Buddha on Mindfulness

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| Instead of quoting ancient Buddhist texts on the subject of *mindfulness*, I've selected passages from a recent book [*Encountering Buddhism: Western Psychology & Buddhist Teachings*](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0791457354/wisdomportalcom/104-0572652-0810365) edited by Seth Robert Segall (State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 2003). It's instructive to see how Buddha's concept of *mindfulness* is interpreted and applied by modern-day practitioners of meditation and psychotherapists. I enjoyed reading this book because the authors dedicated it to their teachers in Buddhism and in Psychology. Among them, I recognized two old friends from my days at Brandeis University— [Larry Rosenberg](http://www.kripalu.org/presenter/132/) and [Jon Kabat-Zinn](http://www.umassmed.edu/behavmed/faculty/kabat-zinn.cfm). It warms my heart that they have practiced mindfulness and have shared and taught this great art to so many others. I also enjoyed the three epigraphs to this book:  "The Tao that can be spoken is not the Tao" — Lao Tzu, *Tao TeChing*  "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." — Ludwig Wittgenstein, *TractatusLogico-Philosophicus*  Samuel Beckett once said: "Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness." On the other hand, he said it." — Art Spiegelman, *Maus II*  \*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*  The first and foremost item on the Buddhist agenda for healing— not necessarily in its textual formulation but certainly in its practical application— is mindfulness. Since the entirety of our virtual world is being constructed in the present moment, it is crucial to learn to pay attention to this moment. Paying attention sounds simple; one might think we do it all the time, but we actually pay attention very little to what is going on in our present experience. The human mind is constantly swinging into the future and the past, and like a pendulum it passes through the present moment barely enough for us to keep our bearings... The Buddhists are not saying that we should cut off our sensitivity to the full range of experience and live ordinary life in some sort of eternal present. But in order to get beyond some of the embedded habits of the mind, in order to get free of some of the distortions and confusions to which we are subject, we need to train ourselves to attend very carefully and very deliberately to the process by which we construct past and future experience in the present moment. And this is largely what mindfulness practice is all about. It is accessing the present moment, and it involves cultivating the intention to attend to what is happening right now. Left to its own inclinations, the mind would much rather weave its way through some thought pattern that makes us feel good about ourselves, and lead us away from any kind of insight that might threaten our ideas about ourselves... The mind needs to be carefully and gently encouraged through constant practice to look carefully and deeply at what is unfolding in the immediately present moment. One can do this while driving a car, during a meditation retreat, or it can be done sitting here in this very moment: by simply attending carefully to what arises and passes away in experience.  Andrew Olendzki, "Buddhist Psychology" (Ch. 1), Seth Robert Segall (Ed.), [*Encountering Buddhism: Western Psychology & Buddhist Teachings*](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0791457354/wisdomportalcom/104-0572652-0810365) State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 2003, pp. 24-25  \*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*  The eightfold path comprises the following (K. S. Dhammananda, *What Buddhists Believe* 4th Ed., 1987, p. 90; R. Dhamma, *The First Discourse of the Buddha*, 1997):   |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | | *Wisdom* | *Morality* | *Mental Culture* | | 1. Right Understanding | 3. Right Speech | 6. Right Effort | | 2. Right Thought | 4. Right Action | 7. Right Mindfulness | |  | 5. Right Livelihood | 8. Right Concentration |   In this path, the Buddha enunciates a set of practices that the individual can adopt to overcome his or her own suffering. The word right (samma) used to qualify each factor of the path does not imply moral judgments concerning sin and guilt, or arbitrary standards imposed externally. The path is neither hierarchical nor prescriptive, as the Buddha does not dictate what is right or wrong. Instead he speaks of skillful (wholesome) or unskillful (unwholesome) actions, and explains that the path merely serves as a guideline or a "raft" for helping people take personal responsibility (*MajjhimaNikaya*, 1.260)  When the mind is calm, there is space for the development of insight or vipassana. Vipassana means learning to see clearly. The important ingredients of insight (vipassana) meditation are mindfulness and observation. The cultivation of right mindfulness is so important to the Buddha's teachings, that it has been described as the "heart of Buddhist meditation".  Unlike in tranquility meditation, where the practitioner is encouraged to let go of thoughts that impinge, with insight meditation, the meditator is encouraged to be mindful of whatever enters the mind. T. Nyanaponika (*The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, 1992) explains mindfulness as "the bare and exact registering of the object [of attention]". Normally, we infuse what we perceive with subjective judgments and associative thinking. Mindfulness helps us to silence this internal dialogue, and to "see things as they really are," without labeling them good or bad.  Buddhist practice is based on the four foundations of mindfulness (*SatipatthanaSutta*, *Treasure of the Dhamma*, 1994, p. 277). this means developing continuous awareness of the (1) body (e.g., posture, breath), (2) feelings (whether pleasant, unpleasant or neutral), (3) mind (thoughts, emotions, intentions, volitions, etc.), and (4) mental objects (mental phenomena relevant to awakening, such as the seven factors of enlightenment and the five hindrances to meditation). According to the Buddha, if we are mindful of each phenomenon as it arises, we can learn to differentiate, for example, between the injured arm and its damaged condition (body), the unpleasant nature of the associated pain (feelings), the anger and annoyance at the perpetrator (mind), and the way pain affects our ability to achieve meditative concentration (mental objects).. On the other hand, if a person does not differentiate between these different experiences, then suffering arises, which is pain multiplied by all the extraneous additions. In short, mindfulness increases the individual's awareness of the circuitous nature of the mind expounded by the Buddha in the idea of dependent origination, of how one thing leads to another, and enables us to learn to separate our responses and feelings about the situation from the situation itself.  Why does mindfulness occupy such a central position in the Buddha's teachings? The Buddha has repeatedly advised people to accept things only when they have experienced them for themselves. Insight meditation, especially mindfulness, gives the practitioner a method and the internal resources to do this... Mindfulness allows the meditator to freely observe and experience what unfolds without needing to change or justify it. In this way, we gain insight into the true nature of things. Through bare attention, we learn to see things as they really are, without the leveling effect of subjective judgments and preconceptions... Mindfulness brings the meditator into direct confrontation with the continual presence of change and impermanence in a profound way. During meditation, when we experience within ourselves how everything is constantly changing, "rising and falling", and how no phenomenon, whether mental or physical stays the same for two moments, we gain insight into impermanence. This insight helps us to appreciate that change is in the nature of things and that clinging to anything that possesses such a characteristic will inevitably lead to suffering (*dukkha*).  The Buddha advocates paying bare attention to our thoughts, feelings, and sensations as they arise, without falling into the habitual tendency of judging or criticizing them. The idea behind mindfulness is to become continually aware of and to "name" our thoughts, feelings, and emotions objectively and accept them fully for what they are. In acquiring this awareness and understanding, the person develops the freedom to break the hold of compulsive habits. Epstein (*Thoughts Without a Thinker*, 1995, p. 102) explains that "training in this attitude of mind is why meditation is practiced."  Belinda Siew Luan Khong, "The Buddha Teaches an Attitude, Not an Affiliation" (Ch. 3), Seth Robert Segall (Ed.), [*Encountering Buddhism: Western Psychology & Buddhist Teachings*](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0791457354/wisdomportalcom/104-0572652-0810365) State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 2003, pp. 63-64, 66-67, 69  \*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*  Buddhism means a commitment to the practice of *mindfulness*. It's the practice of opening oneself up and being receptive to the flow of sense perceptions, emotions, and thought processes in each given moment while attempting to hold judgment in abeyance. This is done with no other goal than to be as present as one can possibly be within each and every moment. One does this with an intimate attention that is very different from a scrutinizing, objective stance. Rather than being a distant observer of a set of experiences, one is a participant-observer, and what one observes is not only the sense impressions of the "outside" world, but also one's own subjective reactions to that world... In these moments of unimpeded awareness there is a wonderful sense of lightness of being, and a sense of the rightness to things just as they are. In these moments when the sense of a separate self that needs defending, approval, status, or justification is nowhere evident, one is open to being present and responsive to the world in a deeply caring way. This is what I mean by mindfulness: seeing events as they are with minimal interference from a separate ego that needs to control both self and world; being intimately in touch with the moment as it is, and open-heartedly responsive to it.  Seth Robert Segall, "On Being A Non-Buddhist Buddhist: A Conversation with Myself" (Ch. 4), Seth Robert Segall (Ed.), [*Encountering Buddhism: Western Psychology & Buddhist Teachings*](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0791457354/wisdomportalcom/104-0572652-0810365) State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 2003, p. 79  \*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*  At University of Massachusetts Medical Center (UMMC) in Worcester, Jon Kabat-Zinn had recently established his Stress Reduction and Relaxation Program (SRRP), the basis of which is mindfulness meditation supplemented with Yoga practice, group discussion, and some cognitive techniques. The 10-week program (now referred to as the Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction Program), using groups comprised of about 30 people with a widely diverse set of presenting problems, has shown effectiveness for managing chronic pain and anxiety disorders, and for persons suffering from problems such as AIDS, cancer, and depression. Although I was not teaching in the SRRP program, I had the opportunity to participate in the program, and then collaborate on research. Jon Kabat-Zinn's ability to adapt traditional techniques to a contemporary medical environment was compelling. He was able to work with people from a wide range of backgrounds who were not necessarily seeking meditation as a personal spiritual practice, but rather for relief from their symptoms. His flexibility, in the context of his own extensive orthodox training in meditation practice, was profoundly influential in supporting my own perspective that this type of adaptation was both possible and appropriate... I began to focus my own work on the importance of cultivating "bare attention" to the physical and emotional experiences that arise. Another key aspect of mindfulness meditation is the importance placed on explicit integration of meditative practice into all aspects of daily life. This emphasis also fits better than does TM, I believe, with developing a meditation-based approach to treating a syndrome such as compulsive binge eating disorder.  From a therapeutic perspective, both mindfulness and mantra-based meditation approaches have something to offer. Insight or mindfulness meditation has the distinction of more actively engaging the individual in a transformative way with the nature of salient issues than does mantra meditation. In my experience clinically, there is a more rapid movement with mindfulness meditation than with mantra-based meditation toward what I would call "wisdom functioning"— drawing on those higher levels of choice and possibility that are within our capabilities but are often blocked out by more powerful and immediate conditioning effects or survival needs.  Jean L. Kristeller, "Finding the Buddha/Finding the Self: Seeing with the Third Eye" (Ch. 5), Seth Robert Segall (Ed.), [*Encountering Buddhism: Western Psychology & Buddhist Teachings*](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0791457354/wisdomportalcom/104-0572652-0810365) State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 2003, p. 122  \*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*  Western Psychology has also recently begun to recognize the potential value of the Buddhist concept of *mindfulness*, and the Buddhist techniques designed to foster it, as a way to supplement and enhance cognitive-behavioral treatments... The Samadhi component of the eightfold path emphasizes "right concentration", "right mindfulness", and "right effort". J. Rubin (*Psychotherapy and Buddhism*, 1996) has commented on the similarity between the Buddhist idea of "mindfulness" and Freud's concept of "evenly-hovering attention" as a technical aspect of the psychoanalytic method. The most precious gift we can give anyone is the quality of our attention. those moments we have had with others that seem most meaningful to us have been moments when others have freely and genuinely given us their full attention. In existentially based psychotherapies, such attention is given with no other purpose than to be fully present. This means, to the extent that it is humanly possible, leaving all private concerns at the office door; letting go of all concerns for the previous client at the start of the new therapy hour; letting one's attention be "bare attention", rather than analytic attention; listening with one's body rather than with just one's ears. The goal, over and over, is to attend to *this* client-therapist interactive field in *this* moment, just as in meditation the goal is to attend to *this* breath in *this* moment, over and over... Mindful concentration is an essential ingredient to forming a positive therapeutic alliance and to the kind of deep listening that, within the Rogerian paradigm (C. R. Rogers, *Client-centered therapy*, 1951), creates the interpersonal space where transformation and healing occurs.  Seth Robert Segall, "Psychotherapy Practice as Buddhist Practice" (Ch. 8), Seth Robert Segall (Ed.), [*Encountering Buddhism: Western Psychology & Buddhist Teachings*](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0791457354/wisdomportalcom/104-0572652-0810365) State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 2003, pp. 166, 170 |