Searching for the Present Moment

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The practice of mindfulness is fundamentally concerned with becoming more aware of the present moment. Mindfulness techniques such as observing the breath, walking meditation, working meditation, eating meditation, scanning the body, mindful writing, deep listening, mindfully cradling our thoughts and feelings, and observing mind with mind are all methods of cultivating an awareness of the “here and now.” In effect, these techniques are types of meditative anchor that help to tie the mind to the present moment and provide a reference point for maintaining an unbroken flow of awareness throughout the day. The word mindfulness, which is a translation of the Pali word *sati*, essentially means “to remember” (i.e., to remember to be aware of the present moment). However, believe it or not, from the Buddhist perspective, the whole point of remembering to be aware of the present moment is so that we can remember to let go of it.

Having made great efforts to follow the meditation instructor's teachings and strive to become aware of the present moment, to now hear that we should ultimately be aiming to let go of the present moment might seem a little confusing or even alarming. However, if we take a moment to investigate what actually constitutes the present moment and whether it even exists, then these words may start to take on more meaning.

If a person wants to become proficient in the practice of mindfulness, then they need to have some grounded realization of the true and absolute mode in which the present moment exists. Most teachings on mindfulness explain that the present moment is the moment of time that exists between the past and future, and since the future never arrives and the past is history, then the only place where we can truly experience life is the present moment. From the conventional or

relative perspective, this statement is perfectly true. If, like most people, we allow the mind to constantly ruminate about the past or fantasize about the future, then before we know it, our lives will have slipped us by in a blur of unawareness.

However, from the absolute perspective, the above affirmation of an identifiable and intrinsically existing present moment is untenable. Imagine that you decide to take a trip to the countryside and have a picnic in your favorite tree-lined spot next to a river. From the time of your arrival until the time you pick up your picnic basket and start to make your way home, we are sure that it will not come as a surprise to you to hear that you have not been sitting in a static environment. At any given instant when you found yourself gazing at the river, you were observing a dynamic and continuously flowing phenomenon. Thus, between any given instant of time and the next, the river undergoes change. However, not only does the river change between two separate instances of time, but it also changes within the same instant of time. The reason for this is because time is a relative concept; it is a man-made construct that we human beings employ to try to add structure and order to our world.

The truth is, any given moment of time can be continuously divided into ever smaller instants, and this process of division can continue ad infinitum. For example, a second can be divided by 1,000 to form a millisecond, and a millisecond can be further divided to form a microsecond (one millionth of a second). However, the microsecond can be divided to form an attosecond (one quintillionth of a second), and the attosecond can be divided to form a yoctosecond (one septillionth of a second). But even the yoctosecond can be divided again and again. Scientists call the shortest physically meaningful moment of time a *planck*. The planck is an indescribably fleeting moment of time. It is 5.4×10^{-44} s to be exact, which is even quicker than the time it takes the novice monks to arrive in the dining hall after they hear the gong sound to announce that it is mealtime. Although it is difficult to imagine the brevity of a planck, the fact is that the

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planck could also be divided into infinitely smaller and smaller units of time.

So returning to the river analogy, not even for the most miniscule moment of time could we say that the river ever stands still. It is not just rivers that are subject to this continuous process of change, but every single phenomenon that we encounter. In many respects, we could actually view the present moment and all that it contains as one enormous flowing river: A graceful and swirling flood of interwoven mind and matter that continuously flows yet never actually goes anywhere. Now then, here is where an opportunity to make a small intuitive leap arises. If there is never a point in time when the river stands still, how can a thing that does not ever become static undergo any change? Change implies that something changes from one state or position to another. But since phenomena never truly come to rest in a fixed state, then it is illogical to assert that such a transient and “permanently unfixed” entity can undergo change. That which never “is” cannot be said to change between one moment of time and next.

This method of investigating the present moment stems from a certain system of Buddhist philosophy and is perhaps a little mind-boggling. So do not worry if you feel you are getting left behind. There are many other keys that can be used to help you catch a glimpse of reality. Essentially, what we are trying to get at is quite simple: the present moment is just a concept. It does not exist in the manner in which we have accustomed ourselves to believing. The present relies for its existence on the notions of future and past. But, the future is a fantasy that never actually arrives (because it is always the present), and the past exists as nothing other than a memory—it has no substance. So if there is no future and no past, then how can it be said that there is a present?

Insights from Modern Science

It is not the case that these ideas are just crazy theories hatched out by peculiar Buddhist teachers living thousands of years ago. In fact, in recent years, there have been some breakthrough scientific discoveries that have begun to verify the validity of such theories. For example, for a number of decades now, quantum theorists have posited that at the subatomic level, there can never be absolute certainty that a particle exists at a given position in time or space. This effectively implies that it is possible for subatomic particles to exist in multiple places simultaneously and to be nowhere and everywhere at the same time. However, until recently, there was no observable scientific proof for this theory. This changed in 2010 when a team of physicists, led by Professor Andrew Cleland of the University of California Santa Barbara, published in the journal *Nature* the results of an experiment which demonstrated that a tiny metal blade made of semiconductor material (just visible to the human eye) can simultaneously vibrate in two different energy states. In kinetic

terms, this is comparable to being in two different places at the same time.

Another interesting area of quantum mechanics that seems to add validity to a number of long-standing Buddhist principles regarding the nature of reality is that of *string theory*. The string theory basically asserts that reality has multiple dimensions to it. This is very similar to models taught in certain systems of Buddhist cosmology, which assert that there are multiple world systems and world dimensions in addition to our own. Although the string theory is still quite limited from the Buddhist perspective (because it restricts the number of concurrently existing dimensions to just 11), it is a major leap forward in terms of establishing a common ground between modern science and Buddhist thought. So the next time you collect your mind and bring it to rest in the present moment, perhaps you should ask yourself exactly in which present moment you are currently dwelling.

Expanding our View

Perhaps in years to come, discoveries in the field of quantum mechanics will narrow the gap between Buddhism and science even further. Perhaps scientists will discover that a single universe can contain an infinite number of multidimensional universes and that infinite expanses of time can exist within a single second. Rather than thinking about existence as something that began at the time of the Big Bang, perhaps scientists will start to view the birth and death of our universe as just a small blip in a beginningless and eternally enduring cycle of formation and dissolution—just a single phase of expansion and contraction within the realm of unconditioned truth (Sanskrit: *dharmadatu*). This would help to transcend the limiting notion of there being a fixed beginning and a definite end. Without a beginning and an end, the whole construct of time falls apart. Then, instead of concepts such as past and future, or beginning and end, perhaps we would have to use other words to describe existence such as “isness,” “thatness,” or “suchness.”

You may find the idea of simultaneously existing present moments or simultaneously existing dimensions to be a bit far-fetched. But it is actually not that difficult to imagine, and there are plenty of more accessible examples that we can use to help us do so. For instance, there are approximately seven billion people currently living on this planet. Each person is completely different and experiences the present moment in a unique manner. So, that is seven billion different present moments that are simultaneously happening right here and now. It is an inexpressibly greater number if you consider all of the present moments experienced by other sentient life forms such as animals and insects.

The whole point of this discussion is to introduce the idea that the present moment may not exist exactly in the manner in which we think it does, or that it may not exist at all. If we can

adopt a slightly less rigid view of things, then we have a much greater chance of being able to transcend limiting concepts such as the present moment. Please do not misunderstand what is being said here, we are not advising that people should stop practicing mindfulness and become content with living a life of corpse-like unawareness. That is definitely not what is needed. Rather, what we are suggesting is that in order to truly taste and embrace the essence of the present moment, we have to relinquish any kind of attachment to it. Mindfulness helps to bring the mind into the present moment, but that is only half the work. Having allowed the mind to settle into an awareness of the here and now, we then need to make a small intuitive leap and pierce through the present moment to taste the underlying fabric of reality itself. It is not the case that we should make extreme efforts or strain ourselves in order to do this. Rather, just by relaxing the mind and being open to the possibility of a reality beyond our current manner of perceiving, we already begin to dispel some of the mental obscurations that prevent this self-existing truth from emerging.

So when you observe your breath during meditation practice, rather than just follow the breath in and out, you might like to try observing the space and time between the in-breath and the out-breath (and between the out-breath and the in-breath). As you allow the mind to come to rest in its natural state and begin to let go of the normal conceptual mode of perceiving things, you may begin to notice that the space and time between your in-breath and out-breath starts to expand exponentially. With a single breath in and out, you can experience an entire lifetime, and your view can extend beyond the limits of space and time. The boundary between you, the observer, and the present moment that is being observed can start to disintegrate. The perceiver and the perceived can merge as one. Perhaps we could say that this is the difference between “being in” the present moment and simply “being”

the present moment. Be alive by living in the present moment, but liberate yourself completely by letting go of it.

In the foregoing discussion, by using a combination of logical reasoning and insights from recent scientific discoveries, we have tried to point towards a deeper truth that exists beyond the normal way of perceiving the present moment. However, for people who prefer a more intuitive approach to this subject, then the following four-verse *vajragiti* (a form of spontaneous spiritual song or poem) that we wrote called Mahavairocana's One Mind might better embody some of the concepts to which we have been referring:

Mahavairocana's One Mind

I am Mahavairocana, the one Mind
All things arise as me
I am the entirety of space and time
Yet you will not find me there

If you take now and all that occurs as the path
Allowing perceived and perceiver to merge as one
Seeing my face in all that unfolds
Then you forever enter my deathless realm

When you realize that throughout all lifetimes
There has never once been any coming or going
Nothing has ever been accomplished, nothing left undone
You perfect the enlightened mind in a single instant

With pristine mirror-like cognizance
Relax into the awareness of intrinsic wakefulness
All things are Mind-born, yet don't search for that Mind
Noble one, you have been introduced!