

Arise and Pass Away

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I never wanted to be mindful. All I wanted was to get some sleep. For weeks I'd been waking in the middle of the night. Sometimes I lay there thinking obsessively about work; other nights I had fragments of songs looping in my head. I'd read somewhere that our brains recycle thoughts or pieces of music because it saves energy and one night I lay awake thinking 'I'm thinking this thought to save energy' over and over again until dawn.

Another night I pulled on some track pants and a sweater and went for a walk. It was about three o'clock. Very calm. The sky glowed with stars. I could hear the hum of the powerlines and the sound of the stream at the bottom of the hill. I could also hear music. A choir. I couldn't make out the tune. Possibly a hymn? My first thought was: someone is playing their stereo way too loud. But then the music stopped and I heard a man's voice and a woman's laughter and the song began again from the beginning, a little faster and stronger, and I realised the music came from an actual choir of people somewhere nearby. What kind of choir practised at three in the morning?

It sounded as if it came from the school. I crossed the road, treading carefully in my bare feet, and walked up the driveway. Whoever they were, I thought, it would be nice to stand at the back of the hall and listen to a big group of people singing together. It might calm my troubled brain and help me sleep. But when I got to the top of the driveway all the buildings were dark. There was no one there.

There was wind in the trees and I had to wait for it to die down to get a fix on the sound. Then the singing returned,

very clearly: a strong, joyous chant. It came from further down the valley. Which made sense: there was a church over there. The hills must have complicated the acoustics. I set off in that direction, breaking into a light jog.

‘An auditory hallucination,’ my doctor said the next morning. ‘Probably tied to the sleep deprivation.’

‘Probably tied? You think?’ I slouched in a chair, still dressed in the same tracksuit pants I’d worn the night before although they were now splattered with mud. I’d tried to follow the music through the unlit tracks of the town green belt at the bottom of the valley before finally figuring out that it wasn’t real and returning home. I’d been awake ever since.

I squinted at my doctor. His office looked out over Wellington Harbour. It was a bright autumn day and the light from the sea and clouds turned the windows into blinding squares of silver and white light. The doctor was a vague, shimmering figure in the foreground. All I wanted was to lie down in a dark room and close my eyes.

‘Why can’t I sleep?’ I demanded. ‘Why is this happening? I don’t drink. I don’t take drugs. I’ve cut out caffeine. I drink peppermint tea, like an animal. And now this. I can’t be wandering around my neighbourhood in the middle of the night, hallucinating. It’s completely inappropriate.’

‘You say the insomnia started about a month ago,’ he said, looking from his notes to a calendar on his computer. ‘Which takes us back to daylight saving. Maybe that was the trigger? Sometimes the sleep cycles get confused. We’ll try you on sleeping pills for a couple of days, then you can try and sleep without them and see how you go.’

‘What if that doesn’t work?’ I knew there was a link between insomnia and depression, that the conditions amplified each other; I worried that if I didn’t treat the insomnia I’d get depressed again, or that I was already depressed and that was causing the insomnia. If I had to go back on antidepressants

then I would, but they made me gain weight, made me feel sedated, and coming off them was pure misery, so I'd really rather not. I explained all this in a long, rambling speech; my doctor listened, shimmering patiently, then said, 'From what I'm hearing I think you're suffering from anxiety, not depression.'

'Great. Anxiety. Brilliant.'

'But the medications are pretty much the same.'

'Oh.'

The sleeping pills gave me six hours of deep, dreamless sleep and a metallic taste in my mouth. After three days I went back to unmedicated sleep and woke in the middle of the night. Same thing the next night. The following morning I went to the pharmacy and filled my prescription for nortriptyline, a tricyclic antidepressant with a side effect of sedation. The box came with bright yellow stickers advising me not to operate heavy machinery or expose myself to bright sunlight.

The nortriptyline worked. Overnight. But I wasn't happy to be on it and immediately started plotting to discontinue. 'You should try meditating,' my wife suggested. 'That's supposed to be good for anxiety.'

She'd read this on Facebook but it turned out to be true. A search through the literature turned up a 2010 meta-analysis published in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*. 'Based on 39 studies totalling 1,140 participants receiving mindfulness-based therapy for a range of conditions, including cancer, generalized anxiety disorder, depression, and other psychiatric or medical conditions', the study found that meditation had 'a large, robust effect size for improving anxiety and mood disorders'.¹ And so, reassuring myself that mindfulness was an effective clinical treatment and not pointless New-Age bullshit, I went along to a Buddhist

1 S.G. Hofman, A.T. Sawyer, A.A. Witt and D. Oh, 'The Effect of Mindfulness-based Therapy on Anxiety and Depression: A Meta-analytic Review', *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 27, no. 2 (April 2010), 169.

meditation evening. It was held in a church (the church noticeboard was filled with flyers advertising yoga evenings and Tai Chi classes, and I felt a bit sorry for contemporary Christianity: it's not as if temples in India are filled with people flocking to learn the mystical secrets of Protestantism, or how to illuminate manuscripts).

The evening was not a success. At least not for me. A monk appeared, shaved head, saffron robes and all, and talked to us about universal joy and meaningful compassion. Then we meditated on these subjects. I sat in my chair in the warm room and tried to explore joy and compassion but my mind wandered to other things. I felt bored. I spent most of the session thinking about how weird it was to sit in silence with my eyes shut in a room full of strangers. I went home feeling unenlightened and unimpressed. I decided that meditation was not for me.

A week after that, an interview with Robert Wright showed up in my social media feed. Wright was an author and academic: he'd written books about game theory and evolutionary psychology, and his new book was called *Why Buddhism Is True*. He didn't mean it was true in the metaphysical sense, he explained in the interview, or that any other religions were false; rather, he argued that its 'diagnosis of the human predicament' was correct.² He talked about the dopaminergic pathways in our brains: clusters of neurons that make us feel good whenever we engage in behaviour that our genes want to encourage, like eating, sex, acquiring material things, increasing our social status. The reward is fleeting, though, so we engage in the same behaviour over and over again, compulsively, chasing ever-decreasing bursts of pleasure, feeling less and less fulfilled. We're not designed by natural selection to be happy, Wright

2 Robert Wright, *Why Buddhism Is True* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 14.

was saying. But meditation, he claimed, allowed us to escape the hedonic treadmill.

Wright spoke my language. Dopamine. Natural selection. Neuroscience. Let the monks keep their compassion and universal joy. His book was a collection of theoretical essays but Amazon's algorithm served me up a number of books related to the Secular Buddhist movement containing practical instructions on how to meditate. I ordered *The Mind Illuminated* by John Yates, a former lecturer in physiology and neuroscience who discovered Buddhism, changed his name to 'Culadasa'—a Pali word meaning 'lesser servant'—retired from academia, and moved to an old Apache stronghold in the southeastern Arizona wilderness to live a contemplative life.

I meditated every day while waiting for the book to arrive, working off half-remembered instructions from the monk and a general sense that meditation was basically just sitting there and doing nothing, and how hard could that be? I sat every evening, letting my mind wander until I felt drowsy and a sleepy contentment came over me. I found it relaxing. Undemanding. Pleasant. It didn't do much for my overall mood, though. After two weeks of this, Culadasa's book arrived and told me that I'd been doing everything wrong.

The goal of meditation, Culadasa explained, is to improve your attention and awareness, the cognitive faculties with which we perceive—well—everything. At least, that's the goal at first. He defines attention as sustained concentration and awareness as the mind's perception of things outside the scope of concentration. Your attention is on the words you're reading right now; your awareness is capturing the sounds in the background. Attention is developed by concentrating on the sensation of the breath at the nose, awareness by monitoring the thoughts that arise while you're doing this.³

3 Culadasa, *The Mind Illuminated* (New York, NY: Touchstone Books, 2015), 19–41.

Like most people who begin to meditate, I quickly learned that my ability to pay sustained attention to anything was non-existent; after a few seconds of concentrating on the breath my mind wandered, until I realised I was distracted, then refocussed, and then it wandered again. The book has many tips and exercises for overcoming mind-wandering. Follow them diligently and you will be able to focus on the breath, for a little while, until your brain assumes you're trying to fall asleep and you become drowsy and start to experience strange thoughts and see hypnagogic patterns in the blackness of your eyelids and eventually drift off.

The book employs an old Buddhist metaphor: the mind is like a baby elephant. If you tether it to the ground it will run around and strain at the leash, and then it will fall asleep. There are more tips and exercises to counter this sleepiness, which the book refers to as 'strong dullness'. After strong dullness, you run into physical discomforts: pain in your knees, your back, itches in your face. More exercises. Then, once you've overcome mind-wandering, physical discomfort and strong dullness, you have to contend with 'subtle dullness': the awake-but-still-not-alert condition in which we spend most of our lives. There are yet more exercises for this and they, like all the other exercises, are rather boring. I wouldn't bother with them for even a week, let alone the months I'd been performing them, if they didn't have the baffling but overwhelming side effects of making me feel more focussed, less anxious; peaceful and calm.

'So this is what it's like to be sane and happy,' I marvelled to my wife. We were supermarket shopping and I beamed at the products in the pets aisle—the automated feeders, the plastic dog bones, the worming tablets—which all glowed with a soft inner light.

'I'm glad you're happy,' she replied, choosing her words rather carefully, I thought. But I was happy. There are a number of online communities based around *The Mind Illuminated*

and its teachings, and in a somewhat eerie testimony to the efficacy of the system the commentators in these communities are universally friendly and compassionate towards each other, in stark contrast to every other internet community I've seen. The message boards are filled with people suffering from depression, anxiety and other mood disorders who have discovered the book and meditated their way to happiness. But they are also filled with more experienced meditators warning that meditation is a journey, that parts of that journey could be very challenging, that everyone experiences setbacks and disappointments and that you should definitely not abruptly discontinue your medication based on initial success. I decided to stay on the nortriptyline. For now.

If you run every day you become physically fitter: meditating every day seemed to make me psychologically and emotionally fitter. I still felt stress and disappointment and frustration and rage, but the situations that provoked these responses seemed to have the volume turned down, and my mind didn't cultivate self-loathing or rage-inducing thoughts the way it used to. They came and then faded away. People talked a lot of nonsense about meditation, I decided. They made it seem more complicated and mystical than it actually was. Really it was just a form of exercise that made you psychologically more robust. That was all.

The French neuroscientist Stanislas Dehaene once wrote about what we'd see if we could look through our eyes directly, without all the mind's real-time image processing:

We never see the world as our retina sees it. In fact, it would be a pretty horrible sight: a highly distorted set of light and dark pixels, blown up toward the center of the retina, masked by blood vessels, with a massive hole at the location of the 'blind spot' where cables leave for the brain; the image would

constantly blur and change as our gaze moved around. What we see, instead, is a three-dimensional scene, corrected for retinal defects, mended at the blind spot, stabilized for our eye and head movements, and massively reinterpreted based on our previous experience of similar visual scenes. All these operations unfold unconsciously—although many of them are so complicated that they resist computer-modeling. For instance, our visual system detects the presence of shadows in the image and removes them. At a glance, our brain unconsciously infers the sources of lights and deduces the shape, opacity, reflectance, and luminance of the objects.⁴

I thought about Dehaene's writing when I had an odd, unsettling experience. I'd been meditating for about three months, and one morning I discovered that if I concentrated on the sensations of the breath at my nose for long enough, the feeling of continuous conscious sensation—the feeling you'll get right now if you focus on your own breathing—decohered, breaking down into a series of discrete, meaningless vibrations. It was a little like saying the same word over and over again until it lost its meaning, only the decoherence was with my thoughts themselves. After I ended the session I figured that I'd encountered the raw signal from my sensory system, without any of the usual layering or processing.

It's one thing to understand in theory that your thoughts consist of electrochemical constructs in the brain, but the direct experience of this was surprisingly upsetting. I spent the rest of the day thinking of my body as a kind of robot made of meat designed to transport my brain around and supply it with data and energy. Which of course it is, but I felt that wasn't a healthy way to think about it. And I thought about Yeats' phrase

4 Stanislas Dehaene, *Consciousness and the Brain: Deciphering How the Brain Codes Our Thoughts* (New York, NY: Viking, 2014), 60.

that he was a soul ‘fastened to the body of a dying animal’. Over the next week I felt odd pulses of energy fluctuating around my body. I still felt happy, but I worried that my depression or anxiety or whatever the hell it is was ruining my meditation.

I hadn’t bothered to finish *The Mind Illuminated*. It’s a big book; I’m a busy guy. I’d read the basic stuff about how to meditate and about all of the hindrances I’d encountered and how to overcome them, but that was it. Now I read ahead and discovered that this decoherence and solipsism, the weird energy fluctuations, the intimations of death, were all normal, even desirable.

Modern philosophy in the Western tradition starts with Descartes’ famous dictum that we think, therefore we are. We can doubt everything except that the individual self exists, and is thinking, and most of us are happy to go along with that. But Nietzsche, writing in the late 19th century, disputed Descartes. After observing his own mind he noted that *something* thinks, but he had little control over it: he merely observed its thoughts. The Buddhists came to a similar but deeper conclusion two and a half thousand years earlier. What we call the mind, they argue, is really a large aggregation of sub-minds all performing separate tasks that we are mostly unaware of, and our consciousness is just a kind of clearing house or whiteboard for the sub-minds to share information and collaborate on decision-making. There is no ‘self’, they tell us. The sub-minds share their brief, fleeting impressions and these arise and pass away. Culadasa points out that this model is almost identical to the modular theory of mind currently popular in cognitive psychology.

The importance of mindfulness in this tradition is not to feel relaxed as we drift around the supermarket, although that may be a pleasurable side effect. The goal of the practice is to train the mind to realise the three characteristics that the Buddhists claim are central to existence: the impermanence

of the material world, the centrality of suffering and the non-existence of the self. There's no point in understanding any of these things intellectually, the Buddha claimed. You have to meditate and experience them directly, and these experiences can be transformational and, eventually, he claimed, release you from unhappiness. But they can also be troubling—the final appendix in *The Mind Illuminated* is ominously titled 'The Dark Night of the Soul'. The peace and equanimity you gain from mindfulness meditation is designed to help you cope with the insight that you don't really exist, and that everything else you know about reality is allegedly wrong.

I feel a little suckered by mindfulness. I still meditate every day. I highly recommend it over sleeplessness and anxiety and wandering around in the dark, hallucinating. I manage not to think about impermanence or non-existence, much. But every now and then I have another unsettling experience that reminds me that I'm messing around with my central nervous system in ways that aren't documented in the owner's manual. It reminds me that in the eyes of Buddhists and neuroscientists I'm not a sometimes sleepless, sometimes anxious, sometimes medicated, sometimes depressed, often bewildered middle-aged man, that I'm not even a person at all, but rather a cacophony of neural algorithms, a flood of impressions and vibrations no more individual and enduring than a fire started at night that burns until daybreak.