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Mindfulness and Meditation

Andrew Olendzki

What should be done for his followers by a teacher with compassion and care for their welfare, that I have done for you. Here are the roots of trees. Here are empty places. Meditate! Do not be lazy. Do not be ones who later have regrets. This is my instruction to you.

Buddha (Majjhima Nikāya 8)

As words become more widely used, and especially as they become fashionable, they may often become more difficult to understand. One might think it would be the other way around, but this obfuscation of meaning has generally been the rule with the popularization of Buddhist vocabulary. While each had a precise technical meaning in its original context, terms like zen, yoga, karma, and nirvana can mean almost anything the modern writer wants them to mean. A similar trend may well be underway with *mindfulness*, and perhaps even with the more general word *meditation*. Understanding the sense in which these words are used in their original setting should prove to be a worthwhile undertaking as we see them applied in the current creative encounter between psychology and Buddhist thought.

What Is Meditation?

The traditional sense of meditation in Western culture, before significant encounter with Asian practices, involves sustained consideration or thought upon a subject. Originating from the Indo-European root $\sqrt{\text{med}}$, primarily meaning “to measure,” it suggests a discourse upon a subject (as in the title of Descartes’ famous work) or calm thought upon some subject (as with structured religious prayers). As such, it is always an exercise of ordered conceptual contemplation, involving the systematic and disciplined use of language, symbol, and concept. As we shall see, this is exactly what one is *not* doing in mindfulness meditation. While such a structured exploration of a conceptual landscape can be important to some forms of psychotherapy that focus on reframing the narrative of one’s prior experience, most forms of Buddhist meditation are working in the other direction, toward less conceptual modes of consciousness.

The most common word for meditation in the classical languages of Buddhism (Sanskrit and Pali) is *samādhi*. The etymology of this term suggests gathering (*sam-*) the mind and placing ($\sqrt{\text{dhā}}$) it upon (*-ā-*) an object. In this broad sense, its meaning seems similar enough to English usage, but there is a subtle and crucial difference between the Western and Buddhist understanding of how the mind operates. As mentioned in the previous

chapter, experience ensues from the confluence of three things: consciousness, an organ, and an object. An organ cognizes an object; an object is cognized by an organ; consciousness of an object arises by means of an organ—these are three ways of describing the same event. What we consider conceptual thinking is only one of six modes of the mind, the other five being sensory, so meditation may or may not involve conceptual thought. Placing the mind upon a sensory object is just as much meditation as placing the mind upon a conceptual object, and it is not possible to do both at once. The point here is that while in Western usage meditation generally assumes the exercise of “thinking about” something, in Buddhism it may mean this, but more often refers to placing the mind upon physical sensations, upon raw sights or sounds, or upon the tangible objects of smell and taste. This gives it a wider range of meaning, and this difference will become important.

The primary characteristic of meditation, and the term most often used to define it, is *ekaggatā*, which literally means one (*ek-*) pointed (*-agga-*)ness (*tā*). Meditation is about focusing the mind to a single point, unifying it, and placing it upon a particular object. To some extent this happens naturally every mind moment, and if it did not, there would be a serious lack of cohesion to mental experience. According to Buddhist models of mind, consciousness takes a single object at a time and organizes various supporting mental functions around it. This can be construed as a single episode of consciousness, which is essentially an event that takes place rather than something that exists. The knowing of a particular object by means of a particular organ arises in response to a stimulus, persists for only a very brief moment, and then passes away almost immediately. Another mind moment arises right away in response to another stimulus, and this too immediately ceases. Subjective experience presents itself to us as a stream of conscious moments; the sense of continuity, and of subject and object stability, is projected onto the stream much as a narrative is constructed from rapidly presented frames of a movie. One-pointedness is a factor in every frame, for each moment has a single focus, but concentration meditation has to do with extending this singularity of focus over multiple ensuing mind moments. Using the cinema image further, concentration meditation is like holding the video camera steady for a long time—one takes multiple pictures of the same scene.

This is something that does not come easily to the human mind and must be practiced diligently if the skill is to be learned. We have evolved to stay alert to all significant changes to our environment, and attention is naturally drawn to sensory data that is out of the ordinary or that presents in sudden or unexpected ways. Like a bird or chipmunk, rapidly casting around in all directions to check for danger, our mind is habituated to lurching rapidly from one sense object to another, or from one thought to another. As anyone who has practiced meditation can attest, or as you can discover for yourself in a few moments, holding the mind steady on a single object, such as the breath or a repeated word, is exceedingly difficult to do. But like so many other things, it is a skill that can be learned through patient and diligent practice. Much of Buddhist meditation is a process of placing the mind on a particular object, often called the primary object, and then noticing (sooner or later) that it has wandered off that object. When one notices this, one gently and forgivingly abandons the train of thought the mind has boarded and returns the attention once again to the primary object. This process is

then repeated again and again: The mind is placed on a particular object; it wanders off on trails of association, reverie, recollection, judgment, planning, verbalizing, conceptualizing, calculation, commentary, fantasy, and day-dream, only to be carefully and patiently retrieved from its adventuring and settled back upon the primary object.

Obstacles to Meditation

As with every other learned skill, people have differing aptitudes for meditation; make progress in an apparently endless series of breakthroughs, plateaus, and reversals; and can experience repeated episodes of triumph and failure in rapid succession. Any given meditation session might be influenced by how comfortable the body is, how much sleep one has had recently, the overall state of health, the temperature in the room, whether one has a problem on the mind or is working through some emotional issues—all sorts of factors. An interesting feature of the traditional Buddhist understanding of meditation is that it is always influenced by one's overall ethical behavior. The ability of the mind to concentrate is directly hampered by such acts as deliberately harming living creatures, taking what has not been given, speaking untruthfully or harshly, misbehaving sexually, or taking intoxicants of various kinds. Thus, the ethical precepts of Buddhism are a matter of great practical importance, rather than mere moral injunction. But if one is relatively free of the remorse and emotional turmoil that can come from unhealthy behavior, it is reasonable to expect significant progress in the enterprise of unifying and concentrating the mind such that it can remain steadily upon a single object over multiple mind moments.

Buddhist psychology identifies five primary obstacles to meditation, known appropriately as the five hindrances. The first of these is *sense desire*, or the impulse of the senses to seek out their objects. It is as if the eye wants to see forms, the ear is eager to hear sounds, and so on for the other senses, including the mind liking to think the thoughts that please it in one way or another. We are so used to having our senses connect with their corresponding object that a considerable habit energy is present in any given moment inclining the mind to “lean toward” or be attracted to their habitual forms of stimulation. This pull of the senses, including mind as the sixth sense, is subtle but can be viscerally discerned as the mind gets more sensitive. The second hindrance is *ill-will*, a corresponding propensity to shy away or withdraw from those objects of experience that do not please us or are painful in some way. These first two hindrances act as a matched pair of polar opposites, pulling and pushing the mind and senses from one object to another in ways that make it difficult to settle down. The third and fourth hindrances also work together as an opposed pair, *restlessness* and *sluggishness*. Restlessness is a matter of too much energy, driving the mind relentlessly from one object to another, while sluggishness is too little energy, bogging the mind down in slothful, sleepy, or lazy states. The antidote for restlessness is to relax and tranquilize the mind, while the remedy for sluggishness is to arouse greater interest and enthusiasm. Paradoxically, the goal is to reach a state that is simultaneously tranquil and alert. The mind should be calm without being sluggish and alert without being restless. The final hindrance is

doubt, often manifest as recurring thoughts of self-doubt, doubt about making progress, or doubt about the entire enterprise of learning such a daunting thing as meditation. As long as any of these five states or factors is arising in the mind, it will be difficult or impossible to focus the mind and hold it steady upon a particular object. But they can, with patient practice, be temporarily put aside or abandoned. They are likened to wind-blown waves on the surface of water, and when they quiet down, the mind, like water, becomes limpid and clear.

Deepening Meditation

Although at first the attention has an almost irresistible propensity to be drawn to sounds, physical sensations, or stray thoughts—wherever the action is—it eventually gets less and less diverted by random stimuli. At some point the momentum shifts, and it becomes more compelling to remain with the primary object than to pursue the shallow stimulation of some novel input. It is not that the object itself is of particular interest, but rather the quality of mind with which the object is cognized becomes more intriguing as it gains in power, depth, and lucidity. Under the scrutiny of a concentrated mind, everything becomes fascinating. If this process of steadying the mind on a single object is allowed to mature, it will eventually reach a stage called *absorption*, or *jhāna* in Pali (the same word is rendered *dhyāna* in Sanskrit, *ch’an* in Chinese, and *zen* in Japanese). In this state the mind is so thoroughly attending to a particular object that it is no longer aware of other objects that might present themselves at a sense door. A bird might sing and the sound waves will reach the ear and may even be processed by subliminal sensory systems, but it will not enter conscious awareness since “the line is busy” as it is absorbed by the primary object of awareness. This is a state most resembling a trance to the outside observer and is the target of considerable caricature of meditation in popular culture. But while the mind may appear non-functioning from the outside, it has reached a state of remarkable capability when regarded from the practitioner’s subjective standpoint.

The classical meditation literature of the Buddhist tradition describes a systematic (and repeatable) four-stage process by which the mind becomes gradually purified of its distractions as it becomes increasingly focused and potent. Nothing significant happens until the mind has at least temporarily abandoned the five hindrances mentioned above, and any progress is immediately canceled if any sort of harmful or unethical impulse arises in the stream of consciousness. Again, this is not so much a proscription as it is a description of the natural qualities of the mind, which can only achieve an advanced state of concentration if its thoughts and intentions remain ethically wholesome. The first stage of absorption meditation is accompanied by intense physical pleasure and mental joy, more a state of deep well-being permeating the body than of sensory titillation. This stage also involves the normal conceptual or discursive functions of the mind. One can feel very focused while retaining the ability to verbalize and direct thought at will. In the second stage these discursive functions cease, while the joy that comes naturally with concentration persists. It is not that the mind has stopped functioning, rather certain functions of the mind, those that direct and sustain deliberative

conceptual thought, come to rest. In Buddhist understanding the more profound levels of mind, characterized by a strong inner clarity, are only reached when the chatter of verbalization and symbol manipulation ceases. The third stage of absorption sees the diminishing of the intensive joy permeating the first two stages into a more subtle sense of happiness and well-being. With the fourth and final stage, all pleasure is replaced with equanimity, a deep evenness of mind that regards phenomena with complete objectivity. The usual attraction toward what is pleasing and avoidance of what is displeasing, both attitudes of mind that prevent us from seeing clearly, are surmounted by equanimity. At this point the concentrated mind is said to be purified, bright, and steady. Moreover, like gold purified in a crucible, it becomes malleable and can be turned with great effect to a number of non-ordinary modes of functioning.

The civilization into which the Buddha was born had been adept at the contemplative arts for centuries. The world he inhabited was filled with a marvelous diversity of spiritual teachers and teachings, and he learned many meditation practices from others. The *yogis* of his day, those disciplined practitioners of the meditative arts, were influenced considerably by ancient shamanic practices and used deep mental training in the service of universal religious pursuits such as gaining magical powers, traveling to other dimensions of reality, and interacting with non-human beings. Many operated in traditional Hindu contexts, employing meditative practices in the mystical pursuit of realizing and uniting with god in various ways. The Buddha seemed to have a very different set of interests, however, and both discouraged the development of magical abilities and repudiated the theistic assumptions of his day. He fully embraced the science of purifying and training the mind, but directed it to the goal of understanding the nature of human experience. In particular, he was interested in investigating the moment-to-moment functioning of mind and body, the synthetic construction of experience, and the specific ways in which both suffering and well-being are conditioned by interdependent factors. He saw humanity as being in an existentially challenging situation, given the ubiquity of change and the inevitability of aging, sickness, and death. He also saw that human beings have deep instincts for personal survival, which manifest as a whole array of afflictive emotional responses rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion. The bulk of our difficulties, he discerned, come not from the existential challenges themselves, but from internally generated maladaptive responses activated by the relentless and unreflective pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain. Through the example of his own awakening and a subsequent life devoted to training others, the Buddha demonstrated that these internal causes of suffering can be seen, understood, and healed. His approach is basically psychological, his methods are mostly empirical, and his goal is ultimately therapeutic, which is why his teachings are of growing interest to modern psychologists.

Mindfulness Meditation

The primary tool for bringing about the radical transformation from reflexive suffering to profound well-being is meditation, but the one-pointed concentration meditations described so far are of only limited usefulness. The discipline and focus they bring to the mind are indispensable, but insight into

the workings of the complex mind requires a more agile meditative tool. That tool is *mindfulness*. Called *sati* in Pali, mindfulness derives from a root ($\sqrt{smṛt}$) meaning memory or recollection and refers to the cultivation of a certain presence of mind that remembers to attend with persistent clarity to the objects of present experience. Like meditation in general, it involves placing attention deliberately upon an object and sustaining it over time, but unlike one-pointedness and absorption, mindfulness tends to open to a broader range of phenomena rather than restricting the focus to a singular object. Like a floodlight rather than a spotlight, mindfulness illuminates a more fluid phenomenological field of ever-changing experience rather than isolating a particular object for intensive scrutiny. This alternative mode of observation is necessary because mindfulness practice is more about investigating a *process* than about examining an object. All mindfulness meditation requires a certain degree of concentration in order to gather and focus the powers of the mind, but the concentrated mind is then directed to a moving target—the flowing stream of consciousness—rather than being allowed to stabilize on a single point. Whereas concentration practice involves returning the mind again and again to the primary object of meditation, mindfulness practice allows the mind to follow whatever is arising in experience. There is less a sense of controlling *what* the awareness is resting upon and more care given to *how* awareness is manifesting.

In classical Buddhist psychology, mindfulness is regarded as a mental state, one of the 52 functions of the mind that can arise in various combinations to assist the cognizing of an object by consciousness. These mental factors are similar to what are often called intentions, attitudes, or qualities of mind. Among the mental states are found certain functions that are universal to all mind moments, such as perception, feeling, volition, and attention, some that may or may not arise in any given mind moment, such as decisiveness, energy, or joy, and some that occur only in unwholesome states of mind such as conceit, envy, or avarice. Mindfulness is among a list of factors that are considered wholesome, and these serve as antidotes and alternatives to the unwholesome factors. Mindfulness is always accompanied by such complementary mental factors as trust, equanimity, and kindness, along with factors that contribute to the mind's tranquility, malleability, and proficiency. This system thus maps out a rather precise definition of mindfulness, which says as much about what it is not as what it is. Mindfulness is not mere attentiveness to experience; nor is it the deliberate turning of the mind toward a particular object and the sustaining of attention upon that object; nor can mindfulness ever co-arise with restlessness or any of the mental states rooted in greed, hatred, or delusion. Mindfulness consists of a quality of attention that is at once confident, benevolent, generous, and equanimous. It is a manner of being aware, an attitude of mind toward experience, and a mode of awareness that is paradoxically both intimately close and objectively removed (Olendzki, 2008).

One more classical word for meditation that should be considered in this context is *bhāvana*. It is based on the causative construction of the verb “to be” and is thus literally “causing to be”; it is generally translated as *development*. One of the important functions of meditation is the development of those qualities of mind that are beneficial to a path of transformation. There are meditations that develop concentration, there are those that develop

mindfulness, and there are those that develop other specific qualities such as kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity. The idea, as it is stated in an early text, is that “Whatever a person frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of his mind” (*Majjhima* 19) (Nanamoli & Bodhi, 1995). In a model where each mind moment arises and passes away in serial progression, with each moment taking a single object and each object being regarded with either a wholesome or an unwholesome attitude, the quality of each mind moment becomes a matter of great concern. In a moment of anger, for example, kindness cannot simultaneously manifest. In a moment of confusions, there can be no mindfulness. Psychological cultivation thus involves abandoning the unwholesome states as they naturally arise in the mind and encouraging or developing the wholesome states that arise. Mindfulness is the mental factor of most benefit to those seeking mental well-being, so the development of mindfulness is a universally healthy thing to do. Much of Buddhist meditation consists of the cultivation of mindfulness, and this can only be done with great patience and perseverance. Putting aside an hour or two each day or attending a full-immersion retreat setting from time to time is among the ways to practice being mindful. The *content* of experience in this pursuit is almost irrelevant—one can be mindful of breathing, of walking, of eating, or of almost any ordinary activity. What is of most importance is the *quality of attention* brought to these pursuits.

Summary

What we have outlined above can be seen as a continuum that appears at this point to have returned to its beginning. We start with the workings of the ordinary mind, which takes anything that happens to appear in the mind or senses as an object of awareness, but in an undisciplined and apparently random way. According to Buddhist thought, nothing is truly random in the human mind and body, however, so what appears to be the spontaneously attentive mind is actually a mind reacting to phenomena with host of unconscious habits, reflexes, and attitudes. To the extent these subliminal conditioning factors are rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion, our behavior will continually incline toward more suffering for ourselves and others. To counter this tendency, we might embark upon the enterprise of deliberately controlling and disciplining the mind to return to a primary object of awareness during sessions of sustained concentration practice. To some extent this involves countering the mind’s natural inclination to turn away to something else, and like any form of discipline, it can seem onerous at first. But as the mind concentrates it accesses considerable power, and one can choose to direct that power either to explore the deeper reaches of altered states of consciousness or to investigate more carefully the flow of ordinary experience. When, in mindfulness meditation, awareness is encouraged to roam freely over the phenomena of experience, it does so with qualitatively more clarity and continuity than is accessible in ordinary states of mind.

The benefits of this heightened capability of awareness are manifold, both within and outside the Buddhist context. Traditionally, mindfulness was seen as a tool to be used for gaining wisdom, which consists of the direct,

experiential understanding of the impermanence, selflessness, unsatisfactoriness, and interdependence of all phenomena. This might not seem like much at first glance, but the implications of these insights are far reaching, leading to no less than the thorough purification of human nature of its inherited toxins and the complete emancipation of consciousness from its hedonic conditioning. The usefulness of mindfulness to the modern psychotherapist and researcher is being discovered and creatively explored in ever new ways each day, as will be amply demonstrated in the rest of this book.

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