

2023

Mindfulness Traps and the Entanglement of Self: An Inquiry into the Regime of Mind

Richard Dixey

Dharma College, Berkeley, CA, USA

Ronald E. Purser

San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA, USA

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/advance-archive>



Part of the [Alternative and Complementary Medicine Commons](#), [Animal-Assisted Therapy Commons](#), [Art Therapy Commons](#), [Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Commons](#), [Dance Movement Therapy Commons](#), [Developmental Psychology Commons](#), [Health Psychology Commons](#), [Human Factors Psychology Commons](#), [Marriage and Family Therapy and Counseling Commons](#), [Multicultural Psychology Commons](#), [Other Mental and Social Health Commons](#), [Other Philosophy Commons](#), [Other Psychiatry and Psychology Commons](#), [Other Psychology Commons](#), [Philosophy of Mind Commons](#), [Philosophy of Science Commons](#), [Psychiatric and Mental Health Commons](#), [Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy Commons](#), [Psychological Phenomena and Processes Commons](#), [Religion Commons](#), [Somatic Psychology Commons](#), [Theory and Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Transpersonal Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dixey, Richard and Purser, Ronald E., "Mindfulness Traps and the Entanglement of Self: An Inquiry into the Regime of Mind" (2023). *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies Advance Publication Archive*. 57. <https://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/advance-archive/57>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ CIIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Journal of Transpersonal Studies Advance Publication Archive by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CIIS. For more information, please contact ksundin@ciis.edu.

Mindfulness Traps and the Entanglement of Self: An Inquiry into the Regime of Mind

Richard Dixey
Dharma College
Berkeley, CA, USA

Ronald E. Purser
San Francisco State University
San Francisco, CA, USA

Mindfulness meditation can provide salutary therapeutic benefits, as well as lead advanced practitioners to states of calm and equanimity. In this paper, we argue that such forms of meditation may subtly entrap practitioners in circular, self-reflexive feedback loops. Because these meditation traps fail to clearly discern the operations of mind, they offer a temporary oasis of peace within an unaltered dualistic realm of mind that leaves the root delusion of self-identity intact. Drawing upon Tarthang Tulku's seminal book *Revelations of Mind*, we present what he refers to as the "regime of mind," the processes of cognition, identification and re-cognition in which body, mind and language work in unison to maintain a persuasive experience of a self that knows an external world. Because these very same mechanisms are operative in meditation, the states of silence, no-thought, peace, calm, and mental blankness that can occur deceive practitioners into interpreting such experiences as signs of progress and spiritual attainment. By developing an understanding of how the regime of mind operates, such clarity can function as a corrective to the common traps of meditative practice fueled and obscured by subtle dualistic structures of self-identification and self-grasping. This clear ground of understanding can reveal how reflexively dualistic structures of knowing are constructed, opening up wider focal-settings that go beyond dualistic mind, offering more liberating options for exercising human freedom and intelligence.

Keywords: *mindfulness, meditation, nondual wisdom*

Whether a long-time practitioner of meditation or a novice who has taken up a mindfulness practice for twenty minutes a day, the way a practitioner engages in meditation from the start can reveal much about the fruits and "outcomes" of such a practice. People engage in meditation for various reasons and motives. For example, mindfulness meditation has become a widely popular and sought-after therapeutic technique and palliative for relieving stress, anxiety, chronic pain and other stress-related symptoms. Others have encountered meditation within a religious or formal Buddhist context and have committed to a long-term meditation practice for mental development as part of the path towards spiritual awakening or liberation. For some Western students, this has taken the form of following a certain tradition, school or teaching—whether more formally in close relationship with a traditional

teacher, or more informally through reading books, taking an occasional class, workshop or retreat. In any of these cases, it is rare that Westerners have access to extended, in-depth meditative training, informed by doctrinal study and analytical inquiry, along with close supervision and personal guidance from an experienced teacher.

In this paper, we draw from a seminal book by Tarthang Tulku, one of the few Tibetan Buddhist Nyingma lamas fully trained in Tibet, having received traditional training and transmission of important Tibetan Buddhist lineages from some forty different meditation masters. His book, *Revelations of Mind* (2013), was written sensitive to the fact that many meditators not only do not identify as Buddhists, but also even those who do, lack the necessary traditional religious training to inform their meditative practice. Given this gap, *Revelation of Mind* addresses a secular Western audience who

neither have the interest nor the access to seriously study Buddhist doctrinal texts and commentaries, along with the advanced meditation manuals typically required of a traditional monastic. Similarly, this article also refrains from making extensive comparisons to the Tibetan Buddhist teachings and other Buddhist canonical literature since we aim to also reach a wider audience.

The Regime of Mind

A key theme in *Revelations of Mind* is that the path of meditation may be blocked by an inability to develop a clear and deep non-conceptual understanding of the nature of mind. A major barrier to such development is that the sincere meditator may be practicing meditation within the confines of what Tarthang Tulku (2013, p. 13) refers to as the “regime of mind,” an innate perceptual mechanism based on the primacy of conceptuality and language. Even while engaged in the practice of meditation, lurking below the surface calm, linguistic constructs and unexamined preconceptions lie dormant.

A *regime* is a useful metaphor in that it signifies that our ordinary mind functions as an all-powerful and encompassing control system that governs the generation of known experience. Meditation is often sought as a means to develop calm and attain a brief reprieve from the regime of mind and its automaticity, emotional reactivity and constant movement of thoughts. The basic mechanism of this regime is based on a three-phase temporal process beginning with cognition (or perception), identification (naming and labeling) and re-cognition (associative networks and memories). A key feature of understanding the regime of mind is that both the knowing subject (or “I”) and the known object are not primary, but arise in the third phase of this process, co-arising during recognized experience as “I know that.” This creates a key difficulty for meditation methods that rely on instructions “to observe” or “to witness” the meditation object (such as the breath, sensations, etc.) since the observer who is attempting to meditate is part and product of the regime of mind itself.

The regime of mind is not necessarily evil or destructive; in fact, it is evolutionarily a protective mechanism oriented toward ensuring survival as a

species since the processes of naming and recognition allow memories laid down from past experience to inform our responses to current circumstance. The problem, however, is that the unconscious reflexivity of the regime of mind constricts our knowing capacity within dualistic structures that disassociate us from embodied actuality, replacing it with a sophisticated conceptual map based on memories, labels and associations—the world of known things. Furthermore, as a regime, not only does our mind appear to be monolithic, but our known experience is neither felt nor seen as a construct. As suggested, the regime of mind operates like a high-speed, multichannel signal processor with recursive feedback loops, taking sensory inputs—cognizing, identifying/labeling and then re-cognizing them—while simultaneously synthesizing a constant flow and stream of experience that includes the production of a self-referencing narrative that posits an “I” as the central actor in an ongoing story told by “me.”

In the Buddhist tradition, the central doctrine of no self (*anatta*) is properly understood not as a nihilistic denial of existence, but rather as a corrective to our unconscious acceptance of a naming mechanism that infers and reifies an internal knower embedded in a world of things that lies behind our actual experience. In the famous sutra of the Brahmin Bāhiya, who asked the Buddha for the essence of his teaching, the Buddha said:

Listen carefully to what I have to say. In the seen there is only the seen. In the heard there is only the heard. In the sensed there is only the sensed. In the cognized there is only the cognized. When you, Bāhiya, can see that in the seen there is only the seen, and in the heard there is only the heard, and so forth, then you will indeed recognize that there is no thing there; there is no substance in the world of the object. And when you see that there is, indeed, no thing “there,” you will also recognize that there is no thing “here”; there is no being or person, no real “I” in the realm of the subject. (Amaro, 2021, p. 5)

A notable feature of the regime of mind is that known experience is reflexively and habitually fixated on “I” or the “self” as a heroic and active

agent that knows “things,” objects and a world “out there.” It is not merely the naming or labeling of objects as reified things that is the output of this readout, but rather the production of an entire narrative framework, including sets of rules and focal settings, within which our knowing must operate.

A second important element of this analysis is the central role language plays in the process of identification and naming. Through naming, a process that begins very early in childhood and continues alongside physical and mental development, we accumulate a working dictionary of “things,” universal shorthand symbols for particular perceptual configurations, which act to anchor memories of previous events. Understood in this way, “I,” “me” and “mine” can be seen as what they are, namely placeholder names that situate us in the center of remembered experience, now surrounded by the array of named things. The unconscious inference that real entities lie behind such named percepts serves to disguise the operation of the associative regime that constructs them.

Tarthang Tulku compares the regime of mind to a well-managed business with the mind as the supplier and the “I,” or operant ego, as the loyal customer, and language as the principal product. The apprehension of sensory inputs as named things, and the comprehension of what

they “mean” set against a narrative structure, is the primary feedback loop that underlies internal experience. This in turn informs our actions (*karma*) whose effects distort our perceptions (*klesha*), in an external loop that underlies our experience of the “world”. This scheme can be summarized in Figure 1, a condensed schematic version of the famous twelve *nidanas*, or links of dependent origination.

When this conceptual mental apparatus of the regime of mind is operative, even at an unconscious or subliminal level during meditation, it becomes difficult or nearly impossible to actually investigate the nature of mind or the map-maker itself. This is because, as noted, the looker, that is, the one meditating, is part of the display. The map is double-pointed, creating both an external world of known things and an internal knower of those things at the same time. This experiential conundrum can lead to tendencies of being deceived by conceptual phenomena that arise during meditation, which are often interpreted as signs of progress, or that meditation is “working” as expected, usually resulting in the meditator’s desiring to prolong or recreate such experiences in subsequent sessions of meditation.

Problems and obstacles arise in meditation when “experience” is construed within this subject/object dualistic structure. While it is not uncommon for beginning meditators to make judgments such

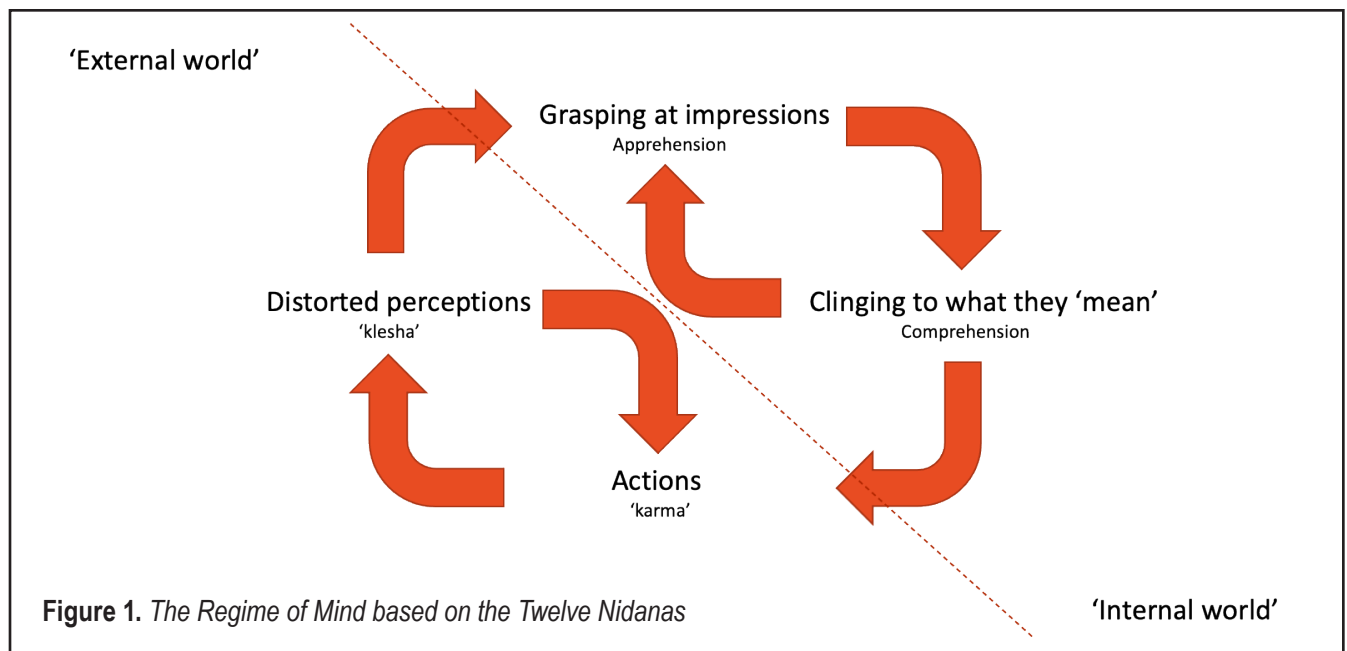


Figure 1. The Regime of Mind based on the Twelve Nidanas

as “I had a very good meditation (or a very bad session,” this dualistic structure can be difficult to apprehend even among “advanced” meditators. As Tarthang Tulku (2013) stated:

We can see mind’s genius for fabrication when we engage in any kind of silent practice with the mind—whether we call our practice “meditation”, “contemplation”, “insight”, “silent reflection”, “prayer” or anything else. The moment we sit down, everything necessary for this process to unfold is already in place. Mind takes a position, setting the stage and supporting the central actor, “I”. As “I” watches, mind carries out its business, creating shapes and expressions that mind then comments on and interprets. (p. 70)

As described in the passage, the structures of the regime of mind are already operative, making it difficult to see this process in operation. This is why understanding the operations of mind is critical to circumventing obstacles and seductive modes of self-deception that inevitably arise in meditation.

Common Meditation Traps

In this section, we describe four common meditation traps: 1) attachment to peak and unusual experiences; 2) watching the mind as a bystander; 3) resting in silence; and 4) fixation and mentally ruminating on meditation instructions. All four are difficult to detect because they are hidden within the conceptual frames of language. Having knowledge and understanding of these common traps that arise in meditation can alert practitioners to their presence.

The Peak and Unusual Experience Meditation Trap

It is not uncommon for those who attend meditation retreats to experience deep calm, characterized by extended periods of silence, peace and contentment. Especially for those relatively new to meditation, these experiences can be felt and interpreted as profound breakthroughs, transcending habitual patterns of mind. Novice meditators have not built up a conceptual repertoire of past meditation experiences with which to inform their current practice. This is what the contemporary

Soto Zen master Suzuki (1970) characterized as “beginner’s mind,” a freshness and openness that occurs because the regime of mind has not yet categorized and conceptualized meditative experience.

In her ethnographic accounts of Western meditators who participated in S.N. Goenka style 10-day silent vipassana retreats, Pagis (2019, p. 52) reported many retreatants were motivated to recapture and recreate unusual and peak meditative experiences they experienced on previous retreats. Such prior peak experiences were perceived as the source of motivation for meditation practice and attending subsequent retreats, and retreatants continued to yearn for them to reoccur. Based on her interviews, meditators often reported their meditative experience entailed a lot of expectant waiting, diligent watching and intensifying of effort, and even, at times, anxiety and doubt that they were not practicing correctly—that is, doing *something*, with the hope and need for validation that meditation was working.

This meditation trap illustrates how the regime of mind can draw the practitioner towards staying with known experience. Having experienced spontaneous breakthroughs in a novel experience, practitioners struggle to re-create experiences already “known” by their cognitive apparatus. Operating at the level of an observer, however, and thus already informed by the reflexive structures of the regime of mind, the breakthroughs they strive for remain tantalizingly out of reach.

It is relatively easy to encounter unusual and extraordinary experiences in meditation, such as radiant light, flashes of bliss and clarity, an overwhelming sense of spaciousness, and, in some cases, negative adverse effects. Such experiences are called *nyam* in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, *nimitta* in Pali, and *makyo* in Japanese Zen. These temporary experiences arise as perceptual frames are relaxed and are a byproduct of that change. However, all traditions warn that fixation or assigning too much importance to such unusual experiences is a distraction and an obstacle. While these experiences manifest owing to changes in perceptual frameworks, attempting to understand or re-create them is to be necessarily rooted in conceptuality.

Almost all meditative traditions warn that these experiences should not be shared or valued in and of themselves since meditators run the risk of turning their *nyam* into a product that is cherished, generated and then consumed. Doing so only reinforces and strengthens a sense of ownership (this beautiful experience happened to *me*) and spiritual pride, and renders authentic meditative experience increasingly difficult (Trungpa, 1973, p. 64).

This is but one example of how meditators get caught or trapped within the concept of meditation. Indeed, it is rare for meditators to escape the concept of meditation. As mentioned, when people begin to meditate, they sometimes have profound and extraordinary experiences precisely because they are beginners. These very experiences can lead people to become stuck in the idea of meditation, for having had those experiences, they will often try to recreate them. The memory of that wonderful experience is the very thing that traps them in the concept of meditation itself.

The Watching-the-Mind Meditation Trap

In an attempt to avoid becoming attached to pleasurable or peak meditative experiences, many meditators shift to trying to watch the mind. But this is also a conceptual trap in which the meditator in meditation attempts to watch him- or herself. Essentially, this amounts to a form of mental gymnastics: the subtle position of a “watcher” is fabricated in order to watch the mind itself. The “watching-the-mind” stance leads to a lot of expectant waiting and tension. What is sought—some special state, whether it is conceptualized as awakening, enlightenment, nirvana—is just out of reach. There is an unquestioned assumption that by just watching the mind enough, awakening and liberation will finally arrive. This process of ruminating will never go beyond the level of thought, however. What is really occurring with this trap is that thoughts are watching thoughts. The meditator is still meditating within the concept of meditation. Tarthang Tulku commented on this predicament of waiting and watching:

So many times, so many sessions, so many weeks, months, and years, yet we may still be

waiting, looking, and watching. There may be times when frustration breaks through: “I can’t stand all this watching and waiting! I don’t seem to be getting anywhere. But I don’t know what else to do!” Exactly what am I watching? While we are waiting for something to happen, are we noticing what is actually happening? Mind is directing us, casting up thoughts, repeating instructions, ordering where to look and what to do. So, are we watching mind, or is mind watching us? Who is watching whom? (Tulku, 2013, p. 76)

Meditation practitioners at this point often feel a sense of futility, a confining feeling of circularity, as if no “progress” is being made. While the meditator may develop concentration and restfulness, it will never be transformative. One of the causes of this difficulty is entrapment in language that takes the form of giving instructions to our mental apparatus, “I now want you to sit quietly and I am going to watch you.” Or, for example, the current popularity of mindfulness with its instruction to “be in the present moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2011) contains within it the seeds of its own circularity. The mind initially complies. However, all the time that the mental regime is creating that experience, it is operating without being examined. The meditator is looking at the readout, a thought looking at thoughts. The readout-maker is always hidden, but never addressed.

The Resting-in-Silence Meditation Trap

Another very common technique among meditators is to try to suppress thinking or to reduce mental chatter by trying to settle into complete silence. The assumption is that if all thinking and mental chatter stops, it will lead to a state of complete liberation or some imagined state of spiritual attainment. Even if concentration is developed by settling into a calm state, unfortunately, this form of meditation alone is still imprisoned within the regime of mind. This can be seen sometimes in meditation retreats. A state of peaceful quiet and calm can be cultivated during the retreat, but this state rapidly dissipates once people return to ordinary life (Pagis, 2019). The mental chatter and

internal dialogue start up, and familiar habit patterns surface once again. This type of fixation on silence is a good indicator that the meditation practice is being conducted within the regime.

Long silent meditation retreats have become popular in the West. Tarthang Tulku (2013) described how these periods of silence can be quite seductive and alluring, but are ultimately deceptive:

There are times when we are engaged in contemplative practices that we may experience periods of silence, when mind seems to let go of its usual way of minding. Directed to be calm and silent, mind may welcome the opportunity to slip into a relaxed, somewhat sleepy state. At first there may be a pleasurable sense of relief as tension melts and mind becomes quiet. For a time, thoughts may come and go peacefully, like soft clouds drifting through the sky. But if we sink more deeply into a blank “not knowing” place, mind and senses can become so still and numb that thoughts and feelings simply cease to arise. At that point, we might enter the mental equivalent of a black hole, where nothing seems to be happening. (p. 79)

Such quiet absorption is a common experience in meditation, particularly with the eyes closed. A lot of meditators think that it is deep meditation because it is relaxing. It is often claimed that the purpose of meditation is to enter that calm state; tensions leave and the meditator has a rest, essentially. There is nothing wrong with it—it is in many ways very beneficial considering how much tension people have in their lives.

Tarthang Tulku (2013) elaborated on this common meditation trap:

We may rest in this sense of “nothingness” a long while, immersed in a deep silence undisturbed by thoughts or any other kind of mental or sensory activity. There may be little or no awareness of our body or surroundings, not even a sense that time is passing. When we emerge from that state, however, what is the sum total of our experience? Nothing: a silent, negative nothing that seems the opposite of the awakened clarity we might have been expecting. (p. 79)

While this experience can be generated in meditation fairly easily, it tends not to last long, and it is very fragile. As soon as there is an external disturbance, for example, the practitioner can quickly snap back into reactivity. Feelings of peace and calm quickly disappear and fade the moment the formal meditation session ends. This amounts to temporarily freezing the meditative experience by blocking and suppressing cognition. While attention may be temporarily stabilized and enhanced, this focused attention is still operating within the dualistic regime.

A famous story about the experiences of the great Tibetan Buddhist teacher Gampopa concerns this meditation trap. In this early period of Tibetan Buddhist history, there were still many strong Indian influences. Gampopa became a fully ordained monk, and he developed *samatha*, calmness meditation, to the point where he could sit for days in quietude. Gampopa came to see another great sage called Milarepa in 1109 CE, reporting that he was able to remain seated in meditation for seven days. Unimpressed, Milarepa laughed at Gampopa. Milarepa told him, “So what? You sit for seven day and don’t experience the clear light. You can’t get oil from pressing sand, you get it by pressing mustard seeds” (Mackenzie-Stewart, 1995, p. 51). Milarepa was indicating that a state-without-thought is still a state; it is still within the jurisdiction of the regime.

Tarthang Tulku (2013) elaborated on the limits of stopping meditation:

Those who practice for these reasons may see no purpose in analyzing the nature of their experience or investigating the possibility of accessing a more vibrant, energized state of being. But there is something static in this way of being, and practitioners could spend a long time in this dull, silent place. The mind’s patterns of identity, recognition, and associations may be put on hold for a time, but they tend to regroup. All too soon, the back-and-forth movements of the dualistic mind revive the operation of self and other. The subject “I” acts on the object, likes and dislikes come into play, judgments are made, and our mind-created reality unfolds as before. Unaware of possibilities for transcending

these subtle deceptions of the dualistic mind, even experienced practitioners may not realize the outcome they seek. (p. 81)

Unfortunately, this phenomenon is not very valuable. Many meditators mistake such an experience as “seeing into emptiness,” but in Zen it is called false vacuity, or “dead-void” sitting; and in the Tibetan schools it often referred to as “indeterminate” (Mipham, 2005, p. 1).

In his seminal article, “Is Mindfulness Buddhist? (And Why It Matters),” Robert Sharf (2015) described the early Chan patriarchs who also taught meditation to cultivate “no mind” through intense immersion in the here-and-now, inducing deep tranquility and non-discursive awareness. This “silent illumination” approach became quite prevalent in eighth-century China, promoted to the laity as a practice that promised quick results, but with no requirements for doctrinal study or ethical training (Sharf, 2015). Song dynasty Chan master Dahui cautioned that this method could lead to the “malady of meditation,” in which consciousness of stillness is mistaken for one’s own true nature. In addition, Japanese Zen Rinzai master Hakuin was also critical, fearing that meditators that fell prey to “dead sitting” were attached to quietude and inactivity, with no concern for the suffering of the world. Hakuin was strongly opposed to “do nothing” Zen teachers who engaged in quietist practices that were like superficial and sophisticated forms of sleep.

Meditators usually have nothing to report about this state because the associative mechanisms that the regime of mind uses to make sense of the world and record things in memory require the projection of a known label onto arising sensations. When this process is stopped before dualistic consciousness has been projected, there is “no thing” to be known. There is no possibility of association either, because there is no point where associations can attach. Experientially it amounts to a temporary freezing of, or time-out from, the mind-looping mechanisms of grasping and clinging, between the apprehension of sensory impressions and comprehension of their meanings. However, just resting in such a state of calmness does not in itself show a path to inner transformation.

For Westerners who are often stressed by work and daily life, this is a valuable experience. However, this is often where meditation stops. Indeed, it is a sign for most Westerners that their meditation practice is “working.” Such forms of calm-abiding meditation do have therapeutic benefits, but will never lead to insight into the nature of mind.

The Fixation-on-Instructions Meditation Trap

Another common obstacle many meditators encounter is fixation on meditation instructions themselves, which triggers evaluative judgments and self-commentaries. Meditation becomes task oriented, with meditators hypervigilant, anxious and full of doubt as to whether they are following the instructions correctly. Such judgments can become sub-audible and difficult to detect. Anticipating these obstacles, Tarthang Tulku (2013) claimed:

Instructions are necessary to provide a certain level of guidance and encouragement. But since they arise within our familiar conceptual realm, they are readily appropriated by the operations of mind’s regime, which repeats them at ever more subtle levels: “Be mindful! You will get lost! Be alert! Mind will fool you. Be vigilant! You may be doing the wrong thing!” (p. 83)

This is the danger of techniques and why they can be so problematic, for in following a meditation instruction, it is also important to be able to forget it or it can never be fully executed. Being able to forget an instruction is much more difficult than being able to remember it, however, and in this way, instructions can themselves become obstacles to meditation. Here we have a classic problem. If one closely follows instructions, the meditator then is bound to the conceptual realm, and meditation is often confined to a safe and cozy conceptual bubble that may be reinforcing the very regime the meditator is trying to escape. It is the ultimate subversion of intent, part of the enigma of trying to learn how to do something without the wisdom of knowing what it is. This is the reason Tarthang Tulku (2013) in *Revelations of Mind* is critical of meditation practice in itself:

Some of us feel a strong need to adhere to this kind of approach. If we believe that awareness is the ultimate goal, we may tend to focus strongly on the need to be aware, even striving to be aware of being aware. Yet the need to be ready at all times to beat back intrusive thoughts and sensory perceptions holds us firmly caught in a subject/object orientation. (p. 84)

This is really worth bearing in mind. Many meditators in the West have become fixated on “trying to be aware” or to steadily “watch the watcher” or “be a witness” by focusing their concentration on the mind to the exclusion of all else. Such a fixated approach only serves to reinforce the subject/object dichotomy with a great act of willpower and externalizing it as a reified object of awareness. Indeed, many meditators report being quite tense and anxious, as well as full of doubts as to whether they are “doing the practice right.” This is partially due to the very act of concentration that splits the world into what is desired and what is not desired, by definition a state of tension.

Tarhang Tulku (2013) described this tension:

But it may seem we have no choice—we have to maintain the relationship between “I” and “my” mind. “Be aware!”...so we do not make mistakes. “Be aware!”...so no one can steal our concentration, so no distractions can come up. Some element of attachment, a sense of identity or possession, is at work, influencing mind and perceptions. We are still bonded, strongly tied to a mind that is functioning on the level of identification. (p. 84)

The very idea that there is a right and wrong way to meditate is entirely based on judgment, the very mechanism central to the regime of mind. It is a trap: the door to freedom turns out to be a dead end. Any attempt to open the door leads to just another corridor in the hall of mirrors. At the same time, knowing that calmness itself is not liberating is helpful; knowing that following instructions too literally cannot liberate us is also helpful. We know two important things now, and they are going to help us develop a genuine heart of meditation.

Many meditators fall prey to these traps and fail to penetrate them, sadly ensuring that

their meditation practice will remain within the “idea of meditation,” rarely escaping the concept of meditation into actual experience itself. There are two major reasons for this. First, many Western meditators do not have adequate and competent instruction from qualified teachers, and those that do may not have frequent access to teachers who can monitor and offer corrections to their practice. Second, many Western meditators have not been adequately prepared before taking up meditation practice. This is common since meditation has become popular and is seen as a stand-alone practice or technique.

While this lack of preparation is no fault of Western meditators, it is important to know that meditation is usually informed by a number of contextual factors, such as: 1) having acquired a clear view of the purpose and aim of the practice; 2) an intellectual understanding of the meaning of the practice that reorients the student’s everyday activities and behaviors to be in ethical alignment and in accord with the practice; 3) a roadmap of the stages of the path that can guide the student into more stable and deeper stages of insight and awakening; and 4) a balanced approach that integrates a clear and intellectual understanding of the view with actual meditative experience (see, for example, Brown, 2005, pp. 2–3).

Going Beyond Dualistic Meditation

What is the alternative then to meditation practice that is still confined to dualistic structures? How can one go beyond the limits of calming meditation? The cultivation of calm and mental stability is valuable, but the basis for transformation requires understanding how the operations of mind are dependent upon self-identity. This requires cultivating insight that can actively inquire into how the regime of mind is constructed. One of the conundrums is how can the operations of mind be investigated while using the mind to do so? The path of inquiry has to proceed differently; otherwise it will be bound to the same limits and deceptions described earlier.

It is difficult to launch a serious and sustained *non-conceptual inquiry* when that inquiry occurs within the operations of mind based on self-identity.

We have described these challenges above in what may be called “identity-based meditation” techniques, such as popular forms of mindfulness. These techniques contain built-in traps, obstacles, deceptions and detours since they proceed from the subject position of “I, me and mine.” Furthermore, because identity-based meditation techniques do not question and transcend underlying structures dependent upon the processes of identification, conceptual labeling and meaning-making, they seduce the meditator to attach to temporary experiences deemed to be pleasant, peaceful and/or unusual.

The Venerable Ajahn Amaro (2021), a contemporary Western Theravada Buddhist monk, described these meditative obstacles in terms of “I-making” (*ahamkara*) and “mine-making” (*mamamkara*) elements. The meditator is caught in the process of becoming, that is, in Buddhist terms, caught in the momentum and undercurrents of desire and craving – not necessarily for sense pleasure, but for the desire to attain particular states of mind. Amaro’s description of this “I-mine making” takeover is worth quoting at length:

What so easily happens is that the activity of meditation is co-opted, taken over by habits of becoming, because of ‘me’ meditating. We think: “I am doing my practice; I am meditating.” When we work on clarity, insight or concentration, there is a subtle sense of, “I am working on clarity, I’m developing insight, I’m trying to concentrate.” And even when the mind is clear and bright, and there are indeed insight and concentration, there is a degree to which there is a “me” who is doing the meditation. There is a “me” who is the agent and a “thing” that is being done. There is a tension. There is *dukkha*. There is a quality of stress in the heart. (Amaro, 2021, p. 1842).

The stress in the heart that Amaro is referring to goes directly to the problem of taking ownership and possession of experience. The heroic ego, the “I” as the knower, presents a false claim that not only is it the active agent—that is, the experiencer and benefactor of the meditation experience—but also that the process of “doing” the meditation (supposedly correctly) is the cause for making such

experiences occur. Once that claim takes hold, the obstacle is created, and the trap is set. The meditator then becomes like a fly in fly trap, captivated by the stickiness of conceptuality. Tarthang Tulku (2013) also noted the limits of simply watching the mind regarding uprooting this mental affliction of “I-mine making”:

For those new to contemplation, this focused way of watching mind can be a useful training. But it is difficult to say whether it can actually lead toward liberating mind. The ability to trace the process of cognition and the interactions of thoughts and senses may not be sufficient to free ourselves of mental and emotional obscurations. To penetrate and eliminate subtle and persistent afflictions, it is necessary to take clarity beyond the level of possession so that it becomes indestructible. (p. 84)

Understanding the common pitfalls that bedevil so many meditation practices is the first step for clarity beyond the level of possession. While sitting quietly or watching the mind may calm the mind, reduce stress or generate unusual meditative experiences, such approaches remain within the limits of dualistic structures based on self-identity. The cultivation of calm clarity needs to be guided by wise analysis if meditation is to transcend the regime. One of the key challenges of meditation practice is learning to recognize when phenomenal experience is subtly tainted by possessive self-identification. Tarthang Tulku (2013) described the stickiness and automaticity of self-identification entangled in the process of perception:

Because the sense of ownership arises automatically as soon as mind labels a perception, it’s difficult to avoid it, whether we focus on the inner workings of mind or on external objects. Awareness of an object activates the polarity of the dualistic mind, compelling mind to establish the object’s position. Responding to a “longing to belong,” mind posits a subject: the notion of “I.” And in this single step, mind validates “I” as subject and me as owner: “This object belongs to me,” “this object is mine.” Wherever “I” manifests, ownership appears also. (p. 86)

As soon as experience arises, it is identified and named, and then confirmed. This naming and labeling process is a subtle level of self-identification. As soon as an experience is named, it is simultaneously establishing the “self that knows.” This sense of self seems innate because it is established in the earliest stage of knowing. This is why an inherent danger exists that meditators could actually be cultivating and strengthening their ego and self-identification, which Kauffman (2021) referred to as “self-enhancement,” leading to a grandiose form of spiritual narcissism. Kaufmann drew upon a notable quote from Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chogyam Trungpa’s classic book, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*:

Walking the spiritual path properly is a very subtle process: it is not something to jump into naively. There are numerous sidetracks which lead to a distorted, ego-centered version of spirituality; we can deceive ourselves into thinking we are developing spirituality when instead we are strengthening our egocentricity through spiritual techniques (Tulku, 2013, p. 1).

Kaufmann (2021) summarized a number of recent experimental studies that show not only that even advanced meditators are susceptible to these self-deceptions, but also that their practice has formed a new identity based on a self-image of spiritual superiority. This is apparent among advanced meditators who derive their self-esteem and identity from their meditation practice itself. Unbeknownst to them, a primordial feeling of self is layered over their experience, and they do not clearly see the subtle volitional formations that happen before their senses even activate. That primary volition, that very first layer of volitional formation, that fundamental obscuration, is active even in meditation—that is why ownership becomes a key obstacle. They may believe that they are having a “direct experience” or “seeing things as they are,” or having “pristine cognition” untouched by the human hand, but actually the centrality of the self is stealthily playing its role as the validator, confirming that their cognitions are correct.

As discussed above, just resting in a state of calmness, or being mindful of the present moment, or simply being aware is not going to cut through this

hidden conceptual formation of self-identification. Meditators can develop perceptual skills in order to build immunity to such obstacles, deceptions and detours in their practice. Self-identification lies ultimately at the root of the human condition. It is very deeply rooted and difficult to access. In many respects, developing insight into the regime of mind and how its operations are at the root of self-identification can help meditators recognize and cut through mechanisms that underlie ownership and self-identification.

Turning Toward Understanding

Inquiry into the regime of mind and understanding how its mechanisms are often unknowingly imported into meditation practice offer a new gateway to spiritual practice. Meditation can then proceed from a much wider range of entrance points that do not operate from the perspective of “I-making” and self-orientation. But this first requires becoming more conscious of the meaning-making mechanisms of the regime, which are linked to the construction of lived experience with all its pains, sorrows and limitations. The challenge is to engage in meditation while not being bound to the rules of the regime of mind with its inherent limitations imposed by language and self-reference.

So why, one might ask, should it matter to attempt to understand this structure that is such a dominant feature of how we react to events? It is, after all, a distinctive feature of our species that we alone can learn from all aspects of experience and communicate what we learn to others. In this regard, this hidden engine of inference has led to the development of tool-making, language, technology, all the other hallmarks of human progress. Yet it was the great insight of the Buddha to see that the selfsame inferential engine also leads to the wellspring of human suffering, for in the increasing elaboration of conceptual mapping at the heart of our experience is an ever-tightening spiral of confinement and stress. Furthermore, since this process informs the present with the experiences of the past, it is inherently circular, looping past problems into current circumstances. The sad litany of human history gives eloquent expression to the suffering caused by this unexamined feature of our common humanity.

Many meditators begin their endeavors to escape this feeling, in an attempt to find freedom from the pain and constriction that seems to underlie their experience. Guided by the insights of Tarthang Tulku, this article has highlighted some of the pitfalls and false objectives hidden in this difficult endeavor. Rather like wandering into a trackless desert where no landmarks guide us, once we begin to relax our conceptual frames, we need other markers to help us on our way. As Wittgenstein (1953) famously stated, “Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language” (p. 109).

Here lies a key. Once we have developed a strong and stable base of *samatha* (a deep and stable sense of calm-abiding), and guided by an understanding of the regime of mind, we are able to see how, in our ignorance, the heard becomes more than the heard, and the sensed more than the sensed, for we can become aware of the process by which our formidable language engine applies itself to our percepts. We can be reassured that this is indeed possible, for the great philosopher monks of Buddhist India and Tibet did indeed record such insights and laid out in detail how the flow of mind-moments matures from percept to concept in each moment of experience (Bodhi, Ed. & Trans., 1993, p. 151). But our interest is not so much in such analysis; our interest lies not in seeing something else, some distant goal for which we might aspire, but seeing ourselves, because in so seeing, the power of association by which concept attaches to percept becomes uncoupled, and the sense of an agent who stands at the center of things begins to fade.

Understanding the function of language, we can see beyond it, allowing ourselves to become familiar with what can be called merely *knowing not-knowing*, allowing ourselves to rest in a state of awareness that does not rely on words. While such a state must necessarily be indescribable, this is not because it is at some elevated level of experience totally beyond our normal function. Rather it is our ordinary mind, but seen at last, experienced fully without the narrated commentary of known things. The gate to such simplicity is a not-doing, an abandonment, rather than an active process of watching and observing. Our concepts deceive and

trap us, for without them we can still be present. This does not necessarily mean abandoning language or living without concepts, which is just another reactive extreme. What is left when we abandon our reflexive reliance on words, labels and concepts, is our natural intelligence, fully embodied and embracing all that arises while resting in the open clarity of Being.

References

- Amaro, A. (2021). The I-making, mind-making mind. *Mindfulness*, 12, 1839–1844. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-020-01579-0>
- Bodhi, B. (Ed. & Trans.). (1993). *A comprehensive manual of Abhidharma*. Pariyatti.
- Brown, D. (2005). *Pointing out the great way: The stages of meditation in the Mahamudra tradition*. Wisdom Publications.
- Kaufmann, S. (2021, January 11). The science of spiritual narcissism. *Scientific American*. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-science-of-spiritual-narcissism/>
- Mipham, J. D. (2005). *A lamp to dispel darkness* (A. Pearcey, Trans.). Lotsawa House.
- Pagis, M. (2019). *Inward: Vipassana meditation and the embodiment of self*. University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226639413.001.0001>
- Sharf, R. (2015). Is mindfulness Buddhist? (and why it matters). *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 52(4), 470–484. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461514557561>
- Stewart-Mackenzie, J. (1995). *Life of Gompopa*. Snow Lion.
- Trungpa, C. (1973). *Cutting through spiritual materialism*. Shambhala.
- Tulku, T. (2013). *Revelations of mind*. Dharma.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical investigations*. Wiley-Blackwell.

About the Authors

Richard Dixey, PhD, received his doctora degree in Biophysics and a M.A. with distinction in the history and philosophy of science from London University, and a B.A. Hons. from Oxford. He was director of the Bioelectronic Research Unit at St

Bartholomew's hospital in London, before founding and becoming the Chief Executive of Phytopharm PLC. He is currently an instructor at Dharma College in Berkeley, California and advisor to the Khyentse Foundation.

Ronald L. Purser, PhD, is the Lam Larsen Distinguished Research Professor of Management at San Francisco State University and on the faculty at Dharma College. He is the author of eight books, including *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality* (Penguin Random House/Repeater Books), the *Handbook of the Ethical Foundations of Mindfulness* and the *Handbook of Mindfulness: Culture, Context and Social Engagement* (Springer). He writes for such media outlets as *The Guardian*, *Salon*, *Huffington Post*, *Alternet*, *Tikkun*, and *Tricycle*. He is also the host of *The Mindful Cranks* podcast.

About the Journal

The *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* is a Scopus listed peer-reviewed academic journal, and the largest and most accessible scholarly periodical in the transpersonal field. IJTS has been in print since 1981, is published by Floragrades Foundation, sponsored in part by Attention Strategies Institute, and serves as the official publication of the International Transpersonal Association. The journal is available online at www.transpersonalstudies.org, and in print through www.lulu.com (search for IJTS).