



# BEYOND MINDFULNESS

In Search of Wisdom in a Secular Age

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# Contents

<b>Preface</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>The Good Life</b>	<b>8</b>
The Story of Progress	8
Work and Leisure	9
Digital Media Addiction	12
Happiness and Meaning	14
<b>The Primacy of Consciousness</b>	<b>19</b>
Physicalism and Modern Philosophy	19
The Mind and the Brain	22
The Hard Problem	24
Phenomenology: Investigating Experience	26
<b>The Ultimate Goal</b>	<b>29</b>
Existentialism: Action Over Identity	29
Death and Desire	31
Rebirth and Conviction	33
The Pursuit of Happiness	34
<b>Spirituality Revisited</b>	<b>37</b>
The Varieties of Spiritual Practice	37
The Myth of Universalism	41
The Culmination of Self-Improvement	43
<b>Path of Practice: Discipline and Virtue</b>	<b>46</b>
Fidelity and Sobriety	46
Honesty and Brevity	48
Fasting and Health	50
Minimalism	52
<b>Path of Practice: Calm and Concentration</b>	<b>54</b>
Solitude and Patience	54
Mindfulness	56
Stillness and Composure	59
<b>Path of Practice: Discernment and Wisdom</b>	<b>62</b>

Study and Discussion	62
Not-self	63
Action and Causality	66
<b>Appendix</b>	<b>69</b>
Happiness, Development, Irreligion, and Suicide	69
Data	69
Exclusions	71
Sources	72
Spiritual Tradition Practices Comparison	73
Methodology	73
Discipline and Virtue	74
Concentration and Calm	74
Discernment and Wisdom	75
Sources	75
Notes	78
Preface	78
The Good Life	78
The Primacy of Consciousness	79
The Ultimate Goal	80
Spirituality Examined	81
Path of Practice: Discipline and Virtue	81
Path of Practice: Calm and Concentration	82
Path of Practice: Discernment and Wisdom	83
Reading Recommendations	84
Technology and Futurology	84
Philosophy and Psychology	84
Self-Improvement	84
Teachings of the Buddha	85
Selected Bibliography	86
Acknowledgments	88
Copyright	89

# Preface

The idea for this project came to me during a stay at a forest monastery in Thailand. I had just read Yuval Noah Harari's bestseller *21 Lessons For the 21st Century*, where he identifies mindfulness as a practice essential for human mental health and autonomy in a world filled with distraction and mistruth.

My first reaction was one of satisfaction—it was about time that there was more widespread adoption of meditation. Here was a professional historian who was writing to a general audience that was not the typical reader of a meditation manual. Instead, the target seemed to be the secular humanist crowd: educated intellectuals aware of the perils of religious faith while holding a scientific worldview and influenced by the story of technological progress.

But reflecting further on this, I was struck by how limited a view of mindfulness was given. Not to malign Yuval—he did not claim to be an expert in the field. In fact, he deserves praise for even taking the risk of broaching the topic to his potentially anti-spiritual reader base. I knew that divorcing mindfulness from its Buddhist context and background of related practices in this way was nothing new. Since the beginning of the mindfulness revolution in the early 2000s—sparked partly by Jon Kabat-Zinn's early research on its stress-reducing effects—there has been a push to extract what is scientifically sound from its undeniably Buddhist sources.<sup>1</sup>

This tendency is quite natural in the Western world, which, in historical terms, has only recently started to look to the Eastern spiritual traditions for guidance in matters of the mind. These things take time. After all, it took the Enlightenment movement centuries of intellectual struggle to break the shackles of religious superstition and dogma prevailing in 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe.

The problem is, as many scholars have pointed out, mindfulness with all its subtleties cannot be entirely divorced from Buddhism proper.<sup>2,3</sup> By this, I am not suggesting that those who have found practicing mindfulness beneficial cannot explore it while retaining a healthy skepticism of religious belief. However, to properly appreciate the implications of the Buddha's insights, questioning some of our own hidden beliefs seems necessary.

My interest in these matters started over a decade ago, a few weeks after getting a much sought-after job offer as a soon-to-be college graduate. Since I had an expiring student visa, I was in a state of relief bordering on bliss. Eventually, I reflected on what was most likely in my future—a career, marriage, kids, retirement. I was struck by the reality of my human condition—my inevitable old age and... death. Intuitively,

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Pickert. [The Mindful Revolution: The science of finding focus in a stressed-out, multitasking culture](#), TIME, 3 Feb 2014, p. 44

<sup>2</sup> Rupert Gethin. *On some definitions of mindfulness*, Contemporary Buddhism, Vol. 12, No. 1, May 2011

<sup>3</sup> Robert H. Sharf. *Is mindfulness Buddhist? (and why it matters)*, Transcultural Psychiatry 2015, Vol. 52(4), pp. 470–84

I focused on the futility and meaninglessness of the situation I was in. This spiritual crisis triggered me to search for what I deemed most worthwhile—the wisdom to know what was truly beneficial, and a path to freedom from my predicament.

Even with this change in perspective, I was still a natural skeptic who considered any blind belief based on tradition or otherwise to be unacceptable. If I were serious about my quest, my faculties of critical analysis would be indispensable. So even though I was raised Buddhist in Sri Lanka, a majority Theravāda Buddhist country, my interest was in spiritual knowledge independent of faith-based traditions and customs. Nevertheless, I still considered the Buddha's teachings to be the best place to start my search. This was because my upbringing inclined me to think that Buddhism devoid of its cultural trappings was compatible with reason and more practical in nature than other religions and spiritual traditions. Even so, it was only after years of studying Buddhist history and its early texts that I was comfortable enough with my own understanding of the subject matter to pursue it wholeheartedly. This journey required that I be quite ruthless in questioning different traditions—especially my own.<sup>4</sup>

Even with this background, I found the task of applying the practical recommendations of those I considered wise to be challenging. The distractions I faced while working for an investment bank in midtown Manhattan was at a different scale to what spiritual seekers in seclusion usually had to deal with. Because of this, my quest became a struggle—I had to figure out how to best navigate the modern world on my own.

Since choosing to leave behind the corporate world, I have been fortunate enough to spend time in Buddhist monasteries around the world and contemplate what it means to live wisely. This has led me to research works of seemingly unrelated fields—from history to futurology, philosophy to psychology, and spirituality to self-improvement. I am inclined to think that weaving these fields together—admittedly peripheral to my primary interest in Buddhist practice—helps one make a coherent argument on how best to live in the world today. I feel that my experience has put me in a position to bridge these seemingly disparate subjects. My background in data science also finds its place when I choose to make a more quantitative case to support my arguments.

The aims of this book are two-fold. First, to provide the necessary context to understand the motivation behind pursuing the ultimate Buddhist goal—commonly known as Nirvana. Second, to recommend certain practices to incorporate in your life to potentially achieve this goal in due time.

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<sup>4</sup> For a survey of the history of Buddhism and the development of its texts, check [Clearing the Way: Resolving Misinterpretations of the Dhamma](#), What the Buddha (Most Likely) Said, pp. 5-13

# Introduction

We all seek to live well. This quest for knowledge that leads to long-term well-being is worth prioritizing in our lives over all else. Applying that knowledge in practice is to live a life of wisdom. In this era of instant gratification where we have little time for meaningful contemplation, this search has become significantly more challenging, and as a result, more valuable. In this book, we will explore what it means to truly be free, and what we can do to progress towards that ultimate goal.

We start by contrasting the digital age we currently live in with how the world was just a few centuries ago. By placing ourselves in the context of history, the hope is to identify the trends that will shape us in the near future. This is where we discuss the ramifications of mass automation and the rise of artificial intelligence—especially the likelihood that it will reduce our time at work. Then, we explore the extent of our addiction to digital media and its influence on our time for leisure and contemplation. Next, the relationship between a country's happiness, development, irreligiosity, and suicide rates are analyzed for insights into the apparent mass loss of meaning in modern secular societies.

Our next focus will be the roots of Western thought, the history of its philosophy, and how some of its strands—specifically phenomenology and existentialism—are connected to Buddhist ideas. To be clear, this is not to suggest that Buddhism should be understood merely as a philosophy—that would be doing a disservice to its practical and soteriological significance. Instead, it is a means to provide intellectual context for its teachings—a way for those unfamiliar with its concepts to grasp its intricacies from a familiar starting point. Through this, we question the unacknowledged assumption in today's popular culture that physicalism—the belief that matter is the fundamental substance of reality—is the most rational worldview in light of scientific knowledge. This is done by discussing the significance of consciousness, and arguing for its primacy.

With this shift in perspective, we dig into the topic of meaning, and find that assuming that death is an unsolvable problem is a result of physicalist thinking. As such, the search for liberation—Nirvana—becomes the most meaningful pursuit we can strive for. We analyze the plausibility of such a seemingly impossible goal and what achieving it in practice would entail. The Buddha's quest for awakening and the insights he arrived at finds its place here, with the recognition that the pursuit of happiness and the search for the deathless are ultimately the same endeavor.

With this clarity in what a life of wisdom is about, we reexamine what different spiritual traditions have to offer. The Buddhist framework of discipline and virtue, concentration and calm, and discernment and wisdom is used to compare their various practices. The universalist idea that all spiritual teachings point to the same

truth is evaluated by comparing their recommended practices and stated goals. Some of the practices that are aligned with the search for wisdom will not be new to those familiar with the world of self-development or spirituality, while others will be uniquely Buddhist.

The last chapter details various skills to develop for those interested in living a life of wisdom. Present day movements and groups that advocate similar practices are recognized as stepping stones for further growth. My hope is that those who are interested in their long-term well-being will experiment with the suggestions given here and use the evidence of their own experience as their guide.



# The Good Life

Before delving into matters of the mind and how best to make use of our time, we will first orient ourselves to the peculiarities of our times. The world we live in now was hard to fathom even a few decades ago. It is undoubtedly shaping our actions and beliefs—probably even more than we know. We will explore the genesis and development of these changes, its pros, cons, and what it all means in the quest for wisdom.

## The Story of Progress

Starting from the time of the Enlightenment in mid-18<sup>th</sup> century Europe, rapid technological progress has significantly resolved some of the long-standing issues of human survival: hunger, disease, and poverty.

The life expectancy of the average person in the world back then was around 29 years—about the level it had been for all of human history.<sup>5</sup> Since then, and especially during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, due to leaps in agriculture, hygiene, and medicine, humans have been living longer and healthier than ever. Today, the expected life span of the average person in the world is over 73 years.<sup>6</sup> While this jump is mostly explained by a hundredfold decrease in infant and child mortality, people are also expected to live longer at all ages than in the past.<sup>7</sup>

Those extra years are also being spent in better health than ever before. Since the invention of vaccination in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, we have successfully eradicated diseases previously thought intractable. The last case of smallpox, a disease that killed more than 300 million people in the 20<sup>th</sup> century alone, was in 1977. Diseases like measles, rubella, and elephantiasis are in epidemiologists' sights for eradication in the near future.<sup>8</sup> The death rate of malaria has been reduced by 60 percent in just the last couple of decades. Even how we related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has shown how far we have come since the days of the Spanish Flu, when up to 100 million people perished according to some estimates.<sup>9</sup>

We are also living in a time of unprecedented abundance. While the focus of most of the current political discourse is on the inequality of the gains, it is inarguable that at the global level, we are experiencing a time of economic prosperity never seen

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<sup>5</sup> Roser, M. 2016n. [Life expectancy](#). *Our World in Data*.

<sup>6</sup> World Health Organization. [GHE: Life expectancy and healthy life expectancy](#).

<sup>7</sup> Steven Pinker. *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*, Kindle Location 1363

<sup>8</sup> Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. [Out Big Bet for the Future: 2015 Gates Annual Letter](#), p. 7

<sup>9</sup> Johnson NP, Mueller J. *Updating the accounts: global mortality of the 1918–1920 “Spanish” influenza pandemic*, 2002, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*. 76 (1): pp. 105–15

before. This growth of wealth is such a sudden phenomenon that most of us are unaware of how different things were just a few decades ago. Humankind was barely any better off a whole millennium after the birth of Christianity, and it took another 500 years for world income to double. Since the early 1800s, however, income has skyrocketed, with the Gross World Product today almost two hundredfold higher than what it was at the beginning of the Enlightenment.<sup>10</sup>

While higher wealth does not always equate to an improvement in the quality of life, on the whole, it is still a reasonable proxy. In 1800, almost 95 percent of the world lived in what would be considered extreme poverty today—less than \$2 a day. Now it is less than 10 percent, with almost half the decline happening in the last 35 years alone.<sup>11</sup> This growth in wealth is even more remarkable when you consider how so many of our modern conveniences were not even a figment of imagination even a few hundred years ago. After all, even the richest and most powerful person alive in 1750 had no access to a refrigerator or antibiotics, to say nothing of a smartphone.

## Work and Leisure

In theory, these developments in health and wealth can free us all from the burden of focusing on mere survival. The luxury of attending to higher pursuits—formerly the reserve of kings, lords, and others with generational wealth—is now increasingly becoming a reality for a majority of the world population, in spite of ever-present global inequality. Consider these anecdotes: In the early 1900s, the average American worker had to work almost 2000 hours to afford a refrigerator.<sup>12</sup> Now, it takes less than 24 hours of labor, and you also get a better device. Electricity, running water, and appliances have freed us from hours of housework. Doing laundry used to take almost twelve hours a week in 1920—now it takes less than two.

The near exponential increase in the speed and capabilities of computers—as was predicted by Gordon Moore in 1965—has completely transformed how we work.<sup>13</sup> Repetitive and programmable tasks are being automated away, minimizing the need for human labor. This trend of automation is showing signs of picking up even more going forward, with developments in artificial intelligence redefining the capabilities of machines to include tasks of increasing complexity. The resulting innovations in

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<sup>10</sup> Roser, M. 2016c. *Our World in Data*, based on data from the World Bank and from Angus Maddison and Maddison Project 2014

<sup>11</sup> Steven Pinker. *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*, Kindle Locations 1997–2016

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* Kindle Locations 5583–601

<sup>13</sup> Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee. *The Second Machine Age: Work, Progress, and Prosperity in a Time of Brilliant Technologies*, Kindle Locations 568–76

autonomous vehicles, online shopping, and voice recognition promise to disrupt the transportation, retail, and customer service sectors respectively.<sup>14</sup>

The growth in productivity moved in tandem with increasing job growth in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but starting from around the turn of the new millennium, this trend has shifted.<sup>15</sup> On the face of it, this might seem to be an issue. If robots result in mass unemployment, how will average workers support themselves? To understand why this point of view is misguided, we only have to look into how we got here and how unique the times we live in now are.

Work as we now know it, was an invention of the Industrial Revolution. The massive technological upheavals of that time had effects far beyond just economic progress. It also completely transformed the social contract between employers and employees: Time became commoditized and standardized, with the introduction of hourly wages and vacation days. Precise timekeeping—formerly a practice of experts and aficionados—was now accessible to everyone due to the increasing ubiquity of clocks and watches. This is in contrast to times past, when work tended to be tied to the seasons.

Unsurprisingly, people started to work much longer than before. It was not uncommon for factory workers in newly industrialized Britain of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to work close to 100 hours a week. Over time, this exploitation of the workforce led to labor movements, which resulted in the introduction of the 5-day workweek and labor laws, giving much-needed rights to workers. Consequently, the average number of hours worked decreased over time until the 1980s.<sup>16</sup>

This trend led John Maynard Keynes, arguably the most influential economist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to hypothesize that future generations would have to grapple with a unique and peculiar issue: having too much time for leisure due to a workweek that had shrunk to 15 hours or less.<sup>17</sup> In many respects, his prediction seemed to be on point. By the mid-1960s, a US government report projected that the average workweek would decrease to just 14 hours by the year 2000, with at least seven weeks of vacation per year. Around the same time, Isaac Asimov, the great science fiction writer, cautioned that in 50 years' time, the biggest problem facing mankind would be boredom, due to the increased amounts of free time.

Yet since the 1970s, this trend of diminishing work hours has not continued. In fact, in some countries like the United States, it has even reversed. Curiously, it has not been because the expected productivity gains have not materialized. In fact, around the year 2000, most Western industrialized countries were five times as wealthy as they were in 1930—when Keynes made his prediction.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Andrew Yang. *The War on Normal People: The Truth about America's Disappearing Jobs and Why Universal Basic Income is Our Future*, 2018, Kindle Locations 1089–98

<sup>15</sup> David Rotman. [How Technology is Destroying Jobs](#), *MIT Technology Review*, 12 Jun 2013

<sup>16</sup> Rutger Bregman. *Utopia for Realists: The Case for a Universal Basic Income, Open Borders, and a 15-hour Workweek*, Kindle Location 491

<sup>17</sup> John Maynard Keynes. [Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren](#), *Essays in Persuasion*, 1930

<sup>18</sup> Rutger Bregman. *Utopia for Realists: The Case for a Universal Basic Income, Open Borders, and a 15-hour Workweek*, Kindle Location 497

There are many attributable reasons for this stall in the transition from labor to leisure. One is the inequality of gains—possibly the hottest political issue of our time. The claim—which has merit—is that the monetary gains of the productivity boom have been siphoned off by the owners of capital without being shared equitably. Chief executives of large corporations have been the main beneficiaries of these gains, rewarding themselves with massive salaries and bonuses while lower-level employees sometimes even struggle to earn a living wage.

This winners-take-all environment has resulted in intense competition in the job market, dramatically increasing the educational pressures on children starting from their kindergarten days. Being more educated and productive than any previous generation, kids these days are forced to sacrifice more of their free time for studies due to the intense pressure to distinguish themselves from their peers.<sup>19</sup> Much of formal education now resembles unpaid labor, effectively being a mere pipeline to the workplace.

Another compelling reason comes from the anthropologist David Graeber, who theorizes that in recent times there has been an explosion of “bullshit jobs”—jobs that if they did not exist, would not adversely affect society.<sup>20</sup> Over 30% of employees in developed countries self-report to having such jobs, with preliminary research suggesting that they are mainly of the financial, bureaucratic and administrative variety.

Yet another possibility for the stall is a cultural shift—one where rampant consumerism has shifted the goal posts for what is considered to be a comfortable life. The typical consumer has much more “stuff” than ever before, even though it is questionable whether this has improved his or her quality of life.

Digging deeper into identifying the actual causes for the current state of affairs and the potential solutions goes beyond the scope of this book. That said, this lack of leisure is not a prevalent issue in Scandinavian countries that have strong social safety nets in addition to free education, universal healthcare, and unionized labor. Therefore it is plausible to think that in the long-run, other nations would follow suit and adopt similar programs. This is a possibility not only in highly developed countries found mainly in the West, but also in emerging economies throughout Asia.

The last decade has seen the rise of China, which, alongside other regional nations, have adopted the Singaporean technocratic model of governance as an effective means for rapid developmental progress.<sup>21</sup> Developing countries have the advantage of late adoption—leapfrogging over older standards like landlines, ATMs, and desktops to take up newer technologies like smartphones, digital banking, and cloud computing.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Malcolm Harris. *Kids These Days: Human Capital and the Making of Millennials*, Kindle Location 672

<sup>20</sup> David Graeber. [On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs: A Work Rant](#), Aug 2013

<sup>21</sup> Parag Khanna. *The Future is Asian: Commerce, Conflict, and Culture in the 21st Century*, Kindle Locations 4309-45

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Kindle Locations 2832-8

Because of all this, it does not seem overly optimistic to imagine a future where increased automation and compelling new ideas like universal basic income have freed us from sacrificing most of our adult lives to earn a living. In this scenario, we will enjoy much more leisure time with the freedom to pursue what genuinely interests us. While this turn-of-events might seem unlikely to materialize anytime soon, the current trends in automation suggest that it is a very real possibility.

The next question to consider is what the possible consequences of this increase in leisure will be on the general populace. While more leisure time might sound good in theory, could it result in mass boredom and ennui brought about by a lack of purpose? Or would we use this freedom pursuing knowledge in the school of life instead? The word “school” originates from *schole*, which means leisure, so this would be a return to how the ancient Greeks regarded leisure.<sup>23</sup>

With people finding meaning in their lives through the work that they do, what will happen when they are not needed at the workplace? How are future generations going to use their free time? Back in the early 1930s, the philosopher Bertrand Russell hypothesized that “*the road to happiness and prosperity lies in an organised diminution of work.*”<sup>24</sup> That sounds great in theory, but we live in a vastly different world now. If current trends are anything to go by, we will be even more immersed in the instantly accessible digital entertainment options of the internet age. Some of us might spend our days in elaborate virtual reality worlds—much more sensually entertaining than anything an unplugged life can offer.

But would that be a bad thing? After all, we have the freedom to go about our lives as we choose. Would such a focus on entertainment not result in a happier and more fulfilled society? To answer this question, we must evaluate today’s digital landscape and its impact on our minds.

## Digital Media Addiction

In many ways, the world we live in now is drastically different from how it was even just a decade ago, due to the advent of smartphones, the rise of social media, and the ubiquity of high-speed internet. What are the consequences of these changes in how we choose to spend our free time?

Suppose you were a carpenter plying your trade in the Indian Ganges region around the time of the Buddha. You are doing quite well, and have extra funds to use for entertainment. What are your options? You could take a bullock cart into town and watch some live theater. Or maybe a music show. You will have to make sure to be there on the correct day and time or risk missing the event entirely, however. Maybe you are looking to satisfy more carnal desires, so a trip to the town brothel is

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<sup>23</sup> Richard E. Nisbett. *Geography of Thought - How Asians and Westerners Think Differently ... and Why*, 2003, p. 4

<sup>24</sup> Bertrand Russell. *In Praise of Idleness and Other Essays*, Taylor and Francis e-Library, 2005, p. 3

what you're after. However you may choose to indulge your senses, the available options require some effort to experience. Even the king would have to walk over to his harem to enjoy the more frivolous pleasures of being a ruler.

Now contrast this life with what even the average person has access to in today's digital age. For the relatively trivial cost of an internet connection, you have access to all the TV shows, music, movies, video games, porn, and any other form of sensual entertainment with a mere flick of a finger or click of a button. There is no need to even leave your room, with the possibility of spending a seemingly endless amount of time indulging in any form of entertainment you wish.

This is a seismic shift in how we interact with the world even compared to just 50 years ago. While the advent of the television began our love affair with the screen, the sheer amount of time we spend on similar media now is unprecedented. In the early 1950s, the average American household spent about 5 hours a day watching TV.<sup>25</sup> While this is still a significant amount of time to be glued to the tube, it is still 3 hours less than the time they spend now. What is astounding about this is how this is not even accounting for the rise of smartphone and digital media applications like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. All told, Americans spend most of their waking hours—over 12 hours a day—interacting with various forms of media.<sup>26</sup>

Video gaming, previously thought to be a niche activity reserved for antisocial teenage boys, is fast becoming the main entertainment option for people of all ages and genders. Over 40% of the world's population—all of 3.2 billion—was estimated to have played video games of some form in 2021.<sup>27</sup> In fact, video games far exceed the film and music industries combined in terms of revenue.<sup>28</sup> Gamers are also playing for longer than ever, suggesting we are still in the nascent stage of its adoption as a form of entertainment.<sup>29</sup>

This ease of access to a concoction of entertainment options is unsurprisingly hard to resist. While the actual prevalence of addiction is difficult to measure since it depends on the definition, it is undoubtedly a growing problem among a younger generation living their lives glued to screens.<sup>30,31</sup>

What is the issue with all this—you might ask. After all, seeking sensual pleasure is one of our primary activities as humans, and so removing any barriers to access and increasing our options for indulgence might seem like the rational thing to do. Isn't this part of the story of progress—that we have successfully “solved” the problem of satisfying our many desires?

The problem with this liberal attitude towards sensual entertainment is that it ignores the impact it has on our overall well-being. Consider the rise of social media.

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<sup>25</sup> Alexis C. Madrigal. [When Did TV Watching Peak?](#), The Atlantic, 30 May 2018

<sup>26</sup> Nielsen Insights. [The Nielsen Total Audience Report: August 2020](#)

<sup>27</sup> J. Clement. [Number of video gamers worldwide in 2021, by region](#), Statista, 25 Oct 2022

<sup>28</sup> Felix Richter. [Are You Not Entertained?](#), Statista, 12 Dec 2022

<sup>29</sup> Rob Pegoraro. [Limelight survey: The pandemic is driving a boom in gaming](#), 10 Mar 2021

<sup>30</sup> Hilarie Cash, Cosette D. Rae, Ann H. Steel, Alexander Winkler. [Internet Addiction: A Brief Summary of Research and Practice](#), Nov 2012

<sup>31</sup> Perri Klass. [Is 'Digital Addiction' a Real Threat to Kids?](#), New York Times, 20 May 2019

Research suggests that it makes us unhappier and lonelier.<sup>32</sup> We broadcast the “best” versions of ourselves on these platforms, unintentionally contributing to self-esteem issues through unflattering comparisons between our more mundane regular lives and those of our friend’s last summer vacation. The resulting emotions of envy and conceit are no doubt one of the main reasons why heavy social media users report experiencing more anxiety and depression.

Our social discourse on these platforms has become more tribal and polarized than ever before. Since base emotions like fear and anger are much better at keeping us engaged, and engagement is what social media companies strive to maximize, they end up pushing us further apart. No wonder then that even social media pioneers and technology visionaries are discouraging its use.<sup>33,34</sup>

The main reason why these digital technologies have become so detrimental to our well-being is the ethos of the attention economy. Technology companies are in a rat race to command more and more of our attention due to its connection with advertising profitability. Unfortunately, what makes us click and engage with our devices is not always what is most beneficial to us. Companies use persuasive techniques borrowed from the world of gambling to manipulate the behaviors of their users. Tristan Harris, a former Google digital ethicist, compares these methods technology firms use to hook their users to the same addictive elements of a slot machine at a casino.<sup>35</sup>

The consequences of the resulting digital media addiction go beyond just wasting our leisure time. Recent research on neuroplasticity has destroyed one of the long-standing myths in neuroscience—that the adult brain is relatively resistant to change after its teenage years.<sup>36</sup> In reality, the constant stimulation provided by digital devices is shaping our brain structures to be similar to those of drug addicts.

The consequence of this unrestricted use of digital media is that we are increasingly slaves to sensuality. By sacrificing our precious time this way, we are tacitly agreeing that there is no better way to live. But we’re not even any happier as a result.

## Happiness and Meaning

Happiness is an admittedly difficult concept to define—let alone measure. Instead of looking into what it means to truly be happy—a question we will return to later on—let us first go by how the United Nations chooses to measure it. Since the mid-2000s, the UN has released an annual World Happiness Report, where they ask

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<sup>32</sup> Holly B. Shakya, Nicholas A. Christakis. [Association of Facebook Use With Compromised Well-Being: A Longitudinal Study](#), 1 Feb 2017

<sup>33</sup> James Vincent. [Former Facebook exec says social media is ripping apart society](#), The Verge, 11 Dec 2017

<sup>34</sup> Jaron Lanier. [Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now](#), 29 May 2018

<sup>35</sup> Bianca Bosker. [The Binge Breaker](#), The Atlantic, Nov 2016

<sup>36</sup> Norman Doidge. [The Brain that Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science](#), 2007

respondents from nations around the world to evaluate their lives on a numerical scale. Typically, the countries that rank higher tend to have higher GDP per capita, longer healthy life expectancy, and stronger social support systems.

If the spike in digital media usage during the last decade is making us happier, it seems reasonable to expect an increase in happiness scores in countries that started with high scores to begin with. However, the ten happiest countries in the 2022 report—five of the top seven being Scandinavian—all show no discernible change in scores since the UN first started keeping track.<sup>37,38</sup> In fact, researchers have found that the youth in Nordic countries are experiencing an “epidemic of mental illness and loneliness.”<sup>39</sup> For instance, there has been a 40% increase in young people seeking help for mental health difficulties in Norway over the five-year period starting 2012.

The relationship between GDP per capita and life evaluation scores also makes for an interesting analysis. While we have all heard the phrase “money doesn’t buy happiness”, the numbers tell a more nuanced story. Happiness scores have a positive correlation with GDP per capita, but every increasing dollar gives diminishing returns.<sup>40</sup> In other words, the more you have, the more you have to seek. This makes sense when you consider that we use income primarily to secure the basic necessities of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. Once that is accomplished, any remaining disposable income is used to “keep up with the Joneses,” and the richer you are, the pricier the toys become. This thesis is supported by studies showing that individual happiness seems to plateau once a moderate-income level is reached.<sup>41,42</sup>

Given the evidence that cultural differences in how respondents answer questions may account for systematically lower life evaluation scores among Asians, attempting to measure happiness through surveys is inherently prone to error.<sup>43</sup> A better alternative is to use a measure like suicide rates—arguably a stronger indicator of a country’s well-being.

Suicide is generally associated with depression and drug abuse, and so it could be used as a proxy for a country’s unhappiness levels. The expectation is that happier countries would have lower rates. But even here, the numbers tell a different story. The “happiest” countries of the world have higher suicide rates than those that are a notch below them.<sup>44,45</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> In order: Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Israel, Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Switzerland, Luxembourg, and New Zealand

<sup>38</sup> World Happiness Report. [Figure 2.1: Ranking of happiness 2020-2022 \(Part 1\)](#), pp. 17

<sup>39</sup> BBC. [Why Nordic countries might not be as happy as you think](#), 25 August 2018

<sup>40</sup> World Happiness Report. [Chapter 2: Online Data](#), 2022

<sup>41</sup> Belinda Luscombe. [Do We Need \\$75,000 a Year to Be Happy?](#), 6 Sep 2010

<sup>42</sup> Andrew T. Jebb, Louis Tay, Ed Diener & Shigehiro Oishi. [Happiness, income satiation and turning points around the world](#), Nature, 8 Jan 2018

<sup>43</sup> Chen, C., Lee, S. Y., & Stevenson, H. W. *Response style and cross-cultural comparisons of rating scales among East Asian and North American students*, Psychological Science, 6(3), 1995, pp. 170-5

<sup>44</sup> University of Warwick. [Happiest places have highest suicide rates, new research finds](#), 21 Apr 2011

<sup>45</sup> For example, the ten happiest countries from the UN report all have [suicide rates](#) that are more than 17 times higher than Barbados.



How does this make sense? One possible explanation is the increasing secularization of richer countries. Developed societies around the world are becoming increasingly irreligious, with more people identifying themselves as atheists or agnostics than ever before.<sup>46</sup> Most religions tend to frown upon taking one's own life, while they also provide a sense of purpose. It seems that without this meaning in their lives, some are more prone to consider extreme measures when facing tough times.

In the following table, I have split countries by their Human Development Index (HDI) values for comparative purposes. The HDI is a composite of a country's life expectancy, education, and per capita income indicators used by the UN. A country scores a higher value the higher its average citizen's lifespan, income, and education level is—seemingly corresponding to being healthy, wealthy, and wise.

HDI Range	Happiness	Suicides per 100,000	Irreligion (%)	Religious Freedom <sup>47</sup>
0.900 - 1.000	7.0	10.2	24.0	91.3
0.700 - 0.899	5.8	6.9	11.2	83.0
0.428 - 0.699	4.8	9.8	4.8	81.5

If higher suicide rates in more developed countries are explained by their increased irreligiosity, why is there a drop in the rate for moderately-developed nations compared to countries with lower HDI?<sup>48</sup> After all, their irreligiosity levels show a corresponding increase.

This can be understood as follows: When people secure their basic necessities, they observe their quality of life tangibly improve, resulting in a decrease in suicides. It also pushes those who superficially adhered to a religion as a crutch to lose interest when they successfully achieve higher living standards—attributing the success to themselves instead of an external authority, explaining the slight increase in irreligiosity.

Such an improvement in well-being is not as discernible with even higher living standards, making some question their life pursuits altogether. Given that most citizens of more developed countries tend to adhere to a scientific worldview, religion is not a plausible alternative as a source for meaning in their lives. On top of this, due to hedonic adaptation, those who are well-off tend to lose perspective of their many blessings. Thus, extreme measures like suicide become more likely.

So how can those who already have stable finances, good health, and a strong support structure best use their time? What self-reported happiness scores do not

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<sup>46</sup> Gabe Bullard. [The World's Newest Major Religion: No Religion](#), National Geographic, 22 Apr 2016

<sup>47</sup> I have limited the analysis to countries with acceptable religious freedom. Current and former communist countries are also excluded. For the reasons behind these choices and a more in-depth look at the data and sources, check the [Appendix: Happiness, Development, Irreligion, and Suicide](#), p. 77

<sup>48</sup> I use the term "moderately-developed" to denote countries in the 0.725-0.899 HDI range. I have chosen this range in the interest of splitting the countries considered (69) into similar sized buckets.

tell you is whether a person is living a meaningful life—in short, a life of wisdom. This means that we are defining happiness too narrowly, not reflecting on what it actually means to be content. Genuinely happy people would be more resilient to the vagaries of life and exhibit stronger mental health.

The digitization of our lives has had a profound effect on how our minds operate. Martin Heidegger, one of the most influential philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, had a sense of this coming change even in the 1950s, observing that the “*tide of technological revolution*” could “*so captivate, bewitch, dazzle, and beguile man that calculative thinking may someday come to be accepted and practiced as the only way of thinking.*” He felt that engaging in “*meditative thinking*” was the very essence of humanity, and that it might be a victim of “*progress.*”<sup>49</sup>

The question we must ask ourselves is whether this era of rapid progress has also made us wiser—not just healthier and wealthier. What does it mean to be wiser in the first place? Why are we overwhelmingly using our free time to indulge in our senses without pausing to reflect on our actions or the human condition? Before we even define what wisdom is, we must find time for reflection, or we are already in a losing battle.

There are some who consider work to be a necessity for meaning in life, making them concerned about the repercussions of increased leisure time on society at large. But couldn't we figure out how best to use our time without the directive of an employer? What is implicit here is that if there were no jobs, we would indulge ourselves without any purpose or goal. The unspoken assumption here seems to be that life is inherently meaningless, and that we need to be directed towards a goal to strive for through our professions—even if it does not solve the deep-rooted cause of that lack of meaning. After all, the average person is born, grows up, starts a family, has kids, works for most of his or her life, grows old, and then finally dies. Whatever he or she may pursue in life, in the end, it does not last.

To think that life as it is usually lived is meaningless can cause us to feel dejected and despondent about our predicament. In the past, there were those who sought solace in religion, where the meaning is laid out and seemingly revealed by an all-powerful entity beyond ourselves. However, for those of us who are aware of the perils of blind adherence to religious dogma, this is not a compelling solution to the issue.

Among such skeptics, a common sentiment is that with the help of advances in science and technology, we will eventually be able to answer these tough questions. With the attitude—largely unexamined—that respecting scientific authority also means disavowing the possibility of life after death, most of us have adopted a physicalist view of life, where the totality of our experience is supposedly explainable in physical terms.

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<sup>49</sup> Martin Heidegger. [\*The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays\*](#) (New York: Harper & Row), 35. Epilogue, 1977

We will now explore the roots of this physicalist view, its assumptions, and the consequences of adhering to it. In particular, we will examine its ignorance of consciousness and the importance of investigating it directly.

# The Primacy of Consciousness

## Physicalism and Modern Philosophy

I only became aware of the wide-ranging influence the Abrahamic religions had on Western culture after I moved to the United States for college. The post-9/11 world had helped ignite an intellectual movement centered on questioning religion, with a renewed awareness of the downsides of blind faith.

This atheist movement was gaining ground in the popular discourse. By the beginning of the new millennium, a significant portion of Western Europe identified as agnostic or atheist, and even the more evangelically inclined Americans were following suit quite rapidly. Recently, over a quarter of the respondents of a Pew Research Center survey in the United States identified themselves as religiously unaffiliated—an increase of over 50% from just a decade before.<sup>50</sup> I considered this to be a welcome development, since rejecting or at least questioning the belief in a creator God figure enables a spiritual search unencumbered by dogma.

However, I was surprised to find out about the implicit and unexamined adoption of a physicalist worldview by the prominent figures of this “New Atheist” movement. For example, Richard Dawkins, the renowned biologist and author of *The God Delusion*, has repeatedly described how he is prepared to face his inevitable disintegration into the physical elements at death. Daniel Dennett—the professional philosopher of the four leaders of the movement—also espouses this view in his book *Consciousness Explained*, where he claims that the “illusion of consciousness” can be explained by examining brain matter. All this suggests that a version of Dennett’s physicalism—that whatever exists is ultimately physical—is most likely what the modern atheist believes.

At first glance, this certainty of our annihilation at death might seem rational for someone who does not believe in some sort of afterlife, which requires a level of faith. With the tremendous advances that applications of the scientific method have brought about in the physical world, it is quite natural to trivialize our inner experience in this way. However, not believing in an all-powerful deity does not seem a sufficient reason to jump to conclusions on the nature of mind and matter without a thorough investigation.

One of the leaders of the atheist movement was not so quick to ignore how the realm of consciousness was something of a mystery to science. In his book *The End of Faith*, Sam Harris acknowledged how fields like neuroscience were inadequate in explaining the subjective experience of consciousness:

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<sup>50</sup> Pew Research Center. [In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace](#), 17 Oct 2019

*...the place of consciousness in the natural world is very much an open question. The idea that brains produce consciousness is little more than an article of faith among scientists at present, and there are many reasons to believe that the methods of science will be insufficient to either prove or disprove it.*<sup>51</sup>

Harris then defends the investigations into consciousness conducted by so-called Eastern mystics. He presents meditation as a valid method of systematically inquiring into such experience, guided by reason, and without adhering to a specific dogma.<sup>52</sup>

At the time, I also sensed that the physicalist worldview did not adequately account for our conscious experience. But since I had not examined its philosophical underpinnings, I was unable to explain its weaknesses to myself or others satisfactorily. Only years later, after learning more about the history of modern philosophy and the influence of scientific progress on its thinkers, did I begin to appreciate the roots of this assumption.

What follows is an admittedly cursory overview of the history of modern philosophy as it relates to atheism and physicalism. Through this, I demonstrate why today's secular humanists tend to be physicalists in a philosophical sense—possibly without acknowledging it themselves.

Throughout the Middle Ages, Western philosophical thought was heavily influenced by the assumed truth of a creator figure. From St. Augustine to Thomas Aquinas and even on to Baruch Spinoza and René Descartes, belief in God was implicit. Famed for his wager, Blaise Pascal was a scientist who doubled as a theologian.

Descartes—the father of modern philosophy—sought to base all subsequent philosophical claims on solid first principles. With that goal in mind, he took a skeptical view of the existence of his own body, but because he was aware of experiencing such a doubt himself, concluded that his own existence was a certainty. This resulted in his dualistic worldview of matter and mind (spirit in his terminology). Even with this apparent insight, he still left the realm of the mind to the jurisdiction of the church—possibly to avoid the same predicament as Giordano Bruno, who was burned at the stake as a heretic a few decades prior.

By taking such a position, he created a dichotomy of lasting impact. Scientists focused on investigating the world of matter, and the mind was left as the domain of the priest. Crucially, Descartes conflated his certainty of being conscious to having some sort of insight into the nature of this very same consciousness and his own existence.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Sam Harris. *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, Kindle Locations 3217–21

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* Kindle Locations 3244–8

<sup>53</sup> Markus Gabriel. *I am Not a Brain: Philosophy of Mind for the Twenty-First Century*, Translated by Christopher Turner, 2017, Kindle Locations 2433

Fifty years after Descartes published his *Discours de la Méthode* and concluded that *cogito ergo sum* (“I think, therefore, I am”), a soon to be renowned English mathematician established the laws of motion and universal gravitation with the publication of *Philosophiæ Naturalis Mathematica*. Isaac Newton’s discoveries would result in a profound upheaval of the Christian worldview—even more than the discoveries of Copernicus a century earlier. His findings suggested that it was unnecessary to posit an all-powerful entity when natural laws were governed by mathematical principles. These discoveries nourished the physicalist worldview, with the influential English philosopher Thomas Hobbes believing that human consciousness was derived exclusively from the brain.

With the Enlightenment movement gaining ground in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, reason was given primary authority and the separation of church and state was viewed favorably by the educated elite. After resolving the rift between rationalists like Descartes and empiricists like Hume, Immanuel Kant proposed a distinction between ‘things as they are’ (the noumenon) and ‘things as they appear to be’ (the phenomenon), claiming that we never actually observe the noumenon due to the limitations of our senses. In other words, our reality is wholly subjective, and even though we endeavor to attain objectivity by the use of the scientific method, it is always limited by this fact.

Kant himself retained a belief in a God related to the noumenon, but his successors like Arthur Schopenhauer built on his ideas and came to the opposing conclusion (“*if we are to make sense of our lives, we must do so, without God.*”)<sup>54</sup> This move towards rejecting a creator entity gained further ground in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Friedrich Nietzsche took to exploring the moral ramifications of the ‘death of God’. Atheism was now becoming the norm in academic philosophical circles.

Influenced by significant scientific developments like Albert Einstein’s general theory of relativity in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, philosophy as a discipline attempted to become more “scientific” in nature. Partly to prevent confusion rooted in unclear language and unverifiable claims, logical positivism became prominent as a movement, with its central thesis that only statements verifiable through empirical observation were relevant.<sup>55</sup> This influenced the rise of analytic philosophy, where argumentative clarity, logic, mathematics, and the natural sciences became the emphasis.

Around the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Karl Popper introduced the concept of empirical falsification as a feature of the scientific method. Most prominent philosophers had now gravitated towards working within the paradigm of the primacy of science and its underlying assumptions. Space, time, and matter were primary, and consciousness was something to be investigated through fields like neuroscience—as empirical verification was paramount.

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<sup>54</sup> Thomas C. Brickhouse, Charlton Heston (Narrator), Berel Lang, Kenneth L. Schmitz, John J. Stuhr, Robert J. O’Connell. *The Giants of Philosophy, Arthur Schopenhauer*, Tape 1 (#33), 17:35

<sup>55</sup> Michael Friedman. *Reconsidering Logical Positivism* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 1999, p. xiv

The unprecedented advances in science and technology in the last century have even influenced the questions philosophers decide are worth focusing on. Given this context, it is not surprising that a philosopher like Daniel Dennett would adhere to a physicalist worldview. In fact, most of today's analytic philosophers subscribe to naturalism, with its claim that “*reality is exhausted by nature, containing nothing ‘supernatural’, and the scientific method should be used to investigate all areas of reality, including the ‘human spirit.’*”<sup>56</sup>

This scientism—the claim that only knowledge arrived at through scientific research and accepted by scientific experts counts as genuine knowledge—has permeated the discourse of contemporary philosophy.<sup>57</sup> This is the paradigm behind Dennett's outrageous claim that *qualia*—instances of subjective conscious experience—do not actually exist in reality, and consequently, human minds are no different from “serial virtual machines.”<sup>58</sup> The absurdity of this position should be clear to anyone who is aware that they are beings conscious of experience.

## The Mind and the Brain

With the general adoption of the scientific worldview, the dichotomy between mind and brain that Descartes helped create has fallen apart. And so after centuries of ignorance due to leaving the task to the church, scientists have found themselves in the awkward position of having to explain the mind from scratch. As expected, they have embraced the idea of the brain as a machine, and rejected the idea of an immaterial mind. This is partly due to the apprehension of being branded as unscientific if they were to theorize the possibility of the latter. There is no lack of confidence within the community, however, with the prominent neurophysiologist David Hubel even going as far as to declare that “*the word Mind is obsolete.*”<sup>59</sup>

One method used to explain away the complexities of human behavior is to attribute our basest desires such as the search for food and sex to a psychology developed over many millennia. The theory of evolution, which gives a legitimate explanation for how human biology came to be, has been applied to the realm of psychology to explain our motivations. One result of this is the imagined limitations of free will, and our potential to go against strong habitual tendencies. This is due to the attempt to explain behavior in macro or societal-terms—a supposed innate need for beings to focus on the survival of its species.

However, recent research in neuroplasticity—the ability of even an adult brain to significantly change its structure in a short period of time—makes us question this

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<sup>56</sup> Steven Pinker. *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*, Kindle Location 8661

<sup>57</sup> Markus Gabriel. *I am Not a Brain: Philosophy of Mind for the Twenty-First Century*, Translated by Christopher Turner, 2017, Kindle Locations 2069

<sup>58</sup> Daniel Dennett. *Consciousness Explained* (New York: Back Bay Books), 1991, p. 218

<sup>59</sup> Jeffrey M. Schwartz. *The Mind and the Brain: Neuroplasticity and the Power of Mental Force*, p. 25

assertion altogether. Darwin's revolutionary theory of evolution has sound evidence as an explanation for the makings of our biology, but even evolutionary biologists and cognitive scientists are unconvinced of its applicability to our psychology.<sup>60</sup> This is because the idea that we have a limited ability to transcend our biology assumes that the brain and the mind are one and the same.

With the arrival of the digital computer—"the thinking machine"—in the late 1960s and 1970s, functionalism became the dominant model of the mind. In it, the mind is what the brain does—software to the brain's hardware.<sup>61</sup> Type identity theory, where mental states are grouped into types and correlated with brain states, was also widely adopted.

Neuroscientists investigating the brain using devices like the fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging), analyzed a person's thoughts and feelings through the neurochemical reactions observable by the naked eye. Through this, consciousness has been theorized to be an illusion created by chemical reactions in the brain and nothing more. This conflation of mind, brain, and computer has permeated the cultural zeitgeist, with movies like *Her*, *Chappie*, and *Ex Machina* popularizing wildly exaggerated ideas of the capabilities of artificial intelligence, and what it means to be conscious.

The problem with this conflation is that by attempting to explain conscious experience through their own conscious experience of brain images, neuroscientists are inadvertently falling into circular reasoning. To say that consciousness is an illusion is nonsensical when they are using precisely that to claim its supposed non-existence. Using brain scans and similar methods that rely on our senses to explain consciousness is therefore inherently problematic because our conclusions presuppose the primacy of consciousness. As the philosopher of science Michel Bitbol states, "*Experience, or elementary consciousness, can... be said to be methodologically primary for science. Consequently, the claim of primariness of elementary consciousness is no scientific statement: it just expresses a most basic prerequisite of science.*"<sup>62</sup>

In truth, the scientific method has no adequate tool or experiment that can directly investigate experience. If consciousness were not to exist, all we know through the core sciences—physics, chemistry, and biology—would perfectly function as theorized. So even if we were all zombies (in philosophical terms, humans without any experience), scientific explanations of the universe would not change in the slightest.

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<sup>60</sup> Elisabeth A. Lloyd and Marcus W. Feldman. *Evolutionary Psychology: A View from Evolutionary Biology*, *Psychological Inquiry* 13, 2002, pp. 150-6

<sup>61</sup> David Woodruff Smith. [Phenomenology](#), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition)

<sup>62</sup> Michel Bitbol. *On the primary nature of consciousness*, *The Systems View of Life*, Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 266-8



## The Hard Problem

In 1974, the philosopher Thomas Nagel argued in “*What Is It Like to Be a Bat?*” that consciousness cannot be explained solely in physical terms. Although similar questions have been pondered in the past by such disparate figures as the rationalist Gottfried Leibniz<sup>63</sup> and the empiricist John Locke,<sup>64</sup> David Chalmers is responsible for popularizing this issue as the “hard problem of consciousness” in recent years:

*It is widely agreed that experience arises from a physical basis, but we have no good explanation of why and how it so arises. Why should physical processing give rise to a rich inner life at all? It seems objectively unreasonable that it should, and yet it does.*

...

*The really hard problem of consciousness is the problem of experience. When we think and perceive there is a whirl of information processing, but there is also a subjective aspect.*<sup>65</sup>

Faced with this problem, some philosophers who acknowledge its validity—unlike eliminativists such as Dennett—agree that consciousness cannot be “conceptually reduced in nonphenomenal terms,” but still hold out hope for an empirical scientific solution in the future involving “neurological and computational properties of the brain.”<sup>66</sup> Others who realize that even this does not amount to an actual solution to the problem, believe that consciousness is “a mystery that human intelligence will never unravel.”<sup>67</sup>

The problem with all these positions lies in the basic paradigm in which they operate—the view that the physical world can explain reality in its entirety. Due to adherence to this paradigm, the information accessible through our physical senses is considered to be the sole route to understand objective reality. As a result, we ignore that we actually become aware of such data at an experiential level—the subjective mental realm of consciousness. To form our understanding of reality merely on a physical basis is therefore inadequate.

Consider this practical example. Whether you experienced some kind of stress while undergoing a brain scan is not actually decided by the detectable presence of a stress hormone like cortisol in your physical system. Instead, that you experience stress is “proven” by your first-hand experience itself, and that takes ultimate precedence to you over any other corroborating physical evidence. Even the fact that cortisol is associated with stress had to have been discovered through the responses

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<sup>63</sup> Gottfried Leibniz, *Monadology*, 1714, p. 17

<sup>64</sup> John Locke. *The works of John Locke: in three volumes*. London: Printed for A. Churchill, and A. Manship, 1722, p. 293

<sup>65</sup> David Chalmers. *Facing up to the problem of consciousness*, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Volume 2, 1995, pp. 200–19

<sup>66</sup> Ned Block. *Consciousness, Function, and Representation*, *Collected Papers*, Volume 1, 2007, p. 112

<sup>67</sup> Colin McGinn. *All machine and no ghost?*, *New Statesman*, 20 Feb 2012

of conscious participants of an experiment. In other words, its “truth” is proven through subjective experience.

The test subjects can conceivably lie to the experimenter, since only they are privy to their own experience. Because of this, empirical investigations of consciousness do not hold to a high enough standard of truth if it depends on the experience of someone other than the experimenter. This is why true “consciousness studies” do not occur in a scientific lab, but by those investigating their own experience directly. This is what spiritual seekers of contemplative traditions through the ages have made their focus.

Since our experience of phenomena is an indisputable truth, it trumps the knowledge gained through the physical senses in priority and importance. It is the one thing we cannot deny. Even if we were all living in a simulation à la the *Matrix*, and what we consider to be reality is actually a grand illusion, that we are experiencing phenomena is one thing we can be absolutely certain of.

This compels us to reevaluate the hard problem of consciousness in a new light. If consciousness is primary, asking why the brain produces consciousness is the wrong question. The question arises only in a paradigm where reality is considered to be exclusively or primarily physical. We have got it the wrong way around. Instead of trying to explain consciousness in physical terms, we should be explaining the material world in experiential terms.

Accepting the precedence of the mind is not a claim that the physical world does not exist. Instead, it is the acknowledgement that our knowledge of the physical world occurs at the subjective experiential level. In other words, what we know are manifestations of consciousness. Naturally, this applies to mental phenomena like thoughts and emotions as well.

It is important to note that acknowledging the primacy of consciousness is different from merely asserting that consciousness is a fundamental constituent of reality in the same way space, time, and matter are viewed in today’s scientific discourse. This popular alternative view is called panpsychism, which claims that all matter has some aspect of consciousness.<sup>68</sup> This still assumes the primacy of matter over consciousness, revealing a residual physicalist bias even among those who are seeking a more acceptable explanation. In fact, some panpsychism-enthusiasts portray its complete alignment with physicalism as a good thing.<sup>69</sup> This shows the inherent difficulty in questioning a paradigm that has permeated the culture.

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<sup>68</sup> Peter Russell. *From Science to God: A Physicist’s Journey into the Mystery of Consciousness*, p. 34

<sup>69</sup> Annaka Harris. *Conscious: A Brief Guide to the Fundamental Mystery of the Mind*, Kindle Locations 682

## Phenomenology: Investigating Experience

Immanuel Kant's insight that phenomena are all that we have access to, influenced the rise of the phenomenology movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Edmund Husserl, its founder, recognized the unquestionable certainty of conscious awareness and how it could be used as a foundation to build our knowledge of reality.

Influenced by his mentor Franz Brentano, Husserl posited that consciousness has the nature of *intentionality*, in that it is always directed at something—be it a physical object, music, a taste or an idea. He also introduced the idea of *phenomenological reduction* as a method to investigate the contents of consciousness. This involved setting aside the question of whether a contemplated object existed, and instead focusing on phenomena as experienced directly.<sup>70</sup>

Heidegger, a disciple of Husserl, claimed that we find ourselves “being in the world”—implying the primacy of consciousness over thought and the irrelevance of speculative ontological questions to lived experience. This marked a dramatic turn from the Cartesian model, which did not recognize mental experience devoid of thought.

The Anglo-American world had already started diverging from phenomenology by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. While Bertrand Russell and Gottlob Frege were both influenced by Husserl's *Logical Investigations* in their work on logical analysis that became the basis for analytic philosophy, until the latter part of the century, analytic philosophers had an attitude bordering on disdain with respect to phenomenology. For instance, the American philosopher John Searle claimed that phenomenology suffered from “*bankruptcy*” and “*does not have much to contribute.*”<sup>71</sup>

In 1913, John Watson proposed to abolish the subjective study of consciousness from the field of psychology by focusing on the “purely objective” behaviorist methods of measurement. Watson's biographer would later admit that “*Behaviourism was a self-conscious revolution against consciousness.*”<sup>72</sup> At this it was effective, dominating the study of psychology till the 1970s. By then, influenced by computational models developed in computer science, the cognitive sciences were coming into prominence.

Why was there such hostility towards the study of consciousness? Francisco Varela, a pioneer in the field of neurophenomenology, suggests that it was primarily due to political and sociological factors, with a post-war reluctance in adopting theories originating from the German idealist movement.<sup>73</sup> Given the historical

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<sup>70</sup> Gabriella Farina. *Dialogues in Philosophy, Mental and Neuro Sciences*, Volume 7, Some reflections on the phenomenological method, pp. 53-54

<sup>71</sup> Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi. *The Phenomenological Mind: An Introduction to Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Science*, 2008, pp. 2-3

<sup>72</sup> Susan Blackmore and Emily T. Troscianko. *Consciousness: An Introduction*, 3rd Edition, 2018, pp. 24-5

<sup>73</sup> Susan Blackmore. *Conversations on Consciousness: What the Best Minds Think About the Brain, Free Will, and What It Means To Be Human*, 2006, p. 223

evidence, however, the predominance of physicalist views among influential figures in philosophy and psychology seems more likely to be the reason.

With recent scientific advancements in brain research, there is a resurgence of interest in phenomenology as a relevant field of inquiry into consciousness. This is mainly due to dialogues between neuroscientists and Buddhist meditation practitioners, with their recognition that Husserl's ideas have parallels in Buddhism.

In the early Buddhist texts, consciousness is defined as experience at the six senses (the intellect that connects to mental phenomena being the sixth), which is a recognition of its property of intentionality.<sup>74</sup> The Buddhist path also has similarities to phenomenological reduction, where notions of existence or non-existence are said not to arise when experience is viewed with wisdom:

*"...when one sees the origination of the world<sup>75</sup> as it has come to be with right discernment, 'non-existence' with reference to the world does not occur to one. When one sees the cessation of the world as it has come to be with right discernment, 'existence' with reference to the world does not occur to one."<sup>76</sup>*

The insight into the primacy of consciousness also finds support in the very first verse of the *Dhammapada*, where it states that the mind precedes all phenomena. Husserl himself was aware of the connections of his ideas to Buddhism after reading one of the first translations of its texts. In fact, his interpreter Eugen Fink, who associated closely with him during his lifetime, confirmed that *"the various phases of Buddhist self-discipline were essentially phases of phenomenological reduction."*<sup>77</sup>

While scientists are just starting to appreciate the possibilities of phenomenological research, the practice of meditation allows us all to study it directly. Given the primacy of consciousness, there is no specialized equipment required—everyone has the same level of access to it. However, the wide variety of meditation methods available means that we have to identify those that are most relevant for the serious study of consciousness and its potential.

Some of the earliest references to meditation as a method to investigate the mind are found in the Vedas, which were compiled in ancient India some time during the 1st millennium BCE. Contemplatives resorted to seclusion in nature to experiment with methods of manipulating the mind. While some engaged in philosophical speculation, others focused on calming and concentrating their minds. It is said that some hermit sages even attained deep levels of concentration beyond thought.

It is in this environment that Gotama the Sakyan—the future Buddha—came of age. After training under the acknowledged meditation masters of his time, he went his own way, and eventually claimed to discover a path of practice that used states of

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<sup>74</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Samyutta Nikāya, SN 22:57](#), p. 224

<sup>75</sup> Here the "world" corresponds to the consciousness that arises from the convergence of the six sense bases with their corresponding objects, explored further in the next chapter.

<sup>76</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Samyutta Nikāya, SN 12:15](#), p. 110

<sup>77</sup> D. Cairns. *Conversations with Husserl and Fink*, The Hague: Nijhoff, 1976, p. 50

concentration as a basis for insight into the nature of phenomena. While meditation as we know it existed before the Buddha, he was the first to formulate detailed methods to focus, manipulate, and investigate consciousness and discover what lies beyond.

In the next chapter, we will explore some of his insights. But first, we will focus on the implications of the primacy of consciousness on identifying a meaningful goal to pursue in life.

# The Ultimate Goal

## Existentialism: Action Over Identity

When seeking meaning in their lives, existentialists tend not to be satisfied with a mere metaphysical assertion. While early existentialists like Kierkegaard followed the Christian tradition, modern existentialism has been deeply influenced by Nietzsche's proclamation of the demise of God.<sup>78</sup> This atheist form is what I will focus on here.

An individual with an "existential attitude" feels a sense of disorientation, confusion, or dread in the face of an apparently meaningless or absurd world.<sup>79</sup> Many existentialists also regard traditional philosophies as too abstract and remote from concrete human experience.<sup>80</sup> The roots of this focus on experience are found in those who influenced Jean-Paul Sartre—the man most responsible for bringing existentialism to the forefront of popular culture in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre claimed that '*existence precedes essence*' was the central proposition of existentialism. In his view, the most important consideration for us as individuals is that we are independently acting, responsible, and conscious beings ("*existence*")—rather than the labels, definitions, or other preconceived categories we supposedly fit into ("*essence*"). We create our own values and meaning through conscious effort.

Put in another way, the actions you undertake are what matter in how your life turns out, over and above how you define yourself. Interestingly, this idea of the precedence of action corresponds to one of the daily reflections the Buddha recommends:

*"I am the owner of actions, heir to actions, born of actions, related through actions, and have actions as my arbitrator. Whatever I do, ..., to that will I fall heir."*<sup>81</sup>

This focus on what we do in the immediate present and the de-emphasis on metaphysical theorizing is a characteristic of the Buddha's teachings, exemplified in his famous simile of the arrow:

*"It's just as if a man were wounded with an arrow thickly smeared with poison. His friends ... would provide him with a surgeon, and the man would say, 'I won't have this arrow removed until*

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<sup>78</sup> Mark A. Wrathall and Hubert L. Dreyfus. *A Brief Introduction to Phenomenology and Existentialism, A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, 2006, p. 4

<sup>79</sup> Robert C. Solomon. *Existentialism* (McGraw-Hill), 1974, pp. 1–2

<sup>80</sup> Walter Kaufmann. *Existentialism: From Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, New York, 1956, p. 12

<sup>81</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 5:57](#), p. 221

*I know whether the man who wounded me was a noble warrior, a brahman, a merchant, or a worker ... until I know the given name & clan name of the man who wounded me ... until I know whether he was tall, medium, or short ... until I know his home village, town, or city ... until I know whether the bow with which I was wounded was a long bow or a crossbow ... He would say, 'I won't have this arrow removed until I know whether the shaft with which I was wounded was that of a common arrow, a curved arrow, a barbed, a calf-toothed, or an oleander arrow.' The man would die and those things would still remain unknown to him.*

*"In the same way, if anyone were to say, 'I won't live the holy life under the Blessed One [Buddha] as long as he does not disclose to me that "The cosmos is eternal," that "The cosmos is not eternal," ... that "The soul & the body are the same," that "The soul is one thing and the body another," ... the man would die and those things would still remain undisclosed by the Tathāgata [Buddha]."*<sup>82</sup>

That the Buddha's teachings are for those who have a pressing awareness of this existential problem is also articulated well by Ñāṇavīra Thera, a British monk who lived in Sri Lanka in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century:

*The reader is presumed to be subjectively engaged with an anxious problem, the problem of his existence, which is also the problem of his suffering. There is therefore nothing in these pages to interest the professional scholar ... for the scholar's whole concern is to eliminate or ignore the individual point of view in an effort to establish the objective truth -- a would-be impersonal synthesis of public facts. The scholar's essentially horizontal view of things, seeking connexions in space and time ... [disqualifies] him from any possibility of understanding a Dhamma that the Buddha himself has called akālika, 'timeless'. Only in a vertical view, straight down into the abyss of his own personal existence, is a man capable of apprehending the perilous insecurity of his situation; and only a man who does apprehend this is prepared to listen to the Buddha's Teaching.*<sup>83</sup>

By accepting that life is "rendered meaningless and absurd by the inevitability of death,"<sup>84</sup> existentialists like Sartre and Camus implicitly assume that there is nothing that can be done to defeat death itself. Therefore, the solution that they offer is that individuals should give meaning to their lives themselves.<sup>85</sup> Although this is reassuring at a certain level since it affirms the power of action, it is ultimately defeatist in that it disavows any possibility of finding a solution to the fundamental problem of death.

Does Buddhism also assert that life is inherently meaningless? What if it was possible to go beyond death itself? Would it not transcend all other potential goals? Is it possible to strive for such a seemingly unfathomable goal without being blind to reason?

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<sup>82</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 63*, pp. 352-353

<sup>83</sup> Ñāṇavīra Thera. *Notes on Dhamma, Preface*, 1960-1965, pp. 5-12

<sup>84</sup> Mark A. Wrathall and Hubert L. Dreyfus. *A Brief Introduction to Phenomenology and Existentialism, A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, 2006, p. 4

<sup>85</sup> Michael Watts. *Kierkegaard* (Oneworld), 2003, pp. 4-6

## Death and Desire

There are those who are convinced that technological progress will surmount the seemingly impossible. With his bestseller *The Singularity is Near*, the inventor and futurist Ray Kurzweil represents probably the most popular vision of this among technophiles. According to him, advances in genetics, nanotechnology and artificial intelligence will allow us to reverse the aging process and achieve a state of *amortality*—where the only vulnerability is accidental death—within the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The idea is that this will be possible because we will understand the brain at the molecular level in the not-too-distant future, and so be able to replace its deteriorating sections—similar to how amputees use artificial robotic limbs today. In effect, man and machine will merge and become one.

Although this is quite an appealing proposition, its underlying assumptions make it harder to believe as a possibility. The core philosophical view underlying this belief in practical immortality is that the physical brain can entirely explain the phenomenon of consciousness, and so replacing the hardware will somehow retain this element. As we saw in the previous chapter, however, this view rests on a false premise.

Even if we were to accept the plausibility of this premise off-hand, any hope of true immortality is defeated by design due to decay being built-in to the physical world. This is why even among avowed physicalists, this is a controversial idea.<sup>86</sup> *Senescence*—the entropic nature of decay—is baked into our body and all of materiality to the core, making any thought of unlimited life an impossible dream.<sup>87</sup> While a significant increase in lifespan is a possibility, it will be limited by the laws that physical elements are governed by.

Even before he became the Buddha, Gotama was deeply aware of this decaying and disintegrating nature of physicality. This meant that searching for a solution to death in the physical world would be futile. If the deathless<sup>88</sup> (*amata*) state was attainable, it had to be from within—at the realm of the mind:

*“I tell you, friend, that it is not possible by traveling to know or see or reach a far end of the world where one does not take birth, age, die, pass away, or reappear. But at the same time, I tell you that there is no making an end of suffering & stress without reaching the end of the world. Yet it is just within this fathom-long body, with its perception & intellect [mind], that I declare that there is the world.”<sup>89</sup>*

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<sup>86</sup> L. Hayflick. *The future of aging*. Nature, 408, 2000, pp. 267– 69

<sup>87</sup> M. Shermer. *Heavens on earth: The scientific search for the afterlife, immortality, and utopia*. New York: Henry Holt, 2018

<sup>88</sup> The deathless is a synonym of Nirvana (*nibbāna*), the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice. This should not be confused with immortality, since that has physical and temporal connotations, while the Buddhist goal is immaterial and timeless (*akālika*)—beyond space and time.

<sup>89</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 4:45](#), p. 132



Through his spiritual journey, Gotama delved into different ways of investigating his mind to better understand its nature. He evaluated conscious experience to be constituted of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and thoughts, with corresponding feelings of pleasure and pain. He also recognized that consciousness at the six sense bases changes from one moment to another.<sup>90</sup> This meant that what he was looking for was not going to be found there either.

At this point, you might wonder how there can be a path to free yourself from death at all, since the physical world and the world of consciousness both are of the nature to change. This is why the Buddha considered the goal of the spiritual search to be equivalent to reaching the end of the “world” itself, with the latter being defined as anything that disintegrates (“*Insofar as it disintegrates, ... it is called the ‘world.’*”)<sup>91</sup> His focus shifted to the search for what is beyond sensory consciousness.

Consider for a moment the futility of attempting to use the scientific method to answer this question. The experiments that need to be conducted are in the realm of the mind, and the knowledge you gain is experiential, not observational, or theoretical.

Gotama discovered that what comprises experience—feeling, perception, intention, consciousness, and thought among other phenomena—all arise dependent on your attention. For instance, say you pay attention to an unpleasant feeling in your body. You are also perceiving it, and conscious of it at the same time. By changing what you pay attention to, you can change your entire experience. This insight had important implications for his quest for freedom.

He also realized that any action he undertook out of desire necessarily involved at least a slight amount of stress—until that desire was satisfied. This led to the understanding that “*all phenomena are rooted in desire,*” which meant that the only possible path to what is beyond consciousness was to abandon desire itself.<sup>92</sup> Desire is what fuels the pursuit of manifold fleeting manifestations of consciousness in the first place. By abandoning desire for all experience, it would be possible to attain the deathless.<sup>93</sup>

This insight into the relationship between desire and death is what predicated Gotama’s realization of the four noble truths—the foundational tenets of Buddhism.<sup>94</sup> Note that pursuing the end of desire requires desire as well. This seeming paradox is overcome by following a gradual path of practice, where grosser forms of desire are abandoned first before subtler forms like the desire for strong states of concentration. The final step to attain Nirvana involves abandoning intentional action altogether.

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<sup>90</sup> Note that the word consciousness is used here in terms of experience at the six senses and not the mind—as was the case in the previous chapter.

<sup>91</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 35:82](#), p. 301

<sup>92</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 10:58](#), p. 479

<sup>93</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 22:53](#), p. 215

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. [SN 56:11](#), pp. 514–5

This state constitutes true freedom beyond the six sense bases and is not “of something,” lacking the quality of intentionality that Husserl asserted was part of the nature of consciousness. The deathless state is not what we think of as experience:

*“In the same way, where there is no passion for the nutriment of ... consciousness, where there is no delight, no craving, then consciousness does not land there or increase. Where consciousness does not land or increase, ... there is no production of renewed becoming in the future. Where there is no production of renewed becoming in the future, there is no future birth, aging, & death.”*

<sup>95</sup>

This ties in with Kant’s observation that experience (phenomena) necessitates time, since to experience something is to literally go through it.<sup>96</sup> And so, something timeless cannot be a phenomenon by definition. This is why Nirvana—not being subject to time—is called the end of all phenomena.<sup>97</sup>

## Rebirth and Conviction

Maybe you now subscribe to the primacy of consciousness, and even agree that desire is the root problem, but how is eradicating desire supposed to free us from death itself? After all, the death we know of is the same death that physicalists think of as the final end. Finding the deathless surely doesn’t stop physical death, so how are we to make sense of the Buddha’s claim?

This is where rebirth—that we have been caught in a repeated cycle of birth and death since time immemorial—comes into the picture. The Buddha claims that after death, desire propels consciousness to another life, and attaining the deathless state stops that process. This ensures that there will be no more birth or death.

While it is not necessary to believe in rebirth to conceptualize how eradicating desire for phenomena opens the door to the deathless, it is useful to reflect on whether it makes sense to reject the idea off-hand. If rebirth actually does happen, it would involve the realm of consciousness—and not materiality. And if you consider the Buddha to be the foremost guide in matters of the mind, it follows that trusting his advice would be wise—after all, it is his field of expertise. If the leading expert of consciousness talks of the possibility of rebirth linked to consciousness, shouldn’t we seriously take it into consideration?

The important question here is what is most likely to be the truth, and who to trust on questions related to life after death: the scientist whose expertise in the physical world does not adequately account for consciousness, or the meditation

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<sup>95</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 12:64](#), p. 147

<sup>96</sup> TTC. *Great Minds of the Western Intellectual Tradition, Kant’s Copernican Revolution*, 3rd Edition, 12:00-53

<sup>97</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 10:58](#), p. 479

master—the Buddha—who has studied consciousness directly and understood it better than anyone else?

If this seems like too far of a cognitive leap to make, consider this hypothetical scenario. Imagine that you have a friend who is into yoga, while you have no knowledge of it whatsoever. He recommends that you join a yoga class to help with your balance and flexibility. You trust your friend’s advice, and after a few months of training, experience those claimed benefits yourself. Did you initially have blind faith in your friend? No—it was a faith based on trust. A trust that your friend is more knowledgeable of yoga than you, and is looking out for your benefit. If you find that your experience differs from your friend’s claims, you will then choose to trust your own experience over his advice—as you should.

The same applies to the teaching of rebirth. After enacting the Buddha’s recommendations for developing the mind, if you find his advice to be worthwhile, you might be more willing to trust his expertise in the field of the mind. This makes you more open to the idea of rebirth, even while acknowledging that you yourself do not have direct knowledge of it. This is an intellectually honest way to adopt a working hypothesis that rebirth actually occurs.

Regardless of what you choose to believe, you can still experiment with the practices the Buddha recommends, and see if they lead to a life of wisdom. However, this requires that you experientially understand the downsides of desire, and the value in its abandoning.

## **The Pursuit of Happiness**

We all spend our days searching for something. Happiness. Peace. Meaning. These goals are hard to fathom, so we make them more tangible by pursuing wealth, fame, status, and pleasure instead. As a result, we spend our time on our work, habits, and other responsibilities, thinking that will get us what we are looking for.

Unfortunately for us, the goals we strive for have a fundamental problem. They only give us fleeting satisfaction. Once we achieve them, before long, we find ourselves seeking something more. There is no apparent ultimate goal where we satisfy all our desires and our pursuits come to an end.

This nature is most apparent with sensual pleasures. Once experienced, their nature to cease puts us on a hedonic grind, with the unachievable goal of satisfying an insatiable thirst. Life as it is normally lived leaves a bad taste in the mouth. Even after becoming aware of this issue, we still tend to follow a form of “enlightened hedonism,” where the goal is to maximize the pleasure experienced through the course of a lifetime, and avoid getting “hooked” on any specific activity.<sup>98</sup> We don’t question the worthiness of the pursuit itself.

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<sup>98</sup> William B. Irvine. *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy*, 2009, p. 11

Those who seek a more meaningful way of life might end up adhering to some sort of belief system—typically one that promises solace for the high price of blind faith and dogma. But for those of us unable to ignore religion’s seeming incompatibility with reason, the search for meaning might seem a fool’s errand. As a result, we revert back to the more reliable day-to-day forms of satisfaction and either choose to ignore the question of meaning altogether or adopt an existentialist attitude towards it. Living a happy and meaningful life as one defines it becomes the primary goal.

The problem with this approach to happiness is that searching for solace in what is transitory necessarily involves stress. As the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer recognized, “*no attained object of willing can give us satisfaction that lasts.*”<sup>99</sup> This means that if your goal is to live a truly happy life, you must stop seeking happiness in what is transitory.

Gotama renounced his princely life of comfort because it failed to satisfy his standards of happiness and fulfillment. He had the audacity to imagine the possibility of finding a permanent solution to the common human frailties that we consider to be part-and-parcel of our existence. While his search was for the end of aging, illness, and death, he claimed that what he discovered also solved the fundamental problem of stress and suffering altogether. This is because when true happiness is defined as something that does not fade over time, its pursuit and the quest for a state beyond death merge and become one. This is why the ultimate goal in Buddhism is not only called “*the deathless,*” but also “*bliss,*” and “*peace.*”<sup>100</sup>

After six long years of struggle, Gotama claimed to have achieved this goal—becoming known as the Buddha. In his first discourse after achieving awakening, he introduces the teaching of the four noble truths—suffering<sup>101</sup> (*dukkha*), cause (*samudaya*), cessation (*nirodha*), and path (*magga*). It amounted to a diagnosis and prescription for the human condition, with the promised cure being ultimate happiness itself.

These days, the scope of popular Buddhist practice is not nearly that grand in scale, being narrowed down to merely finding a sense of calm and well-being amid the stresses of modern life. While developing a mind that does not falter when facing the vicissitudes of life is definitely a prerequisite for deeper practice, a genuine seeker of a deathless happiness would want to investigate matters at a deeper level.

To understand and ultimately free ourselves from all suffering, we must therefore develop minds that are impervious to the instability of the outside world, as “*so long as we are given up to the throng of desires, ... we never obtain lasting happiness or peace.*”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Thomas C. Brickhouse, Charlton Heston (Narrator), Berel Lang, Kenneth L. Schmitz, John J. Stuhr, Robert J. O’Connell. *The Giants of Philosophy, Arthur Schopenhauer*, Tape 2 (#35), 3:51

<sup>100</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Samyutta Nikāya, SN 43](#), p. 393

<sup>101</sup> Suffering is the inadequate translation commonly used for *dukkha*, but it also encompasses even the most minute stress or dissatisfaction you might experience in a given moment.

<sup>102</sup> Thomas C. Brickhouse, Charlton Heston (Narrator), Berel Lang, Kenneth L. Schmitz, John J. Stuhr, Robert J. O’Connell. *The Giants of Philosophy, Arthur Schopenhauer*, Tape 2 (#35), 4:14

That is to say, we must train ourselves to be independent of the influences of pleasure and pain, and ultimately death itself.

# Spirituality Revisited

## The Varieties of Spiritual Practice

In late 1893, less than a decade before Edmund Husserl founded the field of phenomenology, the World Parliament of Religions was convened. The aim of the organizers was to reveal “*the common elements in all religions, so as to foster... opposition to materialism.*”<sup>103</sup> With the irrationality of the physicalist worldview, we have come to a similar situation now. With science lacking the proper tools to directly investigate consciousness, it seems wise to look into what spiritual traditions have to offer.

Does this mean a return to placing faith in an external authority? Fortunately, this is not the case. Taking spirituality seriously does not mean that we need to abandon common sense. It does, however, require us to be open-minded about the many spiritual traditions in history that have made an honest attempt at seeking direct knowledge and freedom from within. We should investigate whether adopting the practices they recommend will benefit us in our quest for meaning and a happiness that lasts.

At first glance, the practices that different spiritual traditions prescribe seem to be quite similar. The recommendation to be generous, for example, is found virtually in all religions. Guidelines or commandments to adopt moral precepts related to non-violence, non-theft, fidelity, sobriety, and simplicity are found in traditions ranging from Jainism and Buddhism, to Islam and Christianity. There are even similarities between how different monastic traditions functioned. The Rule of Saint Benedict that stipulates proper behavior for Christian monastics has similarities with the Vinaya of early Buddhism, where disciplinary rules and guidelines are set forth to support spiritual training and communal harmony.

Faced with this seemingly common core in all religions, Western seekers who initially made contact with the Eastern spiritual traditions concluded that any differences must be mere cultural corruptions hiding the same path to a universal truth. This is the backdrop in which the Theosophical Society was formed in the late 19th century, where Helena Blavatsky, its enigmatic founder, propounded a view of *universalism*—that all the world’s religions point to the same truth. This idea gained currency over time, with William James—the father of American psychology—theorizing that the religious experience was the goal of spiritual practice, and the Neo-Vedanta inspired Aldous Huxley claiming the same in his book *The Perennial Philosophy*.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Peter Harvey. *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices*, 2013, p. 431

<sup>104</sup> William James. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, 1902

To find out whether this idea has actual merit, we would need to compare and contrast the practices of all major spiritual traditions. For this purpose, we can use some of the insights we have gained so far about what would involve a meaningful life. Since the freedom we are seeking can only be found in the realm of the mind, any practices that help us directly investigate it would be relevant. This would involve disciplinary practices that rein in our desire for happiness dependent on the physical world, and a moral code that ensures that we are not hindered by others. Since the mind is fickle and prone to distraction, some form of meditation that focuses its intentions on a single theme and provides sustenance would also be necessary. Therefore, spiritual traditions that do not require faith in an outside authority, acknowledge the primacy of the mind, and consider desire to be the root problem would be more acceptable. Lastly, any practices that help us discern the inconstancy and unworthiness of phenomena—pointing to the ultimate goal of an unchanging happiness beyond death—should also be favored.

Qualifying spiritual practices can be broadly categorized under the framework of discipline and virtue, calm and concentration, and discernment and wisdom. While this mirrors the Buddhist framework of *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā*, the practices corresponding to each category are not dependent on any specific tradition. The reasons behind selecting each practice should be apparent when considering the foundation necessary to potentially achieve the ultimate spiritual goal as we have already discussed. We will now go through each factor and compare the practices of each spiritual tradition. I have included more lay-oriented movements like Stoicism and secular Buddhism for comparative purposes. Otherwise, I only consider the more monastic or “idealized” forms of popular religions to evaluate their potential on fair grounds.

Spiritual Tradition	Discipline & Virtue	Generosity & Non-Theft	Non-violence	Fidelity	Honesty & Brevity	Sobriety	Sensual Entertainment Renunciation	Celibacy	Simplicity	Fasting
Early Buddhism	100%									
Theravāda Buddhism	100%									
Jainism	94%									
Hindu Advaita Vedanta	89%									
Hindu Ashtanga Yoga	89%									
Hindu Bhakti	89%									
Christian Hesychasm	78%									
Sufism	78%									
Stoicism	72%									
Tibetan Buddhism	72%									
Taoism	61%									
Zen Buddhism	61%									
Jewish Kabbalah	50%									
Secular Buddhism	44%									

Comparison of discipline and virtue practices of different spiritual traditions<sup>105</sup>

While most religions and spiritual traditions have some basis of ethical discipline and a moral code, only some—primarily those originating from the Indian subcontinent—emphasize its importance. Jainism and early forms of Buddhism are unique in their uncompromising attitude towards adhering to non-violence in all circumstances, while other religions tend to allow exceptions for self-defense or following one’s supposed duty. One of the clear divergences between traditions of the West and those of the East is the emphasis on renouncing sensual entertainment by the latter. This is due to a culture of asceticism and meditation in ancient India, with a focus on avoiding activities that muddle the clarity of the mind. Tantra and Kundalini Yoga—relatively late developments—are exceptions in that such discipline is deemphasized.

Here it is useful to reflect on why such practices related to discipline and virtue are considered essential in the quest to understand the mind. If we were undisciplined in our behavior and followed along with the whims of the mind, it would be infinitely more difficult to pay attention to the processes that underlie its inner workings. With a basis of discipline and virtue we are able to create the necessary inner space for contemplation. Practices like meditation would not have a solid foundation for development otherwise.

Spiritual Tradition	Concentration & Calm	Wakefulness	Seclusion	Mindfulness of Present/Mantra/Spiritual Figure	Stillness/Singular Focus	Sense Restraint	Mindfulness of Body	Jhana/Absorption
Early Buddhism	100%							
Hindu Advaita Vedanta	93%							
Hindu Ashtanga Yoga	93%							
Theravāda Buddhism	93%							
Tibetan Buddhism	93%							
Hindu Bhakti	79%							
Zen Buddhism	79%							
Jainism	64%							
Christian Hesychasm	57%							
Jewish Kabbalah	57%							
Secular Buddhism	57%							
Sufism	57%							
Taoism	57%							
Stoicism	43%							

Comparison of concentration and calm practices of different spiritual traditions<sup>106</sup>

<sup>105</sup> For the methodology used to calculate these values and descriptions of the discipline and virtue practices check the [Appendix, Spiritual Tradition Practices Comparison, Discipline and Virtue](#), p. 84

<sup>106</sup> For descriptions of the concentration and calm practices check the [Appendix, Spiritual Tradition Practices Comparison, Concentration and Calm](#), p. 84



The Buddhist and Hindu traditions also distinguish themselves by their many methods to systematically calm the mind and develop concentration. Due to interactions between them over the centuries, the source of some of their practices is difficult to ascertain. Patañjali's Ashtanga Yoga, for instance, shows some uncanny similarities with the Buddhist path up to the development of concentration, with some scholars suggesting some unacknowledged borrowing.<sup>107</sup> Similar claims are made regarding the non-theistic Advaita Vedanta, which is arguably a syncretic tradition that borrowed elements from Ashtanga Yoga as well as Mahayana Buddhism.<sup>108</sup> Connections between Taoism and Zen Buddhism are also quite apparent, with the latter probably the result of Chinese mystics reinterpreting Buddhism through a Taoist philosophical lens.

It should also be noted that with the exception of Buddhism, and Hinduism to a lesser extent, meditation is not a common practice among adherents of other traditions. I have still given them the benefit of the doubt even when the relevant references are isolated to a specific practitioner—like Rumi for Sufism, or a single ambiguous text—like the Tao Te Ching for Taoism.

Reflection on death is arguably an essential practice for emotional stability and spiritual maturity. In the end, we all must be prepared to face it. The Buddha recommends that his followers reflect daily on how ephemeral their lives are, with a reminder that their freedom from that process is dependent on their actions.<sup>109</sup> Sufi mystics were known to frequent graveyards to reflect on their mortality—a practice recommended in the ḥadīths attributed to the prophet Muhammad.<sup>110</sup> The Christian tradition can also claim quotes like *memento mori* (remember that we must die), but they were likely inherited from the practical philosophies of the ancient Greeks. The stoics Seneca and Epictetus both made death reflection central to their teachings. Stoicism in particular can be singled out as one of the few Western traditions that emphasized the wisdom of reflecting on inconstancy as a means to live a more equanimous life.

The Abrahamic religions also have a history of contemplative communities that focused on seclusion and prayer. It is quite plausible to assume that practitioners of Christian Monasticism, Islamic Sufism, and Jewish Kabbalah may have experienced mental states of rapturous absorption while focusing their attention on a spiritual object or figure.<sup>111</sup> If that is actually the case, are the meditative practices of different traditions different in name only?

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<sup>107</sup> Karel Werner. *The Yogi and the Mystic*, 1994, p. 26

<sup>108</sup> Frank Whaling. *Shankara and Buddhism*, Journal of Indian Philosophy, 1979, 7 (1): pp. 1–42

<sup>109</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 5:57](#), p. 221

<sup>110</sup> Sunan Abi Dawud, *Hadith - Book of Funerals (Kitab Al-Jana'iz)*, Sayings and Teachings of Prophet Muhammad

<sup>111</sup> Daniel Goleman. *The Meditative Mind: The Varieties of Meditative Experience*, 1988, pp. 41-92

## The Myth of Universalism

This question assumes that the goal of spiritual practice is experiencing such a transcendent state. The same brilliant globe of light that a Christian deems a vision of God, might also be irrefutable proof of Allah’s existence for a Muslim. For someone whose motivation is understanding the mind, however, this is complicating the matter altogether. What they both experienced was a vision of light, possibly a mental image of a spiritual figure, and even an enigmatic voice. Does this verify their beliefs and give assurance of eternal salvation?

The more empirically-minded person would label such an event exactly as it was experienced, without adding any unnecessary interpretations. The light, the image, and the voice were all just that—perceptions and feelings related to a conscious experience, however intense or transcendent it may have been. What matters is if such heightened experiences are truly transformational, and irrevocably eradicates unskillful tendencies—like those relating to desire—from the mind. However, this assumes that eradicating desire is the primary purpose of the spiritual quest. While many traditions acknowledge desire’s downsides, their goals tend to be more related to a union with a creator figure or eternal salvation. Only Buddhist traditions focus on desire as the root cause of stress and suffering while also acknowledging the primacy of consciousness.

Spiritual Tradition	Discernment & Wisdom	Death Reflection	Primacy of Mind	Atheism	Desire as Problem	Gradual Practice	Body as Inconstant & Not-Self	Thoughts/Feelings as Inconstant & Not-Self	Perceptions as Inconstant & Not-Self	Consciousness as Inconstant & Not-Self	Action & Causality
Early Buddhism	100%										
Theravāda Buddhism	90%										
Tibetan Buddhism	65%										
Zen Buddhism	55%										
Jainism	40%										
Taoism	40%										
Secular Buddhism	35%										
Hindu Advaita Vedanta	30%										
Hindu Ashtanga Yoga	30%										
Stoicism	30%										
Christian Hesychasm	25%										
Sufism	25%										
Hindu Bhakti	15%										
Jewish Kabbalah	5%										

Comparison of discernment and wisdom practices of different spiritual traditions<sup>112</sup>

<sup>112</sup> For descriptions of the discernment and wisdom practices check the [Appendix, Spiritual Tradition Practices Comparison, Discernment and Wisdom](#), p. 85-6

When it comes to practices that develop wisdom into the workings of the mind, the Buddhist traditions stand apart. Regarding thoughts, feelings, and perceptions that visit the mind as transitory and not worth identifying with as one’s own, is a teaching unique to Buddhism. That said, each Buddhist tradition has varying commitments to discipline and meditation, and even conflicting interpretations on teachings like not-self.<sup>113</sup> While digging deeper into these differences is beyond the scope of this book, I will use the earliest textual sources to clarify specific Buddhist teachings going forward.

It is easier to understand now why some of the great modern philosophers had such high regard for Buddhism. For instance, Arthur Schopenhauer called it the “*best of all possible religions*,”<sup>114</sup> while Edmund Husserl concluded that it was a “*religio-ethical discipline for spiritual purification and fulfillment of the highest stature—conceived of and dedicated to an inner result of a vigorous and unparalleled, elevated frame of mind.*”<sup>115</sup> High praise indeed.

<b>Spiritual Tradition</b>	<b>Overall</b>	<b>Discipline &amp; Virtue</b>	<b>Concentration &amp; Calm</b>	<b>Discernment &amp; Wisdom</b>
Early Buddhism	<b>100%</b>	100%	100%	100%
Theravāda Buddhism	<b>94%</b>	100%	93%	90%
Tibetan Buddhism	<b>77%</b>	72%	93%	65%
Hindu Advaita Vedanta	<b>71%</b>	89%	93%	30%
Hindu Ashtanga Yoga	<b>71%</b>	89%	93%	30%
Jainism	<b>66%</b>	94%	64%	40%
Zen Buddhism	<b>63%</b>	61%	79%	50%
Hindu Bhakti	<b>61%</b>	89%	79%	15%
Christian Hesychasm	<b>53%</b>	78%	57%	25%
Sufism	<b>53%</b>	78%	57%	25%
Taoism	<b>53%</b>	61%	57%	40%
Stoicism	<b>48%</b>	72%	43%	30%
Secular Buddhism	<b>46%</b>	44%	57%	35%
Jewish Kabbalah	<b>37%</b>	50%	57%	5%

Comparison of spiritual traditions using threefold framework<sup>116</sup>

Even though there are similarities between spiritual traditions in their practices of generosity, discipline, simplicity, and concentration, on the fundamental

<sup>113</sup> For an in-depth look at the Buddhist not-self teaching and its popular misinterpretations, check [Clearing the Way: Resolving Misinterpretations of the Dhamma](#), Understanding Not-Self, pp. 21-32

<sup>114</sup> Urs App. *Richard Wagner and Buddhism*, p. 17

<sup>115</sup> Fred Hanna. *Husserl on the Teachings of the Buddha*, *The Humanistic Psychologist*, Volume 23, 1995, p. 367

<sup>116</sup> For relevant sources check [Appendix, Spiritual Tradition Practices Comparison, Sources](#), p. 85

questions, there is no clear consensus. Practitioners that believe in a creator figure that passes eternal judgment after death are likely to focus more on living moral lives, while those that seek union with such a figure or a cosmic sense of oneness might focus on concentration practices that lead to states of absorption. However, the quest to free our minds is an altogether different motivation.

Why is it not the stated goal of most if not all spiritual traditions? This is probably due to the unquestioned assumptions of the limits of our human potential, and our propensity to rely on blind faith when faced with life's mysteries. As such, it is a mistake to consider all spiritual traditions to be paths to the same goal. The questions we bring to the spiritual quest inevitably have an effect on the path we tread, and where we might end up.

Abandoning desire and reaching the deathless is the most meaningful goal we as humans can strive for. It resolves the issue of meaninglessness of other worldly goals due to their inherent nature of inconstancy, while giving us the potential of achieving a happiness that does not fade over time.

This pursuit requires us to rethink what we consider to be the limits of human capability and aspire to a goal that could be rightly termed to be our ultimate potential. We will delve into practices that can be incorporated into our lives to give ourselves the best foundation to achieve this goal next.

## **The Culmination of Self-Improvement**

Seeking to develop the mind is not unique to Buddhist practice. You can generally find sound advice related to self-development from many avenues. Typically, our first exposure to these recommendations comes from close family and friends. For those who actively pursue self-improvement, there is also no shortage of directives from all kinds of self-appointed teachers and gurus. These supposed experts come from different backgrounds, with various suggestions on how to be successful. Here the focus tends to be your career, health, or relationships, but sometimes it is more spiritual: how to find your life's purpose, or generally live a happy and balanced life.

My focus here is to introduce different practices that help set the stage to achieve the most ambitious of possible goals: the deathless itself. While this may seem far beyond the seemingly mundane and worldly goals that we usually strive for, some of the recommendations I focus on in the next chapter are similar to those found in a typical self-improvement book. By this, I am acknowledging the importance of developing a solid base of mental strength: some of the habits that we need to inculcate within ourselves are helpful in whatever our endeavor might be. Where appropriate, I point out current movements and trends that are conducive to developing the mind, while also noting their limitations and divergences.

The further you pursue the deathless as your ultimate goal, the more your actions will tend to diverge from what is typically connected with success. For example, while it is essential to have the financial means to sustain yourself, once you are better able to be content with a simple life, the sole pursuit of wealth becomes an unnecessary distraction. Similarly, as you find a sense of calm and clarity from within through meditation, you increasingly become independent of outside circumstances and resilient to changes in your relationships. This will preclude you from the need to seek fulfillment beyond yourself altogether.

When seeking peace within, it is important to acknowledge that we start without having much to go by. Most of us depend on what's on offer in the world outside ourselves for our everyday happiness. So when evaluating the various habits that we all have, what is important is whether the benefits gained from pursuing them outweigh the drawbacks. If a particular habit tends to pull us away from finding inner peace and hooks us to be dependent on things outside of our control, it is in our best interests to free ourselves from it. This can be easier said than done, however, and even if you see that the pros don't outweigh the cons for a certain habit, it might still be too difficult to stop yourself from succumbing to it.

For this reason, when looking to incorporate more discipline, focus, and wisdom in your life, it is important to rein in the more egregious behaviors first. The focus should be resolving the "low-hanging fruit" before looking to make drastic changes. By starting with setting limits to your bad habits, you slowly gain the confidence necessary to go further and rein in even the more minor lapses. Over time, this results in more concrete changes in your life and personality.

To emphasize how changing habits for the better tends to be a gradual process that takes time, for each of the practices suggested in the next chapters I introduce progressive levels of mastery: beginner, intermediate, and advanced. While these levels can seem somewhat arbitrary, having clear guidelines will prove helpful in evaluating your progress over time. The recommendations given at the advanced level are intentionally quite ambitious—similar to what a full-time practicing Buddhist monk would follow. By this I want to encourage you to set long-term goals that are both challenging and aspirational. That said, what is important is your own progress—the spiritual path is not about competing with one another. While having peers can motivate you to go further than you thought possible, the best indicator of progress in the path is how your present compares to your past.

Living a disciplined life helps even with achieving worldly goals. But for someone looking to develop their mind, it is also a crucial prerequisite for the more in-depth work of meditation. If you do not have sufficient discipline to restrain yourself to find time to meditate in seclusion, the chances of real progress in the path are quite limited. This is a crucial point that is very often neglected, since practicing restraint does not go along with popular cultural norms of being unrestricted and "free." Developing the path to the deathless and true freedom means you have to be willing

to make wise trade-offs: giving up actions that give short-term pleasure for ones that are more beneficial in the long-term. This is wisdom in practice.

# Path of Practice: Discipline and Virtue

## Fidelity and Sobriety

While each of us has seemingly unique tastes, ultimately they come down to the desire to indulge our senses—be it with sex, food, drugs, TV, gaming, porn, movies, music, sport or any of the myriad other avenues of sensual stimulation we have at our disposal now. By carefully considering the associated trade-offs and knowing our capabilities, we can establish wise boundaries for ourselves. Attempting to give up all our unhealthy habits cold-turkey might result in confidence-sapping failures, so the aim should be to achieve sustainable progress where we are suitably challenged without being overwhelmed.

Consider one of the main underlying driving forces influencing our everyday decisions: lust. This emotion is so powerful that it drives people to commit all manner of atrocities to satisfy its thirst. That said, you might have enough self-control that you think this is not a relevant issue for you. After all, what is the downside of exploring lust with a consensual partner?

On the face of it, there is no issue. But for someone whose ultimate goal is freeing the mind from worldly dependencies, it is a powerful hindrance. Why? Because lust makes us look for pleasure outside of ourselves, and while doing so, deludes us into perceiving the bodily forms of others as being exclusively attractive. We only see the beautiful side of bodies under lust's influence, forgetting that those same bodies eventually decay and die. We unwittingly attach ourselves to what is subject to death, thereby getting caught in pursuing what can never truly satisfy us, and blocking ourselves from a possible deathless dimension.

Because of this, true spiritual seekers would set limits to what they allow themselves to do under the influence of lust. If not restrained in some way, it can overwhelm our wiser motivations. Considering this, it is best to at least restrict ourselves to a single consensual adult partner. Any more would be bringing unnecessary additional complication to your life. This ties in with the advice to avoid adulterous affairs common to most religions.

Keeping lust under control is made significantly more difficult with the advent of internet pornography. In *Your Brain on Porn*, Gary Wilson talks of the unintended consequences of the “great porn experiment” of modern times. He theorizes that easily accessible internet porn tricks us into thinking that we have hit the evolutionary jackpot, since we are able to simulate having sexual intercourse with a potentially unlimited number of partners. This constant novelty of sexual experience

promotes addictive behavior—called the Coolidge effect—among porn users.<sup>117</sup> Instead of being a rare occurrence like in times past, this “super stimulus” is available at any moment, inadvertently training us to find sexual activity with a real partner to be less satisfying. Therefore it comes as no surprise that regular porn usage is associated with an increase in depression and a general lack of confidence.

While there are secular communities like *NoFap* that encourage avoiding porn consumption, their focus is merely to abandon its usage and to eventually develop physical relationships with an actual partner.<sup>118</sup> They do not go further and identify the goal to be eradicating lust itself. This is unsurprising considering their lack of awareness of the downsides of pursuing sex as a solution to lust, and how difficult—and seemingly impossible—renouncing lust seems to be.

For those who are willing and capable of pushing themselves to go the extra mile, it is best to do away with sexual intercourse altogether. The celibate life is usually reserved for those who have dedicated themselves to the monastic life and full-time practice, but in theory, it could be taken up by anyone. Even for those living a lay life, it is worthy to strive for such a goal at least later in life. Why is it so important? Because it is impossible to eradicate lust if you are continually acting under its influence. Even though sexual relations with a consensual partner is not blameworthy compared to other potential outlets for lust, it still involves intentionally perceiving the body of another in a way that is not conducive to sustaining peace of mind.

While the recent interest in psychedelics as even a possible alternative to meditation might suggest otherwise, abstaining from using drugs that result in losing control over your mind is an obvious practice to take up. Even some popular meditation teachers preach the wonders of moderation when it comes to marijuana and alcohol, but a serious practitioner should be willing to abstain from all such substances, with the awareness that by design, drugs are antithetical to developing mastery over the mind.

Those who advocate for psychedelics like LSD, psilocybin, mescaline, and DMT do so because their drug-infused experiences have made them view their lives in a completely new perspective, resulting in them opening up to the possibilities of alternative lifestyles and practices like meditation. It might be that for some, such an experience has sparked an interest in exploring the inner world. But even if that was the case, it is hard to justify continued usage after the insight sparked by the initial experience. After all, dependence on the physical world—a characteristic of all drugs—is bound to involve stress and suffering.

A seeker’s commitment to the practice is tested when facing situations where accepted drugs are used as a social grease. By abstaining completely, you risk being marginalized in your social relationships, so it is much easier to compromise and revert to practicing moderation. This hides a fear of social rejection, and so is

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<sup>117</sup> Gary Wilson. [Porn, Novelty and the Coolidge Effect](#), 2011

<sup>118</sup> Anisa Subedar. [The online groups of men who avoid masturbation](#), BBC, 24 June 2017



ultimately a test of your value system. If your friends are not willing to accept your efforts to improve yourself, are they worth your time in the first place?

For those seeking to abandon their unhealthy sensual addictions, practicing mindfulness can be beneficial. In recent clinical trials, a mix of Buddhist practices (rebranded as RAIN—Recognize, Accept, Investigate, and Nonidentify) has been shown to be more effective in overcoming substance addiction than the existing gold standard psychiatric treatment.<sup>119</sup> We will look into how best to develop these practices in the next chapter.

**Beginner Level:**

Commitment to a single partner in sexual relationships  
Limited or no consumption of pornography  
Limited or no consumption of alcohol, marijuana, and psychedelics  
No harder drugs like cocaine and heroin

**Intermediate Level:**

No intoxicants including alcohol, marijuana, and psychedelics  
No pornography  
Limited sexual activity  
Limited masturbation

**Advanced Level:**

No masturbation or any other sexual activity

## Honesty and Brevity

In the quest to understand the inner workings of the mind, truthfulness is an essential quality to develop. Being honest in your interactions with others nurtures relationships built on trust, which are immensely beneficial in practice. Good friends let you know about your blind spots, motivate you in times of struggle, and push you to strive harder through healthy peer pressure.

The importance of honesty is made even more stark when you consider the impact lying has on your own mind. Hiding the truth to deceive another means you complicate matters for yourself as well. Future interactions with the person you deceived might result in concocting a web of lies to cover up the original untruth.

It might not be clear why hiding the truth from others affects your own ability to grasp deeper truths. This is the case because we are already ignorant of the inner workings of the mind, so dishonesty just makes it even harder to know the truth

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<sup>119</sup> J. A. Brewer et al. *Mindfulness Training for Smoking Cessation: Results from a Randomized Control Trial*, *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 119, nos. 1-2, 2011, pp. 72-80

within. By being honest by default, we give ourselves the best chance to understand our own minds. Because of this, the serious practitioner should consider a policy of truth to be paramount. Any downsides of developing such a trait are worthwhile trade-offs if developing your mind is your primary goal.

In addition to being truthful, by not being intentionally insulting or divisive in your speech, your relationships will tend to be harmonious. For those looking to develop their meditation practice even further, it is also helpful to limit unnecessary idle conversation with others. What is considered idle chatter might vary from person to person, but the importance of focusing on what is beneficial becomes clear when you attempt to focus your mind inwards on a single meditation theme. If you have spent all day discussing topics irrelevant to the task at hand, the habitual tendency of your mind to entertain itself with the gossip of the day will become a burden. The Buddha termed such irrelevant conversation “animal talk”:

*“It isn’t right, monks, ... should get engaged in such topics of conversation: conversation about kings, robbers, & ministers of state; armies, alarms, & battles; food & drink; clothing, furniture, garlands, & scents; relatives; vehicles; villages, towns, cities, the countryside; women & heroes; the gossip of the street & the well; tales of the dead; tales of diversity, the creation of the world & of the sea; talk of whether things exist or not.”<sup>120</sup>*

What then is worth talking about? The Buddha himself defined it to be speech that he “*knows to be factual, true, [and] beneficial.*”<sup>121</sup> Interestingly, whether his words were “*endearing and agreeable to others*” were not relevant, since he had a sense of the “*proper time to say them.*” His skill in conversation is further exemplified in how he handled questions posed by others:

*“There are questions that should be answered categorically [straightforwardly yes, no, this, that]. There are questions that should be answered with an analytical answer [defining or redefining the terms]. There are questions that should be answered with a counter-question. There are questions that should be put aside.”<sup>122</sup>*

This level of mastery requires the wisdom to know where a question leads and whether it is worthwhile from the get-go. This is a sign that the Buddha was a master of conversation, with evidence of this found throughout the early Buddhist texts.<sup>123</sup> While reaching this level of proficiency might seem daunting, it is worth aspiring to as a long-term goal.

## **Beginner Level:**

Commitment to honesty

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<sup>120</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 10:69](#), p. 486

<sup>121</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 58](#), pp. 311–2

<sup>122</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 4:42](#), p. 131

<sup>123</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. [Skill in Questions: How the Buddha Taught. 2018](#)

No insulting or divisive speech

**Intermediate Level:**

Complete honesty, not even white lies  
Limited idle chatter

**Advanced Level:**

No idle chatter  
Commitment to silence unless conversation is beneficial  
Identifying which questions are worth pursuing

## Fasting and Health

Fasting as a religious practice has a long history. It is recommended in all major faiths for varying reasons—as a statement of intent, a way to get closer to the divine, or as an act of discipline. In Buddhism, fasting in itself is not celebrated, but it is used as a healthy way to control craving for food and maximize time for meditation.

Setting limits to your eating habits is a sure way to find out how attached you are to pleasurable tastes. For those interested in transcending sensuality altogether, experimentation with food is an essential practice. For monastics who generally live in environments that are secluded from other forms of sensual entertainment, food is the main outlet for sensual desire. For this reason, being disciplined here is crucial to developing further in the practice.

Traditionally, all monks are expected to follow an intermittent fasting interval from midday to sunrise, during which only light liquids and medicines are to be consumed. This might sound impossibly restrictive, but in practice it is mostly a matter of giving the body time to adapt. Over time, it becomes natural. It is also important to regard food as a means to sustain yourself and nothing more:

*“And how does the disciple of the noble ones know moderation in eating? There is the case where the disciple of the noble ones, considering it appropriately, takes his food not playfully, nor for intoxication, nor for putting on bulk, nor for beautification, but simply for the survival & continuance of this body, for ending its afflictions, for the support of ... life, thinking, ‘I will destroy old feelings (of hunger) & not create new feelings (from overeating). Thus I will maintain myself, be blameless, & live in comfort.”<sup>124</sup>*

While this is easier said than done since the untrained mind craves sense pleasures, adding a level of discipline is the first step in unraveling this dependence.

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<sup>124</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 53](#), pp. 298–9

It is possible, of course, to eat excessively during even a restricted time frame, so the spirit of the practice should be kept in mind.

Intermittent fasting has become something of a trend in recent times, with some research support for its potential health benefits.<sup>125</sup> The Buddha explicitly mentions such health benefits (“As you are abstaining from the nighttime meal, you, too, will sense next-to-no illness, next-to-no affliction, lightness, strength, and comfortable abiding.”),<sup>126</sup> and even recommended only partaking in one-meal-a-day for his more dedicated disciples.

Moderation and healthy eating go hand in hand with intermittent fasting for those looking for best results. Unlike in ancient times, modern societies generally have a ubiquity of food options to choose from. Those who prefer to incorporate Buddhist principles into their dietary choices should consider the survival of the body and its health paramount over mere sensual gratification. By doing this, unnecessary diseases caused by unhealthy diets are avoided. This means limiting consumption of foods high in sugar and those with little nutritional value.

There is also well-documented evidence that processed meat has detrimental effects on human health. After evaluating over 800 studies, the World Health Organization recently categorized processed meat as a type 1 carcinogen—stating that its connection to colon cancer is as clear as the connection between tobacco and lung cancer.<sup>127,128</sup> Researchers have also found that common illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes and cancer are virtually non-existent in rural communities where the diets primarily consisted of whole plant-based foods.<sup>129</sup>

Therefore, looking at food as the first line of defense against disease, it seems advisable to focus on a diet consisting mainly of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes. By doing so, we can develop our skill in restraint in the face of immediate sensual gratification, while also securing our long-term physical health.

### **Beginner Level:**

Limited consumption of foods with high amounts of sugar

Commitment to limiting overeating

### **Intermediate Level:**

Focus on healthy foods like vegetables, greens, and nuts

Two-meals-a-day

Intermittent fasting of at least 10 hours each day

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<sup>125</sup> Roger Collier. [Intermittent fasting: the science of going without](#), Canadian Medical Association Journal, 11 Jun 2013

<sup>126</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves. Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 70](#), p. 363

<sup>127</sup> The Nutrition Source. [WHO report says eating processed meat is carcinogenic: Understanding the findings](#), Harvard School of Public Health, 3 Nov 2015

<sup>128</sup> World Health Organization. [Q&A on the carcinogenicity of the consumption of red meat and processed meat](#), Oct 2015

<sup>129</sup> Chen J, Campbell TC, Li J, et al. *Diet, life-style and mortality in China. A study of the characteristics of 65 Chinese counties (China Study)*. Oxford, UK; Ithaca, NY; Beijing, PRC: Oxford University Press; Cornell University Press; People's Medical Publishing House, 1990

### **Advanced Level:**

Exclusive focus on healthy foods depending on availability

One-meal-a-day, small snack only if needed

Intermittent fasting of at least 16 hours each day

## **Minimalism**

We live in a consumer economy where using our hard-earned money to buy what we want is celebrated. With the ubiquity of targeted advertising, smart marketing techniques, and peer pressure to pursue novelty, most of us end up spending much more than we need to live a comfortable life. And there is no indication that this hoarding has any positive long-term effects on our mental well-being.

Those who have become aware of this erosion of our financial independence have started adopting an age-old philosophy as an antidote: minimalism. The minimalist movement promotes the idea of limiting one's possessions as a way to achieve contentment through simplicity. Such a lifestyle is promoted by the FIRE (*Financial Independence, Retire Early*) movement, where the goal is to save more and reach an early retirement.<sup>130</sup>

Almost every monastic tradition in history has extolled the virtues of frugal living. Practicing Buddhist monks train to be content with the barest essential levels of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine.<sup>131</sup> At first glance, this might seem to be some sort of enforced poverty, but the actual experience is quite the opposite. By only keeping what is of use to you, the mental baggage from any unnecessary junk dissipates, giving you a clarity that you are unlikely to want to give up. By limiting your dependence on material things, you live an unburdened life that is conducive to further mental cultivation.

One aspect of minimalism that is particularly relevant today is minimizing time spent on digital devices. By doing this you give yourself the space to recalibrate and be more comfortable with being on your own—essential for solid progress in meditation practice. This becomes clear when you contrast the goal of concentration practice with the behavior the internet promotes. Keeping your attention on a single theme excluding all else is more challenging when you can immediately satisfy the whims of any thought that arises in your mind. Therefore, it is difficult to imagine achieving sustained progress in meditation without incorporating some form of digital minimalism.

### **Beginner Level:**

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<sup>130</sup> Chris Stokel-Walker. [FIRE: The movement to live frugally and retire decades early](#), BBC, 2 Nov 2018

<sup>131</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 2](#), p. 18

Donating all excess clothes and other non-essentials  
Limiting budget for non-essentials

**Intermediate Level:**

All essential possessions (clothes, medicine) fit in a suitcase  
Active effort to limit possessions to essentials

**Advanced Level:**

All essential possessions fit in a carry-on bag  
Purchases limited to essentials

# Path of Practice: Calm and Concentration

## Solitude and Patience

If the goal of the spiritual search is aligned with sensual indulgence, then the digital world would be the ideal environment to practice. Unfortunately, it is quite the opposite:

*“For one guarding the sense doors, watching a show is a thorn.*

*“For one practicing celibacy, nearness to women<sup>132</sup> is a thorn.*

*“For the first jhāna, noise is a thorn.<sup>133</sup>*

Restraining your senses is essential if you want calm and clarity in your meditation practice. This is much more difficult when there is access to objects of your sensual addictions right at your fingertips, with barely any barrier or space to stop yourself. In his books *Deep Work* and *Digital Minimalism*, Cal Newport discusses various strategies that can help us regain control over our lives from digital distractions. These include quitting social media, spending time alone, and minimizing non-essential time spent on devices. This results in a life of more focus and work of more depth—rewards we can all appreciate even without a spiritual goal.

Spending quiet time in solitude is not encouraged in modern culture, and those with such tendencies are called antisocial or even branded as misanthropes. This cultural preference for socially engaging personalities is a relatively recent phenomenon, and is traceable to the early 1900s when the “extrovert ideal” came to prominence.<sup>134</sup> As Susan Cain explains in *Quiet*, this coincided with the rise of industrial America, which resulted in entertaining personalities being celebrated over those with more traditional traits like discipline and honor.

The rapid urbanization and mass migration to cities meant that people were interacting with strangers more often than in times past, and this increased the importance of making a good first impression. This is evident from the most influential self-help book of that time—Dale Carnegie’s *How To Win Friends And Influence People*. The rise of mass marketing and celebrity culture with its movie stars and performers also solidified this cultural shift. With the popularity of social media applications like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, this cultural bias favoring extroversion is arguably even stronger today.

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<sup>132</sup> The Buddha is addressing heterosexual male monks here.

<sup>133</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 10:72](#), p. 491

<sup>134</sup> Susan Cain. *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*, Kindle Locations 470–500

With this cultural backdrop, seeking solitude and quiet can seem counter to all social norms. Nevertheless, this is a trait found in some of history’s greatest philosophers, inventors, and scientists, with introverts disproportionately being the pioneers in fields of research and creativity. It is no surprise then that young technology entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley today are experimenting with “dopamine fasts”—time spent completely unplugged from digital devices and any sensory stimulation—to reset their mental faculties and find more clarity and focus.<sup>135</sup> While this trend is mostly a fad, transitioning away from the digital world in a more permanent way should be seriously considered by those who want to prioritize their mental development over all else. The internet, while an amazing tool to access information, is not something that we need constantly.

The Buddha himself explicitly dissuaded his followers from spending too much time in the company of others (“...without giving up these... qualities you can’t meditate...: relishing ... talk ... and company.”<sup>136</sup>) Instead he pushed them to find solitude to develop their meditation practice (“Over there are the roots of trees; over there, empty dwellings.”<sup>137</sup>)

After learning about the benefits of meditation and the possibility of mastering the mind, we tend to have a lot of motivation in the beginning. However, sitting in meditation can be an arduous affair, and experiencing niggles, itches, and other pains can easily make you dread your next session. This is where old-school virtues like patience and endurance come in handy. Withstanding these discomforts is necessary to develop further, because eventually a meditator has to be able to spend significant periods of time in the same posture to work on his or her powers of focus:

*“A monk endowed with these five qualities is incapable of entering & remaining in right concentration. Which five? He cannot withstand [the impact of] sights ... sounds ... aromas ... tastes ... tactile sensations.”<sup>138</sup>*

Focusing on developing more patience forces us to confront our tendency to seek constant stimulation, which is how we have unwittingly trained ourselves in this era of instant gratification. Meditation can involve focusing on a specific object for long periods of time without expectations of a particular result. This makes it more difficult than other endeavors like achieving a fitness milestone or career goal, where the results of our actions are more easily discernible over time.

It is quite possible that you might not notice any improvement in your meditation practice for weeks or even months, even though slow progress is actually being made. This is not to say that all progress in meditation is gradual—rapid shifts in perspective are quite possible and actually bound to happen eventually. It is just that

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<sup>135</sup> Chris Stokel-Walker. *Is ‘dopamine fasting’ Silicon Valley’s new productivity fad?*, BBC, 16 Nov 2019

<sup>136</sup> Bhikkhu Sujato. *Āṅguttaranikāya: Numbered Discourses, AN 6:117*, pp. 514–5

<sup>137</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 10*, p. 102

<sup>138</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. *The Wings to Awakening: An Anthology from the Pāli Canon, AN 5:113*, p. 274



sudden progress happens organically through consistent practice and should not be expected or planned for.

### **Beginner Level:**

Limiting sensual entertainment to assigned times of the day

Time in seclusion once a month, preferably in a natural or monastic environment

### **Intermediate Level:**

No sensual entertainment (TV shows, movies, games, music, etc.) for one day a month

Time in seclusion once a week, preferably in a natural or monastic environment

### **Advanced Level:**

No sensual entertainment (TV shows, movies, games, music, etc.)

No digital media usage unless for urgent or mandatory reasons

Significant time in seclusion, preferably in a natural or monastic environment

## **Mindfulness**

*“All phenomena have mindfulness as their governing principle.”<sup>139</sup>*

Mindfulness. The word has become a part of our cultural lexicon in the past few decades. With clear scientific evidence of its benefits, even those who have no interest in spirituality have become interested in putting it into practice. But what exactly does it mean? Dan Harris, a journalist turned mindfulness-evangelist, defines it in a way that is commonly accepted:

*In a nutshell, mindfulness is the ability to recognize what is happening in your mind right now ... without getting carried away by it. ... [it] is ... a way to view the contents of our mind with nonjudgmental remove.<sup>140</sup>*

That mindfulness involves this “bare attention”—a nonjudgmental awareness of the mind—was an interpretation popularized by the influential 20<sup>th</sup> century monk Ñāṇaponika Thera. He describes it in his seminal meditation text *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*:

*Mindfulness (sati) applies pre-eminently to the attitude and practice of Bare Attention in a purely receptive state of mind.*

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<sup>139</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 10:58](#), p. 480

<sup>140</sup> Dan Harris. *10% Happier: How I Tamed the Voice in My Head, Reduced Stress Without Losing My Edge, and Found Self-Help That Actually Works*, Kindle Locations 1728

...

*Bare attention is the clear and single-minded awareness of what actually happens to us and in us, at the successive moments of perception.*<sup>141</sup>

Ñāṇaponika based this on his experience following a meditation method taught by the esteemed Burmese monk Mahasi Sayadaw, who himself based it on his understanding of the most well-known Buddhist text on mindfulness—the discourse on Establishing Mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna sutta* in Pāli).

*Sati*—the Pāli word translated as mindfulness—is defined in the early Buddhist texts simply as the ability to remember what was said in the past.<sup>142</sup> As a function of memory, *sati* enables the practitioner to keep the meditation theme in mind, remembering to come back to it when the mind loses its focus. While this definition explains the meaning of *sati* in isolation, a closer reading of the *satipaṭṭhāna sutta* unearths some subtle contexts that are missed.

One of them is that the discourse defines what the Buddha calls right mindfulness (*sammā sati*) in terms of four specific frames of reference: the body (*kāya*), feelings (*vedanā*), mind (*citta*), and mental qualities (*dhamma*). Being aware of what is happening in your mind in the present moment is therefore only one of the recommended frames of reference.

That there is more to mindfulness is also made clear right at the beginning of the discourse, where two additional mental factors are mentioned as being a part of establishing mindfulness—alertness (*sampajañña*, sometimes translated as clear comprehension), and ardency (*ātāppa*).<sup>143</sup> This is less well known because their definitions are found elsewhere in the early texts:

*“And how is a monk alert? There is the case where feelings are known to the monk as they arise, known as they persist, known as they subside. Thoughts are known to him as they arise, known as they persist, known as they subside. Perceptions are known to him as they arise, known as they persist, known as they subside.”*<sup>144</sup>

*And how is one ardent? There is the case where a monk, (thinking,) ‘Unarisen evil, unskillful qualities arising in me would lead to what is unbeneficial,’ arouses ardency. (Thinking,) ‘Arisen evil, unskillful qualities not being abandoned in me...’ ... ‘Unarisen skillful qualities not arising in me ...’ ... ‘Arisen skillful qualities ceasing in me would lead to what is unbeneficial,’ he arouses ardency.*<sup>145</sup>

Of these qualities, nonjudgmental awareness—the way mindfulness is commonly defined—arguably covers the qualities of mindfulness and alertness (*sati sampajañña*).

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<sup>141</sup> Ñāṇaponika Thera. *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation: A Handbook of Mental Training based on the Buddha’s Way of Mindfulness*, pp. 30–1

<sup>142</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 53](#), p. 366

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.* [MN 10](#), p. 55

<sup>144</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 47:35](#), p. 461

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.* [SN 16:2](#), p. 179

For instance, remembering to pay attention to the breath corresponds to being mindful, while being aware of any thoughts or emotions that come and go corresponds to alertness.

A helpful way to look at these different mental qualities is to consider mindfulness as having three levels of progression. At the first level, the goal is solely to pay attention to your meditation object. When you become aware that your mind has wandered, you bring it back to your theme. At the second level of skill, you remain mindful, but are also alert to passing thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. You might still get lost in thought and lose mindfulness, but when reverting to your meditation object, you take note of what caused you to lose your bearings.

As you get more skilled, you begin to notice that certain phenomena are more distracting and stress-inducing than others. This is the root driver in developing the quality of ardency—the recognition that there are skillful and unskillful “guests” in the mind, and it is worth putting the effort to abandon the unskillful and develop the skillful.

Even in the face of it, to suggest that mindfulness just involves nonjudgmental awareness proves to fall short under basic scrutiny. Acknowledging that it is worth letting go of distracting thoughts and refocusing your attention on the meditation object shows that a certain level of sound judgment is essential to practice. Therefore, developing ardency is clearly antithetical to merely paying “bare attention” to your experience.

What does distinguishing the “skillfulness” of different mental qualities mean in the context of meditation? The texts define the knowledge of what is skillful as equivalent to possessing what is called right view (*sammā diṭṭhi*)—“When a disciple ... discerns what is unskillful, ... the root of what is unskillful, ... what is skillful, and ... the root of what is skillful, it is to that extent that he is a person of right view.”<sup>146</sup> And elsewhere, right view is defined in terms of applying the four noble truths—the core tenet in Buddhism—to your experience:

*Knowledge with regard to stress [suffering], knowledge with regard to the origination of stress, knowledge with regard to the stopping of stress, knowledge with regard to the way of practice leading to the stopping of stress: This, monks, is called right view.*<sup>147</sup>

This is the third level of mindfulness where discernment (*paññā*, commonly translated as wisdom) comes into play. Due to its ethical implications, it is generally deemphasized in Western Buddhist circles. Most meditators want to learn how to stay calm and focused, but not that some of their day-to-day actions might be unskillful and be causing them unnecessary stress and suffering. While it is understandable why broaching this topic would be unpopular, to misrepresent the

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<sup>146</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 9](#), pp. 37–8

<sup>147</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Samyutta Nikāya, SN 45:8](#), p. 418

ancient teaching of mindfulness because of this is a disservice to those with genuine interest in spiritual growth.

The four noble truths are intimately tied with ardency—an aspect of mindfulness—and so it is impossible to separate mindfulness from the core Buddhist teachings without diluting its meaning significantly. The popular definition of mindfulness is therefore an oversimplification of what it originally meant.

It might seem overly critical or nitpicky to come to that conclusion, since practicing mindfulness even in its limited scope is still clearly beneficial. What does it matter that how it is understood now is different from how it was defined in a text written over two millennia ago?

On the face of it, there is no issue. Even if only the basic level of mindfulness is put into practice, there is no reason to discourage it. The issue lies in how this dilution of the teaching leads to mass ignorance of its depth and possibilities.

### **Beginner Level:**

15-30 minutes of meditation a day

Attention to thoughts throughout the day

### **Intermediate Level:**

One hour of meditation a day (sitting and/or walking)

Attention to the quality of thoughts throughout the day

### **Advanced Level:**

A minimum of two hours of meditation a day (sitting and walking)

Developing skillful thoughts and abandoning unskillful thoughts throughout the day

## **Stillness and Composure**

*“All phenomena have concentration as their presiding state.”<sup>148</sup>*

The term “flow” is popular in the world of self-development today. It originates from the work of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who studied people who experienced focused and pleasant states of concentration while engaging in a sport, art, music, or even activities that might be considered work. He defines this experience of being “in the zone” as being in “*the boundary between boredom and anxiety.*”<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 10:58](#), p. 480

<sup>149</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Kindle Location 1527

There is some similarity between flow and the experience of *samādhi*—a state of composed concentration defined in the Buddhist texts. *Samādhi* requires abandoning the hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*), and two of those—sloth & torpor (*thinamiddha*) and restlessness & worry (*uddhaccakukkucca*)—correlate with boredom and anxiety in the definition of flow. Where flow and *samādhi* diverge are in the themes that are attended to, and the intensity of the experience. For concentration to be part of the Buddhist path, it is attained by developing the four establishments of mindfulness: body, feelings, mind, or mental qualities. Achieving a pleasurable experience of flow while playing tennis, for example, is not considered conducive to that path because the frame of reference is outside of these themes.

A popular misconception of mindfulness is that it is a wholly separate exercise from concentration.<sup>150</sup> This is probably due to the Burmese insight meditation roots of the mindfulness movement, even though this interpretation is not supported in the early Buddhist texts, where the establishments of mindfulness are called the themes for developing concentration.<sup>151</sup>

This false distinction comes from conflating what mindfulness entails, to what insight—*vipassanā* in Pāli—involves. Insight meditation is typically portrayed as the core of Buddhist meditation, with tranquility (*samatha*, which leads to *samādhi*) being an optional and potentially dangerous alternative path. Why is tranquility practice maligned in this way? One reasoning is that the bliss that you might experience by pursuing it can lead to addiction and stall your progress in the path.

However, this idea that concentration can be a distraction is contradicted in the early texts, where it is portrayed as an essential aspect of the path. The eighth factor of the noble eightfold path—right concentration (*sammā samādhi*)—is always defined as the four *jhānas*: experiences of stillness and composure that involve heightened awareness and feelings of joy.<sup>152</sup> Pursuing such pleasure from concentration is necessary, since a mind addicted to sensual pleasures needs an alternative sustenance:

*“Even though a disciple of the noble ones has clearly seen as it has come to be with right discernment that sensuality is of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks, still—if he has not attained a rapture [joy] & pleasure apart from sensuality, apart from unskillful qualities, or something more peaceful than that [first jhāna or higher]—he can be tempted by sensuality.”<sup>153</sup>*

This makes the whole path seem more feasible and illustrates its gradual nature. If we are to give up our sensual addictions without any alternative, it is unlikely to be a transition that lasts. By using the pleasure derived from *jhāna*, it becomes possible to give up sensual desire (*kāma rāga*) altogether and attain the third stage of

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<sup>150</sup> Robert Wright. *Why Buddhism Is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment*, Kindle Locations 792

<sup>151</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 44](#), p. 267

<sup>152</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 3: An Anthology from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, SN 45:8](#), p. 419

<sup>153</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 14](#), p. 82

awakening (*anāgāmi*). At that stage, desire for *jhāna* (passion for form—*rūpa rāga*, and passion for the formless—*arūpa rāga*) remains,<sup>154</sup> which is let go at full awakening (*arahant*).<sup>155</sup>

All this does not mean insight meditation can be ignored. Concentration practice strengthens and focuses the mind, laying a solid foundation that allows insight at a deeper level. The mind can then be focused even further. In this way, insight and concentration practices complement each other in freeing the mind.<sup>156</sup>

Attaining concentration at the level of *jhāna* is no easy task, however, and it can be viewed as the culmination of developing all aspects of the path. That said, it is important to note that a momentary experience of *jhāna* is not the same as attaining awakening. The goal is the mastery of the process of reaching *jhāna* and sustaining that state as required to use as a basis for insight, and eventually weaning yourself off of sensual pleasures altogether.<sup>157</sup>

**Beginner Level:**

Moments of calm and/or bliss during meditation

**Intermediate Level:**

Moderate periods of calm and/or bliss during meditation

**Advanced Level:**

Extended periods of calm and/or bliss during meditation

Possible experience of *jhāna*

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<sup>154</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 10:13](#), pp. 461-2

<sup>155</sup> Ibid. [AN 3:88](#), p. 90

<sup>156</sup> Ibid. [AN 4:94](#), p. 147

<sup>157</sup> For an in-depth look at the relevance of *jhāna* to the Buddhist path and its misinterpretations, check [Clearing the Way: Resolving Misinterpretations of the Dhamma](#), Meditation: Theories, Techniques, and Traditions, pp. 51-4

# Path of Practice: Discernment and Wisdom

## Study and Discussion

*“He has learned much, remembers what he has learned, and consolidates what he has learned. Such teachings [that] are good in the beginning, ... the middle, and ... the end, with the right meaning and phrasing... he has learned much of, remembered, recited verbally, investigated with the mind and penetrated well by view.”<sup>158</sup>*

Given that there is an ocean of knowledge on different aspects of the path available to those who seek it, there is no reason to make the practice more difficult than it needs to be by attempting to reinvent the wheel. Learning from other practitioners can inform us in many ways. There is also a vast body of ancient texts that can be used as a practical guide.

It is also important to be aware of the progressive levels of the path. This is not easy to do, however, since the discernment required to understand what is wise is not at an advanced level by definition:

*“It’s through discussion that a person’s discernment may be known, and then only after a long period, not a short period; by one who is attentive, not by one who is inattentive; by one who is discerning, not by one who is not discerning.”<sup>159</sup>*

Because of this, it is dangerous to be intransigent in your opinions of who you deem wise. Once you learn all that a chosen guide has to offer, it will naturally become apparent if there are others with more to offer. This means that you should expect to transition from one spiritual teacher to another over time.

As we have seen, the early Buddhist texts point to a gradual path of practice that guides us to a goal more worthwhile than all other potential pursuits. Since it also has detailed instructions on how to go about getting there, it makes sense to study it as a source for advice. Of course, this does not mean you have to abandon any other resources for self-improvement that you find beneficial.

Over time and practice, you will gain mastery of certain aspects of the path. This might enable you to become a guide to others yourself, which can be an enriching

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<sup>158</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi and Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli. *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*, MN 53, p. 462-3

<sup>159</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 4:192](#), p. 218

and fulfilling experience. In Buddhism, this is considered the highest form of generosity (“a gift of dhamma conquers all gifts.”)<sup>160</sup>

Why is being a guide in the spiritual path regarded so highly? Because any other gift to another only gives temporary relief in their insatiable pursuit of happiness, while the right teaching resolves issues at the root level—resulting in a peace of mind that lasts.

### **Beginner Level:**

Read a non-fiction book related to self-development or spirituality every month  
Find a guide to discuss and clarify unfamiliar aspects of the practice

### **Intermediate Level:**

Read a discourse from the Pāli Canon every month and reflect on its meaning  
Discuss aspects of the practice with a friend or guide every week

### **Advanced Level:**

Read a discourse from the Pāli Canon every week and reflect on its meaning  
Guide another on aspects of the practice familiar to you through discussion

## **Not-self**

*“The perception of not-self ... when developed & pursued, is ... of great benefit. It gains a footing in the deathless, has the deathless as its final end.”<sup>161</sup>*

One of the insights gained through practice is that thoughts are transitory, and it is a conscious decision whether you take them to be a part of who you are, or what you are made of. By not identifying with them, you gain more composure, focus, and control over your lived experience.

This is a perfectly valid insight, but some also claim that since thoughts are what give us our identity, what we consider to be the “self” is itself an illusion.<sup>162</sup> The author Sam Harris, detailing his meditation experiences in *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality without Religion*, claims that the goal of the spiritual path is this realization:

*The fundamental insight of most Eastern schools of spirituality ... is that while thinking is a practical necessity, the failure to recognize thoughts as thoughts, moment after moment, is what gives each of us the feeling that we call “I”...<sup>163</sup>*

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<sup>160</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. [Dhammapada: A Translation. Dhp 354](#), p. 106

<sup>161</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 7:46](#), p. 342

<sup>162</sup> Sam Harris. *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, Kindle Locations 3308–10

<sup>163</sup> Sam Harris. *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, Kindle Locations 3381–3



This idea is quite popular among modern Buddhist teachers, and understanding that the “ego” does not actually exist is often portrayed as equivalent to achieving spiritual awakening. This is supposedly the way to understand the Buddhist teaching of *anattā*—commonly translated as “no-self.” Adherents even use neuroscientific “proof” for this interpretation, assuming that *anattā* only applies to the view of a permanent and unchanging self.<sup>164</sup>

When we look for this interpretation of *anattā* in the early texts of the Pāli Canon, however, it is nowhere to be found.<sup>165</sup> Not-self is instead taught as a practice that depersonalizes your experience, with the express aim of not identifying with the body, feelings and emotions, perceptions, thoughts, and sensory consciousness as who or what you are.<sup>166</sup> It is not an answer to the question “do I have a self?” which is actually a thought trap that adopts a view of self-existence even when the conclusion is in the negative.

This lack of a no-self claim is not surprising considering how we actively create our self-conception in experience. This phenomenological self—called I-making and my-making in the Canon and only completely eradicated at full awakening—is ignored even in traditional commentarial Buddhism in its zeal to disavow the existence of a self.<sup>167</sup> This has led some—like the philosopher Evan Thompson in *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*<sup>168</sup>—to conclude that the teaching of *anattā* is incoherent, due to incorrectly assuming that the popular traditional interpretation is in keeping with the early texts.

This is not to say that there is no awareness of the teaching to depersonalize your experience in the popular Buddhist narrative. The idea that thoughts and emotions should not be identified as who you are is even popular in the self-help world. For instance, the popular spiritual guru Eckhart Tolle discusses the benefits of this practice in his best-seller *The Power of Now*.<sup>169</sup>

The issue, however, is the limitation of the scope of *anattā*. Merely realizing that thoughts and emotions are not who you are is equated to achieving spiritual awakening (“*Enlightenment means rising above thought...*”).<sup>170</sup> However, the early texts also state that experientially understanding that the body, perceptions and consciousness are not-self is also required to attain even the first stage of awakening.

It is likely that those who adhere to the idea that *anattā* means that there is no “I” are misinterpreting a personal experience where they successfully perceived thoughts as not-self to be the same as achieving the ultimate goal. By doing this they

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<sup>164</sup> Evan Thompson. *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*, 2020, Kindle Locations 1254-62

<sup>165</sup> Alexander Wynne. *The ātman and its negation: A conceptual and chronological analysis of early Buddhist thought*, Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, Volume 33, 2010, pp. 105-6

<sup>166</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 109](#), pp. 488-9

<sup>167</sup> For an in-depth look at the Buddhist not-self teaching and its popular misinterpretations, check [Clearing the Way: Resolving Misinterpretations of the Dhamma](#), Understanding Not-Self, pp. 21-32

<sup>168</sup> Evan Thompson. *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*, 2020, Kindle Locations 1342-87

<sup>169</sup> Eckhart Tolle. *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*, Kindle Locations 297-8

<sup>170</sup> Ibid. Kindle Location 352

are ignoring how that perception itself is inconstant, and therefore not-self as well. Since perceptions by nature are not unchanging, the supposed realization that there is no self cannot be the same as Nirvana.

As to why considering the body as not-self is ignored, a plausible reason is that the typical practitioner adheres to the physicalist view, even if they do not consciously acknowledge it. As we delved into the issues with this assumption in detail in previous chapters, I will avoid repeating myself here. What is important to note is that assuming that you are annihilated at death precludes you from practically applying the idea that the body is not yours—since it seems to be the one thing that actually is. Therefore, opening yourself up to the possibility of life after death—or at least acknowledging your lack of knowledge of what happens, enables you to apply the teaching of not-self in its entirety.

Due to this aforementioned popular bias, Buddhist practices that help you understand the body's nature to decay and the unworthiness of identifying with it are largely avoided as unpleasant or altogether unnecessary. These practices include reflecting on death, visualizing the body as its constituent parts, examining it in terms of properties like solidity and fluidity, and visually analyzing its disintegration as a corpse.<sup>171</sup>

It may come as a surprise that these practices are even considered to be meditation. After all, isn't the goal of mindfulness meditation "seeing things as they are?" Visualizing your body in various stages of decay might seem like imagining what is not actually there instead. It is clearly quite far from nonjudgmental awareness.

What is important to understand here is that these methods are *perception* practices, where we intentionally view our bodies in such a way as to clearly understand its nature. In other words, we use these perceptions as a means to gain insight, knowing that they are tools used to counter the delusion that the body will indefinitely be with us.<sup>172</sup> Even though you may already know what happens to the body intellectually, the level of insight required to separate your mind from the body—literally speaking—is experiential, and only achievable through meditation.

For those looking to pursue the path without restriction, it is worth exploring such practices in more depth. Training in these techniques allows you to relate to the body with more clarity, while mastering them is said to direct the mind to a freedom beyond death itself.<sup>173</sup>

### **Beginner Level:**

Depersonalize repetitive and stress-inducing thoughts and emotions

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<sup>171</sup> Thānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 119](#), pp. 519–20

<sup>172</sup> For an in-depth look at body contemplation practices and how they related to the Buddhist path, check [Clearing the Way: Resolving Misinterpretations of the Dhamma](#), Meditation: Theories, Techniques, and Traditions, pp. 55–8

<sup>173</sup> Bhikkhu Sujato. [Aṅguttaranikāya: Numbered Discourses, AN 1:627](#), p. 61

### **Intermediate Level:**

Depersonalize greed-inducing thoughts and emotions  
Daily reflection on death

### **Advanced Level:**

Depersonalize the body  
Experiment with body contemplation techniques  
Depersonalize perceptions of self and not-self

## **Action and Causality**

*“A fool is characterized by his actions. A wise person is characterized by his actions. It is through the activities of one’s life that one’s discernment shines.”<sup>174</sup>*

When establishing mindfulness in the present moment, the advice typically given is to put aside any emotions or thoughts that arise, and redirect your attention to the meditation object. To do this with wisdom, we are told to recognize the impermanent nature of phenomena.

While this standard recommendation has its merits, it is missing a considerable part of the story. It is implied here that practicing wisdom merely involves acknowledging the inconstancy of phenomena, without further investigation into why a certain thought or emotion arose in the first place. In fact, this might be actively discouraged due to the possibility of thinking too much—after all, isn’t meditation all about not thinking? Or so we’re told.

For truly liberating insight, however, it is not enough to just be aware of things coming and going. It is also necessary to see the connections between them. We have to investigate *why* they originated, passed away, and how much our own actions influenced this process.<sup>175</sup>

This is where the teaching of karma comes into play. Often misunderstood as some form of fatalism, karma in the early Buddhist texts is defined as mental intentions and their repercussions. Paying attention to the process by which karma operates allows you to understand and thereby control the inner workings of the mind.

For instance, you will observe how the thoughts that arise in the mind also end up shaping it, affecting your words and deeds. The mind is inclined to behave in accordance with what it frequently thinks and reflects upon.<sup>176</sup> To be able to see such connections, it is important to depersonalize thoughts. If you were to identify with

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<sup>174</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 3:2](#), p. 29

<sup>175</sup> Ibid. [AN 4:41](#), p. 154-5

<sup>176</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 2: An Anthology from the Majjhima Nikāya, MN 19](#), p. 119

them and get involved, the perspective required to see the conditional process at work is lost.

With increased sensitivity to the subtleties of the mind, you begin to see how the quality of your intentions connects to the quality of your experience more clearly. This is where you understand the pattern underlying all actions and results—called dependent co-arising (*paticcasamuppāda*)—a significant step in the path.<sup>177</sup> Through a combination of calm and clarity, you experientially see the process by which you create stress and suffering for yourself through your own actions.

Say you momentarily “see” a mental image of some junk food, immediately recognizing its taste and the associated pleasure in consuming it. If you are aware that going along with this perception is not in your best interest, you can avoid building it up by choosing to not pay attention to the mental image. By doing this with mindfulness and an understanding of karma, you are avoiding the stress involved with taking up such a desire, and so becoming less of a slave of the mind. With practice, and the sustenance provided by the alternative mental fuel source of meditation, you become the master of the mind instead.

By realizing the regularity of how the skillfulness of an action affects its results, we are able to make better trade-offs. This involves foregoing actions that are pleasant in the short-term but are not in your long-term best interest, and adopting actions that are unpleasant now but lead to your well-being in the future:

*As for the course of action that is unpleasant to do but that, when done, leads to what is profitable, ... a wise person reflects, ‘Even though this course of action is unpleasant to do, still when it is done it leads to what is profitable.’ ...*

*“As for the course of action that is pleasant to do but that, when done, leads to what is unprofitable, ... a wise person reflects, ‘Even though this course of action is pleasant to do, still when it is done it leads to what is unprofitable.’<sup>178</sup>*

The ability to make such trade-offs with understanding is a sign of progress in the path. It is the mark of a life of wisdom.

### **Beginner Level:**

Recognize how your words and deeds are conditioned by your thoughts

### **Intermediate Level:**

Recognize how your thoughts are conditioned by your intentions

### **Advanced Level:**

Recognize how your intentions are conditioned by perceptions you attend to

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<sup>177</sup> For an in-depth theoretical exploration of dependent co-arising based on the early Buddhist texts, check [Clearing the Way: Resolving Misinterpretations of the Dhamma](#), Decoding Dependent Co-arising, pp. 33-50

<sup>178</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. [Handful of Leaves, Volume 4: An Anthology from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, AN 4:115](#), p. 186-7

Notice how desire simultaneously involves stress  
Understand how the quality of an action determines its results

# Appendix

## Happiness, Development, Irreligion, and Suicide

Data

Country	HDI	Happiness	Suicides per 100,000	Irreligion (%)	Religious Freedom
Switzerland	0.962	7.24	9.8	22.8	93.38
Norway	0.961	7.315	9.9	11.6	93.38
Iceland	0.959	7.53	11.2	3.9	94.24
Australia	0.951	7.095	11.3	28.6	98.41
Denmark	0.948	7.586	7.6	12	87.75
Sweden	0.947	7.395	12.4	29	93.38
Ireland	0.945	6.911	8.9	7.9	92.38
Germany	0.942	6.892	8.3	26.3	93.8
Netherlands	0.941	7.403	9.3	44.3	93.38
Finland	0.94	7.804	13.4	20.8	92.38
Singapore	0.939	6.587	9.7	16.5	65.22
Belgium	0.937	6.859	13.9	31	94.25
New Zealand	0.937	7.123	10.3	39.6	97.13
Canada	0.936	6.961	10.3	24.5	99.57
Luxembourg	0.93	7.228	8.6	26.7	93.38
United Kingdom	0.929	6.796	6.9	31.2	93.8
South Korea	0.925	5.951	21.2	46.6	91.5
Japan	0.925	6.129	12.2	60	92.5
United States	0.921	6.894	14.5	18.6	97.12
Israel	0.919	7.473	5.2	3.2	77.38
Malta	0.918	6.3	5.3	2.5	91.38
Austria	0.916	7.097	10.4	14.5	88.63
Spain	0.905	6.436	5.3	21	93.38
France	0.903	6.661	9.7	31.9	83.7
Cyprus	0.896	6.13	3.2	1.9	75.5
Italy	0.895	6.405	4.3	13.4	93.8
Czechia	0.889	6.845	9.5	78.4	89.63

Greece	0.887	5.931	3.6	6.1	84.88
Portugal	0.866	5.968	7.2	8.6	93.38
Chile	0.855	6.334	8	9.7	90.5
Argentina	0.842	6.024	8.1	12.1	88.17
Uruguay	0.809	6.494	18.8	41.5	97.13
Costa Rica	0.809	6.609	7.6	8	74.5
Panama	0.805	6.265	2.9	5	94.25
Malaysia	0.803	6.012	5.8	0	67.97
Mauritius	0.802	5.902	8.8	0	96.13
Thailand	0.8	5.843	8	0	40.69
Sri Lanka	0.782	4.442	12.9	0	60.76
Dominican Republic	0.767	5.569	5.1	10.9	95.13
Peru	0.762	5.526	2.7	3.1	90.5
Mexico	0.758	6.33	5.3	5.7	82.25
Brazil	0.754	6.125	6.4	8.4	86.29
Colombia	0.752	5.63	3.7	6.7	92.21
Ecuador	0.74	5.559	7.7	5.6	76.34
Mongolia	0.739	5.84	18	36.5	77.38
Tunisia	0.731	4.497	3.2	0	70.29
Paraguay	0.717	5.738	6.2	1.1	84.88
Jamaica	0.709	5.703	2.3	17	96.13
Lebanon	0.706	2.392	2.8	0	76.5
Philippines	0.699	5.523	2.5	0	65.96
Botswana	0.693	3.435	20.2	17.5	98
Bolivia	0.692	5.684	6.8	4.1	86.75
Venezuela	0.691	5.211	2.1	9.7	71.56
El Salvador	0.675	6.122	6.1	11.2	83.88
Nicaragua	0.667	6.259	4.7	13	70.75
India	0.633	4.036	12.9	0	72.59
Ghana	0.632	4.605	10.5	3.8	95.13
Guatemala	0.627	6.15	6.2	3.9	83.88
Honduras	0.621	6.023	2.6	10.5	83.88
Zimbabwe	0.593	3.204	23.6	7.6	73.1
Cameroon	0.576	4.973	15.9	5.2	77.38
Kenya	0.575	4.487	11	2.3	77.5
Ivory Coast	0.55	5.053	15.7	8.1	91.38
Nigeria	0.535	4.981	6.9	0	67.54

Uganda	0.525	4.432	10.4	0	76.5
Malawi	0.512	3.495	10.6	2	86
Senegal	0.511	4.855	11	0	96.13
Madagascar	0.501	4.019	9.2	7.3	77.38
Gambia	0.5	4.279	9.6	0	87.3
Liberia	0.481	4.042	7.4	1.4	96.13
Guinea	0.465	5.072	12.3	1.8	76.38
Mali	0.428	4.198	8	0	78.25

It should be noted that the numbers of the irreligious are probably underreported even in countries with adequate religious freedom. This is because some might answer negatively to a direct question about their lack of faith due to identifying with the community, but still readily admit that religion does not play a significant role in their lives.

## Exclusions

The analysis is limited to countries with available data by design. Only countries with at least an acceptable level of religious freedom are considered. This is because people in countries with less freedom might not openly admit to a lack of belief due to possible negative societal or governmental repercussions. This excludes many intolerant Islamic states:

<b>Country</b>	<b>HDI</b>	<b>Happiness</b>	<b>Suicides per 100,000</b>	<b>Irreligion (%)</b>	<b>Religious Freedom</b>
Mauritania	0.556	4.724	5.5	0	3
Iran	0.774	4.876	5.1	0	7.8
Saudi Arabia	0.875	6.463	5.4	0	8.53
United Arab Emirates	0.911	6.571	5.2	1.1	8.53
Iraq	0.686	4.941	4.7	0	9.63
Afghanistan	0.478	1.859	6	0	12.38
Egypt	0.731	4.17	3.4	0	12.57
Algeria	0.745	5.329	2.6	1.8	13.38
Bahrain	0.875	6.173	7.2	2	15
Pakistan	0.544	4.555	9.8	0	15.31
Indonesia	0.705	5.277	2.6	0	20.51
Comoros	0.558	3.545	8.5	0	21.75
Morocco	0.683	4.903	7.3	0	29.46
Jordan	0.72	4.12	2	0	29.6



Bangladesh	0.661	4.282	3.9	0	31.18
Turkey	0.838	4.614	2.3	1.2	31.32
Vietnam	0.703	5.763	7.2	29.9	37.66
China	0.768	5.818	6.7	51.8	38.8
Kazakhstan	0.811	6.144	18.1	4	38.82

I have also excluded current or former communist countries (including post-Soviet) to avoid skewing the analysis. This is because the Marxist ideology involved a physicalist worldview, which encouraged atheism and resulted in religious persecution. These countries exhibit significantly higher suicide rates than expected (averaging 10.9) given their development levels. This supports my thesis of its connection to irreligiosity, but muddles the analysis when compared with nations without such a history. Religion might be “the opiate of the masses”—to paraphrase Karl Marx himself—but for some, there seems to be no alternative to the solace it provides:

Country	HDI	Happiness	Suicides per 100,000	Irreligion (%)	Religious Freedom
Mozambique	0.446	4.954	23.2	17.3	77.38
Russia	0.822	5.661	21.6	15.2	46.32
Lithuania	0.875	6.763	20.2	9.8	93.38
Ukraine	0.773	5.071	17.7	12.5	73.1
Montenegro	0.832	5.722	16.2	3.1	92.38
Latvia	0.863	6.213	16.1	45.3	93.38
Slovenia	0.918	6.65	14	18.8	92.38
Moldova	0.767	5.819	12.2	1.3	76.38
Estonia	0.89	6.455	12	60.2	93.66
Hungary	0.846	6.041	11.8	20.3	76.34
Croatia	0.858	6.125	11	5.1	92.38
Nepal	0.602	5.36	9.8	0	62.38
Ethiopia	0.498	4.091	9.5	0	69.11
Poland	0.876	6.26	9.3	7.3	75.5
Slovakia	0.848	6.469	9.3	15.8	86.75
Kyrgyzstan	0.692	5.825	8.3	0	42.88
Uzbekistan	0.727	6.014	8.3	0	44.15
Serbia	0.802	6.144	7.9	3.3	75.5
Georgia	0.802	5.109	7.7	0	76.2
Romania	0.821	6.589	7.3	0	82.13
Bulgaria	0.795	5.466	6.5	4.7	77.38
Laos	0.607	5.111	6	0	67

Cambodia	0.593	4.393	5.5	0	53.97
Tajikistan	0.685	5.33	5.3	1.5	43.63
Albania	0.796	5.277	3.7	0	92.38
Armenia	0.759	5.342	2.7	1.3	77.79

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[Human Development Report 2021/22](#)

United Nations Development Programme. pp. 299–302

### Happiness

[World Happiness Report 2023](#)

Editors: John Helliwell, Richard Layard, Jeffrey D. Sachs, Jan-Emmanuel De Neve, Lara B. Aknin, Shun Wang; and Sharon Paculor

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[“Suicide rates Data by country”](#)

World Health Organization, 2019

Rates are age-adjusted to reflect the rate that would have existed if all populations under study had the same age distribution as a “standard” population.

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[Global Religious Landscape - Pew Research Center](#)

[Mapped: The world's most \(and least\) religious countries - Telegraph.co.uk](#)

[Religiosity Highest in World's Poorest Nations - Gallup.com](#)

[Religious Composition by Country \(2020\) - Pew Research Center](#)

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[World Index of Moral Freedom](#)

Definition: *How free is the practice of any religion or none, and how religious controlled is the country's current government, or the state as such.*

Gloria Álvarez, Yasuhiro Kotera & Juan Pina

# Spiritual Tradition Practices Comparison

## Methodology

If a spiritual tradition explicitly recommends a certain practice, the corresponding cell is colored dark gray, representing a 100% score (numbers not shown for clearer presentation).  
If a practice is implied to be part of the tradition, or only followed partially, the corresponding cell is colored light gray, representing a 50% score.  
If a practice is not recommended in the tradition, the corresponding cell is colored white, representing a 0% score.  
A spiritual tradition's score for each category (virtue, concentration, or discernment) is a simple average of its scores for the corresponding practices of that category.  
The overall score for each spiritual tradition is a simple average of its scores for each category.

## Discipline and Virtue

### Generosity/Non-Theft

Explicit guideline to be generous and to avoid theft of any form for full credit  
If implied instead or only one of the practices is explicitly recommended, then partial credit

### Non-violence

Explicit guideline to renounce all forms of violence under any circumstances required for full credit  
If not a strict guideline and merely a recommendation, with exceptions to protect yourself or others, then partial credit

### Fidelity

Explicit guideline against infidelity in relationships for full credit  
If not explicit or implied, but model practitioners follow the practice regardless then partial credit

### Honesty/Brevity

Honesty is assumed as a practice when not explicit  
Brevity involves a recommendation to speak less or only speak when conversation is beneficial  
If brevity is not practiced, partial credit

### Sobriety

Involves all intoxicants (alcohol, soft and hard drugs)  
If moderation is recommended, partial credit is given

### Sensual Entertainment Renunciation

If no explicit recommendation to avoid sensual entertainments like singing, dancing, music, shows is given but implied by model practitioner behavior, full credit may be given

### Celibacy

If celibacy is recommended in traditional texts but rarely followed, only partial credit is given

### Simplicity

Explicit guideline to reduce possessions and practice being content with little required for full credit  
If not explicit and implied instead based on the ideal encouraged by the tradition, partial credit

### Fasting

Eating restrictions during a given day is sufficient for full credit. Specific periods of multi-day

fasting are not required

## Concentration and Calm

### Wakefulness

Explicit guideline to limit sleep to essential amount is required for full credit (only found in Buddhism)

### Seclusion

Explicit guideline to seek seclusion and spend time alone is required for full credit

### Mindfulness of Present/Mantra/Spiritual Figure

General category where any attention to a specific object (even if notion of God or present moment awareness) with the intention to focus the mind is given full credit

### Stillness/Singular Focus

Explicit evidence of practitioners achieving a state of concentration/stillness required for full credit

### Sense Restraint

Explicit guideline to mentally avoid themes that give rise to greed when experiencing sense objects is required for full credit (only found in Buddhism)

Recommendation to physically avoid temptation is given partial credit

### Mindfulness of Body

Explicit guideline to use theme related to body like breath or bodily sensations is required for full credit. Generally only found in Buddhism or traditions influenced by it (Ashtanga Yoga)

### Jhāna/Absorption

Absorption experiences involving a state of heightened awareness and/or rapture even if construed as a vision of a creator figure or similar are given full credit

If conflicting recommendations on the necessity of its practice are given, partial credit

## Discernment and Wisdom

### Death Reflection

Explicit recommendation to reflect on death is required for full credit

### Primacy of Mind

Explicit acknowledgment of the primacy of the mind/consciousness is required for full credit

If no such teaching is given but physicalism is rejected, partial credit

### Atheism

If there is some notion of a supernatural entity but faith is not relevant, partial credit is given

If faith in a creator entity is deemed necessary, no credit is given

### Desire as Problem

If desire is considered the root problem, full credit is given (only the case in Buddhist traditions)

If desire is acknowledged as a problem and recommendations to control it are given, partial credit

### Gradual Practice

Recommendation to follow a gradual path of practice is required for full credit

If the recommended gradual path is not sequentially given or does not completely encompass the different practices in the tradition, partial credit

### Body as Inconstant & Not-Self

Explicit recommendation to regard the body as transient and not worthy of attaching to, along with relevant perceptions to use for that purpose is required for full credit

### Thoughts/Feelings as Inconstant & Not-Self

- Explicit recommendation to regard thoughts and feelings as transient and not worthy of attaching to is required for full credit
- Perceptions as Inconstant & Not-Self
- Explicit recommendation to regard perceptions as transient and not worthy of attaching to is required for full credit. If the perceptions of self and not-self are misinterpreted as answers to the question of whether the self exists, full credit is not given
- Consciousness as Inconstant & Not-Self
- Explicit recommendation to regard consciousness as transient and not worthy of attaching to is required for full credit
- Action and Causality
- Explicit mention of realizing the causal arising and passing away of phenomena required for full credit

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