

A Therapist's Introduction to Buddhism: Putting Mindfulness Back in Context

Mindfulness has become something of a buzz-word in the last decade, generating huge numbers of web articles, book sales and has extended its reach into popular culture colonising such diverse worlds as HR, therapy, business and well-being. As a therapist mindfulness is central both to how I work with clients and how I live my life – learning to become a therapist and learning how to live more mindfully and with more compassion were parallel paths for me. What's led me to write this article is that mindfulness is increasingly becoming divorced from its roots in Buddhism and while you don't need to be a practicing Buddhist to make mindfulness part of your life (I don't consider myself a practicing Buddhist) something valuable is lost when you divorce theories and practices from their contexts and you risk perverting those ideas, changing them in ways that betray their original meaning. There were two catalysts for writing this article for me. The first was a conversation I had with my meditation teacher where we discussed how in Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy there has been an erasure of compassion from the model: in the measurable, empirical worldview of cognitive therapy, compassion is tricky – how do you measure it or its effect on human being, how can you quantify compassion? Mindfulness without compassion for me is like dancing without music, they're fundamentally connected and interdependent. The other spur for this article was reading a piece in the Huffington Post about how mindfulness is increasingly being used as one more prop for success, a way of training the mind to achieve more and maintain its keenness in a time of information overload and employment insecurity. Both these developments have changed the meaning and intention of mindfulness and are illustrative of what can happen when ideas are abstracted from their contexts. Mindfulness exists within Buddhism as a practice that clarifies human being, allowing us to see the pain, difficulty and error that we so easily fall into, attaching too closely to those things we desire such things as money and success in the attempt to flee the reality that life is imperfect, sometimes painful and that we are less the striving individuals abstracted from our world than we would hope and part of the flux of life. Sorry if things have already begun to get confusing, in Buddhist terms I'm only a beginner myself but I hope in this article I can offer at least some context to what mindfulness and compassion mean within Buddhism and the confusing flux of our imperfect lives.

The Buddha was a real man who discovered a new way of being

The Buddha was a real man who lived in what is now the Ganges valley in India at time of great upheaval that we now term the *axial age*. Throughout the known world from Greece and Palestine through Mesopotamia, Iran and India to China, vast economic and social changes were leading many to question the old polytheistic (more than one god) faiths based around sacrifice and ritual, and to seek a more personal relationship with religion. One such questioner was a young nobleman named Siddhartha Gautama who in 538 B.C.E left his wife and family to set out on the road as a travelling ascetic. Siddhartha abandoned his cosseted and wealthy home after seeing a sick man, an old man and a corpse and realising that there was terrible pain in the world. Initially, he adopted the ascetic customs of his time in an attempt to attain enlightenment, punishing his body through going without food, undergoing extremes of heat, cold and pain, until the bleak realisation that all this mortification of the flesh had led him nowhere. Seized by a determination to look in a new way at the problem of human being he sat under a Bodhi tree in what is now Bodhgaya in Eastern India, vowing not to arise until he had discovered a new way of being human. On the night of his 49th day, the Buddha awakened to the realisation that neither extreme asceticism nor the pleasures of the world were the route to happiness, the Buddha had discovered a new way of being he termed the Middle Way. Initially he was afraid this new insight would not be understood but he overcame his fears and preached his first sermon to a group of monks in a deer park at Sarnath just outside modern-day Varanasi. This sermon, known as the Four Noble Truths, was to become the heart of Buddhism. From that day until his death many years later the Buddha continued to share the news of his awakening and that all men could share in this new way of being in the world.

What was the Buddha's revolutionary view of human being?

In that first sermon in the deer park at Sarnath, the Buddha explained the Buddhist view of human being. The Four Noble Truths affirmed that:

- 1) The character of human existence is *dukkha* or suffering
- 2) The cause of suffering is *ignorance* of the true nature of human being which is *shunyata* (emptiness or interconnectedness) and this leads us into *attachment* and *aversion* (clinging to what we like and pushing away what we don't)

- 3) Moving away from ignorance towards an understanding of our plight brings an end to suffering
- 4) The end of suffering is accomplished through the Buddhist path or dharma (Epstein 1995, 43-102), (Tulku 2005 27-37).

These are quite difficult ideas for a beginner but I'll be coming back to them throughout this article: essentially what the four noble truths articulate is that we are less solidly real and individual than we like to think we are, a creeping sense of our lack of a solid-self causes us to puff ourselves up and get lost in ego games and a ceaseless round of striving for what we like and pushing away what we don't like. Accepting that we are imperfect creatures in an imperfect and impermanent world allows us to stop running away from ourselves and stay with the difficult feelings that come with being human. Like the Buddha under the Bodhi tree we are able to rest for a moment in the experience of just being ourselves in the present moment, one of the hardest things for any of us to do.

Buddhism is a vast subject and I do not pretend to more than a superficial understanding of its history and scriptures. My reading has been limited to introductory texts by Western and Tibetan teachers as well as books and articles on how Buddhist ideas have integrated with Western psychology. What has been more important though is my experience of as a member of a number of meditation and mindfulness groups and it is this practical shared experience which is of key importance in Buddhism: learning to experience the lived reality of human being together with others. The heart of Buddhist practice is the Three Jewels from which Buddhists gain their support, or in Buddhist terminology *take refuge*, and are referred to again and again by Buddhist teachers: 'Buddha, dharma, & sangha'. Buddha refers to both the historical Buddha who was the first to achieve enlightenment and to the 'Buddha nature' which resides like a seed in each of us and offers the possibility that we too might become 'awake' as the Buddha became awake; the 'dharma' are the writings of the Buddha and of Buddhist teachers as well as the practice of Buddhism and finally the 'sangha' refers to the importance of joining together with others to study the dharma and to learn and practice the key disciplines of mindfulness, meditation and compassion.

Only through finding others to practice with, a 'sangha', or Buddhist group, is it possible to begin to follow the Buddhist path. Belief in the importance of sangha includes a belief in the importance of finding wise teachers to help us on our way, as Buddhism is a taught tradition that has survived through oral transmission from teacher to student and places great emphasis

on finding the right guide or 'spiritual friend'. The suggestion is that as humans we are always prone to falling prey to our biases or getting lost in our own stories and preoccupations, it is only through learning together with others that we can evade falling into what the Buddha termed *ignorance*. As a therapist this echoes for me how in therapy we need to explore in relationship in order to dismantle the biases, and often damaging beliefs about self and world that we constructed as children. Alone, we are too close to this material to see it, it is the air that we breathe. Only in exploring this material together with another can we begin to truly see how we have constructed our worlds, and then rebuild them anew with more compassion and understanding.

The three jewels of Buddha, dharma and sangha are a first step on the path to enlightenment or nirvana. The Buddha was the first to achieve this enlightenment and it is an important idea within Buddhism that we all have this potential within us termed *Buddha nature*. However enlightenment does not mean that we can attain a pure happiness or become categorically different, rather it means that we awaken as the Buddha awakened to the reality of our human being which the Buddha saw as *dukkha*. While *dukkha* is normally translated as suffering, psychoanalyst and Buddhist scholar Mark Epstein suggests that a more useful translation is 'pervasive unsatisfactoriness' an unsatisfactoriness derived from a number of sources: the suffering of physical illness, aging and mental pain, the frustration of our desires and wishes for fulfilment and for an end to what we do not enjoy, and a "gnawing sense of imperfection, insubstantiality, uncertainty or unrest" together with a longing for "a magical resolution of that disease" (Epstein, 1995: 46). This characteristic suffering of human being is termed *samsara* in Buddhism, however it is not essentially different to nirvana, the difference is purely one of understanding:

"Samsara and nirvana are not two separate places or locations... the basic nature of nirvana and samsara are the same: they are both what we call *shunyata*, or emptiness" (Tulku: 2001: 7-8).

Just what is this thing called emptiness?

This brings me to one of the central ideas in Buddhism: *shunyata* or *emptiness*. It is a difficult word to translate, as Tibetan Buddhist Master Ringu Tulku explains:

“It is usually rendered as ‘emptiness’ or ‘void’. Although I use the word ‘emptiness’ here I use it with some reservation... ‘interdependence’ would perhaps be a better term to use... because everything is interdependent, nothing can be said to exist separately, in and of itself” (Tulku, 2001, 2).

Emptiness is an important Buddhist idea and one that many in the west have struggled with. In Buddhist psychology emptiness means that we are less the atomized individuals we see ourselves as in the West. The Buddhist terminology for this is ‘no-self’ and this has led to accusations that Buddhism is negative and ‘depressing’. The enlightenment idea of the thinking self, making-sense of the world is dear to us and the idea of ‘no self’ feels alien and strange, a negation of what we see as ‘us’. However this is something of a misunderstanding. It might be more useful to see Buddhism as seeking to reduce the importance of the ego and restore us to our context, embedded in the world around us, part of the flux of life. Also the creeping awareness that we are less solid and real than we might wish and the anxiety this creates in us is not just an Eastern idea. From Kierkegaard and Nietzsche through to Heidegger and Sartre, the Existential tradition in Western thought has emphasized a view of human being as process and interconnected, more a verb than a noun. Every moment brings change, and we can never escape deciding how we are to be and how we are to see our world if we aren’t to miss out on a vital and real experience of being human. Kierkegaard, seen by many as the first existential thinker, memorably described this core anxiety as ‘the dizziness of freedom’ and our tendency to flee in the face of this anxiety has been noted by many existential philosophers. Nietzsche warned against falling into the thinking of *the herd* and Sartre memorably described how we seek to evade our responsibility to make sense of ourselves and our world in a kind of self-deceit he termed *bad faith*. The difference between Western and Buddhist accounts of this existential insecurity is that in the West there is more emphasis on individual meaning. However even here there are points of contact, while Heidegger echoed Nietzsche’s warning not to let others think for us, in his writing man can’t be abstracted from his world and our shared ways of being are important. While we must discover our own meaning, meaning can never be abstracted from its context, it is always situated. Christian existential thinker Jaspers (also the man who coined the term *axial age*) echoed Buddhist ideas of ignorance and compassion, warning against an over reliance on individual meaning. For Jaspers if we think alone we too easily fall into error, self-delusion and ambiguity, only in coming together in a kind of relationship he termed *loving communication* could we make sense of ourselves and our world. What Buddhism and existential thought agree on is that staying with the often painful experience of being human

is very hard for us, for as soon as we begin to sense that existential insecurity we seek to evade it.

Buddhism like Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity makes great use of visual representations to help in understanding difficult theological concepts. . One of the most famous is the Wheel of Life, the Buddhist depiction of human being, at the heart of which are a red cock a green snake and a black hog, “each one biting the tail of its neighbour to indicate their interconnectedness” (Epstein, 1995: 39). The black hog represents ignorance, our failure to see things as they are, the red cock represents greed, attachment or clinging our desire for the things we feel will make us happier or more substantial and the green snake is anger, hatred or aversion, our desire to push away or negate those things we feel threaten us or our happiness:

“These three animals represent the three main mental poisons which are at the core of the wheel of life. Stirred by them the whole cycle of existence moves. Without them there is no samsara. Samsara, therefore, is not a place. It is a state of mind” (Tulku, 2005: 30).

What underlies the ceaseless round of attachment and aversion, clinging and pushing away, greed and hatred, is ignorance, and what underlies the ignorance is our awareness of emptiness: we sense the truth that we are less substantial and solid than we'd like to be, and that our world is impermanent and changing, and we run from this fear into attachment and aversion. This “core existential insecurity” (Epstein 1995: 55) causes us to flee into craving or attachment, a thirst for pleasure, riches or a more fixed image of ourselves. The culture of celebrity and the vigour with which we tend our Facebook pages are testament to our desire for this more solid sense of self. Equally we fly to quickly into aversion, a brittle hatred of those we see as getting in the way of what we want or who trigger our fears. Our recent period of economic uncertainty has channelled our hatreds towards groups such as bankers and immigrants, those in power whom we blame for our unhappiness or those on the margins we see as rivals for what we believe to be rightfully ours. This is not to say that Buddhism encourages an uncritical acceptance of the status quo, rather it removes the blinkers of hatred allowing us to see the things that need changing more clearly. You can begin to see here how a mindfulness practice that helps you attain personal success without questioning the ethics of how you live your life risks doing some serious damage to the meaning of the practice. Rather than allowing you to resist the flight into attachment and aversion, it could well be facilitating that very flight, keeping you trapped in ignorance.

Buddhist teachings emphasize that in throwing off ignorance, we begin to free ourselves from dukkha or suffering: through understanding of emptiness we accept that we are much less solid and real than we would like to admit to ourselves and this allows us to stay with our experience and resist the flight into attachment and aversion, clinging to what we desire and pushing away what we hate, in the ceaseless cycle of samsara. Crucially the Buddha offered not just a diagnosis of what was wrong with human being but a solution, the dharma. Being a man of the axial age, he was not content with rituals, he offered instead practices which offer a lived experience of a better kind of human being through *mindfulness*, *meditation* and *compassion*.

What is Buddhist practice all about?

The Buddha laid out the foundations for Buddhist practice in the form of the Noble Eightfold Path which forms the basis for all higher teachings and lays out a Buddhist morality focussing on the basic building blocks of right view, right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness right meditation and right concentration (ibid, 37-54). What is important here is the Buddha is laying down the building blocks for an ethical way of living. There are some important distinctions here between Buddhist morality and that of the other world religions, particularly the monotheistic (only one god) religions of Judaism, Christianity & Islam. The crucial difference is that while Buddhism doesn't reject the idea of god or gods, it turns away from the divine as the focus of religion. When asked by his followers whether the gods existed the Buddha rejected such questions as improper or inappropriate. Venerating god or dismissing god was not the answer, finding the right way to live was. Divorced from the idea of a judging creator god in whose image we are created, Buddhism has developed a different approach to morality. Instead of biblical commandments designating right and wrong, with harsh punishments for infraction, we have an approach that instead designates between *skillful* and *unskillful* ways of living and offers compassion to those struggling to find their way. A key aspect of this reality was the idea of Karma, one aspect of Buddhist morality that can cause a lot of confusion in the west, in the east belief in reincarnation has always been a commonly held view. Karen Armstrong explains this tricky concept beautifully:

"Karma bound men and women to an endless cycle of rebirth into a series of painful lives. But if they could reform their egotistic attitudes they could change their destiny. The Buddha

compared the process of rebirth to a flame which lights a lamp, from which a second lamp is lit, and so on until the flame is extinguished. If somebody is still aflame at death with a wrong attitude, he or she will simply light another lamp. But if the fire is put out, the cycle of suffering will cease and nirvana will be attained” (Armstrong 1994: 44).

There was no sense of an afterlife or heaven (this was another area the Buddha wisely refused to discuss as it lay beyond the known) nirvana was freedom from suffering and rebirth. While Nirvana and the end of rebirths may have been end result of Buddhist practice this has led to a misunderstanding of Buddhism in the west. The object of Buddhist practice is less on attaining nirvana than in being on the way, making your life a better one in the here and now. Nirvana isn't part of the day to day reality of most Buddhists, their practice is. Karma is an important concept but not one which all Buddhists agree on. I'm agnostic about karma in a cosmic sense but I do believe that how we live our lives and approach others has a very real effect on how we construct and interpret the world around us, so in an immediate way karma is very real for me. What Buddhist practice offers is a way of changing the way we live our lives and construct our worlds for the better and stay with our moment to moment experience of being human without fleeing into ignorance, attachment and aversion. The hope is less that we can attain nirvana than that for a moment we can put down our stories about ourselves and the world and see things more clearly through a personal understanding of the teachings. This understanding is achieved through Buddhist practice and the three basic forms of practice which are central for most followers of Buddhism are *mindfulness*, *meditation* and compassion.

Mindfulness:

The first step to experiencing the self in the present moment is the practice of *mindfulness*. Mindfulness is the attempt to stay with moment to moment experience through focussing on what we are doing. It sounds simple but is really very hard, as it's about a move from *doing-mode* to *being-mode*. We can all recognize doing-mode, for many of us in the West it's our habitual way of being,

“A conceptual, thought-based mode of processing experience... attention is based largely in the past or in the future. We are out of touch with ‘felt’ internal experiencing.... The ‘doing mode’... is configured in such a way that it remains in action on a particular ‘problem’ until it is solved” (Crane, 2009: 28).

Whenever we are rushing through our day ticking off our mental to do list, or lying in bed at night planning the next day or worrying about our finances we are in doing mode and seemingly unable to turn it off. Mindfulness is a way of switching off this whirring mental activity which if unchecked can become 'rumination': "self-critical, self-focussed, repetitive negative thinking" (Crane, 2009: 11). Cultivating mindfulness is key to stepping out of doing-mode into being-mode, using our bodies as our focus so that we are no longer lost in our minds:

"attention is *intentionally* placed on present moment experiencing; the person is in touch with the world directly through their senses; experience is held within an attitudinal framework characterised by acceptance, kindness, interest, warmth and non striving; all experience is perceived as events within the field of awareness" (Crane, 2009: 28).

A key technique is the *body-scan* in which either sitting or lying down you mentally scan each part of the body from the feet to the crown of the head, focussing all one's attention on what is actually felt in each part of the body. It's amazing when you first attempt this how little you can feel of your body and the gradual awakening to sensation over time is painstaking and very powerful as a reminder of how much we are taught to live in our minds and neglect our bodily experience. Through employing the body scan over time one is better able to experience the day to day tasks of life in an embodied manner. Any task is an opportunity to employ mindfulness, as the revered Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Han makes clear, famously citing the example of 'washing the dishes to wash the dishes':

"At first glance, that might seem a little silly: why put so much stress on a simple thing? But that's precisely the point. The fact that I am standing there and washing these bowls is a wondrous reality. I'm being completely myself, following my breath, conscious of my presence, and conscious of my thoughts and actions. There's no way I can be tossed mindlessly like a bottle slapped here and there on the waves." (Thich Nhat Han, 1975: 3).

Whether you are washing the dishes, cleaning your teeth, or walking down the street, any task is an opportunity to practice mindfulness, switch off your mind for a while and truly experience where you are and what you are doing in an embodied way free from the tyranny of thought.

Meditation

Meditation is the sister practice to Mindfulness. If mindfulness is a way of experiencing the doing of life differently, meditation is time out from life to sit with the breath and our moment to moment experience of ourselves and the anxiety engendered by emptiness:

“Sitting in meditation is nourishment for your spirit and nourishment for your body, as well... Once you are able to quiet your mind, once your feelings and thoughts no longer disturb you, at that point your mind will begin to dwell in mind. Your mind will take hold of mind in a direct and wondrous way which no longer differentiates between subject and object.” (Thich Nhat Han, 1975: 3)

Meditation takes two forms, shamatha and vipashyana in Sanskrit or shine and lhakthong in Tibetan, the first stage is the calming of the mind and can be translated as ‘calm abiding’, the second stage is the use of meditation to explore the nature of being and means ‘clear seeing’ or ‘special insight’ (Tulku, 2005: 44). For the beginner just sitting down, calming the mind and focussing on the breath is challenge enough:

“The mind is like a monkey swinging from branch to branch through a forest, says the Sutra. In order not to lose sight of the monkey by some sudden movement, we must watch the monkey constantly and even to be one with it.”

In meditation we do not have to force the mind to be still, rather we use the breath or sound as a focus and let the thoughts drift across the mind without following them, concentrating instead on the breathing or on sounds coming and going in an attempt to stay with our moment to moment experience of ourselves. One of the great misconceptions about meditation is that it is intended to clear the mind of thought when the real challenge of meditation is to sit and observe the monkey mind in doing-mode generating thoughts. A useful concept borrowed from CBT illustrates this idea. If you see your thoughts like buses, you can spot them whizzing past, it's one thing to notice you're worrying about work but if you get on that speeding bus and it takes you off into a rumination about how your boss doesn't value you, you've stopped observing your thoughts and have fallen victim to them. Time to get off the bus, dust yourself off and start again. Over time meditation, like good therapy, can reveal the patterns and ways of seeing the world that are habitual to us, allowing us to see how we think, feel and behave, how we construct our world and how we relate to others. In this, Buddhist practice is similar

to therapy as it strengthens that part of the brain that observes and reflects on our experience, termed the *observing ego* by psychoanalysts (Epstein, 1995: 135). Neuroscientists have been able to observe how this process operates in the brain. Meditation has been shown to strengthen connections between the *anterior cingulate cortex*, the overseer of our attention, and the *insula*, which reports our emotional felt sense. Being able to become more self-reflective and notice and understand our emotions and what they tell us about our process, offers us the possibility to change. This learning to observe one's thoughts and emotions can be very powerful in relieving the pain of experiences such as rumination:

"It is remarkable how liberating it feels to be able to see that your thoughts are just thoughts and that they are not 'you' or 'reality'.... The simple act of recognizing your thoughts as thoughts can free you from the distorted reality they often create and allow for more clear-sightedness and a greater sense of manageability in your life" (Kabat-Zinn, 1990: 69-70)

Compassion

The third of the key practices of Buddhism is compassion or *loving-kindness*. Meditation groups often begin with a refuge prayer which in the first part emphasizes a commitment to 'Buddha dharma and sangha' and in the second part wishes that we might achieve enlightenment and that all other beings to may achieve the same release from suffering. As Ringu Tulku asserts:

"Compassion is wishing that all suffering without exception might be utterly extinguished. And here we are not talking about all the sufferings of one person or a few people, but all the sufferings of all sentient beings." (Tulku, 2001: 3 in Gilbert (Ed.) 2005: 218).

I'd like to stop here for a moment and consider this important point: the meaning of compassion within Buddhism. For Buddhists the happiness of all beings is as important as their own as emptiness teaches us that you cannot abstract man from his context the world. Once you divorce mindfulness from compassion you have broken the ethical framework of Buddhism. Mindfulness divorced from compassion is then free to become a tool of individualism. For me, the practice of compassion is perhaps the most important thing about Buddhism, as it teaches that kindness is a skill that can be practiced, allowing us us to become kinder and less judgemental both with ourselves and others.

Interestingly, developing compassion for oneself has been one of the key focuses of the western Buddhist project and in the inroads Buddhism has made into psychotherapy as many who turn to Buddhism in the individualistic west are troubled by an inner confusion that is less common in the more collective East as Buddhist Psychoanalyst Mark Epstein describes:

“Many of the people who were drawn to Buddhism were attracted by the idea of ‘no self’ and ‘emptiness’ that are central to the Buddha’s psychology but these are difficult concepts to understand... in the West people who were suffering from alienation or from spiritual or psychological distress often mistook Buddhist descriptions for an affirmation of their psychological emptiness, ‘you have to be somebody before you can be nobody’ was a way of telling them that their psychological work of raising self-esteem or creating an integrated or cohesive self had to precede efforts at seeing through the ego” (Epstein, 2001: 22).

As Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy has identified, the doing-mode that we find ourselves in so much of the time can quite easily slip into self-critical rumination and compassion for the self is a first step away from rumination. A key part of the meditation in both groups I’ve attended focuses on developing feelings of compassion for self and others in the form of *metta* or loving-kindness meditation, the form of compassion practiced in many Buddhist traditions. The practice of loving-kindness meditation involves an embodied focussing on the heart not the head and cultivating kind feelings for others, our intimates, those we don’t know and those we find difficult. When this practice was introduced to the west a new element had to be introduced, *kindness towards the self*. In the West, our focus on individualism has led to a more fragile and self-critical ego, that can slip easily into rumination, so meditators have to begin by learning kindness towards themselves. Such gentleness isn’t always easy: I hear from clients all the time complaints such as, ‘I should be able to deal with this myself,’ ‘I shouldn’t still be complaining to you,’ ‘Why can’t I cope with this on my own.’ It’s as if having forgotten our fundamental interconnectedness we now blame ourselves for not being up to the task of being everything. Learning the lesson of emptiness is learning to be kind to ourselves and see ourselves more in our context, in a web of interconnected relationships and to view ourselves and others with compassion.

What Buddhism means for me

As I warned in my introduction, Buddhism is a vast and complex religion and what I have attempted here is a very personal introduction based on my own experience of its core teachings and practices as I have encountered them. I'm fairly sure that I have managed to replicate what I was setting out to remedy, and have changed the meaning of Buddhism in subtle and not so subtle ways due to my own partial and biased view of the world and for that I apologise. But hopefully I have managed to express something of the spirit of Buddhism and given some sense of what mindfulness means within this context. Seen from within Buddhism, mindfulness is a way of helping us to stay with the anxiety-provoking sense of ourselves as being essentially fragile and interconnected beings in an imperfect and impermanent, ever changing world. Through employing the core practices of mindfulness, meditation and compassion, Buddhism tries to help us to stay with our moment to moment experience of ourselves and the world without running away from the anxiety we feel and taking flight in ignorance, attachment and aversion. Buddhism like good therapy helps us to move beyond the old patterns and stories we grew up in and to change how we see ourselves and the world.

However, losing our illusions and beginning to see things more clearly is often painful work. As a therapist, mindfulness and compassion allow me to be with my clients' material in a kind and non-judgmental way without rushing in to offer solutions too quickly or to see things too much from my perspective, allowing me to hold my own anxiety, and teaching mindfulness and compassion to clients allows them to be gentler with themselves and their process. For the hardest thing about therapy is that you don't begin to understand how you are in the world and *then* change, there is what I call the *necessary lag*: you must observe yourself being the person you learned to be, doing the things that make you sad or crazy, and be patient and gentle with that person. Only in observing ourselves making the same mistakes we've always made with understanding and compassion can we begin to change. Clients so often see this as failure but being able to show patience in the face of our frailties without fleeing into criticism or judgement is a true achievement and the necessary precursor to change. Without this necessary stage we will remain locked in the neurotic patterns the Buddha termed ignorance and samsara. For me, without the Buddhist practices of mindfulness and compassion, and the shared understanding of relationship there can be no change. The Buddha identified how hard it is for us to endure being human and he offered a way of dealing with that pain that is as relevant today as it was in the Axial Age.

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