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The Present Moment

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

mindfulness movement, represented most notably in the practice of MBSR, or Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction.

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

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

STARTING WAY BACK

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

Why look back to the past, instead of striking out on our own? For one thing, wisdom is scarce, and it's always good to seek guidance from the great thinkers of the past. More fundamentally, however, the dialogue between Buddhism and the West in recent decades has been too narrow in its range. In our historically-challenged culture, we seldom look back at the sources that shape how we make sense of our lives. There are plenty of people ready to tell us about the links between Buddhism and psychology, and others who see interesting possibilities for a conversation between Buddhism and

science. Some look to the 18th- and 19th-century Romantics, such as Schiller and Blake, or reach back to individual philosophers, such as Spinoza or Nietzsche. But if that's as far as we go, we are leaving out of account more than 2,000 years of Western thought.

Can the Buddha's teachings truly transform who we are when we don't know in any deep sense who we have been?

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

THREE WAYS TO BE PRESENT

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

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

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

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

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

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



Opaque Fields, for the exhibition *Grenzen und Innenwelten* at Kunstquartier Bethanien in Berlin, January 2014.

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

Happiness in this one moment is all the happiness one could ever want.

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

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

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

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

A better way to make sense of the practice of mindful presence, however, is to see it as inviting a broader sense of what it means to inhabit the present moment. We can see

this clearly if we focus on the fact of mortality. True, your death is an event in the future, but the certainty that you will die is a present reality, true in each present moment. Dropping your concern with the future (therapeutic presence) does not mean losing sight of your mortality, which (as Buddhist and Western thinkers alike steadily remind us) colors every moment of our lives. As Marcus Aurelius writes: “Let your every deed and word and thought be those of one who might depart from this life this very moment.” For the very same thought, see the [Stoic philosopher Epictetus](#): “Today, effort must be made; tomorrow death may come, who knows?”

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

Mindful presence acknowledges this wider temporal presence and asks us to frame it according to the insights of the Buddha. To go back to the example of giving mindful present attention to the body, you do not just experience feelings and sensations in the body; rather, right now, in the present, you see the body as repulsive, composite, and mortal.

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

It may seem that the practice of mindful presence puts us squarely back within traditional mindfulness practice, but looking to the traditions of Western philosophy helps us see that what is at stake here is much broader. There is a striking parallel between Stoic and Buddhist practice here that helps make the point clear. Stoic writers regularly invite their followers to practice by memorizing (shades of *sati/smriti!*) short

sayings or maxims that embody Stoic teachings, so that you always have them on hand to apply to each new situation. Here is the Stoic statesman and philosopher Seneca (c. 4 BC) on such short sayings: “These are the precepts that [the practitioner] must never let go. Rather, he must cling fast to them and make them a part of himself, and by daily meditation reach the point where these salutary maxims occur to him of his own accord.”

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

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

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



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

ACTIVE PRESENCE

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

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

In this sense, active presence includes the other three forms of present-moment attention already identified here. In therapeutic presence, you actively choose where to focus your attention. In joyful presence, you actively choose how you react to your experience. In mindful presence, you actively choose how to make sense of your experience.

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

TAKING THE PRESENT-MOMENT PLUNGE

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

Those who question the contemporary mindfulness movement ask whether it does justice to the Buddha’s revolutionary call to transform both self and world. But we do not have to conclude from this that the only alternative is to stay within the tradition,

though for some that will clearly be the right response. Active presence does justice to the Buddha's revolutionary impulse on a wholly different basis. Not holding back, fearlessly questioning, always going beyond what we know, active presence offers a way into the deeper existential and universal concerns that the Buddha raised through his teachings.

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

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

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