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Beyond mindfulness, towards antiquity

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This article explores an alternative philosophical route to contemporary mindfulness practice. Through a consideration of Hellenistic philosophy, the article argues that a Western cultural heritage has much to offer the current mindfulness milieu, which largely depends upon a singular model of secularized Buddhism. This latter approach can limit the therapeutic potential of mindfulness as an embodied practice for living. Through embracing a more complex understanding of present-moment awareness – one that is underpinned by Hellenistic philosophical practice – we encounter valuable seeds for self-transformation.

Keywords: mindfulness; Hellenistic philosophy; present-moment awareness; ethics

Hellenism and embodied practice

Current challenges to secular mindfulness focus on the fact that its historical, social and philosophical contexts have been neglected in pursuit of quick-fix and ends-based outcomes. This outcome-orientated culture – evident in the popularity of mindfulness-based courses and their proliferation – is in stark contrast to an emphasis on cultivating a mindfulness practice as embodied through the manner in which we live our whole lives. Mindfulness as an embodied praxis helps us come to terms with our existence, but also contains the seeds for self-transformation.

Through my own experiences as a psychotherapist and meditation practitioner, I have come to believe that attaching clear objectives to mindfulness practice holds the danger of becoming a form of mindless dogmatism, in contrast to a nourishing (and perplexing) practice of existential enquiry. However, I am not alone in current criticisms of contemporary mindfulness, yet I wish to use this emerging cultural polemic as a springboard (Bazzano, 2014) to highlight the philosophical work that has nurtured my ideas of embodied praxis.

I wish to consider a kind of mindfulness inherent in a Western cultural heritage, one that is often neglected in favour of the Eastern-influenced eight-week courses that teach participants meditation techniques to relieve their anxiety, physical pain, negative thinking, stress and depression. This Western philosophical tradition, in particular Hellenistic schools, places a strong emphasis upon attending to one's life in the present moment. My intention is not to force a-historical parallels between Hellenistic and Buddhist philosophy, nor to advocate these traditions over more modern versions of mindfulness practice. Instead, through revisiting ideas of present-moment awareness within a Western philosophical context, I will consider antiquity's place within mindfulness practice, in particular the relationship between the present

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moment and ethics, and the roots of this philosophical tradition as an embodied practice for living everyday life.

Dropping the *dharma*

Secular mindfulness-based interventions originated from the work of Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn at the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in the late 1970s. Initially working with people with conditions such as chronic pain, AIDS and cancer, without being able to 'cure' them he discovered that meditation could help them relate to their pain in a different way (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). An experienced practitioner in both the *zen* and *vipassana* traditions, Kabat-Zinn's intention was to bring the wisdom of traditional Buddhist practices into 'an arena where it could be of benefit to an audience that would clearly never approach meditation, let alone things "Buddhist"' (Peacock, 2014, p. 13). In order to broaden the accessibility and appeal of the benefits of meditation, Kabat-Zinn identified a need to secularize Buddhist practice; this required dropping the *dharma* – the teachings of the Buddha – and creating a mindfulness-based intervention that could be practised without religious, philosophical and historical context.

With the backing of the UK's National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), which has since 2004 been recommending mindfulness-based intervention for recurrent depression, Kabat-Zinn's work has been the inspiration behind a number of subsequent therapeutic mindfulness courses in the UK, including Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT), Mindfulness for Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), mindfulness-based treatments for eating disorders, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Children (MBCT–C), Mindfulness-Based Relationship Enhancement (MBRE), Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention (MBRP) and Mindfulness-Based Childbirth and Parenting (MBCP). We can sign up to Mindfulness in the Work Place courses, Mindfulness-Based Bereavement Care groups, Mindfulness-Based Awareness Coaching and the more general Mindfulness for Health and Well Being courses. Contemporary mindfulness, therefore, has intentionally narrowed its focus from a broader ontological enquiry and philosophical sensibility to a *dharma*-free, targeted intervention that adapts mindfulness techniques and approaches to specific populations or problems.

The past of the 'present moment'

If we sift through this barrage of mindfulness marketing and jargon-ridden course titles, we find that current targeted mindfulness-based interventions share a simple philosophical and practical premise: that through bringing increased present-moment attention to our lives, we can live with greater ease and less anxiety. It is fitting that Kabat-Zinn holds perhaps the most indicative definition of contemporary mindfulness: 'Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally' (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4).

What is meant by 'present moment'? This concept is not unique to its Buddhist heritage, but is shared across philosophical and cultural traditions. Might we be able to broaden and deepen our understanding of this present moment if we explore our own cultural heritage? The reservoir of practical wisdom offered by Hellenistic

philosophy is too rich to be neglected. Also, if we understand the present moment more fully through these philosophical traditions, we might be able to (re)discover fresh resources for addressing the disparities between traditional mindfulness practice and the modern mindfulness *Zeitgeist* (Petranker, 2014). To quote Petranker, can 'teachings truly transform who we are when we don't know in any deep sense who we have been?' (Petranker, 2014, p. 64). According to Robertson,

> When we read about Buddhism being a 'here and now' philosophy we are unwittingly viewing it through the lens of an ancient turn of phrase which we only understand because our dimly recollected European philosophical heritage made such extensive use of this concept. (Robertson, 2010, p. 153)

Hellenistic philosophical schools made frequent use of the present moment within their philosophical outlook. According to Hadot (1995, 1998, 2004), Hellenistic philosophy involved an existential choice or commitment to a particular way of living one's whole life. In this respect, the Hellenistic schools of Stoicism and Epicureanism presented their philosophy in much the same way as Buddhism has: as a way of life, primarily concerned with how to live in a way that cultivates wisdom and tranquillity (Petranker, 2014). Both schools emphasized the importance of present-moment attention (*prosoché*), and while there is nothing to suggest that Stoics and Epicureans practised sitting meditation in the same way that formed Buddhist practice, their teachers did advocate a meditative approach to everyday life, cultivated through the practice of *askésis*, a term Hadot translates as spiritual exercises (Hadot, 1995, 1998, 2004). Through discipline, practice and effort, *askésis* was intentionally applied to the whole of one's life, requiring the engagement of one's whole being. In this respect, the Hellenistic philosopher was training not simply in philosophical ideas, but in how to live. Davidson writes:

> Philosophy, so understood to be a form of life, required exercises that were neither simply exercises of thought, nor even moral exercises, but rather, in the full sense of this term, spiritual exercises. Since they aimed at realizing a transformation of one's vision of the world and metamorphosis of one's personality, these exercises had an existential value, not only a moral one. (Davidson, 1990, p. 476)

Hadot (1995, 2004, 2009) often refers to the phrase Goldschmidt used to characterize Platonic dialogues to illustrate ancient philosophy in its broader application – that it intends to *form more than inform*. This formation of self occurs less through academic and analytic expertise – as current university philosophy pedagogic approaches would have us believe – and more through an applied practice of philosophy, embodied through the manner in which one lives. This idea of philosophy as praxis – an applied and embodied theory of living – is also one of a transformation in being, including one's beliefs, ethics and values. This metamorphosis of self, according to the life work of Hadot, underlies Hellenistic *askésis*. Stoicism and Epicureanism shared philosophical similarities as well as differences. Simply put, both schools associated human suffering with engulfment in passions such as desire and fear, which prevented people from living well.

However, for the Stoics, suffering arose from desiring things that were difficult to attain, and avoiding things that were difficult to avoid. Stoic philosophy advised us to live in accordance with Nature – to seek only that which is available to us, and to

only avoid that which is avoidable. In order to live stoically, one must understand how little of what occurs in life is within our control. For Epictetus, things outside the sphere of choice are nothing to me. In contrast, Epicurean philosophy was concerned with overcoming one's anxieties and fears, not in order to live a virtuous, moral life, but to transform them into the bare pleasure of existing. Both schools were therapeutic in nature in that their philosophy intended to generate freedom from the restriction and obstruction of passions in order to live well; they differed on what constituted the good philosophical life. However, the art of living well was located firmly in the present for both schools, and was underlined by the necessity of present-moment attention, or *prosoché*.

Hellenistic 'mindfulness': *prosoché*

Robertson writes:

> The notion of 'mindfulness', which is popular in modern Buddhist and psychotherapeutic literature, clearly bears comparison to certain European concepts … Stoicism is a 'here and now' (*hic et nunc*) philosophy that centres upon the concept of *prosoché*, 'attention to oneself', which can also be translated as 'mindfulness' or 'self awareness'. (Robertson, 2010, pp. 152–153)

Prosoché is the essential attitude and practice of paying attention. Described by Hadot (2004, p. 138) as a 'fundamental attitude' of continuous attention, of vigilance exercised at every moment, attention maintains one's acuity and alertness, preventing complacency and laziness in one's philosophical practice. Through this attitude, the philosopher brings present-moment attention to her actions, enabling her to respond to circumstances at will. For the Stoic, the ability to respond required having the key underlying rule of life – the distinction between what is in our control (for example, the present, morality) and what is not (for example, the past and future, nature) – always to hand (*procheiron*). The Stoic was required to apply this rule to all life's situations, revising and integrating it into their understanding of themselves. They cultivated the ability to do so through engaging with various exercises or *askésis* – for example, memorization (*mneme*) and meditation (*melete*). In *Letters*, statesman and philosopher Seneca described their purpose:

> These are the precepts that [the practitioner] must never let go. Rather, he must cling fast to them and make them a part of himself, and by daily meditation reach the point where these salutary maxims occur to him of his own accord. (Quoted in Petranker, 2014, p. 104)

In this respect, *prosoché* lay at the heart of Stoic philosophy which constantly required, through memorization and meditation, actively putting Stoic teachings into practice and testing out their application to one's life. Epicurean followers engaged in meditation practices analogous to those of the Stoics, but their aim was not to maintain constant moral vigilance, but instead to purge painful thoughts and anxieties by placing present-moment attention on pleasurable experiences. Again, remembrance and recollection were essential to this practice which, for Epicureans, means recollection of past and present experiences of relaxation and peacefulness in order to cultivate the ability to apply these experiences to one's daily life.

We encounter *prosoché* most vividly in the writings of the Stoic Emperor Marcus Aurelius (2003). Throughout his *Meditations* he frequently emphasizes the value of placing one's attention on the present moment, and his aphorisms would not be out of place on a contemporary mindfulness course, and they could be effortlessly compared, for example, to the words of popular Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hahn (Ussher, 2014).

What is it that we are being present to? Epictetus reminds his students that *prosoché* is crucial for living an ethical life. He emphasizes the importance of cultivating the ability to apply key ethical precepts to everyday situations; the most important one, as we have seen, is to focus on what you can and cannot control (Ussher, 2014).

Here is where we encounter a distinction between traditional and contemporary understandings of 'present-moment' attention. When we trace it back to its philosophical meaning and application in Hellenistic philosophy, we find that it is rooted in being actively present to living an ethical life. In this respect, *prosoché* holds the applied function of how to live a good and flourishing (*eudaimonic*) life. As Ussher writes, '*Prosoché*, unlike contemporary mindfulness meditation, is not, in and of itself, concerned with the present moment for its own sake. Rather, it is concerned with applying key ethical precepts to how one is living in the present moment' (Ussher, 2014, p. 163).

I began by briefly stating some of the concerns and criticisms with mindfulness practice today, and have sketched these out in order to evoke philosophical and historical traditions that I feel are lacking in the current climate. As a therapist, I empathize with the challenge of working with people who suffer life through repressive cultural values and religious dogma. Providing access and insight into meditative practices can and has proven helpful to many. However, the reliance of current mindfulness programmes on a singular model of secularized Buddhism can only limit its potential when considering its Western philosophical foundations. Michel Foucault's late work, particularly his lecture series at the Collège de France, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (Foucault, 2001), owes a very significant debt to the work of Pierre Hadot, whom I have quoted already in this article. Yet Hadot's and Foucault's philosophical corrective, namely that the role and function of the Western philosophical tradition, from Hellenistic times, lay in its ability to be applied to life as an embodied practice, is still, some 30 years since Foucault's seminal lecture, largely unrealized. It is within contemporary modes of psychotherapy that, perhaps, this corrective can begin to take root. My work as a therapist seeks to dismantle the divisions that exist between practice and theory; and my reading of philosophical texts and the application of *askésis* as an ethics not just of remembering – a quality so dear to the Greeks – but an ethics of care are central to my outlook. This integrative approach has been enriched by the extensive and rich work of both Hadot and Foucault. For therapists using mindfulness-based interventions with their clients, this understanding can surely only enrich their practice.

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