

the quiet power of being present, here and now

Padkos November 2021

dear padkos friends,

... breathe in, and breathe out deeply and calmly¹. On Spring Day (here in the South at least!) you join us in conversation with Sharon Grussendorf under the trees at the side of a tranquil dam at [Solitude Retreat Centre](#). In what will be second-last edition in this season of padkos, we are talking about mindfulness and meditation. It's a vast area that we can only begin to explore together in this brief mailing - but experience, and a growing body of data, make clear it's deeply beneficial for mental, spiritual, and holistic wellbeing. In our exploration together we will see that mindfulness practice unites body, mind, and spirit in the here and now, and can relieve our minds, bringing peace, calm, and clarity. In the traditions we're focused on here, this is not done by escaping the realities of this world or the suffering and injustice in it but being present to them.

We closed our 2020 CLP pamphlet, called *In, Against and Beyond Corona*, with the extraordinary poem, *Lockdown*, from Brother Richard, a Capuchin Franciscan priest-friar who also teaches Christian meditation and mindfulness, and who works with the Sanctuary Spirituality Centre in Dublin. Sharon Grussendorf's approach is also rooted in Christian faith but there are many contemplative traditions, resources and practices to draw on (in, and outside of, all faith traditions).

A key point we made through *In, Against and Beyond Corona* was that the crisis we are living through "may call for a sense of being and presence, and not—or not only – doing and action". The moment has granted us the opportunity to "re-think 'activism' too, and to recognise that for some people, a meaningful 'role' is much more one of being rather than acting. Indeed, there have been times in crisis when it becomes clear that this invisible work can be the deepest resource for others to draw on in life, and perhaps especially when normal or taken-for-granted resources that people draw on are under stress or removed. Let us also acknowledge that non-action can sometimes be a result of being overwhelmed by, or simply not clear in, a situation (like now in a time of global crisis and unimaginable loss and death) – and that that's okay. In all though, let us at least recognise that doing is indeed vital but *only* where it is thought – and that, right now, means deep and serious reflective thought." This sentiment echoes a comment by renowned Buddhist figure, Thich Nhat Hanh: [T]he problem is not only what you can do. You are motivated by the desire to do something to help the world suffer less – yet 'to do' is just one option. 'To be' is another way of doing; if you can be relaxed, if you can be peaceful, if you can be compassionate, that is considerable action in itself (June 8, 2021 "*Fighting injustice without being consumed with anger*").

One of the world's great traditions of mindful practice and thought is yoga. A practitioner in that tradition, Keshav Mohta, notes that "the onset of the coronavirus has revealed that as a civilisation, we are far from a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms of our body-mind complex as well as from a socio-economic design which enables a harmonious collective evolution inclusive of all life forms. In contrast to the ignorant view that as humans we are in complete control of this planet, we have been faced with the certainty of impermanence, the first universal characteristic of experience as laid out by the Buddha. ...

1 Please note that if, for you, the breath is associated with trauma and discomfort, you might adapt to something that is more nurturing for you, such as mindfully focusing on a saying or an image (adapted from: <https://www.rickhanson.net/one-breath-at-a-time/>). See also very useful comments and suggestions from Dr Susan Pollock about "How to Meditate if You're Going through Trauma" from the Center for Mindfulness & Compassion at: <https://www.chacmc.org/practices>

One of the fundamental views in ancient Indian wisdom is the understanding of inter dependent existence - that as humans, we are all connected to each other as well as to other life forms in the very depths of consciousness”².

This also resonates with comments in *In, Against, Beyond Corona*, where we stressed that “the ways in which the corona crisis has emphatically fore-grounded the fundamentally deep sense of the interconnectedness of all people, and of all people with the rest of the environment we’re in, will validate for many, a sense that any worthy understanding of moving beyond this point to something radically transformed, will include reference to the ‘spiritual’ dimension of our being and our being-together”.

Our conversation with Sharon Grussendorf began by asking her to share what areas of life and practice came to mind responding to the underlying themes of this padkos series - ‘being here... now ... now ...’. She said that core things would be a daily commitment to *meditation*, and everyday *mindfulness*. In line with her Christianity, she uses the practice of ‘centering prayer’ for meditation. “Doing these helps us to shift from the auto-pilot mode that our mind can lock us into and instead to live in a more open, receptive and free mode. Paying attention to mindfulness through the day interrupts the auto-mind - and effectively disrupts the negative churning of our mind that gets us stuck in ordinariness allowing us to reconnect with being, with our being, and with being alive. We see with fresh eyes and we break usual ways of seeing and being in life - ways that can tend to be trapped in negativity and resistance to being in *this* moment. We make space for befriending who we are. For me the related sense of being held in this moment is a sense of aliveness in God, here, now.”

We’ve tried to make sure to link ideas with practical ways of doing throughout this padkos series, so we talked about what everyday mindfulness might be about. Sharon explains that “the point of mindfulness is to take a moment to be aware - when we find ourselves feeling churned up inside, there is real power in coming to awareness that it is happening. In that awareness, and with self-compassionate curiosity, we can begin to trace back the thoughts that got us here. It may feel scary and dark to go there, but there is healing and relief in taking the time to painstakingly take notice.

The first step is often to become present, bodily and physically, to the moment - breathing and breath work are key here, but also just grounding our bodily presence with our senses (thus for instance, saying to myself, “I am at this table that I can feel; my feet are in touch with the ground; I am breathing”). Then we can bring our mindful awareness to the mind and our emotions. This often allows us to know that although things *feel* like such-and-such, actually it isn’t necessarily so. This awareness of how thoughts and emotions can trap us is vital - unless it’s noticed, it drives us and will keep us in a spiral. With time, the practice of mindfulness lifts the internal pressure and it feels like a light being shone onto the darkness that was there. This feeling of letting in the light, of opening the windows, starts to ease our distress.

Meditation, and for me the form of meditation through centering prayer in particular, is such a helpful practice. You learn to choose to notice when your mind may have drifted away from the present moment and you choose gently and non-judgmentally, to learn to return to presence. Learning to do that is very helpful and healing.

2 Keshav Mohta, June 2021. “*International Yoga Day 2021: Evolving along with the coronavirus, through the lens of yoga*”, <https://www.firstpost.com/living/at-yogas-heart-is-technology-to-transform-our-sensory-and-cognitive-faculties-to-see-and-know-whats-beyond-ordinary-conditioned-life-9738121.html>

I think of meditation and mindfulness practice as a kind of mental and emotional hygiene – we brush our teeth daily but we also need daily cleansing of the foul fumes that can accumulate and corrupt our sense of self. We know from the science of neurobiology that we can't just trust our thoughts - especially because our brain tends to alarmist thoughts (probably as a result of our evolutionary need to be hyper-vigilant against danger - but that need has long since stopped being useful for us). The clear evidence of our 'neuroplasticity' means we know that we can 're-wire' the brain's pathways by ongoing practices to challenge and change those that trap us in negativity and keep us stuck".

We talked a little about how a mindful way of being connects with notions of an abundant life. Sharon referenced a Bible story where Jesus engages with the woman from Samaria at the well. Christ talks about the living waters that will flow from within. This is to speak of the possibility of abundant life. That abundant life contrasts with our ordinary experience in the linear economy, and its mentality of scarcity. The biblical parable of the feeding of the five thousand amply describes this abundant alternative that is possible outside of the logic of the way we currently order our life, our society and our economy. That 'logic of the world' is imprinted also in how we set up our cultures and society through othering to achieve a sense of belonging for ourselves. By contrast, for Christians, there is an other way of openness to abundance that is within; there's a vastness open to us. ... So contemplative and mindfulness practice is really important because we need to become aware of, and to notice how, the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and others keep us from living full and abundant lives; we need to draw on a different sense of self that is not governed by the logic of the linear economy and scarcity and fear; a sense of self that is not threatened but that knows contentment; a sense of self that knows wellbeing and expansiveness. Ramana Maharshi said: 'Let what comes come, and let what goes go, and find out what remains'.

In mathematics, a 'singularity' occurs where the logic of space and time stops being operational. I think of eternity similarly as a singularity – it does not mean linear time carrying on forever but being outside it's logic.

Towards the end of our time together, we discussed the challenge of accessibility. In some important ways, access to the practices of mindfulness and the space for meditation can be inscribed with the privileges of power and wealth. For Sharon this is a deep and urgent challenge. She responded to the question emphasizing: "I will not be glib about the real challenges of inequality and unfairness" that constrain and damage people. Nonetheless there remains the powerful and paradoxical truth that in fact the work and the rewards of mindfulness require precisely nothing. As Grusendorf put it: "the core of this is *inner* work. My own surprising discovery has been of 'inner spaciousness', a discovery of inner un-restriction that is there for anyone to access – just sit down with nothing and be present to the moment and yourself in the simplicity of being. It precisely requires no thing/s - it is an inner resource and spaciousness that we all have the ability to tap into. In that sense, it is not elitist but genuinely and radically there for all. Like death, it's a great equaliser".

So despite the image that some people might have of contemplative work, you can see that it is mostly a way of being *present* rather than absent from the world – as we noted earlier, mindfulness here is not about 'escaping the realities of this world or the suffering and injustice in it'³.

3 Not only does escapism and accommodation with the status quo leave injustices intact, it can also be understood as fundamentally detrimental to our mental health. Kaufman points out that "Refusing to look at life's darkness and avoiding uncomfortable experiences can be detrimental to mental health. This 'toxic positivity' is ultimately a denial of reality. Telling someone to 'stay positive' in the middle of a global crisis is missing out on an opportunity for growth, not to mention likely to backfire and only make them feel worse. ... The antidote to toxic positivity is 'tragic optimism,' a phrase coined by the existential-humanistic psychologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl" (Scott Barry Kaufman, 2021. "The Opposite of Toxic Positivity", *The Atlantic*, 18 August 2021 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2021/08/tragic-optimism-opposite-toxic-positivity/619786/>))

Nonetheless, maybe especially in the ‘West’ (& subsequently, in western-dominated areas of life and the world), some ways of thinking about this work have undoubtedly been more about escape from, or accommodation with, suffering and injustice rather than engagement and transformation. Ronald Purser⁴ makes some valuable critiques along these lines (though we will also look thoughtfully about his overall perspective below, and make some self-critical comments about certain modes of Left activism). Purser opens his critique of contemporary mindfulness saying that “[i]t is sold as a force that can help us cope with the ravages of capitalism, but with its inward focus, mindful meditation may be the enemy of activism”. He acknowledges that “[a]lthough derived from Buddhism, it’s been stripped of the teachings on ethics that accompanied it, as well as the liberating aim of dissolving attachment to a false sense of self while enacting compassion for all other beings”. So Purser reckons that “mindfulness only serves to reinforce [the] destructive logic” of our “dysfunctional system” and that its practitioners “are providing support for the status quo”.

These are definitely important critical points to be aware of – and there is surely much mindfulness and meditative work of the type Purser has in his sights here. But there is also something disturbing in the language and approach underlying the article – disturbing elements that are all too often found in much (Left and Right) ‘activism’ and thought. Framing mindfulness as a ‘**conspiracy**’ (as per the title of the article - ‘The Mindfulness Conspiracy’), and opening with the line that “... mindful meditation may be the **enemy of activism**” discloses a certain kind of unhelpful and damaging mindset. As our padkos reflection here and throughout this series clearly shows, there are many traditions, practices and resources that connect mindfulness with radically-critical engagement in the world.

Holistic psychologist [Nicole Le Pera](#) (2021) highlights an uncomfortable truth when she comments that, at the individual level, “every time we blame someone for our current circumstances, we miss an opportunity to create new ones.” It’s important to reflect on the ways in which this true for collective action too. An orientation to blame and to conspiracy blinds us from our own, and others, multiplicity of entanglements and complicities with the situation we’re in; it externalises and fetishises agency for the state of things to others (usually others with exaggerated ascriptions of power over us, and unanswerably sly and devious scheming); it obscures and suppresses our, and others, capacities for (critical, creative, and rebellious) thought, and for doing and relating in new ways that would break the patterns and relation that keep things how they are.

Timmerman maintains that “contrary to the popular view of Buddhism as a ‘refuge’ from the world, to become a Buddhist today is definitely a political act. ... We are presented with something at once very old and very new: the connection of our daily activities to the sustaining of the vast, intricate and amazing world around us. This connection is known and celebrated by many religious traditions as ‘the sacredness of the ordinary’” (ibid 66). And as Martine Batchelor notes,

“Buddhists throughout the ages have discovered that ‘the truth that sets the heart free’ is not found in some metaphysical reality outside the place and time in which each of us lives and breathes⁵. ... The spiritual meaning of life is to be found right here in the midst of this network of relationships we call ‘life’” (Batchelor, “*Even the stones smile: Selections from the scriptures*”).

This insight is foundational in the tradition of ‘engaged Buddhism’ associated with Thich Nhat Hanh, who was mentioned earlier. Talking about ‘Breathing Mindfully’, he explains that:

4 “*The mindfulness conspiracy*”, 14 June 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/jun/14/the-mindfulness-conspiracy-capitalist-spirituality>

5 Note that for Buddha this also means to be wary endowing meaning and life with an all-powerful external God or eternal soul and the like too

“The kind of Buddhism I have been writing about and practising is called ‘Engaged Buddhism’. Here we do not practice only in the meditation hall, but outside as well... I always recommend mindful breathing before action. When something happens it is good to breathe mindfully, but it is even better to be breathing mindfully before the arrival of that event. Because if you have practiced breathing before something happens, you will be able to receive it with calm and see the situation more clearly. Without such calm and deep understanding your action will probably bring about more harm than good”⁶

“Some meditation teachers tell us not to pay attention to the problems of the world like hunger, war, oppression, social injustice, ecological problems, etc. We should only practise. These teachers have not truly understood the meaning of the Mahayana⁷. Of course, we should not neglect practices like counting the breath, meditation and *sutra* study, but what is the purpose of doing these things? Meditation’s purpose is to be aware of what is going on in ourselves and in the world. What is going on in the world can be seen within ourselves and vice versa. Once we see this clearly, we cannot refuse to take a position and act. When a village is being bombed and children and adults are suffering from wounds and death, can a Buddhist sit still in his unbombed temple? Truly, if he has wisdom and compassion, he will be able to practice Buddhism while helping other people” (ibid 108). There continue to be many expressions of this tradition of engaged mindfulness organising around the world. For instance, “Buddhists Across Traditions” <https://buddhistsacrosstraditions.org/> is an “United Kingdom-based BPOC/BAME-centered collective (with white allies and currently white-led organisations) uniting Buddhist and Mindfulness groups in service of racial justice, social equity and healing. ... Our practices can help blossom a radically different society – ‘beloved communities’. We recognise that racism is a result of greed, class and gender stratification, which impacts us all and is also rapidly destroying the planet. We hope to collaborate and share interest and energies in challenging and healing these intersecting areas of racial and social injustice”.

Some notes about your readings

There are two short reflections from Thich Nhat Hanh in one of your attachments. In the first one, "Fighting injustice without being consumed with anger", the great Buddhist monk and teacher talks about the practice of mindfulness as "a practice to preserve ourselves" so that we are not overwhelmed by the suffering around us and [but rather,] we can allow ourselves to be fully present in the here and now. ... Then we can become instruments of peace, of happiness, of joy, to help others suffer less". In "Creating Enlightened Society", he recognises that "[a]round the world, we are facing climate change, terrorism, and wars between people of different religions. Fanaticism, discrimination, division, violence, economic crises, and the destruction of the environment affect us all. We have to look deeply into these sufferings so we can make good decisions and conduct ourselves wisely. ... If we look deeply with clarity, calm, and peace, we can see the causes of our suffering, uproot and transform them, and find a way out. ... A Buddhist contribution to global ethics is ... based on observing and understanding the world with mindfulness, concentration, and insight. It begins with an awareness of the nonduality of subject and object, and the interconnectedness of all things". Thich Nhat Hanh discusses the emergence of the term 'engaged Buddhism' and the circumstances that gave rise to it saying that "we wanted to maintain our practice while responding to the suffering around us. ... If we hadn't practiced while we served, we would have lost ourselves, become burnt out, and we would not have been able to help anyone."

Your other attachment is based on some extracts from "Learning to See in the Dark Amid Catastrophe - An Interview With Deep Ecologist Joanna Macy" for Truthout.

6 Thich Nhat Hanh (ed Martine Batchelor) “*Look deep and smile: The thoughts and experiences of a Vietnamese monk*”, in Martine Batchelor and Brown, Kerry (ed’s) 1992. *Buddhism and Ecology*, Cassell, London & New York. 102-3

7 For discussion of the meaning of *mahayana* meaning, see, for example: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahayana>

Annex: The Fourteen Precepts - Thích Nhất Hạnh

1. Do not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. Buddhist systems of thought are guiding means; they are not absolute truth.
2. Do not think the knowledge you presently possess is changeless, absolute truth. Avoid being narrow minded and bound to present views. Learn and practice nonattachment from views in order to be open to receive others' viewpoints. Truth is found in life and not merely in conceptual knowledge. Be ready to learn throughout your entire life and to observe reality in yourself and in the world at all times.
3. Do not force others, including children, by any means whatsoever, to adopt your views, whether by authority, threat, money, propaganda, or even education. However, through compassionate dialogue, help others renounce fanaticism and narrow-mindedness.
4. Do not avoid suffering or close your eyes before suffering. Do not lose awareness of the existence of suffering in the life of the world. Find ways to be with those who are suffering, including personal contact, visits, images and sounds. By such means, awaken yourself and others to the reality of suffering in the world.
5. Do not accumulate wealth while millions are hungry. Do not take as the aim of your life fame, profit, wealth, or sensual pleasure. Live simply and share time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need.
6. Do not maintain anger or hatred. Learn to penetrate and transform them when they are still seeds in your consciousness. As soon as they arise, turn your attention to your breath in order to see and understand the nature of your hatred.
7. Do not lose yourself in dispersion and in your surroundings. Practice mindful breathing to come back to what is happening in the present moment. Be in touch with what is wondrous, refreshing, and healing both inside and around you. Plant seeds of joy, peace, and understanding in yourself in order to facilitate the work of transformation in the depths of your consciousness.
8. Do not utter words that can create discord and cause the community to break. Make every effort to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.
9. Do not say untruthful things for the sake of personal interest or to impress people. Do not utter words that cause division and hatred. Do not spread news that you do not know to be certain. Do not criticize or condemn things of which you are not sure. Always speak truthfully and constructively. Have the courage to speak out about situations of injustice, even when doing so may threaten your own safety.
10. Do not use the Buddhist community for personal gain or profit, or transform your community into a political party. A religious community, however, should take a clear stand against oppression and injustice and should strive to change the situation without engaging in partisan conflicts.
11. Do not live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature. Do not invest in companies that deprive others of their chance to live. Select a vocation that helps realize your ideal of compassion.
12. Do not kill. Do not let others kill. Find whatever means possible to protect life and prevent war.
13. Possess nothing that should belong to others. Respect the property of others, but prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on Earth.
14. Do not mistreat your body. Learn to handle it with respect. Do not look on your body as only an instrument. Preserve vital energies (sexual, breath, spirit) for the realization of the Way. (For brothers and sisters who are not monks and nuns:) Sexual expression should not take place without love and commitment. In sexual relations, be aware of future suffering that may be caused. To preserve the happiness of others, respect the rights and commitments of others. Be fully aware of the responsibility of bringing new lives into the world. Meditate on the world into which you are bringing new beings.