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2016

## Fish Discovering Water: Meditation as a Process of Recognition

James F. Carmody

*University of Massachusetts Medical School*

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### Repository Citation

Carmody JF. (2016). Fish Discovering Water: Meditation as a Process of Recognition. Preventive and Behavioral Medicine Publications.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/med:psych/9780199688906.003.0004>. Retrieved from

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## Chapter 4

### **Fish discovering water: Meditation as a process of recognition**

James Carmody

#### **Introduction**

Forty-some years practicing in the three main Buddhist traditions and *Advaita*, together with teaching meditation and researching the psychological effects and neural mechanisms of mindfulness training, has shown me the need for a clear and parsimonious description of the attending processes associated with meditation practices that address psychological distress. In this chapter I have aimed for such a description: an uncluttered and jargon-free explanation using cultural constructs and principles familiar to non-practitioners. It is one I would have liked to have had access to when first introduced to practice.

To do this, I place the description in a broader context of human development and use the lens of natural selection pressures that have resulted in default and habitual vigilance-related attending processes serving the survival and safety-related needs of the social creatures we are. Central also in these processes is the sense of personal agency and ownership that has evolved along with a reflective capacity to imagine that things could be better for me than they are. The affective downside of this biological imperative is the sense of unease or dissatisfaction in the mind-body. Mind training practices used in the meditation traditions are designed to relieve this everyday malaise.

I then describe the psychological processes and principles that these skills draw upon and develop in supporting the recognition or regulation of these default attending processes, and the role these skills play in the cultivation of a more salubrious experience of everyday life. A number of ostensibly different meditation practices draw upon these generalizable principles, as do Western psychotherapeutic modalities; one or more of them can be seen at play in the arousal- and distress-reducing effects of the training exercises used in mindfulness, TM, mantra, tai chi, yoga, and reiki, as well as such psychotherapeutic modalities as progressive muscle relaxation, symptom monitoring, CBT, biofeedback, and loving-kindness.

To clarify terms, I describe two senses in which meditation “practice” is used in discussions of meditation and the unnecessary confusion created for beginners when these become conflated. I then go on to discuss the advantages of embedding the mechanisms by which meditation systems have their effect on stress/distress within this broader ecosystem of mind-body attending processes. It draws attention to the common processes in the training exercises of apparently disparate meditation traditions, demystifies the idiosyncratic language and terminology of specific modalities, and highlights the commonalities these traditions have with psychotherapeutic systems.

This approach provides the clinician with a useful conceptual coherence and a more synergistic understanding of the mental processes associated with various mind-body programs and the extent to which they can affect stress/distress. It also affords a few relatively simple principles clinicians can use to tailor explanations and presentations coherent with a patient’s interests

and background, so making the skills that meditation represents more meaningful, approachable, and accessible to the patient.

I end by raising issues I think are worth considering but that receive little attention in the meditation literature. These include the cultural and political values that derive from East Asian cultures that may remain embedded in meditation as it is taught and practiced in the West, and the assumptions often made about the effect that wider use of meditation may have upon the broader culture. Removing meditation and its mechanisms from traditional and dharma-related language and assumptions in this way also allows us to consider afresh the broader context in which it finds its place; to ask anew such questions as why we are not naturally at ease and why something like meditation is needed in the first place, and how it is that we do not recognize or remember the formation of the habits of attending that shape the valence of our lives.

I begin by considering these fundamental questions.

**What is the origin of human angst? Why is ease not a natural condition of everyday life? Why should we even need something like meditation?**

The experience of human suffering and angst has not unreasonably occupied human beings for millennia—probably since we developed the sense of an ongoing “I” with its accompanying existential dread and the capacity to imagine that things could be different for me than they are. And because our perception of problems is shaped by the analytic glasses through which we view the world, our imagined solutions also flow from the ascribed source of the problem.

Throughout much of history this suffering has been ascribed to one or more deities taking offense at our individual or collective behavior, and the methods and programs prescribed to appease these capricious animations in order to obtain relief have ranged from the somewhat reasonable to the bizarre. Episodically, however, more rational analyses ascribing suffering to naturalistic causes and effects have arisen.

During the time of the European Enlightenment, for example, critics focused on environmental deficiencies. These have included the system of education or parenting, the political institutions and systems under which we live, and the stressful economic and time pressures on family life that result. Such critiques gave rise to the enduring and familiar social/political movements that have become part of the accepted fabric of modern life.

Analyses ascribing the roots of suffering to individual and interior psychic processes also have a long history in both the East and the West, and were pervasive and enduring in South Asia. Among these, the Buddhist explanation was radically internal and firmly located the source of suffering in a fundamental ignorance of the way perceptions are shaped in the human psyche, with its attendant craving and downstream experiential fallout. Meditation, the term that has become a grab-bag of reflective practices designed to make this process apparent, was an integral part of a prescribed eight-faced escape route. But on the more fundamental question of why this ignorance-based misperception should be initially present in the psyche, the Buddhist analysis offers little more than the construct of karma.

Every age describes the psychic process in terms of the cultural beliefs, language, and constructs of the time. And, although the notion of karma can be a convenient story in addressing everyday unease, it amounts to little more than whatever happens does so for a reason also rooted in ignorance in some near or far personal past. Such a circular narrative provides little explanatory power in the face of the question of why the initial ignorance should be present and is unlikely to hold much water with skeptical minds. Questions such as this gain importance in our secular world, where the accessibility and coherence of the conceptual framework within which meditation is presented can make the goals and challenges a beginner may face in getting started more or less meaningful.

In this respect, evolutionary theory and the pressures that have shaped our organism, as well as advances in social science since the Buddhist psychic map was laid down, enable a framework that more broadly responds to the question of why, after so many millennia of evolution, we inhabit an organism so ignorant of its own fundamental psychic processes that, having attained adulthood, it requires an experiential educational recall.

### **The formative role of evolutionary pressures in everyday attending**

Evolutionary theory allows us to consider and appreciate the body-mind as an ecological system developed in the service of meeting our human needs, the most primal of which are for survival and reproduction. And the advantages bestowed by some measure of safety in supporting survival has given rise to the attendant second-order social needs for relationships, power, and status that exert such entangled pressures, shaping the cooperative-competitive creatures we have evolved to be. Given that our senses and nervous system detect and process large amounts of possibly useful information, attention—the capacity to consciously experience some portion of this information—is vital in the system's design for meeting our needs.

This capacity to focus attending resources and give priority to parts of experience perceived as supporting, or having the potential to support, our human needs has clear survival value. And accomplishing this with reactive immediacy rather than through more slowly-operating deliberative cognitive functions bestows even greater value. Unfortunately, even as this automatic and rapidly moving attention serves its vigilance function by highlighting threats and opportunities for the satisfaction of needs, we experience an attendant downside in the affective realm.

### **The affective downside of these default attending processes**

The experiential downside of these automatic movements of attention results from two associated features. First, its vigilance function means that attention's everyday focus is more or less threat-based. The second feature derives from the automaticity with which biological arousal levels follow the valence of the object of attention, meaning that the threat-based perceptions result in some measure of arousal-related bodily constriction. The feeling tone associated with these constriction- or tension-related sensations is to some degree unpleasant, with the degree of constriction-related unpleasantness depending upon both the perceived level of threat and our perceived capacity to deal with it.

These very rapid default movements of attention would not be a problem to our ongoing felt sense if the alerts were transitory and arousal naturally rapidly returned to a quiescent state. This appears to happen with animals in the wild, and possibly did for earlier hominids when physical survival was their primary concern. Survival in the face of immediate physical danger required attention to be predominantly awake to their senses and, the changing conditions of their bodies, and the physical surroundings (sights, sounds, tastes, and tactile and kinesthetic sensations). The physical danger of the proverbial saber-toothed tiger was seen, arousal levels spiked, it was dealt with in some way, and arousal levels went down once again.

Today, with our needs for physical survival largely met through the institutions of society, concerns associated with the second-order social safety-related needs for relationships, status, and power have become predominant in our attention. And, unlike immediate physical safety, satisfying and maintaining these needs entails ongoing cognitive activity involving imagination and complex planning. Because these also depend upon the indeterminate behavior of others, even a momentary satisfaction is then threatened by changing circumstances. And so this cognitively-driven vigilance never stops; attention continues to scan for imagined threats and circumstances perceived as important in maintaining the need's satisfaction.

The result of attention repeatedly defaulting to, and dwelling upon, threat-based themes is some degree of elevated arousal, its accompanying measure of muscular tension, and the attendant less-than-pleasant sensations of constriction. The everyday rub, then, of this gift to our survival is that we rarely feel completely relaxed and at ease in life, and at times experience the intense mental suffering that can result from this tendency.

### **Recognizing these threat-based themes in everyday angst**

These default mind-body processes can be recognized experientially by noticing where, and to what, our attention goes from moment to moment. When unregulated, or not required for the completion of some physical task, attention rarely rests upon immediate sense impressions and bodily sensations. Rather, it defaults to cognitions: thoughts about these and a myriad other things. And our social safety-related needs for relationships, status, and power mean those thoughts often concern the welfare of family and friends, whether we are in some way loved or sufficiently loving, or livelihood and money. This concerns-based cognitive commentary is experienced as the internal monologue.

Based in memory and imagination and often only peripherally related to sensory function, the internal narrative relentlessly plans, seeks, compares, judges, and regrets. Its needs-related function is seen in those emotionally-tinged thoughts and images experienced as concerns, worries, and transitory joys about family and friends, work, money, and one's own social standing. Attention preoccupied exclusively with this cognitive monitoring is experienced as rumination.

The power of the biological imperative driving attention's vigilance role in this way can be experienced when we attempt to bring some degree of self-regulation in the face of these processes. For although we have the capacity to deliberately bring attention to many parts of

experience, attempting to keep it on one consciously selected object makes its own persistent intentions apparent.

### **Meditation practices cultivate mindfulness of this dilemma**

Meditation practices are designed to bring awareness to and/or modify these default mental processes; to become mindful of them dwelling on threat-based themes and the resultant less-than-pleasant felt sense characterizing so much of life. Unsurprisingly, then, these practices usually begin with an attention-related exercise. We may, for example, be asked to direct attention to the sensations of breathing and to keep it there. But despite our resolve, we notice that within seconds it shifts to some other facet of experience; a phenomenon we refer to as a wandering mind.

Wandering is a misnomer, however, for it implies no clear destination. And if, instead of taking the wandering designation for granted, we become curious about what our “wandering” attention moves toward and what drives it to move in this automatic way, we begin to experientially understand the role this wondrous capacity plays in supporting our lives and the biological imperative that drives it. We begin to experientially recognize something of the ecology of our minds. This improved understanding allows us to be more sympathetic toward it and to work with it more skillfully, rather than regarding it as just an unfortunate obstacle we must train or in some way overcome in order to “meditate.”

However, before discussing further how meditation practices support dealing with these default processes, it would be as well to specify the way in which I am using the terms “meditation” and “practice”.

### **Clarifying the terms “meditation” and “practice”**

One of the issues this volume will no doubt grapple with is the wide-ranging uses of the term “meditation” and their associated connotations. In both popular and scholarly literature these extend from evoking the supernatural, spiritual, mystical, and exotic, to the more mundane experience of a quiet moment listening to music or taking in a landscape, or quietly thinking about something. Each of these uses of the term attracts some people.

As a jumping off point I use the Wikipedia definition of meditation: “a practice in which an individual trains the mind or induces a state of consciousness either to realize some benefit, or as an end in itself.” It is a useful starting point because it is bare and unadorned and does not attempt to describe and define the possible benefits or states of consciousness. I like it also because it places “practice” upfront and artfully goes on to describe two different meanings of practice that can be used in reference to meditation.

In the first meaning, meditation practice is used in the sense of “I’m practicing my jump-shot to get better at it during a real game.” In the other it is used in the sense of “I’m practicing my profession, having preceded this with an apprenticeship during which I gained competence in the skills it entails and which I now execute with expertise.”

While these two meanings of practice overlap and intertwine, either explicitly or implicitly, both academic and popular writing and instruction on meditation refer to practice in both senses and in ways that are not often made clear. Sometimes also they are conflated, with an apparent or stated assumption that the meanings are not in fact different or fruitfully distinguished between, invoking catchphrases such as “not doing,” “no effort,” or “just being.” But invoking paradox to explain away the apparent and sometimes obvious contradictions in these ways of approaching meditation is not helpful to those first approaching the field, even in the interest of pre-empting a beginner’s tendency to separate “life” from “practice.” Rather, making the distinction clear in instructions can be useful for beginners, especially in clinical settings. For, as I discuss below, the psychological processes involved in each sense of the word are different in important ways, and competent instruction can fruitfully support the development of each.

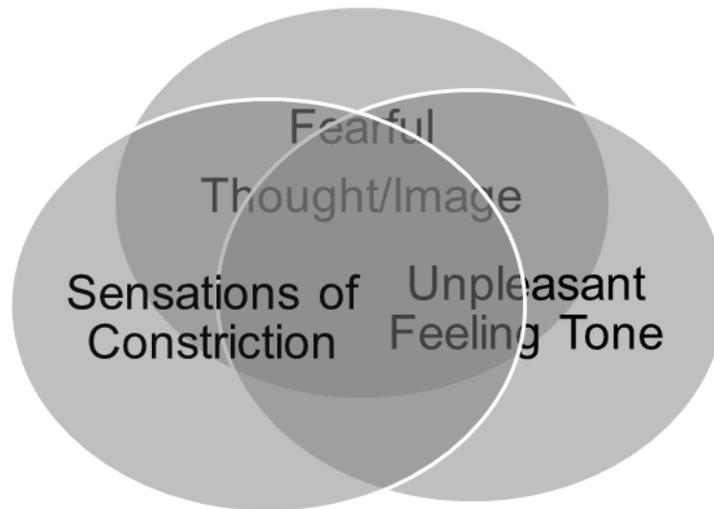
I focus initially on the first sense of meditation practice as “practicing my jump-shot to get better at it during a real game”. I describe the psychological processes activated by the attending skills embedded in the beginning instructions commonly used in a variety of meditation traditions, and the connection they have with the experience of distress and well-being. I then go on to discuss the second sense in which meditation practice is used, as in “practicing my profession with expertise, having gained competence in the skills it entails,” by describing the recognitions that can be established as a result of this kind of attending and the effects these too can have in everyday life.

### **Meditation as “practicing my jump-shot to get better at it during a real game”**

In order to meaningfully describe the psychological process through which mental distress is experienced, and the process by which the practices people are usually asked to do under the name of meditation address these, it is useful to recall the three phenomenological components that Buddhist analysis incisively lists as comprising experience. These are sensations, cognitions, and the pleasant/unpleasant feeling tones associated with those. Everyday experience and emotions are a symphony of the interplay of these most fundamental experiential elements.

While this seems straightforward enough, for reasons I discuss below, a feature of the root ignorance referred to earlier is that these components are not usually recognized as differentiated in everyday experience. And to make things even more difficult, they are locked in apparently seamless, conditioned cycles of association; these can start with any of the components. For example, a thought may be associated with a particular feeling tone and bodily sensation. The sensation then reminds us again of the thought and off the cycle goes, sometimes for lengthy periods.

Figure 4.1 illustrates one of these cycles operating in the experience of worry. An alarming thought is associated with some sensation of bodily constriction, which results in an unpleasant feeling tone; the unpleasant feeling tone then reminds us again of the thought. This undifferentiated and distressing cycle forms and reforms millisecond by millisecond and, by compelling attention in its adapted vigilance function, becomes self-sustained, sometimes for hours.



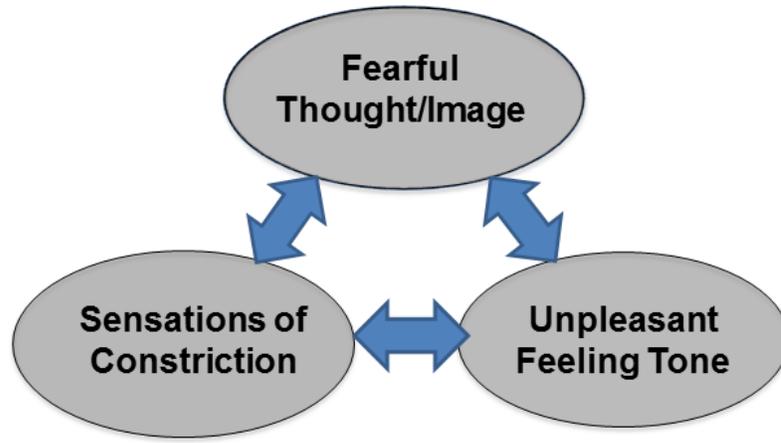
In its vigilance function unregulated attention maintains distress-related cycles of association  
**'I feel tense/anxious all the time... This is who I am'**

**Figure 1: Components of experience are undifferentiated  
Experience appears seamless**

So how do the mental tasks people are asked to perform in “meditation practice” as a “jump-shot” result in experiential benefit in the face of the psychological processes sustaining the dilemma illustrated in Figure 4.1? They are actually familiar psychological mechanisms.

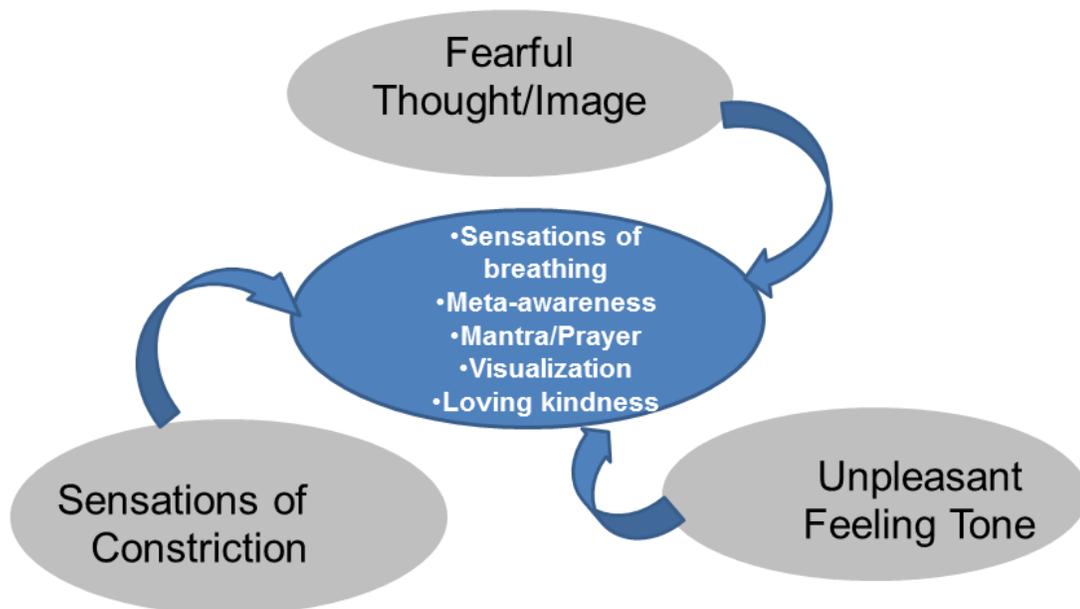
The initial and fundamental practice used in many meditation traditions is to introduce some measure of control of attention by directing it to a specific sensation, thought, or feeling; in meditation parlance these are called mental events or objects. This may involve attending to bodily sensations such as those of the breath, the kinesthetic sensations of a sitting posture or sequence of movements, the aural sensations of a mantra, the visual sensations of an image, or a specific thought or feeling. In learning to attend to them singly, or in combination, the components comprising experience are explicitly or implicitly recognized and differentiated, so creating an opportunity for some measure of self-regulation. This is illustrated in Figure 4.2.

This is not done with the intention to push the experience away but to recognize it for what it is and how it is created. A profound acceptance is implicit within this recognition.



**Figure 2: Opportunity opens for self-regulation as components of experience are recognized as differentiated and connected**

Next, the deliberate re-direction of attention from its default predilection toward an arousal-neutral mental object interrupts the conditioned cycle of association maintaining distress, and sets up a more arousal/affect-neutral cycle. This is illustrated in Figure 4.3.



**Figure 3: Conscious redirection of attention to chosen affect-neutral/positive object of attention interrupts cycle and forms a new more affect-neutral or positive cycle**

The process of differentiation of the components of experience, and recognition of their nature as mental phenomena, is sometimes supported by mentally labeling or noting these events as thoughts, sensations, or feelings as they are occurring. Attention is usually directed toward the content or meaning of the components and their conditioned associational cycles as in Figure 4.1. Bringing attention instead to a cognitive evaluation of their nature as events in the mind draws attention from their distress-maintaining content or meaning, while simultaneously functioning as an arousal-neutral evaluation of them. This is sometimes called meta-awareness.

This, then, is the generic mechanistic picture of the psychological nuts and bolts of meditation practices as they affect everyday arousal levels. Feedback from clinicians attending my courses on introducing mind-body principles into clinical care indicates the utility of these principles as a conceptual framework for both beginning the clinicians' own experience of mindfulness and mind-body practice, and in presenting and teaching these to their patients within the time constraints of a typical primary care appointment.

John Lennon once wrote that life is what happens to us while we are busy making other plans. And given that so much of life is spent with attention preoccupied by infinitely varying combinations of these angst-inducing cycles of mental components, it is useful to ask why the process is not ordinarily apparent to us. Why should we need to undertake these kinds of remedial classes?

## **Why these angst-inducing patterns of attending are not ordinarily apparent to us**

In considering the question of why these kinds of mental exercises should be needed to support recognition of these patterns and habits of attending that shape so much of our felt sense of everyday life, it is useful to reflect on the way we attend when we first come into the world, and how this incrementally changes during development. As any parent can attest, we start off as sensate creatures; attention focuses on bodily sensations—touching, tasting, hearing, seeing, and their pleasant and unpleasant feeling tones. Parents get to hear loudly when it is unpleasant. As language and socialization develop, cognitive processes become gradually integrated into the perception of sensations and feelings, and woven into the fabric of the emerging “I”; an implicitness that makes them inaccessible through the usual processes of memory recall, and so invisible to us. In this way, these patterns become the everyday water of experience we swim in and are not noticed in the way water is invisible to a fish.

The developmental process of this moment-to-moment forming and reforming of conditioned perceptual mental processes implicitly shaping our felt sense in the everyday world can be illustrated through the parallels it shares with the process of learning to read. When, as adults, we see a sentence such as “The cow jumped over the moon,” some thought or image is immediately created in our minds, probably involving a cow and the moon. We are not consciously aware of the process of recognizing the letters and their combinations as words comprising the sentence—it has become automatic. We may not even be consciously aware that we are reading. But of course we did not start off with this immediate recognition. Rather, we went through a painstaking process of learning letters and how they combine to form words that can then be joined in sentences to abstractly represent the world and our experience of it.

Meditation practices are designed to help us recognize perceptual processes that have become as automatic as reading. To torture the metaphor a little further, they help the practitioner to recognize that everyday experience is comprised of sentences constructed from the letters that are fundamental components of experience: thoughts/images, sensations, and their pleasant/unpleasant feeling tones. Meditation practices support this recognition in three interconnected ways: (1) cultivating curiosity about how the valence of experience is constructed from moment to moment—without this interest the rest does not follow; (2) experientially recognizing and discriminating between the components comprising experience and the near-immediate formation of their closely associated conditioned cycles; and (3) developing some capacity for self-regulation of attending in the face of this.

Before going on to the second sense in which meditation practice is used, it is useful to consider for a moment the widely varying goals people have in mind when approaching meditation and how these variations may shape the way it is described and approached.

## **Practitioners use meditation to suit their individual purposes and interests**

People approach meditation with different levels of interest and with diverse aims and ends in mind. This has been true throughout its history. In the clinical context a person may be satisfied with learning to direct their attention to the sensations of breathing or a mantra in a way that interrupts attention’s preoccupation at times of stress. Or through something like the body scan,

hatha yoga, or tai chi they may discover greater delight in everyday life as a result of attention being less preoccupied with the vigilance-based cognitive process and more attuned to their bodily/sensory experience. Still others will make skillful use of the associational cycles of thoughts, sensations, and feelings to cultivate a preferred suite of these as in *metta* (loving kindness) practices, affirmations, and prayer. Most people probably use some combination of these. Some also are interested in ideas of enlightenment, transcendence, and spirituality and this leads into the second sense in which meditation practice is used in the working definition.

Being vigilance-based, the cognitions associated with seeing are often associated with some degree of arousal. But occasionally, circumstances are such that we find ourselves in a situation where the thought associated with vision stops, such as when a beautiful sunset or the face of a child captures our undivided attention, and wonder and awe naturally come to the forefront. These were always available behind our preoccupation with the cognitions. Meditation then becomes about bringing curiosity to the everyday process by which this occurs so that the experience of awe and wonder is less dependent upon random circumstance and becomes part of our everyday experience. Both the exercises and the curiosity are needed; without the exercises, the curiosity tends to become once again preoccupied with cognitions about the process and so more of the same. And without the curiosity, the exercises become an end in themselves with little spill-over into everyday life. This brings us to meditation practice in the second sense.

### **Meditation practice in the second sense**

As described in the first sense in which meditation practice is used, the training exercises result in some level of recognition; the extent and depth of this will vary according to the kind of interest the practitioner brings to it and their level of ongoing curiosity. Some will be satisfied with recognition of the automatic perceptual processes and the capacity to redirect their attention to an affect/arousal-neutral mind object and the accompanying reduction in distress. Others will have gained a deeper awareness of these ongoing mental processes and will remain curious to take the enquiry further.

This is meditation practice in the sense of “I’m practicing my profession, having preceded this with an apprenticeship during which I gained competence in the skills it entails, so that I am now able to execute them with expertise.” This second sense of practice is often regarded as its original intent, and the many forms it takes are shaped by the culture and traditions within which the person developed their attending skills and also their temperament; factors that are themselves probably not unrelated.

Cognition is the most challenging mental component to recognize clearly since, as I described above, it is intimately and implicitly woven into the fabric of experience and identity. And so, while the most obvious thoughts, such as “Mary is wearing a red dress” or even “I’m noticing a fearful thought,” are readily observed and labeled, the more subtle cognitions also become more and more apparent as the enquiry proceeds, including into that of “practitioner” and “observer-noticer.”

Experience through practice in this sense also makes apparent the essential translucency of cognitions as mental phenomenon; a recognition that results in attention no longer being automatically captured by their content—what they are about or mean. As a result, attention's preoccupation with the cognitive processes of memory and imagination, which often prevents us from seeing things and people with freshness and curiosity, is undermined. Recognition of the tyranny that ruminative preoccupation has been exerting over life, perception, and well-being is a great release; cognition can now be engaged with, or not, as the situation merits. The person is using thought instead of being used by it.

Happily, this recognition is a lasting change; lasting in the way a fish's relationship with water might be permanently changed when, having been taken out of the water for an instant, it is returned to it. The fish has no organ for the perception of water; it was born into it and can only see things within water; recognition comes through its momentary absence, opening the mind to awe and wonder. Some will be satisfied with the greater freedom and enjoyment deriving from this.

Those curious to investigate further may engage in a more penetrating investigation into the "I"-ness of things; —the sense of ownership of I-related experience and the moment-to-moment creation of the sense of personal agency. Here a more contemplative approach is required, since every attempt to frame and investigate the question cognitively leads back into the familiar territory of memory and imagination. And instructions, being language-based, inevitably lead into the same cul-de-sac of infinite cognitive regress. Zen literature is replete with stories of teachers attempting to bypass this dilemma as they try to foster the particular kind of interest and curiosity required in their students.

Meditation practice in this sense leaves behind canonical vessels and approaches the pathless referred to in a number of traditions. The direct experience emerging from this kind of enquiry bestows clear, and at times jaw-dropping, recognition of how the world as we know it is created and that "mind" is the name we give to our interpretive experience. When meaning imbues everything, words like "spiritual" become redundant; even time past and future is recognized as a creation of memory and its partner imagination.

The difference between the two approaches to practice may be summed up in the following way. The first recognizes the principles and rearranges the components of the cycles so that they are more salubrious (less arousal-inducing), even if the cycle is one that assures one that this is passing and you can just "watch it." The second seeks to undermine even this perceptual cycle by transferring interest to the knowing itself. As such, it encompasses a more penetrating interest and curiosity in addition to the cultivation of attending skills. That which knows begins to become of more interest than that which is known and deep levels of satisfaction and peace integrate themselves into everyday life as a result. Nothing in the world encourages this shift in interest—in that sense it is truly unworldly.

### **The qualities of presence**

As the narrative meaning of mental contents (thoughts, sensations, feelings) arising in awareness no longer automatically compels attention in the old way, the presence of awareness

itself becomes intuitively recognized. Awareness cannot be perceived or cognitively apprehended; perception and attention are designed only to recognize objects arising within it. It is an intuitive recognition, accompanied by ease sweeping through the body-mind. I prefer the term “presence” to “awareness,” which has established associations and meanings, although other people will have their own, different names for this.

A number of other previously masked features of mind become gradually or startlingly apparent with this recognition. Among these is that presence itself is imbued with qualities of meaning and peace, faith, gratitude, as well as joy—their companion and fellow-traveler—and a deep empathy for the suffering embedded in nature. We recognize how these were missed as interest and curiosity were instinctively preoccupied with the mental objects arising in this field; that the meaning and joy in the seeing itself have been apprehended through, and attributed to, the narratives and mental constructions reflecting them, and that the same preoccupation has diluted empathy and responsiveness.

As tribal creatures, this should not be surprising to us. Our adapted capacity for the cooperation upon which our very lives, and the lives of our children, depend is powerfully bound to and dependent upon our collective, and more intimate and personal, imagined narratives and stories; rich narratives of identity and connection that infuse our loving. These impulses, deeply-rooted in the more primitive past of our nervous system, also form the basis of ongoing human conflict and divisions and do not readily surrender their fascination to a more recent cerebral interest in reflective enquiry of unproven survival value. The elusiveness of freedom becomes apparent when just the suggestion that these are collective imaginings, albeit essential ones, and that they can be appreciated as such without compromising the relationships they suffuse turns out to be a bridge too far for many if not most.

The imagery and language used to describe this process of recognition and direct experience reflect the cultural ground and narratives that surround it, as well as the practitioner’s beliefs and temperament. This is seen in the interpretive reflections contemplatives through the ages have offered around certain of these qualities. Buddhism refers to awakening, Plato in his enquiry refers to non-material ideal forms, Saint Paul to no longer seeing through a glass darkly, still others to the presence of god. The list is long and diverse. And while the initial descriptor is a more or less awkward attempt to allude to the unspeakable, the metaphors and processes described by the founders to approach it seem to inevitably gather a narrative of their own and we’re off to the races again; preoccupied and fascinated by the narrative in a way that truncates curiosity, enquiry, and exploration, it becomes dogma and the basis for fruitless arguments among adherents.

Here I have presented a narrative using psychological and evolutionary principles that I hope rescue the process from sectarianism and ill-defined language and is less pandering to our emotional needs for certainty and identity.

### **The yin and the yang of it**

Although the meditation training exercises are relatively simple and straightforward in themselves, the act of practicing them does not appear to be of interest, or accessible, to all.

Patient samples in my clinical trials of meditation-based programs are predominantly relatively well-educated white women. Likewise, women regularly comprise the majority of the courses I teach for clinicians. I've wondered why this should be. What makes it seem so less immediately attractive to men and other groups, and how could it be made more initially attractive? No doubt the sign on the door determines to a large degree who enters and is introduced to meditation. In this sense its portrayal in popular media of people sitting on cushions with their eyes closed has something to do with the very term meditation invoking an aversive impression of passivity and implicit receptivity, an image the ubiquitous sitting Buddharupa does nothing to diminish.

Interestingly, when I began practicing meditation some 40 years or so ago, interest was more evenly divided across the genders. In fact Zendo had quite a martial air that emphasized sitting through pain and discomfort, and getting by on less sleep. And some Burmese *vipassana* retreats included encouragement for retreatants to make a "firm resolve" not to move a muscle for increasingly long periods of sitting practice; as those periods went on, the silent air in the hall became increasingly charged and tense. And while *metta* practices were a part of other *vipassana* retreats, it was increased interest in Tibetan traditions and the centrality they placed on relationships and the feminine that has been largely responsible for the present emphasis in meditation programs on compassion and connection, and the introduction of terms such as tenderness and healing into the process. The veneration people feel for the Dalai Lama is no doubt related to that. On the other side of this emphasis on connection run the attempts to use meditation for what is referred to as the "spiritual bypass"; seeing it as a way of avoiding the complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty these feminine qualities represent, and bypassing the necessity of resolving uncomfortable preoccupations that develop when internal conflict is present.

This situation refers back to the first part of this chapter and the discussion of the mind as a needs-meeting apparatus where the internal narrative functions as part of the cognitive apparatus serving that end. It is essential that the narratives through which we live our everyday lives are coherent, functional, and integrated with those of others in order to fulfill our obligations, and that they are seen as leading to goal satisfaction. Conflicting themes in the narrative and its surrounding life circumstances mean that attention becomes inordinately preoccupied with them as we attempt to find an internal coherence recognized as leading toward the satisfaction of important needs, be they for relationships, status, or power. Attention, in its role of vigilance for opportunities for resolution, repeatedly returns to the conflicted narrative and its distress in such a way that it is unavailable for anything else.

While meditation can provide some necessary stability in the process of exploring and living through this, attempting to use it to bypass these interactive life tasks results in withdrawal into relentless concentration practice as an emotional analgesic that does not address the underlying problem. It becomes the role of something like psychotherapy to unveil the conflicting elements of the narrative and find some resolution. With its conflict reduced, the narrative no longer needs to preoccupy attention in such a compelling manner and interest is sufficiently available for other activities such as meditation practice.

It is the sense of seeking to undermine the very root of the internal narrative that most clearly distinguishes meditation from psychotherapy, which is generally aimed at altering some feature of the internal narrative, or resolving conflicts embedded within it that are perceived to be preventing the person from fulfilling their goals. As such, psychotherapy may at times be an essential adjunct to the process of enquiry.

### **Meditation occurs within a broader social and political landscape**

As psychologists, we endeavor to map mental territory, and just as geographic maps reflect political territory, our mental maps also in some way reflect the tacit political and social priorities of the day. Likewise, meditation has always been something of a Rorschach test in the sense that each age understands, interprets, and utilizes it in ways that suit prevailing values and ideology. And so it remains in the twenty-first century; the dharma wheel is being re-imagined to take radial tires and chrome hubcaps. As evidence of the personal and health benefits that can derive from meditation practice becomes more widely discussed, it is finding an increasingly accepted place in mainstream health care. One result of this is the uneasy relationship between the internal and phenomenological investigation of meditation's practices and the external, sense-based empirical methods of assessing outcomes and mechanisms in Western clinical medicine.

Meditation programs are also being employed by some large companies with the aim of reducing stress and so increasing workplace productivity. It is even being introduced into explicitly political settings such as the British House of Commons. And while the assumption seems to be that these developments can only be an unalloyed good, it is worth considering the changing broader social, political, and economic landscape within which this increase in interest is occurring. The rise in popularity of meditation-based stress reduction programs in health and business settings in the US in the 1970s and 1980s closely tracked falling middle-class incomes and rising levels of personal debt as people tried to maintain their standards of living. Even as these programs become more widely used, conditions and economic circumstances become increasingly dire for workers and families.

While it would be unreasonable to suggest that the use of meditation by an ever-increasing number of people could alone be expected to result in social and political change, it is worth critically analyzing and discussing the embedded values that may be associated with meditation practice and instruction and how these relate to the personal desires that create cultural or political change. Is there a danger that these skills and world view just result in getting people to be more "productive" even if their pay does not increase along with this productivity, or result in coping better with conditions that, to initiate change, require resistance rather than acceptance?

The increasingly popular mindfulness meditation programs have roots in the politically passive and authoritarian societies in which East Asian Buddhism evolved and the social conditions in countries with long Buddhist traditions do not offer promising role models. Judeo-Christian traditions have, painfully and bloodily, evolved to be more democratic with ideals of justice, tolerance, and equality, and with solid ideas of sin; actions are seen as right and wrong rather than skillful and unskillful. So, as Buddhism-based meditation becomes more integrated into

Western societies, it is worth examining without prejudice whether and in what ways the values that tolerate and support the societal structures in which it evolved may be present in the practice, the way it is taught, and its assumptions about change and well-being.

The contrasting roots struck me clearly in a venue in which I found myself teaching. A Buddhist organization had acquired what was once a Catholic monastery. The old chapel had been converted into the meditation hall and, while readily accessible Christian iconography had been removed, the stained glass windows in the clerestory depicted Christ and various martyrs in some form or another grimly shedding blood and dying. These images contrasted starkly with the imposing eight-foot Buddharupa dominating what had been the altar and depicting the Buddha sitting quietly with a beatific smile. And while bodhisattvas are at times depicted wielding weapons, these symbolize the slaying of ignorance, not other people. It is worth noting also that the Buddha was not politically radical himself; rather, he appears to have been a pragmatist, careful to cultivate the support of the rich and powerful.

Do such differences bear upon views of acceptance and compassion? The practice of refraining from changing experience is a cognitive stance adopted in meditation practice. But acceptance can occur implicitly at a deeper level. In this understanding, when sensations or thoughts are recognized for what they are, and it is recognized that they will by their nature change of their own accord, the acceptance is implicit. At this level the cognitive/affective stance is recognized as a mental activity comprised of the components of experience. And while the dynamic quality of compassion is emphasized in meditation training programs, and studies show that exercises to foster self-compassion have a salubrious effect upon happiness, an assumption that this will impact the broader social and political fabric needs to be critically examined.

### **The principles of practice are straightforward even as the world is not**

In this chapter I have endeavored to draw together some of what I have learned through the threads and circumstances of my own personal, professional, and scientific experience with meditation. I hesitate to ennoble the process by calling it a "journey"; it was more akin to muddling along in the face of confusion, incomplete knowledge, and spotty instruction. My object is to provide a conceptual framework that may be useful in understanding meditation in a relatively straightforward way; a description unencumbered by the narratives of religious traditions and instruction that often mask its essential simplicity by conflating the practices engaged to cultivate the ground for recognition and that which is recognized as a result of them. It is a description I think I would have found helpful.

In extracting and describing in this way some of the fundamental mental principles at work in the shaping of our experience of the world, and making a clear distinction between the relatively straightforward mental training exercises used to experientially recognize some of those principles in real time from that which can result from their practice, I do not mean to imply that the world itself is simple. But it does have a number of advantages.

First, it is easy for the actions and material objects related to the execution of the enquiry to become ritualized and/or fetishized, diverting and truncating the curiosity that is the heart of enquiry. This description appropriately transfers the mystique that the attending skills and

dharma narrative associated with meditation practice are often given toward the mystery we find ourselves in. This does not exclude the skills and process from the mystery, but neither does it make precious the means by which the mystery is better appreciated.

Second, it values the cognitive function as an aid to penetrating into this mystery. Conflating meditation's means and ends can lead practitioners to undervalue their thinking function, concerned that it will just lead them further into the cognitive weeds and distract them from the real work of meditation, which is often seen as beyond thinking, or stopping thought. Instruction in some traditions repeatedly caution against "over-thinking things," invoking the Zen admonition to not mistake the finger pointing to the moon for the moon itself, as though attempting to think critically about meditation is to attempt to reduce the ineffable to the cognitive. Certainly the cognitive is slippery mental territory to yoke, but any of our human functions that remain underdeveloped or under-utilized limits us in the enquiry; not taking full advantage of critical and analytic thinking only limits the resources available to us in penetrating to the heart of the question.

Third, it makes clear the distinction between meditation means and ends. Conflation of these contributes to confusion in discussions of meditation as it becomes popular in clinical and business settings. Here, people's initial curiosity is oriented in some way toward the goals of obtaining clinical or productivity effects rather than about the "I-ness" embedded in the perceptual process that interests long-term meditators in the Buddhist and other insight traditions; an interest that requires a deeper enquiry and level of understanding in the instructor. Nevertheless, terms and practices from one interest carry over into the other. For example, the common exhortation to 45-minute practice periods is a holdover from monastic traditions but without any evidential base for clinical or business settings. As such, this and other practices may serve only to make the process appear forbidding to some who might benefit from short periods of practice. Another example relates to my remarks above about the cautionary stance toward the thinking function, which results in beginners not being given a clear conceptual framework from which to approach meditation practice; this stance finds expression in the admonition that "it's best to learn this by direct personal experience." While this is undoubtedly true, the sign above the door is an important determinant of who enters and a clear explanation can arouse the interest of more than those with a high tolerance for ambiguity.

I have also raised some questions about the cultural values and assumptions that may be embedded in meditation practice as it travels and finds expression in Western countries. The iconographies and approaches to change are quite different and it is important to extract, examine, and discuss their implications without prejudice.

### **Personal Meditation Journey**

In 1961, I found myself travelling through India. It was a fortuitous series of events that took me there, and the vibrancy and chaos was jaw-dropping for a very young man raised as a Catholic in a small, remote, and provincial country.

Most memorable among the wonders was the sight of a stark-naked man walking nonchalantly along a crowded street. Just as remarkable was the minimal attention he drew. I learned he was a seeker of something called enlightenment. The idea fascinated me.

A year later, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, on a world tour, spoke at my university. He talked about the root of suffering, and meditation as a path to enlightenment. I was skeptical, but a friend who attended the practice session taught me what she had learned. And that was the start of it. Since childhood my interest has gone to how things work, the underlying causes, and here was something practical I could experiment with. I found the mantra meditation emotionally soothing for my turbulent emotional life, but it created more questions than it answered.

Something called yoga was also popular at the time and I found its claims intriguing also. Practical instruction was hard to come by, however. So, once again I headed off to India, this time to live in an ashram that offered yoga training. It was a demanding program but left unanswered questions.

While there I heard of a Burmese instructor who taught *vipassana* meditation courses and I travelled north to try it. The slender insight it provided into my mind captured my interest and offered a means to continue. I stayed on in the Japanese temple in Bodh Gaya taking instruction in Zen from the roshi. It was the start of a decades-long immersion in Buddhist practice that included long periods of solitary retreat.

*Advaita's* contemplative approach later provided a third leg for the stool and in making apparent the limitations of a path-based approach to meditation, facilitated recognition of the qualities of presence I allude to in my chapter.

**Figure 4.1:** When components are undifferentiated, experience appears seamless.

**Figure 4.2:** Components of experience are recognized as differentiated and connected; opportunity arises for self-regulation.

**Figure 4.3:** Conscious redirection of attention to an arousal-neutral object interrupts the cycle and forms a new, more affect-neutral or positive cycle.