

Slow-Food Mindfulness

by Patricia Ullman

Meditation is becoming more ordinary and mainstream each day, which is amazing and wonderful. The challenge that naturally comes along with that, as with many traditional things that become popularized, is how to retain clarity about its profound core even while celebrating its growing accessibility.

As the ancient practice of mindfulness meditation co-emerges in the west as both an authentic practice and as a self-help fad, businesses are springing up all across the country which offer a variety of things under its umbrella—at mindfulness studios and in yoga classes, in schools, and in organizations and businesses. Washington DC is a little behind the more hip, less conservative cities like New York and Los Angeles in starting up and developing these businesses, but in the last couple of years the meditation scene has begun to grow here as well. Several mindfulness-related studios opened in the DC area last year, and there are a growing number of people and organizations teaching it in schools, hospitals, and businesses.

I've been teaching meditation all around the DC area during the last year or so, and I've been trying to stay on this interesting edge between making the authentic practice accessible without succumbing to a fast-food mentality—our society's habit of wanting to get a quick fix that feels good and doesn't require any work.

The problem with fast food is that it ultimately leaves the body undernourished and the mind craving more. The slow food movement, on the other hand, is about remembering and honoring the benefits of real food, locally sourced, cooked at home, enjoyed sitting down. Eating in this way takes more time and attention, but it ultimately enriches one's life and health, both physically and emotionally. The analogy is a good one.

The **Washington Post** recently carried an article by Dr. Thomas Joiner, a professor of psychology at Florida State University (*Mindfulness would be good for you. If it weren't so selfish: How a self-help trend warped a good idea*; Aug. 25, 2017). Dr. Joiner writes that the usurpation of authentic mindfulness by the current “ersatz version” is more an issue of how it's being promoted and less to do with the practice itself. Yes indeed—the practice, after all, has been passed down from teacher to student for millennia, like a precious family treasure. Its methods and import are so fundamental to our integral functioning as human beings that it's actually puzzling it isn't taught in schools and promoted as essential to our mental and physical health and development.

I expect—I hope—that meditation will follow a trajectory similar to that of yoga, exercise, and running, reaching a tipping point where it will be taken for granted as part of our cultural paradigm. Yoga studios and gyms are now considered a normal feature of our American society, but not that many years ago yoga was viewed with skepticism as a trippy Hindu fad, and, before that, gyms were seen as the provenance of body-builders and wealthy narcissists. For various reasons (including, among others, the publication of scientific research confirming the many real benefits; unscientific, profit-biased

promotion of entrepreneurs; adoption by celebrities with resulting publicity; and the marketing of cool and sexy costumes and gear), it's now taken for granted that exercise is necessary for our basic physical health and that yoga helps keep our bodies flexible and our minds calm. Doctors routinely tell us to be sure to run, walk, or exercise. It's as fundamental to our health as eating well and brushing our teeth.

The trade-off to these disciplines becoming so wildly popular is the uneven quality of instruction and the resulting risk of injury, frustration, or misunderstanding. The way mindfulness is being promoted can easily lead our fast-food culture to think it's another miracle drug, a magic pill for stress. As Dr. Joiner says in his article, "There's nothing wrong with pleasant activities, but those already have a name: 'pleasant activities.'"

The Practice: Relaxation or Realization?

Because of the way mindfulness is being promoted, it's natural that most people would expect to experience one of the many 'pleasant activities' being offered in the name of mindfulness, like sound bathing, visualizations involving purring kittens and wind chimes, things with exotic names like chakras, tantra, and kundalini, and instructors who talk the entire time because they're afraid to leave people with more than a few seconds of silence. There is nothing wrong with these kinds of activities (whether or not they actually qualify as 'meditation'), but rather with the mad scramble to mush them all together under the wildly popular, scientifically-endorsed umbrella of mindfulness. (A quick internet search will tell you that mindfulness can bring a reduction in stress, less rumination, more happiness and peace, improved focus, less emotional reactivity, improvement in menstrual cramping and inflammatory disorders, lower blood pressure, improved memory, increased optimism, relaxation, greater awareness, and less anxiety, fear, loneliness, and depression—and so on.) With the current promotional barrage, it's only natural that people would seek it out as something to try, another potential tool that may offer help in the on-going struggle with this challenging human life.

But mindfulness meditation isn't just another relaxation technique—although relaxation can be one of its natural side effects. The essence of mindfulness is nonjudgmental attention, a full engagement with what is happening in the present. Another way of saying this is that it's a synchronization of body and mind, having one's body and mind in precisely the same place in any given moment. We usually experience this only when something out of the ordinary catches our attention, or when we exert some particular effort to pay attention. What scientists call our "default mode" is our usual wandering mind, with which we spend a disproportionate amount of time talking to ourselves and ruminating on past and future hopes and fears, so that our mind is not in this present moment in which we are actually alive. When we think this habitual wandering mind is the only alternative, we live our lives largely on automatic, reacting rather than responding. Mindfulness meditation shows us an alternative, a way of freeing ourselves from our own endless cycle of conditioned thoughts, emotions, and actions.

Mindfulness is an inherent quality of the mind, but practices for intentionally cultivating it have never been part of the western cultural paradigm which sublimates the veracity of direct experience to intellectual analysis and scientific proof. In mindfulness meditation, we stage a gentle, intentional boycott of our usual conceptual processes (both conscious and not) of categorizing, rehashing, labelling, and judging everything. There is no criticism of our busy human mind in this gentle practice, but simply a structured opportunity to notice the alternation between being caught in the busyness and

then returning repeatedly to an intentional focus, like the breath. The discipline of consistently doing this strengthens and stabilizes our mind, and there's no question that this fosters countless mental, physical, and lifestyle improvements. The Buddhists and the scientists agree on that, and it's wonderful that we're now able to actually measure many of the physiological and behavioral effects of this practice.

Mindfulness meditation comes from the Buddhist tradition. The historical Buddha left the comforts of his palace and studied with various ascetic yogic practitioners before concluding that he could only find the nonconceptual truth he was seeking through his own direct experience. He famously sat down under a tree, vowing not to get up until he could see and understand the nature of reality beyond his limited concepts. He simply watched his mind, not buying into it, until the "veils" covering over this basic wisdom were removed and he could see things clearly. He realized that all human suffering is caused by the disjoint between our conditioned expectations and what is simply true. We can't just apply further concepts to think our way out of this predicament, but we have to sit down and unwind the web of our habitual responses, which is a courageous, even outrageous, thing to do. And while Buddhism is ultimately about helping others, we first have to see through the clouds of confusion we're constantly emitting with very little (if any) awareness of what we're doing. "First, cause no harm." "Put on your own oxygen mask first." "Clean your house." Etc. The beginning of the Buddhist path necessarily needs to be self-focused, which is not self-ish. The student-teacher relationship at this first stage of the path is described as that of a patient-physician. We realize we need help, and, realizing that there is no magic pill, we seek a teacher who can show us how to walk along the path with our own two feet.

Understanding the different purposes of the many kinds of meditation—from simple relaxation techniques to a discipline leading to greater understanding of oneself and the nature of reality—is essential in both teaching and practicing any of them, as is the case with anything we undertake. So the all-pervading question is how to preserve the authenticity of the tradition of mindfulness meditation—this profound wisdom—while teaching people who are being pummelled with endless promises of its magical benefits? If we have been trained in an authentic tradition, how do we stay true to the depth of that training in these kinds of settings, even while being touched by the suffering and stress of those who are seeking us out? And how do we respectfully tolerate instructors who have very little authentic training and view mindfulness as a relaxation technique, but are kind people who wish to help others? On the other hand, what do we do about instructors and entrepreneurs who are clueless and only interested in their bottom line?

The Instructors: Coaches or Teachers?

Even though I have a lot of experience teaching meditation in both spiritual and secular environments, I have struggled with its sudden popularity. It feels like a dream-come-true and my worst nightmare at the same time: What could be better than meditation being accepted in our culture? What could be worse than having it be watered down, misunderstood, and co-opted for profit?

When I first stumbled upon Buddhism back in the '70's, there were few books and fewer teachers. I was fortunate at that time to meet Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the first Tibetan Buddhist teacher to

come to the west following the escalation of the Tibetan cultural genocide and resulting diaspora. Trungpa was exceptional in his understanding of the western mind and our tendency to want a bandaid approach to spirituality, something painless and superficial, dressed up in exotica and flashy credentials. One of the first books he published in the west was called *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, an amazing treatise about the gross and subtle ways in which we deceive ourselves, and a description of how to unwind this web and awaken to a less ego-centered existence. He always stressed that walking on the path of personal awakening is manual labor, that no one else can do it for you. I was a personal student of this deeply trained master of meditation until his death in 1987, and then continued my studies with his successors and others.

Trungpa Rinpoche's requirements for becoming a meditation instructor were strict and demanding. We had to complete a dathün (a month-long meditation retreat, which also had prerequisites), a three-month seminary (which had stringent practice and study entry requirements), and the preliminary vajrayana practices known as *ngöndro* (100,000 physical prostrations with a liturgy and visualization, 100,000 purification mantras, 100,000 mandala offerings, and 1 million devotional mantras), which were preparation for full vajrayana empowerment, or *abhisheka*. There was then a rigorous meditation instructor training program, complete with memorization, simulated interviews with feedback, oral and written tests, a trial period, and on-going levels of authorization requiring continuing study and examination. At a gathering in Boston in 1978, Trungpa Rinpoche called us all in for a special meeting and told us that we were his lineage holders, placing his ritual *dorje* on our heads as we filed by and knelt for this profound empowerment.

Now there are countless opportunities to learn how to be a meditation instructor (including just saying that you are). There are long and short programs, in-person and on-line. Many of these wisely require the participants to complete a certain amount of meditation practice as part of the training. But because it seems so simple, there are many others who don't understand the subtleties that can only be gained through personal experience. I've met many instructors in many different contexts, and I would say that most of them are wonderful people with the best of intentions. But the depth of their own experience is all over the place, and this becomes important when guiding people who are sitting quietly with themselves, often for the first time. Many experiences and questions naturally arise.

My niece, a fourth-year medical student, recently had the opportunity to attend a special class on meditation as part of her school's alternative medicine section. It was a short one-off session, and when she commented after the guided meditation that she kept falling asleep and couldn't concentrate on her breath, the instructor told her that she was doing it wrong and needed to try harder. My niece left feeling that she wasn't the kind of person who could meditate or who would be helped by meditation. This is a classic example of how a poorly-trained instructor can harm rather than help someone by holding herself out as an expert. Who knows how many people she and others like her have turned away from meditation?

So the challenge is to be non dogmatic but genuine, and to present meditation in a way that can resonate with people of diverse backgrounds and circumstances. I confess that I've floundered at times, wondering how to help people who show up looking for quick relief from their anxiety. I've learned to add a bit more guidance through the meditation sessions, but if people have been coming regularly I like to challenge them with longer periods of silence, which most of them seem to

understand, appreciate, and feel empowered by. At times I feel I talk too much, at times too little. There is no way to predict who will be at any particular session, so my goal is to make it meaningful for whoever is there—not always achievable because of the wide range of expectations. (One person who said he had been meditating for years but had never had instruction from a live person compared me unfavorably with the “Headspace” App!)

The Practitioners: Clients or Students?

A colleague of mine at one of the mindfulness studios came out of his session the other day with a glowing smile on his face. He said that when he asked his usual “What brings you here?”-type question, someone actually said that she was looking for deeper meaning in her life, the underlying cause of her anxiety, and a path for working with that. My colleague and I hugged each other and whispered, “Hooray.”

I would say that roughly 95% of the people I instruct say they’re interested in meditation because they want to feel calmer and less stressed out. Which is so perfectly fine as well. The down-side of this is just that, because of the way mindfulness meditation is being promoted, their only context makes them expect a relaxation type experience, with guided visualizations and calming music. Many people are surprised that we aren’t going to lie down. (Some lie down anyway.)

As businesses, the studios want people to be happy so that they keep coming back. This sets up an atmosphere where there is pressure to entertain, to please, to make sure the experience is ‘pleasant.’ When someone walks into one of my meditation sessions and says that they need help with their anxiety and out-of-control mind, I’m touched that they have the courage and intelligence to try something so new and unfamiliar. I want them to feel safe and cared for, and I want to help ease their suffering. But some people are surprised that meditation is not as entertaining as they expect. I often tell them about the importance of boredom in helping us begin to notice our habitual way of filling every moment with some kind of fidgeting. Trungpa Rinpoche called this “cool boredom,” the good kind that we need. Becoming reacquainted with ourselves, quiet and unoccupied, is precious.

So I think we do people a great a disservice if we peddle mindfulness as just another pleasant and entertaining thing to do—another bandaid for our discomfort. I always encourage people to keep looking for what makes sense to them, whether it’s a particular teacher or kind of meditation, more exercise, therapy, or a vacation. Everyone is different and some people just need to relax.

Many people come and go, like butterflies checking out the pollen of different flowers. But everyone is looking for sustenance, and if we can present meditation in a way that makes sense to them they will be able to integrate it into their lives and benefit in many ways. This automatically makes the practitioner more available and helpful to others, since they become less constantly, mindlessly caught up in their own storyline. Everyone, without exception, has this potential, this fundamental ground of sanity and openness. When I teach meditation, I prefer to trust in people’s basic wisdom.

The person sitting in front of me is a human being, and all human beings are suffering in some way. Mindfulness meditation brings stability, clarity, and strength to our naturally intelligent minds; and as

we sit with whatever arises, with kindness and nonjudgment, we begin to realize that everyone has the same fear of loneliness and failure, the same longing for love and connection, the same ability to connect with their own breath and heart, and the same capacity for joy. So this is what I wish to provide to people who come to meditate: not just another pleasant, temporary experience and empty promise, but respect for their human journey and confidence in their ability to live their lives with a strong back and open front—embodied by the dignified posture of meditation. I want them to be able to savor every aspect of this delicious and complex meal which is our precious human life.

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Patricia Ullman is a senior teacher and meditation instructor in the Tibetan Buddhist and Shambhala traditions, having studied and practiced for over forty years under the guidance of some of the most renowned teachers of our day. She has led workshops and retreats throughout Europe and North America for children, professionals, students and adults, from beginners to advanced practitioners of meditation and mindfulness in everyday life. Patricia holds a J.D. degree and has spent her professional life in law, mediation, restorative justice, and non-profit leadership. She brings mindfulness techniques into these fields as part of the natural process of transforming organizational culture and working with conflict. A fourth generation Washingtonian, Patricia currently lives in the DC area and works with private clients and businesses—including law firms, hospitals, assisted living facilities, and other organizations—who wish to gain tools for improving the quality of their lives, work, and relationships with others. Visit Patricia's website at peaceofourminds.org.