



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK

Beyond “McMindfulness”: How Not To Get Stuck in the Early Stages of Buddhist Meditation

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One of my new favorite books is **The Mind Illuminated: A Complete Meditation Guide Integrating Buddhist Wisdom and Brain Science** by John Yates, a former Ph.D. professor of neuroscience turned full-time meditation teacher under the name Culadasa (xi). What he does well is translate the traditional stages on the path to Buddhist Awakening into a clear, user-friendly manual with many helpful illustrations.

For each of the ten stages, there is an emphasis on best practices for that phase of your development. And although the book is almost five hundred pages long, you would need to read less than a hundred pages to cover the basic overview and the tips for the first few stages toward Buddhist Awakening.

Despite common misunderstandings, it’s important to emphasize that Buddhist Awakening is *not* about becoming perfect in all aspects of your life; rather, it is about **experientially understanding certain aspects about the nature of reality**. And those particular Buddhist insights about impermanence, interconnectedness, and the cessation of suffering are most likely to happen when the mind is in a state of tranquility. So all that time you are spending on your meditation cushion is about building the skills of concentration and mindfulness necessary to reach the tranquil state of mind needed to have insight into the nature of reality as it actually is (xix).

Now, here’s a twist: many popular mindfulness programs today do not talk about all that becomes possible at advanced stages of meditation. Rather, they seek to use a stripped down, se-

lective version of Buddhism (sometimes called “McMindfulness”) to lower stress, strengthen focus, and increase productivity. All of those are potentially worthy goals, but it is interesting to note that one could practice McMindfulness for decades, **get some real benefit from the practice, but never move out of stage two or three from a more traditional Buddhist perspective.**

To trace a few of the highlights of the stages of insight, **Stage One is simply about establishing a regular daily practice** of at least twenty minutes a day—and ideally forty-five minutes a day—which is not an easy feat. (I would add that if you are finding yourself regularly experiencing the common problem of falling asleep during meditation, “Stage Zero” in your practice may be getting more sleep each night as a staging ground for pursuing the Buddhist path.) **Stage Two focuses on how to shorten the frequency of mind-wandering during meditation** and how to sustain your attention on the breath. And one of the best tips I could pass along here is to be gentle with yourself when distractions inevitably arise. Instead of beating yourself up internally, simply note the distraction compassionately, practice gently letting it go, and return your attention to your breath.

As you continue to progress,

You have mastered Stage Three when forgetting and mind-wandering no longer occur, and the breath stays continually in conscious awareness.... The mind still roams, but it’s “tethered” to the meditation object, never getting too far away; the unconscious mental processes that sustain attention never entirely let go of the meditation object. Because attention no longer shifts automatically to objects of desire and aversion, you can purposely hold your attention on an emotionally neutral object like the breath for extended periods of time. (111)

“Continuous Attention to the Meditation Object” is the first of four traditional milestones on the path to Awakening, and it is the transition point from being a *Novice* Meditator to becoming a *Skilled* Meditator. The other three milestones are “Sustained Exclusive Focus of Attention,” “Effortless Stability of Attention,” and “Persistence of the Mental Qualities of Tranquility and Equanimity.”

What I most appreciate about Culadasa and other practitioners of what is sometimes called Pragmatic Buddhism is the emphasis that **Buddhist Awakening is attainable not only by**

cloistered monks, but also by everyday people who work demanding jobs and have families. However, it does take time and commitment.

To give you a few parallel examples (and I would encourage you to relatedly think of similar examples in your own life), I find it pretty easy to run four miles twice/week with a third, longer run once/week. I've also successfully trained for a both a half marathon and a Sprint Triathlon. But I've failed twice in training for an Olympic Distance Triathlon. Both times, the twice/day trainings started taking up more time and energy than I was willing to expend about halfway through the four-month training period. **I could have continued, but chose other priorities.**

Similarly, I am a pretty good guitar player and semi-passable pianist. But my **progress plateaued on each instrument in high school, when I was unwilling to keep ratcheting up the required periods of practice needed to improve.** When the needed thirty minutes/day became an hour/day — with a projected 90 minutes to two-hours a day soon-to-be needed, I hit the eject button. That being said, I conversely want to emphasize how much is possible if you do choose to spend an hour a day on something you are passionate about, coupled with a weekly time of more intensive practice, and occasional (or annual) retreats of a week or more. And I'm not only talking about Buddhism. Your interest may be athletic or artistic, scholarly or pure fun. My point is **to recognize the power of sustained commitment over a long period of time in the same direction.**

Tolstoy's War and Peace may be 1,200 pages, but if you read only 10 pages/day, you can finish it in four months. Likewise, progressing on the path toward mental tranquility and emotional equanimity is possible. When I meditate, I do sometimes wish that the timer would go-ahead-and-ring-already, so that I can go on to the next task in my schedule. But especially in our 24/7 world of constant connectivity, there are also times I look forward to meditation as a time to practice letting go of control and simply experience reality as it is with the arising and passing away of each next present moment. (I'll also add that if sitting down for 45 minutes of counting your breath seems impossible, I recommend more active forms of contemplation such as Tai Chi, yoga, or walking the labyrinth.)

As one of my mentors used to say, “**Practice may not make perfect, but it does make permanent**”: whatever we practice becomes increasingly second nature to us. In that spirit, I would like to use the second half of this sermon to lead you through a brief guided meditation called “Driverless Awareness” adapted from one of my teachers, Vince Horn. Instead of simply talking about how Buddhist practice can allow you to experience a different way of being in the world, I would like to invite you to experience an example.

To begin, if you are comfortable doing so, I invite you to assume a meditation posture in your chair—with your back straight, your feet flat on the floor, and your hands resting gently. Finding an upright balance: relaxed but alert. If you are comfortable doing so, I invite you to close your eyes, allowing your attention to settle into your body. Gently letting go of tensions throughout your body.

Now I invite you to direct your attention to the inner screen in the mind, the place we see internal imagery, the movies in the mind. And from here, I want to invite a particular scenario to arise in your mind. **Imagine yourself driving in a car.** You are going down the highway. Tuning into what it’s like, looking out the windshield at your surroundings, looking at other cars, looking out your rearview mirror. Looking at how much gas you have left. Accelerating, decelerating, occasionally pressing the brake. Noticing the *effort* it takes to drive.

There is a *constant alertness* to the road: when we have to switch lanes or pass someone, we have to go through an orchestra of movements. Notice what it’s like to drive.

Feeling the subtle anxiety that’s present when we drive. Knowing that if we make a mistake, it could be dangerous. So we maintain a level of vigilance, sometimes hyperaware. Notice what is present as you imagine the act of driving. How does it make you feel? What’s present for you in your body, in your mind’s eye as you image the act of driving?

From here we are going to shift the imagination to a new mode. Imagine that technology has advanced to the point where we’re in a **fully autonomous, driverless car.** You start the car, you are out on the road. Imagine this technology

has been proven. There are far fewer accidents. We know from experience that when we switch to the driverless mode, we can just relax. We don't have to be alert to what's happening on the road. We can allow the car to drive itself. We can just allow the car to communicate with other vehicles to avoid problems.

Imagine what it would be like to just be the passenger without having to do anything. Perhaps enjoying the vista. **Let yourself feel what it would be like to switch from driver mode to driverless.** Notice the difference. It could be relaxation, ease. Could be anxiety and fear of not being in control. Whatever's present: just notice it. Allowing it to be present. Feeling it in your body.

Now we'll shift again to a new imagination, a new scene. **Taking a moment to imagine your normal day, your normal activity.** Going through your normal routines, how many things do you have to keep in your mind at one time? How many things do you have to do? How much effort does it take to do those things?

What's it like "driving" through your day? Imagining your typical day, notice what it takes to prepare, eat, connect, avoid conflict, relax, zone out, make the best decisions we can with the information we have, deal with difficulty and unexpected surprises—all the things that we maneuver through and around in our daily lives. Just imagining that in a general way and feeling what it's like to move through your day.

And now in the same way that we shifted in the car from driver to driverless, **imagine there's a switch that you can press that switches you from the driver of your life to the passenger**, to the one enjoying the experience without having to direct or control or maneuver. Allow yourself to press that button and to move into driverless mode. Notice what this mode is like. What is it like to move through your day now that there is no one behind the wheel? How does it change the way you engage each moment, how you respond in driverless mode?

What if we could trust the capacity to do, the capacity to act, the capacity to respond *without* having to feel like we're the one that has to be in control? What would that be like? Take a moment to rest in driverless mode.

Taking a moment to remember what it was like to switch into driverless mode. Keeping that as an internal tool that you can use moving forward: a simple flip of the button and a *shift*: being able to take your hands off the wheel, to relax, to enjoy the ride. Everything simply happening as it is.