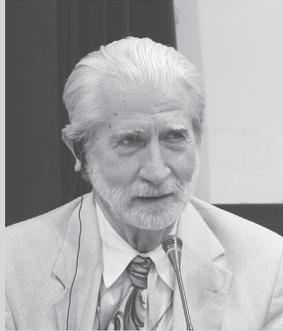


**STUDIES ON
HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM ❶**

Foundational Thoughts
人間佛教論文選要

Fo Guang Shan Institute of Humanistic Buddhism, Taiwan
and
Nan Tien Institute, Australia

Humanistic Buddhism: Responding to Contemporary Developments



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There are contemporary approaches to the use of Buddhist practices that can be considered revolutionary in terms of how we study and evaluate the tradition. Since these practices are directed toward the public domain, they are one type of “Humanistic Buddhism.” A challenge for Buddhist groups is how to respond to these developments. A similar challenge exists for the academic study of Buddhism. How can we understand and deal with the contemporary world that has emerged?

A large number of new approaches to meditation are now widely advertised and marketed. Under the term “mindfulness,” these exercises promise to develop certain powers such as relaxation, better concentration, health, and a sense of well-being. The focus is on procedures, a routine method to be followed. A “product” is brought into being as a result of effort. There is debate as to whether this is progress or abasement. If meditation, as a practice, is taught to be essential for the goal of practitioners in Buddhism, then it is difficult to hold the position that it should only be the activity of a privileged few. However, in the process of moving from the controlled environments of monastic life to the internet approach of the “mindfulness” programs for all, there are a host of questions about how successful such a transfer can be.

Today, the study of consciousness has become a major part of cognitive science and Buddhist meditation has found a home in science labs. Having made it to these sites of new technology, in some ways, meditation has been moved from being viewed as a metaphysical experience to the mainstream of science and quantitative analysis. This has given the practice a new imprimatur of respectability and perceived usefulness. Thus, in our contemporary world, the trail, by which Buddhism is making inroads into social and cultural spheres, leads not just to monasteries, shrines, temples, or religious organizations. Instead, we can see the imprint of influence taking place in universities, public schools, business headquarters, hospitals, mental health clinics, prisons, internet sites, and films. Much of the documentation of this is still limited to the internet and has not yet found its way into published scholarly volumes.

A major business example for Buddhist meditation adoption can be found with Google where the results are expected to be displayed in the workplace. As a part of the corporate structure, it is referred to as “science-backed” mindfulness that is used for “Emotional Intelligence Training.” Led by an engineer in the company Chade-Meng Tan, Google has supported the Search Inside Yourself Institute that serves the employees and is

now being offered to the general public.¹ The underlying objectives are aimed at dealing with issues such as “managing your energy.” It is now possible on the Google campus to have a Mindfulness Luncheon where participants observe silence, and on the grounds of the headquarters, there is a labyrinth built for walking meditation.²

A movement that has attracted much attention in the digital communities is the Wisdom 2.0 Conference. Hundreds of participants attend online or in person to hear messages about “optimizing your mind.” As one observer reports, the conference is a “networking opportunity with a light dressing of Buddhism.” At times, the rhetoric shows the influence of the digital world when the program teaches what is described as “Neural Self-Hacking.”³

At the corporate level, Facebook is another technology firm that is looking to Buddhist practice and values to help inform the company. Arturo Bejar, the Engineering Director, seeks ways to use mindfulness and at the same time to infuse the idea of compassion into daily business.⁴ Twitter joins the group of commercial organizations making use of mindfulness as corporate policy. Evan Williams, the co-founder of Twitter, encourages staff to make use of mindfulness techniques in order to revolutionize how business is operated.⁵

Institutions of higher education are becoming involved in mindfulness training and research. One of the best-known centers for mindfulness is at the University of Massachusetts, under the leadership of Professor Jon Kabat-Zinn. One sign of the degree of outreach is the fact that his YouTube lecture on mindfulness has attracted more than two million viewers. There are a host of similar centers at such major institutions as: University of California, San Diego; University of Pennsylvania; University of Wisconsin, Madison; Boston University, and University of California, Los Angeles.⁶ This is by no means limited to the United States Campuses in the U.K. are at the forefront of mindfulness activities. University of Manchester has drop-in workshops for students and faculty who wish to be trained in mindfulness. University of Cambridge and University of Exeter have a joint program for mindfulness in Schools. A Mindfulness Initiative by Oxford, Exeter, and Bangor campuses is an excellent example of how cognitive science and mindfulness training are being combined in higher education.⁷ The Centre for Buddhist Studies at Hong Kong University instituted a major research project to test the effectiveness of meditation and Buddhist teachings through the use of neuroscientific technology. The

Buddhist College of Budapest has included meditation practice to be part of its regular curriculum.

In the world of television, Buddhist meditation practice was part of an episode of the popular program *The Simpsons*.⁸ In a segment entitled “She of Little Faith,” Lisa Simpson abandons Christianity to become a Buddhist and learns to meditate. The story featured the depiction of the actor Richard Gere teaching her. For a mainstream television show, this was a very surprising narrative. Lisa is a fictional character, but she has remained a Buddhist in the show for more than a decade and is often shown meditating.

Teaching meditation to elementary students has been expanded to thousands of schools around the world. In the U.S., one high profile program is the work of the actress Goldie Hawn, who established a program for schools called “MindUP.”⁹ It is a study unit with 15 sessions and teaches students to meditate without attaching any Buddhist doctrine or other religious teachings. As might be imagined, there are complaints from some that this violates the separation of religion and state. However, she states that the work of the foundation is based on neuroscience, while making use of Buddhist meditation, and emphasizes focused concentration, empathy, kindness training, and problem-solving skills. The use of this approach has been put into a documentary entitled *Room to Breathe*, where students in a school in San Francisco are shown learning to meditate.¹⁰ Their comments after taking the training can only be described as inspiring. In the U.K., the Mindfulness Centre at Oxford has helped set up a full meditation course in an elementary school in Tonbridge.¹¹ The leader, Professor Mark Williams, gives a good summary of the activity when he states, “This is not about converting people to Buddhism, but showing there is scientific evidence that these practices are useful.”¹²

It is not only young students who profit; research at George Mason University in the U.S. shows that college students who meditate before a lecture have higher grades.¹³ And politics are not left out of the mix. In London, there is an All Party Parliamentary Mindfulness Group that has 95 members.¹⁴ Representative Tim Ryan of Ohio has instituted a mindfulness group meeting that is held before the daily voting session of the Congress in Washington.¹⁵

Perhaps one of the most striking appearances of Buddhist meditation is in prisons. A pioneer in this use of the technique was S.N Goenka. His *vipassāna* training was allowed to be introduced into the prisons of India and thousands of inmates have participated.¹⁶ I

have been involved personally with the International Bodhisattva Society of San Diego in prison visitation and teaching for more than a decade. This group has been teaching meditation to the prisoners of the California state prison system for over 20 years.¹⁷ Watching the changes in the lives of those serving long term sentences has convinced me of the effectiveness of the practice. My classes, a part of the outreach of the University of the West in Los Angeles, are open to those who have done meditation but also wish to know more about the history and thought of Buddhism. Recently, one of my students spoke of his experience meditating daily for eight years, sometimes for entire days. His change in attitude and demeanor was so marked that his family members were shocked and at first felt that he had been driven insane by prison since he was calm, focused, no longer constantly angry and aggressive. They were worried that he had been brainwashed and made to act like a robot. He is able to smile at the assertions because he understands the daily life of his family and the stresses that they live under. He has told them, “For the first time, I feel sane.” This reminded me of the Israel documentary about the work of Goenka in India, *Doing Time Doing Vipassāna*.¹⁸ The review of the film by Ed Gonzales in *Slant Magazine* did not find the story of major changes in the prisoners convincing.¹⁹ After more than a decade of observing individuals both within the prison and in life after parole, I find it difficult to dismiss the impact of what seems, on the surface, to be a simple activity. I remain surprised at the powerful long and short-term results of meditation. Unlike the reviewer, I am convinced.

In the state of Alabama, the prison system allowed mindfulness sessions. Alabama is dominantly Christian, and not surprisingly, there was opposition in the state legislature, so for a time they closed the classes. However, at the request of both the prison guards as well as prisoners, it has been reinstated and remains a regular offering for those who want it. A very popular documentary film, *Dhamma Brothers*, told the story and has inspired others to work within prisons.²⁰

What is the role of Buddhist organizations to such efforts that are receiving widespread exposure for the general public on the internet, television, and film media? How will Buddhist groups respond to the inclusion of such practices in elementary, secondary, and college education? What is to be made of providing prisoners with training in meditation? These developments present a challenge of no small scale. For years people have wondered what a Western form of Buddhism would look like. In many ways, these

mindfulness programs may be the largest developments yet seen for a massive Buddhist movement in the societies of Europe and North American. There are problems to be faced in this situation. Will the programs simply take an original seed of Buddhist teaching and practice and adapt it to a secular and more easily acceptable format? In the process, will the Buddhist heritage become invisible? Does the current approach provide the “best” of Buddhist teachings and thought?

I believe that the present moment in new technology, new media, and new interest in the value of Buddhist practice is an unprecedented opportunity for Humanistic Buddhism. There is suddenly a vast audience of people who have not previously been involved in the religion. It is an audience that will not easily find a home in the Buddhist temple that primarily meets the needs of emigrant communities from Asian nations. The languages of discourse are not those of most Buddhists. The use of neuroscience and computers, including handheld devices, is not a zone of comfort for many monastics. This world of digital social networking is as foreign to many Buddhist teachers as the Buddhist “temple” is to an American or European.

There are a great many questions to be asked, and the answers will not come easily. Nonetheless, there is an opportunity at this time and it may be short-lived. If interest lags, the digital age has taught us that what is supreme in one time and place is easily cast aside. We all have to learn how to reinvent ourselves if we want to remain relevant in a fast-paced world of change. These mindfulness programs will face the same dilemma. What seems new and promising today may be superseded in short order. The fact that so many in Europe and America are responding to “mindfulness” is a reflection of great social and personal needs. If Humanistic Buddhism lives up to its name, such needs are to be recognized, and strategies for support and help forthcoming. Venerable Master Hsing Yun has certainly been a part of the revolution. He has used film, internet, radio, and television to reach out beyond the walls of the monasteries. No other Buddhist leader has been as successful in this endeavor. The emerging global communities have opened new doors and he believes that Humanistic Buddhism should step through those doors and provide support for that era. I think we have to once again look at the “open door” of today and ask the question of how to step through it, provide support, and remain relevant.

Notes

- 1 Chade-Meng Tan, David Goleman, Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Search Inside Yourself: The Unexpected Path to Achieving Success, Happiness (and World Peace)*, New York: Harper Collins, 2012.
- 2 See Noah Shachtman, "In Silicon Valley, Meditation is No Fad. It Could Make your Career," *Wired*, June 18, 2013.
- 3 Morris MacMatzen, "Brain Hacking," *Business Insider*, August 16, 2014.
- 4 Neal Conan interview of Arturo Bejar "Facebook Bejar takes on compassion challenge," *Talk of the Nation*, National Public Radio, January 3, 2012.
- 5 See the article by April Dembosky, "Ev Williams & Jonathan Rosenfeld build a company mindfully," *Financial Times*, February 27, 2013.
- 6 University of Massachusetts, www.umassmed.edu/cfm/, University of California, San Diego, mindfulness.ucsd.edu/; University of Pennsylvania, www.pennmedicine.org/mindfulness/; University of Wisconsin, Madison, www.uwhealth.org/alternative-medicine/mindfulness-based; Boston University, www.bu.edu/fsao/resources-for-mindfulness/; University of California, Los Angeles, marc.ucla.edu/
- 7 Cambridge University, www.clare.cam.ac.uk/Mindfulness-at-Clare/; www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp/leaflets/mindfulness/; Oxford University, oxfordmindfulness.org/; University of Exeter, www.exeter-mindfulness-network.org/; University of Bangor (Wales) www.bangor.ac.uk/mindfulness/
- 8 *The Simpsons* Season 13, Episode 6, December 16, 2001.
- 9 (thehawnfoundation.org/mindup/mindup-curriculum)
- 10 (roomtobreathefilm.com) The film was broadcast by PBS on World Channel October 30, 2013.
- 11 Andrew Hough, "Schoolboys getting classes in meditation and stress relief," *The Telegraph*, January 12, 2010.
- 12 See a report in *Transcultural Buddhism*, January 14, 2010.
- 13 This study was done by Beatrix Cuartas, Stacy Guenther, Anna Barber under the title "Mindfulness at the University: Toward a Replication Model," George Mason Center for Advancement of Well-Being, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, George Mason University, Virginia, USA.
- 14 See the report by Juliet Adams on (mindfulnet.org) "Report on the launch of the All Party Parliamentary Mindfulness Group," July 5, 2014.
- 15 Tim Ryan, *A Mindful Nation: How a Simple Practice Can Help Us Reduce Stress, Improve Performance, and Recapture the American Spirit*. New York : Amazon: 2013.
- 16 Brian Ostalin, et. al. "Intensive Mindfulness Training and the reduction of psychological distress: A preliminary study," *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*. vol 13, issue 3, August 2006. 191-197. See also Notti Ponek et. al. "The practice of positive criminology: a Vipassana course in prison," *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* vol 57. No. 2, February 2013. 133-153.
- 17 (<http://ibsmeditation8.wordpress.com/>) See "Prisons and Buddhists: Healing individuals and structural injustice," *BuddhaDoor International*, September 12, 2012.
- 18 (<http://hartleyfoundation.org/doing-time-doing-vipassana>)
- 19 See his review in *Slant*, July 6, 2005.
- 20 The film is based on *Letters from the Dhamma Brothers*. by Jenny Phillips (Unalaska: Paryatti Press) 2008. See a review by Whitney Joiner "Staring at Death and Finding their Bliss," *New York Times*, September 13, 2007.