

One Thing the Present Moment has Taught Me

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What I want to talk with you about this evening is some of what I have come to understand about 'the present moment'. This is Ram Dass making his epic pronouncement, "Remember, Be Here Now!".

The myna birds in Aldous Huxley's novel, *Island*, calling out the reminder, "Attention!, Attention!".

The 8th century Chan master, Mazu responding to the question, "What is the meaning of the Buddha's way?" with the response, "What is the meaning of this moment?"

And the Buddha, referring to the four foundations of mindfulness: "Bhikkhus, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way. Those knowing this, mindful, fully unbound in the here and now, are forever calmed and have crossed over beyond entanglement in the world."

So of course, we all know what the present moment is. It is commonplace, obvious. We know that ultimately the present moment, here and now, is the only place that we can ever really be, though we also know what we mean when we talk about not being present: that we're stuck in our heads, or lost in thoughts of the past or the future, and that we've stopped paying attention to what is right in front of us.

Even though our lives naturally unfold moment by moment, our ability to be aware and present for them, is somehow diminished. And yet, we all have known moments of presence and awareness, when our senses have been completely open, when we have fully encountered another person or being, when we have been intensely aware of our own bodies and physical sensations, and all the times we've been swept away by every emotion there is.

We all have moments when we are startled awake by something beautiful or dangerous, or something we have never encountered before. This is why we love to be in nature and travel to places we've never been. The moments we vividly remember, whether wonderful or terrible, are the ones we were present for. At every stage of our lives, we experience so many things for the first time, with the direct immediacy of present moment awareness. Especially when we were young children.

The question is, what would it mean for our lives to bring this wide awake presence to ordinary moments? And to be able to sustain this kind of awareness more often? This ordinary, extraordinary, mysterious and elusive 'here and now', that we sometimes inhabit, and often do not, is what I'd like to explore.

Sometimes the present moment is talked about as though it is an instant in the flow of time, like a still frame in a movie, one moment following another. But still frames have no movement and no sound, and our subjective experience isn't like that at all. Present moment experience is filled with movement, change and energy.

There is the concern coming from a neuroscience perspective that we are never really in the present moment because of facts such as the time lag between light hitting the eye, followed by neural processing and finally the conscious experience of seeing. But these details, though true, don't really matter because being in the here and now, is about our present moment subjective experience, not how it all gets put together.

I've also heard people talk about how the moment is something that goes by so quickly that it cannot be grasped before it has passed. But that's from trying to hold on to the present moment, which is impossible, rather than simply being in it.

There is the existential concern that nothing now really matters, because everything is impermanent, and we are all going to die anyway. That the earth is going to eventually burn up either by falling into the sun, or even sooner from global warming. But why is some future moment somehow more important than this one, right now, which is the only place where we can enjoy our lives or take action to make a better future?

And then, the concern about missing the present moment because we are unintentionally stuck in our heads or lost in thoughts about the past or the future. And of course that occurs in a present moment, but what's lacking is an awareness that we are no longer centered in the here and now, and have by default entered into a mentally created context, a fabrication, consisting of a sense of self, our life and the world.

And that's where I want to go next. How and why does that happen?

A young infant lacks what is called in western psychology, 'object permanence'. This is the ability to understand that objects exist even when they cannot be observed, that is, seen, heard, touched, tasted or smelled. If a toy a young infant is playing with is placed out of their sight, they won't look for it, as it literally has ceased to exist for them. That is, until a few months later when they have develop object permanence.

Jean Piaget, the Swiss Psychologist who first studied this, argued that object permanence is one of an infant's most important accomplishments, and that without this concept, objects would have no separate, permanent existence. Notice the contrast of this with the Buddhist understanding that there is no separate, permanent existence. I'll come back to that.

But human beings need object permanence to survive. Imagine that you are one of your distant ancestors. A hunter gatherer out on the savannah. You see a lion, who then hides behind a bush. You can't see it anymore. It is important for to know that the lion is still there.

When I was a psychotherapist and later a social worker, there was a tool we used called the Mental Status Exam, which is used to determine how well a person is functioning. An important piece is assessing whether they are oriented to person, place and time. So a person with schizophrenia who thinks they are Jesus, for example, or a person with dementia who can't find their way home, are assessed as not sufficiently oriented. In other words, a person is seen as functioning well when they are sufficiently anchored within contexts of their self, their lives and their world.

So we start off at an early age developing object permanence, knowing that things exist even when we cannot observe them, and then building upon this, we create elaborate understandings of our self, others and the world, existing over time.

So there are essentially these two ways we experience our lives: One in which we place ourselves within orienting contexts and feel ourselves to be in the midst of our lives, living in the greater world, though at the same time we are largely unaware of being in the here and now, in our bodies, our senses and our surrounding environment. In this mode, sensory experience and behavior become rote, shaped by habit. And another way we experience, in which we are centered in an ongoing, ever evolving present moment, with the contexts relegated to an informative background, our sensory experience fresh, unique and alive.

We tend to live mostly in the first mode, as this is what our culture teaches us to value. And I think this is where it gets sorted out. We spend time in the mode of experience where we think we will find value and meaning. And then habit takes over.

So this is what we tend to do, each of us, moment by moment, as we try to grasp what's actually going on. We tend to live within, and operate out of, an elaborately constructed sense of self and our lives, of time and timelines, and a necessarily flawed and inadequate understanding of the world.

However, we are not always firmly anchored in these orienting contexts. As human beings we have a natural capacity to spontaneously function with a significantly reduced reliance on these contexts. For instance, when lost in a moment of creative flow, or during intense physical activity, we lose ourselves, we lose track of time, and the world disappears. In order to sleep we disengage from both from our environment and these orienting contexts, like a boat slipping its moorings before drifting out to sea. When we don't, we have a difficult time falling asleep. While dreaming, we forget the details of our life, how the world works and we blithely accept all sorts of preposterous scenarios.

Each morning when we awake, we boot back up, almost instantly reorienting, recreating our self and our lives, anchored once again in our personal version of reality. We remember who we are, where we are, what's going on in our lives and in the world. We place ourselves on the timeline of our lives. And

then, we proceed, into the day within this constructed context of our lives and our world, traveling through time, from our past into our future. And of course we need to know the world we live in, our place in it and what we are doing with our lives.

But, there is a difference between being chronically stuck like a bug in a web of overlapping contexts of self, life and world, and having the ability to spend more of our moments here and now.

Western Psychology tells us how we go about putting together this complex set of maps in order to function successfully. The Buddha was focused on the true nature of human experience, how we create discontent and suffer as a result. Buddhist practice helps us to recognize that these contextual maps, though useful, are nonetheless illusions, fabrications of the mind.

In Buddhist psychology six, not five, senses are recognized. Our experience consists of seeing, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting, but also thinking. Our sense organs are the eyes, ears, body, nose and tongue, but also the mind. In order to create and experience a perception, such as the sound of a singing bird, we need our sense of hearing, and also our mind, where there is a storehouse of our knowledge, experience and memory, *alayavijnana* in Pali, that allows us to interpret the sound as the song of a bird. This storehouse is where all the contextual information about our selves, our lives and the world is stored, along with our habits.

As we develop from infancy, over time, we create a sense of self, an identity, the story of our lives. In any given present moment we have access to only a few bits and pieces of the orienting contexts. When investigated with awareness, such as in meditation, it becomes apparent that only a few aspects of an orienting context, such as our sense of self, are manifest in any specific moment, impermanently arising and passing away, as opposed to permanently existing.

Here is an example: One of the most salient features of your identity is your name. And yet, ask yourself, how many moments in a day is your name a part of your here and now experience? Most of the time it rests comfortably hidden away in the storehouse, along with all the other information about who you think you are.

Western psychology and Buddhist psychology generally agree on much of this. But they diverge in their values and implications. Western psychology, says, 'Yes, develop elaborate maps of your self, your life and your world. This is healthy, and necessary'. Buddhist psychology says, 'Wait a minute. Create your maps, but remember they are creations of the mind. The world does not really consist of separate permanent objects. In the world, all things arise and pass away. Keep impermanence in mind. And sounds and sights, feelings, smells and tastes, also arise and pass away in our sensory experience'. The child's toy is visible and then it is not. When object permanence is developed, knowledge of the existence of the toy, arises in the mind from the storehouse, and then passes away out of conscious awareness.

Buddhism tells us, 'Do not be fooled by these useful tricks of the mind. If you believe in them too much you are deluded, and you will suffer as a result of thinking you actually live in the representation of the world you have created in your mind'.

In this western mode of experience, when you are living within time, on the constructed timeline of your life, with your past stretching out behind you, your future leading onward, the present moment becomes just this thin ephemeral slice that is so easy to miss. And amongst all the objects in the wide, wide world you know to exist, what is right in front of you, knowable by your senses, that which is actually real in this moment, may go unnoticed, of little importance.

Nearly all meditation techniques focus on here and now present moment experience. For example, focusing on the breath, the senses, body scanning, and mental noting. Meditation can lead to noticing how both mental objects and material objects arise and pass away, to an operational understanding of impermanence.

Noticing the arising and passing away, the impermanence of phenomena, is literally an antidote to the calcification of mind that tends to result from the necessary development of object permanence and the subsequent creation of orienting contexts of self, life and the world. The Buddha put it a simpler way. "The enlightened one has become liberated by seeing, as they really are, the arising and passing away of sensations."

So, what is present moment experience? We are so close to it that it's difficult to pin down. Our visual experience is part of our subjectivity, and can also provide an example of how we go about creating our experience. So, tune into your visual field. Notice that it's of a limited and somewhat vague size, with imperceptible undefined edges that just fade out, which are part of a less focused periphery around the area where things appear clear.

And like our visual field, the present moment is of a certain limited size, or length, though vague and flexible. There is a central focus where our attention is placed, which fades into a less focused periphery of things we are less aware of. And like our visual field, Now has no real edges, no actual or perceived beginning or end. Objectively it's part of the flow of time, but subjectively its always just 'now'.

We talk about experiencing time passing, but that may be just an abstract thought. I think what's actually happening in the present moment is a flux of movement, change and energy. In other words, the process of arising and passing away. Outside of conscious awareness, in the background, all kinds of processes are at work making for a smooth experience.

Going back to vision as an example, with the visual field we have these wonderful illusions that help create our subjective visual experience. Remember before, we talked about the area in front of you where things are clear. OK, now how hold up your thumb at arms length for just a moment. Notice the size of your thumbnail. That little area is the actual size of clear focus, and is ten times more clear than anywhere else in your visual field. And yet that's not what we experience. Things seem clear much further out into the periphery. This is because our eyes dart around making these rapid movements called saccades, that we're not aware of. And all these points of focus are collected, collated and then held in our ongoing experience of a stable visual field. We don't feel like we're bouncing around, or filling in blurry places with substitute pictures. We just get to experience, *seeing*. And that's just one of many visual illusions. We also have the illusory experience of our entire visual field being in color. It's not.

As we go about our day, these same kinds of illusions are at work in helping to create all the aspects of our subjective experience. Things arise and pass away at an incredibly rapid rate, as attending to this in meditation can show

us, yet, our experience generally feels smooth, continuous, coherent and complete. And we truly could not function without these illusions.

Not being deluded doesn't mean living without illusions. 'Seeing things as they are' in Buddhist parlance, means recognizing impermanence, despite the illusions created by object permanence. Recognizing the sleight of hand inherent in creating the contexts of self and one's life. And recognizing how suffering, dukkha, is created by believing too much in the necessary illusions and fabrications of mind, and then behaving as though they are real. That is delusion.

'Being in the here and now' isn't some ideal state where we're simply living in our senses, just smelling the roses all the time. Remember that in addition to the five senses, in Buddhist psychology, the mind is the sixth. And it's helpful to understand and learn to recognize how the mind is an integral aspect of being in the present moment. When centered in present moment awareness, what is the relationship between the senses and the mind?

The cognitive psychologist George A. Miller discovered what he whimsically referred to as the *Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two*, which defines the limits of our capacity to process information. Originally applied to the number of items that can be stored in short term memory, seven, plus or minus two, it was soon noticed that this also applies to how much we are able to pay attention to in the present moment.

That we can be aware of only seven plus or minus two things at a time seems quite limiting, and yet, this turns out to be a great advantage to centering in the here and now and balancing the senses with the mind.

Here's how: When we are stuck in our heads, there is little room to attend to our senses, feel ourselves embodied and remain aware of what's happening in our immediate environment. And conversely, if we turn our awareness to our senses and being embodied, and focusing on that which is actually present, there is less room, and less chance to get lost in mental fabrications. Yes, we remain functionally oriented, but the mentally created contexts of self, life and the world remain more in the background, with pieces of them arising from the mind to inform us when needed, then passing away. This 'here and

now' mode of experiencing then naturally moves us into a more balanced relationship between the senses and the mind.

However, it's also good to recognize that revisiting the past, planning for the future, and mentally solving problems are all good places to put our attention at times, when this is something we choose to do. And when something does come unbidden into our thoughts, demanding attention, we by all means should give it the attention it needs.

But, our habitual way of letting our mind, mindlessly run the show, leads to suffering. For example when the proverbial monkey mind hijacks our awareness and won't let go. Getting lost in this realm of self perpetuating, proliferating thoughts, *papancha* in Pali, hinders our ability to be in present moment awareness.

A practice of centering in the present moment can lead to the ability to discern the difference between 'here and now' based thoughts, which are fleeting and true to the moment in which they emerge, and the kind of thoughts which emerge like solid facts, from the created contexts of self, life and world. And each of these can lead to very different outcomes.

Consider the difference between this identity statement: "I am such a stupid person!" and a 'here and now' statement based on feeling: "I don't know what to do right now. I'm feeling so confused." Or, "You have serious anger issues," versus, "You look angry, what's going on?" Judgmental and critical thoughts, and the language of preference, carry the weight of seeming true and permanent. 'Here and now' based thoughts are of a more observational nature, true to the reality of the moment with no inclination to persist, as ephemeral as bubbles. Like haikus.

Like all of us, I have learned the lessons of 'object permanence'. I do know that there is a real world out there, that I and others exist, and that there is a past and a future, even when these things are not directly observable. But I also know that where I actually live is the present moment, here and now. Now, I am not always in this state of present moment awareness, but it has become much more often the default. And when I do fall out of present moment awareness, I more often notice, and can bring myself back.

For me, the present moment has become a portal into the Dharma. A way to notice what is real and what is not. It is a doorway I walk through more and more often now, leading out of the unreality of my mind's fabrications and stories, and into that which is real, my own here and now experience, embodied, senses open, mind engaged, and more spontaneously responsive to my surrounding physical and social environment.

When I am able to be present, the orienting spheres of person place and time are not the context for my experience, but recede into the background. And instead, the present moment itself becomes the context. It becomes easier for me to hold lightly, opinions, views, ideas and perceptions, and to be more understanding of how this works in others.

When I am able to wake up and recognize my presence in the moment, my experience transforms. Often, when in these moments of presence, my life becomes an aesthetic experience, filled with implicit and natural meaning and value, less encumbered by attachment.

Now, having gotten to this point in my talk where I find myself waxing rhapsodically about the virtues of the present moment, I feel a need to balance the discussion with a couple of caveats. Letting go of operating out of a context of self can be a scary process, and trusting that we don't need to do that may feel like a leap of faith. But again, paying attention to how little of the self is manifest in any particular moment, that is, to what arises and passes away, can begin to erode our belief in a solid, existent self.

And for those of us who grew up in families where remaining hyper-vigilant was a reasonable way to deal with an ongoing traumatic environment, letting down our guard in the present moment can feel like we're not paying attention to the possibility that there could be a dangerous lion hiding in the bushes.

Any kind of trauma has this effect. The need for safety, protection and survival leads to the reasonable behavior of paying attention to the possibility of danger. In other words, even though something dangerous may not be directly observable in present moment sensory experience, fear, anxiety or even just alertness may be there, along with the thought that the threat may be hidden, and could become present in the next moment.

These habits of mind can keep us safe, but fear, out of abundant caution, generalizes. And we end up protecting ourselves not just from real danger, but from threats which are either not there at all, or are, at least, not what we think they are. Habits of mind can also keep us stuck.

Bringing in another idea from modern psychology: A part of changing habitual patterns of perception and behavior, is having 'corrective experiences'. Paying attention to those times when we spontaneously center in the present moment, such as being in nature or creating art, or whenever we feel both safe and present, is something to build on. Learning to trust that we can be fully in the present and that, in the background our minds will stay sufficiently alert to danger, is a process. But corrective experiences do erode old habits.

Also an awareness practice of sorting out our sensory experience from what arises from our mind, can lead to the ability to more accurately assess what are indeed actual current threats, as opposed to those which arise out of habit from a traumatic history.

As both a former psychotherapist and client, I strongly believe that dealing with these kinds of issues, with a good therapist, is a necessary and complimentary adjunct to Buddhist practice.

Ok, back to extolling the virtues of presence.

*Sound of the bell, my morning meditation ends.
Alert, continuing presence. Contentment.
Through the window
morning sun's warmth and brightness.
Sleeping cat curled up against crossed legs.*

*A yearning,
lungs filling deeply,
legs stretching slowly and carefully with the inclination
to let my cat continue her sleep:
A moment of ordinary compassion.*

*The half asleep sound she makes,
a small and quiet complaint,
entering my ears and mind.*

*The perceived meaning presents:
'I wish to stay asleep, right here',
inviting my reassurance.*

*My hand gently placed, feeling her breathing.
Then, a movement that feels both natural and perfected: petting my cat.*

*Connection, relationship, awareness of mutual pleasure,
the presence of both our beings,
joy and sympathetic joy,
mutual friendliness.*

*Softness of hand on fur,
soothing sound and vibration of purring.*

*Arising, tidying, completion.
Then, motion stepping down each stair,
seeing and feeling movement through space.*

*Engaging with the surrounding environment
which offers reminders,
cues to action.*

*Energy and enjoyment,
a seeking forward motion
into the unfolding here and now,
into the day.*

To sum up. What I am saying here is that one thing that the present moment has taught me is that I don't have to carry around with me all the time, the weight of my self, my life and the world. That I don't need to live there, I can be here, now.

I think with practice, on and off the mat, we can choose to live less in the fabrications of mind and more often in the present moment, closer to reality,

and more content. And then centering in the present moment becomes a way to bring our meditation practice into our lives. With practice over time, we can loosen the grip of deluded mind and reach a tipping point where the default switches to being in present moment awareness more often. And then we can let that be the context, let the moment hold us.

In the present moment there is freedom, beauty, spaciousness, spontaneity and resourcefulness. Even in difficult moments. The present moment always offers the opportunity for a fresh start. It is the only place where direct action can be taken. I think that *absolute* or *ultimate* reality, can be glimpsed only in present moment awareness. And only there can be found such things as Buddha mind, Buddha nature, awakening, nirvana.

Going back to the Buddha's words about the foundations of mindfulness: "Those knowing this, mindful, fully unbound in the here and now, are forever calmed and have crossed over beyond entanglement in the world."

And a Zen Gatha poem:

*Caught in a self-centered dream.
Only suffering Holding to self-centered thought.
Exactly the dream.*

*Each moment, life as it is: the only teacher.
Being just this moment.
Compassion's way.*

One more thing:

*The present moment is really
a very simple uncluttered place,
in which the pieces
out of which a self is built,
cannot be held onto.*

*Perhaps the brilliance
of the present moment
is that it makes no pretense
to be able to hold the entire world,
or even anything at all.*

*Everything slips through its fingers
and yet its hands are always full.
Here, is emptiness and form.*

Thank you for listening and letting me share my thoughts with you.