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Deathlife, lifedeath

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a comparative exploration of mindfulness and therapeutic presence and absence. Drawing from the Buddha's teachings, mindfulness is articulated here as awareness of impermanence rather than as a set of techniques. Drawing from Rogers, Presence is discussed not in mystical terms, but in terms of its valuable, neglected counterparts: absence, entropy, and the Buddhist notion of *sunyata*.

Lebentod, Todleben

Eine vergleichende Untersuchung von Achtsamkeit und therapeutischer Präsenz. Ausgehend von den Lehren Buddhas wird Achtsamkeit hier als die Bewusstheit der Impermanenz formuliert statt als eine Reihe von Techniken. Mit Rückgriff auf Rogers wird Präsenz nicht in mystischen Begriffen diskutiert, sondern in Begriffen ihrer nützlichen, vernachlässigten Gegenstücke: Abwesenheit, Entropie und der buddhistischer Ansicht von *sunyata*.

Vidamuerte, muertevida

Una exploración comparativa de la mindfulness y la presencia terapéutica. A partir de las enseñanzas de Buda, mindfulness se articula aquí mas como conciencia de la impermanencia que como un conjunto de técnicas. Basándonos en Rogers, se discute la presencia no en términos místicos, sino en cuanto a sus valiosas y desatendidas contrapartes: ausencia, entropía y la noción budista de *sunyata*.

Mort la vie, la vie la mort

Exploration comparée de la pleine conscience et de la présence thérapeutique. Sur base de l'enseignement de Bouddha, la Pleine conscience s'articule comme une conscience de l'impermanence plutôt que comme un ensemble de techniques. Sur base de Rogers, la présence est discutée non pas en termes mystiques, mais en termes de certaines de ses contreparties précieuses et négligées : l'absence, l'entropie et la notion bouddhiste de *sunyata*.

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Uma exploração comparativa do *mindfulness* e da presença terapêutica, partindo dos ensinamentos de Buddha. O *mindfulness* é apresentado como a tomada de consciência da impermanência, mais do que como um conjunto de técnicas. Partindo de Rogers, a presença é discutida não em termos místicos, mas em termos das suas contrapartidas valiosas e negligenciadas: a ausência, a entropia e a noção budista de *sunyata*.

1

Once upon a time, a young woman named Kisa Gotami gave birth to a stillborn child. Overcome by grief, she went from door to door in her neighbourhood, the dead child in her arms, asking everyone if they knew of a medicine that could bring her son back to life. Her child is dead, people thought, has she completely lost her mind? Eventually she met a man who said “I don’t have the medicine myself, but I know a physician who does.” She said: “Please tell me; who is it?” And the man replied: “Go to Shakyamuni, the Buddha.” Kisa Gotami went to the Buddha and in a flood of tears asked: “Please give me the medicine that will cure my child.” The Buddha replied: “I will, but first I need from you a handful of mustard seeds to mix to the healing potion.” Then he added: “The seeds must come from a house where no one has ever died.”

Carrying her dead baby with her, Kisa Gotami went from house to house, asking for some mustard seeds. The people she met naturally felt sorry for her and gave her what she wanted. But when asked “Did a son or daughter, a father or mother, die in your family?” they all said yes, someone had died. Soon she found that there was no house in the town where someone had not died. Towards the evening, exhausted and weary, she sat by the side of the road watching the lights of the town flicker and slowly fade. Then night came and darkness fell. In the same way, she reflected, the life of all those now asleep in the town flickered and would one day be extinguished. She thought “Death happens to everyone.” It was a profound realization that transformed her. She went to the forest to bury her child. Then she returned to the Buddha, and asked him to initiate her to the teachings of the Dharma.

2

Reflecting on the above story, a couple of things strike me right away. Firstly, the Buddha is referred to as “physician.” He is not a miracle-maker, a prophet of supernatural prowess, a messenger from an otherworldly dimension or one who preaches a special state of mind unknown to mortals. Instead, he is a physician who cures our everyday state of metaphysical slumber and helps us confront life (or life-and-death, one word in Zen: *shoji*) head-on, without the filters of delusion and distraction. That life is impermanent and death certain is what the Buddha’s teachings on mindfulness are all about. Mindfulness is always mindfulness of something, primarily of our condition as humans, compared by the Buddha in the 576th verse of the *Sutamippata* to that of a ripe fruit constantly on the verge of falling (Bazzano, 2010) or even more strikingly, in the same

collection, Buddha presents in the same collection to that of “cows grazing happily in the field, blissfully unaware that each of them is in turn being taken away to the slaughterhouse (Bazzano, 2010, p. 36).

Another thing that comes up for me in relation to Kisa Gotama’s story is that he did not resurrect the dead child. I don’t know if anyone can, although Jesus is said to have brought Lazarus back to life. The Buddha performed a different kind of miracle: he created a situation where the young woman could come to an awakening. After her breakdown, overwhelmed by so great an anguish that did not allow her to think straight, Kisa Gotama reached a profound understanding, by meditating on the grave matter of life and death. Her realization is not mere logical deduction (“We all die sooner or later, so better seize the day”), nor does it have cynical implications (“Life is a bitch and then you die, so go ahead and grab as many fat bonuses as you can”). The realization is *existential*, i.e. experienced viscerally in the totality of one’s heart, body, and mind. It may come as a shock. It is, in a way, a *conversion*, but in the proper sense of the word – what the Greeks called *metanoia*: a change of heart, a turning point, rather than abandoning one set of beliefs and rituals for another as one rearranges the furniture.

The Buddha’s teachings are of no value unless they reach the heart and mind of a person and bring about a shift in perspective. They do not proffer a cosmology, prescribe dietary requirements, or demand the wearing of a particular attire.

The first fundamental teaching or “ennobling truth” is “to fully know suffering.” “Suffering” is an approximate and rather inaccurate translation of the Sanskrit *dukkha*, which describes a stuck wheel – a metaphor for our difficulty as humans to embrace becoming and to accept impermanence.

Mindfulness is fashionable today in the mental health field though its understanding is limited to being aware of one’s thoughts, feelings, and emotions in order to relieve stress and anxiety. This is all well and good, but mindfulness is not a technique, a way to “chill out” after a stressful day at work. To be mindful means to be *aware of impermanence*, to recognize the delicate work of death everywhere, to wake up to the fact that the flower of life blooms right in the arms of the Great Reaper. We are fragile flowers, even though we may feel great after a brisk walk in the morning sun, even though we may feel invincible when someone praises us or falls in love with us. An illness, a crisis, a setback, a diagnosis: it doesn’t take much to make us tremble.

In that sense, the Buddha’s teachings are not about “stress reduction” as the current craze has it, but “stress induction” (Bazzano, 2013): stress in the sense of waking up to the tragic nature of our condition. I use “tragic” not in the disconsolate, hopeless meaning of common parlance but in the way it was conveyed by the great tragedians Sophocles and Euripides before the Socratic rationalist turn. A tragic view thus understood embraces *experience* in its totality; it cultivates a difficult appreciation of our joys *and* sorrows. Embracing *life* in its totality means embracing death as well – not an easy task. In this sense, and despite appearances to the contrary, the Dharma is not “the melancholy doctrine” Victorians originally thought it to be at the time the Buddha’s teachings travelled to Europe nor the pessimistic philosophy the West has inherited via the readings of Schopenhauer, whose keen interest and overall misinterpretation of Buddhism still plays a role in seeing the latter as a life-denigrating worldview (Bazzano, 2012).

If it were true that “life is suffering” as some Buddhists and mindfulness practitioners are fond of saying whilst nodding sagely, the world would be full of miserable people. But the universe is filled with joy and sorrow, laughter and tears, sunshine and rain. We should call it *lifedeath* or *deathlife* (Fisher, 2007).

3

Mindfulness of impermanence is in turn linked to awareness of our inherent imperfection. One way to gauge one’s “level of mindfulness” is perhaps by comparing it to the level of acceptance of our intrinsic limitations and to that of the perishable yet beautiful world around us. When training at Zen Mountain Center in the San Jacinto Mountains in California, Zen teacher Pat Enkyo O’Hara was in charge of the altars and one day a big ancient wooden cup she was carrying fell on the floor and cracked. She was upset; it was a beautiful cup, very valuable; it pained her to think that the Zen Center was not wealthy. She went to her teacher, Taizan Maezumi Roshi, apologized profusely and said she would replace it right away: she would order a new one from Japan. Roshi “took the cup and ... said: ‘Look at the cup, Enkyo, it’s more beautiful now than it was before’” (Boyle, 2015, p. 159).

The story is particularly poignant in relation to its context. Alongside Shunryu Suzuki, Taizan Maezumi (1931–1995) led the way in communicating genuine Japanese Zen to the West. A scholar as well as a shrewd and experienced teacher, he combined *Sōtō*, *Rinzai*, and *Sanbo Kyodan* styles of practice and was successful in transmitting the teachings to many gifted practitioners and teachers, including the teacher under whose guidance I studied Zen formally between 1996 and 2006: Genpo Merzel. The episode recounted above happened at the time when Maezumi had been “humiliated by many Zen people across the country and abandoned by half his students” (Boyle, 2015, p. 160) following the scandals related to sexual indiscretion and his drinking habit. And yet, “here he [was] still teaching, still doing this work, and he [was] more valuable after all those scandals than he was before ... I just saw the beauty of our humanness through him” (Boyle, 2015, p. 160).

4

The above bears a similarity with the common image of the wounded physician, one who is aware of her *vulnerability* (from the Latin *vulnus*, wound) and imperfection as functional and even essential in aiding the healing of self and others. In Greek mythology, Chiron, the centaur wounded by an arrow from Heracles’ bow, does not die but undergoes agonizing pain. The wound is never entirely healed, and it is *because of this* that he becomes a healer. The wounded physician is directly linked to another familiar image, that of the fully-functioning person, “one who is able to be with and cherish her wound as a translucent stain, a mark of her humanity” (Bazzano, 2016, p. 15). At the heart of our ability to heal lies a painful awareness of finitude, acquaintance of our human fragility and intimate knowledge of the impermanence of all things.

This could be partly described as organismic awareness, the cultivation of which brings its own rewards but also its fair share of challenges, the fashioning of a fuller life but “not ... for the faint-hearted” (Rogers, 1961, p. 196). This is in turn linked to the notion of presence, variously understood as one more (arguably transcendental) “characteristic” (Rogers, 1980, p. 129), as the bringing together of the core conditions (Wyatt,

2000), as “the foundation of Rogers’ basic conditions of empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard and as the overarching condition that allows them to be expressed” (Geller & Greenberg, 2002, p. 71).

In the light of what has been discussed so far, we would also need to link presence to *absence*. In practising the sort of organismic awareness and phenomenological observation known as *zazen* (Zen meditation), the “I” itself becomes diluted, fully present *because* absent as intrinsic, separate phenomenon.

By listening to sounds in the room, in the street, in the sky above, I now perceive myself as embedded in this vast phenomenal world, as part of this very moment as it unfolds: a multifaceted, rich and complex totality (Bazzano, 2011, p. 118).

Awareness of self as a “flowing river of change” (Rogers, 1961, p. 122) is another way of asserting the relative interdependent nature of the self, what the Buddha calls *sunyata* which, loosely and erroneously rendered as “emptiness” refers to this fundamental experience of everything being intimately connected to everything else.

Whether or not specifically meditating on death, the meditator opens the gates of perception to the knowledge of his/her own eventual demise. What makes me fully present in the mysterious unfolding of this moment is the awareness of my future absence, of the sequence of my breathing moving towards the final expiration. What makes me more acutely alert to the ceaseless, creative unfolding of living potentialities is (paradoxically?) awareness of *entropy*. I confess to a certain amount of skepticism in relation to the ways in which person-centered literature on the whole has interpreted and developed Rogers’ notion of the formative tendency but it is clear that the latter does not deny the tendency towards deterioration and death (Thorne, 1990).

5

The practice of *zazen* or Zen meditation is *just sitting*. There is no object of contemplation, no task, nothing to do. Within the Zen Buddhist tradition, this is considered the highest practice. It is an act of faith, the striving of no-striving or effortless effort, in itself a declaration that a human being, no matter how flawed, incongruent or in distress, is already a Buddha. To realize that one is already a Buddha may of course require many years of dedicated practice. Something similar may be said to the gradual *and* sudden “process whereby man becomes his organism – without self deception, without distortion” (Rogers, 1961, p. 111). To practice the Buddha Way entails beginning to appreciate “life’s imperfections as gifts” the implication being that “this life is already the life of the Buddha, already the life of a fully functioning person” (Bazzano, 2011, p. 127).

Doing nothing is difficult, particularly in our age of anxiety where “gadgets are gods and we go on talking, many about much but remain alone” (Auden, 2011, p. 34), or an age of agitation and prestidigitation which, according to Sartre (2012), requires a certain amount of bad faith in order to keep the show going, so as to preserve our sense of self-justification

6

One day the Zen teacher Dogo and his student Zengen went to a funeral. Zengen knocked on the coffin and said: “Alive or dead?” Dogo replied: “I am not telling you.”

He can't simply say: it is death. There is more than death here. You can't say: it is life. There is more than life here. It's deathlife or lifedeath. Zengen became restless: "Why don't you tell me?" Dogo said: "No I am not telling you." On their way home Zengen said: "Be kind enough to tell me or I'll hit you." Hitting the teacher is a terrible thing to do. But the student is desperate; he really wants to know. And he really believes the teacher has the answer. Dogo said: "You may hit me, but I am not telling you." Zengen hit him.

Many years later, after Dogo's death, Zengen went to another teacher named Sekiso and told him the whole story. Then he asked him: "Please, help me now." He was still carrying the question with him. Sekiso replied: "I will not tell you if it is life or death." Zengen asked: "Why don't you tell me?" Sekiso: "No, I will not tell you." On hearing this Zengen attained sudden realization.

The cuteness of the above story should not deceive us. Most Zen stories (or *koans* as they are known) are designed for us to reflect and respond. The story invites us to cultivate *not-knowing*. Like the young woman in the previous story, Zengen came to a realization, one, I feel, that is linked to not-knowing. Our knowledge is mostly second hand. We tend to have an explanation for everything under the sun. We like to believe what death is, what life is. One important existential Zen question is "What is this?" meaning: what is the totality of my experience as it unfolds at this very moment? The aim is not to find an "answer" but to awake our profound perplexity about ourselves, others, and the world. This perplexity, or doubt is present deep down in all of us but we tend to cover it up because it brings up anxiety and fear. So we turn to religion because it offers us a consolation in the form of a ready-made answer. Or we turn to the scientific explanations. We choose the fables and mythologies that best suit our style and temperament, whether we profess theism or atheism, science or religion or a combination of both. The third way is to cultivate not-knowing when it comes to the so-called "big questions." Paradoxically, it takes a lot of searching, practicing and studying in order to be able to say confidently "I don't know." It takes a lot of courage to admit that when it comes to life and death, we know next to nothing. A common phrase used in relation to the dead person at a Zen funeral ceremony is "Where are they now?" This is pure agnosticism, from *a-gnosis*: not-knowing, not buying into the Gnostic or metaphysical trap, however appealing its wares, its consolations and comforts. What we have instead is a poetic response: our fragile existence is like that of beautiful cherry blossoms. When the wind rises, some of them follow away. The wind in life is death. *And*: the beauty and magnificence of life (in spite of the suffering it entails) is increased by the certainty of our finitude.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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