

Thinking Outside the Academic Box: An Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation for Education¹

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Abstract *This paper focuses on uses of contemplative practices drawn primarily from the Vipassana and Zen traditions to develop learning in three areas: to enhance students' learning, address oppressive discourses, and develop a world-view grounded in non-essentialism and interconnectedness. The philosophical work of Nagarjuna, which is foundational to thought across the Buddhist traditions, is used to explore key Buddhist concepts. This is supplemented by Wittgenstein's mature work on language-games to provide an holistic understanding of the person who engages in these practices, thus developing an understanding of why they "work" not only on cognition but in the areas of emotion, somatic experience and praxis as well.*

Keywords mindfulness, Nagarjuna, Wittgenstein, contemplative education

Without a foundation in conventional truth,
the significance of the ultimate cannot be taught.
(Nagarjuna, MMK 24: 10, as cited in Garfield, 1995)

Introduction

A wide range of contemplative practices have found places in all levels of education and across the disciplines since interest in these as academic pedagogical tools began to develop (Miller, 1994). There is a rapidly growing body of research and literature as well as conferences, such as the Holistic Learning Conferences² with which I have been involved, that have this as a focus. This paper narrows the focus considerably to some of the Buddhist meditation practices, in particular those in the

¹ A version of this paper was given at the Inkshed Conference, May 29, 2012, University of Toronto. Available at: <http://www.inkshed.ca/blog/>

² Holistic Learning Conference, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, www.holisticlearningconference.org

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Vipassana and Zen traditions, and to their uses in higher education. To a large extent contemporary educational uses have focused on affecting such results as stress relief, relaxation and enhancing the student's focus and concentration. As we will see, once some progress has been made in these areas, students can work with specific personal and academic material with the goal of producing new and creative responses to that material, for instance in jazz improvisation (Sarath, 2003), or dealing with oppressive concepts and practices (Forbes, 2002; Orr, 2007, 2005, 2004). Mindfulness practices can also have a useful role in helping teachers deal with stress and burnout (Newsome et al., 2006) as well as developing more open and creative responses to their students. The topic we will explore in this paper is how these Buddhist practices can be used in a wide range of academic contexts and how and why they "work."

The work of Nagarjuna, the second century Indian thinker and leading Buddhist philosopher whose work is accepted across the Buddhist traditions, will help us begin to understand how meditation "works." He maintains, and demonstrates in his *Mulamadhymakakarika* (as cited in Garfield, 1995), that "The Buddha's teaching of the Dharma, is based on two truths: A truth of worldly convention, and an ultimate truth" (MMK 24:7, as cited in Garfield, 1995); and further that, "Without a foundation in the conventional truth, the significance of the ultimate cannot be taught" (MMK 24:10, also 18 – 19, 26, passim, as cited in Garfield, 1995). The strategy of his work is to do a rigorous logical analysis of concepts which are part both of "conventional," everyday language as well as important to Buddhist discourse in order to show that their referents are all *sunyata* or "empty" i.e. devoid of independent and unchanging existence. Below we will look further at the meaning and implications of *sunyata*, and then turn to the modern Western philosopher Wittgenstein's concept of language-games (Wittgenstein, 1968) to further clarify the uses of concepts in ordinary or "conventional" discourse. Importantly, this focus on language-games will show that understanding concepts is not simply a matter of cognitive grasping but rather involves the totality of one's experience. This, in turn, will help to elucidate the function of meditation practice to effect change not only in the meditator's attachments to their patterns of thought, and especially their self-concept, but also to their emotions, somatic reactions and behaviors. Thus Wittgenstein's concept of language-games helps to elucidate for us Nagarjuna's understanding of "conventional truth" as involving not only cognition, but rather the totality of one's being.

Although meditation is an integrated and holistic practice, we will analytically divide this discussion of meditation into three parts or levels: (1) Breath and The Relaxation Response; (2) Challenging Ideas and Our Attachments to Them; and (3) Going Beyond the Self: *Pratityasamutpada*, *Anicca* and *Karuna*.

Breath and The Relaxation Response

“While it is simple to practice mindfulness, it is not necessarily easy.”
(Kabat-Zinn 1994, p. 8)

Vipassana teacher and researcher Jon Kabat-Zinn (1994) explains that, “Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally,” and that this “nurtures greater awareness, clarity, and acceptance of present-moment reality” (p. 4). Although this practice is simple, it is not easy and calls for effort and discipline (Ibid, p. 8) on the part of the student. While attention may at times have to be paid to difficult, even painful thoughts and emotions, it also “opens channels to deep reservoirs of creativity, intelligence, imagination, clarity, determination, choice and wisdom within us” (Ibid, p. 9).

Even at this preliminary level meditation holds out promise of relief for students who regularly come to class tired, stressed, distracted and, even in lectures, unwilling to turn off their devices. But how to begin? The advice here is to stop for a few moments and just watch your breath as it comes and goes. Nothing is to be forced. I’ve experimented in different ways with this and currently am simply beginning my lecture in my large, lower-level course with two minutes of mindful breathing – in conjunction with a “no devices in the lecture hall” policy! My sense is that students are responding well and do seem more calm and focused. In fact, they objected when I failed to have our practice before the midterm test! Once students find they can just sit and do nothing for a couple of minutes I introduce a technique to enhance the relaxation response by working with the autonomic nervous system, and, over time, explain some of the aspects of mindfulness, how it works and its benefits.

The autonomic nervous system controls functions that are usually considered automatic and out of our control although “autonomic” means independent, not automatic. These functions include breathing, heart rate, blood pressure, and hormone production. Central to this is the reflex connection between the heart and lungs. When someone is startled they will respond with a sharp, deep inhalation. This serves to speed up the heart, stimulate the production of adrenaline, cortisol (the “stress hormone” that encourages the body to store fat), and other hormones among other effects, and thus prepare the body for “flight or fight.” This, unfortunately, is the mode many people are chronically in owing to the pressures and hyper-stimulation of contemporary life. The “relaxation response” is induced by the opposite reaction, that long, deep, sighing exhalation when the pressure is finally off. Coulter recommends increasing the length of the exhalation relative to that of the inhalation 2:1 (Coulter, 2001, p. 91). This will reduce the heart rate, decrease adrenalin and cortisol production thus decreasing feelings of fear and anxiety, and bring about the deep relaxation and feeling of well-being necessary for the other effects that Kabat-Zinn has identified.

Focus on the breath is, of course, crucial to controlling it and thus achieving the desired effects. But this focus must work in tandem with, and in fact facilitates, not dwelling on thoughts and ideas. Much of our thinking tends to be not only obsessional but stressful – Am I going to fail the exam? How can I pay my bills? Does s/he still love me? etc., etc., etc. These thoughts defeat the purpose of this exercise and so students must also practice nonjudgmentally watching their thoughts as they come and go without engaging with them. A side benefit of this is that, with a bit of practice, you can put yourself to sleep with a few breaths - although not in class! -, but letting the thoughts go is key at this level.

A relaxed mind, one that is free of the paralyzing grip of stress, anxiety or fear, is a more spontaneous and creative mind. A mind under such conditions as stress or fear is apt to “freeze” and not even be able to remember let alone be creative. We have all had the experience of being deeply stressed and so unable to even remember simple, well-known facts or information. This is apt to manifest in extreme forms when one who is not used to doing so has to do such things as perform in front of an audience, but with practice, and with a mindfully relaxed mind prior to and during performance, one becomes able to work with ease. New and innovative ideas can also be generated by the relaxed mind, ones that are unavailable when one is “trying hard” to think of something creative. There are many well-known examples of creative people who claim their best ideas come at times of relaxation – Newton under his apple tree -, even in dreams, such as Gandhi’s dream of the salt march (Miller, 1994, pp. 106-107); and we have probably all had the experience of having ideas seem to ‘just flow’ when totally engaged in the work one is doing.

Challenging Ideas and Our Attachments to Them

Four Noble Truths:

1. Life is suffering (*Dukkha*)
2. *The cause* of *Dukkha* is craving/attachment
3. Attachment can be overcome
4. The 8-fold path (right view, concentration, mindfulness, speech, effort, action, morality, livelihood) is the way to overcoming *Dukkha*.
The Buddha

The Buddha’s four Noble Truths provide a useful entrance to the next level of mindfulness. It outlines a complete therapeutic approach to human suffering: (1) the diagnosis, (2) etiology, (3) prognosis, and (4) treatment. At the root of craving/attachment is *avidya*, which is usually translated as ignorance or delusion. *Avidya* is the negation of the Sanskrit *vidya*, which gives us the Latin *videre*, to see, and the English words vision, video, etc. Thus the first step in the eight-fold path is right view. In order to overcome suffering the four Noble Truths call us to examine

our “views” (*darsana*), our ideas and assumptions and, following that, our relationships to them and the ways that these play out in our lives.

Nagarjuna shows that many of the concepts we are attached to are misunderstood as referring to atomized, self-subsistent objects that we reify and oppose to other such objects. David Loy has shown in extensive detail that this sort of misunderstanding is pervasive in both Eastern and Western cultures (Loy, 1988). The most important and fundamental example for human experience is the concept of “self” (I, me, mine) which includes concepts of self-identity (e.g. race, gender, sexual orientation, class, etc.), self-evaluations (“I’m not good enough”) and much else. The concept of self is opposed to concepts of the Other and this gives rise to dualisms (e.g. self/other; male/female; straight/gay; subject/object; and so forth) which objectifies both sides of the dualism and alienates them from their opposite. Dualisms also function within the self extensively in the ubiquitous Western mind (soul, spirit)/body dualism.

Mindfulness practice enables an acute awareness of our ideas and the intellectual, emotional, somatic and behavioral relationships we have with them, that is, the ways in which they fit into language-games. Wittgenstein’s concept of language-games as “the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven” (Wittgenstein, 1968, p. 5) is important for foregrounding the ways in which the understanding of language is woven into human emotions, somatic experiences and behaviors. His work shows that the language-games we play, and consequently the experiences we have, are a function of our historical and cultural situation as well as our personal experiences and our human nature, and that “this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten [...]. Here the term “*language-game*” is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.” (Wittgenstein, 1968, p. 11-12). Thus a meditation on any aspect of language can both bring to awareness its non-cognitive dimensions as well as open up into the mediator’s broader social and historical context.

As one allows each aspect of a language-game to come into awareness without engaging with it, one realizes that each aspect of any system of concept/emotion/somatic responses/behavior is impermanent (*annica*). That is, each will come and go and, in fact, it is often not possible to find discreet boundaries of them. In a simple example, students may be asked to notice a sensation such as a tickle or an itch and try to find exactly where its boundaries are or even just where it is located in the self. This usually proves impossible to do. Further, if the student resists the urge to tickle or scratch, they will notice that the sensation soon passes away of its own accord (*annica*). This exercise can then be extended to whatever concepts are being considered, even the concept of the self, emotional responses, or the desire for some attainment such as success, or a culturally valued trait such as

beauty or machismo. The realization of the impermanence and the indistinct boundaries of elements of language-games, i.e. somatic responses, emotions and behaviors, can begin to loosen attachments, thus opening up space for new and creative ways of understanding, being and behaving (see Forbes 2002; Orr 2007, 2005, 2004).

The position that the self is constructed is widely accepted in psychology and psychotherapy, in philosophy, and in academe generally, and is increasingly to be found in the general discourse. Nevertheless, people still reify the self, often unconsciously, and so repress their radical constructedness along with its lack of permanent or solid existence (*anatta*). David Loy argues that this is *the* repression, not sexuality or the fear of death, that lies at the base of human suffering (1992). It is ‘the suspicion each of us has that “*I am not real right now.*” (Loy, 1992, p. 151) that lies at the root of each individual’s *dukkha*. Much human activity is devoted to the desperate but futile task of trying to fill the void or lack that we fear constitutes our true nature. And, because we are connected and social beings, this fear and the symptoms of greed, ill-will and delusion that cover it has been played out on the broad social and historical level in the practices and institutions we have developed (Loy, 2002), and thus in the language-games that we now play. In contemporary culture the attainment of forms of personal success, i.e. wealth, status, power and beauty, are the goals most frequently albeit futilely pursued in order to obtain, through the achievement of those goals, a sense of permanence and solidity for the self.

Meditation practice, which involves developing awareness of the impermanence of thoughts, feelings and sensations, would, it may seem, only reinforce this underlying suspicion of lack and even exacerbate it since Buddhist thought also stresses the need to drop dualistic thinking, most especially the belief in a reified self which stands in opposition to all others and all else. What does Buddhism offer to address this dilemma? In the words of David Loy:

If each link of *pratitya-samutpada* [interconnectedness] is conditioned by all the others, then to become completely groundless is also to become completely grounded not in some particular but in the whole network of interdependent relations that constitutes the world. The supreme irony of my struggle to ground myself is that it cannot succeed because I am already grounded *in the totality*. (Loy, 1992, p. 174).

The problem of *dukkha*, the craving for something the attainment of which we believe will real-ize us, and the attachment to a “self” which compulsively seeks reassurance that it is real can be solved but this solution is not to find the thing that will satisfy *dukkha* but rather to dissolve *dukkha*. This is not necessarily an all-or-

nothing solution; aspects of it can be addressed in the classroom through the pedagogical uses of mindfulness.

Going Beyond the Self: *Pratityasamutpada*, *Anicca* and *Karuna*

To study the Buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things. When actualized by myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away. No trace of realization remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly. (Dogen 1985, p. 70)

Academic uses of mindfulness practice do not take place in a vacuum. They can and should be made an integral part of a course of study and this is fully consistent with traditional practices. Masao Abe, the well-known scholar of comparative Buddhism and Western thought, maintains that, “Although intellectual understanding cannot be a substitute for Zen’s awakening, practice without a proper and legitimate form of intellectual understanding is often misleading. An intellectual understanding without practice is certainly powerless, but practice without learning is apt to be blind” (Abe, 1985, p. 4). For Abe this applies first and foremost to the study of the literature of Buddhism, but we can extend it to any text or other artifact (Thurman, 2006). For instance, a study of Nagarjuna’s *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, (Garfield, 1995) can begin to undermine the plausibility of mind/body dualism. This realignment of one’s thinking can be enhanced by the study of Wittgenstein’s work on the “mind/body problem” and the associated issues of solipsism, the existence of other minds, and the ultimate impossibility of language acquisition and use that are generated by this model of the person (Wittgenstein, 1968, *passim*). However, in order to develop a full understanding of this dualistic structure and its multiple ramifications in people’s lives, and consequently to be in a position not only to more fully understand it intellectually but also to be able to address it in their own life, a meditation practice must be added to the student’s intellectual study.

Nagarjuna, working with the absolute dichotomies expressed in Sanskrit, a root of the Indo-European linguistic family, typically used *reductio ad absurdum* argumentation to consider the logical possibilities of any metaphysical position and, by drawing out its consequences, show the logical absurdity of holding it. Those possibilities can be schematized in the logical quatrallemma as, “either A (self causation), or not-A (caused by another), or both, or neither” as we find, for example, in MMK 1:1 “Examination of Conditions” and throughout that work. The crucial point to bear in mind here is that the target of Nagarjuna’s attack is the metaphysical notion of causes and not the “conventional” or every-day uses of that word. The result of his work is to show that the only viable alternative to the view of reified atomic metaphysical items is *sunyata*. *Sunyata* is usually translated into

English as “emptiness” and thus on Nagarjuna’s account all concepts are empty, that is, they lack “self-existence” (*svabhava*).

This does not mean that things are nonexistent as is sometimes erroneously stated. Nagarjuna’s notion of “conventional truths” applies here and is perhaps best elucidated through Wittgenstein’s concept of language-games. As Wittgenstein shows, the senses that the concepts of existence and nonexistence have is given by the uses these words have in the context of the various day-to-day games we play with them: they do not carry hidden metaphysical or ontological meanings although we often erroneously attribute these to them. In rejecting metaphysical views Nagarjuna, and Wittgenstein after him, returns us to the everyday uses of language, now shorn of both explicit metaphysical theories and also the unconscious dualisms and reifications we read into them and then play out in our language-games and so in our lives. It is this grounding in the undeluded, every-day uses of language-games that supports the flip side of *sunyata*, *pratityasamutpada*, that all things are interconnected in a vast and ceaselessly changing web.

The fact that we create our conceptual systems and language games, that none of them are dictated by nature, may initially seem counter-intuitive to students, but an introduction to radically different systems such as the Chinese and/or a study of the historical and cultural manifestation of this creativity in Western culture, e.g. tracing the historical development of gender concepts or the concept of love, can serve to begin to loosen the hold of some of the more insidious of these.

It is worth noting at this point as an illustrative example that Chinese and Japanese cultures have traditionally utilized concepts that undercut Western mind/body dualism. This is useful not only for the sake of engendering further skepticism regarding this dualistic structure, but also because even a brief look at these linguistic systems will begin to give the Western student a sense of the possibility of radically different ways of understanding and thinking about the issues they confront, and consequently radically different ways of being, both academically and personally. The Chinese *xin*, (*shin* in Japanese) carries a sense that can be expressed in English as heart-and-mind (Hall & Ames 1995, pp. 192–193; Berling, 1992). This distinctly human quality is not an aggregate of two things, heart + mind, but a quality which must be developed over the course of one’s life, somewhat analogous to the development of an artistic talent. Hall and Ames explain that *xin* is “a correlative image which precludes any final separation between reasoning and imagination, reasoning and experience, reasoning and rhetoric, reasoning and feeling. In this tradition, thoughts are, irrevocably, embodied actions” (Hall & Ames, 1995, p. 224).

This concept is grounded in a radically different mode of conceptualization from the structuring by absolute dichotomies to be found in the Western system. While an adequate discussion of this is far beyond the scope of this paper, a sense of the difference is given by Hall and Ames who point out that:

Yin and *yang* are not, as often claimed, dualistic principles of light and dark, male and female, action and passivity, where light and dark exclude each other, logically entail each other, and in their complementarity constitute a totality. Rather *yin* and *yang* are, first and foremost, a vocabulary of qualitative contrasts which are applicable to specific situations, and which enable us to make specific distinctions. (Hall & Ames, 1995, p. 261)

They continue that *yin* and *yang* are understood as “contrastive concepts”:

Originally these terms designated the shady side and the sunny side of a hill, and gradually came to suggest the way in which one thing “overshadows” another in some particular aspect of their relationship. The nature of the opposition captured in this pairing expresses the mutuality, interdependence, diversity, and creative efficacy of the dynamic relationships that are deemed immanent in and valorize the world. (Hall & Ames, 1995, p. 261)

Western dualistic logic can be diagrammed by a perpendicular line separating “A” and “~A,” but contrast this graph with the Chinese *Yin* and *Yang* symbol, a circle with a light side which contains a smaller dark circle and a dark side containing a small light circle and the sides separated by a curving line. Rather than the rigid stasis of the Western diagram, this symbol suggests the dynamic, ever-changing process of light becoming dark and dark becoming light as light and dark move in their perpetual cycle.

Hall and Ames contrast the Chinese worldview, which takes the form of “focus and field” with the Western atomized, dualistic and logically organized view:

The Chinese conception of aesthetic order, in contrast to the rational understanding of order, is characterized by the multiperspectival organization of particular details. Such order is not a function of “locus” (the placement of items in such a manner as to realize a formal pattern) but of “focus” (the construal of the particular elements in a field from the perspectives of focal centers). (Hall & Ames, 1995, p. 239)

Daoism is profoundly compatible with the Buddhist concept of *pratityasamutpada*. *Pratityasamutpada* is, as we have noted, the flip side of *sunyata*. It is understood as the interconnectedness of all things which are *sunyata*, empty of the independent existence. Daoism conceives the *dao* as a field “where each thing is at once

insistently itself, and necessary for everything else to be what it is” (Hall & Ames, 1995, p. 237).

Cultural psychologist Richard Nisbett’s extensive study of the Eastern and Western systems and ways of thinking has led him to conclude that:

These approaches include profoundly different social relations, views about the nature of the world, and characteristic thought processes. Each of these orientations [...] is a self-reinforcing, homeostatic system. The social practices promote the worldviews; the worldviews dictate the appropriate thought processes; and the thought processes both justify the worldviews and support the social practices. (Nisbett, 2003, p. xx).

While meditation practice will hardly result in the acquisition of Chinese cognitive patterns, the research referenced here is richly suggestive for ways of thinking differently, which might fruitfully be brought to bear on a wide range of Western issues and which resonate positively with emerging Western views. This is in areas from environmentalism, to neuroplasticity, to human wellness and beyond, which theorize the wide-ranging interaction of multiple factors as necessary to understand and address any phenomenon.

The purpose of meditation practice is to change the person for it is through personal change that the suffering that is *dukkha* is, if not totally overcome, at least ameliorated. Ignorance and delusion are erased by breaking attachments to dualistic and reified ideas and replacing them with wisdom (*prajna*) rather than intellectual knowledge. *Prajna* means, in part, living out *pratityasamutpada* in one’s life, experiencing, rather than just knowing about, the connection between oneself and both other beings and other things in the world. Perhaps the most powerful educational implication of this is that a person who achieves a degree of *prajna* will begin to live and interact differently with their world. Right action is the sixth part of the 8-fold path and *karuna*, or compassion, is the form that action takes. *Karuna* is not an ethical system in the Western sense, nor does it mean having a sentimental or pitying response to the other. Rather, as the etymology of the English word “compassion” suggests, it means to “experience with the other”, better yet, to experience as one.

Schroeder argues the “link between wisdom and compassion” is “skill-in-means (*upaya-kausalya*)” (Schroeder, 2001, p. 3). In examining the teachings of the Buddha as recorded in the sutras he finds that they are often “inconsistent”, but argues that each exhibits wisdom and compassion in that it addresses the specific form of suffering and level of understanding of the person or audience he is speaking to. There is no one truth and certainly no formula, no overarching moral principal or psychological intervention that will guarantee the alleviation of

suffering. Skillfulness lies in discerning the suffering of others and addressing it in an efficacious manner. However, a skillful response may call for knowledge as well. For example, David Loy argues that responding to the ecological crises we face “means embracing our responsibility for the well-being of the biosphere, because its well-being ultimately cannot be distinguished from our own well-being. Understood properly, our taking care of the earth’s rainforests is like me taking care of my own leg” (Loy, 2008, p. 109). One does not take care of one’s own leg out of pity or sentimentality nor from the application of a moral imperative, but because doing so leads to health and well-being; likewise, caring for the rainforests also leads to the health and well-being of the biosphere of which we are a part. At the same time, this care calls for a great deal of specialized knowledge; as Abe has pointed out, “practice without learning is apt to be blind” (Abe, 1985, p. 4).

Jon Kabat-Zinn said in an interview that mindfulness need not necessarily be pursued for the purpose of “achieving enlightenment,” a goal which may not have particular appeal for most Westerners. But developing a practice and dealing with specific issues which are causing us suffering can help us all to become a little more mature. Robert Thurman also focuses on the development of a more mature and humane individual as a part of the traditional mission of liberal education. While I am wary of categorizing Buddhist practices as “religion” in the tradition of the Abrahamic denominations, I agree that in order that education become liberating “The moral, psychological, contemplative, and philosophical disciplines embedded within various religions must be made available to faculty and students if education is to go beyond being merely informative and become transformative” (Thurman, 2006, p. 1771). This paper has demonstrated that all “levels” of meditation practice can be useful as tools for teaching and learning. They can foster the development of more mature and wise individuals, and can be adapted to specific curricular material to open a space for new and creative learning. Beyond that, they can give each student a taste of the “ultimate truth” of which Nagarjuna spoke and which is the only one available to us, the lived experience of relief from *dukkha* and groundedness in relationship with all things.

The birds have left the sky
And the last cloud faded away
We sit together the mountain and I
Until only the mountain remains.
Li Po

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