm it (or my body) actually was. I started over. When my yeast began to bubble in the water, too, I added flour and salt. I measured from Dale’s recipe into my bowl, while he just threw the ingredients into his, telling me to respond more to what I saw in the bowl than to the exact measurements he had written in his book. He showed me how to fold the ingredients together gently so that the proteins in the flour would stay long and pliable, until we had what he calls a “shaggy mass,” which was slightly sticky to the fingers. He turned his dough out onto the floured counter, and it bounced around in his hands as if it were alive. Mine needed coaxing. Dale told

me to be careful to keep all my dough together, not some on my hands or the side of the bowl, because they didn't like to be separated. It sounded like he was speaking about little creatures. Dale turned his ball of dough into an olive-oiled bowl. "You go!" he told it. Then he looked at me a little sheepishly. "Some people would say you pray over the dough. It's about the power of intention."

"You go!" I said to my dough.

The dough rose, we gently spread it out, nice and elastic, and topped it with what we had at hand. The pizza turned out crusty and flavorful, one sprinkled with onion confit and oozing Gorgonzola, another with tomatoes, anchovies, and olives. Somehow, after having worked with the dough and noticed its texture and its response to my fingers, I found that the pizza tasted better.

Two days later, I tried making pizza myself. It was my birthday, and I have a tradition, borrowed from the Italians, of offering a meal to my friends on that day. So I invited 30 or 40 people over and began preparing that morning. I had just absorbed all this good advice from Zen master cooks, so I felt pretty invincible. I was looking forward to having some relaxed time to enjoy the twin benefits of mindful cooking that Melissa had described, of combining peaceful space with yourself with cooking healthy, delicious food and nourishing your friends.

I began by preparing all the ingredients carefully and putting them into pretty little bowls for later on. I kept in mind what Annie Somerville had suggested about doing things ahead of time to make the experience more enjoyable. "Break a dish down into its elements," she said. "Then when the time comes, it's easy, because you're ready. Everything is in the prep work."

So for a couple of hours I shredded mozzarella cheese, stirred a simple tomato sauce, tore arugula, sliced anchovies and prosciutto (the

Tassajara cookbooks are vegetarian, but I am not), and assembled all the other pizza toppings. My kitchen was calm and orderly, and I felt a tremendous sense of well-being, especially given that I was a year older that day, and already in my late forties.

Then I started in on the dough. I felt my skin temperature, felt the water, and sprinkled the yeast in the bowl. It bubbled up just right. Then I realized that I hadn't actually written down the recipe for the dough. All I knew was flour, water, salt, olive oil in the pan. I called Dale: no answer, and no reply on Melissa's cell phone. No one answered email. I tore through a bunch of recipe books, but none seemed to have the same recipe as the pizza dough I'd made with Dale. I opened Brown's Tassajara Bread Book for advice and got angry that he hadn't thought, in 1970, to include pizza: What? Pizza isn't bread? Then I grabbed his Tassajara Recipe Book and found this:

*The truth is you're already a cook.  
Nobody teaches you anything,  
But you can be touched, you can be awakened.  
Put down the book and start asking,  
"What have we here?"*

So I took a deep breath and looked. I added flour and salt, and looked some more. I tried to create a shaggy mass. I felt how sticky the dough was. I oiled the bowls and put the dough somewhere warm, perhaps too warm, to rise. It rose and rose. I cut it into quarters, made little balls, patted them around, placed them on greased cookie sheets, and they rose some more. I put them in the fridge to stop their promiscuous reproducing, and there they combined into one big, flat blob. The dough was sticky and exuberantly unruly. It was suddenly five o'clock, and my

guests were coming at six. Maybe I could just serve them a lot of wine and olives, stick a few crackers on a plate with some cheese.

Then I picked up a ball of dough and added some flour. “It’ll be all right,” Dale said when my dough at the ranch had been too blobby. The dough seemed like it would be forgiving. So I worked the dough until it felt more like something you could make pizza out of. Then I greased some pans, spread it out, spun some around for an added Italian effect before laying it out to bake, and added toppings. “You go,” I said before I put it into the oven.

My friends arrived, and the kitchen was full. The pizza came out fine. It was not great; it didn’t have a perfect crispy crust, it was a sad cousin to Dale’s pizza, and it will take some practice. My friends, on the other hand, were wonderful. They threw themselves into sprinkling toppings onto crust, cutting the pies, checking the oven, and eating square after square of different pizzas. Full and content, they talked and laughed and sparkled and even cleaned up afterward as a gift to the cook. It seemed like magic, the way everyone loved that imperfect pizza party.

“The real magic,” Brown writes in the introduction to his *Complete Tassajara Cookbook*, “is that you could grow kind, generous, and larger-hearted in the process of preparing food—because you give your heart to the activity. You are realizing yourself by realizing food. Instead of looking good, you are becoming you.”

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6

DO I MIND?

Keeping your head in a mindless world

JOAN DUNCAN OLIVER

It's all there in the *Satipatthana* ("Foundations of Mindfulness") Sutta: The direct path to awakening calls for maintaining awareness of body, feeling, mind, and thoughts—and not just when we're sitting in meditation. Whether eating, drinking, chewing, urinating, defecating, walking, standing, falling asleep, waking up, talking, or remaining silent, we must remain fully alert, the Buddha said.

There's a high cost to not paying attention, as one of the Buddha's parables on mindfulness suggests. Imagine a large group of people gathered around a famous beauty queen, watching her sing and dance. A man comes along, and he's handed a bowl filled to the brim with oil and told he must carry the bowl on his head between the crowd and the beauty queen without spilling a drop, or a guy following along behind with a sword will cut off his head. "What do you think, monks?" the Buddha asked. "Will that man allow himself to be distracted from the bowl of oil?" Naturally, the monks said no.

Life is just one situation after another in which we have to choose between staying mindful or losing our heads. I often think of daily life as Thich Nhat Hanh's mindfulness bell, endlessly reverberating with people and circumstances that chime *Wake up!*

When it comes to mindfulness on the hoof, even the movies can be a form of training. A good movie is like a Zen *teisho*, or teaching talk: it can open you up to a deeper awareness. Something like that happened to me watching *Letters from Iwo Jima*. For the first hour or so of the movie we eavesdrop on a handful of Japanese soldiers and their general as they wait for the invading American forces to strike. Excerpts from their letters to loved ones and flashbacks of their lives back home give us a sense of these men, but it's their conversations—intimate, banal—that are almost unbearably poignant: they know, as we do, they're about to die. The attack is a given, yet when the screen suddenly explodes in a hail of bombs and mortar fire, blood and screams, I recoiled as if I, too, were under siege. I ducked and squeezed my eyes shut. As the battle raged, it was mirrored in my inner turmoil—thoughts and feelings shooting off like rockets, about human brutality, the evils of war, the warmongers in power. Caught between sorrow and rage, I burst into tears. Sneaking a look at the people around me, I wondered: How could they sit there so calmly? Why wasn't everyone upset? Or was I overreacting?

Desperate to stop the war in my head, I focused on the breath rising and falling in my chest. Soon, a space of calm opened up inside me—the sort of peace the novelist Orhan Pamuk described as “the silence of snow.” On screen, the mortar fire continued, but I experienced it at a distance, no longer overwhelmed. For the first time, I could hear the noise for what it was—a movie soundtrack. The thought of the carnage was still horrifying. But when I separated the sound from the story, the ka-booms and rat-tat-tats were only a series of vibrations emanating from a bank of speakers and ricocheting off the theater walls.

To know the truth of what is there—not the echoes and shadows on the walls—is the beginning and end of mindfulness. Once I was able to disengage somewhat and observe the kaleidoscope of sensations and

thoughts, the feeling of aversion began to subside. I could open my eyes and watch the rest of the movie without collapsing into self-centered distress. The images on the screen were no less brutal, no less wrenching than before, but without the running monologue in my head—*This is terrible. I'm so miserable. Why do we kill? I hate violence*—genuine empathy could emerge, and compassion for whatever in us needs to fight.

Mindfulness is not easy—it calls for diligence I can't always muster. One problem is, I'm so much more conversant with its opposite—mindlessness. Not the Zen teaching of No Mind but everyday obtuseness—the Adam-and-Eve-in-the-garden kind of heedlessness that carries on without any thought to the consequences. Mindlessness can be extravagantly self-indulgent: I agonize over things I can't control—the war in Iraq, the health care crisis, rampant incompetence and incivility, tax breaks for billionaires—while what I *can* control cries out for attention. More often, mindlessness takes a simple, albeit perverse, form: mispending the afternoon with a stack of magazines and a cup of tea when an important deadline looms.

Like all mindless activities, this comes to no good. The magazines, once read, are discarded. The tea is consumed. Yet the deadline looms even larger, a hurricane gathering force. Mindlessness, however petty, is reckless at its heart. It only postpones; it never takes us anywhere. Mindfulness, by contrast, is patient, careful. It takes a longer view.

Want to see the difference between mindlessness and mindfulness? Meet me in midtown Manhattan around noon. I'm running late for an appointment and elbowing my way through the crowd. People are lurching this way and that, too engrossed in their cell phones to fall into the unspoken dance that keeps traffic flowing along without mishap. Crash. Someone sideswipes me without pausing or murmuring "I'm sorry." Oof. Someone else steps on the back of my shoe and, when I lean down



to adjust it, shoots me a dirty look. By the time I reach the corner, I've had a half-dozen or so of these encounters and dodged a dozen more. And I still have blocks to go.

Mindless-Me plows on, muttering at people who don't walk fast enough, snarling at those who cut me off. By the time I arrive at my destination, I'm in a foul humor, barely able to paste on a smile or proffer a polite greeting. Twenty minutes go by before my breathing and blood pressure return to normal and I can turn my attention to the business at hand.

How different this same scenario looks when approached mindfully. I take time to center myself in the breath before I step into the crowd. My thoughts are neutral, not armed for blood. I walk at a relaxed but steady pace, attentive to where my feet are and where they're headed. I have nary a collision with the cell phone-toting hordes. At the corner, I wait patiently, not jockeying for position so I can bolt across when the light changes. I arrive at my destination on time and calm, ready for whatever lies ahead.

Thich Nhat Hanh speaks often of the "miracle of mindfulness." It's a miracle for me to walk a block without working myself into a lather or, at the other extreme, losing myself in worries about tomorrow or a rehash of last night's conversation. Simply bringing my attention to the moment can change the timbre of my day.

There was a time when I couldn't live a minute in the present. I knew nothing of bare attention, or nonjudging awareness, or the truth of impermanence. When I felt miserable, I had no faith the discomfort would ever pass. One night when I was still new to meditation, I lay awake for hours in agony from a badly sprained ankle. Finally I decided to see what would happen if I meditated with the pain as my object. The result astounded me.

I recalled a teacher's suggestion: "Get curious about your experience." I had never before stayed with pain long enough to be curious about it, much less to investigate it. Whenever my knees or back hurt during meditation, I escaped into counting breaths or repeating my koan. I might notice when the pain stopped, but I noticed nothing of its nature. Was it burning, stabbing, throbbing, dull? Was it steady or intermittent? Were my muscles clenched or relaxed? What thoughts did the pain trigger?

Lying in the dark that night, I greeted the pain as a sensation I'd never met before, and explored each flutter and twinge. In time, the pain eased, and I drifted off to sleep.

If physical pain can change under scrutiny, would the same thing happen with emotions? I wondered. My aversion to physical suffering was nothing compared with my fear of facing emotional distress, despite years of therapy. But here, too, mindfulness served. Under observation, the mental chitchat seemed less diverting. And when painful feelings arose, the practice became how to note them without retreating, how to investigate them without obsessing. Troubled relationships and long-simmering resentments began to unravel.

Not that I can claim a perfect mindfulness score. On the cushion I struggle, spending more time, it seems, shooing my attention back to the object of meditation than attending to it in the first place. Off the cushion, I still lose my cool more often than I'd like, leaving the door ajar for more problems to waltz in.

Even a semi-awakened mind, however, has a harder time kidding itself. I can tell immediately that I'm off when I fudge the truth, don't pay bills on time, or poison the world with my ratty mood. When I slip up, I know enough to learn the lesson or make amends. There's a saying in Alcoholics Anonymous: AA ruins your drinking. In like fashion,

mindfulness ruins a thousand nasty habits, from “justifiable” anger and *schadenfreude* to laziness and overspending. Mindless behavior has less kick when you’ve been practicing for a while.

The Buddha’s teachings on mindfulness point to one end—realization and release from suffering. Still, there are rewards along the way—greater compassion and a clear conscience, for two. And even, dare I say it, happiness. We all want to be happy, but as the monk Matthieu Ricard has pointed out, “there’s a big difference between aspiration and achievement.” The quick fixes and immediate gratification I think will make me happy never do in the long run, leaving me empty-hearted. Mindfulness digs the truth out from under the excuses and confusion, lighting the way to true satisfaction. Now if I would just pay attention . . .

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7

# WHAT'S SO GREAT ABOUT NOW?

Cynthia Thatcher tells us why the present  
moment isn't all it's cracked up to be

CYNTHIA THATCHER

“Be mindful.” “Stay in the present.” “Bare attention.” We’ve all heard one of these phrases. And if you’re more experienced in insight practice, these may be the watchwords that chime in the back of consciousness from morning till night, reminding you that everything genuine in the spiritual path is to be found in the now.

But then one day you’re sitting in meditation, trying to observe the rise and fall of the abdomen, or a thought, or pain, and it all seems terribly dreary. Suddenly a question floats like a bubble to the surface of your mind: “What’s so great about the present moment, anyway?”

Casting about for an answer, you think vaguely of seeing the beauty you’ve been missing (although nothing seems beautiful right now), or enlightenment (which is what, exactly?) or simply gaining more peace and happiness. You’re not sure how those good things occur as a result of staying in the now—here you squirm a bit—and yet, imagining some golden light in the distance, you feel that if only your mind could stay in the present, things would get better. Better how? Well, just . . . better. Happier.

Alas. Although we may be thoroughly versed in the method of mindfulness practice, our clarity sometimes fails when it comes to stating why the now is worthwhile. Yet we needn't sweep the issue under the rug or be satisfied with a vague answer. It warrants serious thought because, unless we're clear about what the present is, it will be easy to abandon the practice of mindfulness when experience doesn't match expectation.

Fourteen years ago, during my first meditation retreat with Achan Sobin Namto, this question came up full force. I was a new student, in the first week of a three-and-a-half-month retreat. Achan Sobin, a Thai Buddhist teacher, had more than thirty years' experience teaching meditation.

"How do you feel?" he asked me. He'd just finished the evening chanting; the burning incense sticks made three glowing points in the otherwise dim room. Despite his kindness, desolation hung on me like a cape. "I'm having doubts," I said. He grasped the nature of the doubt instantly. It wasn't my ability that I questioned, or the teachings, or the practice method itself. It was the bleakness I experienced when staying in the now. Fundamentally, was the present even worth staying in? Somehow, Achan knew my thoughts. "There's nothing good in the present moment, right?" he asked, hooting with laughter until his eyes teared up. Apparently this cosmic joke struck him as hilarious, though I didn't find it particularly funny. He was glad I was on the right track. I was beginning to find out what all meditators were supposed to see: the First Noble Truth that every moment of samsara, every blip of mind (*nama*) and matter (*rupa*), was unsatisfactory (*dukkha*).

Yet Achan's response startled me. Hadn't I read that when you placed your full attention in the moment, you'd finally notice all the beauty you'd been missing? Wouldn't the plum taste sweeter? Wouldn't

the bare winter branches (now that you weren't too distracted to actually see them) thrum with radiance against the no-longer-bleak gray sky? But he'd confirmed that the now wasn't all it was cracked up to be. I sighed. So the plum wasn't going to get sweeter. The present moment, it turned out, wasn't wonderful at all.

The current myth among some meditation circles is that the more mindful we are, the more beauty we'll perceive in mundane objects. To the mind with bare attention, even the suds in the dishpan—as their bubbles glint and wink in the light—are windows on a divine radiance. That's the myth. But the truth is almost the opposite: in fact, the more mindfulness we have, the less compelling sense-objects seem, until at last we lose all desire for them.

It's true that strong concentration can seem to intensify colors, sounds, and so forth. But concentration alone doesn't lead to insight or awakening. To say that *mindfulness* makes the winter sky more sublime, or the act of doing the dishes an exercise in wonder, chafes against the First Noble Truth.

This myth points to a misunderstanding of the role of mindfulness. Mindfulness, accompanied by clear comprehension, differs from ordinary awareness. Rather than seeing the conventional features of objects more clearly, mindfulness goes beyond them to perceive something quite specific—the ultimate characteristics common to all formations, good or bad. There are only three of these: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and non-selfness. (Note that beauty isn't among them.) Mindfully noting mental and physical phenomena, we learn that they arise only to pass away. In the deepest sense, we cannot manipulate or actually own them. These traits are unwelcome—unsatisfactory. So the more mindfulness one has, the clearer dukkha becomes.

But sitting there with Achan Sobin, staring at the glow from the

incense sticks, I felt vaguely cheated by something I couldn't put my finger on. Had some perverse trick been played on the world? Ironically, having begun meditation in an effort to be free of suffering, I was now seeing more unsatisfactoriness—and rightly so, according to my teacher. Then why cultivate mindfulness? Why stay in the present at all? But rejecting mindfulness out-of-hand wasn't the answer. Since Achan was the lightest, most carefree person I'd ever known, I wanted to be like him, to follow the technique that had apparently brought him such ease.

The Gordian Knot needed untangling. And why not approach it in a rigorous manner, strand by strand? A scientist might first analyze the material in question, which in this case was the present moment itself.

So we might begin by asking: Of what is the present moment actually composed? There is a system of Buddhist metaphysics called Abhidhamma, in which we learn that our day-to-day experience can be broken down into units called “mind-moments.” These moments are the smallest bits of consciousness—the quarks of the mental world.

Each moment is composed of two parts: consciousness and one object—not a watering can or a thimble, but an object of the mind. Consciousness is always aware of something. When a patch of azure bursts into our field of awareness, a blip of eye-consciousness sees the color. When a smell wafts toward us, another blip of consciousness knows the scent. Only mind and object; that's all there is to it. Our entire lives are nothing but a chain of moments in which we perceive one sight, taste, smell, touch, sound, feeling, or thought after another. Outside of this process, nothing else happens.

Now, what about the objects themselves? There are six types in all: sounds, colors, smells, tastes, touches, and mental objects. Consciousness perceives them via different sensory “doors.” A sight, for instance, is cognized at the eye-door. Mental objects are perceived through the

mind-door directly. They include, among others, thoughts, concepts, feelings, and emotions.

These six main objects are all that we can know. No matter how wildly adventurous our lives are, we still can't experience anything other than these half-dozen forms. Since mind and object are the only building blocks from which a moment of life can be fashioned, there is nothing else that could possibly take place in the now.

Once we know what the present moment comprises, the next question is: Are these components delightful and lovely? We often think that images, smells, and so on can be wonderful. And in the mundane sense, they can. We take delight in the scent of jasmine or the glimpse of a red sun over the mountains—but this pleasure is entangled with delusion. We think sense-impressions desirable only because we can't see beyond the conventions to their real characteristics.

Take the sunset: What happens when we see it? Ultimately, we don't. When the eye contacts a visual form, we merely see color, not a three-dimensional thing. In fact, the tint, along with the consciousness seeing it, dies out in a split-second, but we fail to catch the dissolve. Why? Because delusion blurs the separate moments of perception together, making experience look seamless. After the color sparks out, subsequent moments of consciousness replay the image from memory, dubbing it "sunset." This process takes only a fraction of a second. Nevertheless, by the time we name it, the original image is already gone. "Sunset" is a concept perceived through the mind-door, not the eye. We mistake this product of mental construction for something irreducibly real. Without the tool of mindfulness the trick is too fast to see, like trying to catch the separate frames of a running film.

The deception ends in disappointment—as if we believed a necklace to be priceless, then learned that the gems were paste. The Buddha said,



*Sabbe sankhara anicca*: All formations are impermanent and therefore unsatisfactory, even the ones that seem heavenly. He didn't add the footnote: "Psst! Some formations are wonderful."

Now, if all formations are unsatisfactory in the ultimate sense, then so must be the ones that make up the present moment. But again we ask, if the now is so far from wonderful, why stay in it? Note the difference between saying "The present moment is wonderful" and "It's wonderful to stay in the present." This is more than a semantic quibble. The first statement implies that the bare sensory data occurring in the present are themselves little bits of divinity. The second allows that, by staying in the now, one can be free from the distress that comes from clinging to those sensations.

In fact, the Buddha clearly stated the reason for practicing mindfulness: to uncover and eliminate the cause of suffering. That cause is desire. When its cause is absent, suffering cannot arise. At that point, the sutras tell us, one knows a happiness with no hint of anxiety to mar it. But that isn't because sights and sounds magically become permanent, lovely, and the property of Self. Rather, these impressions temporarily cease and consciousness touches a supramundane object called "nibbana," the unconditioned element. Although a mental object, nibbana, the "highest bliss," is not a formation at all; it is unformed and permanent. So the present moment is worthwhile because only in it can we experience nibbana—complete freedom from suffering.

Nowhere did the Buddha advocate mindfulness for the sake of appreciating the warmth of soapy water, the brightness of copper kettles, and so on. On the contrary, he called it a "perversion of view" (*vipallasa*) to regard what is ultimately undesirable as worthwhile or beautiful.

Yet can't sense-impressions be pleasurable? Yes, but pleasure isn't the unending source of happiness we take it to be. In daily life we per-

ceive beautiful sensations as solid and relatively lasting, when in fact they're only unstable vibrations that fall away the instant they form. Like cotton candy that dissolves before you can sink your teeth into it, pleasure doesn't endure long enough to sustain happiness.

But since ignorance conceals impermanence, we react by grasping and pushing away, which agitates the mind. The very act of clinging causes mental distress—have you ever noticed that longing *hurts*? Moreover, the exertions are futile since grasping cannot extend the life of pleasure, not even by a nanosecond. As for unpleasant sensations—in truth, they disappear in a moment, too. But when you feel averse to them, the pain doubles. It's like trying to remove a thorn in your foot by piercing the skin with a second thorn. If we could let go, the mind wouldn't suffer.

The Buddha discovered that the happiest mind is the nonattached one. This happiness is of a radically different order than what we're used to. When asked how there could be bliss in nibbana, since it offers no lovely sights or sounds, Sariputta, the Buddha's chief disciple, said: "That there is no sensation *is itself happiness*." Compared with this joy, he implied, pleasure falls woefully short. We read in the sutras that "everything the world holds good, sages see otherwise. What other men call 'sukha' (pleasure) that the saints call 'dukkha' (suffering) . . ." (SN 3.12). This isn't just an alternative viewpoint—it's ultimate reality.

As paradoxical as it sounds, we can only find this genuine happiness by first understanding that the present moment of mind and body is unsatisfactory. By progressing through the stages of insight—experiencing fear, then weariness, then dispassion when noting phenomena—we can give up attachment, the real cause of distress. The more clearly we see the lack of worth in mental and physical sensations, the less desire we'll have for them until, thoroughly disenchanted, craving will be snuffed out automatically. As soon as that occurs, pure happiness will arise by itself.

But if we keep searching for more beauty in the sights and sounds themselves, how can we see them clearly? How can we become dis-illusioned and quell the fires that keep us agitated?

Imagine that you and some friends are trapped in a burning house. Chunks of flaming wood keep dropping from the ceiling. Would it be better to acknowledge the danger and help the others escape, or to stay and search for beauty: “Look, it’s not really so bad. The mauve cast to those flames is quite lovely. . .” ?

Likewise, we should mindfully observe *dukkha* in the present moment because that’s the only staircase out of the burning house, the house of the *khandhas* (the five aggregates: matter, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness), in which we’re trapped. That’s not a well-received view. But is it better to ignore the message, to plop down on the stairs with a shrug? Not acknowledging the danger, we’re in far worse straits. Seeing it, we can negotiate an escape.

Not that we’ll develop long faces. Buddhists recognize suffering in order to be free of it, not to wallow in it. Ask yourself this: Is it “wallowing” to tell those in danger that the house is on fire? The great news is that anyone who follows the Eightfold Path to the end is guaranteed to attain nibbana. Who wouldn’t be glad to know that unalloyed happiness is possible? Indeed, most of us aim much lower than that.

Mindfulness practice does lead to happiness, but not because the *stuff* of the mundane now—its sights, sounds, and the consciousness that knows them—turns out to be better than we’d thought. Despite the myth, bare attention doesn’t expose some hidden core of radiance in the empty vibrations; no such core exists.

When the components of mundane existence are themselves unsatisfactory, can we reasonably hope to fashion happiness from them? That’s like trying to weave a white rug from black wool. So, rather than

frantically looking for loopholes in the teachings, isn't it wiser to accept that mindfulness won't make the plum any sweeter or the kettle any brighter? But here's the hopeful part—the more we practice mindfulness, the less we'll care about sweetness or brightness. Once we have a superior substitute, the traits that are compelling now will interest us less and less. This is not numb indifference but true liberation. We'll have learned the great secret that nonattachment is a lightness and freedom complete in itself, separate from the impressions pouring in through the sense-doors. Imagine it. We'd no longer need certain sights or touches to feel at ease.

Nor would we feel depressed due to others. Although we may not understand it yet, once we've tasted this freedom we'll treasure it more than the most delightful sensation we can think of—the fragrance of linden trees, the notes of a Chopin prelude, or the pleasure of making love. We may continue to experience these and other pleasant sensations. But we won't grasp at each sight or touch when it ends, and therefore won't suffer from the loss.

Now comes the tough question: Do we honestly seek liberation from the dreary rounds of dukkha? Then let us be mindful, not to imbue the pan of suds with a fabricated beauty, but for the reason the Buddha intended: to see the distress of clinging until we behold the real plum—nibbana. The enlightened ones have sung it in many ways: When the mind's object is nibbana, the present couldn't be more wonderful.

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8

THE LAMA IN THE LAB

Advances in medical technologies are allowing scientists a peek into the brains of experienced meditators.

MARSHALL GLICKMAN

“Someone ought to wire the Dalai Lama up to an EEG machine to see exactly what’s going on.”

It was an offhanded remark, made at the end of a Vipassana retreat by a gung-ho, fresh-out-of-college meditator, and as he talked more, it became apparent what he wanted was a shortcut to enlightenment. It was hard not to stumble over his lack of tact. But in fact, even as he spoke, in scientific labs across the country there was already a research initiative underway to study advanced Tibetan monks and seasoned Vipassana teachers. And the studies—sponsored by The Mind and Life Institute, a Boulder, Colorado-based nonprofit organization—have the input and full support of the Dalai Lama.

It is even possible that at that very moment, in a state-of-the-art brain science lab at the University of Wisconsin Madison, a Tibetan monk was lying on a hospital gurney with his head in the tight-fitting tube of a functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) machine. As the monk generated compassion and other meditative states, the fMRI would record images of the cellular structure and functioning of his

brain. After finishing the fMRI, he would be whisked down the hall to repeat the same protocol while hooked up to a high-resolution EEG. Analysis of the test results would keep a team of Ph.D.'s busy for months.

There are, however, significant differences between the experiment the enthusiastic meditator had in mind and the scientific work Mind and Life is doing. Mind and Life isn't trying to discover the neurological basis of nirvana but rather to investigate the brain mechanisms at work during various meditative states, and gain insight into the impact of meditation on our thoughts and emotions. It may then be possible to objectively demonstrate the benefits of certain Buddhist contemplative practices—part of Mind and Life's ongoing efforts to explore how science and Buddhism, as equal partners, can help each other.

Over the past sixteen years, Mind and Life has taken a practical approach to the partnership. Best known for its conferences—dialogues between the Dalai Lama and prominent Western scientists—Mind and Life has managed to avoid the partisan conflicts that often plague such encounters. “Mind and Life isn't trying to bolster Buddhism,” explains R. Adam Engle, cofounder of the institute and chairman of the board, “but is looking to create a true collaboration between Buddhism and science to benefit humanity.”

Among those who see great potential in the partnership is Evan Thompson, co-author of *The Embodied Mind* and a close associate of the late Francisco Varela, the innovative cognitive scientist who was Mind and Life's other co-founder. “While the conversations Mind and Life is facilitating between scientists and Buddhists are very important,” Thompson says, “dialogues have been done before. What's most exciting is that they're creating something new—a fusion of science and Buddhism that's appropriate for Western culture.”

In 1992, when Mind and Life researchers first set out to as-

sess the effects of decades of intense meditation and spiritual practices, they sent a team of equipment-toting scientists up the Himalayan slopes above Dharamsala, India, to meet with accomplished Tibetan yogis in their secluded meditation huts. There were a few cross-cultural misunderstandings; one monk, for instance, decided against being outfitted with EEG electrodes when the scientists couldn't tell him how the test might affect his subtle energy body. Few native Tibetan monks traveled to the U.S. for more extensive testing. But that initial project paved the way for the fruitful collaborations that have developed since. Today, the Mind and Life team has created arguably the best—and certainly the most sophisticated—tests ever designed for measuring the long-term results of a yogi's mind training.

Currently, the institute has in-depth research projects under way at the University of California at San Francisco Medical School, the University of California at Berkeley, and Harvard University, as well as the work in Richard Davidson's lab at the University of Wisconsin. Davidson is one of the country's leading affective neuroscientists. Though his Training and Studying the Mind Project has tested only a few advanced practitioners so far, the preliminary results are impressive. One Tibetan Buddhist lama, code-named Oser in *Destructive Emotions*, Daniel Goleman's new book, demonstrated a clear, measurable ability to assume six different meditative states—including one-pointed concentration, visualization, pure awareness, and compassion—on command. In a separate test, while generating compassion, Oser showed a dramatic increase in electrical activity in the brain region associated with positive emotions. Davidson's lab had already found that high levels of activity in that region are associated with feelings of happiness, enthusiasm, joy, and alertness. While the results aren't yet conclusive, they suggest the vast potential of dharma practice for creating stable, positive states of mind.

At the Human Interaction Laboratory at UC San Francisco Medical School, Paul Ekman, a widely recognized expert on emotions and facial expressions, has also achieved remarkable results testing well-trained meditators. When images of faces with specific expressions were quickly flashed on a screen, Oser and an experienced Western meditator were asked to read the emotions the faces expressed. Both demonstrated an extraordinary level of accuracy—an indication of compassion and emotional sensitivity. People who are skilled at recognizing emotions are also more open-minded, reliable, and efficient, Ekman's previous research found. Oser's abilities, along with a transformative encounter with the Dalai Lama, inspired Ekman to launch the Extraordinary Person Project to study exemplars of empathy, compassion, and other desirable qualities.

The number of “extraordinary persons” who qualify for testing is obviously limited. But the results of Mind and Life's research are potentially far-reaching. “Even if we can only demonstrate what's possible for one person,” says Richard Davidson, “it shows the capacity of our species, and it helps us better understand the far reaches of neuroplasticity.” Neuroplasticity—the ability of the brain to generate new nerve cells and neural connections, thereby altering emotions, behavior, and perceptions—is the major story in neuroscience of the past decade, overturning basic assumptions about brain structure and functioning. If research can show that meditation changes brain structure in ways that increase health and happiness, the implications will be enormous. What Buddhism brings to the West is its profound understanding of the mind, points out B. Alan Wallace, a Mind and Life board member and Buddhist scholar. “Buddhism presents many theories about the functioning and potential of human consciousness that can be tested empirically,” he writes in *Tibetan Buddhism from the Ground Up*. “If many of these



hypotheses are confirmed by sound and thorough investigation, we may need to radically alter our interpretation of both scientific and religious knowledge.”

One of Mind and Life’s goals is to create educational programs based on its experimental findings. A key initiative for this is Cultivating Emotional Balance, a project that originated in Ekman’s lab. The goal is to develop a program to reduce destructive emotions that combines mindfulness practice and elements of Western psychology—and that could be taught to people with no background in meditation. Ultimately aimed at people in high-stress jobs, it is being tested on high-school teachers. “We don’t exactly know what form the final curriculum will take,” Engle says, “but we do know it will be completely nonsectarian.” Once educational programs are in place, Mind and Life will have realized an important piece of its mission: to show that science and Buddhism can inform each other to alleviate suffering. Eventually, the Institute hopes to work with non-Buddhist contemplative traditions as well

Mind and Life’s beginnings can be traced to the Dalai Lama’s lifelong scientific curiosity. Naturally gifted with a mechanical mind, as a teenager His Holiness fixed movie projectors, clocks, and old cars, without the help of instruction manuals. At a 1983 symposium on consciousness, while talking to the pioneering neuroscientist Francisco Varela, a student of Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the Dalai Lama expressed interest in meeting with scientists. Coincidentally, Adam Engle, an entrepreneur and longtime student of Lama Thubten Yeshe, independently began to pursue just such a forum. When Engle and Varela learned of each other’s efforts, they joined forces—Engle as organizer and fundraiser, Varela as scientific coordinator. The result was “Mind and Life I: Dialogues between Buddhism and the Cognitive Sciences,” held in 1987 at the Dalai Lama’s residence in Dharamsala.

Since then, there have been nine more conferences, on topics ranging from “Sleeping, Dreaming, and Dying” to “Altruism, Ethics, and Compassion” and, most recently, “The Nature of Matter, The Nature of Life,” in Dharamsala last October. The meetings, which typically last five days, are small, invitation-only affairs. No journalists are allowed, although the proceedings are taped, and most have resulted in books. (*Destructive Emotions*, recapping the 2000 conference, has just been published; *The New Physics and Cosmology*, covering Mind and Life VI in 1997, is due out later this year.) “Keeping the meetings private creates a freer atmosphere,” explains Anne Harrington, a History of Science professor at Harvard and a Mind and Life board member. “It makes it easier to take intellectual—and even emotional—risks. This enables a sense of trust and camaraderie that strengthens Mind and Life’s work beyond just the week in Dharamsala.”

In September 2003, Mind and Life will hold its first public meeting: a two-day event at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, on “Investigating the Mind: Exchanges between Buddhism and Biobehavioral Science” (see [www.investigatingthemind.org](http://www.investigatingthemind.org)). The focus will be joint research possibilities in three areas of interest to both Buddhists and scientists: attention, emotion, and imagery. The Dalai lama will participate in all sessions.

While Mind and Life has always been a collaborative effort, two key figures remain central to its activities: Adam Engle, the chairman, and His Holiness the Dalai lama, the honorary chairman. If Engle (who has a law degree from Harvard and an M.B.A. from Stanford) is the producer, director, and CEO who built Mind and life, the Dalai Lama is unquestionably the main attraction. The participation of His Holiness has allowed Mind and life to flourish and do elite-level work. Scientists consistently report how impressed they are with the acuity of the Dalai

Lama's questions and his ability to follow rigorous scientific discussions, as well as his open-mindedness and his radiance. It is this last quality more than any other that draws exceptional scientists to Mind and Life meetings. Eric Lander, an MIT researcher who is one of the leaders of the Human Genome Project, acknowledges that he would not have participated in the conference had it not been for the Dalai Lama. "Spend-ing a week with the Dalai Lama was inspiring," agrees Steven Chu, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist at Stanford University. "The experience helped me remember why I'm a scientist."

For Paul Ekman, contact with the Dalai Lama had a powerful, life-changing effect. "I wasn't interested in Buddhism before I went to Dharamsala," Ekman says, "yet I left taking on a project that is centered around mindfulness training. When His Holiness asked someone to develop {what became} the Cultivating Emotional Balance project, I somehow felt he was asking me directly, and I couldn't say no. Whenever I question that commitment now, I think of him and know I must continue working on it."

Given the preeminence of the Dalai Lama's role, could Mind and Life survive without him? "There's no doubt he's been critical to whatever success we've had," Engle concedes, "but we're working to create dialogues and a body of research that are robust enough to be bigger than anyone person. His Holiness wants that, and we know the interest among scientists is there. This is very fertile ground. We have an extraordinary opportunity here, and we're trying to make the most of it."

**Marshall Glickman** is the author of *Beyond the Breath: Extraordinary Mindfulness Through Whole-Body Vipassana Meditation* and publisher of Echo Point Books and Media, LLC.

9

## ROUNDTABLE: MEETING OF THE MINDS

*Tricycle* sits down for a free-ranging discussion with several pioneers of the dialogue between science and Buddhism.

Since 1987 the Dalai Lama has met biennially with small groups of Western scientists to talk about the nature of mind and reality, and to plan collaborative research between science and Buddhism. These sessions, organized by the Mind and Life Institute, are designed to explore not only what Buddhism and modern science can learn from each other but also what they can learn by working together. Studies sponsored by Mind and Life are beginning to unravel the brain mechanisms underlying contemplative practice, providing scientific validation of the beneficial effects of meditation practice.

*Tricycle* checked in with the Mind and Life Institute for an update on these studies. Seven board members (see box below) took a break from a planning session at Princeton University to sit down with *Tricycle's* James Shaheen and Joan Duncan Oliver. The conversation ranged from the institute's recent findings on the demonstrable effect of meditation on brain function to the potential of Buddhism to advance the efforts of modern psychology. As Mind and Life board member Daniel Goleman explains: "His Holiness said, 'Take the methods of Buddhism and test them rigorously and scientifically. If you validate them, share them widely. If they can help alleviate suffer-

ing, they shouldn't just be for Buddhists—they should be everyone.”

**Roundtable Participants:**

**R. Adam Engle**, J.D., M.B.A., chairman and cofounder of the Mind and Life Institute

**Richard J. Davidson**, Ph.D., director of the Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience and the W.M. Keck Laboratory for Functional Brain Imaging and Behavior at the University of Wisconsin, Madison

**Daniel Goleman**, Ph.D., psychologist and author of such books as the best seller *Emotional Intelligence*, and two works based on Mind and Life proceedings, *Destructive Emotions* and *Healing Emotions*

**Jon Kabat-Zinn**, Ph.D., professor emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School and founder of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health, Care and Society

**Matthieu Ricard**, Ph.D., cellular biologist and a Tibetan Buddhist monk at Shechen Monastery in Kathmandu

**Bennett M. Shapiro**, M.D., former executive vice president of Merck Research Laboratories and former chair of the biochemistry department at the University of Washington

**B. Alan Wallace**, Ph.D., president of the Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies and a former Tibetan Buddhist monk

**What are the results of the Mind and Life studies so far, and where do**

**you plan to take them from here?**

**Richard Davidson:** Our initial work certainly indicates that meditation changes brain function. One of our hopes now is that a broader range of scientists will be inspired to examine the potential impact of contemplative practice on different behavioral domains. One of our goals is to launch studies that look at the impact of meditation on attention and the brain systems that support it.

**Which aspects of attention will you be looking at, and how would you measure them?**

**Richard Davidson:** We've been talking with experts who do experiments in which, for example, a person is required to focus on a specific object and ignore distractions. One question is whether training in meditation facilitates one's capacity to do this, and, if it does, which parts of the brain are being affected.

There are well-developed procedures in cognitive psychology for exploring such questions. The classic one is the Stroop Test. In one version of this test, the word "green" might be printed on a card in red, and the subject's task would be to name the color in which the word was printed (red), ignoring the meaning of the word (green). Classically, people are slower in responding when the color of a word is inconsistent with the name of the word than when the two are the same: when the word "green" is printed in green, people are able to say "green" faster than when they're looking at the word "green" printed in red. What this requires is that we inhibit our automatic response and focus our attention on the instructions given by the experimenter.

**Is there a certain kind of meditation that would enable one to respond faster?**

**B. Alan Wallace:** Shamatha [a meditative practice of calming the mind] is specifically aimed at controlling attention. When the word pops up, if you're able to control your attention, you can say to yourself, "I'm not going to see the whole word. I'm going to focus on the middle of the word and ask only one question: What is its color?" If you're looking at the whole word, the meaning of the word will compete for your attention, and you'll be slowed down.

**What would be some practical applications of developing that kind of attention?**

**B. Alan Wallace:** Attention training has broad applications. It would be helpful in the fields of education, mental health, and athletics as well as increasing individual creativity and problem-solving skills. And attention practice is crucial for cultivating the profound virtues of the heart and mind—lovingkindness, compassion, bodhicitta [awakened mind], and the realization of emptiness.

**Bennett Shapiro:** Could attention training also help in dealing with destructive emotions?

**Matthieu Ricard:** Yes. In the same way we can learn to see only the colors of words and not their meanings, cultivating focused attention can help us become much quicker at recognizing what type of emotion is arising without being distracted by context or story line.

**B. Alan Wallace:** If, when anger or another afflictive emotion arises, you can say to yourself, “Never mind the object of my anger and the context; isn’t this interesting?” and investigate your own emotional state instead of merely reacting, you can also cultivate greater emotional balance and mental health.

**Jon Kabat-Zinn:** That kind of mind training allows you not to take things personally but instead to cultivate equanimity.

**Daniel Goleman:** All the techniques we’ve been discussing, Buddhists have known about and have been practicing for thousands of years. What’s interesting is that now scientists at places like Princeton are doing research on methods such as shamatha, asking questions like, “Does it refine attention? Does it make attention more flexible?” The aim is to see if there’s something in the wealth of methods offered by Buddhism that would be useful for the general population, Buddhist or not.

**Richard Davidson:** In the scientific community, attention span and emotional regulation have been regarded as static abilities, which can’t be improved upon. The dialogue between science and Buddhism is helping to reframe our understanding of those processes as skills that can be trained.

**What other innovations might develop out of the dialogue between science and Buddhism?**

**B. Alan Wallace:** It would be interesting to look at the treatment of personality types within Buddhism from the perspective of modern psychology. Both the Visuddhimagga [a seminal fifth century C.E. Thera-



vada text composed by Buddhaghosha] and the Tibetan Buddhist texts say, “For this personality type, this practice will be most beneficial.” To translate that into personality types as defined by modern psychology would be fascinating, not only as an area of pure scientific inquiry but also pragmatically: You could select the contemplative practice that is likely to be most effective for each individual.

**Jon Kabat-Zinn:** The condensed version is: What works for whom, and in which circumstances? These are nuanced questions that go beyond the meditation technique itself to who’s teaching it and under what circumstances. All sorts of elements could make a technique powerful for one person in one situation and not powerful for the same person in another situation. It’s very interesting from a medical point of view to try to design meditation-based interventions that take advantage of this specificity.

**B. Alan Wallace:** If we relate this individualized approach to developmental psychology, we could determine what types of meditative practices would be best for preschoolers, adolescents, for people in midlife, and for older people. This hasn’t been done in Buddhism, but why not? We have a strong tradition of developmental psychology in the West, so “when” becomes a skillful means.

**Mind and Life’s scientific studies seem to support the Buddhist view that the processes of the mind can be reliably observed first-hand through meditation practice. The scientific community has traditionally been dubious of this type of subjective investigation. Are Mind and Life’s results changing the outlook of the larger scientific community?**

**Richard Davidson:** In some scientific fields there is certainly skepticism about the validity of subjective experience. Psychologist Daniel Kahneman won the Nobel Prize in economics for research in which he discovered the powerful biases people tend to show in describing their own experiences. If you ask a person to think back over an experience he just had, he will tend to emphasize events that occurred at the very end of the experience. But there's a testable hypothesis: Individuals who've undergone meditation training will be less subject to these biases.

**Jon Kabat-Zinn:** We tend to dismiss subjective experience as if there's no objectivity within subjectivity. But there is actually a tremendous amount of objective self-observing in meditation practice. And the more you cultivate that discipline, the less likely you will be to filter your experience through internal biases.

**B. Alan Wallace:** In Buddhist training, we're working on the human tendency to immediately identify with a mental state when it arises: "I'm happy, I'm sad, I'm agitated." How can there be any kind of objective report when you're completely fused with what you're experiencing? In mindfulness training, shamatha, and Dzogchen, what's explicitly cultivated is a space of awareness that is larger than its content, so that an emotion arises and we're able to say, "Aha! There is an emotion of feeling upset, disappointed, frustrated, anxious." You become aware of the emotion without being fused into it. You develop a type of objectivity within the domain of subjective experience.

**Daniel Goleman:** That's big news for science, which has largely dismissed subjective observation as a reliable source of data. But Buddhists,

on the other hand, have recognized its usefulness for centuries.

**Buddhist practices, such as lovingkindness meditation, incorporate the cultivation of positive mind states. Does this emphasis differ significantly from that of Western psychology?**

**Richard Davidson:** From the Buddhist view, optimal mental health or well-being is not simply—as Western medicine defines it—the absence of disease or anxiety. It involves the active cultivation of certain kinds of positive mental states. With some notable exceptions, however, Western psychology and medicine have not studied these, and bringing these mind states to the attention of the scientific community is one contribution Mind and Life can make.

**B. Alan Wallace:** There's a distinction there that might still be too subtle for scientific research to investigate. What does “positive” mean? Is it simply feeling good? Which emotions and mental states are “positive” in the sense of being conducive to overall well-being and genuine happiness, as opposed to episodic highs?

**Richard Davidson:** This is a very important question. Neuroscientists are starting to take this issue more seriously, because data from the brain using conventional definitions of so-called positive and negative mind-states have not been particularly crisp in yielding strong differences. One possibility is that if we use a Buddhist taxonomy of mind states, it may actually help to clean up the evidence and make better sense of what's going on.

**Can you elaborate?**

**Matthieu Ricard:** Pathologies, or negative mind-states, have attracted most of the attention in psychology because they are characterized by such intense suffering. But from a Buddhist perspective, so-called “normal” is still characterized by pervasive suffering. The emerging field of positive psychology represents a shift in focus to this ongoing, “normal” suffering.

**B. Alan Wallace:** The big innovation of Buddhism is not in recognizing the suffering of a normal life, but in pointing out that mental afflictions are not intrinsic to the human psyche. Recent scientific research has shown that these afflictive tendencies of mind can be measurably lessened through Buddhist practice. But Buddhism is making a much stronger claim: that the mind at its deepest level has the nature of luminosity, of innate bliss, and is altogether free of mental affliction. That’s a big hypothesis. We can’t test it now, but we can head in that direction.

**What sort of changes, then, have you observed in the brains of subjects who meditate?**

**Jon Kabat-Zinn:** Richie [Davidson] and I did a study of mindfulness in which we observed a shift from right activation of the prefrontal cortex to more activation of the left prefrontal cortex, which is interpreted as a positive shift in how one is processing afflictive emotions. The subjects were inexperienced meditators who met once a week for two-and-a-half hours, then practiced for an hour a day on their own. We were able to show that a shift of this kind is maintained up to four months after the end of the intervention. This shift correlates in a positive way with a positive immunological marker.

**An immunological marker?**

**Jon Kabat-Zinn:** Yes. We gave people flu vaccine and found that the greater the leftward shift in brain activity, the more flu-fighting antibodies the body produced. This is a preliminary study, but it suggests that even naive subjects, given attentional practices that involve refining self-awareness around issues of emotional affliction, in a relatively short time show physiological changes that indicate greater emotional intelligence.

**What are the implications of Mind and Life's scientific research in terms of dharma view?**

**Matthieu Ricard:** I don't see the scientific research Mind and Life is doing as much different from Buddhist practice itself. It's part of the ongoing process of refining meditation practice and trying to understand it better. For Buddhist practitioners, the motivation is to get rid of afflictive emotion; for scientists, it's to reach a better understanding of the processes of suffering and how relief of suffering might take place.

10

STEPPING TOWARD  
ENLIGHTENMENT

How deep can your meditation go? Thai forest monk Ajahn Brahm traces the path from mindfulness to profound meditative states through the sixteen steps of *anapanasati*.

AJAHN BRAHM

The essence of Buddhism is the enlightenment of the Buddha. Many centuries ago in India, the wandering monk Gautama remembered a childhood experience of *jhana*, mental or meditative absorption, and realized that jhana is the way to awakening. He went to a quiet stretch of forest on the banks of a great river, sat on a cushion of grass under a shady fig tree, and meditated. The method of meditation that he used is called *anapanasati*, mindfulness of the in and out breaths. Through this practice, he entered jhana, emerged, and quickly gained the insights of enlightenment. Henceforth he was called the Buddha, the Awakened One.

The Buddha continued to teach *anapanasati* for the remainder of his life. It was the method that had given him enlightenment, the meditation practice par excellence, and he imparted that same method to all his disciples both in the monastery and in the city. This foremost method of meditation is bequeathed to us today in the original Buddhist

texts as part of many suttas, but most notably the *Anapanasati Sutta*.

The Buddha described the practice of anapanasati as consisting of preliminary preparations followed by sixteen steps. The first twelve of those steps are instructions for entering jhana, and the final four steps are instructions on what to do when you emerge.

Before giving instructions for experiencing the bliss and beauty of jhana, I will briefly cover the preliminary stages of meditation. If you pass through these initial stages too quickly, you may find that the preparatory work has not been completed. It's like trying to build a house on a makeshift foundation—the structure goes up very quickly, but it may come down too soon! You would be wise to spend a lot of time making the groundwork and foundations solid. Then, when you proceed to the higher stories—the ecstatic states of meditation—they will be stable.

Foremost, the Buddha said, go to a quiet place where you will not be disturbed by people, sounds, or things like mosquitoes. Tough guys might want to meditate in mosquito-ridden jungles or in the middle of tiger paths, but this is more likely to build only endurance and not the ease of jhana. The Buddha instead praised pleasant places like orchards or parks similar to Bodh Gaya, where he gained enlightenment. Next, sit on a comfortable seat. You may sit on a cushion, on a bench, or even on a chair as long as it isn't too comfortable. The comfort required for success in breath meditation is that level where your body can be at ease for long periods of time and also alert.

You are now asked to set up mindfulness “in front of you,” to give it priority. We establish this preliminary level of mindfulness by practicing present-moment awareness (giving up the baggage of past and future) and then silent present-moment awareness (refining your practice of being with every experience as it happens to the level where you do not have the space for inner speech). When you let go of the past, you

will be free in the present moment. As for the future—the anticipations, fears, plans, and expectations—let that go too. Now you should proceed to the even more beautiful and truthful silence of the mind. A useful technique for developing inner silence is recognizing the space between thoughts. Attend closely with sharp mindfulness when one thought ends and before another begins—*there!* That is silent awareness! It may be only momentary at first, but as you recognize that fleeting silence, you become accustomed to it; the silence lasts longer. You begin to enjoy the silence and that is why it grows. But remember, silence is shy. If silence hears you talking about her, she vanishes immediately.

The mind can do wonderful and unexpected things. Meditators who are having a difficult time achieving a peaceful state of mind sometimes start thinking, “Here we go again, another hour of frustration.” But often something strange happens; although they are anticipating failure, they reach a very peaceful meditative state. My first meditation teacher told me that there is no such thing as a bad meditation. He was right. During the difficult meditations you build up your strength, which creates meditation for peace. We may want to spend much time—months or even years—developing just these first two preliminary stages, because if we can reach this point, we have come a long way indeed in our meditation. In that silent awareness of “just now,” we experience much peace, joy, and consequent wisdom.

When you are silently aware of whatever it is that is happening right now, in front of your mind, then you have established the level of mindfulness required to begin progressing along the sixteen steps of anapanasati. In steps one and two the Buddha says to first experience long breaths and then experience short breaths. You do not need to control your breathing to fulfill the instructions; this will only produce discomfort. Instead, you are meant to simply observe the breath long enough to



know whether it is long or short, or, as some practitioners note, deep or shallow, rough or smooth. This gives you more to look at, makes mindfulness of breathing more interesting so that you do not get bored.

The third step is experiencing the whole process of breathing. This is where your mindfulness increases its agility sufficient to observe every sensation involved in the process of breathing. You are aware of the in-breath from the very start when it arises out of the stillness. You see the sensations of in-breathing evolve in every moment, reaching its peak and then gradually fading away until it has completely subsided. You have such a degree of clarity that you even see the space, the pause between the in-breath and the next out-breath. Your mind has the attentiveness of a cat waiting for a mouse, as you wait for the next out-breath to begin. Then you observe the first stirrings of the out-breathing. You watch its sensations evolve, changing with every moment, until it, too, reaches a peak and then enters into its decline before fading into nothingness again. Then you observe the pause, the space between the out-breath and the subsequent in-breath. When the process is repeated breath after breath, you have fulfilled the third step, experiencing the whole breath.

When you are comfortably at one with the breath, it will calm down automatically. There is so little remaining to disturb your progress that you naturally experience the sensations in each moment becoming softer and smoother, like a piece of rough denim changing into fine satin. Such a refinement of attention is only achieved through a gentle and persistent letting go; it is never attained by the brute force of sheer will-power. At this fourth step you will not know whether it is an in-breath or an out-breath, beginning, middle, or end. As your breath calms down, your attention becomes so refined that all you know is this one moment of breath.

As your unbroken mindfulness watches the breath calming down,

joy (step five) and happiness (step six) naturally arise like the golden light of dawn on an eastern horizon. This will happen gradually but automatically because all of your mental energy is now flowing into the knower and not the doer. In fact, you are not doing anything, only watching. The sure sign that you are doing nothing is the tranquility of your breath. Mental energy flowing into the knower makes mindfulness full of power, and energized mindfulness is experienced as happiness and joy. The breath at these fifth and sixth steps appears so tranquil and beautiful—more attractive than a garden in springtime or a sunset in the summer—that you wonder if you will ever want to look at anything else.

As the breath becomes ever more beautiful, as the joy and happiness grow in quiet strength, your breath may seem to completely disappear. This seventh step does not happen when you want it to but when there is enough calm.

A well-known passage from English literature might help clarify the experience of one's breath disappearing. In Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice is startled to see the Cheshire Cat sitting on a bough of a nearby tree and grinning from ear to ear. Like all the strange creatures in Wonderland, the Cheshire Cat has the eloquence of a politician. Not only does the Cat get the better of Alice in the ensuing conversation, but it also suddenly disappears and then, without warning, just as suddenly reappears.

Alice said, "... and I wish you wouldn't keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly: you make one quite giddy!" "All right," said the Cat; and this time it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone. "Well! I've often seen a cat without a grin," thought Alice; "but a grin without a cat! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life."

This story is an eerily accurate analogy for the meditation experience. Just as the Cheshire Cat disappeared and left only its grin, so the meditator's body and breath disappear, leaving only the beautiful. For Alice, it was the most curious thing she ever saw. For the meditator it is also strange, to clearly experience a free-floating beauty with nothing to embody it, not even a breath.

Two common obstacles occur after this seventh step: exhilaration and fear. In exhilaration, the mind becomes excited: "Wow, this is it!" If the mind thinks like this, then the jhana is unlikely to happen. This "wow!" response needs to be subdued in the eighth step of anapana-sati in favor of absolute passivity. You can leave all the wows until after emerging from the jhana, where they properly belong.

The more likely obstacle, though, is fear. Fear arises from the recognition of the sheer power and bliss of the jhana, or else at the recognition that to go fully inside the jhana something must be left behind—*you!* The doer is silent before entering the jhana, but is still there. Inside the jhana, however, the doer is completely gone. Only the knower is still functioning. One is fully aware, but all the controls are now beyond reach. One cannot even form a single thought, let alone make a decision. The will is frozen, and this can be scary for beginners, who have never had the experience of being stripped of control and yet so fully awake. The fear is of surrendering an essential part of one's identity.

This fear can be overcome in the eighth step through confidence in the Buddha's teachings, and through recognizing and being drawn to the enticing bliss just ahead. The Buddha often said that the bliss of the jhana should not be feared but should be followed, developed, and practiced often. So before fear arises, offer your full confidence to that bliss, maintain faith in the Buddha's teachings, and let the jhana warmly embrace you in an effortless, bodiless, ego-less, and blissful experience

that will be the most profound of your life. Have the courage to fully relinquish control for a while and experience all of this for yourself. Maintain the causes of this bliss. Remain in the stillness, otherwise the bliss will go away.

Ajahn Chah's famous simile of the "still forest pool" can help us understand this. When he was wandering in the jungles and forests in Thailand, he'd always try and find a stretch of water when late afternoon came. When he found a pool, stream, or a spring somewhere in the forest, he'd camp nearby overnight.

Sometimes after drinking and bathing and settling in, Ajahn Chah would sit in meditation a few yards away from the pool. He said that sometimes he used to sit so still with his eyes open that he would see many animals coming out of the jungle. They wanted to bathe and drink as well. He said they would only come out if he sat very, very still. When they emerged from the bushes they would look around and sniff to see if it was safe. If they detected him, they would just go away. But if he sat absolutely still, the animals wouldn't be able to hear him. They wouldn't even be able to smell him. Then they would come out and drink. Some would drink and play in the water as if he weren't there. He said sometimes he was so still that, after the ordinary animals came out, some very strange animals emerged, beings whose names he didn't know. He'd never seen such extraordinary creatures before. His parents had never told him about them. These wonderful creatures came out to drink, but only if he was *absolutely still*.

This is a well-drawn simile of what happens in deep meditation. The pool or the lake is a symbol for the mind. At this eighth step of anapanasati you are just sitting before it and watching. If you give any orders, you're not being still. Beautiful creatures, like jhanas, will approach only if you're absolutely still. The ordinary ones come out first, then the very

beautiful ones, and lastly the very strange and wonderful ones. These last are the amazing experiences that you have no names for, the ones you never imagined could exist because they're so strange, so blissful, so pure. These are the jhanas.

The ninth step of the *Anapanasati Sutta* describes a very important creature that comes to visit the still, silent mind—a *nimitta*. Pali for “sign,” a *nimitta* is a reflection of the mind. This step is called *cittapatisamvedi*, “experiencing the mind,” and is achieved when one lets go of the body, thought, and the five senses (including awareness of the breath) so completely that only a beautiful mental sign, a *nimitta*, remains. This pure mental object is a real object in the landscape of the mind, and when it appears for the first time it is extremely strange. For most meditators this mental joy, is perceived as a beautiful light. But it is not a light. The eyes are closed, and the sight consciousness has long been turned off. Other meditators choose to describe this first appearance of mind in terms of a physical sensation such as intense tranquility or ecstasy. It is perceived as a light or a feeling because this imperfect description is the best that perception can offer.

Two flaws of the *nimitta* may hinder further progress: the *nimitta* appears too dull, or the *nimitta* is unstable. To address these two common problems, the Buddha taught the tenth and eleventh steps of *anapanasati*: shining the *nimitta* and sustaining the *nimitta*. “Shining” is my expression for the Pali term *abhippamodayam cittam*, literally, “giving joy to the mind.” The more joy there is in the mind, the more brilliant shines the *nimitta*. To enter *jhana*, the *nimitta* has to be the most brilliant thing that you have ever seen.

When a *nimitta* has arisen during meditation but appears dull, there are four ways in this tenth step of proceeding. Focus on the center of the *nimitta*. Even in a dull *nimitta*, the center is brighter than the periphery.

By gently suggesting to yourself to look at the center of the nimitta, the central brightness expands. Then focus on the center of that, and that is brighter still. By going to the center, then the center of the center, and so on, the dull nimitta soon becomes incredibly bright and often continues “exploding” in luminosity all the way into jhana. Sharpen the attention in the present moment. Even though present-moment awareness was part of the preliminaries to anapanasati, it often happens that by this stage the attention is “smeared” around the present moment. Personally, I often find that a gentle reminder to focus more sharply on the present moment brightens the mindfulness and shines up the nimitta, abolishing any dullness. Smile at the nimitta. Remember that the nimitta is a reflection of your mind. So if the mind smiles, then the nimitta smiles back! If you do not understand what I mean by smiling at the nimitta, go and look at yourself in a mirror, smile, and then take the mental part of that activity and repeat it in front of the nimitta. Sometimes it is simply too early to go to the nimitta, and it is better to exert a gentle determination to remain with the beautiful breath a bit longer.

The second of the two flaws of the nimitta that hinder a deepening of the meditation experience is instability of the nimitta. It does not stay still but quickly disappears. In order to deal with this problem, the Buddha taught the eleventh step of anapanasati, *samadham cittam*, literally “attentively stilling the mind” and here meaning “sustaining the attention on the nimitta.”

It is common that the first few times a nimitta appears, it flashes up for a short time and then disappears, or else it moves around in the mental field of vision. Usually, the bright, powerful nimittas remain longer than the dull, weak ones, which is why the Buddha taught the step of shining the nimitta before the step of sustaining the nimitta. Sometimes shining the nimitta is enough to sustain it—the nimitta becomes

so beautifully radiant that it grabs the attention for long periods of time. However, even a brilliant nimitta can be unstable, so there are methods to sustain attention on the nimitta.

Once again, it is usually fear or excitement that creates the instability. You are reacting too much rather than passively observing. Experiencing the nimitta in the beginning is like when you first learned how to ride a bicycle. For the first few rides, you probably gripped the handlebars so tightly that, like me, your knuckles went white. And because I wasn't relaxed, I kept falling off. I soon discovered—after many cuts and bruises—that the more relaxed I was, the easier it was to keep my balance. In the same way, you soon learn to stop gripping the nimitta. You relax and discover that the more you ease off controlling, the easier it is to sustain the nimitta. The marks of good nimittas are that they are the most radiant colors you've ever seen. For example, if you see a blue nimitta, the color is no ordinary blue but the deepest, most beautiful, bluest blue you've ever known. The good, or should I say “useful,” nimittas are also very stable, almost motionless. When you are experiencing a beautiful, stable nimitta, you are on the edge of the world of jhanas, looking in.

The twelfth step in anapanasati is called *vimocayam cittam*, “freeing the mind.” Here, you have an experience that you might describe afterward in two different ways, depending on your perspective. Either you find yourself sinking or diving into the nimitta, or the nimitta with its brilliant light and ecstatic feeling completely envelops you. *You* don't do this. It just happens as a natural result of letting go of all doing.

You enter the jhana through liberating the mind. The jhanas, the Buddha said, are stages of freedom. The mind is now free. That is, free from the body and the five senses. You're unable to hear anything, unable to say anything, yet fully mindful, still, stable as a rock.



A jhana will last a long time. It does not deserve to be called a jhana if it lasts only a few minutes. The higher jhanas usually persist for many hours. Once inside, there is no choice. One will emerge from the jhana only when the mind is ready to come out. Each jhana is such a still and satisfying state of consciousness that its very nature is to persist for a very long time. This is not a trance but a heightened state of awareness. I say this so that you may know for yourself whether what you take to be a jhana is real or imaginary.

A lot of people, after getting a few of these jhanas, want to become a monk or a nun. The world becomes less attractive. Relationships, the arts, music and movies, sex, fame, wealth, and so on, all seem so unimportant and unattractive when compared to the freed mind. But there is much more than just bliss. There is also the philosophical profundity of the experience. The Buddha called it *uttari-manussa-dhamma*, something that surpasses ordinary experience. He also considered the happiness of jhana so similar to enlightenment happiness that he named it *sambodhi sukha*, bliss of enlightenment.

So if you develop these stages, the first twelve steps of anapanasati, they will lead you into jhana.

The last four steps in the *Anapanasati Sutta* relate to the meditator who has just emerged from a jhana. After you emerge from your first experience of jhana, you can't help but think, "Wow, what was that?" So the first thing you should do is review the jhana. Investigate that experience, though you will struggle to give it words. Ask yourself, How did it arise? What special thing did I do? What did it feel like in jhana? Why did it feel like that? How do I feel now? Why is it so blissful? All of these reflections will give rise to deep insight.

You'll find that the best words to describe why jhana happened are "letting go." You've really let go for the first time. Not letting go of what



you're attached to, but *letting go of the thing doing the attaching*. You've let go of the doer. You've let go of the self. It's a difficult thing for the self to let go of the self, but through these methodological stages you've actually done it. And it's bliss.

The first of these last four steps, the thirteenth step, is reflecting on *anicca*, usually translated as "impermanence." What's important to reflect upon after deep experiences of meditation is that previously there had been something that was so constant that you never noticed it—this thing we call a "self." In jhana, it disappeared! Notice that. Noticing it will convince you of the truth of no-self (*anatta*) so deeply that it's very likely to put you on a direct path to enlightenment.

If reflections on *anicca* fail to work, there is *viraga*, the fading away of things (step fourteen). This is when things just disappear. You've seen many things disappear when you enter jhana—some which were so close to you that you assumed that they were an essential part of your identity. They are all gone in jhana. You're experiencing the fading away of yourself. The third reflection after emerging from a jhana, step fifteen, should be on *nirodha*, or cessation. Something that was once there has now completely disappeared. It has ended, gone, and its place is now empty! Such emptiness can be known only in deep meditation. So much of the universe that you thought was essential has ceased, and you're in a completely different space.

The last of the reflections described in the *Anapanasati Sutta* is on the wonderful word *patinissagga*, "letting go, abandoning." In this context *patinissagga* is giving away not what's "out there" but what's "in here." Many times people regard Buddhism as being unworldly, giving away what's out there. But *patinissagga* is the letting go of the inner world, the letting go of the doer and even the knower. If you look very carefully, you'll see what has been happening in jhana is not only letting

go of the external world but also letting go of the internal world, especially letting go of the doer, the will, the controller. This insight gives rise to so much happiness, so much purity, so much freedom, so much bliss. You've found the path to the end of suffering.

This is how the buddha described anapanasati. It's a complete practice that starts with just sitting down in a quiet place, on a comfortable seat, mindful of what's in front of you and just watching the breath. Step by step—in steps that you know are within your ability—you can reach these profound and blissful states called jhana.

When you emerge from them, you have all of these four things to contemplate: the impermanence or uncertainty of things, the fading away of things, cessation of self, and letting go of all that's "in here." And if you reflect upon these things after the experience of jhana, then something is going to happen. I often say that jhana is the gunpowder and reflection is the match. If you put the two together, then there's going to be a bang somewhere. It's only a matter of time.

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