

Walking Toward Mindfulness

By Jennifer Egan
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Peter Williams sits cross-legged on an upholstered chair near mine, eyes closed, hands resting near his socks. A thick, starchy silence pools around us. Williams takes several slow breaths and then begins, narrating aloud the contents of his mind:

". . . hearing . . . enjoying . . . buzzing in my feet . . . fear: will my feet be O.K.? . . . hearing . . . breathing . . . wondering: will my parents read this article? . . . enjoying . . . afraid . . . what do you think of me? . . . fear . . . it's O.K. . . . compassion . . . butterflies in belly . . . fear . . . kindness . . . compassion . . . hearing . . . bird, house finch . . . naming . . . thinking . . . joy. . . ."

It's a blustery day in March, and Williams and I are in a meeting room at the Spirit Rock Meditation Center, 45 minutes north of San Francisco, in Marin County. He's actually meditating, having offered, quite graciously, to do this in my presence. "Mindfulness," a quality aspired to by practitioners of what is called insight meditation (known as Vipassana in the Buddhist tradition), isn't that easy to explain.

This much I get: It's not about emptying the mind, which is what I'd always assumed. In a sense, insight meditation is the opposite; it involves noting the ebb and flow of one's feelings and thoughts and allowing oneself to "sit with," or fully experience, whatever comes up -- even discomfort and pain.

Outside the plate-glass windows, a group of people move with glacial, dreamy languor around a courtyard, some holding almost still, others consuming many minutes to traverse a tiny distance, a few creeping up the lower flanks of the fat, iridescent green hills that surround us. They're performing what is known as a walking meditation. Williams would be out there, too, if he hadn't chosen instead to speak with me about the two-month silent retreat he and 69 others were about to complete. The members of the group have coexisted in close proximity -- many as roommates -- without exchanging a word or even a look; direct eye contact is discouraged as an invasion of privacy. As discordant as such a notion may seem at a time when communication is possible between people virtually anywhere, silent-meditation retreats have grown enormously popular in recent years; waiting lists and even raffles are common at centers around the country to handle the demand.

Williams looks younger than his 40 years, and slightly rakish. A part-time professor of biology at the University of Vermont and a self-employed biology consultant, he has arranged his life in order to accommodate his first priority: spiritual awakening. This is his third long silent retreat in as many years.

After a couple of minutes, he stops meditating and explains what he wanted me to notice: that the contents of the mind shift radically and constantly in the course of just a few minutes. He experienced joy, compassion and fear (something he hadn't been aware of) almost back to back. Mindfulness means allowing these shifts to occur while remaining present -- that is, without latching on to any one feeling (Oh, no, I'm afraid! Why am I afraid? It's bad, I have to find a way to stop being afraid . . .) or using it as fodder for a familiar narrative about oneself (I'm always afraid, it's a weakness in me; even when I was a kid, I was afraid all the time . . .). Being "in the story" is a meditation term for getting caught in a repeating narrative about oneself that feels deeply true but in fact is just habit -- the result of psychological conditioning. Of course, avoiding such thinking can be extremely difficult even while meditating -- we're narrative creatures, and the mind's play often leads quite naturally into storytelling, as Williams illustrates:

"There was this twang in the meditation hall, almost like a bass," he says, alluding to the majestic octagonal room where he and his fellow yogis, as they're known, spend the better portion of each day. "And instantaneously I heard the bass in a John Coltrane tune called 'Africa.' And I go into this kind of bliss, and I go, 'Ah, infant bliss.' And then I thought, Infant, oh my God: my friends Jim and Mary Claire have a little infant named Luca. I'm remembering the time that Luca was in a car seat in the house, and I got this craving for a chocolate chip cookie. I put him a little bit hastily on a laundry bin full of clothes and the thing toppled. And he fell on the floor, he's 6 months old, and he hit his head, and he's bawling. I felt so bad. And then I thought, That happened because I was greedy, because I wanted a cookie. And so all of a sudden I'm feeling my childhood pain, my unworthiness. I start reviewing my tape loops: the times I've rushed through a door and didn't hold it for somebody. I'm sitting there in that unworthiness and feeling bad for quite a while."

In analyzing how he swerved into this state of self-criticism, Williams says: "It's an example of the way in which we suffer. Where did that unworthiness come from? It came because there was a twang in the meditation hall, one condition in the mind creating another. I was identifying with it, holding on to it. But if you just sit with emotions, they disappear. Nothing lasts. And when they leave, there's just spacious sky. Awareness."

The power of insight meditation, proponents say, lies in its ability to make people aware of, and ultimately free from, the obsessive and restrictive thought patterns that can compromise their relationships and work and lives. Of course, personal transformation, that quieter variant of the American dream, has been the goal of numerous practices and programs -- from Gestalt therapy to Eastern religious practices, from encounter groups to EST -- that have been grouped together by some as the Human Potential movement, an explosion of interest in consciousness and

spirituality dating from the early 1960's. Nowadays, the Human Potential movement is wiser and more subdued: there is a general wariness of gurus and abusive teaching practices, a skepticism toward overnight enlightenment and an emphasis on incorporating personal growth and spiritual practice into an integrated life.

Williams spent years in therapy, but found that psychology alone was not transformative enough. "Therapy helped me," he says, "but it wasn't until I went on a three-month silent retreat that I really got a lot of what my therapist had been telling me for years. I could start to see, My God, I'm just sitting here editing and judging myself day after day after day. You get confronted with it, and it's so painful because there's no escape from it. And the only solution is kindness. Acceptance. Acceptance is not a passive thing. The more you accept, the more you energize your whole being."

An enormous nexus exists between therapy and insight meditation; all five teachers on the Spirit Rock retreat are therapists, and they have a tendency to discuss meditation using therapeutic language. One teacher, Tara Brach, says: "More than any other kind of suffering people bring in to me is the suffering of feeling deficient, unworthy in some way. Psychotherapy works on that somewhat -- you're bringing out the nature of the wound and how to address it. But what Buddhism brings to the mix is a way of cultivating compassion for what's going on. You're actually learning to reparent yourself."

Williams, who became serious about meditation five years ago, credits the practice with enormous changes in his life: "I now say to myself: 'What's my deepest aspiration? What is my heart's desire?' And then I try to make decisions based in that." He veered off the Ph.D. track and now devotes more time to meditation, as well as to working with foster children. "You go through so much on retreat," he says. "It softens you, it tenderizes you, makes you a lot more vulnerable. It's also made me a lot more forgiving toward my family."

Williams delights in pointing out the little ways in which a silent retreat can teach him about suffering. "One thing that has been driving me crazy is people coughing," he says. "When you become concentrated, you really polish the sense store, your awareness is really heightened. This person who sits near me coughs really loudly, and I literally feel it in the marrow of my bones. And there's nothing you can do, except just note the pain of the situation."

Another time, a woman vomited beside him in the meditation hall, then resumed her meditation. "But life is chaotic, you can't control it," he says, laughing. "May everything in experience lead to awareness. O.K., I have this disgust, and I have this disbelief, and then it's gone. New experience. That's the absolute crux of the practice, learning to be at ease with pleasure and pain. Think about that: if you don't care if the next moment is comfortable or uncomfortable, you're free."

Jennifer Egan, a novelist, is a frequent contributor to the magazine.

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