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A Homecoming for The Wandering Mind

Review of 'The mindful college student:
How to succeed, boost well-being & build the life
you want at university and beyond'
by Eric B, Loucks

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When the dharma is really taking care of the problems of life, it is true dharma.

– Thich Nhat Hanh

When I practiced mindfulness, I achieved a state in which I was fully conscious of my mind being completely empty.

– Hoca Camide

The specter of mindfulness has been haunting psychological science and its self-help applications. Mindfulness, we are to understand, is a special state in which the mind is gathered up into itself, thereby achieving an autonomous state that is likely pleasant, probably supportive of subjective well-being and health, and possibly conducive to the cultivation of useful life skills (Bishop et al., 2004). The publication of Jon Kabat-Zinn's (1990) hefty volume "Full catastrophe living" was a watershed event that motivated millions of seekers and healers as well as many academics to embark on a search for this beneficent if elusive mental state. Eric Loucks, a professor in the School of Public Health at Brown University, has developed a course on mindfulness for students, and he has given a TEDx talk on the matter. He presents his case for the educational use of mindfulness training in *The mindful college student: How to succeed, boost well-being & build the life you want at university and beyond*.

The contemporary interest in mindfulness continues the old quest for an integration of the philosophy and science of the West with the wisdom of the East (Schopenhauer, 1819; Suzuki & Fromm, 1960; Watts, 1957). These geographic

designations have lost much of their acuity, but their echoes remain. Now as then, there is in the West a sense of loss, a mourning for what is magical and mystical. The East still has some of what the Enlightenment has exorcised in the West. Loucks, like Kabat-Zinn, invokes the promise of a synthesis, and the late Thich Nhat Hanh plays the role of patron saint (Bryant, 2022), blessing the Western quest for self-improvement with the effortless Zen of the dharma (e.g., Thich, 1975). Yet, to some Western eyes, an epigraph such as Thich's points to a place where the profound and the nonsensical are one. But ok, it's a Zen thing.

Thich's epigram can be found in his preface to Kabat-Zinn's 467-page tome, whose title is surprisingly nondharmaic. As Kabat-Zinn explains, we owe the powerful image of full-catastrophe living to Nikos Kazantzakis and his immortal character of Alexis Zorbas, or *Αλέξης Ζορμπάς* (Kazantzakis, 1946/1952; Krueger, 2015). Reflecting on his bygone family life, Zorbas recalls that yes, he had a wife, a home, children – the full catastrophe! The character of Zorbas is the antithesis to the pensive and Zen-like narrator, a.k.a. “the boss.” Before mindfulness became *de rigueur*, Kazantzakis experimented with the dialectic of his two characters to explore the interplay of Eastern and Western perspectives. He never achieved a synthesis. Perhaps to his credit he surrendered to a life suspended between the poles of contemplation and action.

Kabat-Zinn's project had an immense impact on psychotherapy and on how lay audiences view psychology. It created an industry of mindfulness studies and practices. The initial mission of this project was focused and pragmatic: to help people live with chronic pain, and to help the stressed-out to decelerate, relax, and "chill." Since then, the mission has been creeping. Today, mindfulness is hoped to be beneficial in all manner of ways, a sentiment expressed full-on in the title and the byline of Loucks's book.

The challenges of the mindfulness paradigm are well known. The first challenge is to achieve conceptual clarity. What is mindfulness? Is there a unique psychological state (or states) going beyond traditional concepts of self-awareness, attention, or a relaxed state of mental rest? Loucks uses two popular definitions. According to one definition, mindfulness is a state in which attention and awareness are focused to a point, which may be a physical location in the body, a murmured mantra, or a visual image. According to another definition, mindfulness consists of a nonjudgmental attitude towards the contents floating through consciousness. Loucks lays emphasis on the notion of anchor points, especially in relation to the all-important breathing practices, while also endorsing the nonjudgmental attitude toward all variants of mental contents, such as sensations, emotions, desires, and thoughts. As Loucks leaves it to the reader to identify a suitable anchor point, one might consider – with a nod to Japanese tradition and Graf Dürckheim (1962/1956) –

a spot an inch or two below the navel (see Loucks, p. 18). Here lies the essence of grounded being, so Dürckheim, the German count who attained the title of Zen master. What, by contrast, is the big toe's claim to prominence?

No practice-oriented book written for non-experts can be expected to solve this conceptual riddle, or the other one, which asks what, exactly, is the part of the mind that observes its own contents? The riddle of self-awareness is ancient, much discussed by philosophers, psychologists, and theologians (think Genesis!), and it still eludes a solution (Humphrey, 2023; Krueger et al., 2017). With a sleight of hand, William James (1950/1890) declared that the observing part of the self is the "I," and the observed part is the "Me." His solution was pragmatic at the cost of a hard-to-justify dualism. David Hume (2000/1738) tried to observe his own I, but failed. James would say Hume failed by necessity. His, James's, conclusion required a kind of dualism Hume would have rejected and it lacked evidentiary support, but it allowed psychologists and laypeople respectively to get on with the job of doing research and living. Hoca Camide, in the second epigraph, notes the self-perceptual paradox in a gently mocking tone.

The claim – or hope, rather – that the mind can observe itself is appealing, but strictly impossible. If attention and consciousness are serial affairs, the mind can call up memories of its own past activity, but it cannot observe itself in action in a way that the act of observation and that which is being observed are both represented at

the same time (Baars et al., 2021; Newell & Simon, 1972). This is a categorical matter, and perhaps an obvious one. It must not be confused with the finding that the mind-brain system is capable of carrying out many operations at the same time and that it is able to retrieve a handful of items from working memory – one at a time (Miller, 1956). Conscious awareness, having emerged from a narrow filter, allows but one interpretation of a multi-stable perceptual display such as the Necker Cube (Attneave, 1971), and so it is with thoughts. The mind can thus not observe its own wandering; it can only note, from recent memories, that it has been wandering. Loucks, like others, does not condemn mind wandering. Mind wandering is associated with creativity (Irving et al., 2022; but see Murray et al., 2021), but it is also related to impaired performance and low mood (see for a review Mooneyham & Schooler, 2013). At any rate, the attitude of mindfulness forbids second-order judgments, such as self-recriminations for feeling lousy or ruminations about one's ruminations.

Loucks advises readers and budding practitioners of mindfulness to gently bring back awareness to the focal point and the breathing associated with it. This is good and practical advice, but the logical puzzle remains. When the mind becomes aware of its gentle regulation of thought, that regulation has already happened. How then can the conscious intention of taking regulatory action be the cause of that regulation (Wegner, 2002; reviewed in Krueger, 2004)? Alas, the student of

mindfulness practice need not worry about such epistemological thickets. The student is well served by Loucks's clear and methodical presentation.

One attractive element of Loucks's presentation is the "STOP Mindfulness Practice" (p. 56). The acronym stands for **S**top what you are doing; **T**ake a breath; **O**bserve your bodily experiences; and **P**roceed by doing something constructive. Loucks reports that this simple technique, while not necessarily improving well-being, protects the practitioner from a worsening of mental and emotional states during periods of stress such as when students take exams or give in-class presentations. The main body of the book takes the reader through four arenas of mindfulness practice, each presented as an "opening": the body, the heart, the mind, and the spirit. The imagery of opening refers to the idea that mindfulness makes mental contents that would otherwise remain hidden or implicit accessible to consciousness. Once accessibility is achieved, the idea is that these mental contents can be accepted and integrated without being judged. The body-heart-mind-spirit tetrad metaphorically represents sensations (e.g., pain), emotions (e.g., anger), thoughts (e.g., visions of vengeance), but, well, the category of spirit turns out to be complicated. When Loucks gave his TEDx talk, which I attended, he came close to faltering just once – when he had to tell the audience what he meant by "spirit," and do so in a few words. In the book, he notes unhelpfully that the spirit is "the nature of reality" (p. 5).

With four levels of opening, Loucks goes for trialism plus one. With the distinction between body, soul, and spirit being traditional, he splits the soul into feelings and thoughts. Now what about the spirit? Should the spirit have any place at all in an evidence-based work grounded in psychological and medical science? To Loucks, the spirit is that “part of us where the emotions and consciousness dwell, in other words, the soul, or our true self” (p. 101). A critic wishing to go into deep conceptual analysis here would have to do some serious work, so I decided to let this go – which happens to be one of the ways to open the spirit. So, I will focus – with partial success – on a brief description and summary.

Opening the spirit begins with access to the “true self” and continues with a recognition of “impermanence.” One wonders if the true self is thought to be an immutable essence or if it is also impermanent. Next, there is the “disappearance of desire” and an opening to eight pairs of opposites (pain and pleasure, gain and loss, etc.). Wags have wondered whether we can wish to be desireless, but again, such waggishness distracts from the message. Loucks invites “you to work with the concept of desirelessness: just be who you are, letting go of attachment to sex, sleep, tasty food, money, power, fame, gain, pleasure, and praise” (p.112). Let us please not too well at this, otherwise, why get up in the morning? Then, there is a meditation on “cessation,” There is no birth and no death, as Thich Nhat Hanh observed – before he died in 2022. Loucks hones in on a cessation of ignorance, to be obtained by

breathing out. Quoting a former student, who shared that “Nobody really dies because parts of them are in us” (p. 113), Loucks deconstructs the natural meaning of death to the point of meaninglessness. It appears to follow that a concept without meaning cannot be false. This sort of deconstruction then extends, with another nod to Thich Nhat Hanh, to the claim that the self does not exist. A nod to Eckhart Tolle (1999), the wise man from Westphalia, would also do, but Thich is cooler. At any rate, what are we to make of “the true self” from a few pages prior? In short, the chapter on opening the spirit is over the top and off the cliff. The presentation would have been stronger had it focused on meditation work addressing sensations, feelings, and thoughts, in plain English.

Having hacked our way through this conceptual thicket, we are approaching the end of our *Morgenlandfahrt*, or Journey to the East (Hesse, 1956/1932), but not before considering the second challenge, which is the question of incremental validity. Loucks carefully lays a foundation of healthy living, noting the benefits of regular and sufficient sleep, a wholesome and diverse diet, and moderate and sustained exercise. Given that mindfulness practice requires a substantial investment of time and self-regulatory willpower, one hopes to be reassured that the practice yields significant incremental benefit. As well, it would be good to know if the practice is superior to traditional alternatives such as cognitive-behavioral training, relaxation exercises, yoga, or the more traditional practices of stoicism (Joiner, 2017;

reviewed in Krueger, 2018) or the pursuit of an Epicurean state of *ataraxia* (Dimitriadis, 2018: reviewed in Krueger, 2020), which seems rather similar to what Loucks et al. (2021, p. 604) call *equipoise*.

Loucks does not attempt to answer these questions in the book and need not be required to do so. I therefore read the 2021 PLoS article referenced above as it appears to report research representative of his approach. In a randomized-trial study, the authors find that mindfulness training works with a medium effects size. Two features of the study make it clear that further research is necessary. First, the mindfulness training was extensive and multivariate, so that it is not clear whether college students training themselves will obtain enough benefit to “build the life [they] want at university and beyond.” Second, the outcome measures were also multivariate, comprising seven domains including an assessment of mindfulness itself, which arguably should have served as a manipulation check or as a mediator variable. Incidentally, the treatment group did not score significantly higher on this measure than did the control group, although there was an encouraging trend. In short, the study design has a bit of a kitchen-sink quality to it, with multiple aggregated interventions and measures. Perhaps, as Thich Nhat Hanh might have invited us to wonder, slow and steady breathing, with our gaze focused on our rising navel, would be enough.

The question of breathing deserves an afternote. Advocates of mindfulness seem to rather unquestioningly (one is tempted to say “mindlessly”) assume the possibility of observing one’s breath without changing it, or at least to assume that this feat can be accomplished with practice. Now, breathing is regulated by circuits in the medulla, which is just a few notches above the spinal cord. These circuits are ancient and autonomous. They work even when the rest of the skeletal musculature is paralyzed during REM sleep (Del Negro et al., 2018). Yet, like that musculature it is open to volitional control. We may hold our breath for a while or hyperventilate on purpose. A moment of self-observation suggests that as soon as we direct our attention to the activity of breathing, we alter the autonomous rhythm. In theory – and perhaps in long and dutiful practice – it may be possible to observe without doing. But how would we know? We cannot, by definition, know what our breathing was or felt like before we looked at it. Steady and calm breathing, when the body is at rest, is a good thing on the face of it. But why must we bear witness?

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