

## 2. “I” DOESN’T MIND

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*There is nothing in the triple world;  
where can mind be found?<sup>a</sup>  
—Blue Cliff Record, Koan #37*

All practices are poison; they invoke the very problems they address. Solutions and problems, like all phenomena, are interdependent, inextricably intertwined; the cure must invoke the disease as surely as enlightenment can only be realized through delusion. Any meditation practice can become a poison, regardless of whether it’s immersion in mindfulness, Zen koans, shikantaza (“just sitting”), or even exercises aimed at increasing compassion.

The practice of mindfulness may have a particular vulnerability that at first seems to be its strength: over the last few decades it has lent itself to extraction from its original Buddhist roots and been applied as a solution to a variety of modern ills. It can be used for stress reduction, to deal with medical problems, and as an adjunct to psychotherapy; it has been embraced by positive psychology proponents, New Age enthusiasts, and myriads of people interested in self-improvement. However, when mindfulness is taken out of its original Buddhist context and practiced as an isolated technique, it can lead to effects exactly the opposite of what were intended.

Mindfulness, according to a well-known introduction to the Sati-patthana Sutta by Soma Thera,<sup>2</sup> is designed to liberate practitioners from suffering and craving by developing their insight into the transience of all things and into their emptiness of self-essence. It helps us deconstruct the false sense of self that is the basis of delusion and suffering, and it aims

at the liberation not just of ourselves but of all beings. If we use mindfulness merely to achieve a greater sense of personal well-being, or as a palliative technique to alleviate a painful experience, its effects are much more limited.

Some of the genuine value of mindfulness lies in the way it can increase what therapists call “ego strength”: the ability to tolerate our emotions, maintain the ability to think flexibly, and respond with resilience to disappointments and challenging life circumstances. However, if mindfulness practice stops there it paradoxically can reinforce the false sense of an essential self—which from a Buddhist perspective is actually a primary source of our misery. The emphasis mindfulness places on awareness of the contents of mind can inculcate a sense of an “I” being mindful of an “it” and in doing so reinforce the very ego the practice is meant to shake up.

On the one hand, when “I” can be aware of “my” feelings as just feelings and “my” sensations as just sensations, “my observing ego” obtains some distance from the impulse and emotions that can overwhelm it. This apparently benign result, though, masks a potentially toxic seed: introducing a welcome distance from the vagaries of thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and impulses also can produce a divisive sense of separation.

It’s nice to not feel at the mercy of one’s feelings and sensations, but if “I” am separate from “my” emotions and thoughts and physical experience, what do “I” *really* feel and believe? Who is this “I” that is being aware? When mindfulness practice is shorn of its Buddhist teachings, it offers no method for addressing this essential existential question. This may lead to people basing their sense of self on an insecure attachment to some particular mental state or badge of identity. We can even become attached to the practice of mindfulness itself: “I” am the person who practices mindfulness.

This is dangerous: it can lead to the sense that “I” am the one who is responsible for “creating” mindful mental states. Instead of just watching mental states come and go, I may try overmuch to control them. Instead of feeling gratitude at recognizing mindfulness as a basic human faculty, I may feel I am both the author and the owner of “my” mindfulness.

This can be an effortful burden. If I lapse in being mindful, I may feel like a failure and berate myself. Alternatively I might place the blame on

external circumstances being too difficult (but the most difficult situations are precisely when we need to be most mindful) or even blame others ("he isn't being mindful enough... he really did attack me... I needed to drop mindfulness and defend myself"). The opposite holds true as well; if we succeed in cultivating mindfulness we can feel good about our accomplishment and subtly set ourselves apart from, and feel slightly superior to, other "nonmindful" friends, associates, and family members. We might even become mindfulness professionals and think we have something special to teach others!

This is a well-known trap in almost any practice that leads to mastery of a skill. In Zen, it's an almost inevitable stage commonly seen in enthusiastic beginners, but we are warned against it: we say of such a person that "he stinks of Zen." We are taught to not cling to any one method (even the Buddhadharmā), experience (even enlightenment), or fixed sense of who we are. This includes letting go of "mind" itself. Thus a famous Zen koan:

Damei Fachang of Ming Province asked Mazu Daoyi,

"What is buddha?"

Mazu answered,

"This very mind is buddha."

Later another monk asked Mazu,

"What is buddha?"

The master replied,

"Not mind, not buddha."<sup>3</sup>

Liberation comes from letting go of everything, since every *thing* is, basically, empty of any essence. This is difficult, so Buddhism has many skillful means to assist the process. The Satipatthana Sutta, the central text on the way of mindfulness, does not stop with mindfulness of breathing, modes of deportment, and clear comprehension; in order to liberate the practitioner from attachment and clinging, it goes on to encourage the practitioner to reflect on the repulsiveness of the body, on the rotting corpses in a cemetery, and on the fragmentary nature of all materiality. This doesn't initially feel very comforting, so it rarely forms part of the instruction in secularized, goal-oriented self-improvement courses on mindfulness.

But radical letting go is a key to liberation. In Buddhist practice, as we let go of our hold, we start to realize “I” am not the one who produces mindfulness. Rather, as Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield describe, when we stop “doing” anything and allow ourselves to sink deeper into stillness, “We see in the depths of our being how nothing at all lasts and nothing can be grasped... ‘No self, no problem!’... We come to a ground of silence as inherent completeness... and freedom of our being emerges and expressed itself naturally.”<sup>4</sup>

Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki used to say that it is a big mistake to think that you are the one who meditates. When we let the meditation do the meditating, it is effortless effort; we are the expression of something larger than ourselves (but which can only be expressed through each being’s practice). In Zen we say “I am not It; It actually is me.”<sup>5</sup> But when mindfulness (or any meditation) is taught purely as a technique I can master, it can become a source of false pride.

Pride is not a sin, but it can restrict our sense of wonder to an unnecessarily narrow field.

### GRASPING AT MIND

Another danger in practicing mindfulness is inherent in the very word. “Mindfulness” sounds like there is a wise “mind” that “I” can be full of, and that “I” should be able to access. Many classes on mindfulness teach that there is a “conscious” mind (often associated with thought), an “unconscious” mind (often associated with feeling), and a “wise” mind that resides at the intersection of the two. This reification is misleading; it can lead me to try to control my mind so it is always “full” of “wise mind.” This can be a problem, as exemplified in another well-known koan:

Dazu Huike: Master, I cannot pacify my mind. Please help me.

Bodhidharma: Bring me that mind, and I will pacify it for you.

Dazu Huike: When I search my mind I cannot hold it, so I can’t bring it to you.

Bodhidharma: Now your mind is pacified.<sup>6</sup>

Zen delights in paradoxes, partially because they're fun, but more importantly because they reflect the world as it truly is: wondrous mystery, streaming and shimmering. Neither the mind nor anything in the world stays still long enough for us to be able to grasp it. Perhaps it is better to say the world's stillness rests on movement, and its movement rests on stillness: moment to moment, constant flow.

Vipassana mindfulness practice intentionally introduces a split between the observer and the observed, breaking down consciousness and the objects of consciousness so that the meditator discovers both are merely "heaps" of transient components, or *skandhas*. Zen practice, while acknowledging the value of mindfulness, also is marked by a strong sense that using mind to control mind is a big mistake, one that leads to infinite levels of recursive-ness. You can be aware of being aware, and aware of being aware of being aware, and aware of being aware of being aware of being aware, and so on. The problem is (to use a common Zen phrase) that the eye cannot see itself. If you only go from room to room looking out for your glasses, you may fail to notice they are perched on your head.

Huangbo, an influential ninth-century Zen teacher, described the problem this way:

When people hear that all buddhas transmit the Dharma of the Mind, they fantasize that there is a special Dharma they might attain; they suppose that there is something to be acquired or realized apart from Mind. They then try to use Mind to seek the Dharma, not knowing that Mind and the object of their search are one; they don't realize that this very Mind is the Dharma and that the Dharma is this very Mind.

The mind cannot be used to seek the Mind; doing so through thousands and thousands of *kalpas* [eons] of cultivation, you will still not acquire It.<sup>7</sup>

Zen meditation focuses not so much on observation and insight (though it involves both) as on direct experience: immersion in nonstop flow. This experience is ungraspable, so when Zen Master Joshu was asked, "What is meditation?" he replied, "It is not meditation." Pressed further to describe meditation, Joshu simply responded, "It's *alive*."<sup>8</sup>

## MOMENTS AND MINDFULNESS

Zen differs from mindfulness practice in placing less emphasis on training in modes of awareness. However, both practices share an interest in *presence*.

In his essay “Actualizing the Fundamental Point,” Zen Teacher Eihei Dogen writes, “When you find your place where you are, practice occurs... When you find your way at this moment, practice occurs... Here is the place; here the way unfolds.”<sup>9</sup> We can compare this to a commonly used description of mindfulness by Jon Kabat-Zinn: “Paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, nonjudgmentally, in the present moment... mindfulness is about being fully awake in our lives, it is about perceiving the exquisite vividness of each moment.”<sup>10</sup>

Being fully alive here and now is a gift, what I like to call “the present of presence.” But there is a problem, which can be seen in the introduction to koan number 28 from the Gateless Gate (*Wumenguan*):

Deshan, a scholar of the Diamond Sutra, was traveling south to teach, carrying his commentaries on the Diamond Sutra with him. On the road he met an old woman selling tea and rice cakes, and told her he would like to buy some refreshments. After finding out who he was and what he was carrying, the old woman said to Deshan:

“I will sell you some rice cakes if you can answer a question for me. In the Diamond Sutra it says that past mind is ungraspable, future mind is ungraspable, and present mind is ungraspable. What is the mind you wish to refresh with rice cakes and tea?”<sup>11</sup>

We know the past is gone and the future is not here yet. But the present moment cannot be grasped. When I was in college, I read Ram Dass’s *Be Here Now* and spent a year meditating trying to be fully aware “right now.” It’s not possible. (If you don’t want to take my word for it, try it; you’ll find whenever you say “now” you’re already too late.)

How, then, can we be “in” the present moment, as is sometimes taught in classes on mindfulness-based stress reduction? Consider Dogen’s Zen response to this issue:

The way-seeking mind arises in a moment. A way-seeking moment arises in the mind... This is the understanding that the self is time.<sup>12</sup>

*The self is time.* The self is not a thing; it sparkles and ripples and moves. It's important not to identify with any of the myriad components that flash by, the bits and pieces that constitute us, however glorious they might appear. This is the central liberating teaching of Buddhism—there is no essential self, and we should not even become attached to identifying ourselves with our mind. Elsewhere Dogen explicitly says, "The mind is not I."<sup>13</sup>

When we are not attached to any particular mode of attention or consciousness, we can discover a vast intimacy in all being, not only in meditation but in everyday life.

## UNDIVIDED ACTIVITY

Mindfulness meditation, as the name implies, fosters liberation with a careful examination of the workings of the mind; by exploring the varieties of consciousness, awareness, and the objects of mind, one develops insight not only into the transience of all phenomena but also their basic freedom of any graspable essence. Dogen, though, in the process of establishing Soto Zen in thirteenth-century Japan, issued a warning: "The mind is able to make everything its object" but these varieties of mind "are not the teaching of the buddhas and ancestors."<sup>14</sup>

The problem is that when we treat something as an object we introduce a separation that obscures the continuously flowing, dynamic inter-being of all existence; then there seems to be a tangible essence to subject and object independent of each other. Zen encourages us to have a direct experience of the vibrant flow of being through the practice of what is sometimes called "the teaching of no-mind"; it includes meditation instructions such as "drop body and mind," and "think not-thinking." Thich Nhat Hanh, who encompasses aspects of both Zen and mindfulness traditions, describes meditative states characterized by no-mind: nonperception (where there is no perception and no need for perception; the meditator is present but

does not perceive objects) and the attainment of cessation (where there is not only no perception but also no feelings, no cognition). He sees these states as crucial to a process of fundamental transformation that occurs through “the insight that the object it grasps is not self, and that subject and object are not separate but are one. We see ourselves in our universe, in other people, and in other species, and we see the universe and others in ourselves.”<sup>15</sup>

The point here is that becoming more mindful only in the restricted sense of being “more attentive” of your surroundings and of your thoughts, emotions, and perceptions does not tap into the depths of meditation practice. Being “more attentive” while clinging to a sense of yourself as a separate, independent being will not necessarily make you a better person any more than solving a koan will prevent you from becoming depressed or completing a thousand prostrations will make it easier for you to drive to work in the morning. Conscious awareness can facilitate, but should not be mistaken for, enlightened being. Enlightened being requires seeing ourselves in others and others in ourselves: this is not a state of mind, not a refined consciousness, but a universe of continuous practice.

Zen meditation is a continuous practice of liberation not so much through observation and awareness—though it includes these—as through undivided activity in mundane, everyday experience. Zen prefers manifestation to observation and explanation; the prototype Zen example of Dharma transmission is Buddha holding up a flower and his disciple responding with a simple smile. Zen practice emphasizes a total immersion in the *suchness*, the “just this” of whatever presents itself, shorn as much as possible of self-centered views.

Rather than (or better said, *coexistent with*) paying attention to the workings of the individual self, Zen meditation encourages letting go of self; this is sometimes referred to as “dropping body and mind.” Instead of standing apart one plunges in, and there is a kind of merging that “leaps beyond” self and object, many and one, even while including the specific particulars of each unique enactment.



## BODY AND MIND STUDY OF THE WAY

When we meditate in this fashion, whatever realization we are graced with does not come as a lump of knowledge we acquire, grasp in our consciousness, and put in our storehouse. The more we become aware, the more we understand that realization comes forth naturally and simultaneously with its practice; our job is not to achieve realization but to put it into play while getting out of the way of its expression. It's nothing special. We just "assist the self-becoming of all being"<sup>16</sup> (including our own) without adding anything or taking anything away.

Don't talk much about it;  
just work quietly at it.  
When the work has its fruit, allow people to say,  
"It just happened naturally."<sup>17</sup>

It's natural, then, to sometimes study the way with the body, sometimes with the mind; sometimes by casting off the mind, sometimes by taking up the mind. We study the way with thinking, and we study the way with "not-thinking."<sup>18</sup>

So when we're drinking a cup of tea, rather than focus (as in a common mindfulness exercise) on whether the sensations are pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, rather than think about the chain of being that brought forth the tea plant and its harvest, perhaps we will instead simply immerse ourselves in the experience. Without thinking too much about it, we'll practice holding the cup with both hands, using just the right amount of grip strength, neither too tight nor too loose; we'll pour the tea *just so* without spilling a drop; we'll bow to the server and to the tea itself; we'll sip the tea without regard to whether we like it or not, but with full appreciation of the "suchness" of water and tea and cup and hands and lips. Doing this again and again, we let go of self-consciousness and intentional observation; we find ourselves where we are through forgetting ourselves in the act of drinking by merging with it. Then the tea realizes itself in being consumed, and we realize ourselves by consuming ourselves in the drinking of it.

Nurtured by the continuous mystery of the ordinary and the inexpressible wonder of the mundane, we do not gain anything but awe, we do not lose anything but self-importance. We do not practice in order to become enlightened, but to express the enlightenment that is every where and every when.

“Zen Mind” is drinking tea and sweeping the porch. It is bits and pieces that are undivided and whole in their ordinariness. Body and mind are two sides of the same coin, and both are found everywhere. As Dogen says, “Because the study of the way is like this, walls, tiles, and pebbles are mind... this human body, undivided by self and others, is the entire world.” This very mind is always anchored in the immediacy of concrete experience:

[It] is beyond one or two... it is free of error; it has thinking, sensing, mindfulness, and realization and it is free of thinking, sensing, mindfulness, and realization...

Blues, yellows, reds, and whites are the mind.

The long, the short, the square, and the round are the mind.

Living-and-dying and coming-and-going are the mind.

Years, months, days, and hours are the mind.

Dreams and fantasies, and flowers in space, are the mind.

The spray of water, foam, and flame are the mind.

Spring flowers and the autumn moon are the mind.

Each moment is the mind. *And yet it can never be broken* [my italics].<sup>19</sup>

Ultimately, we meditate to touch the wholeness of life that can never be broken. *Just this* flows constantly, whether we are aware of it or not. To help us realize *just this*, we cultivate modes of attention and consciousness that bring us down into our bones, to our way-seeking mind that is fully liberated precisely because it can never be grasped. The mind of *just this* is beyond attainment; it is the source of attention and its ultimate resting place.

For each of us the fundamental question is this:

At just this moment, what is it that appears directly in front of you?<sup>20</sup>

Mind cannot objectify it; thinking cannot describe it.<sup>21</sup>